



Mary Gordon

the Frost Medal Lecture

Introduction by

MARY GORDON

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“GRAVITY AND GRACE” IS THE TITLE OF A BOOK by Simone Weil, an author whom both Mariw Ponsot and I are in the way of being devoted to. And it seems to me that the beautiful work of Marie Ponsot is marked by this attention to both the world’s gravity and its grace. Beautifully weighed down by the flesh, the weight of nature, the weight of form, Marie’s work takes flight—with us in its beak—at shocking, and surprising moments. This is the flight of the mind, the flight of the surprising image, the flight of the unpredictable event, inexplicable passion or pathos. Consider this recent poem “Pathetic Fallacies are Bad Science But.” It begins with the literally earthy image of “leaf-trash” that “chokes the stream bed,” which requires that the poet “rake the muck out.” That work being done, the poet orders herself, and us perhaps to “stand back” and “watch.” But we must watch in a particular way. We are urged to “see clear, resist the drag of images, Take nature as it is, not Dame of Kind. Act in events; touch what you

name/Abhor easy obverts of natural metaphor. Let human speech breathe out its best poor bridges/from mind to world, mind to self, mind to mind.” What a complex and noble task this is, to see clear, to use language for its most humane purposes: connection, to resist its seductions in the favor of its clarity, to refuse to place its powers above the powers of action and touch. The poet sees a bird, a thrush, and says yes to it. The thrush reminds her of a book on the philosophy of language she read long ago. The philosopher Suzanne Langer tells of a thrush who sings out a shocked song of mourning as its mate is carried off by a hawk. The poet recalls this act of reading, which cannot remain only an act of language cut off from life: “I read this drenched in bird-panic/its spine-fusing loss all song, all loss; that loss mine/awash in unanswered unanswered song/ and I cannot claim we are not desolate.”

From nature to mind to loss to lamentation: the heartbreaking word desolate the entirely earned last word of the beautiful poem. No barrier between mind and nature, self and world, language and act: everything redeemed, enclosed in the power of desolation.

The gravity and grace of a life of relationship is an important theme in Marie Ponsot’s work. If we look at “Advice: AD Haereditates,” we encounter a poem that is part allegory, part living will. She offers water to her children. She tells them:

“For there is never as much water
 Available to share or store as we’d like,
 never. Nor do most of us manage
 to give enough time to locating
 new springs and keeping
 old sorts of jars, vials, bottles
 both safe and accessible. I hear
 they do it better, in some places
 nowadays they have special process.
 Probably, voyaging, you’ll learn
 Improvements in methods I haven’t dreamed of.
 That’s progress. For instance,
 One way my mother didn’t know, I learned
 On a voyage of my own: Be dry be as dry
 With yourself as you can, so as to
 Absorb what you need in passing
 From the ground or right from the air.
 It can happen. Though you miss
 The shocking joy of taste,
 It will do you good anyway.

How the wisdom of these lines mocks the shallowness of conventional wisdom, how the journey of the image of water Marie takes us through in these lines opens the sluice gates of our understanding. The necessary dryness; the difficult dryness, without which wisdom is merely sop. Wisdom is one of the great gifts Marie Ponsot gives us. Because for me, Marie Ponsot’s poetry is a species of wisdom literature, in that it is about the essential things, not about itself, that although the language is incandescent it is the companion of, and in the service of the truth: it is not alone on its own solipsistic march. The nature of truth proffered us by Marie Ponsot is its insistence that the truth is never simple, and never only one. “Pourriture Noble,” noble rottenness, is a poem about the marvelous outcome of bad behaviour. The l’ord Eyquem was too busy chasing a woman to tend to the proper making of his wine, the wine should have been spoilt or nonexistent, instead, it is bliss on the tongue, golden, savorable. And so Marie Ponsot warns us: “Never Prophesy. You can’t. So don’t try. Lust, pride, and lethargy/May cause us misery/Or bliss. The meanest mistake/ has a point to make. Listen to the play of that language. Play in two senses of the word: it plays like a musical instrument, and it delights us with its jumpy adherence to the rules of rhyme. And it knocks over with a quick sharp kick of the heels, or perhaps with a wag of the tail all notions of propriety and bourgeois causality. The grasshopped triumphs, the

ant is foxed. There is grace beyond good behavior, beyond any of our deserving. Like her beloved Aesop, Ponsot ends this fable with a moral: “Age is not/ all dry rot/ It’s never too late/ Sweet is your real estate.” Fable or nursery rhyme: words sung to children, whispered to children at the edge of sleep. The wisdom that we need to live by. A wisdom that does not suggest raging against the dying of the light, like the urgent young Dylan Thomas or the betrayed old man Yeats, or Picasso furious at the fate of the dying animal. Like Matisse, as she ages she grows lighter, simpler, her wisdom more striking, more profound.

But if your taste is for a wisdom that is a single truth that wants the definite article “the” Marie Ponsot is not for you. Because in the same volume as “Pourriture Noble” is “And A Large Serving Dish”: “The dish itself is Deomosthenes/age/ Its suave lines issue an invitation, open-ended, a strange attractor. It tells you it will if you eat from it tech/ your deepening night to brighten/ at the depth where no gesture/ is straightforward or false, and you do not need to expect/ you can rise above suffering.” A whole bookstore’s worth of self-help books go tumbling down the steps of Disney World here: suffering is our lot, and yet, along the way, there seems to be those golden tastes on the tongue.

I know that Marie Ponsot would not hesitate, as some of her younger sisters might, to call herself a feminist poet. She would never deny that her wisdom is rooted in the female body; body of a girl, daughter, lover, mother, grandmother. Yet she will have no truck for essentialist fuzziness. Latinist and formalist, she has gone to school as well to masters who are taskmasters: the embellishes Hopkins, the plain-spoken Williams, garlanded Marvell. And yet she is clear in claiming a female identity nourished and enriched by the foremothers who have given their lives for a life of the mind when the odds were enormous. She dedicates a poem “Love is Not Love” to Elena Cornaro, first woman PhD born in Padua, 1647. She says, “I reach for comfort/ to the left out lives of women here and gone/ They lend them willingly. They know my need/ They do not hate me for my crying/ It beats despair.”

And this is what the work of Marie Ponsot is for us: a vessel of hope in a time in which it is all too easy to despair. She is one of our national treasures, if we are the nation we wish we were instead of the nation we are.

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Frost Medal Lecture by
MARIE PONSOT

I STAND HERE AND YOU HAVE COME HERE BECAUSE what we like to read and write is poetry. We like poetry a lot. I think that's because we experience it as the primitive dialect of our human race. That's what makes the difference in words at work in poems.

This isn't the reasoning I find everywhere. Most talk even by poets, about poetry, is either autobiography and anecdotal, or entertained from the point of view of a reader—that is after the fact of writing. So if I want to wonder about this essentially different use of language, I can just wing it. Here's what I think:

We begin making poems as babbling infants, and that's a first reason to claim poetry as primitive. Inspired and perhaps hard-wired, infants babble. Poetry begins as babble.

Let me try to describe that babble from memory: Infants, with no reference to subject or meaning, like spontaneous utterance. They find a vowel-sound and a consonant sound, and say them together: abababab or ararara. They expand, and say a small suite of the syllable they've made, often with a neat pause between sets: ababab ababab ababab.

It's a stream of syllables, rhymed, iterative, reiterative. Its aim or goal is itself. I evokes moments of acute attention, sometimes, as if even infants like to hear themselves think. It is, in all these ways, a primitive language, and it is a poem.

Hard-wired as we are, and born mimics that we are, we can't help ourselves really; young and old we just do what we can. Soon the babbling morphs into runs of sound that echo the tunes infants hear in adults' sentences. These are the seamless tunes there are no separations into word-sound yet. It's not words that come first by rhymed and rhythmic repetitions of the structures of whole sentences and their memorable music.

These events of language acquisition before the time of words seem to me marked by flashes of keen attentiveness and by pleasure in the doing. My moves in the process were absolutely ordinary, conventional, untutored, unselfconscious. I found it ordinary—and astonishing, conventional—and astonishing. And I still find moves characteristic of babbling behavior right there at the foot of

humane letters. We write for many reasons, but one that keeps us writing the possibility of strong pleasure as it carries us deep into the purely human event of language. No two people have language in mind in quite the same way. Our language is particular to us—that's why we are able to be original.

Language minds us. Language minds memory, minds the substrata of thought, minds the means of imagining and the imagination itself. Language is our single greatest possession. Temporary though it be, this possession of a languaged consciousness is also known as a mind of our own. With our language to think with and through, with language to bind and loosen memory, we have access to that boundless imagined world where we are whole because we are on our own, and therefore incomparable.



Marie Ponsot

The attentiveness and pleasure an infant takes in babble change soon enough, but first they introduce a state that is, I'd say, what poetry hopes of us, and for us: enraptured attention.

My final flip of speculation is this: usually the change takes place in a shared shock of recognition, and in the adults' thrill of first hearing abababa become Papa or Dada. Even cartoons celebrate this ordinary and momentous event. It's huge. I see it as having dual effects: The first is the realization of a break-through. Mind reaches mind as babble shifts into the code of intimate transcendence. The second is the open-sesame beginning of purposeful social inter-

course. From now on, the babbled little tunes will have increasing instances of intentional correspondence. The poems we love exhibit both intimate transcendence and purposeful social significance. The entire sum of what I've been proposing is that both strands—passion and action—are rooted in the universal human voice of babble, and invest our primitive voices with the power to make us present to ourselves and to the given world, as listeners and makers of language.

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POURRITURE NOBLE

a moral tale, for Sauternes, the fungus cenaria, and the wild old

Never prophesy.
 You can't. So don't try.
 Lust, pride, and lethargy
 may cause us misery
 or bliss.
 The meanest mistake
 has a point to make.
 Hear this—
 what his vintner d'Eyquem said
 once the lord of d'Eyquem was dead:
 "The wine that year promised bad or none.
 He'd let it go too late.
 Rot had crawled through all the vines,
 greasy scum on every cluster
 dangling at the crotches of the leaves.
 Should have been long picked
 but he'd said, 'No. Wait for me,'
 off to wait on a new woman,
 grapes on the verge of ripe
 when he left. Coupling kept him
 till rot wrapped the grapes like lace
 & by the time she'd kicked him out
 the sun had got them, they hung
 shriveled in the blast.

Well, he rode home cocky
 & bullied the grapes into the vats
 rot & all, spoiled grapes, too old,
 too soon squeezed dry.

The wine makes.

The wine makes thick, gold-colored,
 & pours like honey.
 We try it. Fantastic!
 not like honey, punchy,

you've never drunk anything like it—
 refreshing, in a rush
 over a heat that slows your throat—
 wanting to keep that flavor
 stuck to the edge of your tongue
 where your taste is, keep it
 like the best bouquet you can remember
 of sundown summer & someone coming
 to you smiling. The taste has odor
 like a new country, so fine
 at first you can't take it in
 it's so strange. It's beautiful
 & believe me you love to go slow."

moral:

Age is not
 all dry rot.
 It's never too late.
 Sweet is your real estate.

—Marie Ponsot
 From *The Bird Catcher*
 (Knopf, 1999)

OLD JOKES APPRECIATE

Up the long stairs I run
 stumbling, expectant.
 Impatience is hopelessly
 desperate. Hope
 takes time.

Sort out the private from the personal.
 Advance on losses at a decent pace.

"Aside from all that, Mrs. Lincoln,
 how did you like the play?"

—Marie Ponsot
 From *Springing: New and Selected Poems*
 (Knopf, 2003)