

MR. BOSWELL PEELS AN ORANGE

A Dissertation in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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Part I: The Lyric Object

How does one write a poem? This is a question every poet faces anew, each time she is confronted by the blank page. My essay presents a way of reading poetry that is one way to answer this question, by allowing the poet to encounter particular moments of creative insight in others' works. Reading others' poems with attention is an essential part of a writer's development. It is my experience that reading a poem for the specific details of its language increases the poet's facility in managing his or her own poetry, both through the power of example and the stimulating effect of careful reading. One way to engage with a poem in this way is by reading for what I call the "lyric object."

I define the lyric object as an object (usually a concrete image) that appears in a lyric poem as a focal point for the poem's main themes. The lyric object is often a kind of image, but it is distinguished from the pure image in that the lyric object also plays a key role in the poem's main conceit, and is not always strongly present in a visual sense. Lyric poems are filled with images, of course, if not all of these images are of central concern in the work. Sometimes, the lyric object is not depicted as a concrete image at all. Its nature is strongly suggested to the reader, but the object itself may not receive detailed description in the poem's text. In addition, the lyric object is often the focus of the first-person meditations that tend to distinguish the lyric poem from other genres. A frequent result of the speaker's concentration on the lyric object is to slow the poem's narrative movement, while encouraging the speaker (and also the reader) to develop a certain train of thought. It is also important to note that the "lyric object" is a man-made, inanimate object, which is not presented as part of a landscape. This distinguishes the lyric object-poem from related poems dealing with naturally-occurring landscape

features, such as trees or cliffs.¹ My focus on the constructed rather than the naturally occurring object reflects my own interest in the poem as a constructed artifact, as the chief significance of the lyric object for the poet lies in this device's tendency to direct the reader's attention toward the poem itself as a "made thing." An encounter with these powerfully suggestive objects can be productive for the poet-as-reader, since they model various ways of employing language that is both evocative on the page and individual to the writer. Some lyric objects are so clearly expressive of an aesthetic that these items are an encapsulated *ars poetica*, at least for the specific poem they appear in. In certain cases, the object reflects aspects of a poet's style, aspects that appear in his or her work more generally.

My essay presents a cross-section of examples demonstrating how the lyric poem uses the lyric object. These objects function to express or suggest their poems' key preoccupations, depending on the poet's artistic preference for the work. These special objects contribute to the poem's argument through the poet's skillful deployment of their physical features and/or practical function. Sometimes a single object is the poem's visual focus, but objects can also appear more briefly in a poem. When an object is read with an emphasis on its thematic function within the poem as a whole, it gains a luminous significance that encourages the reader to look closely at the poem itself in order to make meaning with it.

Perhaps the most straightforward way that the lyric object can be used is as a concrete image in its poem, while also contributing—even drawing attention to—the

¹ For instance, Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni." This poem depicts an entire nature scene, rather than focusing on one part of it.

work's thematic center. When the lyric object happens to maintain a strong physical presence in the poem in this way, however, it does not have to interfere with that poem's embrace of ambiguity. In such instances, the poem's detailed description of an object may even contribute to the poem's resistance of a straightforward interpretation.

However, the lyric object's visual presence in a poem does not always indicate that that object possesses a consistent physicality. Particularly in those poems with an ekphrastic element, the object can become primarily a narrative device, as its physical nature fades into the background of the scene. The lyric object can also be an element in the poem's arc of thought, instead of taking center stage as the principal image. In such cases, the object might arrive at the conclusion rather than the starting point of the speaker's meditations. Used in this way, the object effectively summarizes the poem's main themes. Finally, as mentioned above, a lyric object can even occur in a poem without being present as an explicitly detailed image. The poem's simple mention of an object can be enough to allow the reader to apply that item's function and/or characteristics to the poem's argument.

In the following pages, I will examine these uses of the lyric object through five sample poems. A reader might assume that the lyric object must be a central visual image in its poem in order to play a significant role in explicating the work. However, I argue that the lyric object can perform this explicating function without being the poem's main image. I will begin with a basic example in which the lyric object's function and presence are clearly foregrounded in the poem. From there, I will move on to poems that lessen the object's level of physical "reality" in the poem as well as the space given to its description, without weakening the object's ability to encapsulate the work's themes.

The first poem I will discuss, Elizabeth Bishop's "The Monument," contains an object whose physical presence is at the heart of the poem. The titular monument is plainly the speaker's priority. However, this object is described in such a way that its specific characteristics remain unclear. The purpose of the monument stubbornly evades interpretation, despite the prolonged attention the speaker gives to it. This ambiguity, however, is essential to the poem's discussion of the art of poetry. In contrast, Donne's "The Relic" uses its lyric object as a jumping-off point for the poem's train of thought, rather than as the poem's central image. This object (a bracelet) is an aid toward the reader's contemplation of the human relationship described the poem,. The bracelet is treated as a "real" physical object that is specific and unique. Its uniqueness in turn emphasizes the beloved's singularity in her lover's eyes. The third poem under discussion, Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," presents a use of the lyric object that deemphasizes its physicality as well as its visual centrality to the poem. Like Donne's bracelet, the urn is the poem's thematic focus. (It even receives more attention from the speaker than the bracelet does, since the urn is also its poem's visual center.) However, the urn exists more strongly as a narrative device than it does as a physical object with weight, color, or texture. After introducing the urn, the speaker moves from the object itself to the scenes depicted on its surface.

The next poem demonstrates a further step toward minimizing the poem's visual focus on the lyric object, though the object nevertheless makes an essential contribution to its poem's thematic center. The lyric object in Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium" does not appear until the final stanzas. This item, a clockwork bird, still embodies the poem's concern with death and bodily decay through the bird's immunity to physical change. The

bird's position in the poem enables it to act as a summary of these ideas. Finally, the last poem I will discuss shows that a lyric object's physical "presence" in its poem is not actually necessary for that object to provide insight to the reader. George Herbert's "The Pulley" is entirely absent from the poem as an image, while still contributing to the reader's understanding of the work. This object appears in the poem's title rather than in its text. The pulley is not explicitly described, but it is essential in shaping the poem's conceit. The poem's conclusion and its entire argument depend on the reader's knowledge of how a pulley works and what it looks like.

In the following analyses of lyric object examples, it is important to acknowledge that the critical definition of the lyric genre as a whole is historically conditioned. What the term "lyric" means to the reader of contemporary poetry in 2016 is not what it meant to George Herbert's first readers. My own definition of the term "lyric object" assumes an understanding of the lyric genre that is heavily influenced by nineteenth-century critical theory. However, I believe that the qualities relevant to my observations can exist in common between poems, without these features having been always catalogued as "lyric." This allows for the lyric object to be located in poems that were written previous to the codification of the lyric genre. My use of the term "lyric object" takes advantage of the idea of "lyric" as it is defined in contemporary prosody.

The poems I examine for their use of the lyric object are all considered "lyric" by the contemporary definition of the term, though Donne's and Herbert's poems existed before this idea of the genre was developed, and Keats' work dates from an early period in its development. I generally follow *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* in defining "lyric" as a genre that is "thematically representational of the poet's

sensibility as evidenced in a fusion of conception and image” (Johnson xlvi), though with a difference. I think it is important not to confuse the poem’s speaker with the poet herself. The speaker is the poet’s artistic construction of a “real” person whose utterance is the poem, while the poet is the complete human being who designed this construction. The poet is necessarily selective in choosing the aspects of personality and mood that her speaker expresses, even if the speaker is meant to represent the poet herself. Thus, the *Encyclopedia*’s definition would be more accurate if it substituted “speaker” for “poet.” I would add also the lyric tendency toward relative brevity, at least in comparison with other genres, as for instance an epic poem. However, the *Encyclopedia*’s definition does emphasize the use of images to portray the sensibility that the poem enacts. The lyric object is sometimes the image that plays this role.

To put my definition of the lyric object into historical perspective, I will briefly outline some important developments in both the practice and the critical understanding of the lyric genre. One of the most distinctive changes in the lyric poem was its eventual disassociation from both music and metrical form as part of its fundamental requirements. This was a radical change from the genre’s origins. Lyric poetry (and poetry in general) began as a performance art, dating from the millennia before widespread literacy happened to coexist with the printing press.² Etymologically speaking, the English adjective “lyric” is derived from the Greek word for lyre, λύρα (*Oxford English Dictionary*). As David Lindley notes, even in the sixteenth century most poetry reached its audience through the medium of song, as experienced through events such as plays or church services (10). Heather Dubrow observes that this trend continued

² To quote the first line of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, “Arma et virumque cano” (“I sing of arms and the man”).

during the seventeenth century. She also notes that seventeenth-century critical discussion of lyric as a genre, though relatively uncommon, tended to focus on the poem's relationship with music and/or metrical form (32). This cultural memory has survived in current prosody through a certain attention to creating a pleasant or striking arrangement of sounds, though not necessarily setting the poem to music. Reviewers of contemporary poetry collections also tend to describe a pleasant-sounding poem as "lyric." This deployment of the term again suggests the earlier custom of pairing poems with music. Though poetry has lost an overt connection with music and oral performance, poetry's current existence on the page is what makes the practice of close reading possible.

A feature persistently observed in the idea of the lyric is the "meditative" aspect of such poems. Lyric poetry tends to be linked with the poet's expression of moments of contemplative solitude. These moments offer opportunities for the lyric object to be observed by the poem's speaker, thus contributing to the poem's thematic development. John Stuart Mill articulates the concept of the meditative lyric in his "Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties." In this work, Mill "limit[s] poetry to the delineation of states of feeling" (94), and claims that poetry in its purest form is contemplative rather than narrative (93). "Poetry," Mill writes, "...is the natural fruit of solitude and meditation" (95). Though Mill's work equates lyric poetry with poetry in general, the features of lyric poetry that he observes help describe the environment in which the lyric object often appears.

One could reasonably posit the existence of non-lyric objects as well, since the use of powerfully suggestive images is hardly confined to the lyric. For instance, one

might examine such items as the epic object or satiric object. But non-lyric objects serve different functions in their respective genres, since they are deployed in service of priorities that aren't relevant to the lyric. Rather than participating in the description of a speaker's state of mind, an epic object, for example, may help advance a poem's storyline. Unlike the lyric object, the epic object is not the poem's central focus, though the poem's action may be suspended while the narrator describes this object. One example is the shield of Aeneas in the *Aeneid* (which is modeled on Achilles' shield in the *Iliad*). Aeneas' shield suggests the scope of the epic's narrative even while the poem pauses the action to describe the shield. As Aeneas admires the weapon's craftsmanship, the images on its surface become a narration in miniature. The scenes carved into the shield's face portray future events that will befall Aeneas' descendants, beyond the scope of the poem itself. "Upon his shoulder he / lifts up the fame and the fate of his sons' sons" (8.954 – 955). The shield is both a physical object and a powerful expression of the poem's focus on the mythic-historical past of the Roman people. After describing the shield, the poem resumes Aeneas' own story. This epic object does not re-appear in the poem explicitly, though presumably Aeneas still carries it. The shield has served its purpose as an aid to the story as an emblem of Roman identity, and as an analogy for the action of the epic itself.

The satiric poem demonstrates another function of the object that is distinct from its use in lyric. What may be called a "satiric object" (or perhaps "didactic object") appears in the satiric poem in order to support the speaker's point of view. These objects tend to occur in groups, rather than singly as in the lyric. This aids the development of the poem's argument, through an accumulation of illustrative images. (This format is often

an adaptation of the traditional epic catalog.) Jonathan Swift's "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed" contains a satiric catalog of a woman's cosmetic supplies. By this device, Swift pokes fun at female vanity. Each night the so-called nymph of the title "Takes off her artificial Hair: / Now, picking out a Crystal Eye, / She wipes it clean, and lays it by. / Her Eye-Brows from a Mouse's Hyde, / Stuck on with Art on either Side, / Pulls off with Care ..." (10 -15). Here the objects are each given equal consideration, with no single object serving as a focal point.

The remainder of my essay presents my own observations on the lyric object in the representative poems I have chosen. These examples will demonstrate that the lyric object can appear within its poem in varying degrees of visual concreteness, while still aiding to explicate the poem itself. I will also trace scholarly opinion on the object by reviewing the relevant literature on each poem. Since the lyric object *per se* has not attracted much critical comment, it is best located in scholarship through studies of individual lyric poems.

Elizabeth Bishop's "The Monument" presents a lyric object that has a very definite concrete existence in its poem, and obviously plays a key role in presenting the work's ideas about art and its creation. The monument's carefully described physical features, however, do more to obscure and complicate the poem's possible meanings than to make them cohere into a single message. But this refusal to present a clear statement of meaning is in fact the point. Bishop's treatment of this object is characteristic of her restrained writing style, wherein the speaker refrains from making a direct statement about the poem's message. The titular object in "The Monument" evades definition, despite its detailed description. This object is a wooden sculpture of sorts, positioned

overlooking the ocean. Scholars have speculated that Bishop's poem was influenced by *frottage* art, which makes rubbings on paper of various objects. Bishop may even have had a particular work of Max Ernst in mind (Pickard 49). Though the monument's physical appearance receives careful attention in the poem, its aesthetic valuation is not explained. This leaves the question of the monument's artistic "value" open for reader interpretation. The critic Nancy McNally argues that the monument is "so obviously ugly that it cannot be considered a work of art in any accepted sense," and therefore the poem's serious treatment of an ugly object is ironic (194). McNally's claim is unconvincing, however, because the speaker's treatment of the monument presents this object as mysterious rather than unpleasant to look at. The monument is weather-beaten and relatively plain, but these aspects do not mean that it is a poorly made work of art.

Paradoxically, the poem's lengthy description of the monument does not actually do much to clarify how it looks. The speaker revises an initial statement about the monument—that it is "built somewhat like a box," with the amendment "No. Built / like several boxes in descending sizes / one above the other" (1 – 4). The monument's specific features are described using terms that suggest both an immediacy of observation and a subtle understanding that this description remains a provisional analysis. The monument's uppermost point is "a sort of fleur-de-lys," and it is decorated with "vaguely whittled ornament" (15). Even the monument's exact geographical location remains obscure (33 – 34).

The speaker's continued observation of the monument can do little to explain its intended purpose. The monument was built "to cherish something" (67), but the identity of this something is not evident to the speaker. The closest the speaker can get is only

speculation, that perhaps an “artist-prince / might have wanted to build a monument / to mark a tomb or boundary, or make / a melancholy or romantic scene of it...” (36 – 39). However, it appears that part of the monument’s purpose is to conceal what it was built to honor. The mysterious object or quality that the monument commemorates “cannot have been intended to be seen” (77). When Bishop’s poem is recognized as an *ars poetica*, this lack of a concrete statement of purpose has a suggestive resonance. In refusing to define the appearance and purpose of the monument, the poem advocates for a general reluctance to make statements of “meaning.”

Bishop’s distinctive use of the lyric object in “The Monument” is an excellent illustration of her poems’ restrained manner. Recognizing this, Nancy McNally uses Bishop’s monument to explain how her work differs in tone from Romantic-era poets such as Keats and Shelley. McNally points out that Keats’ urn and Shelley’s ruined statue in “Ozymandias” establish a particular relationship between the object and the person or people it commemorates, while Bishop’s poem does not. In addition, McNally notes that “The Monument” does not tailor its descriptive passages for an overt rhetorical effect (195). McNally associates Bishop’s almost anti-didactic tone with the poet’s use of concrete physical description rather than generalizing statements (191). Zachariah Pickard makes the important observation that Bishop’s use of physical description, while giving her poems an ostensible clarity, has also produced many different critical accounts of the same poem. For example, the main figure in her poem “The Man-Moth” has been thought to stand for anything from the poet herself, the poet’s muse, to the anxiety of urban life (Pickard 24). Pickard’s study of Bishop’s imagery characterizes these images as existing on a continuum between the purely descriptive and the allegorical, performing

these functions to some extent simultaneously (17). The ambiguous nature of Bishop's monument has thus allowed for a broad range of interpretive possibilities by later readers. An attentive poet could make much of Bishop's example.

My next example of a lyric object indicates how the object's utility in a poem does not depend on its continual presence as a visual object. An object can contribute to the poem's progression even if it receives only a brief mention within the text. The object in John Donne's "The Relic" is both a visual and thematic focal point in the poem. Its visual appearance is only gestured at, however, while this object's implications about the speaker's relationship with his beloved form the poem's main argument. This object is a love-token (it happens to be a bracelet) that outlasts the lovers' own bodies after their death, since it is found in a state of relative wholeness when the corpses have been reduced to skeletons (6). The reason for the bracelet's miraculous preservation is perhaps the strength of the lovers' emotional connection in life. It is paradoxical that this connection is indicated by a physical object, since the speaker claims that the lovers enjoyed each other in a spiritual more than physical sense (24 – 30). The speaker suggests, in fact, that the couple's abstention from sex is one of the "miracles" of their relationship (31). Though the poem praises this achievement, the speaker nevertheless suggests the bracelet's power as a physical artifact. Its discoverer wonders if the bracelet is meant to be a kind of signpost for the deceased lovers' souls, so that they can meet again at their grave (9 – 11). This idea allows these souls to maintain a connection to the physical world, since they are imagined to use a concrete object to find a particular place. The lyric object of "The Relic" is the connective point in the poem's juxtaposition of the physical and spiritual.

The poem's dramatized discovery of the bracelet introduces two possible outcomes for the lovers, depending on how this object is received by the gravediggers who find it. In one situation, the bodies are not removed from their original gravesite, as the bracelet's significance is recognized. The two bodies are left where they were buried, in hopes that their souls will meet there after the Resurrection (7 – 11). The other possibility depends on a Catholic interpretation of the marvelous bracelet, which would attain the status of a religious relic. If the lovers' grave is exhumed in "a time, or land / Where mis-devotion doth command," i.e. Catholicism (12 – 13), the grave's contents would be brought to the authorities and venerated as relics of Mary Magdalene (14 – 18). Helen Gardner argues that the bracelet's pale color is a significant detail in this regard. She claims that this characteristic reinforces its attribution to Magdalene, since artistic representations of Donne's time often portray Magdalene as blond (222). This is a suggestive point, that links the poem with the visual art of the period. Gardner disputes the related claim, however, that the bracelet's attribution connects the poem's "Magdalen" with the real-life Magdalen Herbert, who was a friend of Donne's. Gardner points out that Magdalen Herbert was an older woman by the time Donne knew her, and could not be said to have had "bright" hair at that point in her life (248). In my opinion this is not a convincing argument, since Donne's poetics are hardly constrained by an adherence to literal facts.

The critical work surrounding Donne's bracelet demonstrates this object's central place in the poem. Critical response to this object ranges from observations on its qualities as a lyric object to investigations into its literary pedigree. The lyric object's function as a thematic signpost has been noted by Gardner, who points out that the

bracelet's placement on a dead wrist powerfully emphasizes the poem's concern with the nature of life and death. Gardner notes the reader's probable "shudder at the thought of a love-token around the arm of a skeleton or of a corpse" (258). Other treatments of the bracelet use this object to illuminate the relationship between lovers that is the poem's focus. Both Gardner (249) and Theodore Redpath (285) note that the lovers' interactions are only minimally physical. Following Herbert Grierson, Redpath states that the kisses exchanged by the couple (li. 28) are the chaste conventions of greeting and parting, rather than an expression of physical desire (287, n. 27). Redpath's useful note helps readers understand what this interaction between the lovers indicates. As a gift from one partner to the other, the bracelet is a physical symbol of commitment that replaces its physical expression.

Other critics have explored the origin of the bracelet in Donne's previous reading. These treatments of the lyric object demonstrate how it may be used to find sources that helped form the poet's mental landscape, directly or indirectly shaping his work. Phillips Carleton traces the image to Giraldus Cambrensis' *Speculum Ecclesiae*. This volume describes the exhumation of a gravesite attributed to King Arthur, in which (reputedly) was found a bracelet of woven hair. Carleton argues that this image would have captured Donne's "notoriously morbid imagination," to appear later in the version found in "The Relic" (368). Carleton's statement regarding Donne's interests is indirectly supported by Robin Robbins, who notes the presence of a similar bracelet in Donne's "The Funeral." In that instance, the image suggests a more difficult relationship between speaker and beloved than occurs in "The Relic." In "The Funeral," the lover's bracelet of his beloved's hair is compared to a manacle (li. 16), perhaps suggesting his unwilling

servitude to her. To Robbins, these disparate applications of the bracelet image argue for a literary rather than an autobiographical origin (240, n. 6). However, I think the range of Donne's work suggests he would have been quite capable of applying an "autobiographical" fact in a variety of literary contexts. The main interest of Robbins' observation lies in the comparison between the bracelets in the two poems.

Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" uses a lyric object as the central image from which the poem's argument is derived. In this example, the physical "reality" of the object itself takes a back seat to the ideas evoked by the images upon it. The speaker's observation of the object (an urn) is the occasion that begins the poem. However, unlike Donne's bracelet, the urn simply frames the individual scenes that the poem focuses on, and is not itself part of the main narration. The urn's existence as a concrete object is a fundamental point of the poem, but the urn does not receive much attention as an object after this point is established. Instead, the speaker goes on to treat the scenes depicted on the urn in more detail than he does the urn itself. Though Keats' speaker carefully describes these scenes, the conclusion to be drawn from the images is ambiguous. The individual scenes lack context, and the specific people and places involved are impossible to identify. "What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?...Who are these coming to the sacrifice? / To what green altar, O mysterious priest, / Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies...? What little town by river or sea shore, / Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel, / Is emptied of its folk, this pious morn?" the speaker asks (8, 31 – 33, 35 – 37). These non-specific images suggest not individuals, but generalized human activities—love and piety among them. Though Keats' lyric object is itself a specific item that is physically present to the speaker, the urn is not a record of the unique experiences of

individuals. Rather, the urn's generalized images suggest a commentary on the human race in general.

The urn's physicality nevertheless affects the speaker's experience of the urn's images. The images are not imagined to represent a moment in time, with its implication of past and future events. Instead, the scenes on the urn are arrested in time, never to progress beyond the particular moment depicted. "Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave / Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare" (15 – 16). The literally unmoving nature of stone thus imposes itself on the images carved onto its surface.

Several interesting comparisons can be made between Keats' urn and the foundational epic object of Achilles' shield. Both objects have scenes of human activity engraved on their surfaces, which pictures provide vivid depictions of human emotional as well as corporeal life. The shield's scenes, however, are more thematically and emotionally varied than those on the urn. The scenes on the shield include a wedding (18.528 – 534), an argument under arbitration (18.535 – 547), a battle between armies (18.548 – 581), and farmers plowing a field (18.582 – 591). These scenes show a wide range of human emotion and experience, from love to anger to grief, from creating families to violently destroying them. The reader is reminded, however, that the dynamic moments represented are nevertheless static scenes engraved on the shield's physical surface, and cannot change or progress. The plowed field, though realistically represented, is still made of metal (18.589 – 590), and sheep are realistically fleecy-looking though made of silver (18.569 – 570). A realistic ditch is represented in blue enamel (18.607). The physical materials that form the shield's scenes contribute to these lines' imagery, while emphasizing the concrete physicality of the shield itself.

The images on Keats' urn also have a physical presence in the poem, though they are not described in terms of their medium. Like those on Achilles' shield, the urn's images are suspended in time, with their depicted actions forever evading completion. "Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss, / Though winning near the goal" (17 – 18). This constraint is a function of the static medium on which the urn's (and the shield's) images appear. However, Keats' speaker emphasizes the effects, both positive and negative, that the passage of time creates in human lives. Though the urn's lovers are unable to actually kiss each other, they are also protected from the changes of heart and loss of physical beauty that time often brings about (19 – 20).

The urn is a useful example of Keats' frequent use of concrete images, a characteristic that has been widely observed by critics. Critical treatment of the lyric object in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" has focused on this object's place within Keats' work as a whole. To Magdalena Ostas, Keats' images "are always grounded in the material, external, and outward characteristics of their forms" (119). Cynthia Chase acknowledges that the rich visual beauty expressed in Keats' poems is one of his works' defining characteristics for many readers (211). Despite the titular urn's strong visual presence in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," however, this poem declines to offer a clear interpretation of the urn's significance. Chase notes a similar effect in Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale," in which multiple lines produce conflicting critical interpretations (208 – 209). The urn's final statement, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty— that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (49 – 50) remains stubbornly mysterious.

Cleanth Brooks' interpretation of Keats' poem gives the object a sort of "personality" that, in Brooks' view, disentangles the poem's perplexing final stanza. To

Brooks, the central problem of the poem is its last stanza, which seems to contradict his view that the best poems do not make plain statements of certain philosophical or moral positions (151). Brooks' reading of the poem's final claim is derived from the entire context of the lines that precede it, which characterize the urn itself as a figure that communicates through paradoxical statements and images. For instance, the flutes depicted on the urn both play and do not play music, since their sound cannot exist outside the viewer's imagination (156 – 7). In this context, the speaker's remark that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" can be justified as a further demonstration of the urn's character, and the tone of the poem as a whole. According to Brooks, this statement shares in the poem's general embrace of paradox and ambiguity, and "is supported by a dramatic context" (165). In my view, Brooks' application of the concept of dramatic unity provides a fruitful reading of this poem. His interpretation saves the poem's final lines from a failure to cohere with the rest of the poem, and discourages the reader from considering them in isolation. Brooks encounters the poem as a complete piece, emphasizing its "constructed-ness" as a work of art.

Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium" contains a lyric object that demonstrates how the object can appear very briefly both as an image and a point of thematic focus. This object, a mechanical bird, is not the exclusive focus of the speaker's attention. It is invoked near the poem's conclusion, and encapsulates many of the poem's previous statements. The visual particulars of this bird are less important to the poem than the fact of its artificial or constructed nature. The object itself is not explicitly described. Rather its avian form is simply gestured at, in that it sits on a branch and sings (30). If poetic convention is any guide, this bird can be identified as a nightingale. In addition, the bird

has living nightingales' proverbial musical ability.³ Yeats provides a brief note on his bird, saying only "I have read somewhere that in the Emperor's palace at Byzantium was a tree made of gold and silver, and artificial birds that sang" (459, n. to pg. 194). The bird's metal body is contrasted with the sort of "bodily form" that occurs without human interference—presumably the bodies of living animals (25 – 27). This mechanical bird, on the other hand, is made of precious metal that has been shaped by skilled craftsmen (27 – 28).

The bird appears in the poem's final stanza, a position that emphasizes its importance in the poem's argument. The body of the poem establishes a contrast between the living bodies of humans and animals that are subject to decay, and the lasting "monuments" created by intellectual rather than physical generation. Living creatures breed and die and breed and die, "caught" in their ephemeral life cycles (2 – 8). From the speaker's point of view, such creatures are dying even while they are alive (3). However, works of the intellect offer a kind of immortality, the "artifice of eternity" (24). The speaker's desire to remove himself from the cycle of mortality is reiterated in the poem's final stanza. If given the chance, the speaker would exchange his mortal body for the metal bird's more durable one (25 ff.). Yeats' use of the lyric object in this poem takes advantage of the bird's physicality to emphasize living bodies' impermanence. Through this object, the poem argues that artistic creation is superior to physical generation in that it allows for a sort of immortality. This vision of art's achievement is not without a note

³ A similar metal bird appears in Yeats' poem "Byzantium." This poem shares many of the images and preoccupations of "Sailing to Byzantium," including the contrast between dying mortal bodies and more permanent artificial structures. I have chosen to focus on "Sailing to Byzantium" for its clearer treatment of the bird-as-object.

of sadness, however, since the speaker acknowledges that it is incompatible with life's physical pleasures.

My reading of the lyric object's place in the poem's main concerns is hardly an unorthodox interpretation of the text. Many iterations of a similar interpretation make sense, however, since I argue that this line of thinking is present in the text itself. In 1941, John Crowe Ransom presented a congruent reading of Yeats' poem. Its speaker is "bitter and realistic about the coming of old age: the physical impediment it puts upon the poet who would still be singing..." (519). But the limitations of a physical body can be overcome through the speaker's magic incarnation in the form of a mechanical bird (520).

Alternative readings of this poem are largely possible by invoking material from outside the text. These readings are useful as long as they keep the poem's actual text in view, rather than relying on outside sources to make meaning of it. Harry Campbell draws on Yeats' prose writing to argue that Yeats was making a statement about spiritual immortality in "Sailing to Byzantium," rather than artistic immortality. Campbell incorporates Yeats' writings on religion and the city of Byzantium (or at least his poetic vision of it) to argue that reading Yeats' golden bird as an image of artistic achievement contradicts the poet's spiritual beliefs. To Campbell, Yeats' bird just happens to be mechanical, but its beauty, rarity, and wisdom are its more significant characteristics (589). Campbell's reading, however, does not make a convincing argument that the bird's constructed nature is insignificant. His reading does not utilize the poem's literary context to advantage. Instead, he allows this context to overshadow the poem itself, neglecting to take the poem's actual words into account.

Yeats himself claims that he first encountered his lyric bird in someone else's work, which is a powerful argument in favor of a poet's literary education. Criticism on Yeats' bird has focused largely on its possible sources in the poet's reading. As noted above, Yeats' note on "Sailing to Byzantium" states that he read about this bird in an unspecified source. Thomas Dume draws from Yeats' journals and letters to determine where the poet may have found an image of a singing mechanical bird. According to Dume, works in languages other than English are to be excluded, since Yeats' knowledge of ancient and modern foreign languages was limited (405). Dume argues that the most probable source for the golden bird was *The Cambridge Medieval History*, which Yeats bought soon after 1923. This volume contains a passage about the fabled wealth of Emperor Theophilus, in whose throne room there was (reputedly) a golden tree decorated with golden singing birds (406). The poems "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium" were published in 1926 and 1930, respectively, making it possible that the *History* was the inspiration for Yeats' bird. This line of investigation is useful for the poet-reader in that it emphasizes the role of outside reading in the composition process.

George Herbert's "The Pulley" demonstrates a use of the lyric object that shows how its action is possible without the object's visual presence in the poem. The body of Herbert's poem omits any description of its object's physical appearance. The object, a pulley, is only mentioned in the poem's title. Nevertheless, the object directs the poem's entire argument. "The Pulley" explains through metaphor why mankind is persistently discontent with earthly life, claiming that this "repining restlessness" (17) is God's way of encouraging humanity to strive for permanent rest in Heaven. God's position is that people can't be trusted to seek Him through their "goodness," so perhaps, He thinks,

“weariness / May toss him [humanity] to my breast” (19 – 20). Weariness thereby acts as a pulley, raising humanity up into God’s presence. This statement’s coherence and persuasiveness lies in the reader’s ability to imagine the function of a pulley.

Besides the pulley, other metaphors used in the poem grant a certain physicality to the benefits that God gives to humankind. However, these qualities—strength, beauty, wisdom, etc.—do not attain the status of lyric objects (li. 6-7). The most evident (or pedantic) reason for this is that the above qualities are depicted metaphorically as water, rather than as handmade objects. These items are kept in a “glass” before they are bestowed on humanity, and they “flowed” and are “pour[ed]” out in the act of bestowal (li. 2-3, 7). An argument could perhaps be made for classifying “rest” as a lyric object, since it is referred to as a “jewel” (li. 12). I would consider a jewel as a possible lyric object, since even naturally-occurring ones are cut or polished to bring out their aesthetically pleasing qualities. However, the physical characteristics of a jewel as an object are not invoked. The relevant feature in the poem is a jewel’s monetary value, which is not itself a physical quality.

Scholarly response to Herbert’s lyric object has examined the pulley in light of both its function and its implied physical appearance. Some critics have made the useful observation that the mechanics of a pulley’s function in the real world contribute to the poem’s argument. Helen Wilcox notes that the pulley metaphor contains an “inherent paradox,” since a pulley lifts items by applying downward rather than upward force (Herbert 549). Michael Routh suggests that the seemingly contradictory way of moving upward by at first moving downward emphasizes the concept that God’s actions are

beyond human understanding (45). When understood in this light, the pulley makes an especially apt figure for this poem.

Rosemond Tuve's analysis of "The Pulley" interprets the object within its cultural context. Tuve's treatment of this poem is important because it reveals meanings surrounding its lyric object that might not be evident to today's readers. Tuve's study as a whole emphasizes the benefit that Herbert's readers gain from an understanding of basic Christian iconography, since many of his images employ this visual lexicon. Tuve indicates in particular certain figures that might appear incongruous or unusual to a twenty-first century reader, such as the image of Christ's body as a physical container for humanity's messages (i.e. prayers) to God. Tuve points out that this concept appears in much visual art of Herbert's time, including manuscript illustrations and stained-glass windows (Tuve 128 – 131). When Herbert's images are seen in their cultural context, they are recognized as part of a larger conversation, rather than simply the poet's attempt to be willfully unusual.

Tuve's analysis of imagery of the Cross connects the pulley's visual appearance with that of the Cross. This context allows for an interpretation of Herbert's lyric object that foregrounds his participation in seventeenth-century religious discourse. Tuve notes that the Cross was sometimes depicted in art of the period as a pair of scales, which God the Father uses to weigh humanity's sins against Christ's sacrifice. She cites this image in Herbert's poem "Justice II" (Tuve 165). Tuve argues that the concept of "merciful unbalancings" (165) would have been familiar to Herbert's first audience, making a place for his "pulley" image within a pre-existing visual vocabulary.

An insight from Richard Todd interprets the pulley in a similar vein, that also locates Herbert's use of objects in the broader framework of his period's religious rhetoric. Todd applies the concept of the "Book of Nature," that interprets the visible world as evidence not only of God's existence, but of His nature, and humanity's place in His plan for creation. Therefore the Book of Nature can be actively interpreted by an informed audience, in a way that supports and complements Biblical exegesis (Todd 79). According to Todd, the category of "Nature" is not limited to plants and animals. He notes that Herbert's presentation of the Book of Nature often employs images of "domestic figures having to do with housekeeping" (84). For example, God's Creation is figured as a "cabinet" filled with items provided for man's use (84). The everyday image of a pulley, therefore, agrees with Herbert's frequent use of everyday objects and experiences in his poems. Though this homely imagery is to some readers "a lapse of taste" (Bloch 215), I believe it is an approachable way to conceptualize the nature of God.

I hope this essay has demonstrated an analysis of the lyric object that can be productive for the working poet. On the most fundamental level, the words of a poem itself are all that's needed to engage meaningfully with it. A reading that, for the moment, de-emphasizes the poem's historical and social context makes the activities of reading and writing poetry more approachable for both poets and undergraduate students (who are sometimes the same thing). Once a basic familiarity with the work is achieved, the poem's larger context can be more smoothly introduced. Likewise a visitor to the Roman Forum can easily appreciate its marvelous structures without a guide, though ideally that visitor would learn to distinguish at least the Arch of Titus from that of Septimius

Severus. Certainly if a reader wishes to produce her own poetry, the study of others' work, down to their word-by-word arrangement, is irreplaceable.

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Part II: Mr. Boswell Peels an Orange

The Bait

Rain slimes the riverbank,
the geraniums are slop,
the year slackens,
adore me. In enchanted woods,

canny virgins kneel
for the unicorn. Give me
your precious brow, whorled
with inestimable lightning.

You're my panacea, my fantastic
dupe. I have the blush
of a maid, the tail
and brain of a vulture.

My voice is the surf
bashing the sudden rock. Come close
under the stillicide; gentle
blind fish nose my thighs.

Snake Valentine

Your astroturf living room is cozy with ivy.
Your pink scales shine like a manicure.
Already blushing, you work up a heat

on an electric rock.
Wound in your keeper's fingers,
you warm your belly-armor on his palm.

He dangles you a meal by the tail
once a week—more than enough.
You're no vulgar rat-eater,

no tragic asp. Your jaw unhooks
for even a mouselet. My envelope on his pillow
can't rival your tight embrace.

Or

Or in a clean white aisle where we burn and freeze,
our shopping cart an obstruction, his cold back
pressed on the sliding door to the frozen chickens, there
he'll palm my words,

 or there, across the driver's seat
parked across two spaces, rain sliding down
the fogged windshield as he squints to read. The truth is,
in a regular room with any carpet, in a summer barn,

 or with us bent attentive
in a lawnchair tipping
on its axis, as our oven heats birds
into meat, my little paper
can slip right into his pocket.

William Caslon

A neat letterfit, winking at an angle
 from a playbill,
 caught his eye. Even at his age, he noticed
 a well-turned serif.
 Font collections spread their beauties
 in his specimen books
 for inspection.

At seventeen, he knew every gilt volume
 in his uncle's library.
 He thumbed them open
 to the chapter headings, where swash capitals
 posed *contrapposto*.
 They shook their flounces
 to make him tingle.

In his maturity,
 he liked a more practical style.
 The Caslon Foundry set the type
 he put his name to, a font
 whose useful attainments
 included a catalogue of pamphlets,
 three-volume novels,
 and the odd scholarly treatise, laid out
 with signature grace.

The Caslon pull and cross strokes
 were universally admired, their modulation
 lyric. The aperture's axis
 tilted lightly
 on fine terminals. But modesty remained
 the guiding feature, a point essential
 to the letters' architect.

Kern: A Brief Guide

The BLANK SPACE is the rule
of the kern. In a well-kerned pair, the letters

incline their tails or their arms
toward each other, sparking

a charge in the space between them.
This space is very thin

but it moves the story: the blank
is what incites the reader

to continue. A given COMBINATION will attract,
if a trick of spelling brings them

together. Certain letters (*To*, *Wa*)
are often found in pairs, though

no one can find the rule
that draws one letter toward the next.

KERNING TABLES are a dubious convenience.
To kern your letters automatically, applying

the grid's measure to each question
of letterfit, is quite efficient

and generally less wasteful. However,
we recommend making the kern

by hand. Letters will open up
to the pressure of familiar fingers.

After Catullus

70a

I wrote my promise in the air, emphatic
as lightning, plain as the wind's direction.
I wrote my promise in the water,
since everybody knows the taste.

2b

Should I be grateful? I chased after
a bit of mealy sparkle. My prize:
I got my dress undone.

85a

I don't want your hate, or your love.
Feeling it happen to you, we both are in pain.

Aubade

A tree shivers, weighed with roosting starlings.
The flock grows uneasy, as the puddles
turn silver, portending the morning.

An insomniac turns over, raked by interminable stars.
He waits it out, hour by uneasy hour.
Dawn-shift drivers warm their rosy fingers

over coffee, waiting for shipments of flowers
outside the air terminal. The high-rises' hundred lights
begin to pale, as the sky shifts into rain.

The solar team leans on the reins, begging for flight.
They rear up from the sea, hauling a red sun.
Boatloads of wary sailors batten down.

Tiger *Passant*

after Walton Ford's "Thanh Hoang"

The painted tiger poses, spine inclined,
 shoulders lowered to a bowing crouch.
 His emblematic orange-and-black
 is flawless as a plastic fruit.
 His coat's belabored pattern calls him tiger,
 though the stretch of his wide-open mouth
 gives him a python expression. His tail
 is too smooth for fur—there's no untidy tuft
 marring its serpentine. His ears tilt back
 like an angry cat's, as he confronts the frame
 with the wrinkle of his snarling muzzle.
 Trying for feline, he stalks to the left.
 He raises one forepaw, mimicking
 the sideways lion stamped *passant*
 on real English silver. Only hallmarked ware
 can prove its purity: the tiny lion pressed
 on a spoon's handle or mug's underside
 shows the assayer's approval. The tiger's pads
 press the turf, behind a foreground fence
 of grass at the picture's edge. Boxed in,
 the tiger cocks his lifted paw, proof
 of his own sterling.

Vault

In summer every field
 was full of boys, pitching themselves
 over logs and ditches. They practiced arching the spine
 at the arc's highest point.

The children worked in pairs, spotting each other. They took turns.
 One girl vaulted
 something sturdy, while the other stabbed a stick
 or a broom handle
 at her partner's chest. But practicing

 on real horns
 was how to learn. Girls just old enough
 to clamber over a sheep
 ran through the shearing-corral, jumping partway
 over a startled back, grabbing for the horns
 but getting an ear sometimes. They watched their older brothers and sisters

 go off together, to spend the afternoon
 springing over heavy cattle.

The children studied the painted walls. One wall showed a girl
 with a good lift, whose strong forearms raised her like a pocketknife opening
 over the bull's head. Another showed a boy
 with elegant hip flexion
 flying over the bull's thick shoulder.

Friends gathered at night to trade advice
 and hearsay: where to look, when the bull
 turns toward you; how to invite his approach;
 where to grip the horns
 so the animal's initial toss (a reflex)
 would lift you clear.

Somebody's cousin got gored
 when she tried it. Her right leg interfered
 with the bull's response. Her form wasn't
 quite perfect—probably her discipline
 fell short.

But none of them would wait too long
 to try the vault. They were from Crete; they knew better.

Reconstruction

We cinched the bones with wire, bit them
through with pins, restored
the startling arch of ribs.

We raised one heavy hoof
as if to stamp, in cut-flower
attitude of life:

the relic elk regained
his clumsy height. Now
his joints are fixed,

his naked sockets wide
and shining in the head.
His antlers' antique heft

is out of scale
for dainty modern wolves,
their tinsel skulls.

Plants gone obsolete, flat painted
on the wall, show through
his void of gut.

On Not Knowing Greek

I worried the tangle for hours,
with *Smyth's Grammar* open,
showing its pale belly.
My pencil slit the lexicon at οἶδα.
The pattern was faded, crimped

from its folding. I weighted the corners
with various commentaries.
There was a green field;
an arched, vague deer.
I walked home through the park.

A caramel poodle jumped,
and caught the flying stick.
The big teeth closed as joyously
as once before,
on Actaeon's ankle.

Hummingbird

Plastic flowers are your favorite. You hardly alight
for the nectar we mix daily: you're busy
inspiring scandalous religions,
being photographed like a five-star dinner.
Your plush eighteenth-century frontlet
iridesces under the flash. You drift
backwards, hovering, as we offer
homage through binoculars.
The towhee has a blunt face. He's nobody's darling.
The waxwing mob
gobbles dirty berries, but every flower
parts its lips for you—you needle
your thin tongue in. You've got such Audubon
bedroom names: Opal-Gorgeted Coquette, Cinnamon
Wire-Crested Charmer. In love, you quiver
your peculiar anatomy against another's. Brilliant Plumeleteer,
you nestle in a secret leaf, your sweet raisin
heart steeped in sugarwater.

Second Sight

Again last week, the leaky sunset
got me in the chest. I flicked peanuts at the birds, who told me
in *koine* to get lost. Spirits flapped
into my hair, asking for favors, freezing my blood. They spread my hands
for my fortune. But I was tuning up:

I was a god—glitterhaired,
difficult. I was singular. Psalmistry's tender
conversions, inch by inch,
waste my time. Worming
up a kneeler's vein, I went direct

for the heart. My maniac angels
roosted and preened on telephone wires. They waited for how I would happen. The sky
rattled in its socket: unhinged, I walked
through the air's door. I saw meadows

ankle-deep in ash, a black town drooling smoke, its fields plowed with salt.
I watched flowers uncurl their new
blue stalks in a mineral slurry. Their bitter petals burned
chemical bright, fabulous shades

never-before-seen, as their roots drank
and drank the salt.

Shopper's Prayer

Angel of the supermarket,
grant me

shredded cheese,
granola, Qwik-Oats,
cabbage, rolls
baked fresh in-store.

Give me clean births
in abundance. On my list
of virtues:

yogurt sealed;
huddled grapes; bread
in the chastening sleeve.

There's nothing I lack.

Bagged onions
turn over in their sleep,

wanting the dinner hour.

My brain is thick
with vegetable felicity. I, too,
will be partook.

Steel April at the Holiday Inn

The shampoo has again effected its renewal. The soap,
still in its paper. The bed

has already effaced you, the pillow
strewn with wilting anthologies. But

you can set your imprint
on the sheets again,
trolling your *Renaissance Verse*, your
Poets of the '30s for a phrase

to lift: your turn with "steel April."
The walls are thin

at 2 AM, and you have amorous
left-hand neighbors. There remains
a certain sensation,

perhaps someone's appreciative
finger on your cheek. The TV gets stranger

the longer you're awake.
Beyond the gauze curtains, pigeons

are clattering from sill to sill.

Mr. Boswell Peels an Orange

My wife's marmalade is the best I've had. She peels and crushes
the oranges herself, and for days
the house smells of oranges' beaten golden pulp. Under her persistent hands,
the fruit submits. It becomes a vivid concentrate,
textured with rind. Stored in jars,
it will keep for months.

Johnson used to make a drink for himself
at our Club, with water and muddled oranges. With a spoon he crushed the segments
down in the glass. Fishing out the peels, he put them quickly
in his pocket—it seemed he didn't want to be discovered, though his dirty coat
smelled guilty as oranges. I made a bet with a lady,
who didn't think me man enough
to ask him why he kept the pieces. It was one of his obscure compulsions.

My store of notes was still growing
in those days, rising in ragged pillars in my stonewalled study, away in Scotland
where I'd compile them. Johnson's voice, unmistakable, kept sounding
through me. When he died, I was in Edinburgh. He left me nothing.

On the morning I dared
to ask him, I stood over his writing-desk, my pen ready. I saw the peels
in a neat stack atop his diary. Pressured, my friend admitted
a liking for orangepeel. I noted down his *strange unwillingness*
to answer freely. Each peel was scraped and dried,
cut into thin pieces. What he used them for, *he could not be prevailed upon*
to tell. Firmly as always, he pressed my expression into vigor
and correctitude: he could not be prevailed upon,
even by his dearest friends, to tell. My pages smell of citrus, still.

The Common Loon

for James Merrill

Black on the black mirror of the lake,
 The common loon, made to complicate
 The glassy surface, trails a liquid line
 Of ripples as it glides. Indulging in my notion
 Of the bird, I portage to the lake,
 Set in rigid shores of pine.
 I wait for a communion.

The loon's smooth head and heavy beak
 Are poised to break
 The walleye's fall through water's air.
 My gaze skates off the plumage
 Of the loon, missing its inward heat.
 The common loon prepares
 Cold songs of passion.

The loon knows by its instinct how to slip
 My stark devotion, as it slaps
 Its wings against the air. It pocks the water's
 Runway with its feet, wresting its body
 From sheer lake to blurry sky. To lift
 Into an upward dive to weaker
 Currents isn't easy.

The common loon holds sorrow to its breast,
 Like a cold teacup. Its caress
 Of its haunted grief (it must be grief)
 Emerges in pulsating, echoing seduction,
 Past impressionable shores that still confess
 The hot bull-moose's wallowing relief:
 To him, water's only function.

Always the common loon slides farther
 Across, always I go after—
 But the paddle in my clammy grip
 Shatters the water under my canoe.
 The loon pierces its image, going faster
 Now it's under, ripple-less.
 I wait above the common loon.

Amateur Detective

The sleuth lay in a fog of stimulants—the case was quite a three-pipe problem. With aids inhalent and injectable, he oiled his veins and lungs against the torrent of detail: ciphers; implicated wives; a dropped hat; smell of boiling beef next door; the crawling floral wallpaper drowning him against the sofa. His fingers had a tremor, a machine idling. He rehearsed the marks of occupation: the poet's thumb, for instance, stained from the pen.

Exhibit A: Domestic Goose (*A. anser domesticus*), paddling a foggy pond. The missing gemstone was deep blue: a detail that disguised it as a beetle. Swallowed, the stone sank deeper into the bird's gut with each stroke of its webbed feet. The detective's brain clicked through hypotheses. With experimental resin and nails of his own design, he'd sealed himself against intrusion. He knew the flicker of affection was a shiny stone, faceted to scratch his magnifying lens.

To resume: our chameleon-detective sighed, slung his legs across his trunk of wigs and makeup. He was going under, sucking nicotine fume like it was air. He deduced an imbalance in his device: some chambered cog circulating off-center, its pulse introducing rhythms hard to predict. He rattled the details in his case-file like tumblers in a lock, groping through feathers for the priceless lump. There it was, warm and blue, beating like a heart.

Barometric

Weather comes, even to the city.

Leaves are rocketing down the alley. My coffeecup holds out
for rain, under a new leak. Filtered through packed

insulation, the water's tea-colored.

If he comes now, so what? I've got an awkward bed,
and we haven't met. I'm waiting for his half
of my broken necklace,
his phobias like mine,
our codeword.

Lightbulbs pop as he goes by

in his blue static. I've heard buried weeds

leap through the pavement where his feet touch.

Under pulsing lightning, petunias in the window
flap crazily open.

Evidences

Roses wait in pails along the curb,
pursing their cold lips.
Snowfall thickens their colors:
yellow, red, and sunset-orange.
They smell like the plastic sleeves
they'll be presented in.

A million flowers ago,
alabaster vials held stoppered scent,
crushed twice a year
from pale, ruffled roses.
Whole temples depended
on the proceeds.

In a glass case,
the duckbilled hadrosaur
lies stripped to bone.
Its hard, curved jaw
foreshadows the parrot's beak.
Fourth-graders print their fingers on the glass.

Harison's Yellow

Rosa 'Harisonii'

This rose's upright habit is innate:
a cross of countryside Scots rose
and sulfur-yellow Persian briar gave
this flower an armature of thorns

around its semi-double, pale
yellow buds that open once a year.
It suckers well—this cultivar's no frail
shrinking violet. Young cuttings pioneered

the frontier gardens, going makeshift
in a vase of raw potato. Own-root
sprigs outlasted their cabins. By the vague,
soft pits where cellars were, roses droop,

a mass of wasted blossom on their canes.
Come June, they cannot help their green refrain.

Domestic

I remember my first sight of you.
Panting in the heat, you reclined
in a pose of casual ferocity, as if half-tame
already. Your eyes tracked my approach.

I held out my hand for you to sniff. My snare
had cut you to the waist, marking you out
in natural red. Your ragged sisters hid,
watching me coax you

into the house. I swept the doorstep
clean of their tracks each morning, until
the winter smells came in—cached walnuts,
nervous deer—and your family forgot

to miss you. I washed your hair in turpentine
for the fleas, as you struggled
to lick my face in gratitude.
In the bathwater's warm mirror, I taught you

to admire your own reflection.
You teetered around our bedroom
with my arms around you,
as you learned how to walk

on only two legs. I showed you rational love,
the product of reflection. Our constancy
can weather any temperature. Our son
howls for you from his cradle

until you hold him, though you're teaching him
the trick of wording his desires.
When we curl up in bed, I pet your cheek. Still
you twitch and whimper in your sleep.

The Lesser Wyvern

He, the image of a grander beast
foreshortened, flaunts his dainty tail
in brazen curls around his taloned feet.
His downy skin is tender as a snail's
naked flank. His airborne silhouette
might be mistaken for a smallish peregrine,
since the ancient custom of his family set
eschews the classic, weighty forelimbs
and the rugged, quadrupedal stance
of canon firedrakes. He perches like a finch.
But he is kin to dragons, whose romance
compels his emulation at the highest pitch.
No gabbing fowl can cross his turf
without a bob of homage to his ruffled chest.
He proves continually that he deserves
to bear his famous family's crimson crest:
at sunup he's atop the barnyard fence,
tallying his victories for passersby.
He holds his lineage to be its own defense,
choosing rather to annoy than be despised.
But when the hungry shadow of a hawk
skims down the fenceline, he descends
abruptly to the toolshed, and cowers in the dark.
Such embarrassments have made him sensitive,
and conscious of his honor. When he soars
to henhouse-height, or stabs his spurs into a rival's
eye, he gives his ululating bantam's crow
of triumph, in the old terrific style.
His blood is dragonish and blue as paint,
a heat that stirs his delicate insides.
He's no mere bird. But no high-minded saint
would think him worth a twenty-minute ride.
His head, red-crested, isn't fit to sever,
its gloss so fine, its weight the slightest feather.

Shelley, Electrostatic

The cut-paper couples onstage
bent forward and back, electrified, bowing
as if they were dancing. The electrostatic machine
whirred behind them, hissing its wheel
as the lecturer taught us its power
to move an object without touching it.
The paper figures quaked
with energy. Shelley quivered beside me
as a copper bell shuddered
at the lecturer's gesture. His pretty assistant
stood on the table in front—she giggled as he hoisted her.
She held the machine's wire leash.
Shelley saw her necklace glow, a chain
of sparks around her throat. When her hair rose
and pushed on its bows, Shelley volunteered
to kiss her fiery hand. He flinched
when she reached for him. Afterward, he bought his own machine—
I helped him carry the crate into his room.
As he swept his papers off the table, I pried off the lid
and left him to it. All night
he wrestled with the implements; the wire and the wheel.
Finally he stood on the glass-footed stool, designed
to hold the fire in. As I spun the handle,
I watched his black hair lift and spread
as if underwater. When his cufflinks lit up
like fireflies, he spoke to me, offered me his hand.

Historical Fiction

As an historian, I do not flatter. I should have known
I'd wound my subject. Tender, proud, made up
as Hercules, he bore a costly club,
the knobs along it bossed in gold—a gift

from the servile Senate, for their Emperor and god.
His lionskin was bound in the iconic knot
across his chest, but that false pelt was stripped
from no Nemean prodigy, just a drugged lion

the slaves had herded toward
their lord's poisoned spear. He appeared
precisely as my diligence had figured him
in my first volume's early chapters:

I followed the ancient authors, who
would have him rude and brutish, lacking
the least tincture of refinement.
Eager pupil of the huntsman's arcana,

his arrows had crescent tips, made to split
the tensile necks of ostriches,
and catch in the giraffe's tall hock.
Mastered at last by his delusion, he fought

the *retiarii* in single combat.
He was seven hundred times the victor, bold to dare
the fancied peril of their leaden trident points.
It was an honor for a man to die

by the Imperial sword, a stroke
from an immortal. I dreamt I staggered
in arena sand, a net over my arm.
In my hand, a trident, tipped with lead.

Tadzio Remembers

My feet were heavy
In the water.
Wading at low tide,
I was slow, uncertain,
Carrying my body
Like a portent.

Already I could feel
My perfect collarbone
Stilling to his archetype.
On all our beach,
We never touched,
Or even spoke.

I gathered seashells
In sliding heaps,
As he adorned my body
With roses and paint
On the overlook, plinthed me
Like a young god.

Datebook

In the casual, sideways drift of our potential
for attraction, we grew closer by degrees
of sofa-cushion. In dreams also, discretion was essential:
afloat in silver mist, I held a hand I couldn't see.
The actual climactic proved to be an artful
snowfall scene, like in the stories. So I tried
an icy, pretty coyness. But you parted
my thin fantasies, your cold lips pressed to mine.
Bone-chilled, I kissed you back. We broke off modestly,
shivering at the shock of first exposure.
Afterward we fumbled at each other, in the August
of our calendar. December was long over—
another season's gusts I can't recover.
The weather turned, of course, and chilled our summer.

For a Moody Stomach

This complaint comes from immoderate exertion of the passions. Keen young men, the choleric, and the unrelenting are most subject to the disorder. Timid physicians, loath to upset the organ further, advise that the stomach's riled juices will settle of themselves, if undisturbed. The patient should ignore his belly's rebellion, fixing shutters and beating his dog as if nothing ailed him. But I hold that a man should not suffer this distress. A calm can be imposed with a ginger emulsion, if swallowed sharply at the first tremor of infirmity. The stomach must learn that its freaks and pranks will not be borne. However, one man in twenty must endure periodic wretchedness. The fits that plague his stomach will not admit of any lasting cure. My paroxysms never abate unless I coddle my stomach with tepid broth, served in the clay mug from my student days. The patient must recline, and read a gentle sonnet every hour, until the stomach is placated. Once, I read all of *Astrophil* before I was eased.

Sonnet XIX

[Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion's paws]

Time-waster, blunt, you give the lion pause,
Made so for earth. You brood on sweets,
Brave for the teeth, eager for the tiger's mouth.
But fire lives in burning. In my blood,
Your glad taste fleets. I am not sorry,
Whatever you may wither. Time has feet
For globe and everything. Some fade is sweet;
But yours, most grave transgression.
Cut deep, my love—not palely for a minute.
Don't draw it out. Lines written in your hand
Would be a clean admission, coarse
And fair, a pattern for men after me.
Time's fault is spite. I was your worst,
My love: our youth keeps living in my hurt.

Red Lion

Rosa 'Red Lion'

The trophy rose dosed, packed in the barrel
of a sawed-off pipe, on ice. The field
was thick with rivals, all well-appareled
in plastic-cup helmets. Waxpaper shields

defended tender stems. The champion
roses came to combat for a prize
that quickened the hearts of rosarians:
a solid silver cup, the bowl incised

in spirals with those roses' names
whose color was judged most arterial.
Such buds equip the Valentine bouquet
with petals resolute, too firm to fall

short of their aim. Each ruby bloom's a dart
to pierce a lover in a vital part.

Viperidae

I observe the courtesies,
because I am cold-blooded.

I was a sister. When my brother's head split
the egg, I gummed his face

patiently with my
soft fangs, until
I'd eaten most of him.

I am good at eating.

A rat's heart flickers
near her pattering lung. It gives her away.

I am so hungry. I can smell
the heat of paired bodies,

sets of twin furnaces
male and female. My own species
finds me prudent:

at each encounter, my strike tries
their scales' temper.

My neighbor was
too thin to give
much savor. I do not know
what he was for.

For Blocked Affections

The effect of spirits and devils on this disorder cannot be overlooked. Their natures are various, and their motives obscure. I had a spirit who gave me good dreams and stomach-worms. A blocked affection makes a man tedious. He is driven to decode his friends' addresses, convinced of the malice behind each ciphered word and look. A cache of innuendo shines in the light of his diseased fancy. Some patients can't endure mention of a wet towel or a ribbon, from a secret antipathy. Hooked on the barb of this distemper's devil, the suffering man shuns company and hoards his pleasures. He suspects even his doctor wishes him ill, and avoids medication on a pretext, being wary of arsenic. But the treatment shouldn't fully clear the distempered humor. As in bloodletting, draining too much of its chill vitality will worsen the imbalance. Suspicion has sometime a good cause. (Wasn't my friend a swindler after all?) Anyone may develop blocked affections. If you clasp someone's hand and his fingers are cold, suspect him of it.

Carousel

I've mastered convention:
With cocked hock, elevated
knee, I indicate Prance.

Let my brute sister
Sweat at her carriage—
I don't trot, I Signify.

My little rider parades
In measured rotation.
His parents, witness

To my genius calibration,
Have no feeling
For Art.

Oh token horseman, my pulse
Is perfectly regular,
My painted rump

Never tossed anyone.
The flimsiest child can stand
My mechanical canter.

I gag and lean
Against the curb, but
My struggle

Is for show—I would not
Jostle my rider's yielding,
Bruisable flesh.

Madame Hardy

Rosa 'Madame Hardy'

Some roses entertain only in season,
just then shaking out their ruffled silk.
Wrinkled petals now are out of fashion,
too fragile and unshapely to be picked.

A gardener once gave his rose
a certain woman's name, as to suggest
its blooming, graceful disarray. Its fold
on fold of petals held perfume

for just a day, no matter what powder
the gardener stirred in their vase.
So he let his roses turn to paper,
a refinement calculated to increase

the pressure of their aspect on his heart.
Some called it artificial; others, art.

Yours

After the rainstorm, the darkened asphalt
fumed like living dirt. I watched the road for a scene
to write home to you. A bicycle hissed
on the wet grit, the rider pedaling hard, his blazer flapping.

He steered one-handed. His free hand wavered
over the handlebar, holding roses in a paper cone.
His sunlit glasses flashed as he went by,
coasting down a street of silver. I was eighteen, and love

closed my throat at the thought of you—maybe at that moment
brushing your teeth, or getting into a car,
or looking out for the blink of my plane's wing.
That night I lay on my rented bed,

writing you my letter. This one ended
like the others, my valediction inconclusive.
My postscript undid all my goodbyes. After I left
for good, I learned to finish them.

Catastrophist

I notice each mistake—my crooked parking job,
one hair loose along my face, the dog's piss-angle
bleeding down the curb like my latte's
marred foam leaf. Even my shoes
are wrong for this skirt. A doorknob snags
my coat, it tears a thread
I can't stop looking at. Where's my red pen?
I forgot to buy milk. Still, it's consolation
to expect each day's mistakes.
(The girl waving at me
is waving at the girl behind me.)
I trip and spill my coffee through the lidhole—
just the latest error, soon outrun
by the one I'm walking into.

La Bohème

for Jussi Björling

There's always a poodle for the crowd scenes, or even a bored pony
parked ostentatiously stage right. The dog's attention
wanders from crotch to crotch. Where is the lover,

the suave dark Italian, with his sleeves
rolled in poetic destitution, pretending he's French? Round and Swedish,
you're gamely playing the romantic lead. Your pink stark face is bare of feeling.
I have to imagine young love

consuming your affectionate soul in its body.
You slick your hair down like a cap, and squirm into a sateen sentiment.
The aria sticks to your chin.

I'm blushing and hungry. I drizzle syrup onto the snow, for the sweet ice.
Thrift is my inheritance: my name is a Swedish hand-me-down. The pines in my yard
took a hundred years to top the house. In the hard light off the snow

they make a Scandinavia good as any. You sing me to sleep
under my goosedown, doing all the classic arias
in toasty Romance languages. Caruso sang them before you.
You melt his lyrics in your own mouth, a northern
hemisphere of invincible sugar.

VITA

Sarah Bahn Johnson was born and raised in Minnesota. She holds an MFA from Columbia University, and a PhD from the University of Missouri. Her work has been published in *The Minnesota Review*, *Four Way Review*, and elsewhere. She lives in Missouri.