

Literary Criticism

Capital Conference

2023

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Explicating Poetry

London, 1802

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
England hath need of thee: she is a fen
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower, 4
Have forfeited their ancient English dower
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power. 8
Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart:
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
So didst thou travel on life's common way, 12
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

William Wordsworth

Once by the Pacific

The shattered water made a misty din.
Great waves looked over others coming in,
And thought of doing something to the shore
That water never did to land before. 4
The clouds were low and hairy in the skies,
Like locks blown forward in the gleam of eyes.
You could not tell, and yet it looked as if
The shore was lucky in being backed by cliff, 8
The cliff in being backed by continent;
It looked as if a night of dark intent
Was coming, and not only a night, an age.
Someone had better be prepared for rage. 12
There would be more than ocean-water broken
Before God's last Put out the light was spoken.

Robert Frost

haiku

a leaf spirals
in the summer wind—
his good-bye letter

senryu

men o pause . . .
the men suck in their guts
as a blonde walks by

Arms and the Boy

Let the boy try along this bayonet-blade
How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood;
Blue with all malice, like a madman's flash;
And thinly drawn with famishing for flesh. 4

Lend him to stroke these blind, blunt bullet-heads
Which long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads.
Or give him cartridges of fine zinc teeth,
Sharp with the sharpness of grief and death. 8

For his teeth seem for laughing round an apple.
There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple;
And God will grow no talons at his heels,
Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls. 12

Wilfred Owen

Epilogue

"O where are you going?" said reader to rider
"That valley is fatal when furnaces burn,
Yonder's the midden whose odours will madden,
That gap is the grave where the tall return." 4

"O do you imagine," said fearer to farer,
"That dusk will delay on your path to pass,
Your diligent looking discover the lacking
Your footsteps feel from granite to grass?" 8

"O what was that bird," said horror to hearer,
"Did you see that shape in the twisted trees?
Behind you swiftly the figure comes softly,
The spot on your skin is a shocking disease?" 12

"Out of this house"—said rider to reader
"Yours never will"—said farer to fearer
"They're looking for you"—said hearer to horror
As he left them there, as he left them there. 16

W. H. Auden

Rattler, Alert

Slowly he sways that head that cannot hear,
Two-leveled cone of horn the yellow rust,
Polled on the current of his listening fear.
His length is on the tympanum of earth,
And by his tendril tongue's tasting the air 5

He sips, perhaps, a secret of his race
Or feels for the known vibrations, heat, or trace
Of smoother satin than the hillwind's thrust
Through grass: the aspirate of half-held breath,
The crushing of my weight upon the dust, 10
My foamless heart, the bloodleap at my wrist.

Brewster Ghiselin

Acquainted with the Night

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane. 4
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry 8
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-bye;
And further still at an unearthly height,
One luminary clock against the sky 12

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night.

Robert Frost

The Author to Her Book

Thou ill-form'd offspring of my feeble brain,
Who after birth didst by my side remain,
Till snatched from thence by friends, less wise than true,
Who thee abroad, expos'd to publick view, 4
Made thee in raggs, halting to th' press to trudge,
Where errors were not lessened (all may judg).
At thy return my blushing was not small,
My rambling brat (in print) should mother call, 8
I cast thee by as one unfit for light,
Thy Visage was so irksome in my sight;
Yet being mine own, at length affection would
Thy blemishes amend, if so I could: 12
I wash'd thy face, but more defects I saw,
And rubbing off a spot, still made a flaw.
I stretched thy joynts to make thee even feet,
Yet still thou run'st more hobbling then is meet; 16
In better dress to trim thee was my mind,
But nought save home-spun Cloth, I' th' house I find.
In this array 'mongst Vulgars mayst thou roam.
In Criticks hands, beware thou dost not come; 20
And take thy way where yet thou art not known,
If for thy Father askt, say, thou hadst none:
And for thy Mother, she alas is poor,
Which caus'd her thus to send thee out of door. 24

Anne Bradstreet

The Destruction of Sennacherib *excerpted*

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

George Gordon, Lord Byron

Mutability

From low to high doth dissolution climb,
And sink from high to low, along a scale
Of awful notes, whose concord shall not fail;
A musical but melancholy chime, 4
Which they can hear who meddle not with crime,
Nor avarice, nor over-anxious care.
Truth fails not; but her outward forms that bear
The longest date do melt like frosty rime, 8
That in the morning whitened hill and plain
And is no more; drop like the tower sublime
Of yesterday, which royally did wear
His crown of weeds, but could not even sustain 12
Some casual shout that broke the silent air,
Or the unimaginable touch of Time.

William Wordsworth

The True Story of Snow White

Almost before the princess had grown cold
Upon the floor beside the bitten fruit,
The Queen gave orders to her men to shoot
The dwarfs, and thereby clinched her iron hold 4
Upon the state. Her mirror learned to lie,
And no one dared speak ill of her for fear
She might through her devices overhear.
So, in this manner, many years passed by, 8
And now today not even children weep
When someone whispers how, for her beauty's sake,
A child was harried once into a grove
And doomed, because her heart was full of love, 12
To lie forever in unlovely sleep
Which not a prince on earth has power to break.

--Bruce Bennett

Sonnet XXXV *excerpted*

No more be grieved at that which thou hast done:
Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud,
Clouds and eclipses stain both moon and sun,
And loathsome canker lives in sweetest bud.

William Shakespeare

Aftershocks

We are not in the same place after all.
 The only evidence of the disaster,
 Mapping across the bedroom wall,
 Tiny cracks still fissuring the plaster— 4
 A new cartography for us to master,
 In whose legend we read where we are bound:
 Terra infirma, a stranger land, and vaster.
 Or have we always stood on shaky ground? 8
 The moment keeps on happening: a sound.
 The floor beneath us swings, a pendulum
 That clocks the heart, the heart so tightly wound,
 We fall mute, as when two lovers come 12
 To the brink of the apology, and halt,
 Each standing on the wrong side of the fault.

A. E. Stallings

Non-exhaustive Listing of Literary Concepts Possibly Addressed during This Explication Session

alliteration	envelope stanza	kenning	rhythm (metrical pattern)
allusion	epilogue	liminality	roundel
biblical	eye rhyme	litotes	run-on lines
classical	feminine ending	metaphor	scansion
historical	foot (metrical feet)	leonine rhyme	senryu
literary	anapest	masculine ending	sestet
mythological	dactyl	melopoeia	sigmatism
topical	iamb	metonymy	simile
amphisbaenic rhyme	pyrrhic	octave	slant rhyme
analogy	spondee	onomatopoeia	sonnet
anaphora	trochee	pantoum	Anglo-Norman
antanaclasis	formula / formulaic	pathetic fallacy	caudate
anthropomorphism	haiku	paradox	curtal
apostrophe	heroic couplet	personification	Miltonic
assonance	heteromorous (mosaic) rhyme	persona	Petrarchan (Italian)
asyndeton	homonym / homograph	plote	Shakespearean (English)
chiasmus	homeoteleuton	polyptoton	Spenserian
connotation	imagery	polysyndeton	sigmatism
consonance	auditory	pun	speaker
controlling image	gustatory	quatrain	stanza
couplet	olfactory	refrain	synaesthesia
denotation	tactile	reification	syncope
diction	visual	rhetorical question	synecdoche
elision (syncope)	internal rhyme	rhyme scheme	tone
enclosed rhyme	inversion (hyperbaton, anastrophe)	feminine rhyme	volta
end stop	irony	masculine rhyme	zeugma
enjambment		true rhyme	