

"A Poem Should Not Mean/But Be": A Reading of Poems

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** Poetry reading to illustrate, enhance, and enliven the presentation of papers at: The Eric Voegelin Society**

"Ars Poetica" selected by Charles R. Embry, Texas A&M University, Chair

2 by William Carlos Williams selected by Robert C. McMahon, Louisiana State University, author of The Metaxic Unconscious of William Carlos Williams' "This Is Just To Say"

2 by Mary Oliver selected by Robert S. Seiler, Independent Scholar, author of "Glory is My Work": Mary Oliver's Search for Order

Selections from T.S. Eliot's "Four Quartets" by Glenn Hughes, St. Mary's University, author of A Pattern of Timeless Moments: Existence and History in T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets

"St. Kevin and the Blackbird" selected by Polly Detels, Texas A&M University, Discussant, and Diane Quaid

Ars Poetica --Archibald MacLeish

A poem should be palpable and mute

As a globed fruit,

Dumb

As old medallions to the thumb,

Silent as the sleeve-worn stone

Of casement ledges where the moss has grown--

A poem should be wordless

As the flight of birds.

*

A poem should be motionless in time

As the moon climbs,
Leaving, as the moon releases
Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,
Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,
Memory by memory the mind--
A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs.

*

A poem should be equal to:
Not true.
For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf.
For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea--
A poem should not mean
But be.

This Is Just To Say - William Carlos Williams

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

The Red Wheelbarrow - William Carlos Williams

So much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens

Excerpts from "Four Quartets" -- T. S. Eliot

East Coker

V

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years--

Twenty years largely wasted, the years of l'entre deux guerres

Trying to use words, and every attempt

Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure

Because one has only learnt to get the better of words

For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which

One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture

Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate

With shabby equipment always deteriorating

In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,

Undisciplined squads of emotion. And what there is to conquer

By strength and submission, has already been discovered

Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope

To emulate--but there is no competition--

There is only the fight to recover what has been lost

And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions

That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.

For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.

Home is where one starts from. As we grow older

The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
Of dead and living. Not the intense moment
Isolated, with no before and after,
But a lifetime burning in every moment
And not the lifetime of one man only
But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.
There is a time for the evening under starlight,
A time for the evening under lamplight
(The evening with the photograph album).
Love is most nearly itself
When here and now cease to matter.
Old men ought to be explorers
Here or there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters
Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning.

Little Gidding

V

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from. And every phrase
And sentence that is right (where every word is at home,
Taking its place to support the others,
The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
An easy commerce of the old and the new,
The common word exact without vulgarity,
The formal word precise but not pedantic,
The complete consort dancing together)
Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
Every poem an epitaph. And any action
Is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea's throat
Or to an illegible stone: and that is where we start.
We die with the dying:
See, they depart, and we go with them.
We are born with the dead:
See, they return, and bring us with them.
The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew-tree
Are of equal duration. A people without history
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
Of timeless moments. So, while the light fails
On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel

History is now and England.

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this

Calling

We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

Through the unknown, unremembered gate

When the last of earth left to discover

Is that which was the beginning;

At the source of the longest river

The voice of the hidden waterfall

And the children in the apple-tree

Not known, because not looked for

But heard, half-heard, in the stillness

Between two waves of the sea.

Quick now, here, now, always--

A condition of complete simplicity

(Costing not less than everything)

And all shall be well and

All manner of thing shall be well

When the tongues of flame are in-folded

Into the crowned knot of fire

And the fire and the rose are one.

Pink Moon ♦ The Pond -- Mary Oliver

You think it will never happen again

Then, one night in April

the tribes wake trilling.

You walk down to the shore.

Your coming stills them,

but little by little the silence lifts

until song is everywhere

and your soul rises from your bones

and strides out over the water.

It is a crazy thing to do -

for no one can live like that,

floating around in the darkness

over the gauzy water.

Left on the shore your bones

keep shouting come back!

But your soul won't listen;

in the distance it is unfolding

like a pair of wings, it is sparking

like hot wires. So,

like a good friend,

you decide to follow.

You step off the shore

and plummet to your knees -

you slog forward to your thighs

and sink to your cheekbones -

and now you are caught

by the cold chains of the water -

you are vanishing while around you

the frogs continue to sing, driving

their music upward through your own throat,

not even noticing

you are something else.

And that's when it happens -

you see everything

through their eyes,

their joy, their necessity;

you wear their webbed fingers;

your throat swells.

And that's when you know

you will live whether you will or not,

one way or another,

because everything is everything else,

one long muscle.

It's no more mysterious than that.

So you relax, you don't fight it anymore,

The darkness coming down

called water,

called spring,

called the green leaf, called

a woman's body

as it turns into mud and leaves,

as it beats in its cage of water,

as it turns like a lonely spindle

in the moonlight, as it says

yes

Such Singing in the Wild Branches -- Mary Oliver

It was spring

and finally I heard him

among the first leaves -

then I saw him clutching the limb

in an island of shade

with his red-brown feathers

all trim and neat for the new year.

First, I stood still

and thought of nothing.

Then I began to listen.

Then I was filled with gladness -

and that's when it happened,

when I seemed to float,

to be, myself, a wing or a tree -

and I began to understand

what the bird was saying,

and the sands in the glass

stopped

for a pure white moment

while gravity sprinkled upward

like rain, rising,

and in fact

it became difficult to tell just what it was that was singing -

it was the thrush for sure, but it seemed

not a single thrush, but himself, and all his brothers,

and also the trees around them,

as well as the gliding, long-tailed clouds

in the perfectly blue sky - all, all of them

were singing.

And, of course, yes, so it seemed,

so was I.

Such soft and solemn and perfect music doesn't last
for more than a few moments.
It's one of those magical places wise people
like to talk about.
One of the things they say about it, that is true,
is that, once you've been there,
you're there forever.
Listen, everyone has a chance.
Is it spring, is it morning?
Are there trees near you,
and does your own soul need comforting?
Quick, then - open the door and fly on your heavy feet; the song
may already be drifting away.

- Mary Oliver

ST KEVIN AND THE BLACKBIRD

And then there was St Kevin and the blackbird.
The saint is kneeling, arms stretched out, inside
His cell, but the cell is narrow, so
One turned-up palm is out the window, stiff
As a crossbeam, when a blackbird lands
And lays in it and settles down to nest.

Kevin feels the warm eggs, the small breast, the tucked
Neat head and claws and, finding himself linked
Into the network of eternal life,
Is moved to pity: now he must hold his hand
Like a branch out in the sun and rain for weeks
Until the young are hatched and fledged and flown.

*

And since the whole thing's imagined anyhow,
Imagine being Kevin. Which is he?
Self-forgetful or in agony all the time
From the neck on out down through his hurting forearms?
Are his fingers sleeping? Does he still feel his knees?
Or has the shut-eyed blank of underearth
Crept up through him? Is there distance in his head?
Alone and mirrored clear in love's deep river,
'To labour and not to seek reward,' he prays,
A prayer his body makes entirely
For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird
And on the riverbank forgotten the river's name.

- *Seamus Heaney*