

THE POETRY OF LOUISE BOGAN*

BY THEODORE ROETHKE

TWO of the charges most frequently leveled against poetry by women are lack of range—in subject matter, in emotional tone—and lack of a sense of humor. And one could, in individual instances among writers of real talent, add other esthetic and moral shortcomings: the spinning-out; the embroidering of trivial themes; a concern with the mere surfaces of life—that special province of the feminine talent in prose—hiding from the real agonies of the spirit; refusing to face up to what existence is; lyric or religious posturing; running between the boudoir and the altar, stamping a tiny foot against God; or lapsing into a sententiousness that implies the author has re-invented integrity; carrying on excessively about Fate, about time; lamenting the lot of the woman; catterwauling; writing the same poem about fifty times, and so on.

But Louise Bogan is something else. True, a very few of her earliest poems bear the mark of fashion, but for the most part

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Miss Bogan's publishers, Noonday Press, of New York, have graciously permitted us to make copious quotations from her works.

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she writes out of the severest lyrical tradition in English. Her real spiritual ancestors are Campion, Jonson, the anonymous Elizabethan song writers. The word order is usually direct, she plunges straight into the subject, the music rich and subtle (she has one of the best ears of our time), and the subject invariably given its due and no more. As a result, her poems, even the less consequential, have a finality, a comprehensiveness, the sense of being all of a piece, that we demand from the short poem at its best.

THE BODY of her complete poetic work is not great, but the "range," both emotional and geographical, is much wider than might be expected from a lyric poet. There is the brilliant (and exact) imagery of her New England childhood; there is also the highly formal world of Swift's Ireland; the rich and baroque background of Italy called up in the evocative "Italian Morning." And, of course, her beloved Austria. Her best lyrics, unlike so much American work, have the sense of a civilization behind them—and this without the deliberate piling up of exotic details, or the taking over of a special, say Grecian, vocabulary.

Invariably these effects are produced with great economy, with the exact sense of diction that is one of the special marks of her style. Even out of context, their power, I believe, is evident. Thus, in "Hypocrite Swift," a curious *tour de force* which incorporates many actual phrases from Swift's *Journal to Stella*, there suddenly occurs the stanza:

On walls at court, long gilded mirrors gaze.
The parquet shines; outside the snow falls deep.

Venus, the Muses stare above the maze.
Now sleep.

For one terrifying instant we are within Swift's mind, in eighteenth-century Ireland, sharing the glitter, the horror and glory of his madness.

Again, from the poem, "Italian Morn-

THIS is only one, and by no means the best, of Miss Bogan's poems on time, on change, on the cessation of time. Even in her earliest work, she seems to be seeking a moment when things are caught, fixed, frozen, seen, for an instant, under the eye of eternity.



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ing," the lines:

The big magnolia, like a hand,
Repeats our flesh. (O bred to love,
Gathered to silence!) In a land
Thus garnished, there is time enough

To pace the rooms where painted swags
Of fruit and flower in pride depend,
Stayed as we are not.

The "garnished" and the "painted swags" are triumphs of exactitude in language—suggest the elaborate background without recourse to merely baroque diction.

A very early piece, "Decoration," printed in her first book, *Body of This Death*, but not in the *Collected*, is, I believe, a beginning, a groping toward this central theme:

A macaw preens upon a branch outspread
With jewelry of seed. He's deaf and mute.
The sky behind him splits like gorgeous fruit
And claw-like leaves clutch light till it has bled.
The raw diagonal bounty of his wings
Scrapes on the eye color too chafed. He beats
A flattered tail out against gauzy heats;
He has the frustrate look of cheated kings.
And all the simple evening passes by:

A gillyflower spans its little height
 And lovers with their mouths press out their grief.
 The bird fans wide his striped regality
 Prismatic, while against a sky breath-white
 A crystal tree lets fall a crystal leaf.

This is a vulnerable poem, in spite of certain felicities (the fine "and all the sim-

site "Decoration" in the first book, is a breakthrough to great poetry, the whole piece welling up from the unconscious, dictated as it were:

I had come to the house, in a cave of trees,
 Facing a sheer sky.



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ple evening passes by," for instance). But the uncharitable might say hardly beyond magazine verse. And even though Miss Bogan disarms us with her title, the poem remains *too* static, not very interesting syntactically, and the final line plays upon one of the clichés of the twenties: "A crystal tree lets fall a crystal leaf." Still, the scene is looked at steadily and closely; the poem is what it is.

ANOTHER early piece, "Statue and the Birds," is already a much better poem on essentially the same theme. However, the "Medusa," printed on the page oppo-

Everything moved,—a bell hung ready to strike,
 Sun and reflection wheeled by.

When the bare eyes were before me
 And the hissing hair,
 Held up at a window, seen through a door.
 The stiff bald eyes, the serpents on the forehead
 Formed in the air.

This is a dead scene forever now.
 Nothing will ever stir.
 The end will never brighten it more than this,
 Nor the rain blur.

The water will always fall, and will not fall,
 And the tipped bell make no sound.

The grass will always be growing for hay
Deep on the ground.

And I shall stand here like a shadow
Under the great balanced day,
My eyes on the yellow dust, that was lifting in
the wind,
And does not drift away.

Now, what does this poem mean?—in final terms? It could be regarded, simply, as a poem of hallucination—a rare enough thing—that maintains its hold on the reader from the very opening lines to the end. But we are told some other things, with the repetitiousness of obsession: “I had come to the *house*, in a *cave* of trees”: the house itself is in a cave, a womb within a womb, as it were. But notice: “facing a sheer sky”—obviously the “scene” is being played against a backdrop of heaven, of eternity, with everything moving yet not moving—“the bell hung ready to strike.”

Then the terrifying moment: “the bare eyes,” “the hissing hair,” of the *anima*, the Medusa, the man-in-the-woman, mother—her mother, possibly—again “held up at a *window*,” “*seen* through a *door*”: certainly feminine symbols. And notice, “the stiff bald eyes, the serpents on the forehead formed in the air”—in *erectus*, in other words.

The last three stanzas bring us the self-revelation, the terrible finality of the ultimately traumatic experience. I shan’t labor the interpretation further, except—why “yellow dust”? To me, it suggests the sulphurous fires of hell, here under the sheer sky of eternity.

I suggest that this is a great lyric and in an area of experience where most writers are afraid to go—or are incapable of going.

MISS BOGAN is a contender, an opponent, an adversary, whether it be the devouring or overpowering mother, or time itself. And she can quarrel with her *daemon*, her other self, as in “Come, Break With Time.” Here she manages with great

skill the hortatory tone, the command—from which so much bogus poetry often results.

Come, break with time,
You who were lorded
By a clock’s chime
So ill afforded.
If time is allayed
Be not afraid.

I shall break, if I will.
Break, since you must.
Time has its fill,
Sated with dust.
Long the clock’s hand
Burned like a brand.

Take the rocks’ speed
And Earth’s heavy measure.
Let buried seed
Drain out time’s pleasure,
Take time’s decrees.
Come, cruel ease.

Notice the remarkable shift in rhythm in the last stanza, with the run-on lines that pick up the momentum of the poem. We are caught up in the earth’s whole movement; I am reminded, perhaps eccentrically, of Wordsworth’s

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

In this instance, I feel one poem supports, gives additional credence, to the other.

Yet Miss Bogan does not rest with that effect. There is a terrible irony in “Let buried seed/drain out time’s pleasure.” Then the acceptance that all humans must make: “Take time’s decrees.” The last line remains for me a powerful ambiguity. Is she like Cleopatra, or Keats, asking for easeful death, or the cruel ease of unawareness, of insentience, of the relief from time that old age provides? There is, of course, no final answer, and none is necessary.

ONE DEFINITION of a serious lyric—it may come from Stanley Kunitz—

would call it a revelation of a tragic personality. Behind the Bogan poems is a woman intense, proud, strong-willed, never hysterical or silly; who scorns the open unabashed caterwaul so usual with the love poet, male or female; who never writes a serious poem until there is a genuine "upwelling" from the unconscious; who shapes emotion into an inevitable-seeming, an enduring, form.

For love, passion, its complexities, its tensions, its betrayals, is one of Louise Bogan's chief themes. And this love, along with marriage itself, is a virtual battleground. But the enemy is respected, the other is *there*, given his due; the experience, whatever its difficulties, shared.

Thus, in "Old Countryside":

Beyond the hour we counted rain that fell
On the slant shutter, all has come to proof.
The summer thunder, like a wooden bell,
Rang in the storm above the mansard roof,

And mirrors cast the cloudy day along
The attic floor; wind made the clapboards creak.
You braced against the wall to make it strong,
A shell against your cheek.

Long since, we pulled brown oak-leaves to the
ground
In a winter of dry trees; we heard the cock
Shout its unplaceable cry, the axe's sound
Delay a moment after the axe's stroke.

Far back, we saw, in the stillest of the year,
The scrawled vine shudder, and the rose-branch
show
Red to the thorns, and, sharp as sight can bear,
The thin hound's body arched against the snow.

This, it need hardly be said, is typical Bogan: the concern with time, the setting put down with great exactitude, the event re-created and then looked back upon—the whole thing vivid in the mind's eye, in the memory. The details are no mere accretion, but are developed with a cumulative surprise and the power of great art.

Notice the oracular, almost Shakespearian finality of "all has come to proof"—

and this, at the start of a poem. She announces boldly but not portentously, and we believe. Notice, too, the mastery of the epithet—the cock's "unplaceable cry," the "scrawled vine," the rose-branch "red to the thorns." And then the final triumph of the last image, upon which everything hinges: "The thin hound's body arched against the snow."

But what has come to proof? We are not told, explicitly, nor should we be. Invariably, the final experience, however vivid and exact the imagery, comes to us obliquely. It stays with us, can be brooded upon, and brought, finally, into our own lives.

This obliquity, at once both Puritan and feminine, brings Louise Bogan close, despite differences in temperament, to Emily Dickinson and to Marianne Moore. None quails before the eye of eternity; their world is their own, sharply defined. If others enter it, the arrival, the meeting, is on their terms.

MANY of the best Bogan poems in this vein are of such complexity and depth that the excerpt is virtually impossible, particularly since Miss Bogan often employs the single developed image with usually at least two levels of meaning. And often, within a very short space, she effects an almost intolerable tension, a crescendo in rhythm, as in "Men Loved Wholly Beyond Wisdom"; or builds up the theme powerfully, as in the remarkable "Feuer-Nacht," and then takes a chance with a generalization without losing the momentum of the poem:

To touch at the sedge
And then run tame
Is a broken pledge.
The leaf-shaped flame
Shears the bark piled for winter,
The grass in the stall.
Sworn to lick at a little,
It has burned all.

Some of her best pieces begin with the object perceived, as it were, for an instant,

and the image remembered, fixed in the mind unforgettably.

However, she is not, as I have said, a poet of the immediate moment, as say, Lawrence, but of the time *after*, when things come into their true focus, into the resolution, the final perspective. Listen to "Roman Fountain":

Up from the bronze, I saw
Water without a flaw
Rush to its rest in air,
Reach to its rest, and fall.

Bronze of the blackest shade,
An element man-made,
Shaping upright the bare
Clear gouts of water in air.

O, as with arm and hammer,
Still it is good to strive
To beat out the image whole,
To echo the shout and stammer
When full-gushed waters, alive,
Strike on the fountain's bowl
After the air of summer.

For me, the opening lines are one of the great felicities of our time: the thing put down with an ultimate exactness, absolutely as it is. Perhaps the two appositives "Bronze of the blackest shade/ An element man-made" in the next stanza are a bit "written"; but "gouts of water" saves everything. Nor do I care much for the evocative outcry—and the arm and hammer image. Yet the poem resolves itself with characteristic candor. We have come a long way in a short space.

I believe this poem will stay in the language: its opening alone demands immortality. Yet it exists, too, as a superb piece of observation; as a phallic poem; as a poem about the nature of the creative act in the no-longer young artist.

IN THE last lines of this piece, we hear the accent of the later work: a tone of resignation, an acceptance of middle age, a comment, often, on the ironies of circumstance. Of these, I believe "Henceforth, From the

Mind" to be a masterpiece, a poem that could be set beside the best work of the Elizabethans:

Henceforth, from the mind,
For your whole joy, just spring
Such joy as you may find
In any earthly thing,
And every time and place
Will take your thought for grace.

Henceforth, from the tongue,
From shallow speech alone,
Comes joy you thought, when young,
Would wring you to the bone,
Would pierce you to the heart
And spoil its stop and start.

Henceforward, from the shell,
Wherein you heard, and wondered
At oceans like a bell
So far from ocean sundered—
A smothered sound that sleeps
Long lost within lost deeps,

Will chime you change and hours,
The shadow of increase,
Will sound you flowers
Born under troubled peace—
Henceforth, henceforth
Will echo sea and earth.

And certainly, "Song," "Homunculus," and "Kept," at the very least, are among our best short lyrics. We are told:

Time for the pretty clay,
Time for the straw, the wood.
The playthings of the young
Get broken in the play,
Get broken, as they should.

And, in terms of personal revelation, "The Dream" might be regarded as a later companion piece to "Medusa." In some of these last poems, as "After the Persian," "Song for the Last Act," the rhythms, the music, are richly modulated, highly stylized, grave and slow. Miss Bogan is not repeating herself, but moving into another world. There is no lessening of her powers.

I FIND my rather simple method of "pointing out"—at which Miss Mari-

anne Moore is such a master—has omitted or underemphasized certain qualities in Louise Bogan's work, and of necessity passed by remarkable poems.

For example, the great variety and surety of her rhythms—that clue to the energy of the psyche. Usually the movement of the poem is established in the very first lines, as it should be:

If ever I render back your heart,
So long to me delight and plunder

or

To me, one silly task is like another
I bare the shambling tricks of lust and pride

And she is a master of texture, yet always the line is kept firm: she does not lapse into "sound" for the sake of sound, lest the poem thin out into loose "incantatory" effects. Thus:

Under the thunder-dark, the cicadas resound

or the grave rhythm of

The measured blood beats out the year's delay
or in "Winter Swan":

It is a hollow garden, under the cloud;
Beneath the heel a hollow earth is turned;
Within the mind, the live blood shouts aloud,
Under the breast the willing blood is burned,
Shut with the fire passed and the fire returned.

Louise Bogan rarely, if ever, repeats a cadence, and this in an age when some poets achieve a considerable reputation with two or three or even *one* rhythm. The reason for this is, I believe, her absolute loyalty to the particular emotion, which can range from the wry tenderness and humor of "A Crossed Apple" to the vehemence of "Several Voices Out of a Cloud":

Come, drunks and drug-takers; come, perverts
unnerved!

Receive the laurel, given though late, on merit;
to whom and wherever deserved.

Parochial punks, trimmers, nice people, joiners
true-blue,

Get the hell out of the way of the laurel. It is
deathless

And it isn't for you

This, for me, incorporates the truly savage indignation of Swift—and still manages to be really funny. And even in a poem on a "high" theme, "I saw Eternity," she can say:

Here, mice, rats,
Porcupines and toads,
Moles, shrews, squirrels,
Weasels, turtles, lizards,—
Here's bright Everlasting!
Here's a crumb of Forever!
Here's a crumb of Forever!

I HAVE said that Miss Bogan has a sharp sense of objects, the eye that can pluck out from the welter of experience the inevitable image. And she loves the words, the nouns particularly, rich in human association. "Baroque Comment" ends:

Crown and vesture; palm and laurel chosen as
noble and enduring;

Speech proud in sound; death considered sacrifice;

Mask, weapon, urn; the ordered strings;

Fountains; foreheads under weather-bleached
hair;

The wreath, the oar, the tool,

The prow;

The turned eyes and the opened mouth of love.

But let us see how this side of her talent operates when she is absolutely open, as in the deeply moving elegy "To My Brother":

O you so long dead,
You masked and obscure,
I can tell you, all things endure:
The wine and the bread;

The marble quarried for the arch;

The iron become steel;

The spoke broken from the wheel;

The sweat of the long march;

The hay-stacks cut through like loaves

And the hundred flowers from the seed;

All things indeed

Though struck by the hooves

Of disaster, of time due,

Of fell loss and gain,

All things remain,
I can tell you, this is true.

Though burned down to stone
Though lost from the eye,
I can tell you, and not lie,—
Save of peace alone.

The imagery in some of the last poems is less specific, yet still strongly elemental; we have, I think, what Johnson called the grandeur of generality. They are timeless, impersonal in a curious way and objective—not highly idiosyncratic as so much of the

best American work is. Her poems can be read and reread: they keep yielding new meanings, as all good poetry should. The ground beat of the great tradition can be heard, with the necessary subtle variations. Bogan is one of the true inheritors. Her poems create their own reality, and demand not just attention, but the emotional and spiritual response of the whole man. Such a poet will never be popular, but can and should be a true model for the young. And the best work will stay in the language as long as the language survives.

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