

Landscapes of the Imagination: Louise Cowan's Genre Theory

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Yesterday, when a blizzard in Wyoming cut off all possibility of getting out of the state, first by closing the only airport nearby and then by closing all the roads to Denver as well, I had to tell Dr. Bainard Cowan that I would not be able to attend tonight. My regret runs very deep, not only because of what Louise Cowan has meant to everyone in my family, but also because I am denied the occasion to see so many friends who shared in her bounty. Please accept my apologies for the weather of Wyoming.²

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² This is a lecture intended to be delivered at the University of Dallas on Louise Cowan's literary theory. Weather prevented the author from delivering the lecture in person and was given by another speaker. The Author authorizes us to print the lecture in full in this year's edition of Symposium. We have kept the author's draft of the lecture true to its original, choosing not to line edit the piece.

Before I speak though (and thank you, Andrew), an admission: when Bainard asked me to speak about her genre theory, it gave me pause, and not only because of the time limitations. I first encountered the genre theory of Dr. Louise Cowan as a graduate student at UD in the late 1970s, and I was a little put off by it. Too much attention, it seemed to me, went into exploring the genre of a work, as though reading *Oedipus Tyrannos* or *The Merchant of Venice* were a way to get to the genre instead of the other way around. It seemed to me a kind of Platonism. Was the generic idea of comedy or tragedy more important and powerful than the rich particulars of, say, *Tartuffe* or *Othello*? Interpretive effort seemed to be more focused on aligning the work with its general type—*Othello* as tragedy—rather than on exploring its own themes and images, such as racial and cultural difference, injured merit and malevolence, sexual jealousy, or poisonous conceits that work upon the blood. What I admired in literature was what John Crowe Ransom calls the “rich and contingent materiality” of images, and I read plays, poems, and novels in those terms, whereas genre seemed to me academic, a matter of conventional categorization. It took a long time for this view to change, but the shift began when I took Dr. Cowan’s Comedy course in the Institute of Philosophic Studies, which at the time included philosophy, politics, literature, theology, and psychology.

This would have been in 1979 or 1980 in the large central classroom on the second floor of Braniff. Dr. Cowan presented her theory of comedy by having us read dozens of comedies over the course of the semester. I have never had but one other teacher who demanded such reading, and he was a little mad; for example, he assigned the whole of *Don Quixote* over one weekend for a sophomore survey class. In any case, Dr. Cowan’s literary approach was total immersion. We read comedy after comedy until the nature of the genre began to emerge less as a set of characteristics than as an intuition constituted of many experiences—a kind of critical insight whose moral analogy might be Aristotelian *phronesis*. It was like staying in Tuscany or Wyoming or South Boston long enough to have a variety of experiences so that the nature of that place could mean something in judging, sometimes prejudging, individual character. We read so many comedies that the distinctions of kinds *within*

comedy also began to emerge: what Dr. Cowan—drawing from Dante—called infernal, purgatorial, and paradisal comedy.

One class stands out for me as a paradigm of Dr. Cowan's approach. We were reading Machiavelli's *Mandragola*, and Dr. Cowan was trying to decide whether to read it as an infernal comedy like Ben Jonson's *Volpone* or perhaps, despite all the dirty tricks and low cunning, as a little paradisal because of its happy ending. One of my fellow graduate students, Mac Owens—a Marine, a Vietnam War veteran—was appalled. Didn't she see that Machiavelli was mapping his whole teaching onto the comic form and actually bragging in the play about how he's fooling the audience into suspending its moral objections? By accepting the comedy and laughing at what happens, the audience approves all kinds of things—adultery, bribery, and murder, for example—it would not approve if these things were presented in a different light and with worse consequences.

Dr. Cowan was unfazed. She and the Politics Department—well. In any case, Mac went on. I have forgotten what he actually said, but let me provide what might have been his argument: that *Mandragola* carries an evil teaching, that it is obviously meant to depict a symbolic new founding that subverts both Christianity and classical politics. It turns upside down what happens when Brutus uses the rape and the honorable suicide of Lucretia to rid Rome of the Tarquins and found the Republic. Nobody in the world of *Mandragola* cares the first thing about honor. Lucrezia's own husband and mother, not to mention Fr. Timoteo, urge her to sleep with a stranger who will draw off the poison of the special fertility potion so that Nicia can afterwards safely beget an heir. After Ligurio's plot succeeds and Callimaco spends the whole night with Lucrezia, she agrees to a secret arrangement with him, and she assuages her conscience by attributing her union with Callimaco to providence. Far from being a rape of Lucretia, in other words, far from involving offended chastity and honor, the play is an affirmation of the way of the world. *Mandragola* draws upon low Roman New Comedy instead of high Christian comedy—think of Dante's great work—and rather than merely repeating what Terence and Plautus did, Machiavelli deliberately plays off the ancient mode to import his new modes and orders.

But for Dr. Cowan, it was a very different matter. The old, supposedly Christian society of *Mandragola* has become hypocritical and sterile, and Ligurio's "happy idea," like one of the harebrained schemes in Aristophanes, manages to explode the tyranny of a marriage that thwarts the natural ends of love. Everything works out happily. Callimaco gets Lucrezia; Lucrezia gets a young lover as her nature much prefers; Nicia, whose real desire is for an heir rather than for his honor, has a much better prospect of getting one, whether it's his or not; and the venal Fr. Timoteo gets a contribution for the church. At the end of the play, everybody is delighted with how things have turned out.

A few years later in *The Terrain of Comedy*, Dr. Cowan would classify *Mandragola* as an infernal comedy, but at least for that memorable class, she was willing to disregard the immorality of it in favor of the happiness of the action. From her perspective, it was impossible to abuse the archetypal forces at play in the comic mode; its nature as comedy counters his political intentions and neutralizes the evil. The play comically celebrates what Edmund in *King Lear* calls the "lusty stealth of nature," just as the "Miller's Tale" does in Chaucer with a similar comic situation—the stupid old husband, the beautiful young wife, the ardent young suitor. In tragedy, "lusty stealth" has very different consequences. As Edgar says to Edmund about Gloucester's infidelity at the end of *Lear*, "The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices/Make instruments to plague us:/The dark and vicious place where thee he got/Cost him his eyes."

In judging a play like *Mandragola*, we are not approving or disapproving something in life but something in a mode of representing life—and it is important to see accurately what that mode is: "Each act within [the world of the literary work]," Dr. Cowan writes in the Introduction to *The Terrain of Comedy*, "corresponds to the actual world only when the viewer or reader is aware of its mimetic distortion." Things in life obviously do not work out as they do in *Mandragola*. Mimetic distortion works one way in comedy and another way in tragedy, as we'll see in a few minutes. Edmund cannot make adultery comic in *King Lear*, whereas the whole of *Mandragola* turns on a comic consent to it in the world of the play.

For Louise, understanding the genre of a work was a prerequisite for understanding it. To read it in the wrong light was to be ignorant of the governing affect or emotional tone, like paying attention to someone's words alone without paying attention to the demeanor of the person saying them. As she writes in her introduction to *The Terrain of Comedy*,

the genres are not external structures governed by rules and conventions but internal forms, perspectives upon life that indicate the kind of response called for by a particular work. Not to know their nature is like being deaf to the tone of voice in which a comment is spoken and blind to the face and gesture that express it. To be oblivious of the large generic metaphor governing the climate of the work and hence the very atmosphere in which its characters live and breed is to remain unaware of its deepest meaning and hence its power.

Note the emphasis on "climate" and "atmosphere." Louise's work in Southern literature, especially under the tutelage of Donald Davidson at Vanderbilt, made her acutely aware of the differences between, say, the climate and atmosphere of the New England of Hawthorne and Robert Frost, which were very different from those of the South of Faulkner and Caroline Gordon. It strikes me that this acute regional awareness governs her understanding of the climate and atmosphere of the four genres that Aristotle considers in the *Poetics*—tragedy, comedy, epic, and lyric. It is a matter of terrain or climate or landscape or region, or as she puts it, "a generic territory . . . ruled by its own laws, analogically related to life yet different from daily experience."

Louise's understanding of the genres informed the Literary Tradition sequence she helped establish in the UD core as well as at other colleges, such as Thomas More in New Hampshire, and later it became the basis of the Summer Institutes for Teachers at the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture—and who knows how many college and high school classrooms? When Louise left UD for a while in the 1980s, she began working with a number of her former students on the first volume of the Genre series published by the Dallas Institute Press in 1984, *The Terrain of Comedy*. It was followed in 1992 by *The Epic Cosmos*, edited by Larry Allums; *The Tragic Abyss* in 2003, which I edited; and *The Prospect of*

Lyric in 2012, edited by Bainard Cowan. Louise's introductions to these volumes contain the core of her teaching about the genres. The central emphasis in each case is essentially the one that she first articulates in *The Terrain of Comedy*: "the genres are not external structures governed by rules and conventions but internal forms."

For example, a work can be epic without having invocations, catalogs, heroic oaths, divine interventions, a descent to the underworld, and so on. On the other hand, if these characteristics do not make a work epic, which ones do? How can we recognize these "internal forms"? Read many epics, Louise would say—the same principle she used in her Comedy course. Yes, but how do we know which works are epic in order to read many of them? Trust those who know, she might say. Aristotle says the same thing about moral virtue: one comes to know what good actions are by seeing what the good man does. Louise knew literature, and it was her accuracy of judgment, her capacity for revealing depths, not by applying tools of analysis, but by showing others exactly the right shading of insight into a character or an action, that made her so important not only to her students but to literary theory.

This is not to say that the internal forms of genres are inscrutable. Louise describes epic, for example, in terms of "cosmopoiesis, its making of a cosmos wherein the other genres find their place and within which human life may be envisioned in its varied dimensions." She insists again that the epic cosmos is not constituted by external components that can be "listed," but by characteristics internal to its action:

the primary feature of the epic cosmos is its penetration of the veil separating material and immaterial existence, allowing an intimate relation between gods and men and the resultant metaphysical extension of space. The second feature is its eschatological expansion of time, and, third, its restoration of equilibrium between masculine and feminine forces. The final feature, one that is no doubt paramount in its importance, is the epic sense of motion, its linking of human action to a divine destiny, toward which it senses history moves.

Each of these features she goes on to explain at some length. Her language might seem too theological to account for epics from other cultures, such

as the African Mwindo epic, or the Mayan Popol Vuh, but the more one looks into these, the more the same features emerge. For example, the last one—the “epic sense of motion”—might seem biblical rather than epic per se. But she clearly sees in the Iliad and the Odyssey and certainly in the Aeneid, this eschatological dimension, this “divine destiny” toward which the epic senses that history moves, as though the work knows of a telos that it cannot fully articulate from within its own myth.

Each of the other genres, of course, has its own inner form. When we were writing the essays for *The Tragic Abyss* fifteen or so years ago, I remember that Louise, in her eighties at the time, kept surprising us with new ways of seeing tragedy. She said, for example, that tragedy of all the genres is the one that least of all directly imitates what happens in the world. Its whole purpose is to do something to its audience. In her introduction, she rather startlingly compares it to the action of rain dancers: “tragedy bends all its efforts toward producing a result.” Unlike comedy, “tragedy is less a simulacrum of human action than a liturgical confrontation of a deep-seated dread which, when brought to light, can be borne only through the medium of poetic language.” It consists, she says, of “dramatizations of single moments of unmasking, accompanied by whatever is necessary to reach that chilling and epiphanic event.” In other words, she points to the intense difference of tragedy as a genre from life, regardless of how many terrible things happen in life. The genre’s mimetic distortion exists to expose something in life that life itself cannot reveal in the same way.

When she writes about this tragic revelation later in the introduction, she seems almost vatic in her commentary:

There is a dread that lies dormant at the bottom-most portion of our psyches, suppressed throughout life, since life could not be lived if it were confronted directly. It has to do with our being caught in the flesh, of daring to exist as a spirit incorporated in matter, of believing in the “blind hopes” Prometheus planted in the human race. Uncovered, it reveals itself as a dread of seeing in one fearful instant of Aufklärung the vast distance between temporal consciousness and the realm of essences. Something in the iconic gaze of tragedy evokes a corresponding image in our depths: for a moment we glimpse ourselves as full participants

within the accused and splendid human race. And for a moment we see that the gods look on, with bright interest and admiration, watching the suffering of mortals that elevates them to an almost godlike standing.

This is not so much literary criticism as wisdom literature. “The accused and splendid human race” sounds more Faulknerian than Shakespearean, though I hear echoes of Hamlet’s “what a piece of work is a man” and the famous ode in *Antigone*. The wisdom here comes from long and intimate acquaintance with dread, I suspect, but also from long acquaintance with the illuminating mimetic distortions of literature, the different regions of the poetic cosmos, our “fluent mundo,” as Wallace Stevens puts it, that allow us to see truly what life is.

Before I close, let me turn briefly to the question of the novel, which appears to be a new genre that Aristotle did not anticipate. Mikhail Bakhtin writes about the shift in modernity from epic to novel, as though there were a fundamental difference in genres. But for Louise, the internal forms do not change with the shift in external characteristics, and questions of genre naturally carry over into judgments of the novel. For example, what can we say about *Madame Bovary*, which—like *Mandragola*—turns on adultery? Louise had the courage to disagree with the redoubtable novelist Caroline Gordon, a formidable presence at UD in the days when she taught creative writing here (a story in itself). Miss Gordon revered Flaubert and Henry James as her masters in the form of the novel, and she considered *Madame Bovary* a tragedy of adultery. Louise thought this judgment a serious misreading of its tone. Flaubert’s superb observations of bourgeois village life are written with an ironic wit and pervasive mockery that give the novel, for all its apparent verisimilitude, a “mimetic distortion” characteristic of comedy, not tragedy. Louise saw it as infernal comedy. It is no more tragic than *Breaking Bad*. Flaubert’s whole perspective on Emma Bovary and her lovers, on Homais, on the oafish Charles, is wickedly comic.

I do not know how Louise and Caroline Gordon negotiated this disagreement, but I do know that Caroline Gordon regarded Louise as the only critic who ever really understood her work. Louise saw what it meant to write from within the emotional idiom of a classically educated

Southerner like Miss Gordon, and she saw that Miss Gordon's own generic territory was epic. She saw the same epic features, of course, in *Moby Dick* and *Go Down, Moses*. She taught her students to see how tragedy and comedy work in the novel, sometimes in the same ones—as in *Crime and Punishment* or *Beloved*, both of which have comic actions crossing tragic ones. What she did with novels, she also did with film. In our years working with the Summer Institutes for Teachers, Louise was always discovering superb works that no one else had heard of, such as the Hungarian film, *The Revolt of Job*, with its epic theme of passing on a culture facing annihilation.

Of all the genres, though, lyric was her inmost love. In her beautiful introduction to *The Prospect of Lyric*, she contrasts two poems, one by Blake and the other by Housman, as giving the two poles of lyric longing. Blake's sunflower is "Seeking after that sweet golden clime/Where the traveler's journey is done," and Housman's speaker asks nostalgically about an air that blows from the past: "What are those blue remembered hills,/What spires, what farms are those?" Between these poles, which she associates with the New Jerusalem and the Garden of Eden, falls that middle ground of lyric, "in atmosphere no less intense, an affirmation and celebration of the present moment." More than anyone I have ever met, Louise believed with her whole being that poetry can indeed save the world, and I hope that this celebration of her work in the present moment achieves a lyric intensity worthy of what she has meant to us all.

Let me close with one last citation from her introduction on lyric. It seems to me a profound statement of what it means to have a mediator: "As poet and artist, the lyricist is on our side, against the terror of the numinous, calming the pounding heart as we approach the burning bush, whereas the mystic and prophet are on the side of the holy, against us, reviling our sins and our failings. The lyric cry is the last thing we have between ourselves and annihilation; and as such it is the cornucopia from which human culture issues." Let us give thanks for her own mediation in letting us hear that lyric cry. Her great soul was itself a cornucopia.