

COLLOQUY

A CONVERSATION WITH GUTENBERG COLLEGE



Summer 2021

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The Art of Learning

Community Classes Start October 6

“It’s Complicated:
The Histories Behind What We
Think We Know”

We all know that the world is complicated and that people disagree about many things. It is easy to lose track, however, of just how complicated things are. Every day we make use of ideas, take sides in debates, and rely on historical narratives, but in doing so we can ignore the complex histories that shaped those ideas, sides, and narratives.

The Gutenberg College Community classes for 2021-2022 will dive into some of these histories in hope of shedding light on the ways we think now. In each class, a Gutenberg tutor or community member will select a topic based on their particular passions and expertise, and he or she will complicate the issue by looking at its history in some way.

Perhaps there were rival accounts of it, and one killed off the other. Perhaps the idea in view has mutated over time. Perhaps what is now seen as good was once seen as bad. Perhaps the deep disagreements in a contemporary debate come from the differing historical traditions adopted by each side.

This series will examine an eclectic array of topics, but by teasing out some of their historical complexities, the goal is to illuminate various facets of our lives now. Because sometimes the best way to bring clarity is to first make things complicated.

Classes will meet every other week on Wednesday evenings at 6:30 p.m. Both in-person and Zoom options will be available. Visit Gutenberg’s website for more information as it becomes available.

gutenberg.edu/cc



Reading into Poetry

Chris Alderman

Gutenberg tutor and author of two collections of poetry, *Poems in Verse* and *Ephemerides*

It will come as little surprise to those who knew Ron Julian that among his many interests—music, film, and ancient mathematics, to name a few apart from the Bible—he found room for poetry. More surprising may be the fact that for over twenty years Ron taught a one-credit class on poetry to sophomores at Gutenberg. Alumni I have spoken with still remember that class, insignificant as it must have seemed to them in the greater scheme of the curriculum, so when it became clear that I would have the melancholy privilege of teaching it in his place, I felt some anxiety. Ron had been not only a superb reader but also a superb teacher of how to read, and whatever reading skills I myself might possess, I continued to approach the written word in general, and perhaps poetry in particular, as a writer.

My anxiety was not altogether unjustified: I did have a lot to learn about reading poetry, to say nothing of teaching it. I should have been able, for instance, to give a better answer when, as we were scrutinizing the wording of a poem, a student asked an excellent question: Are we reading into poetry more than its authors intended? What follows is my attempt to offer a better answer, one that I hope will shed light on what I take to be the nature of both poetry and language in general.

Since the early twentieth century, poetry has had a reputation for being difficult. Modernists like W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot wrote poetry that required the kind of exegesis usually reserved for religious texts written in ancient languages. (Eliot’s *Waste-land*, for example, was published with the author’s annotations.) Poetry has not always enjoyed such a reputation, however; if it had, we would know less about Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare than we do about John Ashbery. In the fifth week of class, we looked at the Romantic poet William Wordsworth’s “The Solitary Reaper” (1807), which begins as follows:

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary Highland Lass!
Reaping and singing by herself;
Stop here, or gently pass!

These lines are easy enough to paraphrase. The reader is told to look at a young Scottish woman who is singing as she harvests grain of some kind, then told either to stop to watch her or to go quietly on his way. When we compare a poem like this with Eliot’s “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915), which opens with six lines in Italian, we might reasonably conclude that we are dealing with two very different kinds of poetry, the meaning of the latter requiring careful extraction like gold from its ore, the meaning of the former surrendering itself to the reader like the scent of a summer rose. Some kinds of poetry are meant to be studied; others, enjoyed.

This view, while reasonable enough on the face of it, betrays not only a misunderstanding of the nature of poetry but also a confusion between what American literary critic Cleanth Brooks calls “scientific communication” and ordinary speech (*Understanding Poetry*). Scientific communication is the attempt to convey objective facts in as neutral a manner as possible: “The thermometer in the living room reads 93 degrees Fahrenheit.” By contrast, ordinary speech is typically value-laden, expressing not just objective facts

but also speakers' attitudes toward them: "Man, it's *hot* in here!" We might even say that in much ordinary speech the fact is often incidental to or identical with the attitude itself: "*I'm* really hot (whatever the thermometer might say)!"

Poetry, as a form of ordinary speech, is no different. Its authors intend to convey certain attitudes toward the statements they make. For that reason, no paraphrase (like that of Wordsworth's poem above) will adequately convey a poem's meaning, nor will the fact that one poem is harder to paraphrase than another establish that the two are different in kind. The intended meaning of Wordsworth's "Solitary Reaper"—no less than that of Eliot's "Love Song"—is not to be found in the *propositions* the author makes but in how the author *proposes* to feel about them. Both poems are to be read in the same way.

And both are to be read carefully. It can be difficult enough to understand people when they are making every effort to be understood; when they are not, we may have to work even harder, and poets seem particularly fond of expressing themselves indirectly. What is more, poets not infrequently speak of things about which they themselves do not know quite how to feel—just as we do. As we read a line of poetry and consider what its author is really proposing, we must allow for any possibility: (1) direct or (2) indirect communication of (A) a definite or (B) an indefinite attitude.

Some examples are in order. Let us begin with a famous passage from Alexander Pope's 1733 *Essay on Man*. Here, in the second "epistle," Pope addresses the reader:

Go, wond'rous creature! mount where Science guides,
Go, measure earth, weigh air, and state the tides;
Instruct the planets in what orbs to run,
Correct old Time, and regulate the Sun;...

A paraphrase of this would look much like the one above. The reader is told to go and use science both to understand and describe nature ("measure...weigh...state") and also to control it ("instruct...correct...regulate"). The poet wants the reader to do this; if he did not, he would not use the imperative.

The problem is, of course, that Pope is using the kind of irony known as sarcasm. He began the epistle by writing, "The proper study of Mankind is Man," and he ends this section, tongue almost visibly in cheek, with the words "Go, teach Eternal Wisdom how to rule...!" What he really wants is for his reader to set proper limits on human knowledge and to leave the governance of the universe to God. He wants what he *says* he wants about as much as someone who says, "Just what I needed today!" wanted that parking ticket.

Sarcasm is not the only kind of irony we find in poetry. In 1842, the English poet Robert Browning published his *Dramatic Lyrics*, many of which are put into the mouths of *naive heroes*. As literary critic M. H. Abrams defines him, a naive hero is someone whose "invincible simplicity or obtuseness leads him to persist in putting an interpretation on affairs which the knowing reader ... just as persistently is called on to alter and correct" (*A Glossary of Literary Terms*). In the famous poem "My Last Duchess," for instance, Browning impersonates a sixteenth-century Italian duke telling someone about his "last" wife, whom he may have had killed:

...She had
A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men—good! but thanked
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift....

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Elizabeth and Luli



Cementerio de la Recoleta
Buenos Aires, Argentina



Elizabeth and Walter, Uruguay

Alumni Spotlight: Elizabeth Steeb, Class of 2009

Elizabeth Panzachi Steeb came to Gutenberg College from Argentina. After graduating in 2009, she worked at Gutenberg as its office administrative assistant until 2015, earned her MAT from Northwest Christian University (now Bushnell University), taught Spanish kindergarten, and then started her own business teaching Spanish online (<https://spanishwithelizabeth.teachable.com/>). In 2010, Elizabeth married fellow Gutenberg student Walter Steeb (class of 2009), who also went on to earn a Master's of Philosophy in Theology at NCU/Bushnell. Not only was Gutenberg blessed by Elizabeth's work in the office, but the college still uses many of her photographs in its publications, including the cover for this issue of *Colloquy*. Below, Elizabeth describes her experience at Gutenberg and what it meant to her.

Desde Buenos Aires, Argentina, vine a una ciudad pequeña en los Estados Unidos, Eugene, en el año 2005, al tener solo 17 años; con un nombre inglés y un corazón argentino, me vine sola y sin conocer a nadie. Nerviosa y sin saber mucho del país, la ciudad, o la cultura, me vine con la esperanza de poder crear un mejor futuro, el que llegué a crear, amar, y continuo formando.

I was born in Uruguay, my father's birth country, experienced early childhood in Colombia and the jungles of Venezuela, using snakes as jump ropes at six, and moved back to my mother's birth country, Argentina, until coming to Gutenberg at 17. Argentina will forever be my culture, *mi patria*. My time at Gutenberg and the friendships I formed there have given me the capacity to return to the painful parts of my childhood and create new and joyful memories while holding on to the culture I adore so much.

I think back to those first years with eternal gratitude to Gutenberg. It was the first place for me where curiosity was valued over dogma, dignity modeled, and discourse practiced daily. It taught me to be unafraid of ideas and to courageously move towards new possibilities. For me, Gutenberg was so thoroughly a place of healing and trust building; it allowed me to have the foundation and confidence to continue, after Gutenberg, my pursuit for emotional health and meaning.



I could speak endlessly of what I learned there, but what has become clearer to me over the years is that one of the biggest things that Gutenberg gifted me was the unrelenting belief that people hold value and are worthy of dignity. Each author we read held value; each student's question, confusion, or angry rant held value; and ultimately, it helped me believe that I also held value. I cannot write these words without thinking especially about Ron, who through my years as a student, administrative assistant, and alumna, consistently embodied openness and dignity. He valued Gutenberg and its students as they changed, and I can recount half a dozen conversations where he expressed an openness to embrace the questions we brought, as much as they differed from his own. I learned to listen more openly and offer others and myself more grace through my years of learning with Ron.


Not only did Gutenberg provide me with these ideas and skills, but it also fostered a space in which lifelong friendships formed with individuals that I admire, deeply love, respect, and continue to learn with. These friendships continue to inform me, challenge me, and give me deep joy—whether it is backpacking together deep in the vast northwest wilderness, discussing books together, traveling to new places, exploring new ways of approaching the world, translating and discussing psychoanalytic books from

Spanish, hearing about their ever-progressing beliefs and questions, or simply sharing drinks in our homes.

After graduating and then working for Gutenberg, I earned a Master of Arts in Teaching (2017) and taught Spanish immersion kindergarten at a public school in Eugene for three years. Although I ultimately decided not to continue teaching in schools, it reconnected me to my language, culture, and taught me about children. Since then, I have returned to Argentina with lovely friends from my Gutenberg years and created new and



joyful memories, reclaiming the city I love so much as a place of joy. For almost three years now, I have been growing my business, teaching Spanish to both children and adults online. This has allowed for the flexibility to travel to Buenos Aires more regularly, be able to connect with nature, further my friendships more regularly than I could before, and do more of what I love. I am currently building more curriculum for self-paced Spanish courses, and I am excited to start the process of planning language immersion trips abroad with my students. It is a big next step, but one I am deeply looking forward to.

In my free time I absolutely love to hike and backpack, read and discuss books with friends, tend to my indoor plants, visit friends who have moved away, train our new puppy, Luli, enjoy coffee in the morning with my husband, Walter, on our sunny porch, and explore Oregon in our Jeep! I am so thankful to do life with Walter, who was in my Gutenberg class and has seen my journey since the very start, learned my language, and adores Buenos Aires as much as I do. He roasts amazing coffee, fills our home with books and ideas, weathers storms with me, unconditionally encourages growth, and loves our new puppy! 



Hiking with Gutenberg Friends,
Josiah & Jessinah



Summit of the South Sister, Oregon

Reading into Poetry

Continued from page 3

The duke's attitude toward her is expressed more or less directly: she was indiscriminate with her affections—or at least ungrateful toward the duke. But there are many reasons to believe that the *author's* attitude toward her is quite different. The most obvious of these is that he is a middle-class Victorian writing to middle-class Victorians who would have had a low opinion of aristocratic entitlement. No, the author assumes that the duke's jealousy (of the sunset, no less!) will strike the reader as something abominable.

Two points of clarification: First, this sort of dramatic irony is to be distinguished from the sincerity with which the actual duke would have told his story. His telling might also have embarrassed him, but that would not have been the intention. For this reason, his telling and Browning's would mean different things. Second, we have not necessarily gotten to the heart of the poem by determining the author's general attitude toward the duke. I suspect that Browning was far less interested in expressing his distaste for a man who had died hundreds of years earlier and a social structure that had largely disappeared than in exploring human psychology. Nevertheless, no understanding of the poem that does not begin with a consideration of the author's attitude toward the one speaking in the poem will be complete.

So far, we have been considering language characterized by the *indirect* communication of *definite* attitudes. Let us now turn to examples of language characterized by the indirect communication of *indefinite* attitudes to show its importance. We frequently see such language take the form of a rhetorical question:

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

These are the opening lines of William Blake's 1794 poem "The Tyger." Most people read the poem as being about the problem of evil. As we have seen, however, a poem is less about its subject matter

and more about the manner in which the author treats that subject matter. In "The Tyger," we run into problems as soon as we try to paraphrase the first stanza. "The speaker in the poem asks a frightening tiger what divine being was able to create it" is clearly inadequate, if only because we have failed to address the fact that the speaker cannot possibly expect an answer. He cannot be requesting information; rather, he seems to be expressing something between horror and disbelief. The indefinite quality of this attitude seems to manifest itself in other indirect ways as well, especially in the ambiguities introduced by the words *What, or, and Could*: Was the creator a *person* or a *thing* (i.e., a monster)? Was it a *hand* (powerful but blind) or an *eye* (seeing but powerless)? Is the author concerned with its *ability* or its *willingness* to create the beast?

Incidentally, the rhetorical question is extremely common in language about the problem of evil and the justice of God. We see it in another poem we looked at in class: John Milton's "When I consider how my light is spent," in which the poet, blind and feeling powerless, asks, "Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?" We also see it in the well-known verse from Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Indefinite in its attitude, the rhetorical question may be the most natural way to express the difficulty we may sometimes have in reconciling the existence of evil with that of a good, all-powerful God.

When asked in 1888 about his own views on the problem of evil, the Victorian Thomas Hardy responded: "Mr. Hardy regrets that he is unable to offer any hypothesis which would reconcile the existence of such evils ... with the idea of omnipotent goodness. Perhaps [the reader] might be helped to a provisional view of the universe by the recently published *Life of Darwin* and the works of Herbert Spencer and other agnostics" (quoted in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*). This quote, which will serve as a frame for my discussion of our last example, is remarkable for its ambivalence. To begin with, notice that Hardy writes of himself in the third person, as though to distance himself from the person to whom he refers. Next, in a context like this, the word *regret* comes across as both ironic ("We regret to in-

form you...") and genuinely sorrowful. Finally, while what Hardy is *unable* to think or believe is clear, what he *is able* to think is much less clear; indeed, the idea of a "provisional agnosticism" is almost comically vague.

This ambivalence is something to keep in mind as one reads Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush," an important poem written and published about twelve years later, on December 29, 1900. Here is the poem in full:

I leant upon a coppice gate
When Frost was spectre-grey,
And Winter's dregs made desolate
The weakening eye of day.
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky
Like strings of broken lyres,
And all mankind that haunted nigh
Had sought their household fires.
The land's sharp features seemed to be
The Century's corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
The wind his death-lament.
The ancient pulse of germ and birth
Was shrunken hard and dry,
And every spirit upon earth
Seemed fervourless as I.
At once a voice arose among
The bleak twigs overhead
In a full-hearted evensong
Of joy illimited;
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,
In blast-beruffled plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
Upon the growing gloom.
So little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.

Until I re-read this poem in preparation for class, I took it for a poem that *directly* communicates a *definite* attitude. On a superficial reading, the poem seems to "open the door to religious belief," as critic Howard Baker put it in the essay "Hardy's Poetic Certitude." The poem is set at the end—of the day, the season, the century. Everything is dead, dying, or inert. Suddenly, the speaker hears the call of a thrush, a call associated by words like *soul* and *ecstatic* with religious belief and experience, by *evensong* with

the Christian (specifically Anglican) Church, and by *carolings* with the nativity of Christ. The poem concludes, then, with the speaker's *blessed Hope* in Christian salvation.

I am no longer convinced that this is an adequate reading. Beyond the clues to Hardy's general outlook found in his statement of 1888, textual curiosities in the poem must be accounted for. The most obvious of these is the distance between the *Hope* and the speaker himself: not only does he not share it with the thrush, but he is also *unaware* of it. He merely posits its existence (*I could think*) as a possible explanation for the fact that the old bird is singing at a time like this. Furthermore, the phrase *could think* implies that this is only one—and not necessarily the best—possible explanation. If he does end up thinking this way, it is only because he has chosen to; the thought that there is a hope known to the thrush may be nothing more than wish-fulfillment.


There is more. Has science not provided the true explanation for the song of the thrush? The bird's song is no ode to joy; it is a mating call, very much a this-worldly phenomenon serving less to exalt the mind to the heights of Christian hope than to plunge it into the depths of Darwinian despair. In fact, if we are to be perfectly unsentimental about it, is the bird's song any more "musical" than the darkling yowl of a tomcat that scents a queen in heat? To read things like spiritual hope and joy into such a caterwaul is to commit the *pathetic fallacy*—that is, to attribute to inanimate objects or non-human creatures "human capabilities, sensations, and emotions" (*A Glossary of Literary Terms*).

Come to think of it, is the speaker not guilty of something similar in the first half of the poem, too? The capitalized *Frost*, *Winter*, and *Century* are all personified sentimentally. The sun has a *weakening eye* like an old man. The landscape, sky, and wind all *seemed to be* things they are not, things that just happen to be on the mind of the speaker at the moment. Perhaps the speaker has been deluded from the start: not only is the hope he thinks to hear in the thrush's song a figment of his imagination, but so too is the despair *written* (by himself?) on the material world. Creation—"na-

ture"—is as alien to our sorrow as it is to our joy.

Such, at any rate, is the indefinite attitude indirectly communicated to me when I read Hardy's "Darkling Thrush." If the speaker ends the poem with any hope, it is at most the hope of a hope—a thing about as definite as a provisional agnosticism.

If you recall, the question that I initially proposed to answer was this: Are we reading into poetry more than its authors intended? My answer—a definite one—I hope to have sufficiently, if indirectly, communicated. But let me state it directly: No, we are not reading into

poetry more than its authors intended. At least, not simply because we find ourselves reading carefully or doing more than paraphrasing. This is because poetry, like other kinds of ordinary speech, is concerned at least as much with the authors' attitudes toward the statements they make as with the propositional content of those statements, and the authors' attitudes may be both indefinite and communicated indirectly. If anything, I suspect that our tendency to confuse different kinds of communication inclines us to read into poetry—into ordinary speech—too little. Ron would have agreed, I hope. 

Young Philosophers gutenberg.edu/philosophers

"Life has never been normal," wrote C. S. Lewis in an address to students at the outset of World War II. If we are waiting for a better time to pursue truth, goodness, and beauty, we may never get started. In the Young Philosophers series, Gutenberg College opens its (virtual) doors to high-school-age participants for thoughtful online discussion of important ideas. 2021-2022 topics: Man's Search for Meaning (9/16); Why Be Virtuous? (12/2); What Is Freedom? (3/3); What Is Language? (5/12). Join the conversation!

Preview Days gutenberg.edu/preview

At Preview Days, you will meet tutors who have devoted their lives to learning and helping others learn, discuss works by great thinkers, fellowship with a community of caring people who work together in pursuit of goodness, and learn how you can become a Gutenberg student. The next Preview Days is October 22. Join us to discover if Gutenberg is the college for you!





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The Art of Learning
Education Conference • September 9-11

Join Gutenberg’s faculty and guest speakers to explore the art of learning through talks and breakout sessions in order to become better learners and better teachers.

Plenary Talks

- “Mastery Learning, Ability Development, and Individualized Education” (Andrew Pudewa)
- “More Than We Can Tell: The Art of Knowing” (Chris Swanson)
- “Big Heads on Little Bodies” (Leigh Bortins)
- “Test Everything: Equipping Students for the Pursuit of Truth” (Nancy Pearcey)
- “Fostering the Allure of Learning” (John Seel)
- “Learning as an Act of Will” (Eliot Grasso)

C. S. Lewis – Dorothy Sayers Dramatization

“**The Truth or Nott**”: David and Crystal Downing, co-directors of the Marion E. Wade Center in Wheaton, Illinois, the foremost archive in the world for published and unpublished materials by and about C. S. Lewis, present an imaginative recreation of Lewis and Sayers’s Q & A session before a “packed and lively audience” on October 24, 1954, the only time they appeared in public together.

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