

John Donne's "The Canonization": The Lyric as Contract and the Mind of Louise Cowan

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One of Louise Cowan's favorite poems can help us crystalize her understanding of the lyric genre more broadly; in fact, a line in John Donne's "The Canonization" draws together all seeming contradictions in the poem and helps further our understanding of the paradoxical nature of the lyric itself: "Who did the whole world's soul contract." New Critic and friend of Cowan, Cleanth Brooks borrows another of the poem's lines, "the well-wrought urn," for the title of his standard readings of canonical poems, but he contributed to the analysis of the entire poem and to the line in the final stanza where the poem's lovers become so united that they see the whole world reflected in each other's (or rather in and through their own shared) eyes: these are the lovers who Donne, in the fourth of five stanzas, says "did the whole world's soul contract." If we take up this

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word contract, we can begin to see that somehow this uniting of lovers draws into itself all the contradictions of this poem (critic and poet; man and woman; divine and profane love; eagle and dove; world and room; big and small) which are then wrought together to form and replicate the more perfect, longed-for union of lyric. The major conceit of this 17th century metaphysical poem begins in the paradox of a pair of ordinary lovers who withdraw from the world to pursue their love and who, through an expansion of metaphor, come finally to stand as the patron saints of love for that very world. Critics agree that this is a serious comparison, so that what we want to see is what Donne says about lyric itself in his insistence that the lovers in some way gain the very world they reject. If, as one critic writes, Donne “could put the heart of a poem—contract the soul—into a single phrase,” then a way to enter the heart of this poem’s major paradox is through the meanings of contract as seen in the context of the making of the whole world a smaller thing for our contemplation (Heritage volume, 328).

The world of the lyric is seemingly different than the world at large; it certainly appears smaller, its poetic expressions often fitting on a page. But we here know that poetry is mighty. Cowan dedicated much of her life to investigating the motivating impulses of the four major types of literature, and the final volume of the genre series called *The Prospect of Lyric* stands as a great defense of this least understood, arguably most fragile, realm. Editor Bainard Cowan prefaces that the lyric primarily “unites—it interweaves body, heart, and mind [...] It is personal yet impersonal: in the lyric territory other becomes self and self becomes other, like the lovers in Donne’s....” greatest love poems. There is, he says, an “expansiveness” to this experience. Not only do the drawn-out comparisons of the conceits in Donne’s poetry provide this expansion, but even some of his images—the love that is “Like gold to airy thinness beat” in his “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” coming most immediately to mind. But, Cowan notes that for the modern, this “expansiveness” has gone wrong, and that often “the desired union [of the lyric] has contracted to a distant wish or has finally been lost altogether in the attempt to make the self or language the ultimate microcosm” (viii). While we take great delight in the ability of the lyric poet to be witty and clever, we see as Cowan does here, that poetic works are cherished “because of their ability

to condense . . . profound experiences and shed light on them" (vii). Donne, of course, avoids any linguistic self-centeredness.

So we turn to this idea of the ways in which "The Canonization" and perhaps by extension, the lyric, condenses deep experiences and yet does not participate in any tendency toward reductionism, but instead contracts the world into the lyric's own territory. While Donne uses some version of the word "contract" in eight of his poems, there is a usage in "The Sun Rising," which treats of similar themes as "The Canonization" and in which there are lovers—"She all states, and all princes I"—who become larger than the sum of their parts, and in whose union "the world's contracted thus" making of the bed the center of the whole world. In "The Canonization" there is the suggestion of contract even before we reach the lovers "Who did the whole world's soul contract." For, this "dramatic monologue" makes its case for the lovers as saints by progressing in its early stanzas from an unwritten contract for a real or imagined desire for the legalistic worldview as separate from the hidden lovers' vision of the world: they can agree to disagree and coexist (Brooks, Dupree). There will still be plenty of legal disputes (one might think breaches of contracts) even though the lovers love. Moreover, if the lovers have contracted a disease, not of the "palsy and "gout," nor of the "plaguy bill" variety, but a kind of lovesickness, then the world will not die from it and will still go on despite this couple's removal from it. Donne is going to expand the notion of a literal removal or withdrawal, however, into a "drawing together" that is the etymological root of contract.

In the third stanza, contraction is present as a drawing together of apparent opposites. Paradoxically, the lovers are like flies, an image that Louise Cowan's student Robert Dupree, in his notes for a collection of Seventeenth-century English Poetry, says "is deliberately shocking to [its] audience, for whom flies were associated with copulation and shortness of life" as well as that the lovers are like candles which are consumed by the fires that light them (52). Not fully content, the poem's speaker hits on a better image of the phoenix that by its ability to self-propagate recalls both the masculine eagle and the feminine dove of the previous lines, but also then becomes the paragon of the pair's ability to die and yet resurrect. Like the lovers, for whom sexual intimacy is a little death they willingly bring about, the phoenix participates in its own death, killing the self by beating its wings at the right time so that it might rise again out of its ashes.

In a poem that is trying to expand into a conceit the idea that the lovers are truly saints, the sex-as-death-shrinkage and bodies-reduced-to-ashes seem at odds with love and life until we realize that nothing is lost or consumed in the uniting of opposing forces, but in fact such contractions add value, increase the overall force of arguments, and give credit to the profound experience of love.

This is John Donne as neither real nor fictive rake (Louise "Marriage"). All of his love poems are about the erotic pull into divine love and they all intuit the deeper sacramentality of the universe that informs the religious language employed. Many critics now believe that this poem was written after his happy, though controversial after hushed "promises and contracts," marriage. Whatever the case, and whatever the cause of the outburst that begins this poem—"For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love," which theorist Jonathan Culler, who thought Brooks' method perhaps too closed, would call an evocative address of "Apostrophe"—what we see here is marriage at its hoped-for best, that contract or covenant, which, like the lyric form, and canonization itself, publishes the interior desire for union (Theory of the Lyric). Otherwise, the comparison to saints, the canonizing of these lovers would be blasphemous and hyperbolic rather than ingenuous and paradoxical. It would be a witty poem, but not one where the lovers are two and one and are made such by love. Here the lovers enter the mystery of incarnation, death, and resurrection. While they rise the same, they are in a different realm, a heaven-like one, however momentarily.

In her Introduction to the Lyric volume, Louise Cowan transitions to "The Canonization" by asking Robert Frost's "Oven Bird" question: "What to make of a diminished thing?" (10). Of course, the question worries over what we sing when the world has perhaps lost its voice and even its ear, but Frost's poem also shows a preoccupation with a general theme of lyric: how do we treat of small things, of the intuitive, of the intangible? "The Canonization" neither laments the loss of union nor anticipates it, but it occupies the least encountered moment of consummation, says Louise, that moment when we are in the presence of Love, and in this poem the last word in the first and final lines of each stanza is "love." Brief though it may be, this experience alters the world from which it has withdrawn and with which it thought to have no connection. In fact, this kind of living-by-dying does not call for a hearse

and burial but for poetry as its place of dwelling. And the lovers' hagiography finding verse is as fitting as their ashes (recalling the phoenix/lovers paradox) finding their home in "a well-wrought urn" that is more suitable than the needlessly expansive "half-acre tombs." Needlessly, here, because like "sonnets in pretty rooms" and lovers, ashes don't require much space. They are what Hamlet might call a "quintessence of dust" (2. line 2.).

Because, finally, contraction indicates more than the short-lived moment as it is, but a movement toward drawing into the lovers", and more expansively into the lyric's economy, the very essence of that short-lived moment; in other words, I am suggesting that in lyric there is a further work, and that through laborious contractions (though Donne would not have known the 20th-century meaning of "contractions" as they relate to childbirth) does the urn become a well-wrought vessel. This work, then, condenses or contracts the real moment into a lyric one where the profundity of the experience is replicated in the space and time of its generic territory. Poet Edward Hirsch sees that "Lyric calls for the greatest degree of concentration . . . It may be that the dramatic poem is forged on the crucible of condensation straining against expression, lyric time against narrative time" (Poem 141). Furthermore, Eileen Gregory observes in *Summoning the Familiar* that time in the lyric is what Dickinson critic Sharon Cameron calls "distilled." It is "not human time; it is complete, and thus rich with supra-temporal intensity. The collective voice of the lyric utters its distilled collective moments" (37). So, it may be said that the two become one and stand against the divisiveness of the world and its distinctions between self and other, and their collective cry of love contracts the world into lyric time, perhaps akin to the liturgical time wherein these lovers enter the calendar of saints.

For, it is not merely the world that the lovers contracted through their mutual attraction, but they precisely drove the world's soul into the glasses of their eyes, its essence, which in the lyric redresses the offences that time makes against our own entitled, yet often marginalized, immortal souls. Here, in the poem, the lovers are transfigured and thus become a "pattern" of a love that is redemptive and invoked: "(So made such mirrors, and such spies, / That they did all to you epitomize)." As the epitome of love, the saints, become both the embodiment of love and a brief abstract for their own story, this love poem. In them is contracted or

condensed the world's soul's desire for, and fulfillment of, this love. It is the distilled, or contracted world, then, that is reflected in the lovers' eyes which are the windows to a collective soul's moment of consummation. With the addition of the world's soul to the lovers' there is, it seems, more than the mystery of two being one, but also the Trinitarian mystery of three being one. So, there is an expansion of the world's vision by the opening of its eyes to the lyric prospect of love. This poem has wrought an urn as a "miniature" world to house a diminished thing; it sets the small, but not short-lived lyric as the standard, as part of the "canon 'gainst self-slaughter" (Hamlet 1. line 2.), and indeed it may be, as Louise says, that the other genres are "mere enlargements of the lyric insight" (14). If "The Canonization" fulfills in consummate form the lyric "mission" to love rightly, to desire things in the right relation, then as Cowan notes of this poem, "we ourselves can be the voice of the lyric in a disharmonious [or, we might add diminished] world and bring to it a pattern of love that is peace, a small replica of the garden ensconced in our hearts and minds." But, though the Garden of Eden is often remembered as part of what my fellow student Paul Connell calls our "genetic memory" (both the longed-for union of the past and future), we might need to consider that it is not our most "primal" memory of the lyric and that there is an even earlier one.

Indeed, there is a further distillation that comes as if an oracle near the end of Louise's Introduction:

The lyric retains still a dim awareness of the way things were before time was, in the original pattern of being. Metaphorically we could say that underneath all its temporal concerns, in the deep current of its underground stream, is a yearning for the moment of creation, when the form of things existed in the divine mind, imprinting matter with the supernally joyous stamp of form. It is not the earthly garden, then, that the poet intuits as the lyric's ultimate aim but a pre-earthly realm, one that Plato envisions with his concept of the forms, one that Dante enters in the Paradiso when he "transhumanizes" himself. (13)

This is perhaps the kind of anamnesis, or "soul memory," that Pope Francis has mentioned: if we can engage in making memories of how God appears in our lives, the Holy Father encourages, of how His image is a presence in us, we can form a personal relationship with Christ. It may be that the lyric moment of consummation, the second of the three

moments, is like the second person of the Godhead, that greatest of paradoxes, in whom there are two natures which, like the two lovers, are one. By contracting the soul of the world, these saints, like Christ, subsist and contract the larger concept of the Trinity.

The poem's unity, then, is paradoxically not closed since the ashes are less remains to be preserved in an urn as souvenirs as they are a concentration, or a quintessence of the still generative activity of love and being. So, now the poem as a whole bears less of the temporal heated irritation that gave rise and urgency to this pressured contraction of love than it does the stamp of the eternal lyric memory contained in the well-wrought urn "For God's sake."