



9th International Conference on New Findings in Humanities and Social Sciences

28-30 July 2023

Dublin, Republic of Ireland

Poetry as a unit-idea in a few 21st century British poems

Valentina-Monica Barba

The University of Bucharest, Romania

Abstract

This paper advances the thesis that, when viewed in its dynamic evolution and its variety of forms and types within the domain of literature, poetry is a “unit-idea”, and that poetry itself may be suffused with unit-ideas. The paper analyses the ideas and conceptions expressed in a few 21st-century British poems, and reveals that the poems are suffused with the type of unit-ideas exemplified by Arthur Oncken Lovejoy in *The Great Chain of Being*.

Keywords: “assumption of simplicity”; “metaphysical pathos”; “eternalistic pathos”; “pathos of the esoteric”; “flower-in-the-crannied-wall motive”.

Introduction

The thesis of this paper is that, when viewed in its dynamic evolution and its variety of forms and types within the domain of literature, poetry is a “unit-idea” (Lovejoy, 2010, p. 3), and that poetry itself may be suffused with unit-ideas. From its original mnemonic purpose to religious practices and to literature, poetry has constantly recurred in human history under a wide variety of categories of forms and types¹ (see Poetry Foundation). Resort to poetry as a unit-idea can be made at any time, in any domain, and in almost any form of language. Benefitting from the high versatility of language since “every sentence that anyone produces can be a totally new combination of words”² (see Chomsky’s Universal Grammar), poetry can express various ideas and conceptions. Conversely, ideas and conceptions are recurrent in different poetry categories of forms and types, irrespective of their names or timing.

The concept of “unit-idea” has been devised by Arthur Oncken Lovejoy in the lectures he gave at Harvard in 1936, and intended as “a contribution to the history of ideas” (Lovejoy, 2010, p. 3). Lovejoy looked at the history of thought with the eye of a chemical analyst and conceived the concept of “unit-idea” as a fundamental operator for the historian of ideas. The basic premise of the concept is that “the number of essentially distinct philosophical ideas or dialectical motives is . . . decidedly limited” and that the historian of ideas has to deal with



9th International Conference on New Findings in Humanities and Social Sciences

28-30 July 2023

Dublin, Republic of Ireland

the primary ideas which intermingle and accrue under various names in the history of thought (Lovejoy, 2010, pp. 4–7). For Lovejoy ideas move fluently and surreptitiously irrespective of the departmentalisation of thought (Keiger, 2000)³.

Lovejoy refrained from giving a definition to the concept of unit-idea. However, he sketched the main types of “the primary and persistent or recurrent dynamic units” which the historian of ideas is to deal with (Lovejoy, 2010, pp. 7–15). He pointed out the necessity of the historian of ideas to look for the emergence of a certain conception in philosophical or religious systems of thought, or in scientific theories, and he particularly stressed the need to look for such conceptions in literature by quoting (Lovejoy, 2010, p. 17) the mathematician Alfred North Whitehead: “it is in literature that the concrete outlook of humanity receives its expression. Accordingly, it is to literature that we must look, particularly in its more concrete forms, namely in poetry and in drama, if we hope to discover the inward thoughts of a generation” (Whitehead, 1960).

With a view to ascertain whether contemporary poetry features unit-ideas, this paper analyses a few British poems written since the beginning of the 21st century. The analysis has identified some types of unit-ideas, of which this paper gives a synopsis of their descriptions in *The Great Chain of Being*. Firstly, Lovejoy detailed the presupposition that man is far simpler than the universe or the “assumption of simplicity”, which he correlated with the “age of *esprits simplistes*” of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries (Lovejoy, 2010, pp. 7–10); then, he identified the “flower-in-the-crannied-wall motive” or the assumption that “where you have a complex of one kind, no element in that complex can be understood, or can, indeed, be what it is apart from its relations to all the other components of the system to which it belongs” (Lovejoy, 2010, p. 10). Other types of unit-ideas include: the “metaphysical pathos” which expresses awe with the written text by sheer lack of understanding it (Lovejoy, 2010, pp. 10–11); the “pathos of the esoteric” which presupposes rising to “a plane of insight wholly different in its principles from the level of the mere understanding” (Lovejoy, 2010, pp. 11–12); and the “eternalistic pathos” or the presumption that something remains forever unchanged (Lovejoy, 2010, p. 12).

Ideas and conceptions in a few 21st-century British poems

Suffused with the unit-idea of “eternalistic pathos” as a variant of the “metaphysical pathos”, the poem “Immortality as Essence” by Daniel Thomas Moran (Moran, MS) illustrates in eleven words the idea of «immortality»:



9th International Conference on New Findings in Humanities and Social Sciences

28-30 July 2023

Dublin, Republic of Ireland

There
once
was
a
gardener.

But
still,
there
is
the
garden.

The poem is written in free verse and arranged in single-word lines which predispose to meditation. Reading the poem requires short pauses after each verse—actually, each word. After the first sentence, there is little time to pause and reflect on its meaning before the poem goes on. The construction of the poem reminds of a chiasmus scheme: both sentences contain existential clauses (*there was*, *there is*), both modify the existentials with an adverb of time (*once*, *still*), and both have a reference from the same word family—the garden family (*gardener*, *garden*). The shift in thought required by a chiasmus is brought about by the conjunction *but*. The shift from past to present is strengthened by the adverb *still* which means “continuing until a particular point in time and not finishing”⁴ (Oxford Learner’s Dictionary) and indicates an unfinished course of the stative verb *be*. This rhetorical scheme—albeit not a chiasmus proper—shifts the reader’s view from the past to a continuous state in the present, which suggests immortality as “the state of living or lasting forever”⁵ (Oxford Learner’s Dictionary).

The title of the poem contains two abstract nouns: «immortality» and «essence». As a unit-idea, «immortality» sweeps through specialty domains from philosophy, to the doctrine of immortality in religious studies, to alchemy (as an effect of the Philosophers’ stone⁶), to business (even big business, according to QUARTZ. Make business betterTM⁷), to biology, to digital immortality, to literature, and so on⁸ (see Wikipedia). Essence as “the most important quality or feature of something, that makes it what it is”⁹ (Oxford Learner’s Dictionary) is another unit-idea, which has swept through philosophy, metaphysics, chemistry, literature, and so on¹⁰ (see Wikipedia). The same kind of “eternalistic pathos”, coming from the idea of immutability, is given by Lovejoy in the example of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poem “Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats” (Lovejoy, 2010, p. 12):

The One remains, the many change and pass,
Heaven’s light forever shines, Earth’s shadows fly . . .



9th International Conference on New Findings in Humanities and Social Sciences

28-30 July 2023

Dublin, Republic of Ireland

Finding the same unit-ideas of immutability in a 19th-century elegy and in a 21st-century free-verse poem shows the property of poetry to subsume the same unit-ideas in various epochs and under diverse forms. This proves the property of poetry to exist under various categories of forms and types as a unit-idea itself. Tigerstedt says that in Antiquity, and particularly depending on the poet's, or the philosophers' views, poetry was created for entertainment and to be a source of beauty. It would also have qualities of spiritual teaching and education. Poetry was also viewed as "mendacious, immoral, and inflammatory", up to a point when it was outright forbidden by Plato's *Republic* as a servile imitation of the world which he would deem only a reflection of the world of ideas (Wiener, 1973, p. 526).

Poetry can also illustrate a conception as in "an understanding or a belief of what something/somebody is or what something/somebody should be"¹¹ (Oxford Learner's Dictionary). Conceptions group poetry within certain domains of human thought: reflections on nature, expressions of overwhelming feelings, poetry manifestos, stream of consciousness poetry, and so on. The poem "*Wahrnehmung*" by Daniel Thomas Moran (Moran, 2006) is such an example of poetry-conception:

I'm certain
the eternal

is more
terrifying
than belief
my life

will end
with my dying.

The title, inspired from "the relation of the limited to the unlimited" (Moran, 2006), introduces the reader to the rapport between humans and "the eternal". The poem contains two Lovejovian unit-ideas: First, the presupposition that man is far simpler than the universe or the "assumption of simplicity" or the notion of "*esprits simplistes*" (Lovejoy, 2010, p. 7) pertains to the understanding that there is something larger than life. The second is the "metaphysical pathos", which derives from the idea that death is perceived as being less terrifying than the eternal.

Another of Daniel Thomas Moran's poems, "Creed" (Moran, 2002), also expresses the Lovejovian unit-idea of "ostentatious modesty in the recognition of the disproportion



9th International Conference on New Findings in Humanities and Social Sciences

28-30 July 2023

Dublin, Republic of Ireland

between man's intellect and the universe" or "the presumption of simplicity" (Lovejoy, 2010, pp. 7–9):

The way
puddles dry
after
a night of rain.

The way
I reach up
and balance
the moon
on the tip
of my finger.

The way
a clock
proceeds
in pointless
circles.

The way
your ribs,
without thought,
mimic the tides
while you sleep.

Perhaps,
this is all

I know about
eternity.

The phrase "the way" in the first four stanzas is a metaphor for the expansion of the state of knowing from experience to abstract. The use of the phrase as a leitmotif suggests the poet's certainty that his learning things on a mundane level in various circumstances might be integrated up to the infinite, and thus becoming an equivalent of eternity. Eternity here is rather different from the idea of eternity in "*Wahrnehmung*". In "Creed", an enumeration of ordinary facts which can be learned in life suggests that the list is virtually endless. Since the way to know is anything but proper logical understanding, the poem also features the unit-idea of the "pathos of the esoteric" by suggesting "a thing to be reached, not through a



9th International Conference on New Findings in Humanities and Social Sciences

28-30 July 2023

Dublin, Republic of Ireland

consecutive progress of thought guided by the ordinary logic available to every man, but through a sudden leap whereby one rises to a plane of insight wholly different in its principles from the level of the mere understanding” (Lovejoy, 2010, pp. 11–12). However, the pathos of the esoteric appears only as a temptation in the poem since the Lovejovian unit-idea of “*esprits simplistes*” or “the presumption of simplicity” (Lovejoy, 2010, p. 7) triumphs in the last verses: “Perhaps,/ this is all// I know about/ eternity”.

The conception in “Creed”, related to the multitude of things that man can find out and learn about, re-appears in another of Moran’s poems: “*Sola Gratia*” (Moran, 2014):

When sweet living
is at last
depleted,
And I’ve assumed
the all mortal
woe,
My only prayer,
I’ll not die
defeated,
By all the things
I could never
know.

“*Sola Gratia*” expresses the poet’s wish to enjoy what life offers and his fear with regard to what death may take away (Moran, MS, *The Spiders*), or the poet’s wish to be able to acquire all the knowledge he can so as not to “die/ defeated”. With the overall conception being that all that matters in life ends with dying, it can be deconstructed into the ideas of the good life, woe at the prospect of ending one’s life, knowledge, defeat, and prayer. The Latin title of the poem, which translates as «by grace alone», strengthens the idea of prayer with regard to wishing to expire without any regrets and reveals the unit-idea of the pathos of the esoteric in the poem.

A form of metaphysical pathos can be found in Margaret Wilmot’s poem “Sown”¹² (Wilmot, 2019, p. 16):

That ridge, fir trees, water
darkening

the house is empty, the house
which burned

once there was a woman

9th International Conference on New Findings in Humanities and Social Sciences



28-30 July 2023

Dublin, Republic of Ireland

evil genius by her cradle

genes
no

(quarry water dark, ridge of firs):
the ghosts of unlove

they sowed, sow, have sown
grasshopper eggs, the ground

of unlove is a sieve of eggs
you walked on, walk on

have been walking on
locust eggs

(you didn't crave a leading role
you simply craved)

all is tense, even in death
you can't burn tense

you can only

beyond the ridge a house burned

what can you only

fir trees, quarry

The poet attaches a note¹² to the poem, in which she explains her intimation that the house which inspired the poem had been occupied by a woman who had been marked by lack of love in childhood, and that this might have left “eggs” to further hatch “tense” in her. The note is a possible explanation of the feeling of uneasiness lent by the woman’s house to the poet while she occupied it for a while. The whole poem breathes uneasiness as a form of metaphysical pathos.

Maggie Butt’s “Wish” (Butt, 2015) is suffused with the unit-idea of the “flower-in-the-crannied-wall” motive:

in	the	wheel	of	the	stars
and	the	mow	of	the	hay



9th International Conference on New Findings in Humanities and Social Sciences

28-30 July 2023

Dublin, Republic of Ireland

in the blaze of amaze
at the birth of the day

in the whir on the wire
and the scorch of the sun
in the warm and the storm
and the world on the run

in the roil and the broil
of the clouds' heaving heap
in the indigo dusk
and the drifting to sleep

in the flap of a wing
or the bat of an eye
the slowness of Sunday
years scampering by

in the damp of the drizzle
the warmth of a glove
let there ever be you
let there ever be love

The poem flows fluently from line to line and from stanza to stanza only to reach its end in the quintessential word of “love”, which the entire poem is constructed for, according to the unit-idea of the “flower-in-the-crannied-wall motive” or “where you have a complex of one kind, no element in that complex can be understood, or can, indeed, be what it is apart from its relations to all the other components of the system to which it belongs” (Lovejoy, 2010, p. 10). Pertaining to the lyric genre, “Wish” regales its readers with rhyme and metre. Iterating the fleeting beauties of the world “on the run”, and intertwining them with the sensations which they bring about, both of which being complemented by the musicality of rhyme and metre, make the poem a literary mandala. The “you” in the last verses relates to anyone—from a simple fellow being to the Supreme Being—and suggests the human need of bonding and of belonging to truth, goodness, and beauty in accord with the poem’s unit-idea.



9th International Conference on New Findings in Humanities and Social Sciences

28-30 July 2023

Dublin, Republic of Ireland

Conclusion

This paper showed that poetry is a unit-idea in literature through its ability to relate to different aspects of human knowledge. The paper also showed that, as a unit-idea in literature, poetry is able to subsume several genres and forms. It also revealed that poetry is able to express ideas and conceptions from different provinces of thought, and that poetry makes recourse to various types of unit-ideas. In this sense, the paper identified some of the types of Lovejovian unit-ideas in a few British poems written since the beginning of the 21st century, thus showing the plausibility of such unit-ideas in the present time as well as their potential credibility within other provinces of thought. Identifying unit-ideas which recur in poetry—irrespective of their being viewed as grand works of literature or being plainly ignored in literature departments—was able to reveal some of the conceptions existing in our time, or the tendencies existing in the thought of our age (Lovejoy, 2010, p. 20) since the history of literature is “a record of the movement of ideas” (Lovejoy, 2010, p. 16).

Notes

1. Poetry Foundation. [Online]. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms?category=209>. Accessed: 11th November 2023.
2. Chomsky, Noam. Tool Module: Chomsky's Universal Grammar. [Online]. https://thebrain.mcgill.ca/flash/capsules/outil_rouge06.html. Accessed: 18th October 2023.

For Chomsky, acquiring language cannot be reduced to simply developing an inventory of responses to stimuli, because every sentence that anyone produces can be a totally new combination of words. When we speak, we combine a finite number of elements—the words of our language—to create an infinite number of larger structures—sentences.

3. Keiger, Dale. (April 2000). Tussling with the Idea Man. *John Hopkins Magazine*, April 2000 50th Anniversary Edition. [Online]. Available: <https://pages.jh.edu/jhumag/0400web/28.html>. Accessed: 18th October 2023.

When Lovejoy looked at ideas, he saw aggregates. He believed that philosophical systems, political creeds, and big ideas about life and God and meaning all could be disassembled by a Lovejovian historian into building blocks that he called “unit-ideas.” These units, he said, were passed down and used in new combinations by generation after generation of thinkers. He wrote, “...most



9th International Conference on New Findings in Humanities and Social Sciences

28-30 July 2023

Dublin, Republic of Ireland

philosophic systems are original or distinctive rather in their patterns than in their components." That is, past a certain point in history there were no new fundamental ideas, just new ways to combine these unit-ideas. To tease out constituent units and understand their recombinations, the historian had to surmount disciplinary boundaries because ideas don't care about academic disciplines. They go from astronomy into poetry, from theology into politics into literature.

4. *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries.* [Online].
https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/still_1?q=still.
Accessed: 27th June 2023.
5. *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries.* [Online].
<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/immortality?q=immortality>. Accessed: 18th October 2023.
6. Theophrastus Paracelsus. *The Book of the Revelation of Hermes*. 16th century.
Wikipedia. The Free Encyclopedia. [Online].
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immortality#cite_note-Paracelsus-5. Accessed: 27th June 2023.
7. QUARTZ. Make business better™. [Online]. <https://qz.com/>. Accessed: 27th June 2023.
8. Wikipedia. The Free Encyclopedia. [Online].
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immortality>. Accessed: 27th June 2023.
9. *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries.* [Online].
<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/essence?q=essence>.
Accessed: 27th June 2023.
10. Wikipedia. The Free Encyclopedia. [Online].
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Essence_\(disambiguation\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Essence_(disambiguation)). Accessed: 11th November 2023.
11. *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries.* [Online].
<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/conception>. Accessed: 28th June 2023.

9th International Conference on New Findings in Humanities and Social Sciences



28-30 July 2023

Dublin, Republic of Ireland

12. Margaret Wilmot's note:

One weekend long ago I was given the keys to a house in Maine for a week. I was alone, not usually a problem, but I found the house uncomfortable, even – creepy, and asked about it when I got back to New York. Apparently, the owners had bought it cheap because it had been lived in for 17 years by a 'madwoman' fed by some neighbour who left a plate at the door every day, and the poor creature had finally set part of the house on fire. What is 'madness?' I have no idea – but speculate on *the ghosts of 'unlove'* and the seeds (*grasshopper eggs*) a possibly traumatic childhood may have sown. Why did her unhappy spirit hang around still, craving – what?



9th International Conference on New Findings in Humanities and Social Sciences

28-30 July 2023

Dublin, Republic of Ireland

References

Primary sources

- Butt, Maggie. (2015). "Wish." *Degrees of Twilight*. The London Magazine Editions. ISBN 978-0-9926061-5-2.
- Moran, Daniel Thomas. (2002). "Creed." *From HiLo to Willow Pond*. New York, USA, Street Press.
- Moran, Daniel Thomas. (MS, in manuscript). "Immortality as Essence."
- Moran, Daniel Thomas. (MS, in manuscript). *The Spiders of September and Other Poems*. Bucharest, EIKON.
- Moran, Daniel Thomas. (2006). "Wahrnehmung." *Looking for the Uncertain Past*. Salzburg, Austria, Poetry Salzburg.
- Wilmot, Margaret. (2019). "Sown." *Man Walking on Water with Tie Askew*. Peatmoor, Swindon, The High Window Press.

Secondary sources

- Keiger, Dale. (April 2000). Tussling with the Idea Man. *John Hopkins Magazine*, April 2000 50th Anniversary Edition. [Online]. Available: <https://pages.jh.edu/jhumag/0400web/28.html>. Accessed: 18th October 2023.
- Lovejoy, Arthur Onken. (2010). *The Great Chain of Being. A Study of the History of an Idea*. (With an Introduction by Peter J. Stanlis.) The William James lectures delivered at Harvard University, 1933. (Originally published in 1936 by Harvard University Press.). First E-Book Publication: New Brunswick (U.S.A.) and London (U.K.), Transaction Publishers.
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*. [Online]. <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>.
- Poetry Foundation*. [Online]. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/>.
- QUARTZ. Make business betterTM. [Online]. <https://qz.com/>.
- Whitehead, Alfred North. (1960). *Science and the Modern World. Lowell Lectures, 1925*. New York, MENTOR BOOKS.
- Wiener, Philip (ed.). (1973). *Dictionary of the history of ideas. Studies of Select Pivotal Ideas*. Vol III 'Law, concept of' to 'Protest movements.' Charles Scribner's sons.
- Wikipedia. The Free Encyclopedia. [Online]. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page.