

Form as Key Concept in the Criticism of Louise Cowan

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The word *form* still crops up repeatedly in literary-critical journals these days, faring perhaps a little better than it has done over the past fifty years that saw a great disinvestment in discussions of aesthetics. But what is form? Scarcely a word is as common as form is in English usage and used in so many ways. Even in literary criticism, it may designate a verse structure, a genre, the general shape of a work in a metaphorical sense, or indeed a shifted shape: “the wise old man now appears in the form of a bird.” On one hand, form is still used to denote beauty, even athleticism or overall good functioning: “Justify’s in fine form today.” On the other hand, it may be taken as something to revolt against, seeing form as a constraining set of rules, a prison; as something that holds back a rising change of style, keeps it down; as something that is mere surface, that deceives us about substance; as something that is beside the point. This last identification, the supreme opposite of the truth, is where the reader’s mind will end up in following the modern obsession with fact, information, or knowledge as power. For form is often put in opposition to content, or to matter, where it is implied the real facts reside. Form, thus, becomes only a kind of cover for matter, and current style shows its refusal to be taken in by using form with open irony.

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Nonetheless, form remains a central term for understanding the power of poetry to engage any dimension of depth in human life or perception, and to fail to grasp its importance and its paradoxes is fatal for a literary sensibility. Form was a central concept for Louise Cowan throughout her many decades of teaching; in many of her writings, and in virtually all her classes, she sought to clarify the concept and its importance. In a 2012 graduate class on literary criticism and theory at the University of Dallas, I invited her to give a series of guest lectures in which she would enunciate the most indispensable propositions of literary criticism (the notes for these lectures are preserved in the Donald and Louise Cowan Archive). It was her preface to the class's study of Jacques Maritain's *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* in which she asked specifically about the philosophic meaning of the word form as it applies to poetry. Its ordinary usage, she admitted, "has led to a superficial conception of poetry and art," producing "a theory of what Coleridge calls 'mechanic' rather than organic form" (Cowan, "Form in Poetry"). Mechanical works, readers will recall, are those whose form is predetermined, "not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material; as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened" (Coleridge, "Shakespeare's Judgment"). Organic form, to the contrary, grows with the material, being present from the beginning to shape the material. As Coleridge continues his description, it "is innate; it shapes, as it develops, itself from within, and fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form." And in a sweeping statement, she united the entire Western tradition under the idea of organic form, maintaining that this is the concept of form "by which all the great poets have written," that it is in essence "this concept that Plato and Aristotle held and that shaped the imagination of the Western world... that Coleridge and Keats espoused, that the Southern critics explored, and that Maritain develops" in *Creative Intuition*. This is a remarkable itinerary and a daring claim, in essence that these thinkers' approaches to literature may be connected through the millennia by means of the concept of form: that the classics of literary theory make up not a hodge-podge of interesting notions but a coherent philosophical approach that, when followed, at the very least makes one take poetry a good deal more seriously than before.

I would like briefly to sketch out Louise's itinerary to explicate further the concept of poetic form, because while almost a foreign notion in today's literary discourse, it is yet absolutely crucial for specifying the particular difference and the particular contribution of literature and literary study to the humanities and their ongoing dialogue with each other. It is essential, for instance, for seeing how poetry constitutes a different kind of knowledge from logical, propositional, or philosophical knowledge, how it is a knowledge that one can gain only by knowing how to read a poem and submitting to that poem in reading it. The authority of the poem comes from its form.

Aristotle's understanding of form is central to the entire Western tradition and can be found pervading his work, notably in the *Metaphysics*, which makes a distinction that will become fundamental in the development of Western thought. Form is not only *eidos* or *idea*, the unipolar principle uniting with matter to make things or beings: it is also the combination itself of form and matter, the union that determines the existence of each thing or being. The terms *energeia* (being-at-work, actuality) and *entelechia* (being-at-an-end) entail both meanings, with *energeia* defined as "the form of something in being, as well as the dynamic unity of its form and matter" (Long, *Ethics of Ontology*, 104). This is, then, what Coleridge will mean when, two millennia later, he will observe, "Such as the life is, such is the form" (Coleridge, "Shakespeare's Judgment"). For Aristotle, then, life is not merely an inchoate energy but comes in a self-organizing and self-developing form for every living being. For its part, form is not an arbitrary category in which for things to be classified but rather those things' fundamental orientation toward the world through their action. Their form is their destiny.

Form is native to us, yet it is difficult to conceptualize. Nonetheless, like time, as Augustine says, we understand it in some sense as we live it continually. This immediacy of intuitive understanding may be felt instinctively in our bodies and expressed in our emotions before our minds know what is going on. This intuitive sense is the same beginning principle by which we understand real poetry, not first as doctrine or argument or speech act. A higher aspect of this immediate communicability of form, though, can be understood in the concept of beauty, a prominent concern of Plato to which Aristotle devotes less attention but which is taken up again through Plotinian Neo-Platonism

and the exploration of the divine in Dionysius and Albertus Magnus, the teacher of Thomas Aquinas. Maritain compresses all of these sources in his work *Art and Scholasticism* when he observes: “Finally, and above all, this radiance itself of the form, which is the main thing in beauty, has an infinity of diverse ways of shining on matter” (Maritain, *Art*, 27-28). In a footnote Maritain goes on to explain, “By ‘radiance of the form’ must be understood an ontological splendor which is in one way or another revealed to our mind, not a conceptual clarity.” The Medieval term *claritas* meant both radiance of the form and ontological splendor, and hence it testifies to an entire Medieval discourse on beauty reminding us that the intuitive manner in which beauty speaks to us is not, like the organic form of organisms, something pre-rational but is in a very real sense supra-rational, communicating something spiritual that mere discursive reason cannot reach. Beauty makes us aware of the existence of something higher, more organized, yet appealing to our nature, calling us beyond ourselves at the same time that it satisfies what we are.

From this twin origin comes our modern conception of form. Whereas Aristotle’s *energeia* bequeaths a lasting vision of form as each thing’s oneness with itself and its own activity, the Medieval teaching, readopting Plato through a Christian lens, speaks of form almost as an event, scrutinizing not how it comes about but its striking effect on us, as genuine beauty operates on us, raising the very plane of our existence. One perspective is immanent, asserting the self-coherence of the thing, and one is transcendent, radiating outward from the thing to those who behold it, forming a higher community with them. These two moments characterize form in Coleridge, the Southern critics, and many more modern authors. I will have more to say on these two moments later.

Commenting on Maritain’s understanding of form as “ontological splendor, not conceptual clarity,” Louise Cowan went on in her lecture to draw out the implications for the literary work: “Ontological splendor, the splendor of Being—not a logical, rational clarity, but a clearness and radiance of being, [has as consequence] that the work, if it has form, makes one thing—unified whole. . . Robert Penn Warren has spoken of ‘visionary form’—as opposed to the linear form by which we read a work of literature: that radiant mental luminosity that we have in our minds after we have finished the work.” Then, turning from the form of the literary

work as a quality to the effect on our understanding this luminosity has, she adds:

Form, I have said, is the embodiment of insight—so that every part of the poem expresses the form, just as every part of the oak tree expresses its oakness. I believe this idea of form, of wholeness, of organicism is one of the archetypes among us, so that it can be easily understood when it is explained. It is, I believe, the key to our whole moral life, just as it is the heart of any critical judgment that we must make of the arts. In other words, if one possesses a virtue, it must permeate oneself, be spread invisibly throughout one's entire being—so that one can act freely and independently in accord with that virtue. If the virtue is turned into a rule, then it is likely never to fit a situation quite accurately; and the person who tries to apply it will never be free, never feel that he is his own person.

This conception of form as both archetype and key to the moral life deserves further commentary, but it is important here to understand her differentiation between form as *claritas* and mere structure, which is secondary, even though it often mistakenly receives the greatest attention in literary study. She makes that distinction clearly in a lecture on Dostoevsky's masterpiece:

The Brothers Karamazov provides the best means I know of for distinguishing between the form and the structure of a work of literature. Form is ontological; structure is intellectual.

Form, then, is the embodiment of vision. And after we have finished reading the novel, we are able to say, I think, that the form in this novel develops out of the gospel quotation: "Unless a grain of wheat [falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit," (John 12:24). Everything in the novel grows out of this insight into suffering and its spiritual effects. This is the anagogical meaning of the work. The structure, in contrast, has to do with the political destiny of Russia: it is presided over by the decaying corpses of the two old men: Fyodor, the corrupt, worldly, sinful past of Russia, and Zossima, its holy, joyous, and loving Christian inheritance of *sobornost* [= communal togetherness]. Between these two stands Ivan's "new idea," an abstraction: the Grand Inquisitor, a "father figure" who protects his weak children by deception and tyranny and who gives them bread in order to take away their freedom.

The form, growing out of the image of dying to oneself, had to be given by what Coleridge called the primary imagination, the voice of the soul. As such it possesses what Maritain has called “not so much conceptual clarity as ontological splendor.” The form of the work, giving rise to its tone, its passion, its genius, its “body” results in an organic growth from the center. The structure, growing out of thought and ideas, had to be more conscious work (Coleridge called it the secondary imagination). (untitled note on BK Form and Structure, Cowan Archive).

In her literary criticism course, one gained a distinct sense that Aristotle and Albertus/Aquinas and Dante and Coleridge and Maritain were all describing the same insight into poetry, the poem, and poetic creation. This loose, invisible linkage was very little noted or disturbed by the criticism wars of the late twentieth century, and once she found it, it remained a firm conviction all her life.

Let us turn back to that remarkable 1955 essay of poet and novelist Robert Penn Warren’s that Louise Cowan quoted, “Knowledge and the Image of Man,” in which he asserts that by saying “knowledge by form” in answer to the question, “What kind of knowledge does poetry give?” he is not enunciating some doctrine of “sheer formalism.” This knowledge instead comes through the “organic relation among all the elements of the work”:

By this I mean the furthest thing possible from any doctrine that might go as sheer formalism. I mean the organic relation among all the elements of the work, including, most emphatically, those elements drawn from the actual world and charged with all the urgencies of actuality, urgencies not to be denied but transmuted—as we are told Tintoretto transmuted the gamin divers of the Venetian canal into the angels of his painting. The form is a vision of experience, but of experience fulfilled and redeemed in knowledge, the ugly with the beautiful, the slayer with the slain, what was known as shape now known as time, what was known in time now known as shape, a new knowledge.

The genuine poem, possessing form and not structure alone, passes over the derivative nature of instruction and discourse, granting to someone who experiences the poem a fullness of knowledge and not just a report of it. The poem, then, is itself an experience, experience intensified.

For Warren, form can bless and redeem an image or act encountered in the world that may be morally incomplete but that nonetheless testifies to the human longing for the whole, for life abundant. It achieves beauty in this way. Form acts in a way analogous to grace by endowing such an act or image with the wholeness of the moral life when it is adopted from its lived context and made a part of a radiant work of art. Warren notes an insight by fellow Southern critic Tate: "Allen Tate has written 'If the poem is a real creation, it is a kind of knowledge that we did not possess before. It is not knowledge "about" something else; the poem is the fullness of that knowledge.'" Warren continues by elaborating on how form transforms its matter:

It is not a thing detached from the world but a thing springing from the deep engagement of spirit with the world. This engagement may involve not only love for the world, but also fear and disgust, but the conquest, in form, of fear and disgust means such a sublimation that the world which once provoked the fear and disgust may now be totally loved in the fullness of contemplation. The form is the flowering of that deep engagement of spirit, the discovery of its rhythm. And the form is known, by creator or appreciator, only by experiencing it, by submitting to its characteristic rhythm.

Note how important here the experiencing of the work is—more accurately, the experiencing of the action the work embodies. What does this mean? Not merely emotional susceptibility. It certainly involved Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief." But it is to take on as ours some experience someone else has had, even if that someone, a fictional character, never had an earthly existence that was his or her own. Rather than raw experience, though, it is experience reflected on, so that the meaning of the action is developed as fully as possible. According to Cowan, "In this world of poetic form one suffers things, as Maritain would say," and suffering is a greater kind of knowledge, making the reader feel rather than see the experience. "One knows something from within oneself as a result of the poem," she continues, "rather than by reasoning to a conclusion.... In the same way, then, that one must learn from life by [experiencing] it and contemplating it, one learns from a poem; we have an experience which draws us into it and then in a later act we know what we have learned by reflecting upon it and contemplating it." Form then is

experience redoubled; and this is why it makes the freshness of experience possible to transmit to others.

Thus, form is not merely a report of living experience but is itself living. It speaks with the authority of something fresh to us because it is fresh. The great poetic works reward our rereading them throughout our lives with new meaning because they are living, and we can see them with new eyes.

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Thus far I have emphasized Louise Cowan's teaching of the "organic" character of form, its patient growth from a "seed" in the poet's mind, its self-similarity in all its parts, its work through reflection on past experiences. But as we have seen, there is something "sudden" about form as well, something unexpected and revelatory, and in approaching this aspect we come more closely to the essentially intellectual dimension of the poem.

In an e-mail to me in early 2012, Louise advised me on the then-upcoming Literary Criticism and Theory course we were teaching together:

Our syllabus for the criticism class ought to feature in some way "seeing the form" (to quote the theologian von Balthasar). This is what we need to remind our IPS students about. I suddenly realize that what happens in Keats's ode is really that. When he stops seeing only the decorations on the urn and pondering about its historic identity, he suddenly "sees the form" and exclaims "O Attic shape! Fair attitude!"

While Balthasar does have something interesting to say on form in his own right that we shall examine shortly, it is rather the common expression "seeing the form" that was of interest to Louise in this message. Here she uses form to mean insight, emphasizing especially that quality of grasping the whole all at once. Insight is an intellectual moment, that moment experienced as the "ignition" of a new understanding. One has been following directions to carry out a procedure, and suddenly comes a moment when one gets the point, seeing what it's "all about." At that moment everything makes sense: there is an advent of meaning, and a new entity is born in one's mind. This moment in the mind is equally the advent of form, now the knowledge no longer of the poet alone but

conceived and renewed in the student. Form, then, is an intellectual and spiritual phenomenon much more than it is a plastic, sculptural one. Form's pervasiveness means that the poem itself is the best guide to its meaning, an insight expressed by Cleanth Brooks in the dictum "Form is meaning" (Brooks, "My Credo," 85). Poetry is a constant testimony that meaning is not simply conceptual and discursive, analytical and argumentative. It is massive and full, complex, redundant, and overflowing.

What comes in this moment of the apprehension of form extends far beyond suddenly seeing what the work itself "is saying," what it is "about." The insight is dazzling because it projects an outward-radiating pattern that the Medieval fourfold way of biblical exegesis attempted to map: what the single action of the work is and how it is significant simply in the immanent frame of its action; then, as this insight continues to radiate outward, what the action reveals that typifies this moment in history (the character's or the author's); what it reveals about every person's moral life; and, finally, how everything in this work is visible in the final light of the ultimate purpose for creation, or "experience fulfilled and redeemed in knowledge," as Warren puts it. Here we may take the famous ending of Rilke's poem "Archaic Torso of Apollo" as a guide. The torso, only a fragment of the original whole figure, is the focus of the poet's rapt gaze. As he notices, the "torso goes on glowing"; so one does not wish the missing parts back in place, for "Otherwise, the curve/of the chest could not blind you." He is impelled here to a stunning revelation:

Sonst stünde dieser Stein entstellt und kurz
unter der Schultern durchsichtigem Sturz
und flimmerte nicht so wie Raubtierfelle

und bräche nicht aus allen seinen Rändern
aus wie ein Stern: denn da ist keine Stelle,
die dich nicht sieht. Du mußt dein Leben ändern.

[Otherwise, this stone would stand here broken
beneath the limpid fall of the shoulders
and would not glisten like the pelt of a tiger;

and would not erupt from all its edges
like a star: For there is no place here that

does not see you. You must change your life.

— trans. Carl Skoggard]

This unequivocal announcement, “You must change your life,” is spoken not on a general plane alone, like a ready maxim. Rather, the resolve to change must come from a sudden new understanding. The poet has received an unexpected word from outside himself, spoken with authority, expressly for him. Yet the form of the ruined sculpture “erupts from all its edges” in pronouncing this word of destiny, and, ultimately, it speaks from within the poet himself. He must change his life because life means something--is something--different now. But the way is something he must choose. Because of the freedom that this moment gives, the imperative seems to have an ineffable message that is expressly for the poet, and also for the reader. The radiating-outward of form continues to break through several frames until it reaches us readers. The encounter with the poem has turned into a conversation with “you” for the subject. This is how form is meaning. True in a far more stunning way than those three simple words indicate, it is what Warren means with his observation:

The form gives man an image of himself, for it gives him his mode of experiencing, a paradigm of his inner life, his rhythm of destiny, his tonality of fate. And this evocation, confrontation, and definition of our deepest life gives us, in new self-awareness, a yet deeper life to live. (Warren, 192)

As we explore what can be said about the nature of form, a bifurcation has again opened up, this one between form “in itself” and form “for us,” stunningly connected as parts of a single extended moment that is first slow, then sudden, but also first sensory and emotional, then intellectual. This bifurcation does not split the act of form but gives it a double, sequential character. Thus far the emphasis has been laid on the “glamor moment” of insight; but there is also slower, more laborious work, the work of interpretation, that begins in a flash of insight but remains in need of articulation. In a lecture on the novel *The Idiot*, Louise Cowan said, “Dostoevsky’s works “remain . . . in need of interpretation: we have to take them into our own imaginations and attempt to discern their form. For it is in form that their meaning lies; not in their characters or their events.” For the interpretation of a work to be on the right track, then, it must be a continuation of its act of form. This connection by no

means cuts off the variety possible in interpretations, for the work continues to develop in a new, as yet unexplored dimension.

As late as 1969 Paul de Man—who went on to be the original English-language champion of deconstruction as a formal philosophical analysis—was still in contact with the New Criticism under which he had studied earlier. In writing on literature, consequently, he still took note of formal interpretive guidelines for bringing a sharp focus to the critical act. In “Form and Intent in the American New Criticism,” he engages the problem of form and, even though he has already deserted the metaphysics of plenitude that the New Critics miraculously kept alive in the modern age, he nonetheless contributes a unique perspective in an interpretation-oriented dimension that differs from the mostly poet- and work-centered approach that Coleridge, Warren, and Cowan take. To approach his vantage point de Man has recourse to the model of the hermeneutic circle, a process of arriving at truer understanding by opening oneself increasingly to the text in question:

Only when understanding has been achieved does the circle seem to close and only then is the foreknowing structure of the act of interpretation fully revealed. True understanding always implies a certain degree of totality; without it, no contact could be established with a foreknowledge that it can never reach, but of which it can be more or less lucidly aware. The fact that poetic language, unlike ordinary language, possesses what we call “form” indicates that it has reached this point.

The closing of the circle, the foreknowing structure, and totality are terms that approximate the moment of “seeing the form,” a moment in which meaning is disclosed “more or less lucidly.” (The language used befits a modern rationalist who is grudgingly giving ground to a power in poetry unreachable by ordinary language.) He continues:

In interpreting poetic language, and especially in revealing its “form,” the critic is therefore dealing with a privileged language: a language engaged in its highest intent and tending toward the fullest possible self-understanding. The critical interpretation is oriented toward a consciousness which is itself engaged in an act of total interpretation. The relationship between author and critic does not designate a difference in the type of activity involved, since no fundamental discontinuity exists between two acts that both aim at full understanding; the difference is primarily temporal in kind. Poetry is the foreknowledge of criticism (31).

Despite his reliance on an entirely different philosophical tradition, one not friendly to claims of poetic intuition, de Man carefully clarifies the continuity existing between poetic composition and interpretation. Restated in non-rationalist terms, it comes down to a scenario in which poet and reader stand facing the same mystery. The mystery, not religious as such, is existence itself. Form is the signature of awareness of that mystery, a testimony that the poet's imagination has been saturated with awareness of it. Rilke's "Torso of Apollo" must be seen in this way, as de Man points out, not as it sometimes is interpreted — as a paean to the perception of a beautiful sculptural form — but rather as something that speaks out of its absence (not despite it). The negative totalization could hardly be stated more concisely: the perfection of form can be detected only when the figure is mutilated and fragmentary and has no head, yet it still "sees" and holds you with its gaze. This is the work of form.

Poems that display and enter into the central mystery of form sometimes become the most renowned: Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is a splendid example of how form works on the mind of the beholder, leading it from its distracting, context-seeking questions about the urn's origin to a silent contemplation of form. Structurally the poem's situation makes it very comparable to Rilke's; in texture it is totally different. Emily Dickinson's "There's a Certain Slant of Light" works also with light, silence, and absence to induce a moment of contemplation. Each of these poems, distinct in themselves, comes close to the mystery of human existence: limited, death-bound, yet able to contemplate and emulate a higher mode of being.

Gerard Manley Hopkins's sonnet "As Kingfishers Catch Fire" hasn't drawn as much attention as these touchstones of poetry, but examining it more closely here suits my purpose particularly well.

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells....

In Hopkins's poem, each mortal thing has form; his own more tightly specified term is *inshape*. As a being, in everything it does, every creature proclaims itself:

Selves—goes its self; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying What I do is me: for that I came.

The bell that “fling[s] out broad its name” is just one example of creation's beings saying myself. Form has a natural resonance that comes from its being in harmony, tuned to itself: “stones ring” as they fall down wells, no less than do the strings of instruments when plucked. Things naturally announce themselves, transitioning effortlessly from being to meaning. Their at-homeness with their own nature is a benchmark unattainable by mere human beings, who cannot avoid wrestling with the willfulness that their own consciousness has bequeathed to them. Our awkwardness comes from our vocabulary: we know not only our name; we have a choice in what to say,

If this being can choose, though, it should be consciously aware of what it is doing. Emphatically Hopkins declares that human beings constitute a second moment in form—the bifurcation of sensory—emotional and intellectual arrives here with peculiar force. “Kingfishers” proposes that a new aim is saved up for human persons.

I say more: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is —
Christ....

To seek justice; to act in such a way as to “keep” one's God-given grace; finally, to invite Christ into the inmost hallows of one's sovereign selfhood—this is the call to fulfill one's existence and purpose. The poem's two moments, housed in its octave and sestet, can also be named nature and grace. The sestet, containing the second moment, is notably barer of imagery than the octave, holding itself at first to abstractions or classes of entities, perhaps to surmount the self-deification that such a centeredness would lead to if installed in human nature. The human being finds his *energeia* in being in community with others and enacting justice with them. In “Kingfishers,” the just man participates in a grace that is

continuous with the selving of all creatures, but it is chosen. This organic form of one's *energeia* has become something to commit to, to aspire to, out of reach of our unthinking nature; but the goal, as with the genuine acquisition of any virtue, moral or intellectual, is to make it just as natural, a second nature. To reprise Cowan, "if one possesses a virtue, it must permeate oneself . . . so that one can act freely and independently in accord with that virtue." Then, as a human self, one will have form. But in Hopkins's vision, it is not "myself" that one "speaks and spells," but the son of God, whose face will be seen in the just man's face:

For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

"Kingfishers" enacts two levels of *energeia*, then, two levels of form for created beings. One of them points back to itself and indicates the sublime self-harmony a creature is capable of exercising, clarifying the essential act that being is meant for. The other level however points outward and upward, so that it signifies not the self but the divine totality, God Himself. Form is meaning: it is, and it points; it directs its light-beam inward to illuminate self-understanding and outward to join in union with all of creation and the divine.

Hans Urs von Balthasar brings a further perspective to this dual moment of form with his intention, announced in *The Glory of the Lord*, of reconnecting theology to its sources in intuition. For this reason, he champions a theological aesthetics in which theologians, led by attention to poetry and art, should seek to reawaken their awareness of the spiritual resources in their senses. He explains: "if man is to live in original form, that form has first to be sighted. One must possess a spiritual eye capable of perceiving the forms of existence with awe" (Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, Kindle Edition, locations 283-84). We are not likely to develop these eyes, however, "unless we have to some extent learned to see essential forms with our old ones," that is, in the profane world (366). Repeatedly he insists that form, the focus of his first volume *Seeing the Form*, must be what the theologian, no less than the literary critic, looks for. The first poem he mentions in connection with this moment is in fact Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo." Citing the poem's famous last lines, he declares that the closing command, with its shocking directness and openness,

claims its authority from a oneness with the moment of perception. The message is not spoken to but originates in the viewer. Balthasar insists that “only such form is genuine form, and only it can wholly claim for itself the name of beauty” (261-65).

From Rilke, Balthasar then turns to another German (and world-renowned) resource of lyric insight, Friedrich Hölderlin, and his short poem “Geh unter, schöne Sonne...”:

Geh unter, schöne Sonne, sich achteten
 Nur wenig dein, sie kannten dich, Heilige, nicht,
 Denn mühelos und stille bist du
 Über den Mühsamen aufgegangen.

Mir gehst du freundlich unter und auf, o Licht!
 Und wohl erkennt mein Auge dich, Herrliches!
 Denn göttlich stille ehren lernt ich,
 Da Diotima den Sinn mir heilte.

O du des Himmels Botin! wie lauscht ich dir!
 Dir Diotima! Liebe! wie sah von dir
 Zum goldnen Tage dieses Auge
 Glänzend und dankend empor. Da rauschten

Lebendiger die Quellen, es atmeten
 Der dunkel Erde Blüten mich liebend an,
 Und lächelnd über Silberwolken
 Neigte sich segnend herab der Aether.

[Go down, beautiful Sun. They paid but little heed to thee; they knew thee not, thou holy one. For effortless and still you rose over the laborious ones.

A friend to me thou go'st down and up, O Light! And my eyes surely recognize thee, Splendor! For in divine silence I learned to honor, when Diotima healed my mind.

O thou messenger of heaven! how I listened to thee! to thee Diotima! Love! How on that golden day this eye saw from thee, sparkling and thankful, upward. Then rushed the springs more lively, then breathed the blossoms of the dark earth on me, and smiling over silvery clouds the heavens bent down in blessing.

(Translation mine)]

The ordinariness of the moment described could not contrast more with the spiritual heights this visionary poem attains. The moment that enables the poem's making is just as definite, but the making occurs because the poet has previously made himself a devotee of his muse Diotima. In a moment of "creative intuition," to use Maritain's language, the poet experiences a "flash of reality" (Creative Intuition, 84). In the language of the poem, "wie sah von dir...dieses Auge": this eye saw from thee in that moment. Hölderlin reverses the perception-to-insight movement while still emphasizing the intimate unity of this moment. He stresses that the poet has to have given himself to this openness before such a moment of poetic seeing can occur. An English reader can compare Keats making himself a "priest" of the "latest born" deity in the "Ode to Psyche," but to such a reader, accustomed to blessed understatement in our language, the intensity of Hölderlin is so beautiful as to be frightening.

The moments of perception and insight, unified in a single act, are related as are seeing and hearing; as form and the splendor of the form; as dwelling in the presence of something and pointing beyond it. Such a connection, Balthasar intimates, also exists between classical art (contented to rest in the purity of the image) and romantic art (with its restless seeking of meaning). A final emphasis in Balthasar's teaching is that the second moment of this act must never leave the first behind: "We see form as the splendor, as the glory of Being. We are 'enraptured' by our contemplation of these depths and are 'transported' to them. But, so long as we are dealing with the beautiful, this never happens in such a way that we leave the (horizontal) form behind us in order to plunge (vertically) into the naked depths" (1903-06). This insistence informs the last words of his Introduction, as he considers apologetics in a new light, asking how one can expect to make divine revelation plausible without having had the experience of the image oneself and thus without the ability to see "the true contours of its total form dawn before the eyes of his spirit." These contours must accompany the novice as he goes deep into the study of dogma, Balthasar concludes, and "he . . . must not for a single moment abandon them" (2045-48).

This closing emphasis on the validity and indestructibility of the sensory experience itself bears an implication for us readers of literature: we are under no obligation to restrict the affirmation of form to poems

with a religious emphasis. Instead the theologians are the ones who are directed to turn to the poets for familiarity with truth as it is accessible intuitively through beauty. It is enough to give full honor to any brief human moment of united perception and expression. A very short piece of verse, like this popular English song from the early sixteenth century, can be a permanent lyric achievement:

Westron winde, when will thou blow,
The smalle raine downe can raine?
Christ if my love were in my armes,
And I in my bed againe. (Davies, No. 181)

A favorite poem of Warren's, this short verse captures the exquisite longing for love and home. Or consider this poem by A. E. Housman, often recited by heart by Cowan in her final years:

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

That is the land of lost content,
I see it shining plain,
The happy highways where I went
And cannot come again.

Despite the frankness of its content, the first poem sets up the outlines of an *imitatio Christi* in the longing to be united in a complete union with one's beloved. Housman's poem develops more elaborately, in the question-and-answer format that characterizes many of his poems. The first stanza highlights a pure perception that pierces all the way to an intense emotional pang, issuing in questions that prove not to be as rhetorical as they sound. In the second stanza, if we are paying attention, we are brought up short by the unexpected answer. What the speaker sees is not a scene like other scenes, something that one can go to and visit, but is rather happiness itself, now with its perceptible form in the memory only, mirage-like and unattainable. The first stanza is a perception, and the second, an abstraction (the true signified, "the land of lost content"), followed by a uniting of the image and the meaning. The loss of the blue

hills, spires, and farms gives those entities an importance and impact in recalling the loss of Eden, and meaning reveals its age-old face as deprivation of the enjoyment of the thing.

As I have tried to show, form is not meant to be the one feature to look for at the expense of everything else in a work: it is rather the quality that, if it is there, shapes and nuances everything else. Form is meaning; “form alone is intelligible” (Watkin).

I find it a sad irony, then, that amidst the general loss of the study of the poetic tradition on university campuses, or its thorough politicization, those very colleges and universities that honor the study of the Western tradition also tend to be ones that underplay the importance of literature. They seem to prefer works of less power that model the virtuous life rather than those that are forged from their inception in the crucible of life and form, the difficult union of opposite-tending forces that make life, especially human life, a mystery to be celebrated and explored. In the quest for not only understanding but remembering our humanity in a time of great change, the necessity of giving the proper respect to poetry ought to be clear: poetry is the agent of illumination and comprehension of form, able to express the mundane and the transcendent in their union. No less than philosophy, poetry is a discipline expressing truth. It brings both natural and transcendent to bear on our existence, seeking to accustom readers to experience the temporal in terms of the eternal, both sensually and intellectually, uniting both aspects of human existence. While the poetic emphasizes the experiential, the image, the reality, the philosophic focuses on the intellectual, the knowable. The cooperation of both is needed to light a path on which the difficult life of our times should move.

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