

1970

# Louise Bogan

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## Recommended Citation

Ramsey, Paul. "Louise Bogan." *The Iowa Review* 1.3 (1970): 116-124. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.1105>

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# Louise Bogan

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Paul Ramsey

Louise Bogan is a great lyric poet.

Greatness in poetry is hard to discuss, especially in the lyric. It is comparatively easy to show that Bogan is a very good poet: powerful in feeling, surprising and chaste in diction, strong in structure, masterly in imagery and rhythm, important in themes; but greatness in the lyric is impact and profundity and so simple as almost to defy scrutiny. The thing happens; the note is struck; in Bogan's own language the "terrible . . . / Music in the granite hill" sounds, and there we are, where her poems arrive time and again.

Lyrics are to be judged by depth and perfecting, not range, yet the reach of her work is more than its slightness in quantity might suggest. She writes mostly on the traditional lyric subjects, themselves comprising no small range, of love, time, passion, grief, nature, death, music, stoicism, limitation, art (not overmuch), memory, dreams. She also has done some very fine light verse with its own special quartz wryness, and manages to have something to say of psychiatrists, malevolent cocktail parties, Jonathan Swift, St. Christopher.

It is the saint who is most the stranger. He is tough and able (arrived from a fresco), an infrequent sort of visitor to her poems. Religion is almost wholly lacking in her work, except in hints, including the brilliant but puzzling hints of the near light verse of "I Saw Eternity," and the spirits who do appear ("Spirit's Song," "The Daemon") are dark ones. Perhaps the lack is an ingredient in the grief which persistently and profoundly underdwells her poems.

Her unique talent is ending poems. I know no other poet who ends so many poems so well. Her endings startle and compose, in most of the poems I discuss, and in at least these others: "Betrothed," "Come Break with Time," "The Frightened Man," "Kept," "Late," "The Romantic," "To Be Sung on the Water," and "Winter Swan."

Her rhythms are brilliant, unique, and work in a variety of kinds: the short-line free verse of "The Dragonfly"; the free verse, varied in line length, often near or in rising rhythm, of "Summer Wish"; the mostly rising rhythm with five strong stresses of "Didactic Piece," one of her best poems; the long-line free verse, quite different in the two poems, of "Baroque Comment" and "After the Persian"; the special falling rhythms of "Train Tune"; and her "Poem in Prose," mostly, despite its title, in rising rhythm with some counterposing with falling rhythms.

These poems, all done well, show a very unusual range of metrical accomplishment, but it is no accident that her most powerful poems are work in which, in Theodore Roethke's words about these poems, the "ground beat of the great

tradition can be heard.” The great tradition in English verse since the late sixteenth century is accentual-syllabics, primarily iambics, and Roethke’s words are well chosen: some of her best poems are accentual-syllabic, and some are near, near enough for her pulsing variations (especially the pressure of grouped, strong accents) to be heard as changes from the norm.

The tradition is heard in other ways than metrical, in diction, image, and thought, yet always heard afresh. She does not violate the dignity of the commonplace by self-indulgent attitudes or freakish privacies, yet has something distinct to say.

She can even write greatly about emotion, a rare achievement, as in the superb “Men Loved Wholly Beyond Wisdom”:

Men loved wholly beyond wisdom  
Have the staff without the banner.  
Like a fire in a dry thicket  
Rising within women’s eyes  
Is the love men must return.  
Heart, so subtle now, and trembling,  
What a marvel to be wise,  
To love never in this manner!  
To be quiet in the fern  
Like a thing gone dead and still,  
Listening to the prisoned cricket  
Shake its terrible, dissembling  
Music in the granite hill.

The poem says that passion is destructive and frustration terrible and fearful. These are known truths, yet only in Shakespeare’s sonnets known with fiercer precision than here. The precision is reached by the images and the rhythms. The visions and tensions tell us what is felt; what is felt is the subject of the poem. Thus the poem is new knowledge of a very important kind. Of the images the staff without the banner is just and potent, requiring a moment’s reflection. The other images have an immediately seen propriety yet lead to far reaches of feeling: fire, dry thickets, fern, prison, granite.

The poem is, in logical shape, a dilemma. A disjunction is offered, this or that, each alternative leading to the tragic. The poem does not say or imply whether other alternatives exist, but surely means—and says in its profound sense of closure, of completeness—there tragedy exists in any resolution of human sexuality, a truth of great moral importance.

Metrically the poem is magnificent, as are several of her poems. It is the one poem I shall discuss in some metrical detail. The principles involved apply to other poems of hers which are near traditional norms. This poem stays within hearing distance of the accentual-syllabic and turns to iambics in the last verse. The variations are more than would occur in more traditional meters but still are heard as variations. To move further from those expectancies, as much modern

near-iambic free verse does, is to lose strength, the strength of vibrancy across the norm. The pattern of the poem is rising trimeter, and the following verses scan traditionally: vv. 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 13. The first line scans as trochee trochee iamb trochee, but the effect is not of a falling line, because of the comparative strength of “loved” and because an iambic substitution breaks a trochaic pattern much more than a trochaic substitution breaks an iambic pattern. Shifting back and forth from rising to falling rhythm, and grouping strong stresses together often in unusual ways, are the two means by which she most frequently varies from the standard procedures of accentual-syllabic. The bacchiac (light followed by two strong), a most unusual foot in English verse, occurs often enough in her poetry to be a singular feature. Several times in her poems the bacchiac is correct in the scansion, and the grouping more often occurs when some other scansion would apply. It occurs in verse eight, of which the best scansion is bacchiac iamb iamb feminine ending (others, acceptable foot by foot, would violate the trimeter pattern).

The sixth line scans as trochees, with iambic movement between the commas; the next to last verse scans as straight trochees, with rocking rhythm after the comma. The last verse begins falling but turns back to resolving iambs; its shape, iambic with trochee in the first place, is traditional. The struggle against the norm subsides; what is sounded, sounds.

Such rhythms are empowered by a control that subtilizes intense feeling, by passion that extends and renews form, and bear a real analogy to the subject of the poem; the contrast of, the struggle between, restraint and passion. The subject appears directly or indirectly in a number of her poems. “Ad Castitatem” deals directly with the theme. It is a good poem, well structured (parallel invocations with nice distinctions and some narrative progress) and beautiful in imagery, especially in the unforgettable “a breeze of flame.” The rhythms are delicate but comparatively lax, mixing short-line free verse and iambs without achieving the intensities the kinds separately can have.

“The Alchemist” is about the passion of the mind in struggle with the passion of the flesh. The poem is in strict iambic tetrameter, except for some truncated lines, truncated iambic tetrameter being itself an important traditional measure; and once again the rhythmical changes are intense, perhaps too intensely mimetic in “ceased its sudden thresh.” The poem is about the failure of the will to govern passion, yet displays, in opposition to that theme, will governing passion to a single majestic continued poetic metaphor which is the poem. Most poems—they are legion nowadays—about the impossibility of the control or understanding of our experience are, with more consistency than Bogan’s poem displays, written in lax and disordered styles and rhythms, but are for the same reason much inferior to Bogan’s poems.

The view of the poem is stoic, anti-rational, pessimistic, and at least approaches physicalism. If “flesh” is not the sole reality, it is the controlling one, and the mind submits. Since I believe that all four of these views have something seriously wrong with them, my admiration needs explaining. It will not do to separate

aesthetics and belief, since one responds to, is moved by, the attitudes expressed in and through the forms, nor will it (simply) do to appeal to “imaginative patterns of experience” or the like as against belief, since, for one thing, some imaginative patterns of experience are more moving and more in accord with reality than others, that is, imaginative patterns themselves can be judged as better and worse. For a second thing, to insist that we are moved in poems by imaginative patterns of experience under or across beliefs is to imply that such patterns are more valid than the beliefs and that to be consistent one should reject the beliefs. Tolerance becomes a monism, and there are logical problems in belief which neither politeness nor rhetoric can dissolve.

What validates the poem is its truth, partial but relevant, and deeply seen. Passion is powerful; not all can be controlled; reasonings fail; experience can be grim and must be met honestly. That is not all there is to say; but there is that much to say, as this poem and other of her poems beautifully show.

Nor is she here offering, or necessarily exemplifying, a general truth. The alchemist in the poem is one (one individual) who seeks a passion of the mind and finds unmysterious flesh. Others may successfully go beyond the submission to passion, for instance the speaker in “Knowledge,” who knows the limits of passion and its treasures, seeks to learn beyond passion and finds in the poem’s success an experience which goes beyond the self.

“Knowledge” is over-structured, each verse paralleling the corresponding verse in the other stanza, but the parallelism does strengthen the impact of the last two verses “Trees make a long shadow / And a light sound.” In these verses the richness of quantity and the curious grouping of accent (the simplest scansion of the next-to-last verse is trochee bacchiac feminine ending) abet the creation of the physical, literal, perfected ending which is the knowledge the poem speaks of and seeks.

“Henceforth, From the Mind” turns from the perception of nature to the strangeness of the mind’s reflection of the world. It is one of her best known poems, and remains one of my favorites despite the poor second stanza. Poor writing is very rare in Bogan’s work; in fact she is one of the most consistent poets in this respect since Campion and Herrick; but the second stanza of the poem is crudely written and has a bad confusion caused by syntax. In “joy you thought” the joy from the tongue is in meaning other than the powerful joy of youth—the difference is the point of the stanza—but the syntax identifies them, and the confusion damages the comparison. Shakespeare at times says more in his syntactical thickets than simple syntax could obtain; and in Bogan’s “Didactic Piece” the syntax of the first stanza, especially of the last verse in it, is dislocated or else very clumsy, yet does not for me damage the emotional force of the passage. Here the syntax does harm, because Bogan says something less and more confused than she meant. The last three verses of the stanza are heavy-handed clichés, with some overstressed alliteration.

The first stanza, however, is well written and of high generalizing power, and the last two stanzas are one of the most perfectly modulated analogies in English

poetry. The image is not phenomenological, though it could have been pushed that way easily enough, since what one hears in a shell is one's blood, not the sea; but the poem has no hint of that. The mind's view of experience is strange, distant, and modified by emotion and memory, but the line to reality is still there; the echo is of truth. What is true is truly loved, even at a distance.

Love moves in grief and dreams, deeply, darkly, in many of her poems; her themes mix there. "I said out of sleeping," says "Second Song," as less explicitly say her poems often. What comes from or descends to sleeping is lucid and other. "Second Song" is a delicate farewell to passion whose delicacy is crossed by the "Black salt, black provender." The phrase may be vaginal, or anal, or for all I know or can prove neither; but to say so is not to explain the force of the phrase, since (presumably) many phrases share such sources; the power of the phrase remains literally incalculable. Its force in the poem comes in some part from its unexpectedness in context, as though she were applying her own rule in "Sub Contra" that notes should be "delicate and involute" but "Let there sound from music's root / One note rage can understand."

She asks of wine in "To Wine." to offer "All that is worth / Grief. Give that beat again." Grief is in the strength of her dreams. Dreams open on reality that the day does not reckon, reality of the mind and, as she hints once in a while, perhaps beyond. In her criticism she is sometimes for the untrammelled in art or sexuality, celebrating modernism for its freeing of the unconscious; but in her verse she never loses touch with mind's and form's lucidities even when sounding the murmurous kingdom of the undernotes. A touch of severe conscience, a passion for truth without pretension, a vested memory (I like to think) of the rockscape of her native Maine, keep her to a center where extremes meet and irradiate each other.

"Come, Sleep . . ." (spaced periods hers) is about dreaming. It describes, in magnificently fresh and concise phrases, bee, ant, whale, palm, flower, grass; asks whether they dream; replies:

Surely, whispers in the glassy corridor  
Never trouble their dream.  
Never, for them, the dark turreted house reflects itself  
In the depthless stream.

The stream is of the mind's depth and it may be deeper. Since the stream is depth-less, not to be measured, we cannot say how far it goes in or beyond the mind. The shades of voice are haunted utterance, reflective of their meaning; yet the house of the poem is well built.

Two of her best known poems, "The Dream" and "The Sleeping Fury," are imagined accounts of dreams, and "Medusa" is a retold myth, very like a dream. "The Dream" and "The Sleeping Fury," though very well done, are less successful and less dreamlike for me than other poems in which dreams flash in or cross. Perhaps the clarity of narrative development, the conscious visibility of

Freudian meanings, or the not quite persuasively earned reversals get in those poems' way, or in mine.

"Medusa" perfects its motion in stillness, becoming image and example of her lyrics. Good lyrics are active objects, Bogan's especially so, steadier in shape and livelier in motion than most. She, like Medusa, fixes motion; unlike Medusa, she does not stop motion. If one fixes motion so that it stops, one has not fixed *motion*; one has usurped its place. Zeno's arrow does not fly. "Medusa," which is about the startlingness of stopped motion, is itself active and changeless, each note struck, and heard. The tipped bell does make its sound.

What the poem is about, beyond the legend, is not made clear. The legend is retold, not as allegory, although it sounds allegorical, but as private experience. One may apply analogies, to death, eternity, time, the past, the paralysis of fear, a moment of trance, but such are analogies, not given meanings, and the poem provides no bridge to any of them. Analogies are subclasses of a larger class; and subclasses are not each other's meanings, except when intentionally made so by signals. Nor are the poem's psychic sources its meaning in the way that psychic sources are part of the meaning within "The Dream" and "The Sleeping Fury." Sources and analogies help to empower the poem; but the poem does not say them. It happens; and it stops.

"Old Countryside" is of the most etched yet suggestive lyrics in the language. Its sensuous description is firm as eye can hold; what is unsaid, painfully unheard, is the silence. The impression of clarity is so final that it is startling to find surface difficulties which make the obscure silence even stranger.

The "we" is unidentified, perhaps generic: it could refer to friends, lovers, brother and sister. The time sequence is elusive. "All has come to proof" since the day remembered of the attic in the country house on a stormy day. The third stanza refers to a time between the time of the memory in stanzas one and two and the present time; since the present is "long since" that nearer time, the first time must be long long since. "Far back" from the time of the third stanza occurs the fourth stanza. The "far back" suggests space, as though the last severe images were in a place that endured "in the stillest of the year" and the stillness stops time and space, in vision. Chronologically the fourth stanza, which has snow, occurs at least one winter before the "winter of dry leaves" and could be much earlier. One cannot tell the relation between the time of the fourth and first stanzas, except that the first stanza seems earlier. It does not matter. Memory makes time past irremediably far and contemporary, as does the poem.

One detail puzzles, either an odd ellipsis or a shift to the godlike, the *we* pulling down oak leaves in a winter of dry leaves, as though they were the agents of the change. The detail in general is simply the finest I know in a lyric poem, total in the clarity of what is seen and in the integrity of what is felt: "The summer thunder, like a wooden bell, / Rang in the storm . . . ," the "mirror cast the cloudy day along / The attic floor . . . ," ". . . we heard the cock / Shout its

unplaceable cry, the axe's sound / Delay a moment after the axe's stroke," and then the perfection of love and clear pain of the last stanza:

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

The rhythms are uniquely hers; the meter is conventional without variation. The poem is in the form called "the heroic quatrain." Except for four anapests, anapestic substitution being normal in much nineteenth- and twentieth-century iambs, and the graceful trimeter in stanza two, no variation occurs that one could not find in Dryden's heroic quatrains. The quatrain is traditionally used for narrative, generalizing, and explicit meditation (Dryden's *Annus Mirabilis* and Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*); here it is used for particularizing, and implicit meditation. Its "narration" is the narrating and relating of memories. Like much in Gray and Dryden, it focuses motion and stillness in quietly echoing tones; and it achieves a sharpness of definition unique in the examples I know of the form, either historical or modern.

In "Song for the Last Act," perhaps her greatest poem and certainly the one I find most moving, her powerfully controlled energies throb with a different resonance. Of all her poems it has the most visible frame (a variation of the refrain verse is repeated at both the beginning and end of each of the three stanzas) and the most radical wildness of meaning and image.

Now that I have your face by heart, I look  
Less at its features than its darkening frame  
Where quince and melon, yellow as young flame,  
Lie with quilled dahlias and the shepherd's crook.  
Beyond, a garden. There, in insolent ease  
The lead and marble figures watch the show  
Of yet another summer loath to go  
Although the scythes hang in the apple trees.

Now that I have your face by heart, I look.

Now that I have your voice by heart, I read  
In the black chords upon a dulling page  
Music that is not meant for music's cage,  
Whose emblems mix with words that shake and bleed.  
The staves are shuttled over with a stark  
Unprinted silence. In a double dream  
I must spell out the storm, the running stream.  
The beat's too swift. The notes shift in the dark.

Now that I have your voice by heart, I read.



Now that I have your heart by heart, I see  
 The wharves with their great ships and architraves;  
 The rigging and the cargo and the slaves  
 On a strange beach under a broken sky.  
 O not departure, but a voyage done!  
 The bales stand on the stone; the anchor weeps  
 Its red rust downward, and the long vine creeps  
 Beside the salt herb, in the lengthening sun.  
 Now that I have your heart by heart, I see.

The first stanza is mellow description with seemingly firm shapes, yet the firmness is in a way only a seeming. Art and nature share the passage, and one cannot exactly visualize the relation of parts. A face is a face in a portrait whose frame is darkened by time and itself painted with flowers, by a window which gives on an actual garden; *or* the face is framed by a garden behind which is another garden. Neither statement quite reaches, and the small sur-rationality prepares for the second stanza.

The metaphor in the opening of the first stanza is general, "Now that I have your face by heart, I look," varied to the musical and self-inconsistent in the second stanza: "Now that I have your voice by heart, I read (the music)." To have music by heart is precisely not to read it. The music in the second stanza breaks loose beyond itself and stutable meaning and returns, storming the silence of its passion. To paraphrase one needs to repeat the metaphors: the music read on the page is not for music's cage; the emblems mix with words, shake and bleed; the staves are shuttled over with silence. The general meaning, however, is in its tending clear: understanding the person addressed is like knowing musical notes and what in music reaches through and beyond the notes into love and pain and passion. To understand is to relate the formulable knowledge and the mystery, as the stanza does, in subject and feeling. The "double dream" includes the music and the silence. (The shift to the image of the stream was probably influenced by two lines from "Secret Treasure" from Sara Teasdale's book *Strange Victory*, a book praised by Bogan in *Achievement in Modern Poetry*. The lines are "Fear not that my music seems / Like water locked in winter streams." The first stanza, even more certainly, echoes some details from "In a Darkening Garden" in the same book.)

In the third and last stanza, the poem moves away from the shifting of meaning to an abundantly clear and plangent image of a port, the sea's edge as an image of oncoming death. It is a traditional image, realized with greatness, with as much beauty and regret as the first stanza's, as much strangeness of pain as the second stanza's, and as much control of the exact measure of sound touched in image on shaded meaning and feeling as that of any poem in our heritage:

. . . the anchor weeps  
 Its red rust downward, and the long vine creeps  
 Beside the salt herb, in the lengthening sun.  
 Now that I have your heart by heart, I see.

It is a great poem, and substantial to my argument. For the case for poetic greatness is always, finally, the poems. To say that some of her lyrics will last as long as English is spoken is to say too little. For since value inheres in eternity, the worth of her poems is not finally to be measured by the length of enduring. To have written "Song for the Last Act," "Old Countryside," "Men Loved Wholly Beyond Wisdom," "Didactic Piece," "Medusa," "Henceforth, from the Mind," "The Alchemist," "Second Song," "Night," and some dozens of other poems of very nearly comparable excellence is to have wrought one of the high achievements of the human spirit, and to deserve our celebration and our love.

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