

Max Wickert

THE MASTERY

(Freely after Guido Cavalcanti's "Donna mi priegha")



This poem was written around 1990 and presented in 1995 at the Robert Graves Memorial Conference in The Poetry and Rare Books Collection, University at Buffalo. The best-known English version of Cavalcanti's canzone is by Ezra Pound—a vigorous piece of modernism that, however, totally ignores the prosodic intricacy of the original. There is an essay by Graves that berates Yeats for letting Ezra im-Pound his diction. I think of my Cavalcanti version as dis-emPounded in this sense. It is a free translation, but in an altogether different way from Pound's.

Max Wickert

The Mastery

--freely after Guido Cavalcanti's "Donna mi priegha"

A woman bids me speak whose gentle will
makes joy of trouble, so I say: There clings
a potency, terror, charm, temptation, skill
ubiquitously to terrestrial things
so grand, "love" is its only name and springs
to every lip. Even men who would deny
its worth have felt some brushing of its wings.
But not for them these words; I only cry
to the discerning who know how and why
a slovenly heart in this cause has no wit
till nature makes a case-in-point of it.

Not that I have a knack or an urge to split
technical terms or to scan abstruse concerns--
what locus love proceeds from, or what writ
warrants her habeas corpus, what new turns
her flame may execute each time she burns.
I cannot fix her essence, nor have leisure
to count vibrations when her ocean churns.
I cannot even find a common measure
to gauge why saying "I love" should give such pleasure,
much less decide if it makes sense to say
there is one image which gives love away.

I only know: love sees the light of day
in that part of the mind where memory
stands still, emerges slowly to display
her white mists hovering on the pitch-black sea
of spiritual war--rises and means to be
forever. Suddenly she is there--a power
once and for all created. Swiftly she
seizes some name as if it were a dower
destined for her of yore, and in an hour
steals from the secretest soul her act and art,
her quality of will straight from the heart.

Though a visible shape may be her place to start,
she soon outsoars her every origin,
her active mood involves it as a part
in the completely possible as in
an ultimate subject, a domain to win
where she must rule and will not budge. Yet she,
once there, cannot be still, has always been
incapable of settling. She shines out, must be
her own perpetual result and see
the end: not pleasure but a state so high
each image for it seems a shallow lie.

Not that she is a virtue--a far cry
from that. Rather, her reticence is where
perfections find their origins and die.
Propose any perfection: she is there
already. But you can't grasp it, I swear--
you feel it. She is not what saves you, she's
what judges you. No subtlety can dare
hope to survive her sovereign certainties.
The keenest eye grows blind where love's eye sees,
though she herself has far from subtle skills
and therefore takes for friends the simplest wills.

And yet, how easily her power kills--
for instance, when she's head-strongly resisted
or when the artless impulse she instills
is senselessly interpreted or twisted;
but also when you find no clog existed
to thwart her aim but one: that you were not
perfect enough. Love will not be enlisted
among the functions of the self. No plot
confines her, no neglect. She is no jot
the less in power after or because
you chance to have forgotten that she was.

When anything is so crucial that all laws
seem mere caprice, all yardsticks bent, it means
love is already there. With never a pause
for easement or adornment, she careens
from pole to pole, spurning all in-betweens,
changing her colors, weeping with laughter, clear
and in the clouds at once, now making scenes,
now fleeing far from them. By turns sincere
and sly, she can contort your face with fear,
gives in all companies but little rest,
and least of all in company with the best.

Her strangeness makes men groan, and they feel pressed
by her to stare into a bottomless hole
at a conflagration of all thirsts, that nest
of ashes where all wishes glow like coal.
No man imagines love who shirks the whole
encounter with her. Something more than mating,
feeling her is a matter of the soul,
beyond all question and beyond all stating;
a matter not at all of simply waiting
to be surprised by joy, and least of all
of knowing something, either great or small.

It is a matter of a glance, a call,
nature to semblant nature signaling,
praising more joy than could ever befall
more surely with each instant. From a thing
so close to him, what man can hide? who swing
his weapon high enough to aim and fire
at a thing so close to him? No, it must bring,
a thing so close, fear to his soul, entire
terror of the heights to which he must aspire.
Fear forces courage and the skill to dare.
He hurls himself, as at a bulls-eye, there!

Yet never a glance from any face can bare
the slightest clue how to direct the aim.
Toward such a target a man must fall or flare
heart first, rush in, not fathoming its name
or form, the searing and intangible flame
flung out from his entire selfhood. Far
from color, a divided thing, the same
and other, in its darkness of one star,
that light shines. Far from where deceivers are,
faithful and singular in exiled grace
mercy is born, and in no other place.

Well, song: you surely have the wherewithal
to encounter whom you please, your countenance
tricked out peculiarly enough to call
for the applause of what you mean from all
who have discretion, while your sort of dance
with all the others scarcely stands a chance.