

2005 William H. and Jane Torrence Harder Lecture, Cornell Plantations

“Talking to the Plants: Addressing Nature in the Lyric Tradition”

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When I was first approached about delivering the Harder lecture, I thought of taking my title from the poet to whom I am most devoted and on whom have worked most, Charles Baudelaire, who wrote to a friend about his impatience with nature poetry: “I have never been able to abide *‘des légumes sanctifiés’*”—“sanctified vegetables.” That seemed to me a good title for a Harder lecture that might be more irreverent about the literary treatment of nature than some we have heard. But in the end, I decided that I did not want to talk about plants themselves but about poetic address, talking to the plants.

Talking to plants is a practice popularized by books and articles suggesting that house plants respond to their owners and urging devoted gardeners to speak to their plants. (I gather the Cornell Plantations does not practice this.) But poets have been talking to plants for centuries, thus:

O Rose, thou art sick!
The invisible worm
That flies in the night
In the howling storm

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy;
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

This wonderfully mysterious lyric, from William Blake’s “The Sick Rose,” certainly differs from the talking to plants that gardening gurus might promote—for one thing, it does not exhort the rose to defeat the cankerworm or whatever blight has made it sick. But putting the poem in the perspective of talking to plants provides a new angle for criticism of the poem. This is a poem that has provoked a lot of critical discussion, especially because other texts of Blake’s do not treat sexuality as a dark, destructive secret—except insofar as a perverted religious and social order constrains and represses it. Critics have suggested that this is a poem of beauty destroyed by evil, or else a critique of the myth of female flight and male pursuit, or even a representation of a puritanical, misogynistic male speaker who imputes sickness to any rose or woman whose bed is a site of sexual pleasure. Moving, perhaps too quickly, from the flower to the woman, critics try to work out what sort of take on human sexuality this poem affords. After all, we seem to have a scenario in which a phallic force has invaded the rose’s bed, but the fact that it was already a bed of crimson joy before the invisible flying worm found it out, raises questions about how guilt for the destruction of thy life is to be apportioned, if there is guilt. But Blake in one draft changed “his dark secret love” to “her dark secret love,” making the invisible worm feminine, before changing it back again, suggesting that, for him at least, this is not a straightforward male-female scenario, with the rose as the woman and the worm as male sexuality.

And what should we make of the fact that this is an invisible, flying worm? One line of argument links it to invisible spirits, *lares* or *larvae*, part of the demonic lore of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, incubi and succubi, evoked by St. Augustine and by Paracelsus, to whose writings Blake was much indebted, especially a book entitled *De Origine morborum invisibilium*—on the origin of invisible sicknesses. This book discusses the imagination as cause of invisible diseases, among them illnesses deriving from overactive sexual fantasy. Blake himself seems to have been convinced that social and religious structures which keep fantasies from leading to action were a source of illness: “He who desires and acts not breeds pestilence,” he wrote. And there is a highly relevant sequence in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*: “She never told her love, / But let concealment, like a worm i’ the bud, / feed on her damask cheek,” (damask, of course, is a rose).

But in all these debates about the meaning of the poem, none of the critics I have read ask why the speaker *addresses* the rose—rather than declaring or observing that the rose is sick (“The red rose is sick” or “My dear rose is sick” . . . etc.). What difference does it make? Address of this sort is the rhetorical figure of apostrophe: a turning aside from real listeners to address absent people or entities deemed only figuratively to be an audience, such as Death—o death, where is thy sting—or Nature, or flowers. Rhetoricians have seen apostrophe as an image of passion. Fontanier’s classic treatise asks, “But what can give rise to apostrophe? It can only be feeling, and only the feeling stirred up within the heart until it breaks out and spreads itself about on the outside, as if acting on its own, . . . the spontaneous impulse of a powerfully moved soul.” Certainly there are occasions when an apostrophe, interrupting a reflection, signifies an outburst of passion, but that scarcely seems the case here. It isn’t clear whether the tone is one of surprise, or commiseration for a sick addressee, as one might expect, but it is certainly not an impassioned cry.

People talk to their plants in the hope they will respond and grow better, etc. To address the rose is to treat it as a subject capable of response, to set up an I-you relationship with the rose (that is a factor that encourages readers to take the poem to be about sexual desire or evil that afflicts or affects humans: one addressed as you seems more human than flower-like). But there is a puzzle of what speech act is being performed here—admonishing, expressing pity, horror? If you were to say to a friend, “George, you are sick,” the assumption would be, I think, that George does not realize he is sick; he thinks his behavior is normal but others recognize that he is in prey of a malady of some kind—why not an invisible worm, like the madness of repressed sexual desire? Perhaps the rose is being apprised of a deadly sickness she knows not of, but critics have not interpreted the poem in this way, and there has been great uncertainty about the tone: pity, condemnation, horror?

Address to the rose personifies it as a listener, or at least as sentient creature, creating an I-thou relation between poetic subject and natural object. Or rather, such address presupposes an animate listener. This is a significant difference. I am fond of an apostrophic question by the French poet, Alphonse de Lamartine: “Objects inanimés, avez vous donc une ame?” “You inanimate objects, have you a soul?” The difference between asking, “Do inanimate objects have a soul” and asking *them* whether they have a soul is that the latter presupposes the animicity by the act of addressing the question to them.

Such an act of address marks this speech act as poetic discourse. If one has trouble saying what the speaker is doing in saying, “O Rose, thou art sick,” it is because this does not

correspond to any everyday speech act, and the simplest answer to what the speaker is doing is something like “waxing poetical.” By addressing the flower or other non-empirical listeners, the poet works to constitute him- or herself as poet, in the tradition not just of epic, with its address to the muse, but of lyric.

The most famous address to plants in English literature is doubtless this celebrated opening:

Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more,
 Ye myrtles brown, with ivy never sere,
 I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude,
 And with forced fingers rude
 Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.
 Bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear,
 Compels me to disturb your season due;
 For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime,
 Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer.

This is the opening of Milton’s “Lycidas,” which has been called the “high-water mark of English poesy,” though Samuel Johnson in his *Life of Milton* registered a strong dissenting opinion: “One of the poems on which much praise has been bestowed,” he writes, “is *Lycidas*; of which the diction is harsh, the rhymes uncertain, and the numbers displeasing. . . . In this poem there is no nature, for there is no truth; there is no art, for there is nothing new. Its form is that of a pastoral, easy, vulgar, and therefore disgusting.”

Others did not share this view of pastoral. And today poetry based on the convention of casting one’s characters as shepherds and bracketing social institutions so that the world is condensed to their flocks, circumambient nature, and other shepherds, nymphs, and shepherdesses, is more likely to seem excessively artificial and refined rather than easy and vulgar. This pastoral elegy is a lament for the death in a shipwreck of a 25-year-old college friend, Edward King, who here is called the shepherd Lycidas, and much of its strength and complexity comes from the ambiguous interaction of its pagan and Christian pastoral imagery. The plants are classical: laurel is sacred to Apollo, myrtle to Venus, and ivy to Bacchus, though it is also associated with learning by Horace, as in today’s Ivy League, and can, like laurel, form a crown for the poet; it can also be a Christian symbol for immortality (*never sere* means never withered—leaves that do not turn and fall), and myrtle can be linked to mourning rather than to love. The opening phrase, “Yet once more,” inscribes this opening in the tradition of the pastoral elegy, where such plants have been addressed before, as in Virgil’s second eclogue, “et vos, o lauri, carpam et te, proxima myrte, / sic positae quoniam suavis miscetis odores.” (trans. “And you, O laurels, I will pluck, and then you, myrtle, since you are placed so as to mingle your sweet scents.”) But “Yet once more” can also refer to Milton’s own poetic career: he had previously written English and Latin elegies and the masque *Comus*, but had withdrawn to read Greek and Latin to prepare himself for more ambitious, epic projects. So King’s premature death makes the plucking of leaves and berries for a wreath premature—before the time berries are ripe—and Milton is here forced to terminate his poetic apprenticeship and attempt to pluck the leaves and berries—before he is ready—seeking to weave prematurely a poetic crown for himself. But the imagery here is not merely conventional. “I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude / and with forced fingers

rude, shatter your leaves before the mellowing year,” with the metrical emphasis on shatter, foregrounds the violence, the abruptness; and shattering the leaves may suggest that he is not, as the tradition would expect, successfully weaving a poetic crown but groping, tugging, ripping the leaves of the plants he addresses.

Critical articles on “Lycidas” seem uninterested in why the poem speaks to the plants. Why not just “Yet once more I come to pluck the laurel. . . .” etc.? The apostrophe immediately generates poetic energy, moving the poem swiftly into the mode of calling, which it then pursues in repetitive calling of the dead by name:

For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime,
Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer:
Who would sing for Lycidas? . . .

One thing poetic address does is to make of the poem an event, a ritualistic, almost magical calling upon—as happens throughout the poem, which is organized not by narrative, but by a representation of some sequence of events, but by sudden shifts of address:

For instance,
“Begin then, sisters of the sacred well” (muses);

Then to Lycidas,
“But O, the heavy change now thou art gone, / now thou art gone and never
must return.”

Then,
“Where were ye, Nymphs, when the remorseless deep / closed o’er the head
of your loved Lycidas”

Later (see the handout at the end of this speech),
“Return Alpheus, the dread voice is past / That shrunk thy streams, return
Sicilian muse.

And,
“Ye valleys low . . . throw hither all your quaint enameled eyes”

Then,
“O ye dolphins, waft the helpless youth,”

Leading to the consolatory turn at the end,
“Weep no more woeful shepherds, weep no more, / for Lycidas your sorrow is
not dead”

And finally,
“Now, Lycidas, the shepherds weep no more,”

And,
“henceforth thou art the genius of the shore.”

Narrative poems recount one event leading to another. Lyric aims to be the event—or as Alice Fulton trenchantly puts it, “fiction is about what happens *next*; *poetry* is about what happens *now*.” Though lyrics certainly can record happenings in the past—“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood”—their most characteristic temporality is a lyric present, a repeatable present of the event of the poem. “Lycidas” creates a time of the poem in which, by this series of apostrophes, we move back and forth between mourning and consolation. When one development ends, the speaker addresses someone or something else, invoking or convoking.

I reproduced on the handout a celebrated passage from this longish poem, the catalogue of flowers, which I don’t have time to discuss. Suffice it to say that after a passage condemning the venality of the clergy in which the dread voice of St. Peter speaks, the poem returns to pastoral and urges the Sicilian muse, the muse of pastoral, to call the valleys and have them cast their flowers of a thousand hues “to strew the lauriate hearse where Lycid lies.” The catalogue of flowers is a *tour de force* involving double address—the valleys are addressed and asked to speak to the flowers—but I will note only that the conclusion to this passage presents it as a false surmise: “For so to interpose a little ease, / Let our frail thoughts dally with false surmise.” The flowers are beautiful and provide a moment of ease, as our frail thoughts, ill-equipped to deal with the reality of death, can falsely imagine that their beauty provides a consolation, and perhaps more concretely, can falsely imagine that the flowers are mourning Lycidas (“Bid amaranthus all his beauty shed, / And daffidillies fill their cups with tears, / To strew the laureate hearse where Lycid lies.”) Is this an indictment of pastoral poetry itself—as a false surmise, in its tropes that summon nature to mourn the fallen swain? The tropes of a responsive nature are put in question as they are exploited. More specifically, the poem treats the flower-strewn hearse as based on a false supposition—for it does not actually contain the drowned body—and the poem immediately turns to the true condition: “thy bones are hurled. . . .” thee the shores and sounding seas wash far away.”

The acts of address of this poetry work to constitute the speaker as a bardic, visionary voice, in intercourse with natural and unnatural forces, seeking to summon and command plants, muses, nymphs, fountains, dolphins, and shepherds. So doing, and this is crucial, the poem flaunts the hyperbolic, topological nature of lyric, the daring of its performative positing of potentially responsive addressees, and its awareness that this may all be dismissed as false surmise. The poem may not actually convince us that Lycidas is henceforth the genius of the shore, but by the ritualistic performance of its repeated callings or conjuring, it keeps the memory alive.

Quite a few poems in the lyric tradition are addressed to flowers, in part because of the traditional linkage between flowers and poems, poesie and posies, ironically highlighted by the title of Baudelaire’s collection, *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Poems addressed to flowers frequently depend on an analogy between the realm of flowers, with its hierarchies and oppositions, and the realm of humans, so that devotion to certain flowers by analogy involves particular human values. Wordsworth, championing the simple and rustic, wrote two poems called “To the Daisy,” whose meek nature contrasts with the proud rose and the wanton violet. He addresses the daisy as:

“Thou unassuming Common-place
Of Nature, with that homely face,”

The daisy distills the charm of the humble or simple, better than people in humble walks of life, and thus can instruct the speaker:

If stately passions in me burn,
And one chance look to Thee should turn,
I drink out of a humbler urn
A lowlier pleasure;
The homely sympathy that heeds
The common life our nature breeds
A wisdom fitted to the needs
Of hearts at leisure.

Wordsworth's other poem to the daisy describes the poet "playing with similes," calling the daisy a nun, a maiden, a starveling, a Cyclops, but coming back to earth with the literal invocation, "Bright flower"—dismissing poetical fancies in favor of simplicity. Poems addressed to flowers frequently turn out to be about poetry.

Wordsworth also wrote two poems addressed to "The Small Celandine," poems which claim to prefer this flower to "Pansies, lilies, kingcups, daisies," as well as primroses and violets.

The poem addresses the celandine as "Modest, yet withal an elf, bold and lavish of thyself"—a nice way of describing an invasive species:

Careless of thy neighborhood,
Thou dost show thy pleasant face.
On the moor and in the wood,
In the lane—there's not a place,
Howsoever mean it be,
But 'tis good enough for thee.

Flowers can be invested with great significance, usually, as with the daisy, the celandine, or in Waller's "Go lovely rose," which we'll come to in a moment, as a stripped-down model of the human: simplicity, beauty, and mortality are more immediately palpable in the flower. But sometimes flowers are given more complexity and independence. Emily Dickinson who identified with grass so strongly as to write, "I wish I were a hay," wrote beautifully of the burdens of being a flower, of its "profound responsibility."

To pack the bud, oppose the worm,
Obtain its right of dew,
Adjust the heat, elide the wind,
Escape the prowling bee,
Great nature not to disappoint
Awaiting her that day,
To be a flower is profound
Responsibility.

To attempt to see things from the flower's point of view is not just to treat it as sentient—as poetic address does—but to go further and not think of it as having its own view of things. The contemporary poet Louise Glück, in her book *The Wild Iris*, goes very far indeed in this direction. These poems are not addressed to the flower; rather, in many of them one or another flower addresses the poet or gardener, though the perspective of a flower is sufficiently unfamiliar that it is often hard to tell what is happening, who is saying “you” to whom. I offer one of the clearer and most beautiful of these poems, “The Gold Lily.”

As I perceive
 I am dying now and know
 I will not speak again, will not
 Survive the earth, be summoned
 out of it again, not
 a flower yet, a spine only, raw dirt
 catching my ribs, I call you,
 father and master: all around,
 my companions are failing, thinking
 you do not see. How
 can they know you see
 unless you save us?
 In the summer twilight, are you
 close enough to hear
 your child's terror? Or
 are you not my father,
 you who raised me?

The strangeness of this sentimentality makes it work, I think. Perhaps the very transparency of this way of achieving pathos—by attributing such thoughts of abandonment to a flower—enables this poem to come off as it does. This, at any rate, seems to me an extreme and successful case of treating the flower as a radically separate creature, whose difference engages the poet or reader. A very different case, a poem memorized by generations of nineteenth-century school children, is Tennyson's address to an unnamed flower.

Flower in the crannied wall,
 I pluck you out of the crannies,
 I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
 Little flower—but *if* I could understand
 What you are, root and all, and all in all,
 I should know what God and man is.

In this little homiletic poem it is easy to test what difference address makes. Tennyson could have written:

The flower in the crannied wall,
 I pluck it out of the crannies,
 I hold it, root and all, in my hand,
 The little flower—but *if* I could understand

What it is, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is.

The address has the effect of positing a reciprocity between speaker and flower, and then treating the flower as opaque even as the poem displays the superiority of the speaker. Compressing the world of the poem to the encounter of speaker and flower makes the speaker godlike—I pluck you out, flower, root and all, hold you entire in my hand. Understanding a *you* seems more complicated—deeper and richer—than understanding an *it*, so the implication is that while I, the speaker, act like God in relation to you, you are too complex for me to understand, as I in turn am too complex to understand. If the flower were an *it*, the possibility of understanding it might seem less improbable, but addressing the flower in this way the speaker constitutes himself as deeply thoughtful.

I am struck by the fact that poetic address to flowers, unlike many other apostrophic utterances, seldom asks them to do anything. Often apostrophic utterance wills the addressee to perform acts—“O temps, suspends ton vol”—and it thus instantiates the extravagance of lyric, which presumes to ask time to stop or nature to heed its calls. In Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” “O wild west wind, thou breath of autumn’s being . . .” the wind is urged in each of the first three stanzas, to “hear, o hear.” Then,

Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

And finally comes the exhortation,

Make my thy lyre, even as the forest is,
Be thou, spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one.
Drive my dead thoughts over the universe,
Like withered leaves. . . .

But flowers, it seems, are presumed not to act, nor are they generally exhorted to hear. There do seem, though, at least two things flowers can be exhorted to do. One is to die or not to die. Robert Herrick’s famous “To Daffodils” urges them:

Fair daffodils, we weep to see
You haste away so soon:
As yet the early rising sun
Has not attained his noon.
Stay, Stay

Edmund Waller’s “Go lovely rose,” on the other hand, asks the flower to speak and then to die.

Go, lovely rose!
Tell her that wastes her time and me

That now she knows
 When I resemble her to thee
 How sweet and fair she seems to be.

And at the end,

Then die! that she
 The common fate of all things rare
 May read in thee;
 How small a part of time they share
 That are so wondrous sweet and fair.

This flower is urged to speak—a natural implication of apostrophic address is that anything you can speak to might talk in its turn. But above all, the flower is urged to manifest its nature, for the purposes of humans. Generally, flowers are addressed to be told what they are—and what reflections they inspire in the poetic speaker.

Here is Emerson's address to the rhododendron:

Rhodora

I found the fresh Rhodora in the woods,
 Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook,
 To please the desert and the sluggish brook.
 The purple petals, fallen in the pool,
 Made the black water with their beauty gay;
 Here might the red-bird come his plumes to cool,
 And court the flower that cheapens his array.
 Rhodora! if the sages ask thee why
 This charm is wasted on the earth and sky,
 Tell them, dear, that if eyes were made for seeing,
 Then Beauty is its own excuse for being;
 Why thou wert there, O rival of the rose!
 I never thought to ask, I never knew;
 But in my simple ignorance suppose
 The self-same power that brought me there brought you.

This poem starts wonderfully, but with the inversions of line 6 it takes an unfortunate turn. The false modesty of the speaker, vaunting his “simple ignorance,” contrasts with the foolish curiosity of the sages; he can claim ignorance because his address to the flower allows him to urge it to articulate the aesthetic moral of the poem—just as in Keats's “Ode on a Grecian Urn” it is left to the addressed urn to speak in its turn to man, “To whom thou sayest, / Beauty is Truth, Truth beauty, that is all ye know / on earth and all ye need to know.” It has a different status and force if spoken by a personified urn than by a poetic speaker. One important function of poetic address is to create the possibility of messages articulated by the natural world or other objects that become potential speakers only through the event of poetic, apostrophic invocation. Louise Glück, as I mentioned, daringly takes this

a step further by dispensing with the address to the flower and having flowers speak without being spoken to or even placed in a scene.

All of these poems I've considered so far treat the investing of plants with consciousness, voice, and message as a benign matter, but of course it is not. Baudelaire is one of the few to recognize this explicitly. His sonnet "Obsession" is a transformation of and response to the more famous sonnet, "Correspondances," which posits an echoing relation between the visible and invisible, the natural and the supernatural worlds.

Grands bois, vous m'effrayez comme des cathédrales,
 Vous hurlez comme l'orgue; et dans nos cœurs maudits,
 Chambres d'éternel deuil où vibrent de vieux râles,
 Répondent les échos de vos *De profundis*
 Je te hais, Océan! tes bonds et tes tumultes,
 Mon esprit les retrouve en lui; ce rire amer
 De l'homme vaincu, plein de sanglots et d'insultes,
 Je l'entends dans le rire énorme de la mer.
 Comme tu me plairais, ô nuit! sans ces étoiles
 Dont la lumière parle un langage connu!
 Car je cherche le vide, et le noir, et le nu!
 Mais les ténèbres sont elles-mêmes des toiles
 Où vivent, jaillissant de mon œil par milliers,
 Des êtres disparus aux regards familiers.

This is a self-reflexive poem about the imagination's propensity to find itself in nature, to project human meaning onto natural objects. The conventional comparison of cathedrals to forests ("Correspondances" begins "La nature est un temple") is given a perverse twist by a voice that finds that investment frightening rather than exalting, and not surprisingly finds the *rire de la mer* "**amer**," bitter. When nature is animated, as it is by the operations of the imagination, the stars speak a known language (like the rose or rhododendron), but even a black night without stars becomes a screen onto which are projected the dead, or whatever obsesses. Taking up a specular relation to nature, one finds only a projection of the self. Lyric seeking to address the other, making it a subject, may find a specular structure that oppresses as well as confirms identity. A neighboring poem in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, "Alchimie de la douleur," states the point clearly:

L'un t'éclaire avec son ardeur,
 L'autre en toi met son deuil, Nature!
 Ce qui dit à l'un: Sépulture!
 Dit à l'autre: Vie et splendeur!

...

The speaker articulates a morbid imagination:

Dans le suaire des nuages,
 Je découvre un cadavre cher
 Et sur des célestes rivages

Je batis de grands sarcophages.

A modern poetry, self-conscious about the power of the poetic imagination and poetic rhetoric to posit and transform, recognizes that imagination can be a source of torment as well as solace, though of course modern spirits may take a perverse pleasure in the hyperbolic torments thus inflicted: “I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed,” or “Je suis un cimetiere abhorré de la lune” (“I am a cemetery abhorred by the moon”). The energy of hyperbolic poetic characterization is a source of pleasure, as it is to readers who cheerfully repeat such declamations. To declaim “I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed,” is energizing rather than depressing.

Baudelaire wrote that hyperbole and apostrophe are natural to modern poetry, which for him was a post-romantic poetry, but post-Baudelairan modern poetry has generally been more dour and laconic. Since Wordsworth had enthusiastically talked to the humble daisy and invasive celandine, what is left for a modern poet if not the weed. Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote enthusiastically of weeds—“when weeds in wheels shoot long and lovely and lush”—but he did not address them. Here is the contemporary poet, Sandy McClatchey:

Weeds

The pigrush, the poverty grass,
 The bindweed’s stranglehold morning glories,
 The dog blow and ninety-joints—
 They ask so little of us to start with,
 Just a crack in the asphalt,
 Or a subway grate with an hour of weak light.
 One I know has put down roots
 As far as a corpse is buried, its storage stem
 As big as my leg. That one’s called
 Man-under-ground. That one was my grudge.

And suddenly now this small
 Unlooked for joy. Where did *it* come from,
 With these pale shoots
 And drooping lavender bell? Persistent
 Intruder, whether or not
 I want you, you’ve hidden in the heart’s
 Overworked subsoil. Hacked at
 Or trampled on, may you divide and spread,
 Just as, all last night,
 The wind scattered a milkweed across the sky.

That *you* is a very effective touch—one we don’t expect. It moves the poem from poetic reflection to invocation, event, and makes it a bit more than a musing on the resilience of some plants, a celebration of their energy and overcoming of adversity, as the address to a *you* brings speaker and plant together in the hope of dissemination. McClatchey’s last line—discretely linking the weed, the milkweed, and the poet, in hopes of scattering, dissemination, replication—recalls Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind”:

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth,
And by the incantations of this verse,
Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!

Address to nature is not, though, a staple of the modern poetry of nature. A. R. Ammons, whom Roger Gilbert showed to be a powerful interpreter of nature in last year's Harder lecture, writes in a poem posthumously published this year in the collection *Bosh and Flapdoodle*, about the problem of address to nature in the lyric tradition. The "you" of poetic address has a continuing function, but now is harder to attach to natural objects:

now with
space travel and gene therapy that "you" has
moved out of the woods and rocks and streams

and traveled on out so far into space that it
rounds the whole and is, in a way, nowhere to

be found or congratulated,

But let me quote by way of conclusion, the entire second half of "Aubade," in which this discussion of the "you" of poetic address appears.

Sometimes when I say

"you" in my poems and appear to be addressing
the lord above, I'm personifying the contours

of the on high, the ways by which the world
works, however hard to see: for the onhigh

is every time the on low, too, and in the
middle: one lifts up one's voice to the

lineations of singing and sings, in effect,
you, you are the one, the center, it is around

you that the comings and goings gather, you
are the before and after, the around and

through: in all your motions you are ever still,
constant as motion itself: there with

you we abide, abide the changes, abide the
dissolutions and recommencements of our very

selves, abide in your abiding: but of course

I don't mean "you" as anyone in particular
but I mean the center of motions millions of
years have taught us to seek: now with
space travel and gene therapy that "you" has
moved out of the woods and rocks and streams
and traveled on out so far into space that it
rounds the whole and is, in a way, nowhere to
be found or congratulated, and so what is out
there dwells in our heads now as a bit of
yearning, maybe vestigial, and it is a yearning
like a painful sweetness, a nearly reachable
presence that nearly feels like love, something
we can put aside as we get up to rustle up a
little breakfast or contemplate a little
weight loss, or gladden the morning by getting
off to work. . . . [his ellipsis]

The "you" of lyric address leaves the woods and rocks and streams, and dwells in our heads as a bit of yearning.

I would suggest that there is always a *you* in the lyric—one lifts one's voice to the lineations of singing—whether expressed or not, as lyrics strive to be an event in the special temporality of the lyric present. Often that *you* is expressed—the *you* of the beloved, or God, the wind, a flower, a yearning. But the lyric is also a bit of language, a trope, that we can simply push aside as we rustle up breakfast and get off to work.

Handout

The Sick Rose

O Rose, thou art sick!
The invisible worm
That flies in the night
In the howling storm
Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy;
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

—William Blake

Lycidas

Yet once more, O ye Laurels, and once more
 Ye Myrtles brown, with Ivy never-sear,
 I come to pluck your Berries harsh and crude,
 And with forc'd fingers rude,
 Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.
 Bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear,
 Compels me to disturb your season due:
 For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime,
 Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer:
 Who would not sing for Lycidas?

* * *

Return Alpheus, the dread voice is past,
 That shrunk thy streams; Return Sicilian Muse,
 And call the Vales, and bid them hither cast
 Their Bels, and Flourets of a thousand hues. [135]

Ye valleys low where the milde whispers use,
 Of shades and wanton winds, and gushing brooks,
 On whose fresh lap the swart Star sparely looks,
 Throw hither all your quaint enameld eyes,
 That on the green terf suck the honied showres, [140]
 And purple all the ground with vernal flowres.

Bring the rathe Primrose that forsaken dies.
 The tufted Crow-toe, and pale Jasmine,
 The white Pink, and the Pansie freakt with jeat,
 The glowing Violet. [145]

The Musk-rose, and the well attir'd Woodbine,
 With Cowslips wan that hang the pensive hed,
 And every flower that sad embroidery wears:
 Bid Amaranthus all his beauty shed,

And Daffadillies fill their cups with tears, [150]
 To strew the Laureat Herse where Lycid lies.

For so to interpose a little ease,
 Let our frail thoughts dally with false surmise.
 Ay me! Whilst thee the shores and sounding Seas
 Wash far away, ...

—John Milton

Horace, Odes, book 3.13

O fons Bandusiae, splendidior vitro,
 Dulci digne mero non sine floribus,
 Cras donaberis haedo,

Cui frons turgida cornibus
 Primis et venerem et proelia destinat; [5]
 Frustra: nam gelidos inficiet tibi
 Rubro sanguine rivos,
 Lascivi suboles gregis.

Te flagrantis atrox hora Caniculae
 Nescit tangere, tu frigus amabile [10]
 Fessis vomere tauris
 Praebes et pecori vago.

Fies nobilium tu quoque fontium,
 Me dicente cavis impositam ilicem
 Saxis unde loquaces [15]
 Lymphae desiliunt tuae.

O fountain of Bandusia, brighter than glass,
 well do you deserve an offering of sweet wine
 and flowers, and tomorrow you will receive a kid
 with new horns bulging on his brow,
 marking him out for love and war—
 to no avail, since he will stain your cold stream
 with his red blood, this offspring
 of the amorous flock.

The cruel hour of the blazing Dog-star
 cannot touch you. You give delicious
 coldness to oxen weary of the plough
 and the straggling flock.

You too will become a famous fountain
 as I sing of the holm-oak
 above your cave in the rock
 where your waters leap down chattering.

—(trans. David West)

Go, lovely Rose—

Tell her that wastes her time and me,
 That now she knows,
 When I resemble her to thee,
 How sweet and fair she seems to be.
 Tell her that 's young,
 And shuns to have her graces spied,
 That hadst thou sprung
 In deserts where no men abide,
 Thou must have uncommended died.
 Small is the worth
 Of beauty from the light retired:
 Bid her come forth,

Suffer herself to be desired,
And not blush so to be admired.
Then die--that she
The common fate of all things rare
May read in thee;
How small a part of time they share
That are so wondrous sweet and fair!—

—Edmund Waller

William Wordsworth:

From To the Daisy

* * *

If stately passions in me burn,
And one chance look to Thee should turn,
I drink out of a humbler urn
A lowlier pleasure;
The homely sympathy that heeds
The common life our nature breeds
A wisdom fitted to the needs
Of hearts at leisure. . . .

From To the Small Celandine

Careless of thy neighborhood,
Thou dost show thy pleasant face.
On the moor and in the wood,
In the lane—there's not a place,
Howsoever mean it be,
But 'tis good enough for thee.

Bloom—is Result—to meet a Flower

Bloom—is Result—to meet a Flower
And casually glance
Would cause one scarcely to suspect
The minor Circumstance

Assisting in the Bright Affair
So intricately done
Then offered as a Butterfly
To the Meridian—

To pack the Bud—oppose the Worm—

Obtain its right of Dew—
Adjust the Heat—elude the Wind—
Escape the prowling Bee—

Great Nature not to disappoint
Awaiting Her that Day—
To be a Flower, is profound
Responsibility—

—Emily Dickinson

The Gold Lily

As I perceive
I am dying now and know
I will not speak again, will not
Survive the earth, be summoned
out of it again, not
a flower yet, a spine only, raw dirt
catching my ribs, I call you,
father and master: all around,
my companions are failing, thinking
you do not see. How
can they know you see
unless you save us?
In the summer twilight, are you
close enough to hear
your child's terror? Or
are you not my father,
you who raised me?

—Louise Gluck from *The Wild Iris*

Rhodora

I found the fresh Rhodora in the woods,
Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook,
To please the desert and the sluggish brook.
The purple petals, fallen in the pool,
Made the black water with their beauty gay;
Here might the red-bird come his plumes to cool,
And court the flower that cheapens his array.
Rhodora! if the sages ask thee why
This charm is wasted on the earth and sky,
Tell them, dear, that if eyes were made for seeing,
Then Beauty is its own excuse for being;
Why thou wert there, O rival of the rose!

I never thought to ask, I never knew;
But in my simple ignorance suppose
The self-same power that brought me there brought you.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Alchimie de la douleur (The Alchemy of Grief)

L'un t'éclaire avec son ardeur,
L'autre en toi met son deuil, Nature!
Ce qui dit à l'un: Sépulture!
Dit à l'autre: Vie et splendeur!

Hermès inconnu qui m'assistes
Et qui toujours m'intimidas,
Tu me rends l'égal de Midas,
Le plus triste des alchimistes.

Par toi je change l'or en fer
Et le paradis en enfer;
Dans le suaire des nuages,

Je découvre un cadavre cher,
Et sur des célestes rivages
Je bâtis de grands sarcophages.

One's ardour, Nature, makes you bright,
One finds within you mourning, grief!
What speaks to one of tombs and death
Says to the other, Splendour! Life!
Mystical Hermes, help to me,
Intimidating though you are,
You make me Midas's counterpart,
No sadder alchemist than he;
My gold is iron by your spell,
And paradise turns into hell.
I see in winding-sheets of clouds
A dear cadaver in its shroud,
And there upon celestial strands
I raise huge tombs above the sands.

—Charles Baudelaire (trans. James McGowan)

Obsession

Grands bois, vous m'effrayez comme des cathédrales,
Vous hurlez comme l'orgue; et dans nos cœurs maudits,

Chambres d'éternel deuil où vibrent de vieux râles,
 Répondent les échos de vos *De profundis*
 Je te hais, Océan! tes bonds et tes tumultes,
 Mon esprit les retrouve en lui; ce rire amer
 De l'homme vaincu, plein de sanglots et d'insultes,
 Je l'entends dans le rire énorme de la mer.
 Comme tu me plairais, ô nuit! sans ces étoiles
 Dont la lumière parle un langage connu!
 Car je cherche le vide, et le noir, et le nu!
 Mais les ténèbres sont elles-mêmes des toiles
 Où vivent, jaillissant de mon œil par milliers,
 Des êtres disparus aux regards familiers.

You scare me, Great forests you frighten me, like vast cathedrals:
 You roar like an organ, and in our condemned souls,
 aisles of eternal mourning, where past death rattles
 sound, the echos of your *De Profundis* rolls.
 I hate you, Ocean! My mind, in your tumultuous main,
 sees itself: I hear the vast laughter of your seas,
 the bitter laughter of defeated men,
 filled with the sound of sobs and blasphemies.

How you would please me without your stars, O Night!
 I know the language that their light employs!
 Since I search for darkness, nakedness, the Void!
 But the shadows themselves seem, to my sight
 canvases, where thousands of lost beings, alive,
 and with a familiar gaze, leap from my eyes.

—Charles Baudelaire (trans. Gaston Haesse)

Weeds

The pigrush, the poverty grass,
 The bindweed's stranglehold morning glories,
 The dog blow and ninety-joints—
 They ask so little of us to start with,
 Just a crack in the asphalt,
 Or a subway grate with an hour of weak light.
 One I know has put down roots
 As far as a corpse is buried, its storage stem
 As big as my leg. That one's called
 Man-under-ground. That one was my grudge.
 And suddenly now this small
 Unlooked for joy. Where did *it* come from,
 With these pale shoots
 And drooping lavender bell? Persistent

Intruder, whether or not
I want you, you've hidden in the heart's
Overworked subsoil. Hacked at
Or trampled on, may you divide and spread,
Just as, all last night,
The wind scattered a milkweed across the sky.

—J. D. McClatchy

From "Aubade"

. . . . Sometimes when I say
"you" in my poems and appear to be addressing
the lord above, I'm personifying the contours
of the on high, the ways by which the world
works, however hard to see: for the onhigh
is every time the on low, too, and in the
middle: one lifts up one's voice to the
lineations of singing and sings, in effect,
you, you are the one, the center, it is around
you that the comings and goings gather, you
are the before and after, the around and
through: in all your motions you are ever still,
constant as motion itself: there with
you we abide, abide the changes, abide the
dissolutions and recommencements of our very
selves, abide in your abiding: but of course
I don't mean "you" as anyone in particular
but I mean the center of motions millions of
years have taught us to seek: now with
space travel and gene therapy that "you" has
moved out of the woods and rocks and streams
and traveled on out so far into space that it
rounds the whole and is, in a way, nowhere to
be found or congratulated, and so what is out
there dwells in our heads now as a bit of

yearning, maybe vestigial, and it is a yearning
like a painful sweetness, a nearly reachable

presence that nearly feels like love, something
we can put aside as we get up to rustle up a

little breakfast or contemplate a little
weight loss, or gladden the morning by getting

off to work. . . . [his ellipsis].

—A. R. Ammons, “Aubade,” *Bosh and Flapdoodle*, 2005

Flower in the Crannied Wall

Flower in the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies,
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
Little flower –but *if* I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is.

—Alfred, Lord Tennyson