

## No.17      MINIATURE MASTERPIECES (November 2019)

Teaching literature to teenagers, I've often asked them to guess at the worth of, say - rather than a Rembrandt or Bonnard, whom they have probably never heard of - the Mona Lisa (or, as the Louvre calls it, *La Joconde*). They guess millions of euros, impossibly priceless. Could you ever own it, or something like it, a Van Goch, say, a Picasso? No way!

Well, I'm going to give you a similar sort of masterpiece, which you can own and treasure for the rest of your lives. And it's yours to keep! (Amazement!)

I use the following "mini-masterpieces", partly to illustrate the "method" of Martin Coyle and John Peck in their useful book, "Practical Criticism". They suggest that ALL literature, whether explicitly or implicitly, is to do with tensions or polarities: youth/old age, summer/winter, solitude/society, joys of love/heartache of love etc. They suggest, also, that these tensions can be discovered by thinking about the positive or negative connotations of words. Now, before you sneer at the simplistic reductionism of their "method", it's worth pausing. Their thesis is that literature is complex and ambiguous, so words may have ambiguous connotations. Writers are not always certain of their ideas and may, themselves be deeply ambivalent about what they are doing. Therefore, testing (tasting?) word-by-word the "feel" of a poem (or drama or novel) is not a bad way at all to sense the driving tension of the work.

So, is everybody ready for some miniature masterpieces? The first is called "The Balloon of the Mind" and it's by WB Yeats. How do we feel about balloons, generally? Positive or negative? Mainly, pretty positive. Parties, fun! Would you like to travel in a balloon ("une mongolfière")? Hmmm! Yes! Any hesitations? Well, it depends on weather conditions. You can't steer the damn things.

### THE BALLOON OF THE MIND

Hands, do what you're bid;  
Bring the balloon of the mind,  
That bellies and drags in the wind,  
Into its narrow shed.

So, we look at all the positives and negatives. "Hands", pretty positive. "Balloon of the mind" – interesting. Why might the mind be like a *balloon*? Lots of ideas... "Bellies and drags" is pretty negative. "Narrow shed" – negative! Constricted, claustrophobic (even young teenagers' vocab is often quite sophisticated). "Shed"? They look out into the garden and spy our rather crappy garden shed, which nevertheless usefully houses all the badminton, croquet, cricket, table-tennis equipment. Useful! A bit small...! Ambiguous!

Eventually, (with a few more gentle questions some bright spark will nearly always say, "Oh, he's a poet, so his hands will be writing..." (Go on!) "And the narrow shed is... a *poem*...!")

"It's *this* poem!?"

General wonderment. It's a poem about all writing. All art, even, is an attempt to wrestle the ballooning imagination of human beings on to a page, or canvas, novel (maybe bigger than a mere shed), film etc. etc.

And the tension here (or what the French like to call the “problématique”) is between the negative-positives of discipline (“narrow”) and the positive-negatives of the freedom of the imagination to fly the skies. Form and structure (to some extent) are inherent in art, limiting, but also protecting and *refiguring* the initial impulses of the mind.

More bright sparks may notice the near-rhymes, contributing to the overall ambiguity. The poem itself is very disciplined, but the rhymes suggest that there is a potential freedom, a breaking loose, always just around the corner.

And so, by the end of the hour, everyone has learned off by heart (and can keep forever (free!) a masterpiece. A poem that goes to the heart of art.

I'm sure that you may have your very own miniatures, but here are some of mine that pupils have enjoyed responding to. (Or if they didn't, they were polite enough to hold their peace.)

## THE RED WHEELBARROW

by William Carlos Williams (1924)

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens

Hmm!? Call this a masterpiece? Why? On what grounds? Younger children, I find, come to this poem (poem?) with fewer preconceptions than older (more cynical) students. A tension may well be harder to spot here, but I think there is one. As always, I profess much ignorance before the pupils (well, I *am* pretty ignorant, also) and ask them for ideas. The following comments over the years are more or less typical:

- Why is it red? Red is the colour of danger! No, it's the colour of passion! I've never seen a red wheelbarrow, it would be so cool!
- Hey, I've just noticed: each of the stanzas LOOKS like a wheelbarrow! (She goes to the blackboard (only few schools have these nowadays) and draws a wheelbarrow outline around a stanza or two, adding handles and nicely spoked wheels.

- Oooh! There are always THREE words in the first line of the stanza and one word with TWO syllables in the second.
- And the second line is sort of broken off from the line before. Eg rainwater should be one word. So should wheelbarrow.
- There are three colours: RED, WHITE and BLUE for water! It's about the American flag?
- There's water (everybody needs water), there's food (everybody needs food) and... there's work – the wheelbarrow (everybody needs work).

Great work! So what do we think? Is there a tension here? My personal “take” on this is to consider the word “depends”. In a sense, this is the most complex and the heaviest (Latin) word in the poem. It would seem to be leading to something momentous. And to our surprise, instead, we are offered very simple things – “the bare necessities” if you like, though the “glazed” of the rainwater is beautifully positive, as are the smart “white” chickens and the artistically interesting “red” of the wheelbarrow. They are all frozen for us into a picture that is almost like a Norman Rockwell painting. The poem, just like cubist art, wrenches details apart, so that you gain a (slightly?) different perspective on the wider picture. The tension is in the paradox of seemingly *so little* depending, or seeming to depend, on the red wheelbarrow.

I read somewhere that when asked, the poet rather carelessly said that he had been visiting a sick girl, whose bed was near the window, and that this had been what she could see from the window. Yes, well poets are apt to try to avoid being pinned down to mislead just as much as to clarify. Easy to memorise, too. Now we have one Van Gogh, as well as a Mona Lisa. And they're yours to keep.

I usually introduce this next one by asking pupils how they think the world will end. Not a very cheerful subject, I admit, but then, literature deals with everything, so why not? Climate change, war, giant asteroids...

### **Fire and Ice** by Robert Frost (first printed Dec 1920)

Some say the world will end in fire,  
 Some say in ice.  
 From what I've tasted of desire  
 I hold with those who favor fire.  
 But if it had to perish twice,  
 I think I know enough of hate  
 To say that for destruction ice  
 Is also great  
 And would suffice.

The tension here, and they spot the metaphorical nature of the poem early on, is easy to locate. Does it rhyme? You bet! And what do those rhymes do here? The simplicity of this poem is lovely, but it doesn't half carry a punch in that final, chilling line. Interesting that "fire" is associated not with war (1920 was very soon after the Great War *to end all wars*), but with "desire". And "hate" is not connected with fire and anger, but rather with ice. And so, we are dealing not with politics and war, so much as personal relations – which of course feeds into politics and war. Plenty for teenagers to get off their chests there. I think we have a Peter Brueghel here, everybody! Peter who?

Here is a nice one by Philip Larkin

## Days

by Philip Larkin

What are days for?  
 Days are where we live.  
 They come, they wake us  
 Time and time over.  
 They are to be happy in:  
 Where can we live but days?

Ah, solving that question  
 Brings the priest and the doctor  
 In their long coats  
 Running over the fields.

The poem starts by asking very simple (blindingly obvious?) questions. Positive, positive... No tension here, surely? The final four lines, however, create a disturbing "image" of "the priest and the doctor" (what do they symbolise?) "Running over the fields". Why would they run? Is it a race? Will either of them be in time...? For what? To administer the last rites, or to save the patient through science and medicine? And, since we are involved ("Where can *we* live..."), *we* just might be the person they are both running towards!

When I was three or four and living in York, we were out one day in the little Morris Minor that my father had so proudly just bought, and we were driving over one of the Yorkshire moors. It was a grey day, gusting with rain, and I remember what happened next very clearly, still after 65 years. A large black car overtook us, driving very fast (probably over 30 mph) and skidded to a halt a few hundred yards ahead of us on the left. A man in a black coat, carrying a large black bag, leapt out and began running as fast as he could down through several fields into the valley below. He disappeared into the mist.

My parents were very worried, thinking he was almost certainly a bank robber making a getaway, so they stopped further on and rang the police. Later on, that evening, the police rang back to say it had been a vet on his way to deliver some calf somewhere. Life is sometimes less interesting than its fictional counterpart. This poem always brings back that memory.

This next one, though very old, is good for teenagers as young as 13. How important are clothes for sending out signals about who we are? Most schoolchildren have very strong views about school uniform, clothes and the freedom or non-freedom to wear what they want. How different is it for girls rather than for boys, and what are the gender difficulties of our present age? Plenty to discuss here before we get to...:

**Upon Julia's Clothes** by Robert Herrick 1591 – 1674

Whenas in silks my Julia goes,  
Then, then (methinks) how sweetly flows  
That liquefaction of her clothes.

Next, when I cast mine eyes, and see  
That brave vibration each way free,  
O how that glittering taketh me!

I try to edge the discussion towards what I think are the important ideas being focused on here, which are to do with freedom and entrapment.

Julia appears, by means of her rich, fluid clothes, to be a free spirit. If this is a love poem, it's odd that all the poet thinks to note about his lover is her clothes. "Liquefaction" (what a superb word) suggests that they almost slide off her completely like water. To put it crudely, is the poet more interested in her clothes (which are never described) or the body they conceal?

The word "cast" sounds as if the poet is making a bid, like an angler, for a 'catch'. He would like to land this slippery mermaid, a very male impulse, perhaps. But notice what happens; the poet claims to be 'caught', entrapped by the "glittering" of Julia's clothes. "Glittering is both positive and negative (no?) – ambiguous, then. And it is not so much Julia as Julia's clothing which has possessed him ("taketh" is a powerfully suggestive word, sexually).

Disingenuous, maybe. Fantasising, certainly. But I still think the poem is meant more light-heartedly, and I love its "play" with words. "Brave vibration"? I point out that "brave" – at that time – had more of the French "*brave*" – not courageous, but more like, praiseworthy. What is/are vibrating? Positive? Negative? For whom? Notice how "*my*" Julia is revealed to be less "his" than he might have supposed. It's a poem about "possession", "control", "freedom"...

And, of course, the discussion can roll on heatedly for hours (or until the bell goes, at least) on whether clothes are worn to attract deliberately – or whether the signals sometimes backfire or get crossed. Whether commercialism and celebrityhood aren't instrumental. Peer pressure? How "free" are these "brave vibrations"...? (cf The Beach Boys??).

And, of course, feminist readings will take issue with a male poet even *speaking* about freedom for a woman... What a nerve!

I've already used up my own Emily Dickinson mini-masterpiece, "That Love is all there is..." in No. 11 The Edginess of Miss Emily Dickinson, so I shall not repeat it here.

Here, instead, is Pound's very famous 'imagist' poem of 1926.

### **In a Station of the Metro**

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:  
Petals on a wet, black bough.

They don't come much shorter or terser than this. Influenced by Chinese or Japanese poetry, Pound was at the forefront of modernism and its desire to change the rules, reduce the "blah-blah" rhetoric of the previous century, "make it new". "Apparition" – positive or negative? As opposed to 'appearance', "apparition" is rather negative, and "faces in the crowd" is similarly off-putting. With the title, it suggests the anonymity of urbanisation, reducing people's humanity; The second line comes as a surprise. "Petals" is positive and natural, and even if the "wet, black bough" seems negative, the line as a whole seems to see this city scene in terms of a beautiful picture taken of nature.

The tension of the poem, between city and nature, ugliness and beauty, unnatural/natural is not resolved by the poem, but it does call into question the role of art in how we (or how art can) choose to view the world about us.

A more satisfying poem, for me, is an earlier one he wrote, published in 1916

### **Liu Ch'e**

THE rustling of the silk is discontinued,  
Dust drifts over the court-yard,  
There is no sound of foot-fall, and the leaves  
Scurry into heaps and lie still,  
And she the rejoicer of the heart is beneath them:

A wet leaf that clings to the threshold

Here, a more complex picture is built up, where absences are emphasised, creating a picture of an abandoned palace or rich home, where a woman seems to have died. How close to her is the persona here? There is a lot of ambiguity in the phrase "the rejoicer of *the* heart", which seems to avoid suggesting a connection with this woman, whoever she was.

The last line, similar to the last line of "Station Metro", transforms the scene (and the emotion) with the metaphor of "A wet leaf", which summons up fragility, death, mourning, sadness. A "threshold" is important, but it is also used figuratively to imply an entrance - to a new phase. Is that also implied here? I find this a beautiful and mysterious poem and more artistically satisfying than its shorter, rather showy, successor.

Finally, while we are dealing with miniatures masterpieces I ought to include the Japanese poet Bashō's most famous haiku. In April, Vicki and I were with our son George and his wife Beth, walking in Japan, south of Osaka. We weren't exactly on the Bashō Trail, as it is now called, but I have always loved his prose and verse sketches, including "The Narrow Road to the Deep North", and I was reading it as we walked the Komano Kodo Trail. I was making up my own haiku as we walked, compressing all my "ballooning" thoughts into the severely "narrow" 5-7-5 syllables, before I realised that Bashō often "cheated" – 6-8-5, 7-7-5, even 9-8-7! Too late, I realised I could have altered my metrics and given my haiku thoughts more space.

I felt pure and noble!

In my Penguin Classic on Bashō, his famous haiku is given thus:

*Furuike ya, kawazu tobikomu, mizu no oto.*

Breaking the silence

Of an ancient pond,

A frog jumped into water –

A deep resonance.

And the tensions here are stillness/disturbance – the eternal/the living and ephemeral. We value stillness and silence, but we are alive, and living things *must* disturb a peace which might otherwise symbolise death.

