

STUDIES IN GENRE

Louise Cowan, General Editor

THE TERRAIN OF COMEDY

THE EPIC COSMOS

THE TRAGIC ABYSS

THE PROSPECT OF LYRIC

The Prospect of Lyric

Edited by
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Introduction:

The Lyric Nostalgia

LOUISE COWAN

“Ah, Sun-flower! weary of time,” William Blake writes, his eyes on the visionary territory toward which the great yellow flower turns as it follows “the steps of the Sun,”

Seeking after that sweet golden clime
Where the traveller’s journey is done....

In contrast, A. E. Housman begins one of his bittersweet lyrics with a nostalgic rather than prophetic gaze:

Into my heart an air that kills
From yon far country blows:
What are those blue remembered hills,
What spires, what farms are those?

These two slight little poems establish the poles of the lyric cosmos. They leave, however, a perplexing and unanswered question: does the lyric long for something lost or for something never found? Throughout its history run the two strains: a nostalgia for those “blue remembered hills” and a yearning for “that sweet golden clime,” each a desire for a territory that the heart considers its rightful domain. For the heart knows that something is amiss in the present, in whatever land it finds itself. Whether it conceives of the right order of things as in the “dark backward and abysm of time,” as Prospero says, or in some Tennysonian “divine far-off event,” its cry is most frequently that of the displaced person.

The land for which the lyric yearns, looking back, overtly or not, is usually taken to be the Garden of Eden, the misty site of origins. The home toward which it aspires, straining forward, is symbolized by the New Jerusalem, the ultimate consummation for which all creation groans. Between these two poles, the retrospective and the visionary, lies the third ground of lyric, the garden, less encountered but in atmosphere no less intense, an affirmation and celebration of the present moment. This is the realm of consummation and joy, expressed in such lines as Hopkins' "The world is charged with the grandeur of God./It will flame out, like shining from shook foil," or Donne's "O my America! my new-found-land," Keats's "Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness," or even Robert Frost's single-sentence testimony:

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.

But such contentment is brief. Throughout all lyric utterances, whether or not openly acknowledged, runs the threat of the lyric enemy, Time. Love is the natural dwelling ground, the "garden" of the lyric, and time is its chief adversary. For time leads inevitably toward mutability, and behind change and loss lurks the spectral image of extinction. Above all else, the lyric is motivated by the desire to overcome obliteration. *Eros* versus *thanatos* is its constantly recurring concern, and it strains to be able to say, with the Song of Songs, "Love is stronger than death." Shakespeare's entire sonnet sequence is concerned with the menace of temporal ravages: "O how shall summer's honey breath hold out/Against the wreckful siege of battering days...?" (Sonnet 65), his speaker queries, as does Andrew Marvell's urgent lover in his *carpe diem*: "at my back I always hear/Time's winged chariot hurrying near." Time's end, death, is an affront, an intrusion, an interloper. "Back from my trellis, Sir, before I scream!" says the lady to the "gentleman in dustcoat" in John Crowe Ransom's "Piazza Piece." So great an antipathy toward time and

loss stems from an apparent conviction that death should not be part of the human contract. Indeed, the lyric emerges from a region of the soul convinced of its rightful immortality. This archetypal intuition is reinforced in Western culture by the Book of Genesis story of creation and fall, the doctrine that death came into the world as a divine afterthought, a punishment on an otherwise immortal creature.

But despite its reluctance, the lyric has had to face its endings: "*Timor mortis conturbat me*," as the fifteenth-century Scottish poet William Dunbar wrote in a time of plague. Poets throughout the ages, while ostensibly refusing, like Dylan Thomas, "to mourn the death, by fire, of a child in London," have composed endless elegies, epitaphs, and lamentations to children of all ages. "Now no matter, child, the name:/Sorrow's springs are the same," Hopkins declares, recognizing that whatever the immediate occasion, "it is Margaret you mourn for." Forced by their very sensibility to remember mortality, poets have written eloquent and moving protests against it, lamenting the grim and callous destruction wrought by the inexorable chronological process. "How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea?" Shakespeare questions in Sonnet 65, proffering his answer with little apparent hope:

O none, unless this miracle have might:
That in black ink my love may still shine bright.

Throughout the ages lyric poets have protested "in black ink" the affront of mortality, writing sometimes frantic *carpe diems* with their pretended hedonism as though reacting to a primal wrong. None of the other genres confronts death quite so openly as an affront. Tragedy sees obliteration as a necessary outcome and almost a welcome relief. Comedy merely pretends to believe in death's existence and overcomes dying with love and images of resurrection. Epic fights extinction as a dreaded adversary, as Achilles battles it all through the *Iliad*, finally confronting death en masse at the river's edge, filling the stream with corpses. But lyric is taken aback by mutability, grieves over it, views it as something amiss, not as the necessary course of events. "Do not go gentle into that good night," Dylan Thomas advises from deep within the lyric territory; "Rage, rage against the dying of the light." And Andrew Marvell ruefully reminds his coy mistress, "The grave's a fine and private place,/But none, I think, do there embrace." Death is so contrary to our nature, lyric poets would say, that, as Ransom puts it in "Bells for John Whiteside's

Daughter," our minds are staggered, we are affronted—"vexed"—at the little lady, formerly so busy, now "lying so primly propped":

There was such speed in her little body,
And such lightness in her footfall,
It is no wonder her brown study
Astonishes us all.

{ The brutal contrast between life and death is so absolute as to astonish its viewers, to turn them, in the original sense of the word, to stone.

The lyric's real hope for overcoming death, then, is not just ceremony or, as Shakespeare would have it, "black ink," but beauty, through what Jacques Maritain, following St. Thomas, has called "ontological splendor," achieved form (*Art* 28n). And though the other genres also strive to achieve this form, they are able to attain its heights only when their language reaches lyric intensity. For beauty has its own energy that propels it to the peak of mortal awareness, toward the dark "cloud of unknowing" within which life meets its enigmatic beginnings and endings. The viewer of the tireless little lady in Ransom's poem has to remember her as vitally alive and then transform those images into a fairy-tale-like eternity:

Her wars were bruited in our high window.
We looked among orchard trees and beyond
Where she took arms against her shadow,
Or harried unto the pond

The lazy geese...
Tricking and stopping, sleepy and proud,
Who cried in goose, Alas,

For the tireless heart within the little
Lady with rod that made them rise
From their noon apple-dreams and scuttle
Goose-fashion under the skies!

It is only by immortalizing the busy little girl as a kind of fairy princess and thus transforming her image into the beautiful, that we, as witnesses, can bear the raw contrast between life and death.

But beauty is not to be found in a mere appeal to the senses. Beauty is the splendor of form, the radiant ontological breakthrough in which flesh encounters spirit. Thus lyric seeks the place where human nature encounters immortality, the obscure realm where the *imago dei* still resides. This region is the source of thinking and feeling, communal not only in that each is connected to the other by a kind of empathy but in that, at least momentarily, each is the whole human race.

Small and fragile as it is, the lyric achieves this universality. But because of its extensive territory and multiple forms, it has been difficult to define as a literary genre. Most handbooks speak of it as the short subjective musical utterance of a single voice, but none of these qualifications is absolute. Although Aristotle mentions lyric as one of the four kinds—tragedy, comedy, epic, and "dithyrambic poetry"—he omits any discussion of lyric in the notes constituting the *Poetics*. His basic distinction concerning the different kinds is helpful, however, in focusing less on their external characteristics than on the general interior action each enacts. And though literary critics have mastered and extended Aristotle's remarks on tragedy and epic and have apologized for his inadequate dismissal of comedy, they have made scarcely any attempt to apply his insights to lyric. Nor have they accepted the fundamental implications of his basic system of four major kinds, each the *mimesis* of a different *praxis*, not the plot, but an underlying "action," interpreted by the drama critic Francis Fergusson as something like "movement of spirit" (29).

If we investigate what Aristotle might have meant by the *praxis* of the different genres, it is easy to see that the basic inner movement of tragedy is loss, that of comedy, restoration. It may not be quite so simple to discern the action of epic, which in general concerns a people's farewell to an old way of life and its struggle to achieve something new. As for lyric, though no one has really tried to ascertain its determining *praxis*, the fundamental action at its base seems quite obviously to stem from eros. But genre determines more than thematic characteristics; in fact, the four kinds are so ontologically distinct that they seem to exist in separate worlds, so to say, where the laws are different and particular standards of behavior are required. For instance, the daughter figure is at risk in both tragedy and epic but cannot be harmed in comedy; one can commit adultery with more or less impunity in comedy and lyric but not in epic or tragedy.

To understand the completeness of the perspective from which each genre views human experience, one has to resort to a geographical

metaphor. What country, what territory is inhabited by each? What are its laws? What kind of land are we in when we step into its bounds? It seems important to understand this virtual territory of the several genres since the images evoked by each are governed to a large extent by the terrain in which the action, the fundamental movement of the human spirit, takes place. For instance, tragedy occurs largely within the family in a symbolic time when the *oikos* is giving way to the *polis*, a time, however, when the fatal obligations of honor require immediate and violent redress. Comedy depicts the intricacies of community behavior, enduring and finally prevailing from within the imperfect city, where patience and hope enable fortune, rather than fate, to work her benevolent tricks. Epic, looking back on an exhausted order, speaks from within a devastated land and works toward the founding of a new order that is more an ideal than a possible achievement.

But as for lyric, where is its territory? Since its basic action is *eros*, a yearning for limitless freedom, its virtual fictional territory seems to be prior to the city, in an innocence prior even to marriage and the family. The great traditions of love poetry seek not so much to possess the lady as to declare devotion to her and praise her beauty. And, admittedly, though lyrics are many times written from within a city, ostensibly celebrating or lamenting specific actual occurrences, their true location, their nostalgia, is for some sort of original freedom, the realm of unfettered love and timelessness, outside and prior to the city's laws. The lyric comes from a place in the soul stubbornly convinced that we were born not for law but for love, not for death but for innocence and clarity. Metaphorically, then, lyric arises in a psychic realm that could be called the garden, that place that was our home before the fall and that we attempt to replicate as enclosed places within the city. Ignoring every scientific argument to the contrary, the lyric persists in reverting to this original time of blessedness. Czesław Miłosz, commenting about our enduring fascination with the story of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, writes: "In our deepest convictions, reaching into the very depths of our being, we deserve to live forever. We experience our transitoriness and mortality as an act of violence perpetrated against us. Only Paradise is authentic; the world is inauthentic, and only temporary. That is why the story of the fall speaks to us so emotionally, as if summoning an old truth from our slumbering memory" (*ABC's* 9). As Miłosz points out, the lyric persists in remembering some sort of divine origin, some blessed time,

lost through human fallibility but still possibly available, perhaps in the beloved, perhaps in the song of a bird, perhaps in the very language that comes unbidden to a poet.

Thus lyric wants always to remind us of something forgotten and to conduct us to the "way we were," the dazzlingly bright original blessedness and the way our hearts still are in their innermost recesses. But what we really want is what Frost desires in "Birches": to climb "Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,/But dipped its top and set me down again," for lyric is intimately concerned with incarnation. Thus we want no fate to "wilfully misunderstand" us and turn us into pure spirits. Indeed, as he concludes, "Earth's the right place for love:/I don't know where it's likely to go better." The lyric is privy to a secret about even divine love: it longs for incarnation. So the paradise toward which lyric poetry leads is eminently earthly, a memory of the original blessedness embedded in matter.

This Earthly Paradise is the region to which Dante climbs at the summit of Mount Purgatory, an image instilled in the limbic core of the brain, unreachable by scientific probing. Dante envisions it as the ultimate goal of earthly life. Virgil (his poetic predecessor, his tradition) leads him to this original garden, and it is here that he encounters the beauty his heart has been seeking. Beatrice's radiant but forbidding presence enables the pilgrim to know himself and thus be cleansed of his flaws. It is of this realm that T. S. Eliot speaks when he describes "a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation" into which poetry conducts us "and then leave[s] us, as Virgil left Dante...when that guide can avail us no further" (*Poetry and Drama* 44). And indeed the poetic ancestors, the Virgils, cannot take the poet on into the celestial regions; Dante requires different mentors for that perilous journey: Beatrice and St. Bernard, beauty and spiritual wisdom. But to come this far into the poetic region seems, on the contrary, to be going back, back to primal innocence. The pilgrim regains the wholeness of the original human race, becoming like Adam and gazing at Beatrice, his Eve, with the fullness of love.

Many poets write about this earthly paradise, but Frost's entire body of poetry is an exploration of the psychic space just outside the garden, where the memory of blessedness is a constant reproach. His poems exist in a moment before civilization, when humankind and nature are still close, man and woman are still blaming each other for the loss of the garden, work is just beginning to be turned into a blessing and not

a curse. The line of dark trees hiding unknown territory, the presence of evil in the new design (white spider on a white leaf), the sound of Eve's voice echoed by the birds: all these speak of a fallen world, an exile. Frost attests to this fall quite overtly in his play on words in the poem "The Oven Bird." This solitary singer, a "mid-summer and a mid-wood bird," tells us that "for flowers/Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten" and prophesies the coming of "that other fall we name the fall."

The bird would cease and be as other birds
But that he knows in singing not to sing.
The question that he frames in all but words
Is what to make of a diminished thing.

The oven bird, remembering spring, is aware in midsummer of diminishment. He would cease singing entirely except that he has mastered the art of not singing when he sings, for his entire song is not praise but disparagement. He sings in order to testify to the beauty and fullness he has known and to contrast it with what is before him. His song is a question much like that of the psalmist: "How shall we sing the LORD's song in a strange land?" (Ps. 137). How do we celebrate something that has lost its luster? All that is left of the original garden is Eve's voice in the song of the birds and, as Frost writes in "Directive," a broken chalice taken from a children's playhouse and the language that, though now halting, once sprang spontaneously from Adam's mouth as he named the animals. It is in that original language, which can be recovered only with effort, that any kind of heart's ease is to be found for the lyric poet.

Sometimes, however, in this remembered realm of innocence within the city, the poet himself is the false note. Sometimes he brings with him the serpent, as Donne says in "Twickenham Garden," and the tone becomes bitter and often cacophonous. For, either harshly or gently, the lyric rebels against the heart's violation everywhere to be found in civilization, where structures continue to expand like a Tower of Babel that confounds the common language of the heart.

So the lyric poet tends to be miserable in the city. One thinks of Blake's harsh castigation of London in which he finds the streets "chartered" for industrial purposes. In this bleak world even a natural thing like the river is harnessed for commercial use, with the soldier's blood staining government walls and child labor casting a pall on the church. Everyone in the city is weakened, with lives made miserable by

the unnatural regimentation and mercantilism of daily life. Love itself is bought and sold: in "midnight streets" one can hear

How the youthful harlot's curse
Blasts the newborn infant's tear
And blights with plagues the marriage hearse.

The organic center of social life, the family, is afflicted by the damage done to the city's feminine victims and their consequent moral and physical disease.

By the early twentieth century, the lyric is lonely and unheeded in the barrenness and alienation of urban life. Eliot writes, in "Preludes":

The winter evening settles down
With smell of steaks in passageways.
Six o'clock.
The burnt-out ends of smoky days.

Yet looking beyond the tawdry images of the city, the poet confesses,

I am moved by fancies that are curled
Around these images, and cling:
The notion of some infinitely gentle
infinitely suffering thing.

Something of the lyric nostalgia can be discerned underneath the apparent sordidness. In fact, the city itself, as a human community, is "infinitely gentle," suffering patiently its degradation. Allen Tate is more bitter and passionate in his castigation of the modern city: in his poem "Aeneas at Washington," Aeneas, who endured such hardships to found the New Troy, views what has become of that civilization engendered by his struggles and remembers the destruction of the mother city:

I stood in the rain, far from home at nightfall
By the Potomac, the great Dome lit the water,
The city my blood had built I knew no more
While the screech-owl whistled his new delight
Consecutively dark.

Stuck in the wet mire
Four thousand leagues from the ninth buried city
I thought of Troy, what we had built her for.

Its roots going even further back in memory and prophecy, lyric recalls its origins in the brilliant original pattern of being and grieves at what is not right in the city. Recalling the way things were in the garden before the fall and the promise of eternity, it can only cast accusations at the present scene, grieve for it, or withdraw completely. Within the modern urban environment, poets necessarily feel unwelcome; for their lament and their prophecy testify against the abstraction and narcissism of urbanized life. This testimony is a constant witness to the richness and depth of matter, with which all of us in our childhood were in touch. Thus the lyric is never really at home in the structured and restricted—and abstract—city. For the things of the body and of the heart will never be right in the city: there will always be wars and rumors of wars, greed and corruption, broken homes, deserted children, lovers betrayed, public scandal, cities like Troy and Dresden and Hiroshima destroyed, and, always and everywhere, destitution. The poor we will have with us always, and there will always, apparently, be strife and violence.

The lyric's mission, then, is how to sing "of a diminished thing." As Donne writes in "The Canonization,"

Soldiers find wars, and lawyers find out still
Litigious men, which quarrels move,
Though she and I do love.

Thus, he declares, even though we two as lovers have withdrawn from the world, we have gained its essence:

[We] did the whole world's soul contract, and drove
Into the glasses of [our] eyes
(So made such mirrors, and such spies,
That they did all to [us] epitomize)....

If we love, he insists, we ourselves can be the voice of the lyric in a disharmonious world and bring to it a pattern of love that is peace, a small replica of the garden ensconced in human hearts and minds.

The stages of the lyric voice are determined by this envisioned blessedness, each tending to express itself in one of three moments, all related to the beloved object: anticipation of its coming, consummation in its presence, and lamentation at its absence—desire, fulfillment, and loss. The mood of anticipation has been expressed throughout history: in many of the Psalms, in the traditional medieval *aubade*, in some of Donne's finest songs and hymns, Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," and, in the twentieth century, such poems as Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" and Wallace Stevens' "The World as Meditation," among many others. One of Sylvia Plath's best poems, "Black Rook in Rainy Weather," exhibits the intense desire of anticipation within this first stage of lyric:

On the stiff twig up there
Hunches a wet black rook
Arranging and rearranging its feathers in the rain.

The expectation, she makes clear, is not for a miracle "to set the sight on fire." It is just that the rook, "ordering its black feathers," can "haul/My eyelids up, and grant//A brief respite from fear/Of total neutrality":

... Miracles occur,
If you care to call those spasmodic
Tricks of radiance
Miracles. The wait's begun again,
The long wait for the angel,

For that rare, random descent.

That "rare, random descent," here longed for but not witnessed, is most often portrayed, when it does occur, as the second stage, the stage of consummation, the momentary fullness of joy in the presence of the beloved or the revelation of supernal vision, glorious but fleeting. This "miracle" is what one discerns in such poems as the Twenty-Third Psalm, Donne's "The Canonization," Marvell's "The Garden," Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Hopkins' "God's Grandeur."

The third stage, lamentation, is by far the most frequently encountered in the lyric realm: Wyatt's "They Flee from Me," Donne's "Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day," Hopkins' "I Wake and Feel the Fell

of Dark," Yeats's "The Wild Swans at Coole," Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead," Richard Eberhart's "The Groundhog." This dark lyric awareness of loss may be terrifying. Hopkins' exclamation "O the mind, mind has mountains" expresses the depth of this interior incompleteness, as does Theodore Roethke's "In a dark time, the eye begins to see." Jorie Graham's "San Sepolcro" combines all three lyric moments, compressing them into a composite lyric insight: an anticipation of the recurrence of a blessed time, a celebration of its remembered fullness, and a lamentation for its absence.

In each of these stages the lyric voice speaks as though privately, from one soul to another with plaintive urgency. In fact the public role for lyric poetry, it is to be feared, will never be very much in evidence in our society. Poets can be featured, as a kind of decoration, as they are sometimes used in presidential inauguration ceremonies; but one fears that to overemphasize the public role of poetry is to risk losing the heart of what poets are for. So what, finally, are they for? The philosopher Martin Heidegger raises this question, following the challenge posed by Friedrich Hölderlin some century and a half earlier in querying the role of poets in a destitute time. Responding to several poems on this theme by the twentieth-century poet Rainer Maria Rilke, Heidegger forms his response: poets are the only ones who can enter the abyss, he says, and bring back a wholeness into the Open, so that others may apprehend it. But, we would add, poets must suffer the secret longings of the human community and express its grief or delight in strange and unfamiliar words that strain to find the original tongue. Such a language is of the soul and viscera, not the abstract mind. It abhors sentimentality; worldly platitudes are foreign to it. Such a language records our nobility, remembers our wisdom, ties us to immortality. But it reminds its hearers that they are displaced persons.

As it turns out, however, the lyric voice is surprisingly sturdy, its apparent frailty belied by an ability to move minds and hearts. As William Butler Yeats wrote, "I am certainly never sure, when I hear of some war, or of some religious excitement, or of some new manufacture, or of anything else that fills the ear of the world, that it has not all happened because of something that a boy piped in Thessaly" ("Symbolism" 158). The "piping" of the lyric brings sound and sense together in a single utterance, accomplishing a kind of hypostatic unity that Ransom has called "a miracle of harmony" ("Future"). It addresses itself not so much to a rational faculty as to a kind of bodily intuition which, though

ultimately cognitive, depends upon a sensitivity keenly aware of the underlying reverberations of language. Its symbolic territory is outside the polis, away from the arena of argument; and, though uttering itself from within a marred and fallen status, it longs for unfettered freedom, the state of the pilgrim in Dante's earthly paradise, where he is told he is free to follow pleasure because he now desires only the good. From this yearning issues a heightened awareness of bondage and of longing, giving voice to the multiple impulses that shape a culture, keeping alive a memory of home. Psalm 137 is a poignant expression of this aching sense of exile and its intimate connection with song, awakened in the poet's homelessness:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept,
when we remembered Zion.
We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.
For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song...
How shall we sing the LORD'S song in a strange land?

But as lyric poets throughout history have discovered, the very singing of loss and exile brings heart's ease and hope of recovering home. In the midst of the forgetful city, poets recall the garden.

Significant as the recollection of the original garden is, however, it is still not the primal lyric memory. The lyric retains still a dim awareness of the way things were before time was, in the original pattern of being. Metaphorically we could say that underneath all its temporal concerns, in the deep current of its underground stream, is a yearning for the moment of creation, when the form of things existed in the divine mind, imprinting matter with the supernally joyous stamp of form. It is not the earthly garden, then, that the poet intuitively feels as the lyric's ultimate aim but a pre-earthly realm, one that Plato envisions with his concept of the forms, one that Dante enters in the *Paradiso* when he "transhumanizes" himself, one that the author of Proverbs writes about as participating in creation:

The LORD possessed me in the beginning of his way,
before his works of old.
I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning,
or ever the earth was.

When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there
were no fountains abounding with water.

Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I
brought forth:

...

... and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him;
Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights
were with the sons of men.

(8:22-25, 30-31)

The "sons of men" are thus included in Wisdom's scope and are called constantly to her voice:

Unto you, O men, I call; and my voice is to the sons of man.

O ye simple, understand wisdom: and, ye fools, be ye of an under-
standing heart.

Hear; for I will speak of excellent things; and the opening of my lips
shall be right things.

For my mouth shall speak truth; and wickedness is an abomination
to my lips.

(8:4-7)

It is the figure of Wisdom that is speaking here, the Word that participated with the Creator "in the beginning." This Wisdom, the true Sophia, the form of things, calls out to "the sons of men," beckoning them to truth, to "excellent things." This is the highest reach of the lyric, its true insight into the being of the world, whether it expresses itself as aspiration or loss.

And it is this memory implied within the lyric that contains the seeds of all the poetic kinds. As the center of poetic energy, lyric is a primary element of formation in the other genres. To go one step into the darkness beyond its lamentation is to enter the region of tragedy; to accept and work with its homelessness is to make do in the realm of comedy; to strive to reestablish the lost garden is to respond to the stirrings of epic. Further, the language of all these other genres remains at their height unmistakably lyric, as though these great forms were mere enlargements of the lyric insight.

As individual poem, however, focusing on what Aristotle lists as the least important parts of tragedy—*melos* and *opsis*, music and image—

the lyric continues to yearn for wisdom, connecting that primordial yearning with its memory of the unfallen garden. For, ultimately, the lyric reveals the secret at the heart of poetry: that, as Dante has made us see, it seeks not only the face of Beatrice but the blindingly bright visage of the Supreme Being. Coleridge discerned this lyric insight at the beginning of the poetic act, designating it as the primary imagination, "the repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (*Biographia* Chap. 13). Its mark is eros, desire, and behind that desire is the hunger for insight, for the wisdom that is the invisible reality of being. This is the kind of knowing that Jacques Maritain has spoken of simply as "poetry," finding it to be the basis of all the arts. "Art continues in its own way the labor of divine creation," he writes (*Creative Intuition* 65). He speaks of "an immense and primal preconscious life," resembling the primal diffused light first created before God made the lights in the firmament to divide the day from the night. In its essence, then, perhaps we can maintain, the lyric imaginal world is the primordial, the moment of creation, of fullness of being, of joy. In Bede's account, the fabled poet Caedmon had been unable to sing until a stranger appeared and commanded him. And on Caedmon's question "What shall I sing," the visitor, his angel, responded, "Sing creation."

And the lyric does indeed sing creation. We could have no perceivable world without the lyric. It is the "jar" around which, as Wallace Stevens puts it, the "slovenly wilderness" arranges itself. Its chief importance for the human community is its ability to engender a sense of both immanence and transcendence. It goes beyond the boundaries of ordinary thought. Did it not descend so deep, it could not rise so high. At its peak the lyric process implies more than can be encompassed by the senses, or even the ratiocinative powers, suggesting an invisible order, though one dependent upon sensation for its realization. Shelley is so greatly overcome by this very real dimension (which he addresses as "intellectual beauty") that he makes the mistake of yielding to it on its own terms and abandoning human limits. The temptation to enter the transcendent realm, to become in a sense an angel without connection to matter, is the dislocation Tate has designated the "angelic imagination" (*Essays* 401-23). What keeps the poet firmly rooted in the finite yet still in touch with the cloud of unknowing that envelops physical phenomena is the symbolic imagination, or rather, as Tate's own writing suggests, the sacramental imagination. Without the lyric to testify to this invisible order of being, an entire age gradually becomes insensitive to the numinous.

The loss is expressed first in the poets themselves, who utter their disillusion and disgust with the present order, calling the epoch to a new, entirely secular world view. The other genres then begin to reflect the lyric negativity, the culture gradually losing touch with the invisible world, its religious impulses going in two radically different directions: one headed toward a kind of moralistic narcissism, the other toward a fanatical fundamentalism in an attempt to preserve the otherworldly aspects of faith. This, alas, seems increasingly to characterize our present state.

There can be no genuine sacramental life for a society, no genuine culture, without the lyric; and the lyric itself cannot exist without a lively sense of the transcendent. In our time we seem to have arrived at the place that the modernist poets predicted—where, in T. S. Eliot's words, "the dead men lost their bones." Ours is an age of disrobing. Lyric poets, having divested themselves of the old garments of another age, are now tearing away at the body beneath. Many recent poets resort to a long listing of names and objects in an attempt to regain the "thinginess" of things. Others continue their frantic search for the wholeness of the garden state.

It is tempting to say that the lyric impulse can never completely disappear from the human community, that someone among us will always be called to utter "the LORD's song in a strange land"; and certainly early twentieth-century Russia seems to have borne out this optimism. Tyranny and oppression may perhaps make the lyric flourish, even if it has to be composed in concentration camps, with only memory as preservation. But then one recalls eighteenth-century England, where reason and good sense harnessed the lyric impulse for its own purposes, where the lyric gifts of such poets as Prior, Dryden, and Pope were used to pave the way for the triumph of ratiocination rather than sacramentality. England was deprived of the true lyric voice for more than a hundred years at a time of crucial development for Europe. As Tate's poem "Mr. Pope" suggests, in a time "strict [with] the glint of pearl and gold sedans," Pope, the deformed genius, was able to conform to the strictures of poetic diction. But he who "dribbled couplets like a snake/ Coiled to a lithe precision in the sun" possessed more poetic genius than the age could permit. "One cannot say," Tate's poem continues, what prompted his "wit and rage"; but "Around a crooked tree/A moral climbs whose name should be a wreath." Pope's poetic genius was used for moral instruction rather than for lyric song. When the lyric

resurfaced, half a century later, the English language had been fatally split; poets began writing in an unmitigated language of feeling that would eventually issue in what T. E. Hulme termed a "wet" style, as if treacle had been spilled on a table (259). In the twentieth century, the disappearance of the poet from the general assembly of voices determining the common destiny is dangerous indeed.

Like the canary in the coal mine, the lyric is a fragile indicator of whether the air in a society is fit to breathe. Lyric's languor may be, like the canary's, an indication of hopeless pollution. "'Hope' is the thing with feathers," Emily Dickinson remarks in one of her lyrics, making overt the subliminal connection of the bird with that eternal spring within the human breast. Throughout the ages the persistence of bird imagery in lyric poetry—Hardy's freezing little thrush uttering its unlikely affirmation, Keats's nightingale redeeming an entire history of inequality and grief, Frost's crow, Plath's black rook, Hopkins' ecstatic windhover—these point to that genre as an indicator of society's most constant, if fragile, optimism. More than its erotic drive, more than its celebration of beauty, the lyric's expectation for some sort of blessedness underlies even its most poignant laments. For the lyric utterance is a response to the gift of life, the first joyous cry celebrating existence. Adam's voice when he sprang upright from the dust, Eve's when she found herself separate and entire—these utterances before the fall are the intonations underlying the lyric voice, whatever its purported expectations, its chosen stance. Lyric remembers wholeness, longs for it, and hopes in its return.

So when the canary stops singing, we know things are really ominous. And, frighteningly enough, that seems to be a possibility for the lyric in our society today. It seems to have become totally committed to what Donald Davidson called the "guarded style," guarded from any expression of feeling or faith or hope, available only to intellectuals and not the general populace. To be sure, lyric may once again blossom, as it gives signs of doing in popular culture. Its high form, however, requires readers who can understand the obliquity of its language, hear its hidden music, and be moved by its plaints. For lyric is dissatisfied with the way things stand and, as I have maintained, is either apocalyptic or nostalgic, the latter hearkening back to "the way we were," to a subliminal memory of a virtual garden state, the former to a final consummation. But whatever the condition of the community, the lyric poet is enjoined to sing, as W. H. Auden exhorts the poet, "of human unsuccess/In a rapture of distress."

So, though lyric remains virtually impotent in the practical affairs of society, it is necessary to human culture, a protection of the channel between word and thing, between heaven and earth, elevating the human to the workings of the spirit. As poet and artist, the lyricist is on our side, against the terror of the numinous, calming the pounding heart as we approach the burning bush, whereas the mystic and prophet are on the side of the holy, against us, reviling our sins and our failings. The lyric cry is the last thing we have between ourselves and annihilation; and as such it is the cornucopia from which human culture issues. It was in Adam's voice when he named the animals, in Eve's when she lamented the loss of Eden, in Mary's when she accepted the annunciation of the angel. It encompasses our joys and our griefs. It is our *nostos*, the story of our exile and homecoming. It is our word, which will stand with us at the last day. And in the meantime its task is to keep our inner being in touch with the cosmos. As Howard Nemerov writes in his poem "The Blue Swallows,"

... poems are not
The point. Finding again the world,
That is the point, where loveliness
Adorns intelligible things
Because the mind's eye lit the sun.

THE TRADITION