

Literary History: A Systematic Approach

Lecture 6: The Evolution of Poetic Difficulty: Romanticism into Modernism (c. 1832-1930 and beyond)

1) The Importance of Romanticism

- a) Subjectivity/Individuality/Culture
- b) Originality/Innovation
- c) Defamiliarization/Difficulty

2) A Period of Transition: 19th-Century Poetry

- a) Experimental Form: Essence of Process?
- b) The Problem of Reception: Ladies of Shalott

3) Modernism

- a) A New “Objectivity”? Impersonality as Poetic Ideal
- b) A Formal Revolution

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1) The Importance of Romanticism

a) Processes of Naturalization: Subjectivity/Culture

(iambic pentameter/blank verse)

The Romantic Construction of “The People”
(ballads/songs)

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b) Processes of Individualization: Originality/Innovation

(formal experiment:

sonnet, hymn, ode, pastoral, romance, epic + ‘composite orders’)

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c) Defamiliarization/Poetic Difficulty

⇒ Romantic Synthesis = Romantic Conflicts

2) A Period of Transition: 19th-Century Poetry

Romanticism



(elaborate form/free verse)

(Aestheticism/Avantgarde)



Modernism

a) Experimental Form: Essence or Process?

embodied essence (complete product, unified perfection, fixed object)	vs.	material process (sensible effects, dynamic shaping, empty ceremony)
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> Idealism vs. Irony

(cf. Slinn 2000, 51)

If idealist essentialism is more readily represented in shorter forms, then the move in Victorian poetry away from personalized and homogeneous lyrics toward dramatic-lyrical and epic-narrative-lyrical hybrids suggests a growing dissatisfaction with the essentialist assumptions of organic poetics. Such hybrids shift individual expressiveness away from isolated subjectivism toward social contexts and culturally produced discursive processes.

(Slinn 2000, 52)

In Victorian poetry we see a proliferation of poetic forms, departing from eighteenth-century heroic couplets and neoclassical odes, and further developing the Romantic revival of ballads, sonnets, and blank verse into increasingly refined and rarefied metrical experiments.

(Prins 2000, 89)

John Clare
“I am”

I am: yet what I am none cares or knows,
My friends forsake me like a memory lost;
I am the self-consumer of my woes,
They rise and vanish in oblivious host,
Like shades in love and death's oblivion lost;
And yet I am! and live with shadows tost

Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,
Into the living sea of waking dreams,
Where there is neither sense of life nor joys,
But the vast shipwreck of my life's esteems;
And e'en the dearest--that I loved the best--
Are strange--nay, rather stranger than the rest.

I long for scenes where man has never trod;
A place where woman never smil'd or wept;
There to abide with my creator, God,
And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept:
Untroubling and untroubled where I lie;
The grass below--above the vaulted sky.
(1842/46; 1848)

Gerard Manley Hopkins,
“Pied Beauty” (curtal sonnet, > sprung rhythm: accentual verse)

Glory be to God for dappled things –
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;
And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.
(1877; 1918)

Algernon Charles Swinburne,
“The Higher Pantheism in a Nutshell” (iambic-anapestic hexameter)

One, who is not, we see: but one, whom we see not, is:
Surely this is not that: but that is assuredly this.

What, and wherefore, and whence? for under is over and under:
If thunder could be without lightning, lightning could be without thunder.

Doubt is faith in the main: but faith, on the whole, is doubt:
We cannot believe by proof: but could we believe without?

Why, and whither, and how? for barley and rye are not clover:
Neither are straight lines curves: yet over is under and over.

Two and two may be four: but four and four are not eight:
Fate and God may be twain: but God is the same thing as fate.

Ask a man what he thinks, and get from a man what he feels:
God, once caught in the fact, shows you a fair pair of heels.

Body and spirit are twins: God only knows which is which:
The soul squats down in the flesh, like a tinker drunk in a ditch.

More is the whole than a part: but half is more than the whole:
Clearly, the soul is the body: but is not the body the soul?

One and two are not one: but one and nothing is two:
Truth can hardly be false, if falsehood cannot be true.

Once the mastodon was: pterodactyls were common as cocks:
Then the mammoth was God: now is He a prize ox.

Parallels all things are: yet many of these are askew:
You are certainly I: but certainly I am not you.

Springs the rock from the plain, shoots the stream from the rock:
Cocks exist for the hen: but hens exist for the cock.

God, whom we see not, is: and God, who is not, we see:
Fiddle, we know, is diddle: and diddle, we take it, is dee.

(1880)

Walt Whitman

“Song of Myself” (2, last paragraph):

[...]

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,
You shall possess the good of the earth and the sun there are millions of suns left,
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand nor look through the eyes
of the dead nor feed on the spectres in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself.

(1855)

Emily Dickinson

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The Brain – is wider than the Sky –
For – put them side by side –
The one the other will contain
With ease – and You – beside

The Brain is deeper than the sea –
For – hold them – Blue to Blue –
The one the other will absorb –
As Sponges – Buckets – do –

The Brain is just the weight of God –
For – Heft them – Pound for Pound –
And they will differ – if they do –
As Syllable from Sound –

(c. 1862; 1896)

b) The Problem of Reception: Ladies of Shalott

Traditional Ballad:

e.g. “Bonny Barbara Allan”

(Child, no. 84. From a miscellany 1740)

It was in and about the Martinmas time,	a
When the green leaves were a-fallin';	b
That Sir John Graeme in the West Country	c
Fell in love with Barbara Allan.	(b)

Romantic Ballad:

e.g. Wordsworth’s “Goody Blake, and Harry Gill” (1798)

Oh! What’s the matter? what’s the matter?	a
What is’t that ails young Harry Gill?	b
That evermore his teeth they chatter,	a
Chatter, chatter, chatter still.	b

...

**Victorian Ballad:
e.g. Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" (1832/42)**

On either side the river lie	a	
Long fields of barley and of rye,	a	
That clothe the wold and meet the sky;	a	
And through the field the road runs by	a	
To many-towered Camelot;	b	
The yellowleaved waterlily	And up and down the people go	c
The greensheathed daffodilly,	Gazing where the lilies blow	c
Tremble in the water chilly,	Round an island there below,	c
Round about Shalott.	The island of Shalott.	b

Tennyson, "The Lady of Shalott": Endings

1832:

They crossed themselves, their stars they blest,
Knight, minstrel, abbot, squire and guest.
There lay a parchment on her breast,
That puzzled more than all the rest,
 The wellfed wits at Camelot.
*'The web was woven curiously
The charm is broken utterly,
Draw near and fear not - this is I,
 The Lady of Shalott.'*

1842:

Who is this? and what is here?
And in the lighted palace near
Died the sound of royal cheer;
And they crossed themselves for fear,
 All the knights at Camelot.
But Lancelot mused a little space;
He said, 'She has a lovely face;
God in his mercy lend her grace,
 The Lady of Shalott.'

3) Modernism

When I say there will be another classical revival I don't necessarily anticipate a return to Pope. I say merely that now is the time for such a revival. Given people of the necessary capacity, it may be a vital thing; without them we may get a formalism something like Pope. When it does come we may not even recognize it as classical. *Although it will be classical it will be different because it has passed through a romantic period.*

T.E. Hulme, "Romanticism and Classicism" (1913/14)

a) A New "Objectivity"? Impersonality as Poetic Ideal

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, *a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events* which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.

T.S. Eliot, "Hamlet" (1919)

The analogy was that of the catalyst. When [...] two gases [...] are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected: has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.

T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919)

T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915)

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question ...
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

...

b) A Formal Revolution

Despite the contrast in their historical position [...] there are a number of similarities between the ballad and [Ezra Pound's] 'The Cantos'. There is one huge difference. It can be indicated by means of the linguistic distinction between sociolect and idiolect, between (roughly) language as related to one social group, however defined, and language as related to one person. The ballad is a sociolect in that any single text combines units of event, motif, and phrasing from other ballads, so drawing on a common and inter-subjective discourse. 'The Cantos' are an idiolect, in that most of their allusions and references are to the intellectual and personal biography of one man, though given currency by constant repetition in the poem. [...] 'The Cantos' remain deeply individual and at present accessible only to a tiny elite of readers.

(Easthope 1983: 160)

> Ezra Pound, *The Pisan Cantos*, 81: 1-32 (1948)

William Carlos Williams: XXII ['The Red Wheelbarrow']

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

(1923)

Wallace Stevens:
“Anecdote of the Jar”

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

(1919)

Marianne Moore:

No Swan So Fine (syllabic verse)

‘No water so still as the
dead fountains of Versailles.’ No swan,
with swart blind look askance
and gondoliering legs, so fine
as the chintz china one with fawn-
brown eyes and toothed gold
collar on to show whose bird it was.

Lodged in the Louis Fifteenth
candelabrum-tree of cockscomb-
tinted buttons, dahlias,
sea urchins, and everlastings,
it perches on the branching foam
of polished sculptured
flowers – at ease and tall. The king is dead.
(1932)

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