Max Wickert

THE MASTERY
(Freely after Guido Cavalcanti’s “Donna mi priegeha”)
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.
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The Mastery

--freely after Guido Cavalcanti’s “Donna mi priegeha"

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,  
one 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.