Poetry Finding Itself: The Dialectic of *Logos* and *Mythos*

by

Michael G. Donkin

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Dissertation Committee:
Paul Peppis, Chair
Mark Whalan, Core Member
Corbett Upton, Core Member
Jenifer Presto, Institutional Representative

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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This dissertation critically examines the long-standing debate between prose and poetry, tracing its origins to the ancient conflict between *mythos* and *logos*. I argue that the dichotomy between prose and poetry is theoretically incoherent, a confusion that has historically obstructed a clear definition of poetry. Through a genealogical survey of lyric poetry's evolution from ancient prayer and hymn, I demonstrate that lyric emerged as the principal poetic form in modern times due to its profound connection with mythical thought. Additionally, this work explores how the prose versus poetry debate's incoherence has shaped modern literary theory, with a particular focus on an overlooked manifesto by Virginia Woolf, where she envisions a novel that synthesizes poetry and prose. Ultimately, I propose a definition of poetry rooted in the concept of "mythical speech," challenging contemporary assumptions and offering a new framework for critically engaging with poetry in its diverse, ever-evolving forms.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The problem of art and society is the problem of its place in a society of men engaged in scientific investigation. —Michael Oakeshott

Today science is predominant, not because of its comparative merits, but rather because the game was skewed in its favor...The superiority of science is not the result of research, or of discussion, it is the product of political, institutional and even military pressures.

—Paul Feyerabend

If Galileo had said in verse that the world moved, the inquisition might have let him alone.

—Thomas Hardy

By my faith! For more than forty years I have been speaking prose without knowing anything about it, and I am much obliged to you for having taught me that.

—Molière, Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme

In this dissertation it is the idea of poetry in the battle of *logos* and *mythos* which concerns me most broadly. The battle is an old one dating to Greek antiquity, when Plato, through a fictionalized Socrates, disparaged poetry (by which he meant mythic tales) in favor of systematic rationality, or what he called "philosophy." Like many of the rationalists of modernity, come the Enlightenment, Plato believed the world ought to be run by people who wholeheartedly embraced *logos* and distanced themselves from *mythos*. Even though the "poetry" which upset Socrates had long since been transmuted into monotheistic myths, mythical speech still irritated rationalists and had never died off. Following in Plato's footsteps, Enlightenment rationalists took aim at poetry, but turned the old battle of *mythos* and *logos* into an incoherent battle of poetry and prose. To the Greeks, *mythos* really referred to mythic stories, not lyric poetry. Despite the fact that Plato had left lyric poetry alone, the rationalists disparaged it, and were right to perceive that lyric was mythical, in a special sense which will be made clear later.

Since prose was ascendant—the medium of scientific discourse itself—and because verse was linked to poetry, verse and poetry would be conflated and set in opposition to prose. The first body chapter of this work shows how Virginia Woolf in a manifesto-like essay used this false opposition as a means of justifying her invention of a new type of novel. In this chapter I also provide evidence that Woolf was undoubtedly building on the poetic ideas of John Stuart Mill and T. S. Eliot, something yet to be acknowledged by modernism scholars.

My close reading of Woolf's essay leads into a rigorous analysis of some of the big, slippery terms we have for too long failed to use in any sort of coherent or consistent manner: namely meter, verse, and prose. Having demonstrated that poetry has nothing essential to do with

verse and can easily be rendered in prose without ceasing to be poetic, I proceed in Chapter III to build a theory of poetry rooted in the idea of "mythical speech." What I mean by mythical speech will become clear in Chapter III, where I provide a definition of poetry based in myth.

In Chapter IV I ground this new definition of poetry in a more down-to-earth sense of what it might mean to think mythically, even superstitiously, so as to prepare the way for a practical framework by which to demonstrate that what many of us intuitively regard as a poem or a poetic text (particularly without prior knowledge of who wrote it or whether it has been granted poetic status) is "poetic" primarily due to its mythical properties, and secondarily because of such "artful" features as meter and rhyme—but many others besides.

* * *

By the Renaissance, poetry was viewed (not disparagingly) as an ornament added to language, similar to the way a piece of prose might be versified as though it were "dressed" in costume (Puttenham 120). This made it easy to turn poetry and verse into communication's "marked" form,[1] so that Dryden would later usher in a poetry more aligned with prose, at least in terms of plainness, its lack of costume:

> Most writers mounted on a resty muse,
> Extravagant and senseless objects chuse;
> They think they err, if in their verse they fall
> On any thought that's plain or natural.
> Fly this excess; and let Italians be

[1] I borrow Deborah Tannen's linguistics metaphor from "There is No Unmarked Woman," where she argues that "Being male is the unmarked case. Endings like *ess* and *ette* mark words as 'female.' Unfortunately, they also tend to mark them for frivolousness" (211).

> Vain authors of false glittering poetry. (Boileau-Despréaux)

That poetry was to be characterized as feminine—or "Italian"—in a misogynist context, contrary to prose's masculine orientation, meant it would increasingly come to be seen as unserious, ineffective, and as delusive, as Dryden implies in his above 1683 adaptation of Boileau, and also as Thomas Sprat implies in the following criticism of poetic ornament: "Truth is never so well express'd or amplified, as by those Ornaments which are True and Real in themselves" (Sprat 414). Of course to recognize poetry's basis in magic and religious ritual would have feminized it equally, as "irrational," that other term of abuse. However, since those spearheading the Scientific Revolution would have been ill-advised to oppose religious dogma head-on, or even at all (Thomas Sprat himself was a churchman), poetry would initially be discredited on the basis of its frivolity and dishonesty. By 1825, however, in his *Rationale of Reward*, the openly atheistic Jeremy Bentham adds to poetry's false nature its "magical" one:

> Indeed, between poetry and truth there is natural opposition: false morals and fictitious nature. The poet always stands in need of something false. When he pretends to lay his foundations in truth, the ornaments of his superstructure are fictions; his business consists in stimulating our passions, and exciting our prejudices. Truth, exactitude of every kind is fatal to poetry. The poet must see everything through coloured media, and strive to make every one else do the same. It is true, there have been noble spirits, to whom poetry and philosophy have been equally indebted; but these exceptions do not counteract the mischiefs which have resulted from this magic art. (Bentham)

The word “opposition” is apt, insofar as it hits on the dialectical relation of poetry and prose, the language of truth itself. By contrast James Beattie in 1783 followed Philip Sydney in recognizing the patent fact that “Prose and verse are opposite, but Prose and Poetry may be consistent” (518). So here was a point of view which would be difficult to reconcile with those of the Bentham camp. As Nicholas Hudson points out, such irreconcilable attitudes nevertheless allowed the novel to rise in prestige as a great imaginative form, on a par with poetry, which in turn enabled “literature” to become practically what it is today—a catch-all for high-quality imaginative verbal art:

> The possibility of enlarging the category of poetry to include the best kinds of prose fiction became increasingly accepted. This enlargement, moreover, called for further adjustments of terminology. In the last decades of the century, “literature” became more common as a category that included both fine poetry and fine prose. (553)

This equation of good poetry and prose united under the banner of literature helps explain why Wordsworth could argue for poetry’s compatibility with prose, a view considered radical but in fact consistent with a point of view already gaining momentum (Miles 41). William Wordsworth, like others, would conclude that there is no essential difference between prose and poetry, and that what made one a poet was a unique sensibility. According to Hudson, “this understanding of prose and poetry evolved through a dialectical pattern. Early efforts to distinguish sharply between prose and verse, as in neoclassical defenses of poetry, gave way to the acceptance that the two media could not be sharply demarcated on theoretical grounds” (554). However, according to Hudson—in summing up the following confusion and impasse in a way which deserves to be quoted in full,

> This was not, of course, the end of the story, which has continued into the present day. Neither Coleridge nor the younger Romantic poets accepted Wordsworth's identification between poetry and prose. They returned to the idea that poetry displays a special kind of language. In an essay "The Borderline of Prose" (1917), T. S. Eliot was still attempting to separate poetry from prose while acknowledging the great theoretical difficulty of this task. In a work once regarded as required reading for scholars *Poetic Diction* (1924–72), Owen Barfield finally acknowledged that the difference between the "poetic" and the "prosaic" lay mostly in the difference between how these two kinds of language "felt" to the reader. Modern scholars of poetics still disagree about the possibility of grounding the difference between poetry and prose in any more exact or consistent features of style. Poets may possess a certain liberty in their use of language that seems abnormal in prose, though prose often uses figurative language and other features in common with poetry. (555)

It was precisely this muddled state of affairs—which has for too long blocked the possibility of consistently and precisely defining poetry's role and relation to other forms of literature, and vice versa—Virginia Woolf would grapple with in her manifesto-like essay "Poetry, Fiction and the Future." The aim of Woolf's essay is to confront an adverse situation for literary art whose solution entailed, hypothetically, the creation of a new sort of novel, which Woolf writes would be more appropriately termed a "play-poem" (several years later she published such a novel, *The Waves*). However, her essay is not merely a polemic; it is a document meriting far more scholarly attention than it has yet received. In it she problematizes the prose/poetry dialectic within the context of the current state of literary production such as to encompass all sides of the issue,

clarifying the debate better than any other modernist writer, aside from Eliot. “Poetry, Fiction and the Future” thus should be regarded as a central document for modernism scholars, laying bare the stakes of the prose/poetry debate at a pivotal moment in the twentieth century, when self-conscious literary experimentation was as radical as it had ever been, when the boundaries between poetry, prose, drama, and non-literary arts such as painting had all but dissolved.

As we near the hundred-year mark since the essay’s publication in 1927, the questions it poses remain just as urgent—demanding our serious critical engagement. Although it may at first glance seem that the prose/poetry debate is a semantic quandary of minor importance, the fact is that it had arisen out of a true crisis in consciousness—one which has never been resolved. In the next chapter I investigate Woolf’s presuppositions about poetry, along with her explicit assertions, not only to elucidate her thinking at the height of her powers as she began to write her most experimental novel, but in hopes of ending the impasse at which theorists since the Romantic period have found themselves.

Experimental modernism has had the effect of rendering almost useless many of the categories we still use to talk about “art” and “literature” (these just mentioned being two such categories). While this can be seen as liberating, in the sense of promoting greater creative freedom, it has primarily brought about a state of creative nihilism akin to that which Nietzsche diagnosed in the wake of the “death of God.” One of this project’s arguments is that much radical modernist experimentation had been motivated by a desire to uncover the essence of the West’s basic aesthetic concepts, such as “poetry,” “painting,” or “art” itself. In this light then it was not just a profoundly experimental and scientific tendency but a deeply philosophical one as well. This is evident in Woolf’s thinking in “Poetry, Fiction and the Future.” It is also clear in Eliot,

when he implies that the categories of prose and poetry will in time come to show themselves more clearly only as themselves: “The distinction between poetry and prose must be a technical distinction; and future refinement of both poetry and prose can only draw the distinction more clearly” (*The Complete Prose* 541). The obsession of a great many artists with the so-called primitive was related, paradoxically, to this philosophical quest for art’s origin and essence. The aim was to transcend what a flawed society had told people art was. To move into the future, one would move backward, back to the beginning, for the origin would lead to the essence. This tendency, however, can be discerned in the predawn of Romanticism, with a new type of poetry which shook the literary world on its first appearance in 1761, for its uncanny ability to synthesize two opposing forces and ultimately demonstrate the point Wordsworth would later make. As Fiona Stafford tells us,

> That *The Poems of Ossian* pleased Macpherson’s literary patrons is understandable because, irrespective of the political dimension, he had succeeded in bringing together apparently contradictory aesthetic ideals with remarkable harmony. The traditional Neo-classical view of the epic as the highest form of poetry had been combined, through the development of the bard figure and his personal memories, with the newer demands for originality, individuality and spontaneous composition, while Macpherson’s Celts seemed to satisfy not only the modern admiration for the primitive virtues of courage, action and austerity, but also the fine feelings of an audience tuned to appreciate the melancholy of Gray’s *Elegy*, or the gentlemanly behavior of *Sir Charles Grandison*. (Macpherson xiv-xiv)

But Macpherson's epic synthesizes even more than Stafford says. She leaves out that it was not in verse, but in language without a strict meter or line breaks, thus opening the possibility of "prose poetry." This supposedly ancient lyricism-within-epic (Macpherson claimed it had come from ancient sources) gave audiences who were nostalgic for what had been jettisoned for the sake of progress precisely what they most missed, or lacked. It reminded them that poetry could be vital and treat of that which really matters in life, and that a human being could be at once heroic (epic) and possess sensibility (lyric):

> The wind and the rain are over: calm is the noon of day. The clouds are divided in heaven. Over the green hills flies the constant sun. Red through the stony vale comes down the stream of the hill. Sweet are thy murmurs, O stream! But more sweet is the voice I hear. It is the voice of Alpin the son of the song, mourning for the dead. Bent is his head of age, and red his tearful eye. Alpin, thou son of the song, why alone on the silent hill? Why complainest thou, as a blast in the wood; as a wave on the lonely shore? (Macpherson 24)

Ossian's poetry seemed, based on its enthusiastic reception, to be what poetry always was, at its origin and in its essence, in spite of what it had become. This bardic revival had been integrated by Macpherson impressively and seamlessly into the dominant aesthetic of the time. It was a dialectical synthesis which took the literary world by storm, capturing the imagination not only of Goethe (Hennig 127-30) but of Napoleon (Gaskill) and Thomas Jefferson, helping to usher in the next international movement. Jefferson notably called Ossian "the greatest poet that has ever existed" (Carpenter 405-17).

In 1800, Wordsworth would follow suit in attempting to reconnect poetry to its source, at the same time referring to the *Lyrical Ballads* as an "experiment":

> The first volume of these Poems has already been submitted to general perusal. It was published, as an experiment, which, I hoped, might be of some use to ascertain, how far, by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation, that sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted, which a Poet may rationally endeavour to impart. (Wordsworth)

In other words, Wordsworth had a hypothesis that ordinary language of real people in certain emotional states was the stuff of poetry; it only had to be dressed up a little. If the result was successful, it was possible that he had isolated something which was fundamental to poetry. By the time of his writing this preface, his hypothesis, he believed, had been confirmed.

A century after Romanticism's heyday, experimental modernism, which was underway by the end of the nineteenth century, dove headlong (sometimes embarrassingly) beyond the life of the folk (Wordsworth's source) and into the primitive, continuing the quest for the origin and essence of poetry—and really of art in general. One of the common, if implicit, features of the various visual arts movements which had cropped up in the wake of Impressionism was a more in-depth investigation into art's essence. The adoption of "primitive" models was for many, artists and critics alike, instrumental in this quest. The primitive led to the origin, the essence, and this quest was self-conscious and thus implicitly "higher" than naive primitivism. It is the difference, say, between Rousseau and Picasso, the former a self-taught, naive genius, and for this reason somewhat laughable to Apollinaire.

In Virginia Woolf's immediate circle was the critic Clive Bell, who argues that "primitive" art in general exemplifies "significant form"—a term denoting what we really respond to in works of art; this he explains in the influential study, *Art* (1914). Bell himself was a disciple of Roger Fry, a critic and painter who played a major role in bringing the new experimental French art to Britain, and of whom Woolf would write a biography.[2]

Woolf, however, unlike Bell, was first and foremost a practicing artist whose motivation for experimenting was somewhat less about gaining philosophical knowledge for its own sake or to help others see art and literature more clearly as it was to make excellent, groundbreaking works of her own. For Woolf, if there was a theory behind a work it would be implicit in the work and confirmed or disconfirmed according to its success, however that might be determined. This was the test of a theory. For other experimental modernists, the success of a work depended on its having partaken of the essence of art while dispensing with whatever extraneous elements had diluted it, primarily in an effort to attain something like "self-realization." In making this claim, I echo Arthur Danto, who observes (perhaps a bit too sweepingly) that "it began to seem as though the whole main point of art in our century was to pursue the question of its own identity while rejecting all available answers as insufficiently general" ("The End of Art" 31). To qualify Danto's assertion, I suggest that the pursuit of art's identity or essence was an important motivation for experimentalism in art (as well as literature), rather than all art in the twentieth century.

The new styles and forms which appeared were in part a rejection of the past, while also a return to a hypothetical deep past. It is this idea of stripping away what was beside the point of

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[2] *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940)

art which Bell articulates in his book, making him a representative voice of the experimentalist cultural production of the general time he was writing:

> What is the quality common and peculiar to all members of this class? Whatever it be, no doubt it is often found in company with other qualities; but they are adventitious—it is essential. There must be some one quality without which a work of art cannot exist; possessing which, in the least degree, no work is altogether worthless. What is this quality? What quality is shared by all objects that provoke our aesthetic emotions? What quality is common to Sta. Sophia and the windows at Chartres, Mexican sculpture, a Persian bowl, Chinese carpets, Giotto's frescoes at Padua, and the masterpieces of Poussin, Piero della Francesca, and Cézanne? Only one answer seems possible—significant form. In each, lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions. These relations and combinations of lines and colours, these aesthetically moving forms, I call "Significant Form"; and "Significant Form" is the one quality common to all works of visual art. (Bell)

Later, in experimental modernism's last days, Clement Greenberg articulated this dialectical purpose—art's self-understanding—but taking it to an extreme (*What Art Is* 108). He declares that if painting is to succeed in this, works must be reduced to line, color, and surface, for they are all that mattered. Thus he increasingly promoted the qualities of flatness and abstraction, at the expense of painterliness. The following is an instance of Greenberg putting forth these views in the unmistakable language of Hegelian dialectic:

> Still, Newman, and Rothko turn away from the painterliness of Abstract Expressionism as though to save the objects of painterliness—color and openness—from painterliness itself. This is why their art could be called a synthesis of painterly and non-painterly or,

> better, a transcending of the differences between the two. Not a reconciling of these—that belonged to Analytical Cubism, and these three Americans happen to be the first serious abstract painters, the first abstract painters of *style*, really to break with Cubism. (Greenberg 129)

Greenberg's insistence on doing away with figure and representationalism ultimately went without saying. It was an echo of Bell's views on form which he then took to their logical conclusion. Greenberg's medium specificity echoes that of T. S. Eliot, in "The Borderline of Prose," forty-five years before Greenberg's above remarks:

> And I cannot help thinking that Mr. Aldington's prose poems (and I allow them great merit) fail exactly because they seek to evade the technical distinction between two forms. Both verse and prose still conceal unexplored possibilities, but whatever one writes must be definitely and by inner necessity either one or the other. (*The Complete Prose* 541)

In both word and deed, experimental modernists strove to isolate those qualities which made each form or medium unique and which therefore justified its existence. The means by which this refining process was carried out were largely experimental.

Woolf is atypical of experimentalists, however. In "Poetry, Fiction and the Future," the emphasis, rather than on self-realization, is on the dialectical synthesis of two conflicting forms, two different arts (prose and poetry): instead of isolating and exalting either poetry's or prose's essence, she wishes to strike the appropriate balance between them in a new kind of book. Since she considers poetry and prose on their own too weak for the making of great literary production, she seeks to take what is best in each for the purpose of realizing her vision.

At the same time, in the essay she appears to be confident that she has more or less correctly defined poetry and prose in their individual essences, as a necessary preliminary toward synthesis. Woolf is like Gertrude Stein not just in her certainty, but in believing that poetry is fundamentally out of step with life and history at the present stage of their development.[3] Perhaps it could be said that, of the canonical experimentalists writing in English, Woolf and Stein were a bit like the Italian Futurists in their skepticism of the Romantic, somewhat backward-looking idea (exemplified by Ossian's appeal) that the greatness of an old form is worth recovering or capable of being recovered at all. They are unlike T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, or Picasso who ransacked the past for new means and models for enabling art and poetry to come through with the intensity they once did in ancient China or Greece or Sub-Saharan Africa or Paleolithic Europe. Stein and Woolf differ in holding that poetry had been superannuated by historical development. The studies of James Frazer, Lévy-Bruhl, or Jessie Weston for them did not point a way forward for the arts. For Woolf, there is the sense that the world had changed, and art therefore had become far more difficult than it once was. In 1928, she writes a short piece on Yeats, entitled "Mr Yeats," expressing admiration for his ability to produce high-quality poetry at so late a date. Importantly, she does not attribute his success to his having tapped into the treasure trove of the ancient past, but to self-discipline:

> The poet's task is harder than it was. He requires an austerity which is difficult for the young; must have felt the lure of language and not yielded to it; and must have said so many things in so many ways that at last—being always vigilant and not self-satisfied—

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[3] In "Poetry and Grammar," Stein explains that "slowly as everybody knew the names of everything poetry had less and less to do with everything" (140)

> he can use his natural voice in speaking and be still musical. (*The Essays of Virginia Woolf* 545)

Yeats, by contrast, saw the poet's role as highly traditional, and his own practice as aligned with ancient models.

Despite what Arthur Danto claims, regarding the conceptual work of Duchamp and Warhol which he believes was a form of philosophy carried out by art, modernists generally—at least in the early decades of the twentieth century—wished to rid art of whatever lay outside its essence by a process of elimination. This, as I have said, prompted experimentation, a sort of empiricism. If not the search for art's nature as an end in itself, it was Woolf's view that in isolating the essence of two opposing arts it would be possible to invent a new sort of hybrid art. As for the merits of her essay's argument, they do not stand up. I will go into this without further ado. Yet in her favor, Woolf does compellingly diagnose the opposition of prose and poetry/verse as a major issue, one at the heart of literature's ability or lack thereof to capture the truth of modern life (whether inwardly or outwardly) and to speak to readers and audiences as viscerally, directly, and in as universal a voice as Elizabethan drama had once done.

As a theorist, Woolf manages to get about as far as any of her peers who had hoped to supply a solution to the riddle of any particular art's nature, in the form of a theory or doctrine. As an artist, however, one of *The Waves'* many successes is that the writing provokes the reader into contemplating the distinctions between poetry and non-poetry, and ultimately the exact nature of each. Numerous experimental writers of the time, consciously or unconsciously, sought to provoke inquiry into that distinction. However, to the extent that the stated purpose in envisioning and realizing a new type of novel was to bring into existence a hybrid work that

would resonate as powerfully as the plays of the Elizabethan period, she falls short (even if the book did end up selling better than such a challenging work might have). When the book was finally done, Woolf was pleased with it. The book seemed to her "my furthest development so far;" "my first work in my own style" (Warner 15). Ultimately, it seems that the passage of time had changed her hopes for the work. And it seems that the high ambition was a necessary excess for the creation of something radically different, arguably, from what she had previously done.

Still, her original intentions and claims should be taken seriously insofar as they tell us a great deal not only about her mind but also about the psychology of experimentalism at large. As for its reception then and now, one could speculate that, contrary to her intentions, *The Waves*, retained a bit too much of what had come to feel alien about poetry for modern audiences. It is a little known fact that Woolf was keenly interested in poetry. Jacqueline Shin has noted Woolf's deep investment in classic lyric forms: "throughout her career Woolf responded to, repurposed, and was in conversation with the classical Pindaric ode . . . as well as with other related forms of praise including the hymn and prayer" (Shin 110). Chapter II will build upon Shin's work by exploring the complicated nature of Woolf's attitude towards lyric, which she explicitly dialecticizes with realist fiction in an effort to create a new hybrid form retaining the best qualities and capabilities of each. It will also build on Roxanne Covelo's work regarding Woolf's interest in the hybridity of Thomas De Quincey's "impassioned prose" in addition to her misgivings about the realist novel's reliance on trivial facts, both of which she wrote about shortly before "Poetry, Fiction and the Future" (Covelo 40, 45). And it was De Quincey, curiously, who referred to the problem of poetic diction—namely the question of poetry's nature, which Woolf would soon take on—"despairingly" as the *quaestio vexata* (Marks 142).

After decades of experimentation, modernism's inability to achieve the breakthrough—the singularity—for which its experiments were carried out confirmed Duchamp's rather skeptical, agnostic (if not atheistic) view—namely, that art has no essence (*What Art Is* 26). Experimental modernism was checkmated, so to speak, by this chess enthusiast, whose anti-definition of art has prevailed.

An ensuing skepticism in metaphysical investments in origins and centers implied by philosophical definitions would lead to a new sort of conceptual artist. Danto states that "The great thing about the sixties was the dawning recognition that anything could be a work of art" (115). Implicitly, the works of Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst continue to pose the now-redundant, almost mocking riddle: "Can you deny that I am art?" in an age when art as a stable and consistent concept is assumed dead. The question is entirely rhetorical, for it answers itself: "Art is anything the art world says it is, and so it is not anything in the absolute sense we hoped it would be."

As for poetry, the prose/poetry dialectic continues to play out in similar ways. Poems which prompt the question how or why something can be regarded as a poem if it is so different from our commonsense notions of poetry continue to be written. At the same time, many, perhaps most poets and critics have become largely indifferent to the question of poetry's essence, and implicitly appear to align with Duchamp's view on art in general, that no definition is possible. According to Danto, the response was that art is pluralistic or subjective:

> It was basically decided by leading aestheticians that art was indefinable, since there is no overarching feature. At best, art is an open concept. My view is that it has to be a closed

> concept. There must be some overarching properties that explain why art is in some form universal.
>
> It is true that art today is pluralistic. Pluralism was noticed by certain followers of Wittgenstein. What makes art so powerful a force as it appears to be in song and story is due to what makes it art to begin with. (*What Art Is* xii)

Poetry and art of course are not the same thing. But poetry is now assumed to be merely a type of art. But, as I will show, it may not be as simple as that.

Another version of the war of poetry and prose wages on outside of the poetry world, in ever newer, sublimated forms. Novelistic and cinematic science fiction and fantasy, consumerism, and fascism have all served to palliate the nostalgia for myth. After all, the prose/ poetry debate was never about poetry or prose as such, but about myth versus rationalism.

Poetry is neither medium nor message; it is something other: an expression of myth, a prelinguistic form of thought, or as Giambattista Vico calls it, "an innate human faculty" (Vico 144). Myth can be expressed verbally or it can be expressed otherwise, and poetry is merely what we call something when myth has found expression in language. Here I echo Ernst Cassirer, whose philosophy of myth follows in the footsteps Vico's groundbreaking study, *The New Science* (1725). There, Vico makes the radical, counterintuitive claim that "human nature determined the creation of poetic style before prose style, just as human nature determined the creation of mythical and imaginative universals before the rational and philosophical universals, which were the product of discourse in prose" (188-9). *The New Science* was published in Italy several decades before Macpherson's invention of the bard Ossian which, as we have acknowledged, made a large impact on Goethe and German Romanticism generally speaking.

Both works represent attempts to reclaim or understand what the new worldview or "spirit" was increasingly trying to consign to oblivion. For Vico, a refusal to take the humanities seriously blocked the way to cultural improvement. *The New Science* was an answer to the seminal thought of Francis Bacon (whom Vico much admired but believed had failed to recognize the crucial importance of the humanities in spite of his claim, as paraphrased by Anthony Grafton, "that the reform of culture in his own time must be prepared for by a systematic effort to collect and explain the cultural achievements of the past" (xxvi), Cassirer tells us,

> For Vico, the real and truly unitary concept of spirit is constituted in the triad of language, art, and myth. Vico's idea was, however, brought to full systematic determinacy and clarity only with the foundation of the science of spirit undertaken by the philosophy of Romanticism. Here too, as in other spheres, Romantic poetry and philosophy reciprocally prepared the way: it was perhaps a response to Hölderlin's spiritual impulse that Schelling, in the first draft of his system of objective spirit, composed at age twenty, called for an unification of the "monotheism of reason" and the "polytheism of the imagination"—that is, a "mythology of reason." (*The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Mythical Thinking* 4)

In concluding this introduction, and following in the footsteps of Vico, Schelling, and Cassirer, I provide the following: an abbreviated summary of the process by which poetry and rationalism have interacted since the advent of rationalism.

. The dialectic of myth and rationalism unfolds as a historical narrative marked by the interaction of opposing forces and the rise and fall of cultural paradigms.

. It begins with the emergence of rationalism challenging the dominance of myth as the means of educating citizens. Plato and the rational movement advocate for reason over myth in shaping societal values, leading to a conflict between poetry/myth and philosophy, particularly with the rise of democracy.

. As rationalism gains traction, it weakens the grip of myth and paganism, gradually repressing traditional mythological narratives and prompting nostalgia among the populace for the old ways. However, Christianity, mediated through Neoplatonism, eventually synthesizes the opposition between myth and rationalism, allowing myth to coexist with rational thought.

. During the Renaissance, semblance or "pattern thinking,"[4] preserved through Neoplatonist thought, prevails alongside Christianity, shaping intellectual discourse. However, the scientific method emerges as a dominant force, challenging religious and superstitious beliefs, and leading to the antithesis between materialism and religion.

. Poetry, traditionally associated with myth, becomes a target in the wake of scientific advancement, with prose hailed as preferable for its clarity and utility in conveying knowledge. The rise of the novel further blurs the distinction between poetry and prose, leading to the dominance of the term "literature" over "poetry."

. As science asserts its supremacy, displacing Christianity and repressing myth, there is a growing nostalgia for myth among the populace. Poetry, once a popular form of entertainment, becomes an elite art alienated from mainstream audiences, prompting the emergence of light verse culture, to palliate the nostalgia for traditional poetic forms.

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[4] As mentioned in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, Northrop Frye considers the old compatibility of astronomy and astrology to have owed to "the schematic and symmetrical type of pattern-thinking which the poets use" (*Spiritus Mundi* 75).

. Despite attempts by elite artists and the avant-garde to reconcile the antithesis between rationalism and myth, no synthesis akin to Christianity emerges. Instead, novelistic science fiction and new media like television and film offer strong but ultimately fragmented attempts at synthesis, lacking the unifying power of religion. Ultimately, the dialectic of myth and rationalism persists as a complex interplay of cultural forces, shaping the trajectory of thought and expression.

CHAPTER II

VIRGINIA WOOLF'S QUEST FOR A SYNTHESIS OF POETRY AND PROSE

It is not rhyming and versing that maketh a poet—no more than a long gown maketh an advocate.

—Philip Sidney

Poetry is metrical writing.

If it isn't that I don't know what it is.

—J. V. Cunningham

That my writing is poetry no one can deny, that it is verse I will not insist.

—Edith Södergran

You campaign in poetry, you govern in prose.

—Mario Cuomo

Poetry is to prose as dancing is to walking.

—Paul Valéry

Just over a month after the publication of *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Woolf began to plan a new novel: another "serious poetic experimental" and "a mystical poetical" book (Warner 22). But before giving herself over to what she considered this more serious project, she would write *Orlando* (1928). On Nov. 7, 1928 she writes:

> Orlando is of course a very quick brilliant book. Yes, but I did not try to explore. And must I always explore? Yes I think so still . . . . Orlando taught me how to write a direct sentence; taught me continuity & narrative & how to keep the realities at bay. But I purposely avoided of course any other difficulty. I never got down to my depths & made shapes square up, as I did in The Lighthouse. (23)

The germ of this new novel appears a year before she wrote "Poetry, Fiction and the Future." At this extremely early stage Woolf was beginning to think about a particular solitudinous, poetic, dreamlike feeling which she would later consider a departure from fiction's typical emotional and atmospheric range. On September 30, 1926, in her diary, Woolf records,

> I wished to add some remarks to this, on the mystical side of this solitude; how it is not oneself but something in the universe that one's left with. It is this that is frightening & exciting in the midst of my profound gloom, depression, boredom, whatever it is: One sees a fin passing far out. What image can I reach to convey what I mean? Really there is none I think. The interesting thing is that in all my feeling & thinking I have never come up against this before. Life is, soberly & accurately, the oddest affair; has in it the essence of reality. I used to feel this as a child—couldn't step across a puddle once I remember, for thinking how strange—what am I ? etc. . . . All I mean to make is a note of a curious

> state of mind. I hazard the guess that it may be the impulse behind another book. At present my mind is totally blank and virgin of books. (26)

It was this feeling which Woolf continued to develop and became the impetus for a new type of novel, at first called *The Moths* and finally *The Waves*. All things considered, "Poetry, Fiction and the Future" was written quite early in the planning and writing process, as it was published on August 7, 1927 in the *New York Herald Tribune* (subsequently it would be collected under the name "The Narrow Bridge of Art"). With this manifesto, we can see what Woolf desired for her book prior to its final materialization at the end of 1931 when it was published.

In one sense, the piece is hard to call a manifesto since Woolf writes as a disinterested critic, not a fiction writer. Speaking in the capacity of a critic about to make an intervention, she asks why it is that critics so often "turn their backs upon the present and gaze steadily into the past" (*Collected Essays* 218). It becomes clear that by critics she does not mean mere reviewers who write about "what is actually being written in the moment" but only in a transient way. This statement makes clear that Woolf sees the critic as a sort of cultural leader, and a leader's job is to prepare the group she leads for the future. She declares that "in an age like ours there is a great temptation to indulge in [speculations]" since "it is an age clearly where we are not fast anchored where we are; things are moving round us; we are moving ourselves." She asks, "Is it not the critic's duty to tell us, or to guess at least, where we are going?"

Woolf has now accomplished her first task, of providing justification for the argument she is about to make. She has articulated a problem, and will now help orient a public perplexed by constant change. After she has spoken on the present state of affairs in literature, she will speak on the future. It is really here that the manifesto begins.

Lyric poetry too narrow for modern life, the poetic play not revivable

Woolf states that nobody who reads "much modern literature" can help "being aware of some dissatisfaction, some difficulty . . . lying in our way." Exactly what could she mean? Woolf apparently means experimentalism when she states that "writers are attempting what they cannot achieve, are forcing the form they use to contain a meaning which is strange to it." This statement suggests that Woolf feels that much experimentalism in literature is carried out specifically for the sake of trying to get old forms to do new or strange things, and this typically results in failure—something of which readers are now weary. As we shall soon see, Woolf is to propose a way of combining old forms to achieve what was in the past achieved by one particular form—Elizabethan drama, which cannot be resurrected. But before we get there, she makes a large manifesto-like claim in an effort to explain why writes are forcing their form to do what is alien to it.:

> Many reasons might be given, but here let us select only one, and that is the failure of poetry to serve us as it has served so many generations of our fathers. Poetry is not lending her services to us nearly as freely as she did to them. The great channel of expression which has carried away so much energy, so much genius, seems to have narrowed itself or to have turned aside.

So it appears that she has in mind poetry, first and foremost. Poetry in the past had satisfied people, but it no longer does. She continues, "But for our generation and the generation that is coming the lyric cry of ecstasy or despair, which is so intense, so personal, and so limited, is not

enough." And it is not enough because people's minds are "full of monstrous, hybrid, unmanageable emotions."

We should briefly pause to linger on this. While it seems odd that lyric should struggle to satisfy people's needs when their minds, as she says, are full of emotion, it is the "hybrid" nature of her generation's emotion which lyric has such a tough time dealing with. It may seem strange to bring John Stuart Mill—being on the subject of poetry so drastically different from his teacher Jeremy Bentham, who was already quoted as saying "between poetry and truth there is natural opposition"—into this reading, but it will become evident that he is a hidden influence in Woolf's manifesto.

In fact we can perceive the faintest resemblance already in her implication that lyric is ill-suited to portraying hybrid emotion. For in "Two Kinds of Poetry" Mill explains that the associative groups of thought and imagery of lyric will revolve around "some dominant *feeling*" (Mill 33). As Woolf explains later, poetry is too pure of heart to take on such hybrid feelings, often characterized by a blend of ugliness and beauty. This distinctly modern condition for which no single emotion predominates, and where two emotions can coincide in a paradoxical way, appears for Woolf to violate poetry's unspoken law of emotional purity.

Yet, for all this accord, Mill and Woolf happen to disagree on one extremely important matter: whether prose and poetry are opposing categories, as well as whether poetry and metrical composition are the same thing. Mill for his part considers the essence of poetry to be a thing quite unrelated to the question of meter. In "What is Poetry?" he states that any definition "which confounds poetry with metrical composition" is a "wretched mockery" (4). As we will soon see,

importantly, Woolf does confound them, since she depends on the poetry/prose dichotomy in order to solve the problem she has set out to solve.

Yet let us first return to Woolf's point about life's hybrid nature. She says that "it is in this atmosphere of doubt and conflict that writers have now to create, and the fine fabric of a lyric is no more fitted to contain this point of view than a rose leaf to envelop the rugged immensity of a rock" (*Collected Essays* 219). Woolf's analogy suggests that lyric poetry is too delicate and flowery a thing and therefore ill-suited to tackling hard, rough, large subject matter and states of mind.

She asks now, rhetorically, what writers formerly used when they needed to "express such an attitude as this—an attitude which is full of contrast and collision." Her answer is the poetic drama of the Elizabethan age, which is nevertheless "the one form which seems dead beyond all possibility of resurrection today."

So here we have, then, an impasse. Since Elizabethan drama is no longer a viable resource, some new form will have to be invented. But before she makes such a claim outright, she spends some time defending her position. "Since the death of Dryden," she tells us of poetic drama, "every great poet it seems has had his fling. Wordsworth and Coleridge, Shelley and Keats, Tennyson, Swinburne, and Browning (to name the dead only) have all written poetic plays, but none has succeeded."

Having had us reflect and agree that no great poet since the age of Dryden managed to compose poetic plays to rival those of Elizabethan drama, she says why. Her explanation is fascinating for its similarity to Eliot's critique in "Andrew Marvell" (1921). Of a sophisticated poetic faculty he calls "wit," he explains,

> When we come to Gray and Collins, the sophistication remains only in the language, and has disappeared from the feeling. Gray and Collins were masters, but they had lost that hold on human values, that firm grasp of human experience, which is a formidable achievement of the Elizabethan and Jacobean poets. This wisdom, cynical perhaps but untired (in Shakespeare, a terrifying clairvoyance), leads toward, and is only completed by, the religious comprehension. (*Selected Prose* 165).

The time of Thomas Gray and William Collins of course is the early Eighteenth century, and Eliot means what he terms the "sentimental age." It is here, according to Eliot, that something important was lost: literature lost sight of "human experience," "human values," and wit.

Now, without digressing too much longer, let us consider another statement of Eliot's in "The Possibility of a Poetic Drama" (1922): "The essential is not, of course, that drama should be written in verse. . . . the essential is to get upon the stage this precise statement of life which is at the same time a *point of view* [my italics], a world—a world which the author's mind has subjected to a complete process of simplification" (*The Sacred Wood* 68). How similar this statement is to that of Woolf when she explains "why poets can no longer write poetic plays" (219). She informs us that in addition to most of today's writers who "see things at an awkward angle,"

> there are others who seem by nature or circumstances so placed that they can use their faculties freely upon important things. It is not that they write quickly or easily, or become at once successful or celebrated. One is rather trying to analyse a quality which is present in most of the great ages of literature and is most marked in the work of Elizabethan dramatists. They seem to have an *attitude toward life, a position which*

allows them to move their limbs freely; a view which, though made up of all sorts of different things, falls into the right perspective for their purposes. (*Collected Essays* 220; my italics)

But today, Woolf claims, this attitude toward life—so similar to what Eliot says of the Elizabethan and Jacobean poets' "firm grasp of human experience"—has been lost. This is precisely what Eliot means by "point of view." And for both it appears that poetic drama needs more than any other element, including metrical composition, a strong point of view, an attitude toward life. So why has the attitude toward life been lost—or rather, how was it lost?

Woolf tells us that it was partially "the result of circumstances" which had enabled them to have "an attitude toward life which made them able to express themselves freely and fully" (221). But unlike those of later writers, Shakespeare wrote plays which "are not the work of a baffled and frustrated mind; they are the perfectly elastic envelope of his thought. . . . Elizabethan dramatists . . . never make us feel that they are afraid or self-conscious, or that there is anything hindering, hampering, inhibiting the full current of their minds." Today's writer, in sharp contrast, "is not at his ease. He is afraid, he is forced, he is self-conscious."

The diagnosis—that modern writers are self-conscious and thus awkward, unable to mobilize the full extent of the mind—greatly resembles Eliot's pronouncement in "the Metaphysical Poets" (1921) in which he articulates what is only suggested in the Marvell essay:

> In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered; and this dissociation, as is natural, was aggravated by the influence of the two most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden. Each of these men performed certain poetic functions so magnificently well that the magnitude of the effect concealed

> the absence of others. The language went on and in some respects improved; the best verse of Collins, Gray, Johnson, and even Goldsmith satisfies some of our fastidious demands better than that of Donne or Marvell or King. But while the language became more refined, the feeling became more crude. The feeling, the sensibility, expressed in the *Country Churchyard* (to say nothing of Tennyson and Browning) is cruder than that in the *Coy Mistress*. (*Selected Prose* 64-5)

Eliot's "dissociation of sensibility" concept thus helps us see that Woolf's thinking is indebted to Eliot. Yet while she agrees with him in regards to the problem, her solution, we will see, is unique. It is unlike Eliot's solution—that poets become more "difficult":

> We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning. (65)

But for now let us fully appreciate the fact that in combining the problem of the difficulty of writing poetic drama with her use of the Elizabethan period as a model of non-alienated literary production, coupled with her two claims that the writer's ability to deal with radical heterogeneity has been lost and that modern life is characterized by complexity and hybridity, she clearly draws from Eliot. Thus situating Woolf's essay squarely within that conversation—to the extent that she is addressing the same problem as Eliot—we are able to better appreciate her singular contribution while appreciating how it could be that an individual writer used the same set of issues as another writer to justify her own unique solution to them. In this case, the context

happens to be the debate concerning poetry's place in an extremely complex and alienated world (or a "dissociated" one, to use Eliot's term) where it was increasingly threatened by scientism and the language of conceptually clear, factual prose. Where Eliot believes poetry had to become more difficult, more allusive, subtle, and complex, we are soon to find that Woolf believes that poetry ought to be abandoned—both the poetic play and lyric. And where Eliot believes, as we saw earlier in "The Borderline of Prose," that poetry and prose cannot mix, Woolf will argue later that they can be synthesized.

Right now, however, Woolf has been explaining why "the modern playwright has either no attitude at all, or one so strained that it cramps his limbs and distorts his vision" (*Collected Essays* 222). Woolf wonders what it is that "has put the writer now at such an angle that he cannot pour his mind straight into the old channels of English poetry?" (222). In answering her own question, she returns to the idea of self-consciousness, a condition she attributes to atomized life:

> Some sort of answer may be suggested by a walk through the streets of any large town. The long avenue of brick is cut up into boxes, each of which is inhabited by a different human being who has put locks on his doors and bolts on his windows to ensure some privacy, yet is linked to his fellows by wires which pass overhead, by waves of sound which pour through the roof and speak aloud to him of battles and murders and strikes and revolutions all over the world. And if we go in and talk to him we shall find that he is a wary, secretive, suspicious animal, extremely self-conscious, extremely careful not to give himself away. Indeed, there is nothing in modern life which forces him to do it. There is no violence in private life; we are polite, tolerant, agreeable, when we meet.

Then, we wonder, what might account for such suspiciousness and self-consciousness, since there is, as she says, nothing in any obvious way forcing it. It is here, in the following explanation, where she agrees perfectly with Eliot in "The Metaphysical Poets." Woolf:

> But again we should find if we took a walk with our friend that he is extremely alive to everything—to ugliness, sordidity, beauty, amusement. He follows every though careless where it may lead him. He discusses openly what used never to be mentioned even privately. And this very freedom and curiosity are perhaps the cause of what appears to be his most marked characteristic—the strange way in which things that have no apparent connection are associated in his mind. Feelings which used to come single and separate do so no longer. Beauty is part ugliness; amusement part disgust; pleasure part pain. Emotions which used to enter the mind whole are now broken up on the threshold.

Compare this with Eliot's explanation of the dissociation of sensibility occurring after the idealized period had come to an end—a period very much resembling the contemporary moment just described by Woolf:

> It is something which had happened to the mind of England between the time of Donne or Lord Herbert of Cherbury and the time of Tennyson and Browning; it is the difference between the intellectual poet and the reflective poet. Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the

> noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes. (*Selected Prose* 64)

Eliot here speaks of "disparate experience" and the necessity that the poet be able to "amalgamate" such experience. This is precisely what Woolf seems to be saying when she refers to "the strange way in which things that have no apparent connection are associated in [the modern person's] mind," except that for her this is simply how people generally feel—by default. Thus where Eliot views this particular associative manner of thinking as a trait possessed by a poet whose mind is "perfectly equipped for its work," Woolf believes that—in 1927—everybody's mind automatically works this way. And so it is here, with this distinction, that Eliot and Woolf part ways; for where Eliot had seen an opportunity (occasioned by the complexity of modern life) to return to the "wit" of the Metaphysicals (that is, what poets "equipped for their work" should always practice), Woolf sees no such thing, advocating instead for a sharp break with the past, but before doing so arguing why lyric, as much as poetic drama, is ill-equipped to satisfy the psychological needs of her contemporaries.

Woolf's assessment of lyric's unsuitability to modern life depends, implicitly, on a theory of emotional purity. Modern life is so full of affective juxtapositions, she claims, that lyric poetry —which treats a single, non-ugly emotion at a time—could never do such an emotion justice without in some way violating its own nature. She provides the following example: "It is a spring night, the moon is up, the nightingale singing, the willows bending over the river. Yes, but at the same time a diseased old woman is picking over her greasy rags on a hideous iron bench. She and the spring enter his mind together; they blend but do not mix" (*Collected Essays* 223). This, on Woolf's view, is an anti-lyric situation. The spring night and the moon and nightingale

represent the proper stuff of lyric, but the sick old woman with her rags and the iron bench are anti-lyrical. The situation's two "incongruent" faces, as it were, the one enchanting or sacred, the other ugly or profane, cannot unite into an emotional whole, cannot be reconciled. "But the emotion Keats felt when he heard the song of the nightingale," she elaborates, "is one and entire, though it passes from joy in beauty to sorrow at the unhappiness of human fate. He makes no contrast. In his poem sorrow is the shadow which accompanies beauty." What she means is that sorrow is beauty's natural complement (its "shadow"), while sordidness belongs to an entirely different class. Woolf realizes it is not the world alone which had changed since Keats's day; it is equally the new mentality—ironic to the core—which had brought about this change owing to its inability to accept and identify with unadulterated lyric emotion. She continues,

> The modern poet talks of the nightingale who sings 'jug jug to dirty ears'. There trips along by the side of our modern beauty some mocking spirit which sneers at beauty for being beautiful; which turns the looking-glass and shows us that the other side of her cheek is pitted and deformed. It is as if the modern mind, wishing always to verify its emotions, had lost the power of accepting anything simply for what it is.

The ideal beauty of former times, she means, is no longer honest. Lyrical emotion does not feel sincere, or aligned with how people really feel. While this might on its face ring true, it is ultimately difficult to accept. Woolf is misrepresenting things.

While it is surely true that in the twentieth century lyric had begun to experiment with combinations of affects (including "ugly" ones) in a more radical, systematic way, this was but the culmination of a trend which had begun over a century earlier, during Romanticism (before Keats), when poets had begun to bring the frightening and the beautiful into combination with

increasing frequency and consistency, so that by Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs Du Mal* (1857), sacred and profane feelings (the profane includes beauty, decay, and corruption) once felt to be irreconcilably opposed were ingeniously brought into harmony, suggesting that their coincidence could be a source of lyrical greatness, something Catullus had proven in his own way two millennia before.[5]

By the twentieth century, however, it becomes evident that poets were self-consciously bringing together as many competing emotions as they could in surprising juxtapositions to induce sensations which would go beyond mere estrangement or morbid fascination, in the direction of provocation and alienation. So by Woolf's writing of this essay, Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) had already shown that the new compositional method could yield lyrical poetry which deeply resonated with modern readers, prompting us to ask how Woolf, who was entirely familiar with her friend's poem, could claim that lyric was constitutionally unable to assimilate the contradictory emotions and sensations coloring (or, ought I to say, discoloring?) modern consciousness.

Poetry and prose in opposition

Woolf has made her case for why the social and psychological conditions of her day had been unfavorable to lyric. She will now contrast lyric with "prose." Prose, as we will see, is not cut out for the representation of beauty, for that is poetry's sphere of operations. Allow us to see what she actually says:

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[5] It is probable that Woolf was familiar with the ancient Roman poet Catullus at the time of writing the present essay, for she mentions him in *The Waves (*reverently, as Neville) no fewer than six times.

> There is a candour, an honesty in modern writing which is salutary if not supremely delightful. Modern literature, which had grown a little sultry and scented with Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater, revived instantly from her nineteenth-century languor when Samuel Butler and Bernard Shaw began to burn their feathers and apply their salts to her nose. She awoke; she sat up; she sneezed. Naturally, the poets were frightened away.
>
> For of course poetry has always been overwhelmingly on the side of beauty. She has always insisted on certain rights, such as rhyme, metre, poetic diction. She has never been used for the common purpose of life. Prose has taken all the dirty work on to her own shoulders; has answered letters, paid bills, written articles, made speeches, served the needs of businessmen, shopkeepers, lawyers, soldiers, peasants. (223)

There is a lot to unpack in this passage. We notice, significantly, that literature and poetry are treated as separate categories, as are poetry and prose. Literature simply means imaginative writing, or artistic writing, and it encompasses both poetry and prose. We notice, second, that poetry is treated by Woolf as writing "marked" female—with Woolf referring to poetry as "she."

As stated at the beginning of the introductory chapter, the basic attitude of poetry being viewed as the female to prose's male had begun in the Renaissance. Woolf appears to keep alive the analogy with her assigning of poetry to the beautiful and the useless ("never been used for the common purpose"), and prose to labor and practical/public affairs. It is strange, because the publication of *A Room of One's Own* is but two years away. On Woolf's view, poetry is a private affair and, like a good wife, she stays at home prettifying herself and it; meanwhile her husband (prose) goes into the world and earns a living by participating in commerce, production, and politics. In her attitude, Woolf seems patriarchal, for she views poetry, with the feminine, as

essentially frivolous (which, however, turns out not to be completely true), insofar as poetry by definition deals with beauty far more adeptly than practical or gritty realities. We learn as well that poetry "insists on" rhyme and meter. This means that rhyme and meter help with the cultivation of beauty and in escaping from practical life, and therefore are indispensable to poetry. But is this really true? From the get-go, one feels compelled to remind Woolf that letters —even official ones—and political writings had, from antiquity, been composed in verse (metered verse, that is),[6] which by definition cannot be prose. Thus even if this had long ceased to be true, Woolf is nevertheless mistaken for having us think that prose was always the language of public life, whereas poetry "has never been used for the common purpose of life."

In any event, Woolf's main point is that poetry, unlike prose, is unable to do what would have to be done because it is so overwhelmingly "on the side of beauty." Being so dainty, it cannot touch the present discord:

> Thus when we ask poetry to express this discord, this incongruity, this sneer, this contrast, this curiosity, the quick, queer emotions which are bred in small separate rooms, the wide, general ideas which civilization teaches, she cannot move quickly enough, simply enough, or broadly enough to do it. Her accent is too marked; her manner too emphatic. She gives us instead lovely lyric cries of passion; with a majestic sweep of her arm she bids us take refuge in the past; but she does not keep pace with the mind and fling herself subtly, quickly, passionately into its various sufferings and joys. (223-24)

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[6] Solon, for instance, wrote about political ideas in verse (Everitt 61).

Woolf has here given us another important characteristic of poetry—its passionate and therefore unsubtle nature, its lack of nuance, its inability to handle complexity, when modern life and the modern psyche are themselves full of complexity. For these reasons she states,

> It may be that the emotions here sketched in such rude outline and imputed to the modern mind submit more readily to prose than to poetry. It may be possible that prose is going to take over—has, indeed, already taken over—some of the duties which were once discharged by poetry. (224)

Prose, that is, has taken over those duties poetry discharged on the stage, when the lines of the poetic play were delivered in metrical verse. But is it the meter and rhyme which account for poetry's passionate form of expression? Can she not speak on matters with nuance due to speaking in meter? While Woolf may be right to say that metered speech makes for too pronounced an "accent," one out-of-step with the informality of modern life, it would be difficult to convincingly chalk up poetry's lack of quickness and precision to metered verse. And while one could defend Woolf by suggesting that she here means that poetry's passionate nature is what makes it so ill-suited to nuanced articulation and modern hybridity, she is nevertheless conflating poetry and metered speech and opposing them to prose, when it is unclear that poetry and verse deserve to be so closely identified; and when poetry and prose may not really be opposed, given that poetry had surely been written without meter or line breaks. Why is Woolf bunching some categories together, and setting others awkwardly in opposition?

Quite simply, she is thinking about the future, a future in which prose will take on more than it already has taken on. In doing so, it will have to behave more like those forms which have become attenuated and disused. For it is only natural that something as vital as prose would do

the work of what is unable to do its job effectively. It will take the lead in dialectically combining with its weaker antithesis, subsuming it, retaining only what serves it and discarding what does not. Woolf writes,

> we may guess that . . . in ten or fifteen years' time prose will be used for purposes for which prose has never been used before. That cannibal, the novel, which has devoured so many forms of art will by then have devoured even more. We shall be forced to invent new names for the different books which masquerade under this one heading. And it is possible that there will be among the so-called novels one which we shall scarcely know how to christen. It will be written in prose, but in prose which has many of the characteristics of poetry. It will have something of the exaltation of poetry, but much of the ordinariness of prose. It will be dramatic, and yet not a play. It will be read, not acted.

So here we have a more concrete idea of what Woolf has in mind. The novel is a prose literary form, one which has cannibalized other forms. In the future the novel will have "devoured" another: poetry. It will also have some of the attributes of a play, and be a composite of the novel, lyric poetry, and the drama. Nevertheless it will be a novel rather than a play, we can merely assume, for the novel had usurped drama as the culture's premier literary form, and thus it will necessarily have the "ordinariness of prose," its special role being "to express some of those feelings which seem at the moment to be balked by poetry pure and simple and find the drama equally inhospitable to them."

As she will discuss now, the novel—though extremely adept in some respect—is far from perfect, suffering as it does from its own excesses and deficiencies, for which certain attributes of poetry and drama will be able to compensate.

Description of the new novel, with a less feminine conception of poetry

Having set up the dichotomy between prose and poetry, Woolf is ready to reveal the new novel, her "play poem," in more depth. She explains that

> it will differ from the novel as we know it now chiefly in that it will stand further back from life. It will give, as poetry does, the outline rather than the detail. It will make little use of the marvellous fact-recording power, which is one of the attributes of fiction. It will tell us very little of the houses, incomes, occupations of its characters; it will have little kinship with the sociological novel or the novel of environment. (224-25)

One of the hallmarks of realist fiction, according to Woolf here, is that it is full of fact and detail. And even though it is perhaps more adept at furnishing such information—to sociological ends—than any other literary form, she regards the tendency as a bit tedious. Her new novel, accordingly, will have very little of this; and in its place, it will feature something belonging to poetry—something she had neglected to mention previously when her task was to convince us that poetry could not do what needed to be done, i.e. when portraying it (i.e. "her") as frivolous and necessarily bound up with meter and rhyme. Now, having switched to the neuter pronoun, and with the aim of convincing us that the novel needs certain elements of poetry, she explains,

> it will express the feeling and ideas of the characters closely and vividly, but from a different angle. It will resemble poetry in this that it will give not only or mainly people's relations to each other and their activities together, as the novel has hitherto done, but it will give the relation of the mind to general ideas and its soliloquy in solitude. (225)

We now have a different conception of poetry for which the exploration of depth—not surfaces and beautiful feelings—is its strong suit, its proper subject matter. Poetry, for Woolf, shares concerns with philosophy. And beyond doing some of the work of philosophy (giving "the relation of the mind to general ideas"), it is characterized as a "soliloquy in solitude." But what exactly does Woolf mean by this? In an especially notable passage, she makes that clear:

> We have come to forget that a large and important part of life consists in our emotions toward such things as roses and nightingales, the dawn, the sunset, life, death, and fate; we forget that we spend much time sleeping, dreaming, thinking, reading, alone; we are not entirely occupied in personal relations; all our energies are not absorbed in making our livings. The psychological novelist has been too prone to limit psychology to the psychology of personal intercourse; we long sometimes to escape from the incessant, the remorseless analysis of falling into love and falling out of love, of what Tom feels for Judith and Judith does or does not altogether feel for Tom. We long for some more impersonal relationship. We long for ideas, for dreams, for imaginations, for poetry.

The "soliloquy in solitude" has to do with lyric's preoccupation with precisely those things the novel, she believes, neglects. The novel treats of interpersonal relations, marriage and commerce in particular, whereas lyric deals in such private activities as dreaming, imagining, and deep contemplation of nature's marvels, as well as themes in which philosophy has long been invested: "life, death, and fate." John Stuart Mill, that eminent Victorian, has a very similar way of looking at the difference between the poet and the novelist. In an essay entitled "What is Poetry," he states:

> What [poets] know has come by observation of themselves; they have found *there* one highly delicate, and sensitive, and refined specimen of human nature, on which the laws of human emotion are written in large characters, such as can be read off without much study: and other knowledge of mankind, such as comes to men of the world by outward experience, is not indispensable to them as poets: but to the novelist such knowledge is all in all; he has to describe outward things, not the inward man; actions and events, not feelings. (9)

Poetry's private exploration of the solitudinous self treated as a stand-in for humanity at large is then what she means by "soliloquy in solitude."

Soliloquy and the Influence of John Stuart Mill

Soliloquy is a dramatic device. Yet it can be viewed as a point of contact between dramatic and lyric poetry. It is likely that, in speaking of soliloquy, Woolf has in mind Mill, who, in "What is Poetry," states that "All poetry is of the nature of soliloquy" (*Essays on Poetry* 12). Mill there contrasts soliloquy with "oratory" or "eloquence," concluding that all art forms, not just poetry, are doing their purest work—"to paint the truth of the human soul" (8)—in the soliloquacious mode: "Purely pathetic music commonly partakes of soliloquy. The soul is absorbed in its distress, and though there may be bystanders, it is not thinking of them" (15). Said differently: "Poetry . . . is the natural fruit of solitude and meditation; eloquence, of intercourse with the world" (13).

We can infer that Woolf had read Mill, and took his ideas seriously. She writes in "The Leaning Tower" (1940) (admittedly later than the essay under consideration), that "We listen to

oratory, not poetry" (*Collected Essays* 175). Referring to a passage from Wordsworth (the very poet Mill credits for saving his life during his breakdown), Woolf states, "We listen to that when we are alone. We remember that in solitude. Is that the difference between politician's poetry and poet's poetry?" (176).

> Let us now compare Woolf's with these words of Mill:
>
> eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *over*heard. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude, and bodying itself forth in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet's mind. (12)

Never mind the striking similarity between this last sentence and T. S. Eliot's formulation of the "objective correlative" in "Hamlet" (*Selected Essays* 145), the cited passage itself makes it all but definite that Woolf had read Mill by 1940. Yet given the parallels discussed already, and the one which follows, it would be difficult to remain dubious that Woolf had read "What is Poetry" by the time she had begun writing "Poetry, Fiction and the Future" in preparation for *The Waves*, wherein six characters speak in alternating soliloquies.

Another piece of evidence that Woolf had been strongly influenced by Mill in "Poetry, Fiction and the Future" is that she and Mill both argue that drama combines the best of fiction (which Mill actually disdains)[7] with the best of poetry. On the merits of drama, Mill says the following: "There is one order of composition which requires the union of poetry and incident,

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[7] "the minds and hearts of greatest depth and elevation are commonly those which take greatest delight in poetry; the shallowest and emptiest, on the contrary, are, by universal remark, the most addicted to novel-reading" (7)

each in its highest kind—the dramatic" (9). Does this not sound like the synthesis Woolf seeks to bring about, in her new sort of novel, necessitated, as she has emphatically argued, by the demise of poetic drama?

Woolf's next point follows the claim that novels do not dwell enough in dreams, imaginations, and poetry. She tells us that "it is one of the glories of the Elizabethan dramatists that they give us this. . . . In *Measure for Measure*, for example, passages of extreme psychological subtlety, are mingled with profound reflections, tremendous imaginations" (225). This last point implies that Shakespeare's plays combine the poetic (reflections and imaginations) and the novelistic (psychology), echoing Mill who observes that the "combination of the two excellencies is what renders Shakespeare so generally acceptable, each sort of readers finding in him what is suitable to their faculties. To the many he is great as a story-teller, to the few as a poet" (9).

By now it ought to be evident that Woolf had used Mill's (or at the very least, a Mill-like) opposition of poetry and the novel, with a very similar theoretical underpinning, as the basis for her poetry/prose antithesis. However, she goes beyond Mill in imagining a new sort of novel which would accomplish what Elizabethan drama no longer is able to do because it is a dead form. It is important to appreciate Woolf's position as having grown out of the previous intervention of Mill in the prose/poetry debate which had commenced at modernity's inception since it gives us a deeper understanding of the stakes of Woolf's argument, as well as a more nuanced sense of what is new (and not new) about her position.

The prose poem

We are nearing the end of the essay. Woolf states that the Elizabethan plays were useless as documents bearing witness to the social and economic conditions of a place and moment in history (*Collected Essays* 225). Thus Elizabethan drama lacks yet another important element of the realist novel, related to the "beast-of-burden work" of recording facts (228), one which Woolf seems more than happy to dispense with, for it will make room for other things—more "important things," a phrase she uses again at the very close of the essay (229). What does she have in mind? Reiterating some of her previous statements, Woolf gives the following description of the novel future novel, which

> will take on some of the attributes of poetry. It will give the relations of man to nature, to fate; his imagination; his dreams. But it will also give the sneer, the contrast, the question, the closeness and complexity of life. It will take the mould of that queer conglomeration of incongruous things—the modern mind. (226)

It will accomplish all of this in prose, not poetry. "But can prose," Woolf asks,

> adequate though it is to deal with the common and the complex—can prose say the simple things which are so tremendous? Give the sudden emotions which are so surprising? Can it chant the elegy, or hymn the love, or shriek in terror, or praise the rose, the nightingale, or the beauty of the night? Can it leap at one spring at the heart of its subject as the poet does? I think not. That is the penalty it pays for having dispensed with the incantation and the mystery, with rhyme and metre.

So even though it will, as it were, import certain aspects alien to the novel from the foreign land of poetry, certain of the latter's attributes will have to be excluded to the extent that they are not translatable into prose. The huge emotions and magical properties agilely drawn and expressed

cannot be present in the future novel because these cannot be done justice. She writes that "one has always a feeling of discomfort in the presence of the purple patch or the prose poem. The objection to the purple patch, however, is not that it is purple but that it is a patch." Here she seems to be echoing Eliot's argument in "The Borderline of Prose," quoted at the beginning of the introductory chapter: "Both verse and prose still conceal unexplored possibilities, but whatever one writes must be definitely and by inner necessity either one or the other" (*The Complete Prose* 541.) Eliot discusses the unsuccessful prose poems of Richard Aldington, which though

> delicately handled, yet seem to hesitate between two media. They are more truly "prose poems" than those of Rimbaud, which were, in form, pure prose. There is a prose arbitrariness and a verse arbitrariness; whichever we are writing, there are moments when we simply have to conform to the limitations of the medium we have chosen. (539)

The main problem, however, with Woolf's argument here is that she clearly does not mean precisely what Eliot does because if she did she would be proposing that the novel of the future would do what Rimbaud already has. While Eliot and Woolf seem to agree that the "prose poem" is a kind of oxymoron, with Eliot stating that "poetry is written in verse, and prose is written in prose" (538), they differ on the possibility of creating something truly poetic in prose, with Eliot stating "nor would Rimbaud be more 'poetic' if he had put his visions into verse" (539). Woolf, by contrast, argues that poetry must sacrifice something of its nature if it is to be translated into prose. Indeed, for Eliot it would seem that poetry need not dispense with those qualities Woolf names—"incantation," "mystery," "shrieks of terror," "the beauty of the night"—when one reflects that Rimbaud includes all of that in his *Illuminations*, a fact Eliot acknowledges in

writing of those pieces that they are "as obscure as Kubla Khan or Christabel" and rise "immediately and unreflectingly from the core of [Rimbaud's] feeling" (538). These qualities are of course precisely what Woolf thinks would be impossible to bring into prose—and we feel that Woolf, if pressed, would be forced to conclude that Rimbaud's prose poems were not successful as poetry. It is owing to this subtle point that Woolf's position can be appreciated as entirely unique, since no one maintaining the strict poetry/prose antithesis had argued previously that some of poetry (though not other attributes, like meter and effusively praising nature) could be isolated and successfully imported into prose.

Yet ultimately she and Eliot agree, fundamentally, that verse is essential to poetry, and that prose is antithetical to it. Yet is this really a tenable position, when we consider the fact that Eliot has already argued that Rimbaud's *Illuminations* are at once 1) written in prose entirely and also 2) no less poetic than they would have were they rendered in verse? He does after all admit that they are written by "a man much greater than any poet then living" at the time of their genesis, which implies that they are poems—even though poems, as he says, could only be written in verse. This is a contradiction, for Eliot (and Woolf with him, since she does not defend this position) err in maintaining that prose and poetry are distinct, or that poetry can only be written in verse.

In spite of those flaws in his argument, in what follows I take Eliot quite seriously, when in the conclusion of "The Borderline of Prose" he states: "The distinction between poetry and prose must be a technical distinction" (541).

Coleridge on meter/verse

It is clear that Woolf and Eliot align with Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the Coleridge/ Wordsworth debate on the question of the vital importance of meter to poetry—and, more principally, the true relation of poetry and prose. Not only does Leigh Hunt (a Coleridge disciple) argue that good verse could never be turned into prose, but that no one has even seen a true poem in prose: "What great poet ever wrote his poems in prose? Or where is a good prose poem, of any length, to be found?" (Marks 176).

In B*iographia Literaria*, Coleridge suggests that, primordially, meter was an approximation of the passionate voice—whether ecstatic, sorrowful, or enraged—naturally taking on pronounced rhythmical qualities. He writes that "the *elements* of metre owe their existence to a state of increased excitement, so the metre itself should be accompanied by the natural language of excitement" (Coleridge). One wonders if it might be more plausible to say that song is the natural language of excitement, and that meter helps language conform to song. Coleridge, might be skipping a step. Still, if Coleridge is right, meter would have served three interrelated functions: to simulate, artistically, the impassioned voice; to serve as an accompaniment to drumming and other musical instruments; and to signify a move away from the profane, into the sacred. Coleridge seems to confirm the third function, when he states: "I write in metre, because I am about to use a language different from that of prose" (Coleridge). But an enormous issue is that literary prose is not ordinary speech. Ordinary speech is less clear than such prose, and—as Northrop Frye points out—whenever someone speaks in prose, it is rather startling. Prose is as much an art form as metered verse (which antedates prose), and should not be confused with ordinary speech, which we tend to call prose:

> It does not follow that all prose is descriptive or thoughtful, much less logical, but only that prose imitates, in its rhythm and structure, the verbal expression of a conscious and rational mind. Prose, therefore, is not ordinary speech, but ordinary speech on its best behavior, in its Sunday clothes, aware of an audience and with its relation to that audience prepared beforehand. It is the habitual language only of fully articulate people who have mastered its difficult idiom. And even they will avoid stilted speech, or "talking like a book," as we say, and when they do, their speech rhythm shows the influence of something that is not prose. (*The Well-Tempered Critic* 18)

One of his issues is that Coleridge, like others before and after, has conflated literary prose with ordinary speech, which is not prose. Coleridge sometimes compares poetry with ordinary speech; other times he compares it with literary prose.

To return to a point we have just discussed, Coleridge implies that meter is natural to poetry because when in an impassioned state, people speak rhythmically—i.e. whether crying or arguing or expressing ecstasy (Coleridge). But he also suggests that meter (blending "spontaneous impulse" and "voluntary purpose" or craft, for this reason and others) is absolutely essential to poetry—as a "yeast" which brings it to life, and in oral societies was the best means of delivering the pleasurable excitement auditors would have expected of the poet:

> It not only dictates, but of itself tends to produce a more frequent employment of picturesque and vivifying language, than would be natural in any other case, in which there did not exist, as there does in the present, a previous and well understood, though tacit, compact between the poet and his reader, that the latter is entitled to expect, and the former bound to supply this species and degree of pleasurable excitement.

Yet what if meter is not itself necessary to put across a passionate state, but rather that any deviation from prose rhythm, even if very subtle, is all that would be required? Or what if other rhetorical devices involving repetition are equally or even more involved in passionate utterance than meter, while remaining just as artful? After all, the repetition of asyndeton (e.g. "I came, I saw, I conquered") produces not only repetition of a thought-image ("I) but of sound, as well.[8] Rhythm—and in this case meter—is its byproduct.

Polysyndeton also leads to rhythm. Where asyndeton lends itself more to assertive or aggressive speech or to that of strong crying, sexual union, or compulsive pray-chanting, polysyndeton lends itself more to a mellifluous or flowing, watery feeling of a somewhat tenderer nature resembling the utterances of one who attempts to talk while crying out of longing or relief (think of an actor who is thanking all who helped her as she receives her Oscar).

But my point is that, instead of meter by itself, one could just as easily argue that poetry must have rhetorical devices involving repetition. Why should meter be more important than other devices? The same could be argued in favor of unmetered free verse (with non-prose rhythm) or "prose poetry" since it would probably do just as well, if not better than meter, owing to the way in which strict meter often strikes people as too artificial to be sincere. Also since the mystical strain of poetry (e.g. that of Pessoa's Alberto Caeiro or of Bashō) is as important as the passionate strain (that of Hart Crane), Coleridge loses the ability to convince us when he states that impassioned rhythm—and thus meter—is most appropriate to poetry or lyric's mimetic task of representing a state of mind. Indeed some mystical poetry has the quality of seeming to come from a place well beyond the passions.

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[8] The translation of Caesar is iambic, though his original words are trochaic.

Coleridge explains that meter helps also to bring focus to words themselves. He calls for "a heightened emphasis on the words themselves" (Marks 149). Of course meter is not the only way to artistically structure a voice appropriate to poetry, namely one that is earnest or full of longing or pique. The artful use of line breaks in free verse, in the absence of meter, can also help readers regulate speed and rhythm, and help draw attention to some words more than others, giving emphasis; and are sufficient to signify a move away from the mundane. But non-rhythmical speech—without line breaks—can indicate, too, a move into a less mundane space, provided that that of which it speaks is sufficiently at a remove from ordinary life.

We may assume a piece of prosaic language broken into lines is poetry, for the mere fact of something having been lineated can signal that we are about to leave the realm of the ordinary. It is not hard, then, to see why poetry and verse have been so often and for so long conflated. Once it had ceased to be customary that writing of any kind be presented as verse, indeed once prose had been established as the norm, any writing presented in verse must have seemed intentionally removed from normal life, and therefore signaled to readers "this is poetry." But versification is in fact a superficial means of establishing a context for ritual, at a remove from mundane life, which is why Solon, for example, could present political theory in verse, or why Romans exchanged letters in verse. Verse was simply the norm for all official writing, as Vico confirms; and only later did prose rhythm take over: "Prose rhythm was only understood quite late by writers, in Greek by Gorgias of Leontini and in Latin by Cicero. Before them writers had used poetic metres to make their sentences rhythmical" (Vico 188).

Versification serves a number of ends. It can establish formality or decorum, it can take the reader back in time, and it can please or hypnotize and help with memorization. For this latter

reason—helping memory—it was as much appropriate for the writ of the law as for myth, as Susan Gillingham explains with respect to the ancient Hebrews (93).

Today the law, despite being presented in hyper-formal language, has ceased to have any real association with verse. Though part of official life, the law belongs to the secular world, i.e. the profane, the realm of practical affairs—the "official public." Indeed the law no longer belongs to the world of the sacred. Today its language is that of jargonistic prose. Poetry, by contrast, along with religion, is relegated to the sphere of the ancient past, or what one could call the "official private." Poetry, religion—witchcraft, certainly—represent backwardness. Perhaps the one form of verse today that feels aligned in any way with secular life is the song lyric. Yet it should be said that the song lyric is verse in only a technical sense. Lyrics must be rhythmic and therefore tend to have a kind of meter. As W. R. Johnson aptly points out, song lyrics tend to exist for the sake of the music, not the other way around (*The Idea of Lyric* 27). Often it is practically as if lyrics are to be shaped like a formless piece of clay, the singer's skill or lack thereof evident in her success or failure to animate them—i.e. transform the raw, dead words into something alive. What is most relevant, in any event, is that the meter or line breaks of lyrics do not lend a feeling of holiness as they do in poetry or scripture.

Print culture

Print culture made it possible for poems to have a particular, easily recognizable appearance on the page. In other words, line breaks made a text look more like a poem than any other single visible characteristic associated with the art form. Yet because poetry with meter had line breaks, line breaks and meter were treated as one and the same thing. This coincidence of the

main visual cue (line breaks) and the main aural cue (meter) reinforced their importance as telltale signs that one was likely dealing with a poem. While logically it is simply true that just because a text has line breaks does not mean it has meter, or vice versa, few people have ever stopped to seriously consider the question. Line breaks being the most superficially identifying visible characteristic of poetry had also eventually made it easier for people to begin writing poetry without meter, in free verse, without losing its status as verse. As Mikhail Gasparov explains:

> Classical verse, even if printed like prose, without segmentation into lines, was easily recognized as verse: its guiding features were recurring rhymes or rhythmically emphasized word boundaries, as in blank verse. By contrast, *vers libre*, if printed as an unbroken continuous text, would be perceived as prose, and it would lose most of its expressiveness and substance. The graphic presentation of *vers libre* makes it possible to perceive the text as *verse*, suggesting its particular importance. Only the graphic shape of an individual line allows the reader to foresee the line-final pause and, as a result, to experience verse intonation. (Gasparov 290)

Indeed if a text had the look of a poem (i.e. the look of verse), perhaps it was in fact important writing, provided of course that it had other, less superficial characteristics associated with poetry. In conclusion, the visual appearance of the printed page led to the eventual realization that something could be verse simply by virtue of having line breaks, even without meter, and this meant that poetry was free to discard meter. At the same time, many people still continue to associate meter and verse because so much canonical poetry is rendered in metered verse. It

becomes difficult to reconcile, then, the old identification of poetry and verse and meter with the contemporary practice of writing verse without meter, or poetry without line breaks (free verse).

Line breaks without meter

Line breaks do not imply meter. A composition made up of words not arranged according to a consistent meter can still have line breaks, or lineation. What lineation can do in the absence of meter is eightfold; it can 1) give a ceremonial or sacred appearance to a text which separates it from profane speech; 2) help to control the speed and rhythm of one's reading of a text, a sort of compensation for the lack of meter built into the language itself; 3) emphasize certain words or phrases. 4) serve almost as a form of punctuation, creating pauses or shifts in the narrative which enhance the reader's engagement with the text; 5) give a sense of intentionality or precision beyond what the language without line breaks has; 6) foster a sense of surprise and drama; 7) create interesting, even ironic tensions between what the eye and ear experience; or harmonize the two; and finally 8) contribute to the text's purely visual appeal, either formally or by evoking "the poetic" or "the sacred." All eight functions may be observed in a single text. The following piece of verse is taken from a stand-up performance I saw at an open mike night. I recorded the following, then transcribed it:

> I like to fly at night, ya know? Like when the cabin's all dark and they serve potato chips or whatever… When it's dark I like to have the light, you know the light overhead for reading on? I like to have it on… I like to have potato chips with the light on.

A metrical text will have meter regardless of whether it is written or spoken. The above, however, because it is spoken and unmetrical, does not have a verse rhythm. It has the

associative rhythm of ordinary speech. But when lineated in a particular way, it assumes an altogether new character, one which would have been less appropriate for stand-up comedy than for conceptual art:

I like to fly at

Night, ya know?

Like when the cabin's

All dark

And they serve

Potato chips

Or whatever

When it's

Dark I like to have

The light

You know the

Light overhead

For reading on?

I like to have it on

I like to have

Potato chips

With the light on

The spontaneous, insouciant quality is lost, but an impersonality, a hardness and sense of machinic rhythmic precision, an objectivity is gained. The robotic and the surprising are pitted

against one another, counterbalanced. Such lineation makes for an ironic piece of (free) verse, in that here we encounter mundane—profane—language treated with the care and exactingness of scripture. It can be read as an interrogation of poetry, as a concept: i.e. if this is indeed a poem, is versification what makes something poetry? But if it is not poetry, why isn't it? What effect do line breaks have on a given text? Can line breaks make any text a poem?

Unlike the case with metered language, there is never only a single way to lineate a non-rhythmical text, though there are usually more or less effective ways of doing so, depending on one's purposes. And so poetry by the twentieth century becomes increasingly invested in experiments with lineation. One might even say it is called *vers libre* because, with it, the line break is freed from meter such as to correspond to painting's having been freed from the Academy. For many poets, lineation becomes an end in itself—not a mere technique, but an art like sculpture or painting. It must be said that if the above text isn't poetry (though that isn't clear, for it might be a self-conscious poem which only makes sense within the context of poetry), it is verse nevertheless, as well as art.

A Proof

Premises

1. Some poems with line breaks do not conform to a strict metrical structure.
2. Some poems lack both versification and metrical structure (e.g. prose poetry).
3. Versified or metrical language does not necessarily make poetic speech (e.g. an instruction manual in rhymed verse).
4. Free verse is not metrical, though it is verse.

5. Meter can exist in the absence of line breaks.
6. Written prose (i.e. non-metrical or written speech without strong rhythm) can have line breaks.
7. Prose, or language not in verse, can be highly rhythmical.
8. Not all strongly rhythmical language is strictly metrical.
9. Not all poetry is "heightened speech" (i.e. full of embellishment, or "in costume," e.g. rhymed or metrical)—quite the reverse: much of it is compressed or stripped-down or reduced speech, without adornment.

Intermediate Conclusions

10. Poetry can exist without meter or verse, as evidenced by the existence of prose poetry (from 2).
11. Versified or metrical language, while often associated with poetry, is non-essential to poetry (from 3).
12. The presence of verse does not necessarily imply the presence of meter, as demonstrated by the existence of free verse (from 4).
13. The presence of meter does not necessarily imply the presence of verse; thus verse and meter are separate categories (from 5).
14. Prose, despite being associated with non-poetic forms, can possess strong rhythmical qualities usually associated with poetry (from 7).
15. Prose, or non-metrical or hardly rhythmical, written speech can be verse in a purely visual sense, lacking strong rhythmical qualities (from 6).

16. Poetry and prose (as non-rhythmic speech) are not antithetical (from 1-9).
17. Poetry cannot be defined as heightened speech (from 9).

Final Conclusions

18. Poetry is an unstable concept, in that none of the above terms used to define it applies to all poems.
19. Meter and rhyme are antithetical to prose, not poetry.
20. Written prose and verse are not antithetical, since prose with line breaks can be free verse.
21. For prose (as written speech lacking strong rhythm or meter) to be verse, it must have line breaks.
22. In cases of metrical or non-metrical but strongly rhythmical speech, line breaks suffice for visual verse; yet oral verse must contain such things as meter, rhyme, and other devices, associated with "heightened speech."

Chapter conclusion

Perhaps one may doubt whether Poetry is a thing that Science can define. —Thomas Carlyle

In her Manifesto, Woolf maintained the distinction between prose and verse, while also implying that poetry had, in part, an essence which could be isolated and brought into the novel. It is arguable that Woolf needed the categorical distinction between poetry and verse so that she could justify writing her experimental novel. Yet in light of the fact established in the above

proof, namely that meter cannot be of poetry's essence, Woolf loses this justification. Still, her contribution to the prose/poetry debate is unique and has, up to this point, been unrecognized.

By Coleridge's and Hegel's time, the comparison of prose and poetry took the form of prose as practical and providing information, a means to an end; and poetry as composed of moments intrinsically stimulating—and for that reason easy to characterize as feminine—combined into an organic whole which was itself intrinsically stimulating and pleasing (*Taming the Chaos*, pp. 150-51). Unfortunately, the opposition fails to get at the essential distinction between the two, and applies more generally to the distinction between art and non-art. What is left out is that poetry is not merely art; it is also partly something else. The fallacy of treating poetry as art, and prose as non-art, becomes problematic when confronting the undeniable fact of compositions in prose having great aesthetic interest. This is precisely what forced Coleridge to bafflingly acknowledge—and so contradict himself, like Eliot—that "poetry of the highest kind may exist without metre" (*Biographia Literaria*), and that "metre [is] the proper form of poetry, and poetry imperfect and defective without metre."

The dialectic's incoherence inevitably leads to an impasse which has plagued poetic theory since Coleridge's day. Yet it has also been auspicious in that its incoherence has enabled poetry to assume the new identity of experimental verbal art, as it did so memorably in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when Woolf was active as an artist and thinker. The false dialectic of prose/verse and poetry ultimately led to exciting developments—such as Woolf's *The Waves*—spawned from the paradox of poetry and prose each appearing to have nearly equal "poetic" potential, as Eliot implies when he discusses Rimbaud's *Illuminations*. With the general breakdown of the strict prose/poetry dichotomy, in other words, it became possible to regard any

given piece of writing along a spectrum, as artistic, un-artistic, or somewhere in between. Indeed treating poetry and art as interchangeable led to poetry being subsumed under art. Whereas poetry had for millennia been regarded as the preeminent art, it now was but another form of it.

In terms of usage, it would seem that "poetry" is a term which has come simultaneously to mean three distinct things. It means "verbal art" or "literature," yet it can also refer more specifically to "lyric poetry." It thirdly tends to be used interchangeably with language rendered in "meter" or as "verse," something which we know cannot be true. People do not appear to fully recognize how much confusion this brings whenever a serious investigation into the nature of poetry has been undertaken. There would be less confusion, though, if critics and scholars would be cognizant that there were three definitions of poetry, each treated as valid, despite often contradicting one another. Yet since this fact is not properly recognized, poetry as a concept all too frequently falls through our critical fingers like so much sand.

The more general definitions (poetry as verbal art/literature) and the fallacious definition (poetry as meter/verse) threaten always to spoil the precision of which the narrower definition (poetry as lyric) would be capable of fostering on its own.

In the scientific community, clear and consistent categorization is crucial for accurate communication, research, and understanding. Imagine that the term "Homo sapiens" were used to refer simultaneously to human beings specifically *and* all primates, *as well as* all bipeds. It would sow much confusion. Precision in scientific language is vital to convey accurate information and avoid misinterpretations.

Likewise, in the realm of literary studies, fostering awareness of the dual definitions of "poetry" and explicitly clarifying its intended meaning in a given context could contribute to more precise and meaningful discussions.

In the following chapter, I put forth and defend a conception of poetry which—if theoreticians happen to find it convincing—will make things simpler for us going forward.[9] Yet if the theory is not persuasive, it will at the very least provide a model for future scholars wishing to reckon with the stakes and complexity of the Coleridge/Wordsworth debate, as Nicholas Hudson and I have done.

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[9] To requote Hudson, who states the following in 2021: "Modern scholars of poetics still disagree about the possibility of grounding the difference between poetry and prose in . . . exact or consistent features of style" (555).

CHAPTER III

TOWARD A CONCEPTION OF POETRY ROOTED IN MYTH

And as hieroglyphics were before letters, so parables were before arguments.

—Francis Bacon

Poetry is cultivated in the most Rude and Barbarous nations, often to a considerable perfection, wherein they make no attempts towards the improvement of Prose.

—Adam Smith

A poem is a rite; hence its formal and ritualistic character.

—W. H. Auden

What literary influence did I have in my childhood? Practically none: no books, no teaching, with the exception of the school assemblies we called "Kiss to the Homeland." But regarding the magical, the mysterious, which is so essential for the development of creativity, my childhood was the most literary time of my life. And this I owe, in large measure, to that mythical figure of my grandmother, who would interrupt her housework or throw down her bundle of firewood in the woods and start talking with God.

—Reinaldo Arenas

Poetry is the deification of reality.

—Edith Sitwell

In our age, to have the courage for direct speech to God (for prayer) we must either not know what poems are, or forget.

—Marina Tsvetaeva

The first literary writings—short and anonymous—appeared in Mesopotamia and Egypt four or five thousand years ago; they were spells, ritual chants, and invocations engraved on tombs.

—Gabriel Zaid

Pure poetry is hieroglyphic: decipherable only with the key of destiny.

—Cristina Campo

It is easy to be a poet among the gods. But we come after the gods.

—Yves Bonnefoy

Rigorous scholarly work has been done in recent decades on the lyric as an ever-evolving construct rather than as a stable genre with a transhistorical essence. Gérard Genette, for instance, has shown that, despite the claims of some of our most important literary theorists (17-9), the idea of lyric prevalent today is really a modern one, although the term itself is ancient. The incorrect belief that lyric was one of Aristotle's three primary genres is but another example of a false idea which has caused great confusion for theoreticians of poetics. Just as the modern dialectical antithesis of poetry and prose has served as a convenient fallacy, so the epic/dramatic/lyric triad was a convenient fiction, attributed to Aristotle and, to a lesser extent, Plato.

At no point in the *Poetics* does Aristotle treat the lyric as a major poetic genre. Genette writes, "As for the poems that we would call lyric (for example, those of Sappho or Pindar), neither here nor elsewhere in the *Poetics* does Aristotle mention them; they are plainly outside his field, as they were outside Plato's" (20).

The story of the formation of lyric's modern identity which Genette tells in "The Architext" (1979), the essay from which I have quoted, is compelling, though it is incomplete without incorporating the story of the fallacious antithesis of prose and poetry discussed in the previous chapters. For Genette misses that lyric so badly needed to become one of the main genres precisely at a time when scientism was threatening to render myth obsolete, when the false antithesis was being used to marginalize all considered irrelevant or inimical to the rise of modern science.

As Genette explains, in Plato and Aristotle's day poetry mainly referred to epic and dramatic verse. These are notably genres which have over time been adapted and transformed for audiences more at home with "prose" than verse. Romances and novels could be regarded as

descendants of the epic, and films and modern theater are easy to regard as non-versified descendants of tragedy and comedy. It is, then, narrative and action which are at the core of the two traditional "genres"—not myth.

Lyric, I argue, becomes a central poetic genre in the modern sense precisely when *logos* culture invites narrative and dramatic art to join it in its mission to cleanse the culture of mythical expression. And since lyric depended and depends on myth for its existence (which is not the case for the other two), it would be necessary to turn lyric into the poetic genre it has become—so it is a term almost synonymous with poetry (Michaels 15).

I argue that lyric is at the heart of what we think of as poetry because the latter is in essence mythical speech, and lyric's bases are the prayer and hymn forms (both of which are essentially mythical). This is a point which on some level was understood by Charles Batteux, the thinker who managed to secure lyric its modern place, when he argued that lyric is as mimetic as epic and dramatic poetry because it is also imitative (mimetic) of passionate "feelings"—especially those expressed in the *Psalms* which he considers the first lyric poems, dictated by God (Genette 23-4).

I quote the editors of *The Lyric Theory Reader*, Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, who problematize the lyric in a manner which I consider germane to this chapter's investments:

> Whether we think about the lyric as ancient origin or modern imaginary, on the page or in the air, we need to have some idea of what a lyric is (or was) in the first place. Yet it has become as notoriously difficult to define the lyric as it is impossible to define poetry itself. How is it possible that almost all poetry has come to be read as essentially lyric and at the same time we do not seem to know how to define the lyric? Since assumptions

> widely shared are usually the ideas least and last investigated, it may be the case that because we have come to think of all poetry as lyric, we have not really wanted a concise definition of lyric. (1)

In what follows, I trace lyric from the ancient hymn up to the present, to show how it has transformed while remaining in some ways the same, and what this may have to do with "poetry" in general.

Lyric poet (priest), lyric poem (prayer)

Andrew Welsh explains that lyric's "roots are first seen as they are embodied in the riddles, charms, and chants of primitive and folk poetry" (vii). Setting riddles and chants aside for the moment, let us explore charms. What is a charm? As Edward Hirsch explains,

> A charm is a spell or incantation spoken to invoke and control supernatural powers. Charms, which are universally known, are among the earliest form of recorded literature. They carry the resonance of magic rites in archaic cultures. . . . Charms can be used for positive or negative ends, to ward off the spirit of evil or to invoke it, to destroy an enemy or attract a beloved, to enchant objects, to ensure good luck with supranormal powers. (*Poet's Choice* 39)

In terms of function, charm is also deeply related to the prayer, hymn, or ode, and it seeks to affect, or change reality through what is called sympathetic magic. Speaking of himself in his youth, Michael D. Jackson states: "Unable to approach a girl I adored at a distance, I would conjure her in poetry as if this would work like a spell and draw her to me" (77). The difference, however, between spell and hymn/ode is that the latter invites the intervention of a deity, or

deities. Herder calls the ode "the firstborn child of feeling, the origin of poetry, the germ of life" (*Glossary* 423). The scholar Helen C. White, in a lecture called "Prayer and Poetry" (1960), makes the connection between prayer and lyric explicit:

> He who has, however remotely, come into contact with the creative vitality of the divine is moved himself to creation.
>
> This is pre-eminently true of the poet, especially of that type of poet who is closest to the man who prays, and that is the lyric poet, who is primarily concerned with telling directly of his own experience. (9)

In some ways, lyric and sacrifice, too (like prayer, spells, and charms), have a common root, and with animal and human sacrifice having become repulsive with paganism's decline, it is hardly surprising that lyric should have ceased to hold the power it did in the pre-secular popular imagination.

The following is an oral charm, translated from the Malay. Though it is avowedly monotheistic, indeed Islamic, it retains an older, pagan faith in magic:

> The light of four Suns, five Moons,
> And the seven Stars be visible in my eye.
> The brightness of a shooting star be upon my chin,
> And that of the full moon be upon my brows.
> May my lips be like unto a string of ants,
> My teeth like to a herd of elephants,
> My tongue like a breaking wave,
> My voice like the voice of the Prophet David,

My countenance like the countenance of the Prophet Joseph,

My brightness like the brightness of the Prophet Muhammad,

By virtue of my using this charm that was coeval with my birth,

And by grace of 'There is no god but God and Muhammad is His Prophet'.

(Finnegan 79)

It is better that we do not assume the widespread view, namely that lyric is the poetic expression of "advanced civilization," where something which might be called a modern individual has appeared as a consequence of class segmentation, who now freely sings with a unique personality and perspective, impossible previously, when a person was but a unit in a larger collective. On the contrary, the hymn and prayer which are lyric's basis, originate in the forms of social organization characteristic of hunter gatherer societies.

The depiction of Orpheus himself is that of a poet-priest of the archaic variety. One of the oldest depictions we have comes down to us from a 6th-century BCE relief at the Temple of Apollo at Delphi (relevantly where the oracle was stationed); there he is shown on the voyage of the Argonauts (McGahey 142). He is shown singing on board the Argo with his lyre to ensure its safe passage through the Cyanean Rocks. Apparently on that voyage he served as something of an apotropaic counter-sorcerer, protecting the crew from the song of the sirens.

And yet it is true that only later did there start to appear, with lyric poetry proper, the strong emphasis on subjectivity and individuality which were to become the hallmark of the modern novel, and really of modern literature in general. In ancient Greece with such poets as Sappho, then Catullus in Rome, it was the basic prayer format (of the kletic type) which began to provide a window into the heart and mind of individual persons (Miller 52). However, it had

begun even earlier with the lesser known Archilochos, with whom the figure of the poet—for the first time anywhere—metamorphosed from a more or less anonymous ritual functionary into a multifacted human being and artist, a three-dimensional person and cult figure, almost a celebrity in the modern sense.

With Archilochos, the poet became someone whose verses, however brief, afforded glimpses into the author's private life, its ups and downs as well as its sacred and profane moments. In but a brief description, Diskin Clay gives the strong sense of Archilochos having been depicted, by himself, as a character from a television series—so to speak, as a modernized Odysseus, or as he might have appeared were Homer writing a modern novel:

> Archilochos appears before us as the first lyric poet in the history of Greek literature. . . . Except for perhaps a few short, full poems, Archilochos survives only in fragments. These display him in a great variety of roles: soldier, poet, seafarer, drinking companion, enemy, aspiring lover, rejected and vindictive lover, satirist, and, in a role that is an extension of that of the satirist, the teller of animal fables. He is also a poet who addresses not only humans but the gods and, on occasion, he assumes the role of the philosopher who meditates on the instability and folly of the human condition. (Clay 2)

This marks a departure, for instance, from the ancient hymns of Egypt of previous millennia in which the poem consists mainly in the praising, petitioning, and cataloguing of attributes of the god or ruler for whom the prayer was made, revealing little personal information about the poet, if any.

The novelty of psychological and personal insight is the feature which strikes us most about lyric, yet it has found perhaps greater development, in certain ways, in longer-form genres

like the novel (even if lyric across a collection of poems, or across a poet's career, can also provide access to the intricacies of a mind very effectively). And even if lyric in the Renaissance, as Roland Greene writes, "comes to be seen as the most readily available fictional space" for writers and audiences to ask, "What is the value of an individual consciousness, of one person's experience?" (225), the realist novel eventually surpasses lyric in this role—a function I ague to be only one facet of lyric—one less essential than its more ancient, residual propitiatory one.

Let us consider Sappho's kletic prayer to Aphrodite, the only poem of hers to survive in its entirety:

Immortal Aphrodite on your richly crafted throne,
daughter of Zeus, weaver of snares, I beg you,
do not with sorrows and with pains subdue
    my heart, O Lady,

but come to me, if ever at another time as well,
hearing my voice from far away,
you heeded it, and leaving your father's house
    of gold, you came,

yoking your chariot. Graceful sparrows
brought you swiftly over the black earth,
with a thick whirring of wings, from heaven down
    through the middle air.

Suddenly they were here, and you, O Blessed,
with a smile on your immortal face
asked me what was wrong *this* time, and why
I called you *this* time,

and what in my maddened heart I wanted most
to happen. "Whom shall I persuade *this* time
to welcome you in friendship? Who is it,
Sappho, that wrongs you?

For if she flees now, soon she shall pursue;
if she refuses presents, she shall give them;
if she does not love, soon she shall love
even against her will."

Come to me now as well; release me from
this agony; all that my heart yearns
to be achieved, achieve, and be yourself
my ally in arms. (51-2)

Sappho's apparent and highly pronounced individualism (sharply contrasting with the formulaic nature of the traditional prayer form) is surely new to the hymn. The addition combines with the

monumental voice of the first recorded hymns to create the voice of monumental intimacy we now associate with lyric. In Greece, the new hymns, which are also known as lyrics, retained the ancient form, less pronounced in today's lyric but still to varying degrees present. In a comparative study between the most ancient hymns of the Near East and those of pre-Classical Greece, Christopher Metcalf suggests that

> Early Greek hymns share certain formal aspects with their Old Babylonian Sumerian and Akkadian counterparts, the oldest available hymnic sources in the ancient Near East. Common aspects include the loose tripartite structure (invocation of the deity, expansion of the praises, prayer), the interest in genealogy (relation to the chief gods), and the emphasis on the deity's important position in the pantheon. . . . such general similarities should be explained by the common function of the texts under study. The hymns examined . . . [are] songs of worshippers who sought to secure divine good-will by praising particular deities within a polytheistic system. (*The Gods Rich in Praise*, 221-22)

Metcalf in his study also discusses "religious songs recorded on Hawaii," suggesting a parallel to those of the Near East and Greece.

And so, in spite of the highly personal element we associate with lyric which makes an appearance only later, at the core of what we mean by lyric is what is oldest and most consistent up to the present, the hymn, even if the hymn form is sometimes not discernible at the surface of the poem.

The hymn or incantation, moreover, is distinct from communal song, despite its connection to song in general which the name lyric suggests, and even if religious hymns were usually sung. The line between communal song and hymn is blurry. Some of the poems of the

Shijing—or *Book of Song*s—of ancient China date to over 3,000 years ago. In this collection are hymns and communal songs. Yet what sets hymn apart from the latter is the presence or trace of apostrophe, where beings not present or incapable of understanding, hearing, or answering are addressed by the speaker, suggesting that Chinese lyric, as in the West, developed out of prayer, with strong roots in sympathetic magic. Drawing on the work of Vico, Ming Dong Gu tells us that, just like poetry in the West, its poems "arose from omen readings in divination" (120).

In order to show the parallels between Sappho's lyric art and religious hymns written outside of Mesopotamia in ancient Egypt, I supply the following text written over 4,000 years ago, typical of the period:

> Will you depart, pray, father Ra, before you commend me?
>
> Will the sky clothe you, pray, before you commend me?
>
> Commend me to night and those who are in it,
>
> So as to find me among those who honour you, O Ra:
>
> Those who worship you at your rising,
>
> Who lament at your setting.
>
> May night enfold me, may darkness shelter me,
>
> According to your command, O Ra.
>
> I am your deputy; you made me a possessor of life to whom
>
> no death comes.
>
> Entrust (me) to the evening hours:
>
> May they protect me.
>
> Entrust (me) to early morning:

> May it put its protection around me.
>
> I am a nursling in the early morning;
>
> I am a nursling in the evening hours,
>
> Born at night, whose life is made [in darkness],
>
> Who fears the herds with turned-back horns.
>
> (But) the anger of your eye is my protection;
>
> You find me as a reward ... (Wilkinson 95)

And although this hymn is devoid of the personal qualities we now associate with lyric, there were a bit later certain exceptions in which those qualities were present, as the poem David Damrosch quotes as of one of the first lyrics in the modern sense attests, from the second year of the reign of Ramses V (Jackson 632). Yet it is overwhelmingly the case that the extent to which the personal found its way into Egyptian hymns and prayers was minimal, in contrast to what became very common in Sappho's time.

But what characterizes an Egyptian hymn? According to the Egyptologist Toby Wilkinson,

> In ancient Egypt, as in many other ancient and modern cultures, there was no clear division between hymns and prayers. . . . Their style is explicitly recitational, employing devices such as repetition and metre to hold an audience's attention. As befits religious writings in general, and hymns in particular, they are often very formulaic, and all feature heightened language and imagery (ranging from the loving to the gruesome), far removed from the vernacular. The language is also rich in metaphor, a particular feature of ancient Egyptian writings. (87)

It is precisely because lyric is grounded in prayer and charm that its length on average is fairly short. And as compared with other forms and genres treating human psychology in greater depth, lyric tends to be at once too slight and too mythical, indeed even too religious, for it to appeal to a wide readership.

We may view the poet as one who specializes in slight works lacking the power of longer, sustained works. Lyric poems are often difficult to access, being obscure, enigmatic, and opaque —to use Stevens's phrase, they nearly resist the intelligence. The poet must therefore compensate, and this can make the poem seem recondite.

T. S. Eliot's output was small in relation to his name, but his influence as public intellectual or cultural critic was tremendous. Was his fame not arguably due to his ideas as much as his influential works? Would his name have gained its prestige without his criticism and works of poetic theory? Becoming an intellectual or a cultural critic, it would seem, has been one of the better ways for a poet to become a poet of consequence.

In the past, though, such a bard as Shakespeare had little need for this: to the audience, the poet's art was complete unto itself, it justified its existence. It is tempting to conclude that such figures as Tolstoy or Dickens, writers of substantial narratives, are the equivalent of Shakespeare. Though they had some strong views and served from time to time in the capacity of public intellectual, they did so not because they needed to compensate for the difficulty of their artistic writings but because they felt genuinely compelled to speak up, as was the case with Tolstoy; or else they were paid to do so, as Salman Rushdie makes clear about Dickens who enjoyed his lecture tour in America immensely because he was paid handsomely for it (150). It

would seem with the poet, by contrast, that it is almost necessary to lead with her intellectual views.

We must, however, bear in mind that the poet is, at least in effect, a latter-day priest or seer—even a prophet. In traditional and ancient societies, holy work is and was extremely diverse. In addition to delivering prayers, sermons, initiatory rites and sacrifices, a priest's responsibility would include serving as a cultural memory bank. Beyond preserving and sharing specialized knowledge which permitted access to the underworld, the priest was, as it were, truly a psychopomp, in that she served as the essential link to the ancestors and the gods. Additionally, a priest would know how the world had come into existence, and so was an all-around cultural leader. Lyric poets are still treated (if not regarded) as latter-day priests, even if we fail to rationally see the justification for it. Simply think of Amanda Gorman's role at Biden's presidential inauguration.

While the philosopher and scientist vie for the role of unofficial priest, the lyric poet has the honor almost by default, to the extent that she keeps alive the most ancient of forms—prayer or incantation. As W. H. Auden had intuited, given the importance he placed on the occasional poem, an incantation of sorts, the job of the poet is to make sacred the community's momentous occasions.

In the section which follows, we will consider why it is that the poet uses the type of language she does.

On kinship, semblance, and universal analogy

Why is it that poets have so often used the clouds, sea, earth, seasons, flowers, birds, stars, etc. for their analogies? There is no clear reason that one should make analogies primarily of these… Are there not other orders of things as beautiful and charming and compelling? Why should one give pride of place to nature, when so many thousands of previous poets have already done so? Viktor Shklovsky helps us to begin putting the problem in perspective:

> Many still believe… that thinking in images—thinking in specific scenes of 'roads and landscape' and 'furrows and boundaries'—is the chief characteristic of poetry. Conse quently, they should have expected the history of 'imagistic art,' as they call it, to consist of a history of changes in imagery. But we find that images change little; from century to century, from nation to nation, from poet to poet, they flow on without changing. Images belong to no one: they are 'the Lord's'. (Kolocotroni 217)

It would seem that it made implicit sense that the human world should mingle with sea, rain, and hills. Yet something changed.

Was it that modern people had become alienated from nature so entirely that the analogical perspective ceased to make sense, and became illegible? Became hackneyed? It is also important to remember that there are today many who spend their lives in nature, who seek to understand it, conserve it, cultivate it according to the old rhythms, but who would perhaps guiltily admit to never having been capable of connecting with "poetry," especially that, for instance, which shows the ways in which the human body is like a lush landscape. They may be avid readers otherwise, preferring non-fiction books that treat of the natural world. Would it, then, be poetry's verse meters that put them off? I don't think so.

But maybe it owes to what T. S. Eliot calls the "dissociation of sensibility": a deficit of wit preventing modern people from perceiving the intuitively apprehensible ways diverse things, from apparently incompatible domains of life, in fact share a great deal? It would explain some of it. Still it would fail to tell us why elemental analogies in particular have so often struck modern people as alien or hackneyed. In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault sheds light on the matter:

> Up to the end of the sixteenth century, resemblance played a constructive role in the knowledge of Western culture. It was resemblance that largely guided exegesis and the interpretation of texts; it was resemblance that organized the play of symbols, made possible knowledge of things visible and invisible, and controlled the art of representing them. The universe was folded in upon itself: the earth echoing the sky, faces seeing themselves reflected in the stars, and plants holding within their stems the secrets that were of use to man. Painting imitated space. And representation—whether in the service of pleasure or of knowledge—was posited as a form of repetition: the theater of life or the mirror of nature, that was the claim made by all language, its manner of declaring its existence and of formulating its right of speech. (17)

Octavio Paz elaborates upon the perspective that had predominated prior to the epistemic shift in the West which, for Foucault, brought an end to the "kinship of language with the world" (43) in favor of language as signification. In comparing Tantrism of ancient India to the ancient traditions in the West, Paz writes,

> Heaven and earth, the sun and the moon, the stars and the planets are bodies in perpetual, rhythmic conjunction and disjunction. The human body, in turn, is a space peopled with

> constellations of signs. Tantrism adopts the age-old metaphor and interprets it literally: stars = signs = destinies. This metaphor appears among us as well: in the Romance languages the word for sign comes from signum, a celestial sign, a constellation. In Spanish there is also *sino* meaning "fate," a double of the word for "sign" (*signo*). (*Convergences* 272).

Paz explains that all poetry is founded on this "universal analogy." It is "the same poetic necessity that led our Baroque poets to invent a language within the Spanish language, and that inspired Mallarmé and Joyce: the conception of writing as the double of the cosmos."

But thinking in correspondences has even more ancient roots, which are likely prehistoric. For Ernst Cassirer, this is called "mythical thinking":

> Myth is an offspring of emotion and its emotional background imbues all its productions with its own specific color. Primitive man by no means lacks the ability to grasp the empirical differences of things. But in his conception of nature and life all these differences are obliterated by a stronger feeling: the deep conviction of a fundamental and indelible solidarity of life that bridges over the multiplicity, and variety of its single forms. He does not ascribe to himself a unique and privileged place in the scale of nature. The consanguinity of all forms of life seems to be a general presupposition of mythical thought. (*An Essay on Man* 82)

If all things, all processes, are to some extent interrelated, interdependent, all can be connected through analogy. In our time, we tend to see processes in isolation, cut off from one another. And yet even before analogy, Cassirer believes that emotion is the great mover of myth. Echoing Cassirer's view—that emotion is the mother of sympathetic thought—Yves Bonnefoy asserts that

poetry's impetus is grounded in loss and failure, and a correspondingly desperate desire for salvation and wholeness:

> the anxious mind, separating what is from natural causality, immobilizing it in absolute form, can no longer conceive of any relation between things except by means of analogy and prefers to stress their "correspondences" and their remotely envisaged harmony rather than their obscure mutual antagonism. (101)

He means that one who is overwhelmed by feelings of dissonance will focus on relations of love rather than strife or difference. It is this, for Bonnefoy, which creates the conditions of the language of affinities and semblance, the kinship of all things.

The poetic or mythic view of reality articulates itself schematically, too, in the form of cycles, with a strong emphasis on the past which embodies the ideal, the prototype formed at the beginning of time (*A History of God* 5). The modern view, by sharp contrast, privileges the future-directed line, the projectile. The change or becoming that occurs in myth and poetry is one which emphasizes the basic processes of life—i.e. how things came into being. This, however, is done in the service of being, or presence. A cycle always returns to its starting point, so its becoming ultimately undoes itself.

At the threshold of systematic reason, to explain the natural world, the so-called Pre-Socratic philosophers reduced all the heterogeneous stuff in it to the four elements, fire, water, air, and earth, which themselves were said to be "destined to return into that from which they came—the third and ultimate stage of existence, the 'limitless thing,' which alone is called by Anaximander 'incorruptible and undying'" (Cornford 8). These "physicists" postulated that the elements formed the basis of all life, a point significant because it illustrates the ambivalent place

of hieroglyphic thinking, existing as it does at the boundary of *mythos* and *logos*. Theirs was a language half-theory, half-poetry, half-impersonality, half-affect; and so today we read, for instance, the fragments of Heraclitus as poetic utterance.

The future-oriented machine of modernity, whose motor is the dialectic of opposites, seems almost to have been made specifically as an antidote to the mythical cycle, which appears at first glance to be dialectical for its pitting of becoming against being. But really it is non-dialectical in the modern sense, since becoming is from its inception subordinated to being, with the hieroglyph serving as the basis on which all manner of analogous images and metaphors can be created.

Hieroglyphs, put simply, are sacred symbols. As much abstract as they are vivid, they blend the concept and the sensuous image, supposedly antithetical, into a mysterious unity.

Even a commentary in cold, scientific speech on the seas and oceans of the world quickly evokes the enchanted world of the "oceanic imagination," of myth and dream, of God. The sea, fire (or sun), the moon, mountains… are some of our greatest hieroglyphs, and they repeat through the poetry of all ages, for they are the given and constant subject matter of poetry. As Shklovsky explains, "Poets are much more concerned with arranging images than with creating them. Images are given to poets; the ability to remember them is far more important than the ability to create them" (Kolocotroni 217-18).

What I call a hieroglyph and what Shklovsky calls an image, W. H. Auden calls a "sacred being," a useful term in that it manifestly emphasizes being as opposed to becoming, just as it does the sacral. Indeed the word "hieroglyph" implicitly emphasizes sacredness, as does Auden's

term. But it does so while foregrounding poetry's medium—language—differentiating the thing itself from the word. Auden's term lacks this capacity.

But despite this relatively unimportant difference in nomenclature, Auden is right to observe the following, very much echoing Shklovsky's above statements: "Some sacred beings seem to be sacred to all imaginations at all times. The Moon, for example, Fire, Snakes and those four important beings which can only be defined in terms of nonbeing: Darkness, Silence, Nothing, Death" (56).

Thus to say that the sea, the moon, and the sun are hieroglyphs is only to call the words themselves hieroglyphs. There is a distinction to be made between a hieroglyph and that for which it stands. These are words which tend to have a peculiar effect on a verbal being's mind when presented nakedly. Hieroglyphs do not depend on their relation to other words for their special meaning to be felt—and I say felt rather than understood. They have the impersonality and blankness of a conceptual sign, but the affective immediacy of a beautiful or gruesome face.

They precede language as a system. They are words which have what many would consider a mystical aura owing to their absolute, instinctual, archetypal presence. Hieroglyphs can be likened to each other (e.g. death to a sunset, the beloved to the moon), but mere words, including symbols, are unable to relate on the basis of equality with them. Symbols serve the hieroglyph or hieroglyphs of a poem. They relate to one another on the basis of equality while doing the work of serving the hieroglyph. The hieroglyph does not serve them.

The modern dialectic, rejects the ancient foregone conclusion of the eternally returning past in favor of a new foregone conclusion: the future—which is to say, utopia.

The cyclical manner of thinking underlying even much modern poetry very much sees the world in terms of essences and pure being. Yet there is a seemingly contradictory fluidity which permits transformations and metamorphoses, a system of exchange between beings on the basis of analogy, where similarities rather than differences are prioritized according to the needs of the situation and poetic purpose. This differs from the context-dependent condition of signs which do not have essences and strong identities of their own. Within such a system, conceptual difference is privileged, and analogical comparison restricted. Thomas Merton has elucidated the distinction:

> In poetry, words are charged with meaning in a far different way than are the words in a piece of scientific prose. The words of a poem are not merely the signs of concepts: they are also rich in affective and spiritual associations. The poet uses words not merely to make declarations, statements of fact. That is usually the last thing that concerns him. He seeks above all to put words together in such a way that they exercise a mysterious and vital reactivity among themselves, and so release their secret content of associations to produce in the reader an experience that enriches the depths of his spirit in a manner quite unique. (327)

The way of putting words together of which Merton speaks is done most typically through operations which make sense only when viewed through the lens of semblance, sympathy, and analogy. The theoretical concept has largely put an end to this system of analogical exchange, by which the "secret content" of hieroglyphs might be "released." The preeminence of the modern concept ultimately has led to the neutralization, the secularization of the foundational hieroglyph

serving as the basis for that exchange. Merton, however, has a different word for what I call hieroglyphs—"cosmic symbols"—and here gives an account of their origin and modern fate:

> Light and darkness, sun and moon, stars and planets, trees, beasts, whales, fishes, and birds of the air, all these things in the world around us and the whole natural economy in which they have their place have impressed themselves upon the spirit of man in such a way that they naturally tend to mean to him much more than they mean in themselves. That is why, for example, they enter so mysteriously into the substance of our poetry, of our visions, and of our dreams. That too is why an age, like the one we live in, in which cosmic symbolism has been almost forgotten and submerged under a tidal wave of trademarks, political party buttons, advertising and propaganda slogans, and all the rest—is necessarily an age of mass psychosis. A world in which the poet can find practically no material in the common substance of everyday life, and in which he is driven crazy in his search for the vital symbols that have been buried alive under a mountain of cultural garbage, can only end up, like ours, in self-destruction. And that is why some of the best poets of our time are running wild among the tombs in the moonlit cemeteries of surrealism. Faithful to the instincts of the true poet, they are unable to seek their symbols any where save in the depths of the spirit where these symbols are found. These depths have become a ruin and a slum. But poetry must, and does, make good use of whatever it finds there: starvation, madness, frustration, and death. (333)

Merton goes on to explain that the "Sun and moon, night and day, rain, the sea, the crops, the flowering tree, all these things were transparent. They spoke to man not of themselves only but of Him who made them. Nature was symbolic."

These elemental beings, in their stability and overwhelming presence, allow the radical becoming and instability of myth and poetry. But when the concept takes over, all signs suddenly operate through their "essential" difference from other things. Difference becomes emphasized, similarity de-emphasized. There is a counterpoint, in mythical thought, whereby the stable elements at the bottom of all existence are met with the extreme instability of all else. Such an internally dialogic, musical way of using language feels alien to our modern linguistic sensibilities, at least for the most part.

The absolutely pure, sacred being of the sea, unthinkable to the theoretical mindset, permits what might be called an irresponsible, irrational promiscuity of analogical exchange—too much lumping (not enough splitting) of essentially different things together, which easily manifests in an alienated world such as the one Merton describes as psychosis and paranoia—for which connections are seen everywhere. That hieroglyphs and symbols are built into the branding of commodities and political parties, as Merton aptly observes, is a debauchery reflecting modern industry's treatment of nature and of people. Thus the basically affirmative, healthy human instinct to operate according to the "kinship of all things" in such a time as our own more and more turns into malignant apophenia—i.e. a "conspiracy of all things" to destroy the alienated subject.

What makes someone a poet is not a love of language. Words as they are—as mere words—are lies, hopelessly inadequate to the task of living well. The poet is wounded by the world because it deploys the word—"love," for instance—as a tool for manufacturing social cohesion or war. The poet is compelled, therefore—some would say psychotically—to close the gap between word and deed by putting language into action, almost as though following divine

orders, and in such a manner that utterance becomes deed. “Love,” when spoken, proves itself through its effect on the world. The word is never used to compensate for a lack of love felt, as many insist on using it—to reassure those who feel no love. The poet despises language, and so pumps it full of magic and devices in order to turn it into something far greater. The poet makes language do the impossible—to change the world and make multiple minds one. In aspiring to this, the poet ceases to be just a person, but becomes love itself, even hate—hatred for the world as it merely is, hatred of language’s failure to become a law of love. For as Homer’s nobler characters state, empty words are evil.

Another term for “kinship of all things” or “semblance” or “figurative language” or “mythical speech” would be “non-arbitrary synaesthesia.” With poetic speech, one entity evokes another on the basis of a subtle connection intuited without the nature of the relation being obvious. With synaesthesia in the typical sense, the letter A might evoke the color red, which would be more or less arbitrary; yet with non-arbitrary synaesthesia, the letter A would be evoked on the basis of a subtle affinity, such as A having the shape of a spade, a tool used to cut into the earth, the latter being a metaphor for the body of woman, or because A looks like the triangular projection from the circle in the Mars glyph, Mars being a symbol of violence, and red being associated with blood, the result of violence. The logic of poetic speech builds chains of association which have a tendency to not only go on forever, but to interlock with one another. What linguistics has considered to be an arbitrary relation between signified and signifier ceases to be arbitrary with poetic speech which denies the arbitrariness of any relation in the world.

What is broadly termed experimental poetry—poetry dispensing with or deforming syntax and which often is full of apparently random, unrelated fragments and sometimes even

free-floating particles—from the get-go presented challenges to readers who had rigid expectations about what a poem should do—namely that it make sense as communication. An early example of this would be the following lines from Mina Loy's poem "Lunar Baedeker":

Cyclones
of ecstatic dust
and ashes whirl
crusaders
from hallucinatory citadels
of shattered glass
into evacuate craters

A flock of dreams
browse on Necropolis

From the shores
of oval oceans
in the oxidized Orient

Onyx-eyed Odalisques
and ornithologists
observe the flight
of Eros obsolete

And “Immortality”

mildews

in the museums of the moon (Loy 82)

Today people generally do recognize such writing as poetry, just as they do abstract painting as art, even if they do not like it. It may challenge about as many today as it did when it first appeared in the early decades of the twentieth century. The challenge consists in whether one can perceive or appreciate the poem’s harmony of sensuous form in spite of the obvious deformation of sense, structure, and “language” generally speaking. Such art seems to say, “I am art, in spite of my manifest chaos. Can you not see me as art?” It is a language of sympathies at the level of sound, texture, and connotation, and nearly a statement about poetry, or art, in general: “Poetry is essentially an art of sympathies, sensuous sympathies—all art is. No, art was not ever about subject matter. Sensuous forms brought into sympathetic relationship with each other is the essence of poetry and all art—mimetic coherence was never it.”

Experimental poetry and abstract art could be understood as attempting to intensify what is most basic about art and poetry, while stripping away whatever is inessential or extraneous—syntax, communication, illusionism—in an effort to bring that essence into sharper relief. For such Symbolists as Baudelaire, Rimbaud, or Mallarmé, who had helped initiate the movement in the nineteenth century, though without taking it to such extremes as poets would later, poetry and art were to approach the condition of wordless music, or synaesthesia.

As I have argued, the logic of sympathetic relations is vital to poetry as well as to art more generally. One may wonder, however, if it has any application or use in theoretical

discourses. In what follows I attempt to show that analogical/metaphorical thinking is used in disciplines governed by systematic rational inquiry.

Mythical thought's role in pretheoretical science

Mythical thought's role in the theoretical disciplines is proof that mythical thought lives on, and is useful, in a theoretically-minded culture such as ours. It thrives in the creative, prelinguistic stages of rational investigation, but is later discarded in order to let conceptual language take the mantle. Analogical picture thinking is the language of theoretical intuition. It is at the same time prelinguistic and a logical tool. The almost certain absence of high-level conceptual thinking among Paleolithic people (since theoretical thought seems to depend on literacy) should in no way suggest that high-level systematic, rational creativity did not occur, for how else could Paleolithic people have designed the tools we know they did? How else could they have solved the practical issues we know they solved?

One has merely to perceive the same principles at work in the structure of a complex phenomenon not yet fully understood (*x*) in terms of something already comprehended (*y*). In systematically trying to comprehend something (x) through the reason, the imagination occasionally—and spontaneously—will produce an image of another thing (*y*) which the subject understands to be governed by the same underlying principles. The relation between the two (i.e. pictured as an analogy) can from there be codified with the use of conceptual terms.

Yet without conceptual terms, it is still possible for people to reason systematically. In lieu of conceptual frameworks, people can verbally share information about complex systems with one another by constructing complex metaphorical frameworks in what we would recognize

today as poetic speech. A good example of what I mean would be the philosophical writings of the *Tao Te Ching*, whose language is certainly philosophical in its ends, but quite poetic or mythical in its means:

> Abstaining from speech marks him who is obeying the spontaneity of his nature. A violent wind does not last for a whole morning; a sudden rain does not last for the whole day. To whom is it that these (two) things are owing? To Heaven and Earth. If Heaven and Earth cannot make such (spasmodic) actings last long, how much less can man! (Laozi)

One reason we do not lose our capacity for mythical thought is that it helps with creativity, not just in the arts but in the sciences. Mythical thought can be channeled into practical and theoretical endeavors, or can be used for the production of structures of sensuous form (i.e. in art and poetry). When combined with systematic reason, however, it is what enables us to adapt quickly and solve problems under pressure.

Under pressure, after all, emotion is at its strongest and most concentrated. Mythical thought is linked to all kinds of inspiration, not only of the poetic variety. Some scientists surely have as much passion as poets. What great science and poetry share is imagination. Imagination is facilitated by emotion. While everyone has some imagination, not everyone who is passionate possesses strong imaginative powers. And for that matter… not all highly imaginative people are passionate. Imagination therefore is not directly reducible to emotion. It must first be filtered through the faculty of mythical thought.

In sum, there is no strict divide between the sciences and myth. As Lakoff and Johnson write in *Metaphors We Live By*, “a special case” where people do think in consistent sets of

metaphors "is in the formulation of scientific theories, say, in biology, psychology, or linguistics. Formal scientific theories are attempts to consistently extend a set of ontological and structural metaphors" (220). But in order for science to do its work, it cannot be content to allow mythical thinking to exist in raw, unmodified form. Even poetry does not allow mythical thinking to exist in the raw form it first emerged in: yet it goes in the opposite direction. What poetry does is intensify, harness, and purify mythical thought—while combining it with language, or translating it into language. If systematic reason (i.e. science as well as philosophy, the former methodically pursuing knowledge of the natural world, the latter investigating and creating new concepts), by contrast, uses mythical thought, it translates the non-verbal analogical or metaphorical representations produced in the imagination under the pressure of strong emotion (i.e. myth) into the abstract, conceptual language of theory. Myth, then, is used as a ladder of sorts to be kicked away as soon as science has found the intuitive insight it needed. The suspension of mythical thought only need occur after a truth has been intuitively apprehended, at which point language must restrict itself to translating what was understood rationally—but also sensuously—into the language of theory by suspending any further mythical thought.

Let us turn now to a couple of concrete examples of analogy and metaphor as they emerge in the mind.

Analogy and metaphor emerge spontaneously

The analogy and metaphor used by public speakers tend to be used for the sake of putting one's view across more clearly and sympathetically, that is to say, for the sake of helping others understand a concept. In other words, analogy is deployed only once the concept has been

established. The rhetorician supplies the ladder for the audience, enabling the audience to more easily reach the concept. By contrast, when the intuition produces an analogy, the analogy appears all at once, with all its parts fully formed. Here the visual/logical correspondence precedes the formation of the concept.

The following is a hypothetical verbal representation which might arise when one has been told that Vincent Van Gogh the painter was a devout Christian:

The painter is the virgin mother impregnated (or inspired) by God. Having conceived the work (i.e. the future savior), the artist labors in order to bring the work into the world. When it is "born" (brought before the public), it has only a few disciples—it is misunderstood by those who possess great power and influence. The work, which has the power to save humanity and to redeem culture, is denounced and crucified. The artist knows that appreciation will come only belatedly. After the work's demise, it is resurrected, embraced, and then consecrated. Since the advent of modernity, artists have felt the need to play the role of prophet, martyr, and mother.

This formulation is but a translation of an image which appeared whole in the mind. It constitutes the analogous relation between the Jesus story and the modern artist. The analogy could be converted into a theoretical formulation (an explanation made out of concepts), or into an allegory (an idea depicted narratively and pictorially), or it could remain an analogy.

Here is but one more example of a hypothetical answer to the theoretical question "what does great poetry do?" taking the form of a poetic image:

A great poem is a baseball thrown with great force but which comes in extremely slow, or it is a baseball which is thrown with no apparent force but which comes in so fast that it cannot be seen.

The answer suggests the Shklovskyan idea that poetry is language deployed to unusual ends, such that its comprehension is either much slowed down or immediate; thus poetry demands from us a different sort of attention. Yet there is no guarantee that the metaphorical formulation will lead to the explicitly phrased theoretical formulation stated above. (Incidentally, the former arguably reinforces the latter, and vice versa.)

Now that we have considered some of the ways metaphor relates to conceptual thinking, let us examine the crucial role strong emotion plays in giving rise to metaphorical thought.

Strong emotion, analogy, metaphor

When we have a strong emotion, we look for the emotion everywhere in our midst. We unconsciously seek sympathy from the world, whether the emotion we are experiencing is painful or pleasant. Some typical examples: sadness perceives a tree as weeping or the rain as tears; the leaves falling from the tree's branch are a symbol of death; a new love sees itself in the resurrection of the spring. Strong emotion has a binding, enmeshing nature—it needs to absorb the world into itself, just as it needs to be absorbed into the world. Music is so important because it mirrors emotional states through tones and sensuous forms. When we are sad, we prefer a sad song because it matches our mood, rather than a happy one to dispel the mood. Strong feelings lead to analogical and metaphorical thought. What they have in common is the binding impetus. Emotion needs to realize itself wholly, to culminate and reach climax, whereupon it can die. The only way it knows how to conclude is by making deep connections with what lies outside itself —in the world. It does not wish to go away or to be suppressed. It demands to see its own reflection from without. Because the intellect is co-opted by strong emotion when it occurs,

language spontaneously starts to do its bidding: the reasoning mind serves its own, emotional ends. If it could speak (as it does in lyric) the emotional state, or mood, seems to command: make everything in nature look like me—I cannot stand any longer being different and separate from the world. The poet then looks out into the world, and perceives strange parallels in the most unlikely of places—as well as in the more conventional, likely ones.

The foregoing is an attempt to articulate something similar to what John Stuart Mill, in "Two Kinds of Poetry," writes, of the sort of poet (e.g. Percy Shelley, who is truly "poetical" by nature) entirely governed by a powerful, almost overactive nervous system and naturally stronger feelings, in contradistinction to the other sort of poet, exemplified by Wordsworth:

> Not only because the natures which we have called poetical, really feel more, and consequently have more feeling to express; but because the capacity of feeling being so great, feeling, when excited and not voluntarily resisted, seizes the helm of their thoughts, and the succession of ideas and images becomes the mere utterance of an emotion; not, as in other natures, the emotion a mere ornamental colouring of the thought. (39).

What Mill never answers is why someone so constituted as Shelley should have chosen words for his medium as opposed to, say, paint or marble, or how someone so constitutionally lacking in emotional intensity as Wordsworth (whose work Mill apparently admired) would have chosen to become a poet at all, let alone any kind of artist. What Mill has likely sensed is that the poet is one who is seen (owing to the nature of the poems, primarily) as one capable of entering alternative states of consciousness. Wordsworth surely comes across as one possessed of mystical vision, a thing perhaps not wholly different from Shelley's messianic vision. But while it may be true that Wordsworth's imagination is less extravagant than Shelley's in terms of the

imagery it fashions, one could never deny that he produces distinctive atmospheres and images. Perhaps it is that mystical states are the flip side of passionate ones, the result of having channeled emotion in such a way as to make a new sort of consciousness. Or perhaps there is some special reserve from which one's poetry flows, as Antonio Machado, himself a mystical poet, suggests: "Although my veins have blood enough ripe for revolution,/My poetry comes flowing from some untroubled well" (Nims 245). But again it could be that Machado's physically grounded passion is transformed into the serene, mystical state of mind which makes itself evident in his verses.

Still, the insight that the outpouring of associative thought arises from passion seems fairly reasonable. A 2014 cognitive neuroscience study concludes that

> conventional metaphorical expressions are more emotionally engaging than literal expressions. Thus, metaphorical expressions may be chosen over literal expressions in part because they are more emotionally evocative; this would go some way to explaining the ubiquitous use of meta- phors by speakers and writers, even when literal counterparts exist. (Citron).

This echoes Ernst Cassirer when he writes that "Myth is an offspring of emotion" (*An Essay on Man* 82), and (assuming a strong link between emotion and the senses) also Vico, who writes that "the earliest people could create only by using their imagination, which was grossly physical. Yet this very physicality made their creation wonderfully sublime, and this sublimity was so great and powerful that it excited their imaginations to ecstasy" (145). It is difficult, however, to follow Vico in the assumption that when the powers of reasoning are weak, the imagination necessarily grows strong (89), an axiom refuted by the mere existence of Lewis

Carroll, or by that of people who are especially averse to logical thinking and do not appear to have strong imaginations. It may be there is something at work in imagination in addition to passion, to more effectively explain it. One wonders if it has to do with the intellect's particular way of interacting with sensation and feeling.

Of Goethe, Nims states, "His ideas and feelings turned immediately into images, as they must for a poet" (138). Nim's statement implies a theoretical position somewhat more nuanced than Vico's. It may be that strong imagination arises from the emotions and the nervous system, as well as from the reason. On such a view, when a poetic thinker has even an abstract thought, a sensuous correlate or image, or series of images, suddenly appears in the mind. The same would occur if one had an intense emotion. Sensuous images (or maybe sympathetic forms of affect would be an apter term) flow out of inner experience for such a person, who thereupon translates these sympathetic forms of affect into speech. The poet, on this view, is merely one who is constantly translating experience into sympathetic forms of affect, and all sympathetic forms of affect into effective speech. To put it even more abstractly but perhaps more precisely, the poet translates abstract ideas into sympathetic sensuous forms (nature symbolized) then back into abstraction (language, or culture); or translates raw feeling into sympathetic sensuous forms (nature symbolized) then back into abstraction (language, or culture).

The sympathetic sensuous form which is to be turned into speech exists at the intersection of nature (raw feeling) and culture (abstraction). To think poetically is to give the imagination autonomy. Language takes the back seat, so to speak. While it might be technically erroneous to suggest that poetic thought is literally translated into language only after the imagination has finished creating an image, it is hard to dispute that feeling and sensation are what lead, while

language and reason follow. I had merely made use of the temporal metaphor in order to make clear a complex process somewhat resistant to intelligibility owing to its synchronic nature. Friedrich von Schiller offers another useful metaphor for illustrating what it might mean for imagination to lead in the process of writing poetry (and in doing so he usefully reminds us that imagination does not necessarily privilege vision, but can pertain to hearing or other sensory modalities too): "For me, feeling does not at first have a clearly defined object. This is only formed later on. A certain musical atmosphere of moods precedes it, and the poetic idea only comes afterwards" (quoted in Nietzsche 29). Nietzsche uses this statement of Schiller to argue that music is the primal wellspring of truly great lyric poetry, "free of images and concepts." His prejudice, however, against images and in favor of music is less important for our purposes than the fact that he links music to "primal pain," a phrase which relates "nature" and "suffering."

Nature exists within each person, as raw sensation and instinct, but also in the outer world—sun, sea, plants, so-called animals, mountains. Culture is simply that which cultivates the nature within and the nature without: it is the adaptable, self-reflective spirit from which language has come into being to collaborate with others in the great project of increasing and exercising freedom. Culture is spirit and self-determination—what makes people (including other species) worthy of the designation "people." Language for its part is this inner autonomy made abstract, as symbol. When culture and nature unite in speech, the result is commonly referred to as metaphor, poetry, or mythological tale, a sort of expression quite different from conceptual language which builds culture on top of culture. As Vico tells us,

> All the primary figures of speech are corollaries of poetic logic. The most luminous figure, and hence the most basic and common, is metaphor. Metaphor is especially prized

> when . . . it confers sense and emotion on insensate objects. The first poets attributed to physical bodies the being of animate substances, endowed with limited powers of sense and emotion like their own. In this way, they created myths about them; and every such metaphor is a miniature myth. (159)

It is interesting to consider that the god-as-river had become the god-as-crocodile and later the god-as-person. Eventually, though, even the anthropomorphic sort was replaced in the West by a bodiless deity, and ultimately by the anti-God of Theory (a word itself derived from *theos*, or "god"). The embodiment of theory is the theoretical concept: culture in its purest form, language divorced from feeling and nature—mind separated from body. Two important avenues for theory are philosophy and science. Since philosophy deals in concepts, Hegel believes that it is to play the lead role in bringing spirit to its fullest realization of itself, all hinging on humanity's emancipation from nature. Art and literature he believes cannot do this because only philosophy speaks the language of reason itself. In view of the ways we have treated the earth for our own selfish purposes, we wonder whether the "end of history" he forecasts will never come owing to our species having suicided itself.

Poetry is an expression of the spirit unsevered from its earthly, wild sources. While there may perhaps be no actual distinction between culture and nature—while relativists or anti-foundationalists would point out that the distinction is but a construct of culture—to dismiss "culture" as a cultural construct suggests that "culture" is a concept we cannot do without so long as we are using the language of theory. After all, does it make sense to say that "culture" is but a fiction because it is a product of culture? That would be like saying God must exist because God is the one who created everything. Ultimately, if "culture" is a fiction, all other concepts must be

fictions, as well. And yet I readily acknowledge the factitious nature of "culture" and "nature" but employ them anyway to the extent that they continue to have meaning within our frame of reference, a claim supported by the mere fact that we behave as though the distinction is real.

Metaphor and etymology

A great many of our words etymologically turn out to derive from words which were themselves metaphors. The word metaphor is itself a metaphor (derived from the Greek *metaphora*, meaning "transfer" or "carrying over"). Even the way prepositions are used is based in spatial metaphor, something which may long remain the case. But verbs and nouns do not technically need to be metaphorical, as opposed to fully arbitrary: many of them simply are because the metaphor had once served a practical function in establishing the root word, and this metaphorical trace has been inherited.

Metaphorical inheritances are sometimes obtrusive, and theoreticians have sometimes expressed a wish to limit metaphor in general, their perspective being that such excess interferes with theoretical precision. John Locke exemplifies the view in stating that "figurative Speeches" are an "abuse" of language which philosophy and natural science ought to eliminate (508). Poetry, on the other hand, tends to create metaphor gratuitously, and self-consciously plays with language rich in metaphorical baggage. Theoretical language and that of poetry can be seen as speech's two poles, thus making it possible to situate any instance of articulate speech along a continuum. That which leans strongly toward the first pole tends to limit metaphor in the name of abbreviating reality; that which leans strongly toward the latter willfully deploys it in the name of intensifying reality.

Poetry's desire to attain the validity of music

It is frustrating indeed that many will regard a written or recited poem as a disembodied piece of spirit—almost as a spirit without a body, and that one can succeed by the highest standard in fashioning a poem, only to find non-poetry lovers incapable of considering it a materially real object. In some cases, one might even feel that a poem has little reality at all, that it does not matter in the way a painting matters, or that a piece of music does. Yet a poem embodied in song would be something different. As poetry necessarily has one foot in myth and one in language (which is essentially abstract), its abstract side prevents it from having the sensuous immediacy of the other arts.

It has been felt that music could grant poetry the material body it lacks. But we wonder why is it so rare for lyrics to stand on their own, when dissociated from the music they put on like so much makeup and sequins. We wonder why when the makeup comes off, the face is unrecognizable. And for that matter, why does a poem which stands on its own often fail to fit into a musical scheme, should one try to adapt it? In a better world, a poem would be able to stand on its two feet, on the page, while readily lending itself to music, if summoned. That achieving both is rare and difficult, and owing to the close association of poetry and music, their irreconcilability in this regard is a frustrating paradox.

A dream of some poets has been for their verse to find a way of attaining the concrete reality and materiality of song, while retaining the deep spiritual authenticity, the complexity, and

eloquence exclusive to poetry.[10] Some have also longed for a means of objectively determining poetic value, at least one more objective than circumstances have allowed. It has been vexatious that on the one hand a work's recognition depends on the approval of biased, self-interested gatekeepers and, on the other, on the imperfect judgement of critics and institutions, whose valuations so often conflict.[11] And so a great poem which doubled as a great song, one realizes, could bypass both hurdles.

Epic, narrative, light verse

Of course the novel is not only narrative in prose, nor is the epic merely narrative in verse. At the core of each, however, is narrative. According to E. L. Doctorow,

> Narrative is the art closest to the ordinary daily operation of the human mind. People find the meaning of their lives in the idea of sequence, in conflict, in metaphor, and in moral. People think and make judgments from a confidence of narrative. The narrative mode of thought comes naturally to everyone, as for instance mathematical or scientific reasoning does not. One imagines in the dawn of prehistoric human life that storytelling did not have to be invented as, say, counting or the wheel did. Everyone, all the time, is in the act of composition; our experience is an ongoing narrative within each of us. (114-15)

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[10] Robert Burns, Federico García Lorca, Langston Hughes, and W. B. Yeats drew inspiration from folk song, adapting traditional forms and collected songs to poetry; Thomas Campion, poet and composer, wrote lyrics to be sung with musical accompaniment. According to *Poetry Foundation*: "While other poets and musicians talked about the union of the two arts, only Campion produced complete songs wholly of his own composition, and only he wrote lyric poetry of enduring literary value whose very construction is deeply etched with the poet's care for its ultimate fusion with music" ("Thomas Campion").

[11] It is why such poets as Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot set themselves up as gatekeepers and often sought to discredit other gatekeepers.

Today when we hear that one is reading Homer, we do not think first and foremost that what they are reading is poetry—but mythical narrative or "literature" in the broad sense. With this, John Stuart Mill apparently agrees: "As an epic poem, though, in so far as it is epic (*i. e*. narrative), it is not poetry at all" (17). By contrast, when we hear one is currently reading Sappho, we think to ourselves, "she is reading poetry." That is, we do not conclude that one is definitely a lover of poetry because we hear that someone is reading an epic. We are likely to conclude, however, that this person is "literary." The same could be said of the drama. For when we hear one is reading Aeschylus, we are apt to think, "she is a drama person," though not necessarily a "poetry person"—but possibly. One of the reasons is that the verse element has only a supporting role in determining the poetic or the non-poetic.

Poetry is used differently than it was in antiquity, when it encompassed lyric, epic, and drama. Today, by contrast, it is typically lyric (or possibly free-form experimental verse) which is meant by poetry, perhaps because it has that voice of intimacy, often prayer, along with the vivid yet ambiguous imagery and rhythm, which amount to poetry when all in the same place at the same time. There are exceptions. *The Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, and *The Faerie Queene* are epics accorded the status of poetry. This is justified, since they are still regarded as poetry on account of their being heavily allegorical with vivid metaphorical language, in addition to being written in verse. A more typical epic, however (like Homer's *Odyssey*), while containing such lyric-like or sacral features as the invocation to the muse (i.e. prayer) or divine intervention in worldly affairs, in its essence lies in the story being told. Its lyric-like characteristics—including meter, which in more recent translations becomes less conspicuous—are merely secondary.

Still, even indirectly, poetry in the most general sense is concerned with the divine or the holy or with the extremely interior or private parts of the psyche, so that a narrative sufficiently concerned with divine or holy matters, or with high saturation of metaphor or poetic symbols like those found in dreams (e.g. Woolf's *The Waves*), tends to produce the often unmistakable feeling or ambience of poetry, even if the text or utterance lacks secondary characteristics such as meter. But since narrative is difficult to sustain without descending into the realm of the everyday, it must necessarily veer away from the "poetic."

Poetry's principal form is prayer, or a kind of earnest address to a living being, particularly the beloved (since erotic poetry in a way deifies the beloved). This is why the prayer or hymn is the poetic form *par excellence*, and it is also why, among people generally, "poetry" has come to denote "lyric." Light verse, by contrast, as a concept has its origins in the shared intuition that short pieces of verse mocking or in parody of the sincerity and solemnity of prayer is a genre somewhat distinct from poetry, but not because it is really of a "lower" order.

Consider Catullus's epicede for Lesbia's sparrow, in which the sparrow is addressed beyond the grave with mock-somberness, parodying a manner fit for a lover, a ruler, or a demigod.

Dress now in sorrow, O all
you shades of Venus,
and your little cupids weep.

My girl has lost her darling sparrow;
he is dead, her precious toy

that she loved more than her two eyes,

O, honeyed sparrow following her

as a girl follows her mother,

never to leave her breast, but tripping

now here, now there, and always singing

his sweet falsetto

song to her alone.

Now he is gone; poor creature,

lost in darkness,

to a sad place

from which no one returns.

O ravenous hell!

My evil hatred rises against your power,

you that devour

all things beautiful;

and now this pitiful, broken sparrow,

who is the cause of my girl's grief,

making her eyes weary and red with sorrow. (7).

Such a poem parodies those two cousins of lyric and epigram (funerary inscription): the imprecation and the lament. (Hate and love, after all, are watchwords for Catullus; traditionally

they stand as the twin pillars of sympathetic magic, hymn, and curse). Catullus prefers a personal mode of address to the meditative style that has prevailed for centuries (Johnson *7*). Whether praising or blaming or some combination thereof, the Roman poet's addresses to others read as genuine. In "The Three Voices of Poetry," T. S. Eliot believed that, for the ancients, the You of lyric was mere formality (*Poetry and Poets* 97). But with Catullus, there is little question that You is intended literally, that it issues from the heart.

The You, for Eliot, seems a formality because sympathetic magic is no longer believed in. Yet a piece of light verse need not be overtly funny, but merely concerned with the everyday, not the holy. The original light verse, then, by nature is carnivalesque, and ironic (which a prayer can by definition never be). It is the lowering of the lofty utterance into the realm of the everyday.

Catullus referred to many of his poems of this nature as "iambics," for Iambe was a goddess of bawdy humor. And so it is in the form known as the *Iambos* (Rotstein 167) that light verse has its origins. Iambe was the Goddess who brought cheer to disconsolate Demeter when Hades had taken her daughter Persephone down into the underworld, just as Orcus has taken Lesbia's sparrow. That is, just as Iambe cheers up Demeter, so Catullus seeks to cheer up his beloved Lesbia. Catullus's poem is deeply allusive: it is in fact a clever reenactment of a moment in the *Homeric Hymn* to Demeter. Catullus's mock-epicede happens to be very charming, and likely served the same end as a sincere address to the beloved—seduction—and in this way retains a lyric-like status. A more subtle predecessor to Catullus's poem would be Sappho's "Hymn to Aphrodite" in which Sappho's speaker humorously petitions the goddess of love to help her out in regard to a particular young woman whom she desperately desires to possess. In spite or because of the speaker's ironic familiarity with the addressee, we suppose her wish is

granted. Prayer, after all, is a type of pre-logical, pre-theoretical persuasion which, rather than appealing to reason appeals to the senses or the imagination.

The other major, related proto-light verse form is epigram, which likely has its origins in the practice of funerary inscription. The form of such inscriptions was appropriated by literature, where remembrance of the dead became an exercise of the creative imagination, an aestheticized ritual (*Poet's Choice* 20). This transformation mirrored lyric's progressive aestheticization of earnest prayer. Having started out as short poignant commemorations of the deceased, composed in couplets (or elegiac distichs), these modest prayers in miniature over time became progressively humorous. And Catullus wrote numerous imprecations and jests in this epigrammatic form, in turn taken up by Martial, whose epigrams are among light verse's primary models in English language literature. Once again, the process we see whereby epitaph becomes literary epigram parallels that by which lyric comes into being, as more and more a purely literary and artistic form, an outgrowth of archaic prayer.

But of course epigram's origins are in some ways a far cry from the middlebrow light verse which on the basis of tone alone some would class beneath non-light poetry, and would align more readily with the cinematic genre of romantic comedy than with the picaresque, satire, or tragicomic genres more comparable to ancient light verse. After all, "light" means "lacking intensity," not the opposite of "heavy." A poem can be simultaneously humorous and emotionally intense; but light verse is "light" and not emotionally intense.[12] Catullus and Martial were elite coterie poets, analogous in their radical artistic ambition to what we today call vanguardists.

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[12] Dorothy Parker is a notable exception to this rule, having followed in Catullus's footsteps in many of her darker, more intense poems, while somehow remaining light on the whole.

Modern light verse does not wish to shock, but to amuse. What the two tendencies often (but not always) share is wit, urbanity, and impeccable versification.

Neither were light verse's origins at a remove from the realm of traditional magic. Iambic poems had a subtle apotropaic function—similar to that of the evil eye. This was retained somewhat through the Hellenistic period. While it is true that Iambe was merely a minor deity, she was a deity all the same. And while it is also true that Catullus referred to his verses as *nugae*, or trifles, it is only later that the poetry we recognize as light verse as we know it today came into existence. Finally, despite the fact that traditional or folk poetry tends to be lumped in with light verse, ballads and other forms of verse based in popular song are of an altogether distinct tendency and tradition, which comes through in the earthy tone of such verse (think: blues):

I went to de gypsy,
De gypsy took hold o' my hand.
Went to de gypsy,
Gypsy took hold o' my hand.
She looked at me and tole me
Chile, you gonna lose yo' man.

These fortune tellers
Never tell me nothin' kind.
I say fortune tellers
Never tell me nothin' kind.
I'd give a hundred dollars

To de one that would ease my mind.

Cause I'll holler an' scream an'

Fall down on de flo'.

Say I'll holler an' scream an'

Fall down on de flo'.

If my man leaves me

I won't live no mo'. (Hughes 70)

Although the name "lyric" tends to emphasize the song element, it is something of a misnomer: the name lyric ought to have been given to folk verse. Folk verse can have the intense, tragic, primordial qualities of Catullan light verse, as well as the connection to traditional magic. The difference is that the latter is cosmopolitan in worldview. Folk poetry is not cosmopolitan, but local (even when outwardly urban)—and thus its ties to myth and therefore poetry remain somewhat stronger than those of light verse.

Definition of Poetry in General

If myth is at the intersection of wild nature and culture, and poetry at the intersection of myth and language, a poem is a megalithic structure (culture) in the middle of a dark wood (wild nature). Poetry is the meeting place of four worlds: nature and culture, on the one hand; mythical thought (dependent on raw feeling, i.e. nature) and language (a cultural form), on the other. It is why nature presented as concept-image or hieroglyph or natural symbol is the language of poetry. The theoretical concept is based firmly in the world of culture, within a cultural

landscape. The theoretical concept is divorced almost completely from nature. Thus the concept is culture, within culture. The concept, so to speak, is the official library in the capital city of the "civilized" world. When language ceases to contain strongly mythical characteristics, it ceases to be poetic since it is at a remove from nature. But when mythical thought is introduced into language, this is where poetry begins. Poetry has one foot planted in culture (*bios*), the other in wild nature (*zoe*). To render it even more figuratively, poetry is the universe—nature itself in all its vastness, sublimity, and order—expressing itself in a human voice.

Let us now go into a bit more theoretical depth and consider the specific characteristics and modes of lyric poetry to the end of producing a definition of lyric, as an intensification of this more general definition of poetry.

Three traditional modes of lyric poetry

SONG/CHANT

-typically characterized by structural repetitions like verses, refrains, choruses; cadences; melodic endings; call-and-response format; often but not always featuring rhyme or rhythmic patterns tending toward meter, or undulating rhythmic patterns

Note: a tremendous range of subject matter is allowable here, encompassing the two following categories, as well as narratives (narrative not being a lyric category—narrative is only lyric when the poem is quite short in length and/or sung/chanted, its language having certain mythical features as well)

Examples: ballad; villanelle; canzone; sestina; rondeau; cante jondo; blues; harvest/work/marching songs; anthems

RITUAL//EROTIC/PUBLIC

-often characterized by intimate or impassioned address to another being or beings; the relevant contexts here are “ritual,” “erotic,” and “public/civic”; the category spans the public as well as the private

Examples: hymn; charm; psalm; ode; address to the beloved; elegy; epigram; lament; invocation; litany; liturgy; prophecy; confession; invective; imprecation; public poetry

MEDITATIVE/REFLECTIVE

-characterized by focused attention on some object, scene, or psychological situation; conversing with oneself; dramatic depiction of how the personality would express itself if it had no inhibitions; realistic representations of “consciousness”

Note: of the three, this is arguably the dominant mode of lyric practiced and read today, having evolved out of the “ritual/erotic/public” sort—well suited to societies in which introspection can be cultivated; it is the ritual—the prayer—turned inward

Examples: haiku; ghazal; sijo; ekphrastic poetry; soliloquy; dramatic monologue; confessional poetry

Three faces of lyric: philosopher, child, lover

Philosophy and poetry sometimes appear to have a great deal in common. Other times, they seem utterly opposed. After all, philosophy is the language of concepts. It is the language of concepts about concepts. It is like a science about culture, and science is not poetry. Philosophy creates concepts to interrogate concepts. What is “justice”? Do we know what justice even means? Do we know what anything means? A conceptual framework then must be developed to

take on the concept in question. Other concepts meanwhile will be redefined, and can only be understood within the realm of philosophy.

But where philosophy and lyric converge is high up, in the clouds, or higher, when lyric adopts an aerial view. When lyric looks at life from on high, it begins to look more like philosophy. There they both think about the meaning of life, of death, of meaning itself—purpose or lack thereof; being; the structure of the cosmos, beginnings and ends, etc. Here poetry is interested in the same questions as philosophy. And indeed these are the concerns of religion too.

But just as easily poetry can descend to the earth, and can be as close to it as a bug. When it does this, poetry becomes like a naturalist, that is, a scientist who describes nature with care born of curiosity—who looks at nature under a microscope. The observation of sensuous detail, particularities rather than generalities—this happens to be its bailiwick, too. Here it seems utterly antithetical to philosophy, with all its abstraction. Many who regard it this way, as being more oriented to the particular, rather than the general, wonder how anyone could ever compare it to philosophy.

But of course there is the most famous, third kind. If the last type was lyric-as-child, this type is lyric-as-lover. Indeed poetry can be incredibly romantic, concerned with the expression of intimate feelings, powerful emotions, impossible desires. Again, it seems opposed to abstraction. One who thinks of poetry along these lines will wonder how it could have anything to do with philosophy at all. Can all three types really be compatible? Which of the three is most essential? If all are valid, how could it be that lyric has these different faces—of philosopher, child, and lover? Hopefully in time such questions will be answered.

In any event, when lyric wears the mask of philosophy (*logos*) it creates a mystical or metaphysical atmosphere, a special tone associated with large, airy spaces. Indeed space is most emphasized here, rather than image, metaphor, or feeling. Metaphor tends also to appear at the global rather than local level. The poem is likely to be one large metaphorical scene, rather than a canvas containing a play of discrete metaphors:

> The palm at the end of the mind,
> Beyond the last thought, rises
> In the bronze decor,
>
> A gold-feathered bird
> Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
> Without human feeling, a foreign song.
>
> You know then that it is not the reason
> That makes us happy or unhappy.
> The bird sings. Its feathers shine.
>
> The palm stands on the edge of space.
> The wind moves slowly in the branches.
> The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down. (Wallace Stevens, "Of Mere Being")

This atmosphere is the product of the marriage of concept and image, along with the reflective search for meaning occasioning that marriage. Concept-images create an aura—the acts of

reflection and contemplation contribute to it. Emily Dickinson, as well, wears the philosophical mask.

When lyric wears the mask of the lover, however, it specializes in the expression of intense feeling. Here metaphors and images arise from such feeling—but the affect is shown nakedly first, and is analogous to the impasto technique in painting, whereby feeling is presented thickly, lavishly. The tone will often be intimate but arrow-like, directed at a particular object. Such passionate concentration (*thymos*) is paradoxically more penetrative than it is harmonious, which we would expect of the lover. It is sexual. Catullus is emblematic of this type.

The child (*eros*, emphasis on "sensing" rather than romantic love) is most interested in the outward aspects of objects, and focuses on surfaces: color, texture, shape. The production of metaphor and imagery—fueled by sheer curiosity—is her bailiwick. Elizabeth Bishop would be exemplary of this type.

Of course all three (*logos*, *thymos*, and *eros*) are free to blend and overlap in a given poem, with the lover and child, however, being the most likely to pair up (think of the poetry of Pablo Neruda). *Logos*, however tends for whatever reason to be most inaccessible to the other two, yet still a major presence in the world of lyric.

Definition of lyric poetry

Whom, then, shall we call poets? Those who are so constituted, that emotions are the links of association by which their ideas, both sensuous and spiritual, are connected together.

—John Stuart Mill

Lyric poetry, rooted in ancient hymns, prayers, and incantations, weaves together emotional expression (or evocation) and intellectual reflection. Because personal feeling and imaginative life take precedence, the genre employs techniques highlighting the interconnectedness of varied or dissimilar things, featuring words carrying sacred and/or magical association, and imagery from dreams and nature, particularly metaphors bespeaking its cycles. Such a dynamic interplay of elements serves to explore complex issues and themes, in a highly personal manner.

This engagement encompasses philosophical musings and reflections on society or broader humanity, adding layers of intellectual depth to the emotional landscape or narrative. Yet, at its core, lyric points to what is shared among people in their concealed, interior worlds. Thus, to this end it is necessary to strike a balance between sensuous and intellectual contemplation through the skillful expression (or evocation) of personal feeling, typically in a tone whereby the monumental and the intimate cohere into a voice of "monumental intimacy." Since a prayer is made aloud or silently, in public or in private, a lyric poem usually leans more toward the monumental or more toward the intimate, but ultimately it blends the two into a form in which impersonality and familiarity, hugeness and smallness, remoteness and intimacy have become one. Monumental intimacy being integral to lyric is arguably the main reason why Antonio Porchia's aphorisms are regarded as poetry: "When you seem to be listening to my words, they seem to be your words, with me listening" (*Voices 77*).

Through blending simple and complex speech, vividness and abstraction, and by arranging words with ritualistic, cyclic repetition (including though not limited to rhyme and meter), usually as would befit a hymn or an incantation, poets cultivate rich, varied experiences,

stirring the imagination (the senses), the heart (the passions), and the intellect (the reason). Lyric poetry creates a sense of balance or harmony. It makes the abstract sensuous, and the sensuous abstract. It speaks in concept-images and cyclic repetitions. And it is often polysemous. As a result, it does its work through evocation to a greater degree than ordinary, practical language, and suggests meanings beyond those it denotes. By virtue of such language use, the poet seems to announce, implicitly:

-My senses and emotions express themselves in rhythm, color, and image.

-My reason expresses itself in syllogism, formula, and diagram.

-When I put them together, I am able to speak a language of my whole being.

-Which just happens to be the language of dreams.

It is the faculty of intuition which bridges the reason and senses/passions, via a highly compressed schematic language of concept-images, a sort of hieroglyphics.

The concept-image, or sensuous concept, can only be understood in relation to the mythical image and the theoretical concept.

The pure mythical image can be likened to a spectral or beautiful face appearing out of nowhere if a match happens to be struck in the midst of blackest night. To exist it must eliminate, must become the only thing—it is purely singular. It even replaces the world, so to speak.

The concept is an abstraction which functions and feels as a subway map. It is a diffusely lit molecule of atomic conception. It ultimately implies the entire dimly lit world without sensuous particularity. It implies the whole universe, all other abstract symbols. The concept is a sign whose meaning, while gaining its meaning through its difference from all other signs, has

no identity of its own. The purely mythical image, on the other hand, has an irreducible identity, and is truly singular.

The poetic hieroglyph, finally, is a sensuous concept. It contains elements of the pure mythical image as well as those of the rationalistic concept. It predates the concept, of course, while containing within it the potential for its existence. Like a pure mythical image, it has a strong gravitational force, its own intensity. But, like a concept—as a sign—it is only an abstraction, a theoretical symbol.

Like all language, however, which is symbolic, it has the extensive, outward-tending force of science and systematic reason, combined with the immanent, hypnotic, self-reinforcing mechanism of fascination belonging to art and myth. Strong emotion could be said to be the basis of mythical images, and the mythical image the basis of figurative language. Poetry emerges when imagination and language work in tandem to convert the pure, alien "wild nature" of powerful emotion into a possession of "culture." Hence the concept-image is one of nature's means of making itself "cultural." It is through this complex process that our ancestors transformed themselves from beings of wild nature into highly cultural beings, in the way that we have subjected nature continually to a process of cultivation. It is this tendency of course which has led us to a point where too many have forgotten their connection to nature, and hence their connection to poetry, and this effort to become purely cultural and increasingly divorced from nature could prove our undoing.

The poetic hieroglyph, one might say, has the form of a stable molecule as well as the blinding light of an atomic blast. If it wished to, it could obliterate the world. It could also enumerate all which exists under the sun, in the form of an endless poetic catalog. Indeed the

catalog (or enumeratio) in its highest expression is a sort of irrational infinity, the flip side of the that which appears out of nowhere in the darkness of a wood. It is as much the Abrahamic god's speech act "Let there be light" as Adam's bestowal of the (true) names upon God's creatures.

Such a broad, comprehensive definition as this acknowledges lyric's capacity for evolution and adaptation over time, while honoring the ritual and ceremonial functions of propitiation and memorialization which are its ancestral bases.

CHAPTER IV

OMEN, RITUAL, AND HOW WE RECOGNIZE POETRY

Poetry is a deep inner calling in man; from it came liturgy, the psalms, and also the content of religions. The poet confronted nature's phenomena and in the early ages called himself a priest, to safeguard his vocation. . . . Today's social poet is still a member of the earliest order of priests. In the old days he made his pact with the darkness, and now he must interpret the light.

—Pablo Neruda

The first half of this chapter is concerned with poetry's relation to superstitious thinking, namely omen and ritual. It reinforces the claims in the previous chapter, while attempting to isolate what I consider a mythical worldview. If the foregoing chapter's primary focus was mythical speech, poetry's essence, this chapter is about mythical thinking—superstitious thinking—which I contrast with a more theoretical mindset. Its purpose is to prepare the way for a framework for thinking about poetry in a less theoretical, more down-to-earth, perhaps even teachable way. It is a kind of proof to show that in practice what people identify as poetry owes mainly to its mythical characteristics.

To start this chapter off, allow me to quote Cristina Campo who states the following:

> Small children have mysterious organs, sensitive to omens and correspondences. At the age of six, I used to read fairy tales all day long. But why did I always return, fascinated, to certain images that later on I would recognize were almost recurring emblems for me, almost heraldic devices. The dialogue, under the dark city gate, between the goose girl and the severed head of a horse. "Farewell, Falada, who hangs up above! / Farewell, young queen, who passes down below…" A story that I discover in every corner of my life, ready to be reinterpreted on new levels and opened with new keys.
>
> Thus, in poetry, the image preexists the idea that will slowly seep into it. For years, it can haunt the poet, whatever it may be: fabulous or domestic, dismaying or familiar, often an image from early childhood, the strange name of a tree, the insistence of a gesture. It patiently waits for revelation to come and fill it. (Campo 134)

Like Campo, I believe that the omen is central to poetry, as it is related to the naming of gods according to a metaphorical logic which blurs the lines between descrete things in the world. It is

an act quite separate from creating distinctions. The same could be said for ritual, by which I mean the rule-based ceremonies during which poetry is recited as a sacred act. This also goes for the hymn/prayer form.

Mythical Thought, Poetry, Omens

For much longer than the historical record can tell us about "civilized" life, people lived side-by-side, intimately with nature, rather than residing in cultural fortresses, as most of us do today. In being so close to nature, the need to invest it with spiritual or cultural significance must have been urgent. Only myth—by which I denote a faculty of thinking—could accomplish this.

Although those of us protected from nature may be liable to regard it as cold, inhuman, indifferent, cruel, those who practice a traditional way of life see spirit everywhere pervading the natural world. Culture does too. Culture and nature blend. And despite the fact that nature is studied and observed with tremendous attention to detail—one could say with an eye as objective as a scientist's, if not more so—imagination presents nature to the consciousness as spiritually alive.

The unique freedom afforded by living in a world where nature is to a large degree subjugated alienates us from myth. This alienation, however is the very precondition for the development of theoretical thought, which uses clean, sharply delineated concepts to describe the world in its discrete parts. To do this work, it is necessary to reject the metaphors and concept-images of myth uniting outwardly dissimilar things; it takes quantitative measurements rather than emphasizing affects and qualities.

And yet, when alone at night, perhaps merely in the wilderness of one's backyard or in a strange house, mythical thinking returns with a vengeance. We remember suddenly what it was like when we were afraid of the dark, without the assurances of the adult world. The appearance not only of predators such as bears or wolves but of supernatural forces becomes distinctly possible. And while we may know such notions are silly—we feel otherwise. According to Ernst Cassirer, strong emotion is the mother of myth (82). The flight of birds, the appearance of a fawn in a clearing, scenes from a dream—these for a mythical thinker are omens. Nature is regarded poetically—interpreted via resemblance, its heterogeneous beings bound through a process of association.

Over time, the nature-human hybridity of culture begins to wane. Consider the difference between the Egyptian pantheon, which is hybrid, and that of the Greeks where the gods become almost fully human. Hegel speaks of the gradual breaking away from nature so easily apparent in this transformation: humankind becoming conscious of itself—individuating, separating itself from nature, from the animal kingdom (*Classics in Western Philosophy of Art* 204-5). Myth gradually wanes along this trajectory. Poetry in short is nothing other than the forces of nature manifest as speech, that is, as though nature itself could speak in a human voice. Poetry, which is mythic art made of words, is at once impersonal and full of affect. This blending of nature and human spirit is why we find in our earliest works of figurative art, dating to the Paleolithic, practically without exception the human form blending with that of the animal world.

We have become increasingly disinclined to invest nature (e.g. rocks) with culture (e.g. spirits). More and more we have invested culture (e.g. bedrooms) with culture (e.g. vases), and even more culture (e.g. plastic flowers).

But we have been able to think theoretically about phenomena in the natural world as if they were objects. Poets for their part have kept alive the ancient way of thinking, and of using speech. And so, even in the twentieth century, Else Lasker-Schüler still expresses herself in a rich language of omens, for which natural "objects" are almost subjects, full of spiritual life:

Into my lap a great star will fall…

We would waken the night,

And pray in tongues

Carved like harps.

We would be reconciled with the night—

So much of God overflows.

Our hearts are children

Who, weary-sweet, would rest.

Our lips would kiss each other,

What do you fear?

Does my heart not verge on yours—

Your blood still stains my cheeks red.

We would be reconciled in the night,

If we embrace, we shall not die.

Into my lap a great star will fall. (Lasker-Schüler 174-75)

Likewise, this poem, by Georg Trakl:

It is a stubble field, where a black rain is falling.

It is a brown tree, that stands alone.

It is a hissing wind, that encircles empty houses.

How melancholy the evening is.

A while later,

The soft orphan garners the sparse ears of corn.

Her eyes graze, round and golden, in the twilight

And her womb awaits the heavenly bridegroom.

On the way home

The shepherd found the sweet body

Decayed in a bush of thorns.

I am a shadow far from darkening villages.

I drank the silence of God

Out of the stream in the trees.

Cold metal walks on my forehead.

Spiders search for my heart.

It is a light that goes out in my mouth.

At night, I found myself on a pasture,

Covered with rubbish and the dust of stars.

In a hazel thicket

Angels of crystal rang out once more. (Trakl 16)

And then this one, by Edith Södergran:

Do not go too near your dreams:

they are a smoke and they could blow away -

they are dangerous and could endure.

Have you looked your dreams in the eye?

They are sick and understand nothing -

they have only their own thoughts.

Do not go too near your dreams:

they are an untruth, they ought to go -

they are a madness, they want to stay. (Södergran 86)

As a fourth and final exhibit, consider the following 4,000-year-old text, from Mesopotamia, concerning the seven visible celestial bodies.

They are 7 in number, just 7

In the terrible depths they are 7

Bow down, in the sky they are 7

In the terrible depths, the dark houses

They swell, they grow tall

They are neither female nor male

They are a silence heavy with seastorms

They bear off no women their loins are empty of children

They are strangers to pity, compassion is far from them

They are deaf to men's prayers, entreaties can't reach them

They are horses that grow to great size that feed on mountains

They are the enemies of our friends

They feed on the gods

They tear up the highways they spread out over the roads

They are the faces of evil they are the faces of evil

They are 7 they are 7 they are 7 times 7

In the name of heaven let them be torn from our sight

In the name of the Earth let them be torn from our sight (Washburn 7-8)

When we use theory and concepts as we do to navigate the world, we lose access to the ancient parts of the self, so that we can only recover them through deliberate acts of contemplation. The most primordial parts—as well as the dream-related parts—sit farther back today than they used to. The apparatus we employ and which mediates reality, far more than many of us realize, diverts our attention from the reservoir of mythical thought and feeling which lives on in us but is attenuated and restricted to the private spheres of contemplation and sleep. Thus it is only through deliberate acts of contemplation, when we are awake, that we have access to the poetic mind again. It is why poetry is written to be contemplated rather than used for prayer or other magical purposes, as it once was, hence John Stuart Mill's remarking that prayer departs from the properly poetic mode of soliloquy when it takes the form of prayer: "grief, taking the form of a prayer, or a complaint, becomes oratorical; no longer low, and even, and subdued, it assumes a more emphatic rhythm" (Mill 15). Surely this would make the Akkadian poem above more a work of oratory than of poetry, just as it would do for this poem of Dylan Thomas, based as it is in lament or ancient imprecation:

Friend by enemy I call you out.

You with a bad coin in your socket,
You my friend there with a winning air
Who palmed the lie on me when you looked
Brassily at my shyest secret,
Enticed with twinkling bits of the eye
Till the sweet tooth of my love bit dry,

Rasped at last, and I stumbled and sucked,

Whom now I conjure to stand as thief

In the memory worked by mirrors,

With unforgettably smiling act,

Quickness of hand in the velvet glove

And my whole heart under your hammer,

Were once such a creature, so gay and frank

A desireless familiar

I never thought to utter or think

While you displaced a truth in the air,

That though I loved them for their faults

As much as for their good,

My friends were enemies on stilts

With their heads in a cunning cloud. (Thomas 118)

Modern hymn, or what we call poetry, is like a mirror whose function is to reflect back the ancient soul; where in the past, it was used as a spear projected forth into the world in order to make something happen. It was expected to bring change—to affect the world, gods, other people. It is so odd, then, to think of poetry as having been viewed this way, as a practical activity, externally rather than inwardly directed, because today it has associations of ineffectuality and melancholy—withdrawal from life.

As suggested, without conceptual schemas, the mythic imagination sits much farther forward in one's awareness. It has been—and still is for some, in traditional cultures—the primary means of mediating life. This interface for practical consciousness is a screen, as ours is today, yet it is sensuous unlike that which is used in the theoretical world. While it is remote, it is there: it has merely been put in the trunk, emerging, coming forth again, when death or crisis suddenly turn our world upside down, or (more positively) when something beautifully moving or sublime occasions a reset for our being.

On poetry and ritual

Today's poetry descends from that which was composed and performed for ritual purposes. Rituals are by definition removed from profane existence. For poetry, the means of achieving distance from the profane are varied, but they fall under the category of heightened speech. Among those Gillingham enumerates in the Hebrew Bible are terse style, archaism, rhyming, ambiguous meanings, strange word order, figurative language, repetition, parallelism, as well as rhythms associated with performance (*The Poems and Psalms of the Hebrew Bible*, S. E. Gillingham 21-7).

The heart of poetry is located in the land of sacred ritual. Lyric poetry has its origins in hymn and the supplication to gods. The erotic element of lyric poetry does not contradict this fact. For the point is that the beloved of lyric—the object of love—is treated as a holy deity. She is paid tribute, entreated, praised. A hymn is a prayer. Thus it is the subject and theme that have greater weight than the mere fact of language having been rendered in verse.

Verse alone was never enough to establish something as poetry. Verse signals separation from ordinary life, but a true ritual worthy of the name holy must have other qualities. Verse is not itself essential to clear the way for the holy. That is why the "prose" one encounters in the King James translation of the Bible has the unmistakable feeling of sacredness. "No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and their righteousness is of me, saith the LORD." In the Tarantino film *Pulp Fiction*, the professional gangster Jules explains that for years he delivered the following piece of (fictional) scripture, supposedly from Ezekiel, before executing his victims:

> The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the inequities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men. Blessed is he, who in the name of charity and good will, shepherds the weak through the valley of darkness, for he is truly his brother's keeper and the finder of lost children. And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who would attempt to poison and destroy my brothers. And you will know my name is the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon thee. (Tarantino)

Jules reveals, however, that he "never gave much thought to what it meant. I just thought it was some coldblooded shit to say to a motherfucker before I popped a cap in his ass." What Jules had no doubt intuited about the passage is that it lent to his executions an aura of sacred ritual, imparting to his victims that they were to be sacrificed in the name of deity. Jules's fictional scripture captures the effect of the passage quoted from Isaiah. But neither of them is verse. What gives them their sacred aura and authority is the same complex of factors—irreducible to verse—that we encounter in Yeats's "The Second Coming," the beginning of which quoted here:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.

Yeats is mainly a lyric poet. And the above poem is a prophecy, full of ominous imagery, modeled on the ancient prophecies of scripture. If the lyric genre has primarily grown out of the song of praise or hymn, is it really correct to regard Yeats's poem as a lyric? In many ways this may seem a very minor question. But it is important for our purposes since the prophecy belongs to the same family of poem to which the hymn (or ode) and curse belong. A prophecy consists in the poet speaking for the gods or simply God; whereas a hymn consists in praising a god, God, or ruler. One can imagine a shaman delivering hymns and prophecies, depending on context. One can equally imagine a practitioner of traditional magic, on the behalf of a ruler or client, delivering curses to an enemy or making prophecies. Any of these would have been carried out in a ritual setting, constituting the ritual's very core, not as an accompaniment to the ritual as music or visual art are during Mass; what we think of as lyric today generally takes the form—diluted—of any or all of these modes.

Today, though, with ritual having become marginal, the poet will often downplay lyric's ritual inheritance, not for any conscious reason so much as because it simply feels old-fashioned,

archaic—indeed, even religious—to compose in these modes without considerable weakening of the ritual element. And yet the convention preserves the archaic trait, in sublimated form. The petition to the god is repressed, resurfacing often today in the form of a conversation with oneself, a form of ritual self-exploration and reflection, or as a confession to a priest… or perhaps as a political song addressed to one's community or one's comrades. The curse is repressed and modified into invective, then satire, or today into the political poem which attacks an adversary. The outward form of lyric—what one could call its trappings—has remained intact, if concealed, in spite of the forces of secularization which are hostile to it. But its inner, subjective life and intention have changed. No longer do poets in general have sufficient experience carrying out ritual to feel honest incorporating it into their work.

Poetry has over time adapted, so now it is largely a secular affair. The novel has flourished meanwhile, having been more suited to secular life—having shed many of the mythical traits of epic. But lyric lives on, as religion does, after a fashion. Of course lyric is not a genuinely "living" form; hence it must be practiced today with self-consciousness and disciplined study. Its ritual vestiges are only partly living. In this particular sense it is like our names for the seven days of the week. Each is still named for one of the seven visible heavenly bodies—the sun, moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn—without our being consciously aware of this barbaric inheritance unless some pedant brings it to our attention. Far from having an enchanted (lunar) aura, the word "Monday" carries associations more banal perhaps than any word. That it is named for the Mother Goddess, which Robert Graves claims to be poetry's true theme, is ironic. To those who have no special investment, poetry has become as simultaneously dreaded and dull as the arrival of Monday—bringing sensations of displeasure and difficulty. At

the same time, most poets would generally find Graves's position to be almost alien, in its departure from an acceptable secular attitude.

The ritual basis of lyric is a holdover from the past, which for Thomas Love Peacock is why poets must admit that the poetic vocation is not just out-of-step with life as it is lived (he writes in the nineteenth century), it is "barbaric," intellectually backward. Of today's obdurate poet, he writes, "The march of his intellect is like that of a crab, backward" (Harmon 327).

Still, the particular type of speech of which poetry consists—used far less frequently in everyday affairs—is another matter. Though lyric's outward trappings (lyric ritual being an expression of mythical thinking) and poetry's special way of using language are deeply related, it is possible to use mythical speech outside of a lyric context.

Over time, mythical speech and images have lost their reality. Instead of believing that the poem speaks to, and of, real gods, or that a painting of an ibex contains the real animal's life force, we merely contemplate a work of art. Myth is practical and therefore it necessarily takes action. Yet for any action to be possible, one must believe in the myth's metaphoric connection to reality.

Myth has gradually given way to what we today call art. Yet poetry—an art—continues to speak in mythical metaphors which we contemplate rather than regard as efficacious. Theoretical thinking and science would ultimately supplant myth as the preferred means by which people act upon the world. For centuries, however, they existed side-by-side, with myth (often in a religious context) more and more losing ground to systematic reason.

With the Enlightenment, myth, in the public sense, would be finished off. And this (not coincidentally) led to the emergence of aesthetic "taste," namely the practice of treating art- and

literary works as objects for contemplation. These would be evaluated, not according to their use or effect on life (or afterlife), but according to their structure, craftsmanship, and form—in other words, for their capacity to be re-experienced across centuries. No longer a gateway to the divine, art was now "liberated" from the sphere of ritual practice.

Contemplation of works of art, of course, was nothing new; for art had been valued for its form and ability to transport for centuries. A work's beauty, exquisiteness, and power—these had always been considered important… yet with one main difference: a work's power or beauty would bespeak its sacred nature, just as its sacred nature added to its beauty or power. The interdiction against idols was inspired by the lushness and grandeur of what was observed during the Jewish captivity in Babylon. It was on the one hand a monotheistic reaction to idol-worship, on the other it was an ascetic recoiling from the life of the senses. What is viewed as the pagan way of experiencing artworks is ambivalent—worship of the idol and the contemplation of its sensuous forms existed in a perverse tension. While to moderns this would be viewed as a half-civilized approach to aesthetic experiencing—a stepping stone between that of prehistory and that of modernity—to those who first severed the link between sensuous contemplation and deity, it was entirely barbaric.

Aestheticism was a movement for which all cultural production was viewed as an opportunity for aesthetic contemplation; it was a reaction against the instrumentalism which had become unquestionably hegemonic since the advent of industrialization. The worship of fine objects and scenes was a sublimation of myth, just as Symbolism's spiritualization of literature was such a sublimation. Above all it was a revival of voluptuous Babylonian idolatry. Aestheticism, Decadence, Symbolism each resurrected this ancient approach to life, for which

contemplation and mythical ritual coexisted in a strange tension. Aestheticism took the bourgeois and scientistic materialism of the day and transformed their vulgar obsession with matter as a means of generating wealth and knowledge into a religion of art, music, and poetry. All culture could and should be made into art, mirroring (and opposing) the bourgeois position that all nature—with the aid of science—could be likewise transfigured into profit. Aestheticism would treat culture the way Romanticism treated nature. But where Aestheticism differs from Babylonian idolatry is in its stance that beauty was utterly useless: art could have no effect on life.

But perhaps of all the productions of Symbolism, Aestheticism, or Decadence, only Wilde's *Salome* faithfully reproduces the ancient Babylonian spirit, his other works being but secular versions thereof, to the extent that they had rid themselves of belief in magic as a force immanent to objects, meanwhile retaining the Babylonian premium placed on exquisiteness. His earlier work, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, gestures toward the former ambivalence of exquisiteness and magic, but does so without seeming to believe in magic. Wilde seems implicitly to say, "but of course we moderns know such things could never truly be." And yet, in both works, Wilde reminds us of the coexistence of magic and art. Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Huysmans, Mallarmé—each hearkens back to the ancient tension but from the vantage of disenchanted life. Each reminds us that poetry has two voices—that of aesthetic contemplation (art), and that of magical action (myth).

In former times—and in some contemporary cultures—the artwork or poem was analogous to the dream that was not only a dream; it was also a prophecy or an omen, a message from beyond. The god Apollo, who presided over both prophecy and poetry, embodies this

inherent relationship. Emily Pillinger writes, “Poets and prophets . . . share in a world of divine inspiration and linguistic power. Their common ground is more marked in the characterisation of the possessed seer, the visionary *mantis*, than in representations of the intellectual sign-reader” (Pillinger 9).

In our culture, the artwork is analogous to a dream which we contemplate but ultimately interpret intellectually, and understand almost materially, reductively, as little more than an unconscious creation from within us, based in our material experiences. We do not tend to regard the dream as a voice delivering a message from the spirit world. However, for previous poets, and what we today refer to as artists in general, it was normal to regard their productions as being in direct conversation with the spirit world—which is to say, the divine. Some of that has carried over into modern life, as we have seen, and this is particularly true of the Romantic cult of genius. Yet, over time, it became increasingly common for artworks to be contemplated as only can be done with what is separate from practical life or scientific inquiry. By contrast, in former ages, the artwork or poem was regarded as an object made with the help of forces separate from and beyond practical life (spiritual forces), but which could still affect life. And so we are able to console ourselves that a nightmare was “only a dream,” just as we say of a film, “art is not life.”

Despite the relegation of mythical life to the background—or to oblivion, as sometimes seems to be the case—people continue in private to behave in what might be termed a “primitive” manner. Indeed much of what is considered pathological may have its basis in mythical psychology. The gambler whose impulsive behavior defies all reason acts as though prayer and unity of intention just might be enough to win divine favor. One who sees

coincidences everywhere is perhaps thinking as mythically as one who has faith that her dog understands the sentences she speaks to him. Acts associated with obsessive compulsive disorder seemingly take the form of ritual.

Under stress, or in response to great uncertainty or excitement, we act in ways that do not make sense from a modern perspective. At a funeral, we may suddenly believe that our thoughts and prayers will help the deceased, which resembles what can be readily observed at sporting events where it is not uncommon for areligious individuals to pray for their team (likely, by the way, to have a totemic name, e.g. Dolphins) in moments of crisis. Or when we feel betrayed by someone, it is not unusual to find ourselves condemning the offender to hell or some other misfortune—as though thought or words uttered in private could actually affect reality.

Intense desire in the face of uncertainty or struggle has a tendency to give rise to prayer—the supplication to one or multiple spirits. It is only then that prayer gives rise to the making of hymns or paintings or carved fetishes or statues. The purely artistic impulse to make a composition which, through its formal structure, is intended to fascinate or delight is acted on in order to better influence the world, that is, to better appease the spirits one wishes to win over to one's cause: the care and attention which are necessary for adept artistic creation become a kind of sacrifice.

The interplay between mythical thinking and artistic contemplation hopefully helps to shed light on the foreign character of ancient poetry. Literary tradition carried poetry's mythical symbols and analogical style forward through history, after their mythical impetus had begun to turn alien. As myth was increasingly pushed to the margins, poetry's tropes and images, having become conventional, spoke less and less to ordinary experience. To fully secular minds, poetry

now had the selfsame character (in terms of how it is perceived) as religion, stuffy, upheld artificially, institutionally, by means of tradition alone, devoid of obvious relevance to life. And it is for this reason that it becomes possible to speak of poetry as having ceased to be "living." Yet even in spite of this, mythical thinking continues to intrude into secular life, if haphazardly, spontaneously, randomly, fragmentarily, and without the sociality and fully filled-out form of deliberate ritual.

Art continues to be made; its making will never stop. Yet neither will mythical thinking come to an end. Art and myth do not appear to need each other as they once did. Poetry has become either literature, experimental art, or children's verse. The issue was not that prose had outstripped verse and became the language of the world, as poetry correspondingly languished. The issue was that magical action (myth) receded from life, and thus from poetry, so that all poetry could be was aesthetic contemplation (art). The real issue, then, is that poetry had lost one of its two voices—half its being.

In order for poetry to be restored as a central form of culture—as many modern poets have dreamed—it would make little sense to dialecticize it with prose, for that would be a solution to a non-existent problem. Prose and poetry have never in actuality opposed one another, even if some have believed otherwise. If anything, the solution would be to restore myth to poetry. This, of course, could be done only if myth were restored to life, which could not be done by any conscious effort.

It would not be a blend in which each loses its distinctive character in the other, but a recognition on the part of science that myth is an ineradicable part of who we are, that it in no way threatens science, and science in no way threatens myth. Modernity, as a mindset, will come

to an end when this zero-sum thinking is repudiated. But such would constitute modernity's last self-conscious negation. It could not take the classic revolutionary form of breaking with the past in the name of some utopian future. Indeed, it would be a repudiation only insofar as something repressed and made to feel ashamed of itself had been remembered and reclaimed, brought proudly into the light of day; it would need to take the form of an *aufhebung*, whereby the best of science and myth was retained.

Science fiction and fantasy provide some hope; they embrace myth as well as science in a single coherent vision. Sci-fi, superhero, and fantasy films satisfy the desire for mythical art, while simultaneously satisfying the desire to contemplate the future—mixing very often worry and wonder. But what about contemporary film, more generally? If cinema is our dominant art form, what is its relation to what I have said above concerning myth—beyond what has been said concerning the Hero's Journey?

Many of the films that are successful at the box office show protagonists forced to undergo trials which can only be described as anomalous (think of *Sophie's Choice*). It turns out that audiences are curious how they would act in situations that are both possible and rare, in which one is forced to act under intense pressure. It is for like reasons that sport has such a draw —viz. consider how much is on the line, say, in the Super Bowl. Sport's advantage over film is that it is real. A war film, by contrast, furnishes a plausible narrative concerning a more intense type of situation which we know exists at the tail-end of the distribution. "What would I do in this situation?" There is no way to be sure, which is the point. Such cinema opens audiences up to ritual, by virtue of what they feel on behalf of others from a safe distance. Horror, psychological thriller, murder mystery, even sports drama—all provoke an emotionally

heightened experience. Such experience may resemble the sort we have had from time to time, except more extreme. We pray for the characters we see suffering in front of us. Intense emotion is at the heart of the mythical mood.

This explains why the story of Christ has proven so useful: we are asked to consider the (unimaginable) suffering he experienced. It is tragic, heroic. It also happens to be a lubricant for ritual. A story may not be mythical in the usual sense. It may lack the symbolism, the structure, the fantastical elements we tend to associate with myth. It may even be set in a disenchanted world, which is to say the "real" one, so that the least "poetic" film becomes the most mythic. Yet it almost always is to an extent manipulative and formulaic. The term "torture porn" is apt. For, like pornography, it seeks to arouse—not sexual desire, but a sort of distress. People have become so mythically alienated, that millions seek out representations of unimaginable suffering in order to experience an aspect of the psyche which otherwise has little opportunity for expression. The repression of myth and ritual makes us vulnerable to pornography, which has its place, but is an escape—from both life and art.

To watch a movie that mechanically induces horror and distress on the behalf of on-screen sufferers is a counterfeit means of achieving a mythical state—of gaining access to a repressed portion of the psyche which wishes to express itself socially, not in an isolated, unintegrated fashion. It is a binge, an overcompensation. There is an inexorable need for powerful emotion and a corresponding need to channel powerful emotion into ritual. These needs are being addressed—if not met—by sporting events, concerts, and political movements. Our private moments of emotional excitement, however, remain chaotic and formless in the absence

of private ritual's structure-giving influence—it tames the chaos, so to speak, conferring on emotion a satisfying structure.

Therapy may be structured like ritual, its theory may incorporate mythical tropes. But all too often it answers to science and, inadvertently or not, causes one to view nature, culture, oneself and others through a scientific lens.

Science of course developed out of a conscious move away from the mythical tendency of seeing analogy and kinship among disparate things, in favor of emphasizing difference and discreteness. This was of course necessary for constructing an objective model of the universe. Unfortunately, however, difficulty regaining the mythical mode of speech has prevented our feeling at ease among ever increasing heterogeneity. We are unable to recover from rationality's founding gesture of making marginal, and over time atrophying, the semblance-loving faculty underlying not only sympathetic magic but metaphor as well. It is for this reason that poetry so often seems to bewilder or underwhelm.

Today we view poetry as a form of rarefied art. Although what we call art began as a ritual practice, contemplation has taken over art's primary role, with traces of ritual, if that, remaining. Which ultimately opened the doors for artists who would play on the assumption that it is a work's sensuous forms or the artist's skill at representing life that are to be contemplated. They would take advantage of the art-institutional context to frustrate or block such contemplation. The work would have something like the magic aura of a fetish and would prompt, by implicit means, the philosophical, rather than sensuous, contemplation of art's essence. We should take very seriously the magic aura that continues to hover like a ghost.

Poetry's primary and secondary characteristics

Following somewhat in the footsteps of John Stuart Mill, this framework assumes that because people generally act and speak as though they have a sense of what poetry is, this is philosophically meaningful. While the distinctions of "popular language" are unimportant to "half-philosophy," "philosophy carried to its highest point may frame new ones, but never sets aside the old, content with correcting and regularizing them" (Mill 5).

This framework attempts to show why exactly it is that various texts are recognizable as poetry, or not, by many different people. It holds that for an utterance to be in a danger of being seen as a poem (not merely a lyric poem, which is a species of this larger genus of mythical speech, a set of potentialities and general tendencies), it would have to feature at least one of the following primary characteristics in combination with at least one secondary. It could also feature at least two primary characteristics with or without any secondary ones.

While many theorists of poetry seem to have written under the presupposition that a combination of secondary characteristics alone would suffice, under examination this is merely a recipe for verbal art, or self-consciously artificial speech. It is in fact difficult to find poems which have secondary characteristics, but not a single primary characteristic. A high percentage of verbal works of art recognized as poems have two or three primary characteristics in addition to several secondary ones. This far exceeds the bare minimum requirements. It is in part this very excess combined with the sheer variety of secondary characteristics relative to three primary ones which has prevented the formulation of a definition of poetry inclusive enough to admit nearly everything considered poetry produced over the last 4,000 years, while being exclusive enough not to admit what would be extremely difficult to accept as poetry. If the framework to a

great extent succeeds, it tells us something about the unconscious premises from which poets and audiences have unconsciously and quite consistently operated, even as poetry underwent the radical transformations it undoubtedly has. It is worth stating, too, that while the framework may be comprehensive for its time, it recognizes poetry's ongoing evolution and thus may require adaptation or expansion in order that it may remain inclusive of those emergent forms of expression yet to present themselves and over time gain general acceptance as poetry.

Primary Characteristics of Poetry (the realm of mythical thought)

. sincere apostrophe (address to a god, a person not present, a being in nature, an inanimate object, not necessarily preceded by the "O!" interjection); sharing of innermost experience, in a tone of personal intimacy or tenderness, or laconically; extended imprecation; prophecy

. pronounced cosmic, sacred, archetypal/elemental, natural/erotic/sensuous, fantastic, or ambiguous/paradoxical imagery; description informed by synaesthesia

. pronounced metaphor or analogy or simile or cyclic schematics

Secondary Characteristics of Poetry (the realm of art and rhetoric)

. meter

. pronounced (but not technically metrical) rhythm conspicuously removed from that of ordinary speech, i.e. lacking "prose rhythm"

. line breaks with or without majusculation

. deliberate arrangement of words on the page for visual effect

. dramatic recitation

. dramatic gestures or dance or music accompanying recitation

. purposeful rhyme

. pronounced wordplay

. intentional assonance, alliteration, or consonance

. consistent succinctness/compression of statement

. consistent use of strange or inverted word order

. extensive enumeratio (in the form of a list of items)

. systematic use of parallelism

. systematic repetition of words or phrases (including but not limited to anaphora, epiphora, asyndeton, polysyndeton, or musical refrain) beyond what is practically necessary

. conspicuous use of onomatopoeia

. conspicuous synecdoche/metonymy

. conspicuous archaic diction

. experimental or systematic deformation of linguistic convention, including of sense

. other rhetorical devices not already mentioned

. short composition length

Example Texts:

This first text has all three primary characteristics but arguably none of the secondary ones aside from “short composition length.” It serves to demonstrate that secondary poetic characteristics are inessential to lyric.

Text 1

O mighty sun whose light animates the world. You brush the sky with every tone. Your frightening scene unfolds each dawn when you are born again. Trees, O stoic watchers, you stand together proud, your branches reaching toward the heavens, your fingers clasped. You whisper secrets to the clouds who blow them to faraway places. Your roots plunge down into the earth, drawing nourishment from the mystery. Yes, river of my spirit, flowing without end, eel of silver. You sing of beginnings and of ends, you carve a path through mountains and valleys. You are a benefactor to everyone that depends on you and lives nearby. O gigantic tiny stars scattered across the mouth of the night, each of you a god in miniature, a promise of eternal life, distant but also close. Thank you for leading the way for scared, indigent pilgrims.

The second text has two of the three primary characteristics (left out is “sincere apostrophe (address to a god, a person not present, a being in nature, an inanimate object, not necessarily preceded by the “O!” interjection); sharing of innermost experience, in a tone of personal intimacy or tenderness, or laconically; extended imprecation; prophecy”). Like the first text, it appears to lack all secondary characteristics, with the exception of “short composition length.” This text demonstrates how a text can be poetic, but not “lyric” and instead narrative, by virtue of its “pronounced cosmic, sacred, archetypal/elemental, natural/sensuous, fantastic, or

ambiguous/paradoxical imagery" and "pronounced metaphor or analogy or simile or cyclic schematics." It serves to demonstrate that etiological myths (explaining origins) depend on primary characteristics. And while "sincere apostrophe" is surely mythical in nature, its presence generally inclines it toward prayer or hymn, and away from narrative. Likewise the "sharing of innermost experience" favors lyric expression rather than narrative. Lyric tends to make use of all three of the primary characteristics, suggesting why perhaps that when people hear the word "poetry," they tend to think "lyric." While this text is not a lyric poem, it would be rare to find somebody who objected to its being called a poem. In conclusion, narrative itself is not a characteristic of poetry, even if many poems—like this one—are strongly narrative.

Text 2

The sun is a lion whose golden rays are its whiskers. It rises in the east, over the edge of the world. Suddenly, she pounces. The night turns red: it is a wildebeest whose blood drains out. The sun drinks the blood till the world is clear and everything appears. The lion takes the carcass to the top of the heavens where her cubs have waited since dawn. She leaves them feasting, and comes down to the savanna, in the west. She stops, lies down, fully satisfied, when she is struck, her heart pierced by an arrow—yes, a hunter has been lying in wait. The lion's life pours out of her, over the horizon. The sky turns red, violet, blue, and then black. The hunter is the constellation of the archer. In the darkness of the night, he rises and walks toward his prize. He hovers over her body at the top of the night, takes her pelt, and presents it to the moon, hoping he will win her love. Yet since it had once belonged to the sun, when the moon drapes it over her body, she illuminates the night.

The third text has two of the three primary characteristics (lacking “sincere apostrophe (address to a god, a person not present, a being in nature, an inanimate object, not necessarily preceded by the “O!” interjection); sharing of innermost experience, in a tone of personal intimacy or tenderness, or laconically; extended imprecation; prophecy”), meanwhile featuring several secondary characteristics besides “short composition length.” It has “meter,” “line breaks with majusculation,” and “systematic repetition of words or phrases.” It serves to demonstrate that a text can be a poem featuring both meter and rhyme while resembling a song or a chant, though without being necessarily hymnic or prayer-like, (e.g. Text 1). While it is mythic and etiological (e.g. Text 2), it differs in lending itself to group chant or recitation (possibly in a call-and-response format) in a ritual setting. Text 1, by contrast, is classically lyric in lending itself to being recited by one leading a ritual, either alone or before a group. Although Text 3 lends itself well to ritual, even magic, it does so without being a prayer, properly speaking.

Text 3

The sun a lion

Of golden whisker,

The sun a lion

Of golden whisker

Rising in the east!

Rising in the east!

Pouncing in the night

On the wildebeest!

The beast is dead

The dawn has come

The sky turns red

Color of blood

The world is bright

Our day is new

All is fresh

A sky of blue.

The fourth text is one having no primary characteristics but several secondary ones. It is a piece of verse, not a poem. I provide it in order to demonstrate the distinction between verse and poetry, in a value-free way. The verse is elegant!

Text 4

Down the aisles, with purpose keen,

In search of tools, and paints serene,

Amidst the hum of tasks to do,

I roam the aisles, with plans anew.

In bins and shelves, the treasures wait,

Each item poised, to renovate.

From screws to bolts, and nails quite fine,

I gather supplies, a grand design!

The fifth text is another demonstration of the same thing. In this epigram of Martial (tr. Garry Wills), we find no primary characteristics, but several secondary. Martial is shown conflating verse and poetry, but what he himself writes is brilliant verse, not poetry. He would have made an intimidating battle-rapper.

Text 5

You send your presents with your home-made verse,

Which worries you, afflicts me even worse.

Give poems with your presents for the wealthy.

Send prose with you if you would keep me healthy.

The 6th text contains a primary characteristic as well as secondary characteristics. Yet many would dispute its poetic status—even its status as verse (for it is very facile). They might cite its

lack of complexity or the presence of cliches, or the fact that it is simply unimaginative. Of course one could say the text is merely a piece of verse, similar to Text 4, to which one would point out that it is in fact more similar to Text 1 in its inclusion of "pronounced natural imagery" (primary characteristic) along with being rendered in meter with "line breaks" (secondary characteristics) and qualifies as poetry on that basis. Because of its subject, we cannot say that it is merely verse, and nor should we want to. The real issue with the text, supposing that people detect one—potentially disqualifying it as poetry—is what many would consider its insipidity. Such insipidity potentially leads us to conclude that it is merely a parody of poetry, a sort of insulting stereotype—and therefore not poetry as such. The response to this would be that a great deal of poetry considered unsuccessful lends itself to being read as parody or intentional doggerel, particularly if we do not know that the intentions behind it are sincere. It should also be stressed that this framework is not meant to certify high-quality poetry. It strives to be merely descriptive. What is clear about this poem is that regardless of whether the author intended for it to be taken seriously or as parody, its ambitions were low. Nevertheless, it is not unpleasant.

Text 6

The sky is blue,

The grass is green,

The sun shines bright,

A peaceful scene.

The seventh text is a very borderline case. It is from Woolf's *The Waves*. It is a soliloquy from the character Susan. It is characteristic of those which largely make up the book in alternating fashion. Superficially, a soliloquy is a bit like an instance of apostrophe, though in essence it is a device enabling the audience or reader to know what a character is thinking. It looks like praying, but it is not, so it is not a form of apostrophe, lacking the inherently magical impulse behind apostrophe which assumes invisible beings or inanimate things can somehow hear. Yet a soliloquy does by definition reveal "innermost experience," and often in "a tone of personal intimacy or tenderness." Yet, Woolf's soliloquy is delivered in a tone of agitation.

In terms of secondary characteristics, the passage has at least one form of "systematic repetition" as well as "enumeratio," and now only needs a single primary characteristic. Does it possess "pronounced cosmic, sacred, archetypal/elemental, natural/erotic/sensuous, fantastic, or ambiguous/paradoxical imagery; description informed by synaesthesia" or "pronounced metaphor or analogy or simile or cyclic schematics"? Its natural imagery may not be pronounced enough. What is most striking about the soliloquy is that Susan is shown imagining herself carrying out a ritual using sympathetic magic: she will rid herself of people who give her trouble by burying their "images" in the ground. To do so she must construct metaphors for these people. She imagines burying a pebble representing Madam Carlo, for instance. This is, in effect (if not overtly so), a ritual "imprecation" as well as a metaphor, for the act of burying something in the ground is a metaphor for the removal of an undesirable thing. Such metaphorical thinking and the ritual imprecation combined with the anaphora of "I would bury" and the enumeratio of what she would bury qualifies this passage as poetic thought and speech. In it, poetry has subtly snuck in through the back door.

Text 7

'We are late,' said Susan. 'We must wait our turn to play. We will pitch here in the long grass and pretend to watch Jinny and Clara, Betty and Mavis. But we will not watch them. I hate watching other people play games. I will make images of all the things I hate most and bury them in the ground. This shiny pebble is Madame Carlo, and I will bury her deep because of her fawning and ingratiating manners, because of the sixpence she gave me for keeping my knuckles flat when I played my scales. I buried her sixpence. I would bury the whole school: the gymnasium; the classroom; the dining-room that always smells of meat; and the chapel. I would bury the red-brown tiles and the oily portraits of old men—benefactors, founders of schools. There are some trees I like; the cherry tree with lumps of clear gum on the bark; and one view from the attic towards some far hills. Save for these, I would bury it all as I bury these ugly stones that are always scattered about this briny coast, with its piers and its trippers. At home, the waves are a mile long. On winter nights we hear them booming. Last Christmas a man was drowned sitting alone in his cart.'

The eighth text is an amorous letter. The love letter is a form which almost automatically becomes poetic under the authentic conditions of writing, given that the aims of the lover with respect to the addressee are so similar to those of one who prays in a time of need. It is safe to say that lovers have always attempted to seduce and gain favor of the beloved much as one who prays tries to win the favor of the gods. But sometimes the lover merely wants to express herself out of frustration that lover and beloved cannot share one body and one mind. The amorous letter

thus resembles prayer and apostrophe due to the dynamic of desire vis-à-vis the one who speaks and the one who receives. Yet unlike the recipients of prayer and apostrophe, who are always somewhat invisible or concealed behind cloud, the beloved is an actual person—one who can be touched and is able to respond. And so the love letter does not line up with prayer completely, in that prayer relies on the inherently poetic faculty of looking at objects in life almost as metaphors. A tree or a stream can be a god to an animist or pagan. Yet one does not have to be an animist to pray. People (even non-religious people) pray all the time in heightened states of emotion, such as when some money is on the line, or if a loved one has died or may die. Likewise the lover can be said to pray—if not literally—to the beloved in trying to communicate how she feels. The phrase "you put her on a pedestal" is apt in that a pining lover in effect deifies the beloved. This is brought about through heightened emotion and desire, which give rise to what many would consider one of poetry's unmistakable voices.

The following is a letter of Napoleon Bonaparte to Joséphine de Beauharnais, penned in 1796. Here the great military commander is "sharing innermost experience, in a tone of personal intimacy" with his beloved. This of course means the letter contains one of poetry's four primary characteristics. The passionate, intense tone has the feeling almost of desperate prayer, of one, say, that has been imprisoned. The letter also happens to contain one major instance of metaphor —the beloved's charms are said to kindle a "burning and a glowing flame" in the heart of Napoleon. This is the only instance of metaphorical language, so one wonders whether this means the letter contains "pronounced metaphor." I think probably so, given how short the text is; yet this would also make Napoleon's letter, like the passage from Woolf, another borderline

case, for it likely has no secondary characteristics, other than "short composition length." One would only have to give the text line breaks to make it, without question, a poem.

Text 8

Since I left you, I have been constantly depressed. My happiness is to be near you. Incessantly I live over in my memory your caresses, your tears, your affectionate solicitude. The charms of the incomparable Joséphine kindle continually a burning and a glowing flame in my heart. When, free from all solicitude, all harassing care, shall I be able to pass all my time with you, having only to love you, and to think only of the happiness of so saying, and of proving it to you?

The ninth text is another love letter, by Frida Kahlo to Diego Rivera. That it so clearly feels like a poem, and is one, owes to the fact that it contains all three of poetry's primary characteristics. While one could point out that the rhythm is pronounced, thus giving it at least one secondary characteristic—"pronounced (but not technically metrical) rhythm conspicuously removed from that of ordinary speech"—I would counter that its rhythm is merely that of passionate ordinary speech. Ordinary speech can be passionate and remain ordinary speech. It is true that one could cite instances of "repetition" or "alliteration" ("flower-fountain") in this translated text, so I suppose a case for the presence of secondary characteristics (other than "short composition length" in low quantity could be made. Still, it seems that the text's undeniable status as a lyric poem owes to its abundance of primary characteristics. Therefore it serves to refute T. S. Eliot's claim: "Surely, the proper language of love is prose" (On Poetry and Poets 97-8). Even if Kahlo,

in part, wrote it for the eyes of posterity, how likely is it that this erotic hymn did not succeed in its private aim?

Text 9

Nothing compares to your hands, nothing like the green-gold of your eyes. My body is filled with you for days and days. You are the mirror of the night. The violent flash of lightning. The dampness of the earth. The hollow of your armpits is my shelter. My fingers touch your blood. All my joy is to feel life spring from your flower-fountain that mine keeps to feel all the paths of my nerves which are yours.

The tenth text is a blues poem called “Bad Man” by Langston Hughes. One reading of it is that it escapes being merely a portrait of a human being who is the product of his environment. The bad man of this poem is fully aware of his meanness and even prefers to go to the devil than to heaven when he dies. The sense is almost that he hails from Hell. He does not try to justify his cruelty, as a mere mortal would—he is completely unafraid. Thus Hughes presents an “archetypal image” of what seems to be almost a supernatural being or mythological character. The poem has an archetypal aura like that of a tarot card. And it is owing to its aura, in combination with the secondary characteristics of “systematic repetition (musical refrain)” and “versification,” that it is recognizable as a poetic work.

Text 10

I’m a bad, bad man

Cause everybody tells me so.

I'm a bad, bad man.

Everybody tells me so.

I takes ma meanness and ma licker

Everwhere I go.

I beats ma wife an'

I beats ma side gal too.

Beats ma wife an'

Beats ma side gal too.

Don't know why I do it but

It keeps me from feelin' blue.

I'm so bad I

Don't even want to be good.

So bad, bad, bad I

Don't even want to be good.

I'm goin' to de devil an'

I wouldn't go to heaben if I could.

A counterexample would be the following, eleventh text, where the archetypal aura is absent. The text is a piece of verse, not poetry. Whether it amuses or fails to amuse is less relevant than

its intention to amuse. And while it is true that cats do not talk, thus tempting one to argue that what we have here is a mythic leap of personification, the prevailing sense is that its personification is carried out for the sake of irony and humor. Similarly, apostrophe which lacks sincerity—often for ironic effect—does not contribute to one's sense that a given text is poetic.

Text 11

I'm a bad, bad cat

Cause everybody tells me so.

I'm a bad, bad cat.

Everybody tells me so.

I'll put ma ass down in your laundry

And you'll never know.

Yes I'm so bad I

Won't ever start to care.

I'm so bad, bad, bad I

Won't ever start to care.

I never cared about your laundry

Or your clean underwear.

The twelfth text is highly indeterminate, both in meaning and in form. As far as form, not knowing who the author is or when it was written, we can confidently determine that narrative

sense is immediately breaking down. We are unable to follow the story being told in what feels to be a steady narrative voice, with a sure tone—yet we feel certain it is really a nonsensical story being told. Owing to its tonal consistency combined with brief moments where its syntax holds up in spite of breaks in line, we begin to feel this text is not just a series of fragments—shards of glass which once made up an unbroken vase. It is more likely a product of deliberate collage. The text has the feeling of intentionality, and is thus experimental. We are sure it is either free verse with some (inconsistent) "majusculation" or that there is a "deliberate arrangement of words on the page for visual effect." What we have before us must be an "experimental or systematic deformation of linguistic convention, including of sense."

But is it really a poem, or just a work of art? Answering this question will depend on whether there is at least one primary characteristic present. First, we may note instances of apostrophe toward the end of the text. Yet since the narrative is in fact absurd, we are unable to determine whether we are dealing with "sincere apostrophe," in which case it would be a parody of poetry. Ultimately, however, it is the "pronounced cosmic, sacred, archetypal/elemental, natural/erotic/sensuous, fantastic, or ambiguous/paradoxical imagery" which enables us to feel sure the text is in fact a poem. For even if it is parodic overall, such imagery asserts itself in a manner that could never be ruled insincere. The question of the sincerity of such inherently poetic imagery is always irrelevant. It simply is.

Text 12

We set up a government

named the horse

Ham of gold

I sell gum and hair to the wheels of the camp

Now is

The eclectic dance for her soul

Esmerelda.

My horse's gun!

And so

We have kept

Among gas and steam the swirling mice

children with eyebrows

We drank troglodyte corn and breathed the brains

we made puppets for cattle

ourselves desirous

of the slobbering mouths of windows

Golden illumining hair!

fog!

green, tubular leg

O wandering cities

we have to learn

the dance of the air!

O senseless sky!

Is the thirteenth text but an incisive (if very short) commentary on the intrusion of the mythic in the painting of the Old Masters, with line breaks? That is to say, is it simply a piece of art historical prose, in verse? Is it a poem, or does it not have strongly metaphorical language? Where is its mythical speech? The text simply seems to make the point that a certain type of painter seemed to understand that great suffering in the world tends to happen among the ordinary, divorced from the strictly mythological context one might expect of a painting's explicit subject. While this does in fact help us perhaps understand, say, Breughel's depiction of the Icarus myth better, it is not overtly poetic. Would we even think it was poetry without line breaks? And yet the text does feel poetic—why?

This commentary (whose purpose is teasingly ambiguous) reveals that W. H. Auden's speaker is not concerned with "suffering" per se, but with the nature of divine events: "the miraculous birth," Christ's "martyrdom" and "Breughel's Icarus" are mythic, supernatural happenings; the former isn't even about a tragedy or suffering. Auden's speaker suggests

therefore that the divine has the tendency to interlope upon daily life, and the world may not stop to take notice. One implication is that it would be silly to think that just because the world makes no room for the divine does not mean it is not in our midst at this very moment. "Open your eyes to the extraordinary concealed in the commonplace," Auden's speaker suggests.

Primary poetic characteristic: "pronounced cosmic, sacred, archetypal/elemental, natural/erotic/sensuous, fantastic, or ambiguous/paradoxical imagery." This combines conveniently with "line breaks" and therefore satisfies our requirement of one primary and one secondary characteristic.

The text is not only a commentary on certain visual art which just happens to contain a mythological/religious theme. It remarks on divine or important events in general. The poem seeks to reveal the sacred so often embedded in the everyday, as well as the tragic in the commonplace. It may be read as an implicit statement on one of art's tasks—to unconceal and to make clearer. And it does so by having us take a closer look at certain iconic images from religion and mythology.

Text 13

About suffering they were never wrong,

The Old Masters: how well they understood

Its human position; how it takes place

While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;

How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting

For the miraculous birth, there always must be

Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating

On a pond at the edge of the wood:

They never forgot

That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course

Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot

Where the dogs go on with their doggy

life and the torturer's horse

Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Breughel's Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away*

Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may

Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,

But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone

As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green

Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen

Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,

had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

Conclusions

While secondary characteristics (e.g. meter or rhyme) are inessential to poetry, their presence or absence can make the difference between a text being recognized as poetry or non-poetry, provided that it features only one of the three primary characteristics. This helps to explain why certain secondary characteristics such as verse or rhyme have so often been falsely (if understandably) viewed as essential to poetry. That they can make the difference between poetry

and “prose” (or what I would prefer to call non-poetry) has led some to regard certain secondary characteristics as essential. But the view has often been complicated by the fact that when a text has no primary characteristics, there is nothing secondary characteristics is able to do to help the text in acquiring the feel of poetry. Such a text is more aptly called verse or art (and it can be excellent art)—yet not poetry. Another proof is that texts with more than one primary characteristic and not a single secondary characteristic are also recognizable as poetry. The heart of poetry for these reasons is located in the primary characteristics, even if the presence or absence of secondary characteristics can sometimes make the difference between poetry and non-poetry.

The above demonstration is also a reply to Stanley Fish’s “How to Recognize a Poem When You See One” (1980), where Fish writes, “acts of recognition, rather than being triggered by formal characteristics, are their source. It is not that the presence of poetic qualities compels a certain kind of attention but that the paying of a certain kind of attention results in the emergence of poetic qualities” (V. Jackson 15). Here Fish strikes me as adopting a similar position to Marcel Duchamp with his implication that artistic or poetic context alone, whether imposed inwardly or outwardly, can render something an artwork or, in this case, a poem. I have sought, however, to show that the intrinsic properties of a text do carry more weight than context.

A more practical definition of poetry

In practice, then, poetry is simply speech “marked” in such a way as to separate it from everyday speech. Any of the primary and secondary characteristics we have been considering are “markers.” While it is not entirely strange for a person to speak occasionally in a way which is

"marked" by a single primary or secondary characteristic (say, with asyndecon or metaphor), it is unusual for casual speech to consistently feature 1) more than one primary characteristic, 2) more than one secondary characteristic, or 3) primary as well as secondary characteristics. When the first and third occur, one almost invariably feels she has left the realm of the everyday and entered that of poetry. When the second occurs, one feels she has left the realm of everyday speech and entered the world of art, but not necessarily of poetry.

Poetry has often attempted to make an impact, as well as to become memorable or permanent. The primary (mythic) characteristics appear to help in this regard, despite presenting certain challenges which may strike us as unhelpful. The secondary characteristics, for their part, contribute by sustaining the attention, and by signaling or "marking" language off as important.

As many beloved poems have a certain level of vagueness or difficulty, we may wonder whether they have become so cherished in spite of or because of this difficulty. It seems that ambiguity, or vagueness (in terms of semantic meaning), allows readers and audiences to project personal feelings, memories, and associations onto a text, provided that there is a certain bedrock of easily apprehensible sense in place. In other words, there should be an accessible element, along with an ambiguous one. The tension created thereby enables one to feel safe and emotionally stimulated enough to give her imagination free rein. Additionally, it can help make the poem more adaptable to time and place.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The real historical problems regarding poetry—which are inseparable from Virginia Woolf's description of modern human character—were that poetry was incompatible with the language of science; and, in a sense, it is a language unto itself, one modern people have trouble comprehending or speaking. Karen Armstrong writes of myth, which is the basis of poetry, "Because most Western people did not use myth, many would lose all sense of what it was" (*A Short History of Myth* 122). This is analogous to the tendency of Americans to be brought up speaking only English, whereas many Europeans, say, have been brought up speaking languages beside their native tongue. Increasingly, people in parts of the world that have undergone modernization have ceased to read, speak in, and think in poetry. This is because poetry is, at its core, mythical speech. Armstrong explains that owing to Western modernity's revolutionary impact "life would never be the same again, and perhaps the most significant—and potentially disastrous—result of this new experiment was the death of mythology" (119-20). She explains that modernity "was the child of *logos,*" which modernity has set in hard opposition to myth. Where logos is "essentially practical," myth is denigrated as "useless, false and outmoded" (121). In previous times, however, "*mythos* and *logos*… were complementary" (102).

The death blow to myth was undertaken in the name not only of a new type of economy, but also in that of secularism, helped by the printing press. Religion, hitherto a public presence, was to be relegated increasingly to the background. Thomas Love Peacock here, in 1820, sounds much like Christopher Hitchens criticizing Christian and Islamic fundamentalists:

> A poet in our times is a semi-barbarian in a civilized community. He lives in the days that are past. His ideas, thoughts, feelings, associations, are all with barbarous manners, obsolete customs, and exploded superstitions. The march of his intellect is like that of a

> crab, backward. The brighter the light diffused around him by the progress of reason, the thicker is the darkness of antiquated barbarism, in which he buries himself like a mole, to throw up the barren hillocks of his Cimmerian labours. (Harmon 327)

And yet, today, it is uncommon to hear such a polemic about poets or poetry. That is because people no longer need convincing. By contrast, the influence of religion remains strong. Many today are confused as to why they cannot understand or feel strongly about poetry. It is why Ben Lerner, an acclaimed poet, felt he was saying what everyone thought when he titled his book-length essay *The Hatred of Poetry* (2016). The author goes to pains to show that the majority of those who dislike or hate poetry do so for good reasons. Poetry fails to attain the heights to which it tragically and comically aspires. Yet the greatest issue with Lerner's argument, despite its insightful treatment of a few of the ways the majority, including Lerner, feel about poetry in the twenty-first century, is that it fails to give a serious account of how this happened. Instead he speaks from the standpoint of the present: "avant-garde poets hate poems for remaining poems instead of becoming bombs; and nostalgists hate poems for failing to do what they wrongly, vaguely claim poetry once did" (75-6). Poetry is not effective in politics, and it does not deliver, even though we think it once did. But, as we have seen, our distance from poetry today is the result of historical process. In Peacock's day, two hundred years ago, poetry was still something that had the power to move people in general; it was a guilty pleasure.

So far we have said that poetry, at its root, is mythical speech, in that it is highly relational (whether analogical or metaphorical). It can also take the form of prayer or curse, whose common purpose is to affect reality through ritualized utterance, that is, by the logic of sympathetic magic (hence, perhaps, the assumption among politically engaged vanguardists that

poems can be as efficacious as bombs). Octavio Paz has explained that the "conception of poetry as magic implies an aesthetic of action. Art ceases to be exclusively representation and contemplation; it becomes also an intervention in reality" (*Children of the Mire* 60).

The violent, dialectical opposition of ever-accelerating technological science and mythical enchantment encapsulates the historically particular problem informing what Lerner has pointed out, something surrealism—maybe the modernist movement with the longest-lasting cultural impact—seems to have understood quite well. Its pictorial, veristic variety lives on in cinema, its influence so deep, so pervasive—even… *unconscious*—that one easily forgets how radical it was at in its beginnings, as well as how transformative it has been. Along with its aim of bridging the unconscious/dream and conscious/mundane realms, the older, more general—specifically literary—quest to revive poetry, and with it mythical imagination, was and continues to be a great preoccupation of that old "double" of Enlightenment, the Counter-Enlightenment, originating in Germany, in the last quarter of the eighteenth century (Smith 14).

Literary and theoretical prose—to say nothing of verse, which had long been in a state of steady decline—had begun to decline in currency at the hands of more immediate forms of representation, namely those falling under the umbrella of mass art. Prose much more complex than the prose-like language of ordinary speech is taxing enough for many people to read, let alone to speak; it is for this reason necessary for an author to write in a prose easy to comprehend without much concentration. Science fiction has mainly been rendered in a comparably accessible prose to commercial fiction and journalism. Poetry, for its part, is almost always hard to interpret and can make the heaviest demands on one's attention. It makes sense, therefore, that

writing as unusual as that in *The Waves* should fail to prepare the way for future literary production, with the universal appeal of Elizabethan drama—which was Woolf's aim.

Verse, ironically—and despite its original fall alongside poetry—has enjoyed a renaissance of sorts; where poetry has not. To find out a play rendered in verse like *Hamilton* was to take the world by storm would have amazed and perhaps dismayed Woolf. To speak in rap is to speak in verse, even if such verse is accompanied by music and rhythm. Rap music is a variety of art, to the extent that rap artists are skilled, creative, witty, imaginative. But poetry, in the strictest sense, is mythical speech; it is not opposed, strictly speaking, to either common speech or to analytic speech, since poetry and the latter share a common root. To survive, poetry had to retreat into art, which was then under the spell of novelty, according to Michael North, who quotes the poets Robert Graves and Laura Riding in 1926, criticizing those who "wanted to be *new* rather than to be poets" (North 149). Graves and Riding indeed seem to notice that the ancient poetic vocation was being swallowed by modern art.

When poetry is spoken or written today, it is almost always self-consciously intended to be regarded as an art, yet it is always first and foremost a mode of language. Poetry, then, when it is art, is a different art from the art of verse, though they complement each other so well that we tend to view them as interchangeable. Verse is a rhythmic art, poetry an ideational art. When it is not art, poetry can remain poetry, even if badly written. To say something is poetry should not be a value judgment; for me—and others—it is to say that poetry is a type of primordial speech, mythical speech. Rap has sometimes been poetry in the sense of mythical speech, but usually it

has taken the form of dramatic speech in verse almost always featuring rhyme.[13] The more mythical or primordial aspects of rap music, in its essence, have to do with its rhythms and gestures which, like poetic speech, dance, and certain kinds of image-making, have their originary basis in ancient ritual. Rap retains much which is primordial, magical, mythic,

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[13] Perhaps to speak too much for others, rhyme tends to have certain associations today which prevent it from accomplishing its task of enchanting and helping to make for an atmosphere of sacredness and enchantment. Today rhyme has associations more of "lightness," "childishness," "frivolity," or sometimes "stodginess" or "Britishness"—i.e. "oldness" instead of "ancientness." What is old does not necessarily feel sacred anymore, but what is ancient does feel sacred, or mythical. Meter does not run into these issues when it is not rhymed. Blank verse, accordingly, can still have great ceremonial power, for it lacks rhyme which conflicts with the production of sacredness; hence free verse can produce an contribute to a sacred atmosphere corresponding to Greekness (but not just Greekness) more than Britishness, even though it has less traditional formal baggage than metrical verse. And what is traditional is not necessarily bad for creating a poetic atmosphere, since line breaks can help produce the ancient mist of the sacred when that is what the poet desires. What rhyme does excel in is helping to generate an atmosphere of down-to-earth wittiness and wisdom. This is why it works so well in rap music. It produces in rap the effect of "folksiness" more than sorcery, however. Merlin is not the Wizard of poetry—the Pythia of Delphi generally is. It is hard for us to imagine the ancient Egyptians rhyming, and we know that the Hebrew Bible did not rhyme. It is in the Middle Ages, we feel, that rhyme really took over, marking a boundary between the old and the ancient. Rhyme is for Renaissance fairs and Shakespeare festivals, but is incompatible with consciousness conversing with itself in solitude. Beowulf feels properly ancient and thus mythical. Rhyme, moreover, is the language of folk magic, but not biblical prophecy—witch and trickster more than seer.

Rhyme is one of the faces of wit, which is often viewed now—for a complex of reasons—as more profane than sacred or mythical, and so we feel that a little of it goes a long way, but too much can "ruin the mood." Rhyme, furthermore, does tend to work well even in a non-sacred capacity when it is deployed in contexts where Britishness is less evoked than some alternative tradition (e.g.: in rap music, a vital, non-stodgy Anglophone form grown out of an alternative cultural tradition). However, it is simply difficult for poetry to separate itself from Britishness, when the English language itself calls forth Britishness by default. Rhyme in English poetry all too often feels British, and things British are viewed today as old-fashioned. When we hear the words "English poetry" we automatically hear "British poetry," which is why many poets in English go out of their way to avoid associations of Britishness. But of course this is simply the general prejudice of the moment. The contradiction is that, intellectually, many people feel that poetry ought to rhyme, and therefore have trouble understanding how an object could be a poem without rhyming. Yet since rhyming in poetry feels so often very old-fashioned—and thus too emotionally mediate rather than immediate—poetry ceases (but surely not only for this reason) to have the attraction of a truly living form. Thus it is "damned if it does, damned if it doesn't."

including verse itself, while dispensing—for the most part—with the mythic language of poetry, preferring instead the speak of common life.

On the other hand, and ironically, what has been decried as among rap's least admirable tendencies, the ritualized diss which is a pronomial attack—for instance, Tupac's diss to Biggie—is without doubt a form of sympathetic magic not without precedent in the literary canon, for instance in the iambic poetry of Archilochus or Catullus, but also in modern poetry such as Dylan Thomas's "Friend by enemy I call you out." An invective is a curse, a spell—a prayer. By comparison, Dolly Parton's "Jolene," though taking the form of ancient spell, is not a curse but a type of prayer: supplication. The erotic hymn tradition, from Sappho forth, is among lyric's most important. In any event, for the most part, the language of rap shares a good deal with the verse W. H. Auden collected in his *Oxford Book of Light Verse*, comprised in large part of verses attributed to that most prolific of authors, Anonymous.

Maybe the reason science fiction, fantasy, and rap "succeed" in terms of providing viable forms for our moment and likely beyond, whileWoolf's experimental works have not, is because literary science fiction speaks to the mythical imagination, not in poetry but in accessible prose—hardly different from newspaper prose. The language of *The Waves* by contrast is a highly stylized dramatic prose, so rich in mythic symbol that it would be less correct to call it "poetic" than to say it *is* poetry; it is indeed as foreign to the language of common life as Umbopa's speech on life and death seems strange to the modern ear of Sir Henry in the novel *King Solomon's Mines*:

He [Umbopa] paused awhile, and then went on with one of those strange bursts

> of rhetorical eloquence that Zulus sometimes indulge in, which to my mind, full though they are of vain repetitions, show that the race is by no means devoid of poetic instinct and of intellectual power.
>
> "What is life? Tell me, O white men, who are wise, who know the secrets of the world, and of the world of stars, and the world that lies above and around the stars; who flash your words from afar without a voice; tell me, white men, the secret of our life—whither it goes and whence it comes!
>
> "You cannot answer me; you know not. Listen, I will answer. Out of the dark we came, into the dark we go. Like a storm-driven bird at night we fly out of the Nowhere; for a moment our wings are seen in the light of the fire, and, lo! we are gone again into the Nowhere. Life is nothing. Life is all. It is the Hand with which we hold off Death. It is the glow-worm that shines in the night-time and is black in the morning; it is the white breath of the oxen in winter; it is the little shadow that runs across the grass and loses itself at sunset."
>
> "You are a strange man," said Sir Henry, when he had ceased. (Haggard)

Strange indeed. As this passage is meant to illustrate, it is not that prose and poetry are opposed, or that prose and verse are, but that the consciousness of poetry differs from that of common, modern life. Rider Haggard draws an analogy between the poetry/modern/common life antithesis and the antithesis of the modern consciousness and the mythic consciousness. Woolf's "novel" would be as strange to Sir Henry as Umbopa's speech, or, for that matter, the poetry of Ossian. Woolf, though, despite her manifest intentions, did not blend prose and poetry—she wrote poetry. As for "that queer conglomeration of incongruous things—the modern mind," something

Woolf felt prose—not poetry—was better equipped to take on, even though she certainly does take on the problem of modern dissonance, she ends up giving it order and shape.

Woolf's characterization is one T. S. Eliot happens to have shared, and which he published six years before Woolf's "Poetry, Fiction and the Future." Eliot, however, felt such dissonances were fodder to be resolved by the true poet: "When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary" (Selected Prose 65). And since modern life was in fact so dissonant, it called for the type of poetic difficulty that *The Waves* in fact gives us—something not lost on Yeats, who compared it to Pound's *Cantos*, and should have compared it to the *Waste Land*.[14]

Cinematic Sci-Fi for its part does speak to poetic consciousness, although it does not do so through language; it engages the imagination in relatively accessible, if striking, *moving images*, accompanied typically by enchanting or dramatic music. The fantasies of Disney, likewise, speak in a visual and musical idiom of enchantment.

The example set by ascendant advance-guard painting was misleading. Its difficulty—comparable to the that of some of Stein's writings—gave the sense that the future would give pride of place to *difficult* forms whose appeal lies in their capacity for cultivating a sense of indeterminacy. The Art World has commodified the productions of the avant-garde; they survive merely in the sense that they increasingly command high bids at auction. Cynical imitators

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[14] Yeats: "Europe is changing its philosophy. Certain typical books—*Ulysses*, Mrs. Virginia Woolf's *Waves*, Mr. Ezra Pound's *Draft of XXX Cantos*—suggest a philosophy like that of the *Samkara* school of ancient India, mental and physical objects alike material, a deluge of experience breaking over us and within us…" (Chapman 318).

meanwhile contrive works that superficially resemble those of the avant-garde, which are in turn sold to credulous speculators, wealthy but not wealthy enough to afford a real Soutine or Basquiat. Poetic works especially, but all literary works really, command neither the massive exchange value of painting, nor the currency of the idioms of mass culture. Sci-Fi meanwhile is an Enlightenment form that draws its power by reclaiming what the Enlightenment sought to eliminate. In its concern for futurity and technological progress, with its implicit social critique, it carries on the legacy of Enlightenment. In its reintegration of mythical imagination, it restores what was lost.

What does an artist do? What is art? What is science? How do they relate to poetry?

Not complacent to think in terms of what was or is, or how things merely appear, the artist acts and thinks according to what could, should, or ought to be, or even truly is, despite appearances, in a language of sensuous forms.

This amounts to what Ernst Cassirer calls the intensification of reality, which we must understand as distinct from the abbreviation of reality: science's function (*An Essay on Man* 148). What art and science share is the aim of better grasping the world and sometimes of improving it, for even to posit "what is" (critique) prepares the way for imagining what could, or should, be (improvement), just as it implicitly states: "All of us would be better off if we were aware, or more aware, of this concealed reality—and shouldn't we live in a world wherein people are better attuned to it?" Each at its best, moreover, is the product of deep contemplation and questioning.

When we say a certain work of fiction or poetry is philosophical, what we mean is not altogether clear. We could mean that this work didactically—that is, explicitly—delivers philosophical conclusions through the mouths of characters in an effort to promote a philosophical program. Yet it might mean, too, that the work manages, implicitly, to bring into focus certain philosophical questions, but without providing definite answers—the difference being that the first provides answers, the second provokes questions. The latter does the work of art, however, since it intensifies reality through sensuous means. When art is philosophical it asks questions without technically asking them; it does so by representing conflicts and tension —by showing them, enacting them. If it seems to answer its own question, it does so such that it would be acquitted of the charge if seriously questioned.

Since art's means are necessarily sensuous, affect plays a significant role. The mere representation of a character's envy or jealousy can have far-reaching implications. Envy is wanting or feeling entitled to what another has, regardless of deservingness. Jealousy is indignation rooted in concerns about fairness and justice, specifically how one is treated in relation to others. Envy is an amoral, self-centered, childish emotion, while jealousy has an important ethical dimension. If we follow this logic to its end, envy wills a world in which individuals prioritize themselves at the expense of others, while jealousy strives for a fair and equitable society in which people are treated equally, and on the basis of merit and wrondoing. This is why we readily understand that the envy-ruled Iago is bad, and Othello is not, at least intrinsically, bad. The tragedy lies in our sense that Othello has a basic sense of justice, and this is what makes him a fit leader. But it is his sense of justice (manifesting as excessive jealousy) which ultimately leads him to murder. Through a process of intensification, by sensuous means,

the play hints that the inclination toward cruel punishments in moral people is the dark side of an unbalanced preoccupation with justice. Othello's personal tragedy may even prompt us to reflect on the difficulty of attaining a thoroughly just society, or point to the large-scale horrors which have been carried out in the name of "the good."

Where science dilutes reality, making it more extensive and abstract such as to enable us to better perceive what is truly the case despite what appearances may suggest, meaningful art isolates particular facets of life, intensifying them in order to lay bare a hidden "truth," and very often to restore an all too familiar object to its previous, unfamiliar aspect—itself an act of unconcealing. For instance, stand-up comedy's special role of suddenly elucidating what we all feel.

According to Viktor Shklovsky, "The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known" (Kolocotroni 219). To do so has the effect of slowing down our automatic perceptions, turning up the volume, as it were, on particular perceptions and aspects of experience, turning down the volume meanwhile on others. A meaningful selection of elements in a composition can potentially lead to a more intense perception of its subject. This is another way of referring to the purposeful arrangement and structuring of sensuous forms.

Philosophy and art, like science, attempt through intense contemplation to comprehend what truly *is*, except science does so from the perspective of a neutral God, which is to say, from the perspective of "nowhere," beyond what the senses are able to inform. Moreover it uses the types of extrapolation employed in thought experiments, or in such speculative forms as science fiction and fantasy. A great deal of philosophy is concerned with what "ought to be"; religion as

well. Because art is concerned necessarily with the ideal, it makes itself readily available to religion, which not only makes use of mythic stories but has a stake in one particular ideal—that is to say, paradise.

We treat technological innovators or inventors as artists if they seem to be possessed of what we might refer to as a visionary temperament, even though their work does not deal in sensuous forms. That they can credibly be called or likened to "artists" owes mainly to their explicit commitment to bringing about a world superior to the current one, suggesting an investment in what ought to or could be.

And just as the desire to innovate has inherently the potential to usher in a worse world, or dystopia, so the artist may choose to present a dystopian portrait of life, perhaps so as to make audiences more attuned to what lies, so to speak, under the surface of things, or awaken the imagination to alternative courses of action which would hopefully lead to a better future.

José Vasconcelos writes, "A noble book is always the fruit of disillusionment and a sign of protest. . . . Every book says, expressly or between the lines: nothing is as it ought to be" (Stavans 76). For Vasconcelos, the artist reproves the world, an act which at the very least implies the *need* for something better, something beyond; that is, assuming that the author has not actively instituted the change.

Where science is practiced according to a value-free ideal—and where modern warfare, dependent as it is on technological innovation, leading us increasingly to view survival as an end in itself—the artist rebukes the world, making us remember what real value looks like, what sort of life may be worth living, worth fighting for and cultivating. Having rejected the deterministic, materialist outlook, an artist acts according to the principle of freedom—the freedom to choose

one's present and future, meanwhile putting the ideal ahead of mere practical considerations, what "ought to be" ahead of "what is," melody ahead of discord, and resemblance ahead of mutual antagonism.

Art is the act of creation by those who fully embrace becoming and reject false being and fictions of permanence. The paradoxical reward of this embrace is the discovery of real being—the achievement of permanence. The most direct avenue toward this discovery is the transmutation of the subjective into the objective. For the artist, what "ought to be" must be made a reality; it is unacceptable to her that what is inside is not on the outside. What "ought to be" is for the inside not to be separate from what lies outside it. What is inside is experienced as a flow of becoming. Thus the artist seeks to blend the becoming of the self with that of others. Through this process of uniting self and other, the artist makes art objects comprised of sensuous forms, which elicit contemplation from others, and serve to achieve the end of making the subjective an objective reality.

Art is for resolving the tragicomic contradictions we are born into. One cannot know, for instance, what one actually looks like, how one appears to others, yet each of us is the only being in the world with privileged access to her thoughts and feelings. A corollary of this is that she is unable to share with others a dream she dreamt except by using language to tell the dream. While one may surely use ordinary speech to describe a thousand and one things in the world, poetic speech alone is capable of imparting and making meaningful the experience of last night's dream for others.

To conjecture perhaps too far, it is not wholly impossible that dreams were the internal motivation for the poetic faculties being put to use in the first place, tens of thousands of years

ago (unusual natural events being, I suppose, the external inspiration), thus giving to poetic speech a highly necessary, crucial function, which would have ensured its central place in sacred ritual.

A. W. Howitt provides the following testimony from his research in Australia: “In the Tribes with which I have acquaintance, I find it to be a common belief that the songs, using that word in its widest meaning, as including all kinds of aboriginal poetry, are obtained by the bards from the spirits of the deceased, usually of their kindred, during sleep, in dreams” (Howitt 416). Frances Densmore reports to us also, “Many Indian songs are intended to exert a strong mental influence, and dream songs are supposed to have this power in greater degree than any others” (Pound 13).

Since many today regard the notion of dreams as messages from another world with some considerable skepticism, it is not surprising that the status of poetry has fallen with it. Well used poetic language, however, has the special ability to concisely render, for a waking audience, not just the content of a dream, but its general mood, its images, and its strange logic. Beyond merely communicating (or abbreviating) its broad outline and events, poetic language allows for the *expression* of the dream to others, which in turn makes possible transcending one’s prison-like subjectivity.

Poetry gives to dreams, and other highly subjective or chaotic phenomena, a type of objective validity, as it speaks in the dream’s native tongue—a tongue simultaneously symbolic, sacred, and metaphorical.

Carl Jung tells us that dream images, or symbols, differ fundamentally from ordinary signs and words, and also have a unique importance in various cultures:

> There are… such objects as the wheel and the cross that are known all over the world, yet that have a symbolic significance under certain conditions. Precisely what they symbolize is still a matter for controversial speculation. Thus a word or an image is symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning. It has a wider "unconscious" aspect that is never precisely defined or fully explained. Nor can one hope to define or explain it. As the mind explores the symbol, it is led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason. . . . Man also produces symbols unconsciously and spontaneously, in the form of dreams. (Jung 4).

As dreams and poetic texts are laden with symbols—which together form a large network of unstable relations—what one oftentimes remembers best of a poem or a dream turns out to be its fantastic, uncanny, seemingly ineffable atmosphere. Symbols are characterized by polysemy, tonal ambivalence, equivocality—thus they tantalize, defying description as well as one's ability to interpret them.

If the interesting formulation, frequently (but perhaps wrongly) attributed to Joseph Campbell is true, that "myth is a public dream and a dream is a private myth," then poetry has only dreams to sustain it, for myth has since modernity suffered a demotion; it has been relegated to life's background (except of course when it comes to entertainment for children and its formulaic, crude sublimation in advertising and politics).

Luckily there exist no means yet, which we know of, by which sleep might be abolished or made profitable, even if some entities would like very much to achieve this, since it would increase humanity's consumptive and productive powers by some fifty percent. As Jonathan Crary explains,

> Sleep is an uncompromising interruption of the theft of time from us by capitalism. Most of the seemingly irreducible necessities of human life—hunger, thirst, sexual desire, and recently the need for friendship—have been remade into commodified or financialized forms. Sleep poses the idea of a human need and interval of time that cannot be colonized and harnessed to a massive engine of profitability, and thus remains an incongruous anomaly and site of crisis in the global present. In spite of all the scientific research in this area, it frustrates and confounds any strategies to exploit or reshape it. The stunning, inconceivable reality is that nothing of value can be extracted from it. (Crary 10-11)

This is good, as I see it, because so long as we are able to keep sleeping—which of course is the precondition for dreaming—language will retain its connection to myth; the private reserves we draw from in order to imagine and express different, more fulfilling realities will never dry up, and poetry will remain possible. In turn this makes change possible. According to E. L. Doctorow,

> If our response to what is going on today were appropriate, it would probably produce books of a grubbier, sloppier, and more energetic sort than we are doing. Books with less polish and self-consciousness, but about the way power works in our society, who has it, and how it is making history. In order to begin to rebuild our sense of ourselves, we may have to go back to childhood, to the past, and down into our dreams, and start again. (Doctorow 116)

Thomas Merton finishes the thought for Doctorow:

> All really valid poetry (poetry that is fully alive and asserts its reality by its power to generate imaginative life) is a kind of recovery of paradise. . . the living line and the generative association, the new sound, the music, the structure, are somehow grounded in a renewal of vision and hearing so that he who reads and understands recognizes that here is a new start, a new creation. Here the world gets another chance. (Merton 128)

Much of what we call art attempts the seemingly alchemical transformation of strife into love—chaos into harmony, pain into pleasure—by means which are at once sensuous, formal, and structural. Whether the transformation is merited and sincere, or lazy and superficial, will much of the time determine a work's social value, its usefulness and life span.

The undesirable entity (i.e. life as it currently is and has been), though changed in a certain way, should not be negated, but re-presented in a different, objective, more neutral light, and tend to elicit fascination and awe rather than fear and disgust. An artist must face up to what is undesirable and find ways of making it feasible for those who have encountered her work, to encounter the entity or situation depicted in the work differently, more perceptively or, in a manner of speaking, from the vantage point of a god. Works of art fascinate and in so doing they invite a special kind of contemplation, empowering us to penetrate into life's very core, while allowing us to survey it from on high. Gabriel Zaid writes,

> Great works focus our minds, speak to the best in us, and spark our imagination. We feel more alive, more engaged in meaningful conversation with life. Reality makes more sense. We make more sense. It's as if we've experienced a miracle, as if we've been granted access to eternity. It's only natural to spread the word, to share the experience, to bring that higher level of living to ordinary life. (Zaid 11)

But unlike science (I am about to use an analogy Merton would not like) which is monotheistic and strives to re-present life—by abbreviating reality—from the perspective of the one and only God, art is metaphorically polytheistic: which is to say, again but a bit differently, a successful work intensifies reality, re-presenting it from a single god's perspective, as the truth of one god among many, not as *the* Truth.

What is missing from art practice now, not to say from philosophy (which has necessarily been the case ever since philosophy's and, after it, modern science's establishment), is a genuine investment in magical ritual. In this way, art has most fundamentally been influenced by philosophy and science. Mythical thought is based in a logic of sympathies rather than conceptual difference, and this logic once accompanied and underlay art's function of presenting and re-presenting intensified reality for the purpose of contemplation.

It was at first philosophy, followed by science (indeed rational systematic treatment of culture precedes the rational systematic treatment of nature) which supplanted—rather than supplemented—mythical thought. Consequently, our ability to so much as consider using sympathetic magic to affect the world was drastically undermined. It had become nearly unthinkable, and remains so. Now we feel as though we can never go back to the unreason of magic. But in its intention, in seeking to alter the world, poetry and magic (and what we call art in general) once resembled science and politics, both of which are regarded as dynamic and change-oriented activities rather than leisurely pastimes.

Lyric poetry keeps intact, by formal convention and perhaps a foolish temperament, our unconscious connection to magic, and the possibility of restoring myth and dream to common, public life. Our embrace of science and technology in its place meanwhile compensates for this

loss of faith, our disappointment in magic's falseness. It is precisely a faith in magic, however, which gives us courage to go beyond ourselves. Yet, as the ethnographer Michael D. Jackson suggests, the basic impetus remains the same, even if the confidence of the sorcerer has left the artist (and audience):

> the passion and paradox of writing lies in its attempt to to achieve the impossible—a leap of faith that bears comparison with the mystic's dark night of the soul, unrequited love, nostalgic or utopian longing, or an ethnographer's attempt to know the world from the standpoint of others, to put himself or herself in their place. (Jackson 3)

One of lyric's hidden functions is that it keeps open the possibility of using the language of sympathy, of again (or at last) using words which perfectly correspond to what they mean, of finding an intuitive language which feels right, and can be shared between all people without misunderstanding. T. E. Lawrence seems to be contrasting the conventional person with the poet when he writes, "All men dream, but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds, wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act on their dreams with open eyes, to make them possible." (Lawrence 3)

The poet is not just one with a unique, defamiliarizing point of view, but who has an expansive, desirous, and naively hopeful disposition, one who implicitly expresses, through imagination and the artful use of speech, a desire to go beyond the known, in pursuit of a place where there is more meaning, a place at once possible and impossible. As Christopher Caudwell has it,

> The poem adapts the heart to a new purpose, without changing the eternal desires of men's hearts. It does so by projecting man into a world of phantasy which is superior to his present reality precisely because it is a world of superior reality—a world of more important reality not yet realised, whose realisation demands the very poetry which phantastically anticipates it. Here is room for every error, for the poem proposes something whose very reason for poetical treatment is that we cannot touch, smell or taste it yet. But only by means of this illusion can be brought into being a reality which would not otherwise exist. (Caudwell 30)

For Caudwell, then, it would seem, to bring into being what should be, the poem produces nostalgia for what does not yet exist.

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