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The Lyric Imagination
Louise Cowan

Excerpt from the first course lecture, 1992

What is the lyric? Most authorities consider it to be a short, subjective poem, primarily song, uttered by a single voice, the most personal of all literature, concerned not with reason but with feeling, uttering the cries of the heart, whether joy or sorrow. Yet lyrics can be long, sustained ceremonial public pieces, expressive of community, making some of the most objective statements in literature, merely presenting without comment; some are essay-like pieces examining ideas, constructing arguments. There seems no easy and immediate way to categorize what Aristotle spoke of as the other kinds, music of the lyre, etc.

No, rather than going by handbooks of literature, we need to go to the lyrics themselves, in an attempt to find what principle unites them, or what constant elements they possess. And this is difficult, of course, because of their great variety.

Look at some lines from poems the world considers to be lyrics:

Full fathom five thy father lies
Of his bones are coral made...
Ah sunflower, weary of time
When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past
As life what is so sweet
What creature would not choose thee?
Have you seen but a white lily grow. . .
For godssake hold your tongue and let me love.
When my love swears that she is made of truth
I do believe her, though I know she lies.
Had we but world enough and time,
This coyness, lady, were no crime . . .

What we can say of all these lines is that they are incarnations. The sound and meaning are fused; language has taken on overtones that elicit various levels of existence: it reaches areas of our minds and hearts that other statements do not reach. Each has its own unique being. Each asks us to respond to it—and this "grasping" is what is left out of most literary study. Readers begin analyzing a poem (mapping its ideas, its structure) before they grasp it—before they respond to it.

The task of the critic, then, in dealing with one of these unique lyric poems is first of all to

respond to it properly—to read it as a complete utterance in itself, a single thing.

Then there can be the analysis—to consider its texture, all those devices of sound and the appeals to the other senses; its structure (its tropes, symbols, ideas, themes, argument). Then finally one must visualize its form, that completed unity it makes, in which its total meaning lies.

But criticism must go on from analysis and interpretation of a single poem to generalize about its object: to know it, to differentiate it from other species, to categorize, to divine, to define, to develop a theory. We have the obligation to know, if we are serious readers of literature (and we are serious readers if we are teachers or graduate students). And we have to remember that details have no real significance until we place them in a structure of knowledge.

But even so, we can hardly define the lyric by its common aspects, by its paradigms, or even by its most frequently appearing elements. Even if we consider all the lyrics in a comprehensive anthology and seek to draw up a definition by describing, we shall of course be facing an impossible task. In any problem of genre, we are forced to begin with a hypothesis: we must posit a metaform that we intuit that lies behind all the instances of the genre, which each example expresses in its own way.

We can begin with a simple statement, one that I have sometimes posited and that other literary critics too have suggested:

*The lyric is an expression of the reciprocal relation between the mind and world (the interpenetration between the self and things, as Maritain says; or what Keats calls “negative capability,” the German critics *Einfühlung*, empathy; Martin Buber, the I-Thou relation. Keats’s contemplation of the Grecian urn, or the nightingale; Blake’s “O Rose, thou art sick!” and even the brief little poem of Robert Frost, “Dust of Snow.”*

The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree

Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of a day I had rued.

This poem, eight lines of iambic dimeter, delineates perfectly and completely that sympathy between the external world and the interior heart: to change the entire outlook.

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet black bough.

2. The action of the lyric, we could say, its mimesis of a praxis, is *eros* (desire, yearning):

eros directed toward either love or insight: Hopkins's "Windhover"; "Westron Wind."

But we still have not said what the lyric is in essence. Aristotle: things develop until they reach their form, then they progress no further. Tragedy found its form in 5th c. Athens; epic found its form in Homer; comedy found its full form in Dante. But the lyric found its form, we maintain, in that other major strain in our culture: the Hebraic. There are many other appearances of the lyric in its various aspects throughout history. (And we shall try to touch on the major ones in this course.) But the Hebrew poetry lets us know fully what lyric poetry is and what it does.

Aristotle told us that the end of tragedy is that emotional release and clarification that we call catharsis, arising from an almost unbearable combination of pity and terror (two emotions that ordinarily do not go together). Not all tragedies, but the ones that attain their full stature--and they illumine the others. Aristotle, then, is defining a genre not by rules, or characteristics, but by our response to it. (Not everyone, of course, will have such a response; but the things are present in tragedy to cause such a response in the attentive viewer or reader.)

Comedy arouses in us joy and merriment, ending in thankfulness and love--Gonzalo's "O rejoice, beyond a common joy/ And set it down in gold on lasting tables . . ." Epic arouses in us admiration; it heightens and ennobles our response: Achilles gazing at Priam; Odysseus and Penelope; Beowulf and the gold: the long gaze of admiration. If we cannot feel these responses, we miss out on literature. The unique kind of knowledge literature has to give us is one that we apprehend with our hearts as well as our minds. If we cannot give ourselves in this manner, we miss it.

So with the lyric. The Hebrew poetry *teaches* us how to respond to the lyric. It engenders in us the proper response. What we see in the ancient poetry of the Israelites is the yearning for wholeness, for that which was lost in the fall--for the primordial blessedness. Hence, we could say, the lyric is the expression of the quest for the garden, for the proper relation between God and man, between love and humankind. Since this is an interior action, the lyric usually has no plot, in the sense of a cause-and-effect progression. The lyric does move, does reach a "peripety," so that something happens in the lyric; but it is an action deep within the human person that results in a changed attitude, not an objective action. ...