

Amanda Gorman at the Biden inauguration: “O sing, sweet lucre,” or, The poet wore Prada

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The media campaign to promote the poetry of Amanda Gorman, the young woman who recited her own work at the January 20 inauguration of Joe Biden, deserves a comment.

Gorman rose from almost total obscurity to the cover of *Time* magazine (personifying “The Black Renaissance”) in the space of a single month. On January 1, nobody outside a relative handful of people even knew who she was.

Gorman was named the first National Youth Poet Laureate of the US in 2017 and has now performed two high-profile recitations. As noted, she delivered “The Hill We Climb” at the Biden inauguration. Her follow-up performance of “Chorus of the Captains” at the Super Bowl on February 7 was no less celebrated, and no less banal. Affixing firmly the establishment seal of approval, Gorman was interviewed in *Time* by Michelle Obama, the former First Lady.

Obama told Gorman: “The power of your words blew me away—but it was more than that. It was your presence onstage, the confidence you exuded as a young Black woman helping to turn the page to a more hopeful chapter in American leadership.”

Much of the media acclaim, frankly, has been deranged. Witness this comment about Gorman from the *Guardian*: “Erect as a statue, her skin gleaming as if burnished, her hair cornrowed, banded with gold and drawn tightly back into a red satin Prada headband, worn high like a tiara, she evoked what poet Kae Tempest calls the ‘Brand New Ancients’: the divinity that walks among us in the present day. According to Greek mythology, nine muses, daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, inspire creative endeavour, with five devoted to different kinds of poetry—epic, romantic, lyric, comic or pastoral and sacred. Gorman suggested a new poetic muse—one to inspire the poetry of democracy...” Not just fawning praise, but Apotheosis!

Two points need to be made at the outset. Gorman is not the instigator or prime mover of her “meteoric rise,” but its victim (albeit, a willing one). A very young person, she is being used, manipulated, turned into an emblem of something that has nothing to do with who she actually is, or at least might be. It is rather sad and degrading.

Second, on the basis of the evidence so far, she does not appear to possess the slightest feel for poetry. Gorman has produced merely thrown-together, patriotic jargon at a low level.

Whatever light her appearances and verses have shone on

contemporary American political realities and the state of its artistic life is unintentional and unflattering.

Gorman’s poem stands in a short line of inaugural poems, all written and recited to crown Democratic presidents with laurels. The tradition began with Robert Frost reciting at the January 1961 inauguration of John F. Kennedy. Neither Lyndon Johnson in 1965 nor Jimmy Carter in 1977 commissioned such a work, but Bill Clinton in 1993 (Maya Angelou) and 1997 (Miller Williams) and Barack Obama in 2009 (Elizabeth Alexander) and 2013 (Richard Blanco) revived and continued what Kennedy had initiated.

An inauguration ceremony belongs to the ruling elite, it is their “show,” and an inaugural poem inevitably conforms to certain standards. One would be naïve to expect anything ground-breaking or penetrating. Such works tend to be patriotic, sweepingly general and optimistic. The majority of them have been forgettable. Frost concluded the piece he *planned* to read (conditions did not permit it, instead he recited a poem from memory) by presaging the “glory of a next Augustan age” and a “golden age of poetry and power,” only 22 months before Kennedy’s assassination and the subsequent descent of American politics into an ever more backward and reactionary spiral.

Poetry ought to reveal the truth about life in highly concentrated form, in concrete imagery. By and large, official, occasional poetry, on the other hand, reveals very little, unveils no new truths. The poets (and their listeners or readers) conclude precisely where they began. The poets simply “make a point,” performing a type of verbal painting by numbers.

Still, the emptiness of Gorman’s verses and of the official praise for them represent something new.

Even an inaugural poem needs to make some point of contact with reality. In “The Hill We Climb,” Gorman appeals for “unity” in a society torn asunder by economic catastrophe, the global COVID-19 pandemic and a fascist coup attempt. She makes no persuasive reference to these latter realities in her poem, a quilt of clichés and the shop-worn tropes of American political speech-making.

Somehow we’ve weathered and witnessed a nation that isn’t broken, but simply unfinished.

We, the successors of a country and a time where a skinny Black girl descended from slaves and raised by a single mother can dream of becoming president, only to find herself reciting for one.

*And yes, we are far from polished, far from pristine,
but that doesn't mean we are striving to form a union that is
perfect.*

*We are striving to forge our union with purpose.
To compose a country committed to all cultures, colors,
characters, and conditions of man.
And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us, but what
stands before us.*

*We close the divide because we know, to put our future first, we
must first put our differences aside.*

Very little here is compelling as “poetry.” Poetic imagery is altogether absent. It is therefore difficult to examine Gorman’s “poem” using the standard approach of art criticism, which takes the aesthetic component as one of its starting points. Her stylistic choices, the hackneyed use of alliteration, anaphora and rhythm echo the political pulpit more than poetry.

Gorman’s poem is better appreciated as rhetorical, political speech, which has been given the mantle of poetry by virtue of its presentation as “poetry.” If it is poetry, it is poetry of a particular kind, intended to be inspiring and useful for those who commissioned it—the Democratic Party and its environs.

The Democrats have been trying to construct a false reality since the November election, and more desperately since the fascist coup attempt of January 6. According to this narrative, the coup attempt came about solely due to the personal machinations of ex-President Donald Trump. Former Vice President Mike Pence and the congressional Republicans who plotted with Trump and sections of the police and military to overturn the 2020 election are “fellow patriots” with whom “unity” must be forged. Now it is time to “put our differences aside.”

Such a picture can only be recast as “poetry” by artistically stilted and second-rate means. Gorman’s description of the American situation relies on unreal, Hallmark sentiments. There is not a genuinely original image in the work, and what little imagery there is often confuses. What is a “bronze pounded chest,” for example?

Gorman has to leave the ugly facts on the cutting room floor. A more mature and serious literary figure surely would have made some reference to the mass protests against police violence last year, to the murderous pandemic, to the burning social ills, even if only as a way of then painting the incoming administration as the potential righter of wrongs. But, no, even that would have been too much for this unreal event.

Gorman does make a single, oblique reference to the coup attempt, having re-written the poem in its wake. She declares:

*We've seen a force that would shatter our nation rather than
share it.*

Would destroy our country if it meant delaying democracy.

This effort very nearly succeeded.

*But while democracy can be periodically delayed,
it can never be permanently defeated.*

What is this “force”? Gorman does not say. She speaks in euphemism. The unremarkable passage evokes no emotional response. It equivocates. On the one hand, “force” nearly succeeded. But never mind. Democracy can “never be defeated.” This is “poetry” for a culture that mass-produces cinematic

superheroes with magical powers, and where no crisis is real enough to spoil the mandatory happy ending. Ultimately, Gorman’s poem is equally fictitious.

As noted above, none of the short list of inaugural works is especially noteworthy as poetry, although each of the previous ones has at least been *recognizable* as poetry. The possible exception is Maya Angelou’s 1993 offering, which managed to wrap up a few inconvenient truths in poetic imagery, including here:

*A River sings a beautiful song,
It says come rest here by my side.
Each of you a bordered country,
Delicate and strangely made proud,
Yet thrusting perpetually under siege.
Your armed struggles for profit
Have left collars of waste upon
My shore, currents of debris upon my breast.*

The day is past, however, when one could publicly rebuke the “armed struggles for profit” at such a ceremony. Gorman’s unfortunate contribution speaks mostly to careerism, social indifference, self-satisfaction. It reflects the degree to which the crisis-ridden and decrepit powers that be, incarnated by Biden, have lost virtually any ability to hear the truth about themselves.

We have reached a point in the decline of official culture where a grab bag of banalities can declare itself to be poetry and be roundly applauded, despite the obviously weak artistic content of the work. The audience is invited to participate in a falsehood, and becomes complicit in it.

What explains the open embrace of such a corrupting pretense? Sections of the upper-middle class inhabit an altogether different world than the working class. This is the real audience for “The Hill We Climb.” For them, shielded from reality by their stock and real estate holdings and high salaries, it is possible to imagine (or wish) the social crisis away with comforting clichés, at least for now.

Such people will experience a rude awakening. A social explosion is developing, and artists sensitive to reality will absorb the convulsive character of the epoch and find new, aesthetic means of representing it. Many others will simply be forgotten.



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