
SOUL SAYS

ON RECENT POETRY

Helen Vendler

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For Xianchun Jiang Vendler

... Accept the certainty
That thou hast borne proportion in my bliss.
—G. M. Hopkins

(This is a form of matter of matter she sang)

(Where the hurry is stopped) (and held) (but not extinguished) (no)

—Jorie Graham, “Soul Says”

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Introduction

The senses and the imagination together furnish rhythms for the poet. The rhythms of the poet translate themselves back, in the mind of the reader, into the senses and the imagination. What is it about the critic that cannot rest content with this silent transaction? Most of the time the critic is just another reader, and can put a book down, whether with appreciation or with irritation, without any wish to write something about that book. Yet certain books will not let the critic look away; they demand a fuller response, and they will not let go until another set of words, this time in the critic's own prose, renders again the given of the book. Something in the book—or in a single poem—is “a hatching that stared and demanded an answering look.” That phrase is Wallace Stevens'; and though he used it about the poet's response to life (newborn every day), it is equally true of the critic's response to a significant piece of writing. Emily Dickinson called her response to life “my letter to the world / That never wrote to me.” Criticism is also a letter to the world, more meditated than conversation, more widely aimed than scholarship.

The significant poem, for me, can be about anything, or almost anything. I have never been drawn in a positive way to subject matter: that is, I do not respond more enthusiastically to a poem about women than to a poem about men, a poem about nature than a poem about the city, a political poem than a metaphysical poem. Though I grew up in a city,

my favorite poems, from Keats's "To Autumn" to Stevens' "The Auroras of Autumn," have often been ones using metaphors from nature; I have liked Protestant poets (from Milton to Clampitt) and Jewish poets (from Ginsberg to Goldbarth) as well as Catholic poets (from Hopkins to Péguy); though I can read only Romance languages, my two indispensable contemporary foreign poets are Paul Celan and Czesław Miłosz, whom I cannot read in the original. Though I am white, I could not do without the poetry of Langston Hughes and Rita Dove. I have written on both gay and "straight" writers. I bring up these questions of locale, religion, language, ethnicity, race, and sexuality because these days they appear so much in writing about literature, and because there is a jealous appropriation of literature into such socially marked categories.

At first I found it hard to understand, when such categories were ritually invoked, why people felt they could respond only to literature that replicated their own experience of race, class, or gender. I heard many tales beginning, "I never found literature meaningful to me till I read . . ." and there would follow, from a woman, a title like *Jane Eyre*, or, from a black, a title like *Invisible Man*. After a while, it dawned on me that these accounts mostly issued from readers of novels. The first time I heard Toni Morrison speak, she told of going from novel to novel "looking for me," and, for a long time, not finding herself, or her story, anywhere. Then, when she found representations of black women in fiction, they were being victimized, or killed, or exploited, a fact that filled her with anger. Since I was not a novel reader, I had never gone on that quest for a socially specified self resembling me. The last thing I wanted from literature was a mirror of my external circumstances. What I wanted was a mirror of my feelings, and that I found in poetry.

An adolescent reader of poetry finds herself in a world of the first-person pronoun: "My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains my sense"; "I awoke in the midsummer not-to-call night"; "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways." The all-purpose pronouns "I" and "you" are tracks along which any pair of eyes can go, male or female, black or white, Jewish or Catholic, urban or rural. Poetry answered so completely to my wish for a mirror of feelings that novels seemed by comparison overburdened, "loose and baggy monsters," and I cheerfully left them aside.

It now is clear to me how completely the traditional lyric desires a

stripping-away of the details associated with a socially specified self in order to reach its desired all-purpose abstraction. “Oh, wert thou in the cauld blast, / I’d shelter thee, I’d shelter thee”: yes, it was in Scots, but the feeling was easily transferable to me in America. “Thine eyen two will sle me sodenly”: yes, it was said by a man to a woman, but it was equally sayable by a woman to a man. “Never seek to tell thy love / Love that never told can be”: advice as sinister to a young woman as to a young man. I plunged on, untroubled by any sense of difference or apartness; and if a poet was a castaway, I too was a castaway; if a poet regretted Fern Hill, I too had a house I regretted and had lost; if Auden wrote about the shield of Achilles, Homer was mine as much as his. Perhaps my high school training in the antiphonal singing of Psalms lay behind my willing self-investiture in any poetic “I”: “Out of the depths I have cried to thee, O Lord, Lord, hear my voice.” We in the choir were to take such words as our own, as generations of Jews and Christians and atheists have done. And if it was not literally true when I said, “They have pierced my hands and my feet; they have numbered all my bones,” I knew it was metaphorically true of all suffering, my own included. Metaphor, not mimesis, was my native realm. Everything said in a poem was a metaphor for something in my inner life, and I learned about future possibilities within my inner life from the poetry I read with such eagerness.

Lyric, from the Psalms to “The Waste Land,” seemed, when I was seventeen, to be the voice of the soul itself. This, I take it, is what Jorie Graham means in calling one of her poems “Soul Says,” which I have borrowed as the title for this collection of essays about lyric poetry. In lyric poetry, voice is made abstract. It may tell you one specific thing about itself—that it is black, or that it is old, or that it is female, or that it is celibate. But it will not usually tell you, if it is black, that it grew up in Atlanta rather than Boston; or, if it is old, how old it is; or, if it is female, whether it is married; or, if it is celibate, when it took its vows. That is, the range of things one would normally know about a voice in a novel one does not know about a voice in a lyric. What one does know, if it is socially specified at all, is severely circumscribed. (There are exceptions that prove the rule, but I am here concerned with the rule.)

What is the use of abstraction in lyric? And why are most lyrics abstract? And what of the somewhat socially specific lyric—one that ends, for instance, with the words “Black like me,” as one of Hughes’s poems

does? Does it offer a track for my feet, or can only a black reader walk its path? And when the exception comes along, a poem full of novelistic detail like Ginsberg's "Kaddish," how is it that it keeps to its lyric intent? What is the human interest in shedding most, or all, of the detail in which one necessarily lives? What is gained, and what is lost, when a poet—one now nameless and sourceless and vanished—writes,

Western wind, when wilt thou blow,
The small rain down can rain?
Christ, that my love were in my arms,
And I in my bed again!

When we look for analogies to such work in the other arts, we might speak of the sketch, the *Lied*, the solo dance. What are they to the oil painting, the opera, the corps de ballet? Their first appeal is the appearance of spontaneity; no one can pretend that the *Mona Lisa* has been dashed off, or that *Aida* has been artlessly uttered. The lyric, though, has the look of casual utterance, of immediate outspokenness: "When I see birches bend to left and right, / I like to think some boy's been swinging them." And it has the look of encounter, of naked circumstance: "Since there's no help, come, let us kiss and part." And it can happen, or seem to happen, even prematurely, as the poet, stunned by a death, must, as he says to the laurels, "shatter your leaves before the mellowing year." While the rhythm of fiction is long-breathed and deliberate in pursuit, the rhythm of lyric is wayward, even hesitant, but always intense, and surprising:

Let us go, then, you and I,
While the evening is spread out upon the sky,
Like a patient etherised upon a table.

Spontaneity, intensity, circumstantiality; a sudden freeze-frame of disturbance, awakening, pang; an urgent and inviting rhythm; these are among the characteristics of lyric, but there is one other that is even more characteristic, and that is compression. In view of the length of certain lyrics (from "The Epithalamion" on), this claim can seem dubious; but as soon as one recognizes that the single day Spenser covers in

his wedding poem is the equivalent of the one day Joyce covers in *Ulysses*, the compression of the lyric (especially from a poet so given to digressive expansion as Spenser) is positively striking.

What does compression have to do with the abstraction to which Jorie Graham gives the name “soul,” by contrast to the more socially specified human unit we normally call, these days, the “self?” If the normal home of selfhood is the novel, which ideally allows many aspects of the self, under several forms, to expatiate and take on substance, then the normal home of “soul” is the lyric, where the human being becomes a set of warring passions independent of time and space. It is generally thought that the lyric is the genre of “here” and “now,” and it is true that these index words govern the lyric moment. But insofar as the typical lyric exists only in the here and now, it exists nowhere, since life as it is lived is always bracketed with a there and a then. Selves come with a history: souls are independent of time and space. “I tried each thing,” says Ashbery; “only some were immortal and free.” The lyric is the gesture of immortality and freedom; the novel is the gesture of the historical and of the spatial.

Readers read with design. The historically minded read socially mimetic literature as a source for information retrieval: What can we learn from the novels of Dickens about notions of criminality in nineteenth-century England? How did working women describe themselves in their journals? For such readers, no lyric source can seem as rich as a novel. The psychologically minded read literature as a source of culturally coded discourse on the passions; for such readers, the novel offers a multitude of characters interacting in highly motivated ways, impelled by a variety of interests and feelings. The lyric might seem, by contrast, impoverished, existing as it does without much of a plot, and without any significant number of *dramatis personae*.

In fact, the lyric has come in for a good deal of criticism on this account. The sonneteers are reproved for not allowing a voice to the female object of their desire; and if Elizabeth Barrett Browning is no more disposed than Petrarch to allow her beloved to get a word in edgewise, her “suppression of the other” is to be blamed, it is suggested, on the bad male example of her predecessors. Even Bakhtin, with his subtle and comprehensive mind, thought the lyric to be monologic and therefore (given his taste for the dialogic and the heteroglossic) a disappointing

genre. Such judgments stem from a fundamental misunderstanding of the lyric. When soul speaks, it speaks with a number of voices (as the writers of *psychomachia* knew). But the voices in lyric are represented not by characters, as in a novel or drama, but by changing registers of diction, contrastive rhythms, and varieties of tone. There is no complex lyric that does not contain within itself a congeries of forces, just as there is no sonata of Mozart's that—voiced though it is by a single instrument—does not contain forms of call and response in many emotional tonalities. The "plot" of a lyric resembles that of a sonata: "As if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen" (*Prufrock*). And since almost every word in lyric language has a long history, each word appears as a "character" heavy with motivation, desire, and import. When these "characters" undergo the binding force of syntax, sound, and rhythm, they are being subjected to what, in a novel or play, we would call "fate." The "destiny" of the words in a lyric must be as complex as the destinies of human beings in life, or the lyric would not be, in its way, adequate to the portion of life it undertakes to represent, the life that the soul lives when it is present to itself and alone with its own passions.

Rhythms have historical meaning, and so do stanza forms; genres have historical meaning, and so do personae. The satisfactions of lyric, for those attached to this form revealing the inner life, are as rich as the satisfactions of novels and plays for those attached to the forms revealing life in society. The interaction of the "soul" and the "self" within a single person is one of the great themes of lyric when it decides to face outward rather than inward: this is the undertaking of poets like Yeats and Ginsberg. They solve the problem differently: Yeats coerces his occult historical systems into a concern with the fate of a single soul; Ginsberg alternates painful social detail and exalted meditation. Yet even such "social" poets remain within the rule of abstraction, so that Ginsberg can ask himself, knowing that he is not writing a novel about his mother's life, "O mother what have I left out / O mother what have I forgotten." Lyric is indexical, not exhaustive; it mentions, and the reader is to expand the mention to the whole arc of experience of which the mention is the sign.

The virtues of lyric—extreme compression, the appearance of spontaneity, an intense and expressive rhythm, a binding of sense by sound, a structure which enacts the experience represented, an abstraction from the heterogeneity of life, a dynamic play of semiotic and rhythmic "des-

tiny”—are all summoned to give a voice to the “soul”—the self when it is alone with itself, when its socially constructed characteristics (race, class, color, gender, sexuality) are felt to be in abeyance. The biological characteristics (“black like me”) are of course present, but in the lyric they can be reconstructed in opposition to their socially constructed form, occasioning one of lyric’s most joyous self-proclaimings: “I am I, am I; / All creation shivers / With that sweet cry” (Yeats).

The poets about whom I have written in the essays in this book are poets whom I admire. There is really nothing to say about an inept poem except to enumerate its absences—“This poem has no energy; this poem relies on clichés and has no original diction; this poem has no compelling occasion; this poem has no tensile strength or compression; this poem has no enabling structure.” It is not interesting for a critic to compile a list of lacks. In all the poets here, there is presence rather than absence, force rather than feebleness, originality rather than derivativeness, strenuousness rather than slackness, daring rather than timidity, idiosyncrasy rather than typicality. In almost all of these cases, one can say, “That’s Bidart,” or “Gary Snyder, of course,” or “Graham, unmistakably,” or “Heaney, yes.” That is, one could not mistake Snyder for Dove, or Clampitt for Heaney, or Glück for Graham, or Goldbarth for Ginsberg. Each has left a mark on language, has found a style. And it is that style—the compelling aesthetic signature of each—that I respond to as I read, and want to understand and describe.

When I was asked to write, for *Antaeus*, a self-portrait under the rubric “The I of Writing,” I had to think about myself in the act of undertaking the sort of writing I do—a writing that takes its origin from an earlier piece of writing, one which I feel at first blindly and dumbly, and then gradually come to know with some degree of accurate understanding. This is what I said in as my self-portrait as a writer:

“Not I, not I, but the wind that blows through me.” Writing, I am deaf and blind; then suddenly I wake to the radio, and to ground covered with snow. Not asleep in body, not asleep in mind, but asleep in the senses and awake in an away, an otherness. The otherness is felt by my hand as it rewrites words—*the bronze decor, a shadow of a magnitude, so strength first found a way*. The hand is not female, the hand is not male; its *celestial stir* moves in a hyperspace neither here nor

there, neither once nor now. The timeless hand moves in a place where memory cannot be remembered because it is part of a manifold undivided in time. The hand has no biography and no ideas; it traces a contour pliable under its touch. The braille of the poet's words brushes my fingers and moves through them into my different calligraphy. The calligraphy tells less than the fingers feel; *sumptuous despair* loses its dark glamour as the hand falters after it. But the hand loves the contour, tracing obscure lineaments, translating them into language. Is the language signed? Only namelessly by its century and its country of origin, influencing invisibly the contour it has felt. The hand is anonymous, mine and not mine, even if my name signs what it has written.

This passage is, I now see, written within the sphere of lyric, where I am as anonymous as the poet of "Western wind," though as much within my century as he within his. To me, what soul says seems convincing, and self seems a contingent adventitiousness always in tension with it. Yeats reversed the terms, and made "self" mean the abstraction of carnal voice, while "soul" was the abstraction of discarnate voice. These are terms that can be defined at will; the Yeatsian "self" is what Jorie Graham calls "soul." Each is the abstracted voice of the whole person, body and mind, riven by the feelings always coursing from the senses to the passions, struggling to say what words, when formally arranged, can say as the experience of the inner life makes itself articulate and available to others. It is through poets such as those I reflect on here that the coming centuries will be able to know, as Stevens put it, "what we felt at what we saw."

The Reversed Pietà

Allen Ginsberg's "Kaddish"

The poem "Kaddish," now thirty years old, appeared in 1961 with two manifestos by Ginsberg bracketing it. The first, on the copyright page of the volume *Kaddish*, announced that "the established literary quarterlies of my day are bankrupt poetically thru their own hatred, dull ambition or loudmouthed obtuseness," and, in acknowledging previous appearances of the poems in journals, remarked that two of those publications were begun by "youths who quit editing university magazines to avoid hysterical academic censorship." This Ginsberg manifesto is one of irritated satiric energy; the other, appearing on the back cover of the volume, abounds in passionate phrases like "broken consciousness," "suffering anguish of separation," "blissful union," "desolate . . . homeless . . . at war," "original trembling of bliss in breast and belly," "fear," "defenseless living hurt self," and "hymn completed in tears." Things that are separate in the manifestos—satire and pathos—come together in Ginsberg's great elegy for his mother. Though "Kaddish" will always remain a son's poem, a poem which we enunciate in the position of a mourning child, it is now more than ever Naomi Ginsberg's poem, too—a poem bringing into representation, with both tragic and comic energy, a woman's hideously afflicted life. In this reversal of the cultural icon we call the pietà, we see not the mother holding the broken body of the son, but the son holding the broken body of the mother. "I saw my self my own mother

and my very nation trapped desolate,” says Ginsberg in his manifesto; but it is his mother that is the chief icon of the trappedness.

“Kaddish” declares its descent from classical elegy in its epigraph from Shelley’s Hellenizing “Adonais”—“Die, / If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek!” Personal extinction becomes real at the death of the sheltering parent; and Ginsberg, through his own resistance to death, has to find a way to the identity of idealization and dissolution understood by Shelley.

“Kaddish” is chiefly an elegy of the body—the physical body and the historically conditioned body of Naomi Ginsberg. Is it the first such elegy of the body (rather than the transcendent self) of another? *Leaves of Grass* was the first American book to expose at length the physical and historical body, but that body was Whitman’s own; in “Kaddish” it is Naomi’s body that is born, grows, gives birth, is scarred in flesh and brain, rots in a living death, dies, and is buried. The absence of a developed Jewish doctrine of the afterlife may in part explain why this poem—named so defiantly with a title foreign to non-Jews—is a poem of the body. The biblical history internalized as the history of the Jewish people may explain why it is also so much a poem of history. Finally, besides being a poem of the body and a poem of history, it is a poem of balked prayer. The prayer of the Kaddish, quoted in the second part of the poem, forms, as Ginsberg has said, “the rhythmic substrate” of the poem: “Yisborach, v’yistabach, v’yispoar, v’yisroman, v’yisnaseh, v’yishador, v’yishalleh, v’yishallol. . . .” Ginsberg, in California when his mother died, missed her funeral, where (as Ginsberg’s brother wrote him) there were not enough people present to form a minyan, so Kaddish could not be said for her. Several years later, Ginsberg wrote his own “Kaddish” to repair the lack. The rhythm of the Hebrew Kaddish shows itself chiefly at the end of the first part of the poem, the elegy proper: “Magnificent, mourned no more, marred of heart, mind behind, married dreamed, mortal changed . . . / almed in Earth, balmed in Lone”; and, a moment later, “This is the end, the redemption from Wilderness, way for the Wonderer, House sought for All . . . Death stay thy phantoms!”

A poem of the body, then; and a poem of history; and a balked rhythmic prayer or hymn. “Kaddish” has five numbered parts, and one extra-numeric “Hymmn” between Parts II and III. Part I is a lyrical overture addressed to Naomi, sounding the themes that will follow. Part II is a