

---

# CHAPTER 1

## Russian Formalism, New Criticism, Poetics

---

### An Introduction to Russian Formalism, New Criticism, Poetics

One of the first things one notices about literature is that it consists of language that has been formed and shaped so that it no longer looks like ordinary language. It is easy to tell a novel from a weather report. Usually, such shaping and forming serves the end of telling imaginary stories, or of evoking intense emotions, or of communicating ideas. People who thought about literature in the early twentieth century were called “formalists” because they said literature is unique because of how it is done (form) rather than what it is about (content). A novel may be interesting because it is about the “hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie” or “the dangers of passionate love,” but it is worthy of study because it is executed in a way that is innovative, compelling, or significant. Its form makes it unique.

For some formalists, known as the Russian formalists, how literature is written, not what it is about, constitutes the essential component of literature that distinguishes it from other kinds of writing such as history or science. The language of literature is different from ordinary, everyday language because it has been bent away from habitual usage. This bending and shaping constitutes what these theorists called form. Literary study, they felt, should focus on this dimension of literature only.

The Russian formalists took issue with the notion that form is merely a clothing attached to meaning. Rather, they contended, form stands on its own and is what makes literature “literary.” Form is not “motivated” by meaning. It has its own autonomous rules and history. The history of tragic drama is not a history of the different ideas expressed in the plays;

rather, it is a history of how the form has changed, how its conventions have evolved and what techniques are used. Form thus has no “correlation” with content. What matters in literature is not meaning but the literary techniques, devices, and procedures that writers use.

Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, in this view, is an important object of literary analysis not for its ideas about human life but for its technical devices. Its themes of family betrayal and personal failure are worthy of discussion, but to study what is literary about the play is not to study ideas. They are rightly the province of sociology or history or psychology. Literary analysis should be concerned with how the play is constructed, how language is used, what imagery is found in it, and the like.

Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, for example, is a novel about adultery, but what distinguishes it from a sociological study of the phenomenon is the way it is executed. At one point, Tolstoy recounts a horse race from the perspective of a rider in the race. This unique and novel device could be connected to thematic issues, such as the way stasis and motion are aligned with characters in such a way as to explain Anna’s attraction for her future lover, who is the jockey whose point of view we temporarily assume in the horse race. But for the Russian formalists, the more important quality of the narrative moment is the device itself and the unique point of view on the action it creates for the reader. By placing us in the rider’s seat, Tolstoy takes us out of our ordinary universe of experience in much the same way that the officer takes Anna out of her ordinary world of experience. We not only hear an idea about the origins of adultery; we actually enact the reality of a disturbing and exciting new experience.

In another famous example, Tolstoy tells an entire story from the point of view of a horse. In another, flogging is described with a geometrical detachment and a calculated precision that force the reader to see anew – and to feel the shock of – a practice that might otherwise seem routine and acceptable. The device is unsettling, but that, according to Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky, is precisely the point of good literature. It disturbs us and takes us out of our habitual and routine ways of seeing the world. It does so by bending and contorting language so that we cannot use it as we usually might to facilitate the kind of rote understandings of the world that allow us to get through our days without becoming overly shocked, alarmed, or surprised by the events around us. The repetitious nature of life dulls our senses and makes the world overly familiar. We cease to see things vividly. By bending language to new uses and new ways of seeing and understanding, literature reawakens our senses and defamiliarizes the world.

The invention of new formal devices and techniques also, according to the Russian formalists, makes possible new content in literature. Earlier theorists of literature had argued that ideas dictate form, but

the formalists turned this around and contended that form gives rise to content.

In the Middle Ages in western Europe, for example, literature was dominated by stories about knights. In the Arthurian romances, knights pursued quests aligned with religious goals. The characters were static and usually embodied virtues such as steadfastness or courage. With the decline of feudalism and of the martial court culture that sustained such literary forms, new forms emerged that embodied the more secular and materialist values and ideals of the new middle class or “bourgeoisie.” Shklovsky argues that one of the first modern novels written during this period – Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, a story of a man who imagines himself to be a knight from one of the medieval romances – develops a new form that makes possible an entirely new kind of hero. While the romance hero is static and unchanging, Quixote is pliable because the new narrative form strings together episodes rather than moving in a single plot line towards a quest goal. The new episodic narrative form makes it possible to have a hero that can change from situation to situation. Form, in this instance, determines content and not the other way around.

A pure Russian formalist reading of a literary text would attend to form alone without any reference to content. Not all formalists, however, thought the form of a work was the only thing worth studying. Some concerned themselves with the relationship between form and meaning, the essential link between the different ways language is used and the ideas such uses communicate. For the American “New Critics,” who dominated American literary discussion in the mid-twentieth century, literary form is welded to content or meaning in an organic unity.

Cleanth Brooks noticed that writers often rely on a particular language shape known as paradox that brings together two contrary qualities or values, such as “the last shall be first.” They do so, according to Brooks, because this particular form of expression embodies an essential quality of human experience. There are many versions of such paradoxes in literature and culture. In *King Lear*, for example, a man is blinded, but only then does he truly see what is going on around him. In *The Matrix*, a young man must die in order to be reborn as the person he truly is. In John Keats’ poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” the vivid experience of life is paradoxically captured most truly in the “cold pastoral” scene painted on a vase. According to Brooks, paradox is the only way of expressing or describing the unity of the eternal and the temporal, the universal and the momentary.

The New Critics were concerned with the universal aspects of human experience. Such universals, they believed, are true of everyone everywhere, and “great” literature captures them best. Such universals are general or abstract rather than specific and concrete, but literature makes

them concrete. Since the time of the New Critics in the mid-twentieth century, literary scholars have come to question the idea that a writer like Shakespeare can indeed write plays that describe “universals” that apply equally to peasant women in India and wealthy aristocrats in Renaissance England. This is not to say that there are not universal ideas in the world or in literature. It is to note, rather, that the world, with all of its specific differences of wealth and station and status and power, does not allow all universal ideas to be equally applicable everywhere. Even a very abstract universal truth such as “hard work is usually rewarded” is belied by the educational system in the United States, for example, where children with similar test scores from different economic backgrounds fare differently in education. Those from wealthy backgrounds attend and graduate college more often than their poorer counterparts. Similarly intelligent children in rural India might not even have a choice.

Moreover, the works of literature that seem most universal often are the most religious or idealist. The New Critics were able to confirm their hypothesis about literature by choosing examples from eras such as the Renaissance and Romanticism when religious idealism – the belief that there is a spiritual world behind or outside the physical world – was taken seriously. Writers therefore wrote in a way that confirmed the New Critics’ essentially religious and idealist view of literature.

### Exercise 1.1 William Shakespeare, *King Lear*

The method of “close reading” for which the New Critics are famous seeks to demonstrate how meaning inheres in the form of a work. A New Critic would seek in the play examples of irony and paradox, especially ones that represent a successful reconciliation of the universal and the concrete. In one of the dominant image patterns of the play, for example, two opposing values are joined in a single formulation. What is prized is suddenly despised, what without worth suddenly valued. The powerful and the powerless change places, and the virtuous are branded as vicious. Both the action and the imagery of the play are characterized by such paradoxes and ironic inversions. The pattern is evident in Lear’s caution to Cordelia: “Mend your speech a little, lest you mar your fortunes.” The two characters are close yet distant at this point in the play, joined by blood yet separated by judgment, and the image evokes phonetic alliteration or proximity (mend, mar) only to draw attention to a more destructive dissonance or disjunction (between repairing something and harming it).

How might such paradoxes be said to fuse a universal idea and a concrete example?

In the same scene, France draws attention to the social inversion that Lear's rashness begets: "Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich, being poor, / Most choice, forsaken, and most loved, despised." These paradoxes underscore Lear's folly, the fact that his actions invert the right order of things. The images embody the sense of social disorder created when valuable things are disvalued and worthless ones elevated.

How do these paradoxes become a way of demonstrating what is truly valuable in the world as well as what, despite its apparent value in a worldly sense, is in fact without value?

In pursuing your own New Critical reading of the play, you might consider other paradoxes associated with sight, clothing, and madness.

A Russian formalist analysis of the play would be less concerned with universal ideas and more concerned with how the actual form of the play – its devices and procedures of dramatic construction – functions.

For example, rather than begin with a direct presentation of Lear, as one might expect from the title of the play, the play begins instead in a mode of indirect presentation. It tells his story initially through the voices of Kent and Gloucester. We learn in their conversation that Lear is both unpredictable and difficult to know: "It did always seem so to us [that Lear favored one duke over another]; but now in the division of the kingdom it appears not which of the Dukes he values most." The device of indirect presentation of the main character thus coheres with the theme of the opening scene. This theme – that people's real intentions are difficult to know – becomes part of one of the major themes of the play – that one cannot trust what people say because real intentions can be different from professed feelings. These themes in turn link to the political argument of the play – that strong monarchs are necessary to maintain control over the unpredictability and treachery to which people are prone.

A small, seemingly inconsequential dramatic device or formal procedure can thus have quite broad ramifications.

In the scene that follows in the play, we learn just how dangerous and harmful language can be. It is a medium without any built-in guarantees of truthfulness. It can be wielded to deceive someone who makes the mistake of taking for granted that words mean what they say. But as a form of verbal representation, an image rather than a thing, language has the potential to create a semblance of truthfulness and of accurate representation where there is none. The procedure of indirect presentation in the opening scene thus evokes themes that will prove central to the play's core concerns. By placing the audience in a position of faulty knowledge (we only partially know Lear at the outset and only hear of him obliquely), the play formally executes one of its principal thematic concerns. It alerts the audience to the opacity of others' motives and inner thoughts, and inscrutability will be a major motivator of plot action throughout the rest of the play.

The procedure of indirect presentation also, of course, decenters and distances Lear as a character. We are instructed by the procedure not to take his speeches in the scene that follows Gloucester and Kent's conversation as seriously as we might had he been presented to us directly, in his own voice, as it were. His words are deprived of some of the authority they might have possessed had not the procedure of indirect presentation framed his entry, and we are positioned to consider him a character to be observed and perhaps even criticized rather than identified with.

A Russian formalist would also notice the bawdy language of the opening dialogue, which is filled with puns and ribald innuendo. The low language of gossip in the initial dialogue between Kent and Gloucester is strikingly at odds with the language of high statecraft in the scene that follows. The more florid speech is associated with Lear's delusions regarding his daughters' affections and with his daughters' false flattery. And as we learn in later scenes, popular speech, in the form of the Fool's instructive taunts and Edgar's mad speeches, has a crucial redemptive effect on Lear. A victim of flattery, with its inflated and false images, he learns from the Fool and from Edgar, both of whose speech is laced with raw, literal, bodily imagery, the truth of what the real state of the world is, without the adornment of rhetorical inflation or of artifice.

The low or bawdy speech of the opening dialogue, therefore, which at first has a defamiliarizing effect that upsets our expectations regarding a tragedy about kings, in fact instantiates a crucial procedure at work throughout the play. The use of low language deflates the pretensions of high language and guides perceptions toward truth and away from falseness. In this initial instance, it prepares us to hear Lear's inflated high speech in the rest of the first scene as being at odds with reality. It is certainly quite different from the more plain style associated with Gloucester's honest acknowledgment of adulterous reality in the opening dialogue, a style that will be linked throughout the play with virtue and innate nobility.

The motif of the sexual pun in the dialogue between Kent and Gloucester ("Do you smell a fault?", "I cannot conceive you") has a similar function. The puns imply that words can have two meanings, one hidden or implicit, the other explicit. Such linguistic duality is at the origin of the political crisis of the play. Goneril and Regan can deceive Lear only because words can have more than one meaning, and the public or explicit meaning may have nothing to do with the private and withheld meaning.

Such duality also bears importantly on the play's theme of true nobility or virtue. The topic of the initial conversation between Kent and Gloucester is the difference between Gloucester's two sons – the

illegitimate Edmund and the legitimate Edgar. As the same word can have two meanings, so the same object – a son – can have two different social meanings. Gloucester's refusal to accept the inverse valuation of his sons – one legitimate, the other illegitimate – which feudal society imposes foreshadows a failure to differentiate truly noble from falsely noble in the scene that follows. For Gloucester, Edgar is "no dearer in my account" than Edmund, but for Lear, Cordelia will be much less in his account for not having flattered him. Lear fails to read his daughters' speeches as Kent and Gloucester read each other's in the opening dialogue, which is to say, as puns, as acts of language with dual meanings. Lear fails to read Goneril and Regan's praise as an expression of dislike and Cordelia's silence as an expression of love.

Of the opening dialogue, finally, a formalist might note that the action occurs out of the way of the principal events with which the play is concerned. Compared to the declarations of Lear that follow immediately, it has more the quality of an aside. Moreover, its topics are an event (adultery, illegitimate birth) that occurred behind the scenes of legitimate social action and a hidden intention kept from public view ("it appears not which of the Dukes he values most"). The behind-the-scenes quality of the opening dialogue might thus be said to dramatize the problem of hidden intentions (kept behind the scenes of public statements) that will bring about Lear's downfall. As it is difficult to decipher Lear's thoughts, so also will it be difficult to know Goneril and Regan's real feelings. And as it is difficult to know the difference between the legitimate and the illegitimate son and heir, so also it will be difficult to know where true nobility lies – in the frank Cordelia or in the more rhetorical Regan and Goneril. That the play begins off center stage suggests the position it will advocate in these debates: truth is not a matter of external show and consists not of staged words but of true feelings that are necessarily experienced out of view – "Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say." Legitimate nobility or virtue will also prove to be a matter of internal noble qualities rather than external public display. The fore-stage, the play itself suggests in its opening background dialogue, is a realm of deception. The motif of indirect presentation through an initial aside therefore serves an important function. It frames what follows as a dramatization of the play's lesson regarding truth and value, and its own use of language and staging suggests already what the point of that lesson will be.

A Russian formalist approach would seek out devices or literary procedures that seem important in themselves, without any connection to meaning. Consider the structure of the plot. What are the different "moves" in the plot? By "move" would be meant an event like "betrayal" or "enlightenment." If you draw a map of the moves in each parallel plot, what parallels or differences do you notice?



### **Exercise 1.2 Elizabeth Bishop, “The Moose” and “At the Fishhouses”**

“The Moose” is an elegy, a kind of poem written on the occasion of someone’s death that offers a way of understanding or coming to terms with death. Dedicated to Bishop’s recently deceased aunt, its point of departure is a bus journey Bishop took back to New England from Nova Scotia after attending her aunt’s funeral. The poem required almost two decades to compose, so its apparent simplicity belies a great deal of careful crafting. The union of simple narrative (a bus journey) and grand thematic concern (how to understand death) would appeal to a New Critic interested in the way universal meanings and concrete particulars are welded together in poetry, while a Russian Formalist would be attracted by the high degree of “literariness” evident in Bishop’s crafted use of rhythm, rhyme, euphony, repetition, and metaphor.

The poem seems entirely concerned with the careful observation and precise description of ordinary events and objects, from a dog’s bark to moonlight in the woods, yet this simple concern can be related to the issue of life and death on which the poem ultimately dwells. Observation and description occur at the surface where human consciousness or subjectivity encounter objective world, and that surface is also the line which distinguishes life from death, the human or subjective from the thingly or objective world. To cross that line is to move from the vivid to the inanimate. The way the poem describes objects, therefore, itself bears on the issue of death, and the form that the contact between mind and world assumes can be understood as having a thematic consequence. A fearful attitude toward death would posit the world as inanimate object. The mind’s contact with the world would from this perspective be with an entirely alien realm, and the subject’s passage into objectivity in death would be understood as simple extinction. Subject and object, awareness and world, thus come to have the meaning of life and death.

But it is possible to imagine the relation between life and death, subject and object, awareness and things in other ways, and that is what “The Moose” is about. The task of the elegiac poet is to conceive of death in such a way that it no longer inspires fear, and addressing that task takes the form in the poem of a journey of consciousness from an initial external perspective that observes the world in its separate objectivity to an immersion in human subjectivity that emphasizes such human powers and capacities as memory, imagination, and naming to, finally, a vision of an object that is itself a subject and that provokes a kind of communion across the line dividing subjective awareness from the world of objects. The very simple recording of observations of natural things and everyday events in the poem is therefore also about the



very human problem of how to confront one's own naturalness and objectivity, one's own final belonging to the world.

The "narrative" of the poem has four parts: the first is concerned with the movement of the bus through the landscape as seen from the outside; the second records the onset of evening; the third describes the nighttime events inside the bus from the perspective of the speaker; and finally, in the fourth part, the moose appears. The first six stanzas of the poem consist of one lengthy sentence which begins with an unusually long introductory clause ("From narrow provinces . . .") and whose subject and verbs are "a bus journeys west" in line 2 of stanza 5 and "waits, patient" in line 2 of stanza 6. The effect of this form is to emphasize the predominance of the landscape over the subject, the immersion of the bus in the world around it. In the unusual form of the sentence, the centrality human subjectivity usually accords itself is displaced. If the bus is a figure for humanity or for the "lone traveller" of stanza 6, then already in this poem it is portrayed as part of a world that in a profound manner precedes and exceeds it. Even when the bus finally is named as the subject, it is described in a way that emphasizes its placement within nature: the windshield reflects the sunlight, the sunlight glances off and brushes the metal, and the bus's side is called a "flank," an animal simile that foreshadows the moose and metaphorically implants the human vehicle in the natural world.

The delayed presentation of the subject also unsettles and defamiliarizes the distinction between human and natural worlds through a confusion of reference. The word "where" occurs three times in the first three stanzas as a modifier of "provinces," but stanza 4 begins with a clause that modifies by anticipation the bus: "on red, gravelly roads." The uninterrupted flow of reading, facilitated by the parallel of "where" clauses and the "on" clause, merges the description of the provinces with the description of the bus and further underscores the inseparability of the human and natural worlds by making the referent of "on" seem the same as that of "where." At first, one seems to be reading about provinces, and only when one reaches the next stanza does one realize that a shift has occurred and that provinces have given way to the bus as the object of the modifier.

The merged inseparability of the human and the natural is made emphatic in the use of rhythm, rhyme, and alliteration in the first four stanzas. From the "fish and bread and tea" of line 2 to "the bay not at home" of line 12, Bishop characterizes nature with metaphors of human domesticity and uses the repetition of sounds to suggest the naturalness of human civilization's constructs. The civilized "roads" of stanza 4, line 1, are echoed in the "rows of sugar maples" in the next line, and the "ap" sound of "maples" carries over into the "clapboard" of the following

two lines – the “clapboard farmhouses” which are echoed in “clapboard churches,” a repetition that links human subjective concerns such as religion with work on nature. If natural woods can become literal wood for human construction, the rhyme of “churches” and “birches” intimates a more profound congruence between the two worlds.

That congruence also takes the form of a mirroring between realms. The rhythm of such parallel lines as “the bay coming in, / the bay not at home” mimes the movement of the tides coming in and going out, while qualifiers like “veins” suggest that nature’s work on itself is akin to a living organism. This crossing assumes a humorous form at the end of this first part where the “collie supervises” and the bus “waits, patient.”

Nature itself is characterized by a harmonic mirroring between its parts that makes the bus’s journey into it – a metaphor for the passage into death – seem not so much a loss of life and a fall into cold objectivity as a move from one realm of vividness into another. The rhythmic alternation of vowel sounds in the opening stanzas, for example, suggests a nature that breathes in and out while circulating water like blood (the “silted red,” “red sea,” and “lavender” of stanza 3). The repeated o’s of line one (“From narrow provinces”) alternate with a’s, e’s, and i’s in line 2 (“of fish and bread and tea”), then with o’s again in line 3 (“home of the long tides”) and with e’s and a’s again in lines 4 and 5 (“where the bay leaves the sea / twice a day and takes”), before line 6 harmonically unites the three alternating sounds – “the herrings long rides.”

Stanza 2 performs a similar alternation of sounds to match the description of water filling and emptying a bay. Now e and i sounds (“where if the river / enters or retreats”) contrast with a’s and o’s (“in a wall of brown foam”) to match the swing of the tides (“the bay coming in, / the bay not at home”). The “er” of “enters” and the “re” of “retreats” (“enters or retreats”) enact the same kind of syllabic mirroring. Such mirroring, if it extends to all realms, both human and natural, implies that the harmony of the observed world balances a harmony in the human observer, and indeed the reading experience would suggest that the verbal form of the poem through these first few stanzas posits in the reader/observer a sense of orderly congruence with the world. This would explain why stanzas 5 and 6 are characterized by images of a mesh between human and natural worlds, from the “dented flank” of the bus which flashes sunlight as if it were paint to the family scene that includes the supervisory collie. If nature is domestic, so also the human is natural, and it is so in a way that is itself perfectly domestic. To be in the world is to be at home.

One might by now glean how the poem might be said to allude to the question of death even though it has yet explicitly to do so. Like the opening sentence which implants its subject within its object (“through the landscape the bus journeys” rather than “the bus journeys through

the landscape”), the poem places humanity within a natural world characterized predominantly by a rhythmic alternation of movement and countermovement. The effect of the second possible narrative pattern – the bus journeys through the landscape – would have been to privilege the activity of the subject on the object. The pattern chosen instead emphasizes the passivity of the subject as it encounters an object larger and more powerful than itself. The subject is therefore a part of something whose movements anticipate its own. That those movements consist of an alternation of contrasting elements (“coming in,” “not at home”) suggests that the death figuratively alluded to in the bus’s westward journey will not be conceivable in any way other than as an alternation, rhythmic and necessary, with a countermovement that forms a complete strophe akin to the poem’s alternating vocalic patterns. One effect of the form of the poem, therefore, is to imply without stating a way of understanding death that fulfills elegiac expectations. It will be understood as part of natural life.

If the natural world of Part 1 is accommodating, even comforting in its domesticity and vocalic harmony, in Part 2, which begins with the line “Goodbye to the elms,” that world begins to disappear in the fading light of evening, and its disappearance gives rise to images of instability, the loss of attachment, and solitariness. Warmth (“burning rivulets”) gives way to cold (“cold round crystals”), and the primary red of the first part is replaced by gray or displaced into the solitary point of a red light swimming through the dark. Awareness now withdraws from the world of external objects and those objects themselves begin to close in upon themselves, withdrawing from view. If the disembodied perspectiveless voice of Part 1 is able to provide a grand vision of nature, of harmonic natural movements, and of the human community with/in nature, the perspective of the traveler in Part 2 takes the form of partial impressions of things going past: “On the left, a red light / swims through the dark.” The mind’s awareness becomes fragmentary (“A pale flickering. Gone.”), and the objects in the world become less connected to each other and to humans: “Two rubber boots show, / illuminated, solemn. / A dog gives one bark.” The boots indicate the absence of the person who wears them, much as the world itself now seems evacuated of that human or domestic content that had characterized it in Part 1. Night is a kind of death, an enactment of the dying out of light and of the world of objects it illuminates that would occur at death. The first part’s communion of human and world, indicated by the link of church, farmhouse, and land, comes to a conclusion, a conclusion suggested by the image of the woman shaking a tablecloth “out after supper.” In the place of contact with natural things are now the signs or names that humans append to things – “Then the Economies – / Lower, Middle, Upper; / Five Islands, Five Houses.”

Images suggestive of death and of the fragility of human contact with the world come to dominate, but Bishop carefully maintains a certain faith in the naturalness of such changes, in an underlying holding together of things that withstands the falling apart that occurs at the level of perception, and in the possibility of finding alternative kinds of sustenance. That the onset of evening is initially characterized in positive natural imagery – “The light / grows richer,” “the sweet peas cling / to their wet white string” – places the withdrawal of light and the loss of the world within the framework of the natural rhythms described in Part 1, and the continued use of images such as “lupins like apostles,” which compares the rows of upright flowers to paintings of rows of apostles, continues the link of nature and religion. Moreover, the instability of perception is balanced by an image of a more profound holding together of things: “An iron bridge trembles / and a loose plank rattles / but doesn’t give way.”

In the stanza that follows the negative images of the loss of the world and the instability of perception – the lone red light in the dark, the solemn empty books, the dog’s single bark – a compensatory image of an elderly woman bearing sustenance in the form of two market bags who gets aboard the bus and announces affirmatively that it is “a grand night. Yes, sir” further balances and rectifies the negativity of the oncoming night. Her request for a ticket “all the way to Boston” is a metaphor of continuity that seems to resolve the discontinuity of the flickering perceptions in the preceding stanzas. The last line – “She regards us amicably” – shifts the focus of the poem away from the lone subject’s unstable perceptions of the external object world and toward a more social subjectivity. A first person pronoun – “us” – is used for the first time, and Part 3, which begins “Moonlight as we enter,” will be concerned with human subjective powers and how they might be used to come to terms with the kind of loss described in the move from the first to the second parts of the poem.

Already one senses in the amicable encounter between the elderly woman and the passengers that those powers and their work will have to do with the ability of speech to make communities between otherwise isolated human subjects and to transform the world through acts of naming like “a grand night.” If the woman’s greeting creates an “us,” a community out of different passengers and “lone travellers,” language in the following stanza is shown transforming the negative nighttime world into something more positive through a creation of similitude: “the New Brunswick woods, / hairy, scratchy, splintery; / moonlight and mist / caught in them like lamb’s wool / on bushes in a pasture.” With the shift from daylight to moonlight, the poem shifts from a concern with the fragile perception of objects to a concern with the internal subjective power of the imagination, its ability to substitute images for things

and to posit similitude between different things. Fragile objects can be replaced by more enduring images, just as the loneliness of a world of objects that pass and disappear can be alleviated by the company and benevolence of others. In this instance, the image is particularly important because it embodies the poem's ambivalence (a New Critic might say its irony or paradox) regarding the compensations for loss it proposes. "Lamb's wool" suggests literal physical warmth, but lamb also refers to the Christian tradition of religious symbolism to which Bishop has alluded at least twice already in the poem, since lamb is an image associated with Jesus. Lamb also, of course, suggests fresh life or birth, and that meaning seems more in keeping with the other transformations at work at this point of the poem. Splintery woods, for example, are supplanted by "pasture," something which, like the old woman's two bags of groceries, provides sustenance.

After this transformation of disturbing objects into comforting images, something like rest is possible for the travelers. The troubled instability of the perception of external objects gives way to an "hallucination," a "divagation" or wandering from the awareness of objects. The fragmented temporality of the trip through space is replaced by a different temporality "in Eternity" that allows the past – grandparents' voices overheard in childhood – to enter the present, so that memory and perception mix. Freed from the limitations of perception, the mind can engage different powers – memory and imagination – that allow a healing understanding – "things cleared up finally," "half groan, half acceptance" – of the kinds of losses one experiences as one travels through nature and time. If the bus journey is a metaphor for the inevitability of loss, of the passage of things and of people into the past of the ongoing journey, memory and imagination allow that past to be retrieved so that a conversation heard "back in the bus" can also be "an old conversation," one that recalls other conversations throughout life – "Talking the way they talked / in the old featherbed, / peacefully, / on and on."

Rhythm now returns to the poem, an alternation of sound and phrase in the tallying of life's losses and gains that mirrors the earlier alternating rhythm of nature: "what he said, what she said, / who got pensioned; / deaths deaths and sicknesses; / the year he remarried; / the year (something) happened. / . . . He took to drink. Yes. / She went to the bad." Unlike the use of rhythm in the description of nature in Part 1, however, the use of rhythm here seems to struggle against disordered contingency of events and to be at odds with what it names. Life in the conversation does not follow nature's alternating form, entering and retreating, coming in and going out according to a logic that draws forth a matching language. Language must struggle now to meet (or miss) what it names ("the year (something) happened"), and although the elements of the earlier vocalic and syllabic rhythms are there (the i's of "She died in

childbirth” alternating with the o’s of “That was the son lost / when the schooner foundered”), the two events are disjoined, unmatched, and only contingently related. Life’s experiences cannot be like nature and cannot have the same kind of compelling and necessary alternating rhythm. They are strophic in that they alternate good and bad, but all together they comprise a list rather than a living unity, a series of accidents rather than anything with internal coherence. If the coherence of nature’s movements evoked religious images, from the churches like birches to the lupins like apostles, now religion is put in question as an option for dealing with the alogical hazards, pains, and losses of life: “When Amos began to pray / even in the store and / finally the family had / to put him away.” The deliberately clumsy use of “and” and “had” as end words renders formally the inappropriateness of the events described, but it might also be construed as suggesting that religion itself is nonsynchronic with the events of life.

Life’s losses are unamenable to the kind of rhythm used to describe nature, and a different strategy of naming and describing is required, one that relies on poetic repetition to match the sheer redundancy of the events: “what he said, what she said,” “deaths deaths,” “the year he remarried; / the year (something) happened,” “He took . . . She went . . .” No logic or coherence or rhythmic unity can be found in events that simply repeat without strophic alternation of movement and countermovement. Instead, repetition functions to emphasize the seeming endlessness of loss: “the year . . . the year . . .”

But repetition might also make possible affirmative acceptance. This possibility is clear in the line: “‘Yes . . .’ that peculiar / affirmative. ‘Yes . . .’” The first step in such acceptance is to recognize and affirm the events, to say “yes” to them rather than to turn away in fear. The kind of religious meaning evoked by the story of Amos (the name is biblical) would arrest the repetitiveness of the events and give them a meaning that would make them cease repeating. With such an alternative discarded, one must instead not only affirm losses, but also greet and affirm them again and again. The pain of the events is not something that happens once and is finished; it is so identical with life – figured again in the bus journey as something in constant ongoing movement – that it occurs repetitively. For there to be life is for there to be such repetitive ongoing losses. Any affirmation, acceptance, and understanding of them must therefore itself assume the form of a repetition. The grandparents’ “yes” must therefore be repeated: “‘Yes . . .’ that peculiar / affirmative. ‘Yes . . .’”

Repetition in the affirmative understanding of life’s losses cannot have the form of the full strophed, alternating rhythm of the description of nature, but the repetition of understanding nevertheless gives rise to a kind of rhythm. By repeatedly affirming loss, the grandparents’ act of

understanding creates a mirroring and a rhythm akin to that of the opening stanzas: “A sharp, indrawn breath, / half groan, half acceptance.” Repetition is endurance, and endurance means learning to accommodate what might be entirely alien to the subject’s mode of observation and understanding. It is to repeat it, though in slightly different form, from “half groan” to “half acceptance.” By being taken in in this way (“indrawn”), the object loses its cold objectivity and becomes subjective. By moving to the side of animation, loss and death enter awareness and become animate.

The poem’s process of simple description now displays its full importance. It is the way (perhaps the only way) of fulfilling the elegiac task of coming to terms with death. Or as Bishop herself puts it with appropriate simplicity: “Life’s like that. / We know *it* (also death).” The statement embodies the way affirmative description works by repeating the object in the subject’s terms, by finding some familiar and similar term of comparison (“like”). Here, however, the term of comparison is life itself, a different moment of life of which what one is understanding is a repetition. Repetition, life’s repetition of itself, thus creates familiarity and similarity: “Life’s like that.” It is something, to use the terms of part 1, with which one can feel at home because “we” already know it.

The full capacity of repetition to promote a therapeutic understanding is rendered in the repetition of life by death: “We know *it* (also death).” To know life is necessarily, by the poetic logic of the apposition, to know death. But one consequence of the acceptance and affirmation described in this part of the poem is that death is now something appended and made parenthetical in relation to life. If life is a journey of observation and description and, through observation and description, affirmation, then all one can know is observable life. Death is known only as what stands outside life (in parentheses) and as what stands in strophic, rhythmic balance with it. By italicizing “it,” Bishop underscores the rhythm and directs the reader not to place the emphasis on “know.” The stress therefore falls in the middle of the line, creating a flow upward that then descends downward and back up again into “death”: “We know *it* (also death).” Repetition here assumes the form of rhythm. The painful repetitiveness of loss, by being repeated in the mind’s own language of observation and affirmation, is transformed into strophic, rhythmically alternating, harmonic form.

The sense that death has been understood and accepted is underscored by the comparison of the grandparents’ talk to “the way they talked / in the old featherbed, / peacefully, / on and on.” Such talk is ongoing, itself a repetition that promises more repetition, endurance that takes its model from past acts of endurance. The poem now also returns to (repeats) the earlier image of the dog who accompanies humans on their journey (“down in the kitchen, the dog / tucked in her



shawl”). The dog wrapped in a human shawl is a figure of the nonhuman accommodated to human forms of understanding and life. The loss of awareness, of life, that would be death, can now be construed as something other than the becoming blank object of the human subject. It need not have the meaning it seemed about to have in Part 2, that of the loss of the world in which one is immersed. The acceptance of loss fittingly now coincides with an acceptance of the loss of awareness: “Now, it’s all right now / even to fall asleep / just as on all those nights.” Repetition allows one to conceive of the loss of consciousness as something familiar (“just as on all those nights”), and it permits one to understand and accept the departure of any observable moment (“Now”) as something which implies a repetition of a similar moment (“now”). Because of the ongoing repetition of nows, one can let go of consciousness, of the token of one’s subjective life, without fear of loss. As rhythm seemed to hold things together in Part 1, here at the end of Part 3 repetition has become a mode of assurance, a promise that things will hold together, be repeated. Like the bridge that does not give way, it sustains the subject in the passage through the loss of the awareness which betokens life.

If the loss of awareness in sleep can be construed as a metaphor for death, then the appearance of the moose, which follows immediately, might be understood as itself having something to do with the issue of death. If the bus’s journey has been a figure for human life moving through the world, that movement now is arrested, “stops with a jolt.” Lights, those tokens of the artificial illumination cast by human civilization, are turned off, and the road of the human journey is blocked. We are in confrontation, direct and unmediated, with nature – “A moose has come out of / the impenetrable wood / and stands there, looms, rather, / in the middle of the road.” The surprise is that nature, which up till now has been a landscape without subjectivity, appears as a subject, an animal which “approaches,” itself the agent of the encounter, and “sniffs at / the bus’s hot hood” as if it were greeting another animal. The line that divides human from natural, subjective awareness from object, life from death, is crossed in a way that confounds by reversing the distinction.

If the moose is nature understood as the possibility of the death of human life and human awareness, it is an especially harmless version of such nature. Though “Towering” or grand, it is nonetheless “antlerless,” “high as a church, / homely as a house / (or, safe as houses).” It is so harmless because it is so familiar. The series of similes compares it to such comforting human institutions as a church and a house, and to the safest commercial investments (“safe as houses”). The similes cross nature and civilization and draw what might have been completely other and alien into the realm of human understanding. Life understood as

the possibility of death can be understood, which is to say, taken in to familiar human terms, made comparable to what most assures us we are out of danger. By listing the passengers' reactions to the moose, the following stanza draws attention to the therapeutic power of the vision of nature as fellow subject, and the rhyme of "passengers" and "creatures" underscores the crossing of realms. The rhyme of "childishly, softly" and "It's a she!" evokes the common human and animal processes of maternity and nurturing.

The moose is now described as "Taking her time," like the grandparents speaking "in Eternity," and as looking "the bus over." Of the many continuities between the third and the fourth parts of the poem, one of the most important is the sense of being outside the limits and constraints of time, especially the time of the bus journey which brings as many losses in the passage of things as it brings gains in achieving a destination. The moose returns the passengers to childhood, just as the grandparents' voices returns the speaker of the poem to memories of voices overheard at night in her own childhood. Time loses the form of passage and becomes instead an elastic medium in which one can retrieve the lost past.

Moments of revelation when the ordinary limits of life are lifted and something else becomes possible – a vision of a different order of being – are generally associated with a suspension of ordinary time, and the revelatory, atemporal quality of this experience is suggested by Bishop's choice of the words "grand, otherworldly" to characterize the moose. Throughout the poem, Bishop has anchored the possibility of such otherworldly understanding or revelation within the everyday and the observable. Even as she capitalizes "Eternity," she keeps it tied to the actual voices of grandparents tallying and remembering and trying to understand the "Eternity" or repetitiveness of human pain and loss. She does the same thing here by anchoring the suggestion of otherworldliness, of an understanding of the moose as a symbol of something that transcends human life in perhaps a religious sense, within the passengers' reactions to it: "Why, why do we feel / (we all feel) this sweet / sensation of joy?" If there is revelation, something "otherworldly" that one can glimpse in this world, she seems to suggest, its significance resides in the feelings it generates. That those feelings are ones of joy can be understood both literally and metaphorically, as the pleasure of an encounter with an animal in the middle of the night or the realization that nature is vivid, the world warm and alive rather than cold and alien, a fellow subject rather than an entirely other object that represents the danger of the loss of subjective life.

That the most metaphoric or symbolic meanings seem difficult to extricate from the most mundane and everyday is, of course, part of Bishop's strategy in the poem. The moose is at once "awful plain" and

“grand, otherworldly” for good reason. Like death in parentheses that indicate it can’t be known, what spiritual or religious meaning that might exist on the other (“otherworldly”) side of the moose cannot be known. Life as depicted in the poem is awareness, observation, description, and naming, and any therapeutic understanding that the poem might offer in the vision of the moose must remain within this realm; it is all there is.

Appropriately, it is to the mechanics of description and naming that the speaker now turns: “‘Curious creatures,’ / says our quiet driver, / rolling his *r*’s.” In the euphonic repetition of *c* and *ur* sounds, Bishop draws attention to what she herself has been doing throughout the poem – supplying sound equivalents of objects in the world, describing what is primitive and primal about human life – the endlessness of life and of death – in rhythmic euphonic terms that might allow them to be understood as inspiring patient affirmation, if not occasional joy. In her own way, with the driver, she says: “Look at that, would you.” The passage through life need not be one of lonely observation; in euphonic language, it can be brought to an affirmative understanding.

The brevity of such moments is suggested by the succeeding lines: “Then he shifts gears. / For a moment longer, / by craning backward, / the moose can be seen . . .” If the moose is to be understood in a New Critical sense as an incarnated universal, a glimpse of spiritual life within earthly life, Bishop nonetheless underscores its dependence on earthly things – the shifting gears, the macadam, the acrid smell of gasoline that seems if anything to emphasize the worldliness of the experience. Moreover, the work of rhythm and repetition in language – “a dim / smell of moose, an acrid / smell of gasoline” – emphasizes the inextricable mingling of the otherworldly and the worldly, the vision and the eyes that see (or, in a spirit of more emphatic worldliness, the nose that smells). The rhythmic flow and counterflow – a dim smell, an acrid smell – is once again of natural things and human constructs, this time more in insurmountable counterpoint to each other, but it is also of life in its essence glimpsed and everything literal, everyday, and mundane about life that means that such vision will never be pure. All metaphors have a vehicle that, like the bus, bears their meaning, and even at its most metaphoric, its most suggestive of the possible glimpse of otherworldly meaning in life, “The Moose” reminds us of our literal placement in this world. By comparing her rather humdrum and everyday vision of the moose in the road to an older religious interpretive framework (“high as a church”), Bishop notes the kinship between her way of understanding and that older one, but like the bus and the moose, it is a kinship with a difference. Both offer therapeutic consolation for loss, one by positing a spiritual world beyond this one, hers by affirmatively looking at this world and finding in it cause (albeit momentary) for joy.

“At the Fishhouses” begins with a simple description and ends with a meditation on universal concerns. It also evokes religious themes, but it seems to withhold an endorsement of religious ideas.

Bishop uses the alternation and repetition of sounds to create certain effects. Notice in the first twelve lines how she alternates vowel sounds and think about what some of the effects of this alternation might be. Look especially at how the man working his net and the fishhouses are described, and how seemingly ordinary things are assigned value-laden adjectives such as “beautiful herring scales” and “creamy iridescent coats of mail.” What is the point of characterizing ordinary things in this way?

Think about these issues in relation to the central story of the Christian religion, the story of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. There is a direct reference to this story in the image of the “ancient wooden capstan,” a cross-shaped device for hauling in cables. It has “melancholy stains, like dried blood.” As for images of resurrection and heaven, look at the description of the fishhouses with their “steeply peaked roofs,” which resemble churches, and the gangplanks that “slant up / to store-rooms in the gables.” Later, Bishop refers more explicitly to religion when she sings a Baptist hymn – “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” – to a seal.

But what are we to make of these religious references? Is Bishop seriously advocating a religious perspective on the world? Does she believe in transcendence, the idea of a spirit world beyond the physical one? Or does she believe the physical world is all we have?

Romantic poets such as Wordsworth did believe there was a spirit in nature. Natural objects were for them symbols of divinity. One could read the world and see there legible signs of eternity and spirituality. Bishop alludes to their style of writing in the poem, but she does an odd thing with it. She interrupts it twice, as if she were deliberately drawing our attention to how wrong it is.

Notice how the third stanza begins: “Cold dark deep and absolutely clear, / element bearable to no mortal, / to fish and to seals . . .” The reference to “no mortal” suggests a possible evocation of religious or spiritual truth. But the ellipsis (. . .) she uses to interrupt this possibility is striking. It is not a standard device of poetry. Why does Bishop interrupt this Wordsworthian poetic line that seems to point the poem in the traditional Romantic direction of revealed spiritual truth in nature?

The first interruption points outward toward the sea and the seal who is assigned a certain subjectivity (“He was curious about me,” “his better judgment”). Religion is summoned here as something that defends us (“A Mighty Fortress”). But what might it defend against? The seal is certainly not threatening, although she or he lives in something that could be an image of danger – the ocean. Why does Bishop call herself a believer in “total immersion” here? What might the human equivalent be of living in water, a fluid medium with no clear, fixed boundaries,

no center, no holdable substance? Immersed in the ocean, one might be more subject to chance occurrences, the contingencies of existence, because one had no protection of the kind the walls of church-like fish-houses, for example, provide. Notice, by the way, that the brand of cigarette in the previous stanza is a Lucky Strike, an image that suggests contingency, the chance character of life lived without the kind of security that religious belief provides. Religion supplies life's contingencies with meaning, but is that meaning inherent because spirit resides in matter, as the Romantic poets believed, or is it placed on natural objects by humans too afraid to live without the secure meanings religion gives us?

Look now at the second instance of interruption. Again, Bishop takes up the Romantic phrasing of "Cold dark deep and absolutely clear, / the clear gray icy water . . ." This time, she simply loses track of the thought, as if it was not worth pursuing or as if it bored her. Instead, her attention is drawn back toward the land, toward the "dignified tall firs." Notice that she assigns a very positive term – "dignified" – to the trees considered as natural objects. And notice too that they are a little like water in that they lack "absolutely clear" distinctions – "Bluish, associating with their shadows." Why does Bishop characterize them as "a million Christmas trees stand / waiting for Christmas"? She could mean that Christmas, the time of year, has not yet come, but she might also mean that "Christmas" is a human-made institution imposed on natural trees so that they suddenly are transformed into "Christmas trees." The human-made religious meaning is something we place on the world to protect ourselves from its contingencies, and it has yet to be placed on these natural objects. As parts of nature, they are merely "dignified" trees, but once cut down and adorned with ornaments they acquire a different meaning, one that protects us from the possibility that there are no "absolutely clear" boundaries between us and nature, us and the trees, us and the sea. We, like they, are totally immersed in the natural world, and there is no way out, no transcendence, no doorway that leads upward to heaven, where we might be saved from the contingency of natural, material life. Death might simply be a passage into matter, rather than a step up and out of matter.

Bearing these issues in mind, what is the point of what follows in the poem? How would you read the final stanza?

### Exercise 1.3 F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

*The Great Gatsby* is about a man who does not see the world as accurately as he should, and he presses others to be more for him than they can be. His emotions paint people and things around him in colors that

do not belong to them. And faults in others go unnoticed until they harm him. Jay Gatsby is a dreamer and a poet, and the language in which his story is told is fittingly poetic, a form appropriate to the content of a novel about a man whose desires and illusions temporarily transform an ugly world into a beautiful one, much as metaphor in poetry replaces an ordinary, quite literal thing with an image that often is more beautiful. In the novel, the language of description merges realms of experience that belong apart such as “wet light,” just as Gatsby seeks an emotional, personal, and economic class merger that is in a social and psychological sense as impossible as the merger of liquid and luminescence. The poetic language spells out the impossibility of Gatsby’s yearnings each time it metaphorically welds impossible realms together – “With fenders spread like wings we scattered light through half Astoria.” As Gatsby animates the world around him, imputing passion to a cynical, self-indulgent girl that she is not capable of generating herself, so also the language of the novel animates the world, turning a missed breath into “startled air.” Fitzgerald read the poetry of John Keats as he wrote the novel, and he inserts a sly allusion to a nightingale just come over from England on the Cunard boat at one point, as if he wished to alert the reader to his compositional strategy in the novel. For Keats is famous for his poems about impossible love such as “La belle dame sans merci” and “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (which is alluded to in the image of a film director leaning over to kiss an actress under a tree at one of Gatsby’s parties). But Keats is also the poet of animated nature and of synaesthetic mergers between physical realms, as in this line from “Ode to a Nightingale”: “But here there is no light, Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown.”

If the poetic discourse of the novel is a correlative of the way the primary character’s imagination merges what in a rational sense should not or cannot be merged, it also is a way of alerting the reader to the startling contrast between the beautiful dream image his poetic sensibility creates and the banal reality upon which it ultimately breaks. For Gatsby’s downfall is triggered by an incommensurability akin to that between poetic metaphor and literal object. The image of romantic perfection that animates his quest is as much at odds with the amoral sordidness of the world Daisy inhabits as the discourse of poetry is with the ordinary world it reworks into something more magical and beautiful. The novel achieves some of its most poetic heights precisely at those moments when Gatsby’s dreams are most vivid and most transformative of the dim-brained Daisy into something sublime, a “golden girl” trapped in a castle. When after his first visit to the Buchanans’ Nick returns home to find Gatsby on the lawn gazing at the green light on Daisy’s dock across the bay, the language of description transforms the world: “The wind had blown off, leaving a loud, bright night, with wings beating in the trees and a persistent organ sound as the full bellows of the earth

blew the frogs to full life.” Gatsby stands with “his hands in his pockets regarding the silver pepper of the stars.” While this poetic description of nature merges realms in ways that elevate and animate the world, making anything seem possible, including the satisfying of Jay Gatsby’s impossible desire, silver, in contrast, evokes the idea of money, and it is money mostly that separates Gatsby from Daisy. When Gatsby finally has Daisy and the distance between his world-transforming yearnings and her reality is reduced to just about nothing, he is able to concoct a metaphor that finally more accurately portrays her, but it is nevertheless a metaphor: “‘Her voice is full of money,’ he said suddenly. That was it. I’d never understood before. It was full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals’ song of it. . . . High in a white palace the king’s daughter, the golden girl. . . .” A poetic metaphor turns the daughter of crass wealth into the “golden girl” – but by that very token it becomes the perfect metaphor for unattainability, for the impossibility of leaping from figure to ground, image to thing, fantasy to reality.

Look at the first two chapters of the novel, which might be said to be about two normally separate social realms that are merged and about ordinary people such as Myrtle who are elevated and transformed temporarily into something extraordinary by Tom’s money and interest. In Chapter 1, Nick goes to visit Daisy and Tom for the first time and meets Jordan Baker. In Chapter 2, Nick goes with Tom on a romp into town with Myrtle, with whom Tom is having an affair.

How are the two functions of poetic discourse we’ve discussed evident in these two chapters? Poetic discourse transforms ordinary things into extraordinary ones so that rustling leaves become wings, and it merges sensible realms that normally are kept apart such as light and liquid. How are Daisy and Jordan characterized by the language of description when Nick first encounters them? Why are they portrayed as unrealistically floating in the air on a balloon? And how does that depiction contrast with the way Myrtle is described? How do the two uses of language operate in each instance? Daisy and Jordan seem to defy gravity. Why? How is that a fitting metaphor for them? Myrtle in contrast is characterized as “regal” and associated with Versailles, where the French royalty lived. Does that seem an appropriate metaphor for her? Is Fitzgerald making a point by using inappropriate poetic language for someone who seems fairly crass?

Try to locate other moments in the novel where a poetic form of discourse is evident. What purpose does it serve in each instance?

For example, when Gatsby first speaks of himself to Nick, somewhat falsely it turns out, it is described from Nick’s perspective as like “skimming hastily through a dozen magazines.” What aspect of Gatsby’s identity does the metaphor capture?



Finally, is poetic discourse used to distinguish characters and worlds in the novel?

Consider how *Gatsby's* parties are characterized. They are lit by “enough colored lights to make a Christmas tree of *Gatsby's* enormous gardens.” “[T]he orchestra is playing yellow cocktail music, and the opera of voices pitches to a higher key.” “[C]onfident girls . . . glide on through the sea-change of faces.” Compare those evocative metaphors with how negatively and contemptuously Tom, Jordan, and Daisy react to the parties. What does Fitzgerald seem to be suggesting about these three characters? Is there anything about the way they are described that places them outside the realm of poetry as it is used in relation to *Jay Gatsby*? How in each is physicality or literality emphasized in contrast to figurality or metaphoricity? Metaphor transforms the world and allows it to be seen in different way. The world is elevated into a state of greater beauty. How might that work of poetry be at odds with the attitudes and beliefs that likely hold sway in the world of Tom, Daisy, and Jordan? Why might they be averse to the kinds of transformation poetic metaphor works in *Gatsby's* world, where ordinary girls become gay gypsies gazed on by everyone for one fantastic evening?

#### **Exercise 1.4 Alice Munro, “Royal Beatings” and “Wild Swans”**

At the center of the story called “*Royal Beatings*” is a father’s vicious beating of his daughter at the instigation of her stepmother. The subject matter is disturbing, a breach of normal fictional decorum. As if to push the sense of unfamiliarity further, Munro layers in stories of incest and accounts of bathroom noises, the “nether voices” of users of the family toilet, which sits in the kitchen, partitioned from the rest of life by very thin walls that do little to muffle sound. Rarely have fiction writers taken readers to such uncustomary territory, yet what is uncustomary is what is most familiar, from the smells and noises of one’s own gut to the oftentimes abusive relations people enter into in domestic settings where they are most close to one another, most familiar.

Why do you think Munro focuses on such normal aspects of life that yet seem somehow outside the norm of fiction writing? How do they connect with her larger concern with depicting the mean-spirited viciousness that humans are capable of? Does there seem to be a purpose to Munro’s invitation to us to explore with her the “nether” regions of life?

What other aspects of the story seem deliberately “defamiliarizing” to you? Were you shocked by anything as you read? If so, what and why?

Munro constructs her characters to appear both very simple and complex. What are some of the complexities she locates in Rose's father? She associates him with Spinoza, a philosopher with an all-accepting view of life, and Botticelli, a Renaissance Italian painter of beautiful women's faces and glowing mythological themes. Why does she do this? What kind of man is he? What does she want us to think of him? What does his habit of speaking to himself suggest about him? Does that picture of him make his beating of Rose all the more shocking?

Flo, the stepmother, is less positively portrayed. How would you characterize her? Her complexity seems to consist of hidden motives acted out slyly. What kind of person does Munro want you to see her as being?

Pay attention to references to reason and unreason, what Munro at one point calls "the tumble of reason; the spark and spit of craziness." Why does Munro thread references to this idea through the story? How are they a comment on the action and the characters and the world in which Rose grows up?

Language plays an important role in the story. Words are easily moved out of their usual function by characters because words have both literal and figural meanings. The name "Spinoza" becomes a vegetable in Flo's mind. "Vancouver" is literally a place, but it can become a figure in a rhyme: "Two Vancouvers fried in snot! Two pickled arseholes tied in a knot!" Rose begins the story by thinking about the word "Royal" in the phrase "Royal Beating." She takes the word literally and imagines a real royal event with "trappings" such as "white horses and black slaves." But these imaginary shows are betrayed by the literal reality of the beatings themselves which "soon got beyond anything presentable."

A figure like "royal" makes something ordinary and banal and even brutal appear somehow better than it is, more "presentable." Can you connect that idea to the story's other concerns such as the difference between the respectable part of the town and the less respectable? Or the differences a character like Flo would like to maintain while nevertheless exercising and expressing the meanest parts of our human nature?

Flo is the character most associated with a devious use of language. Her stories insinuate unseemly things. Her malice toward Rose plays itself out through a well-orchestrated indictment that provokes Rose's father to beat her. What does Munro seem to be insinuating herself about how we use language in everyday life?

Why does it seem appropriate that Flo end up spending her last days in mean-spirited silence, biting her nurses?

Another very disturbing story in Munro's collection *Selected Stories* is "Wild Swans," in which a girl is sexually abused by a minister sitting next to her on a train. What does the title allude to? How is this story defamiliarizing?

### Exercise 1.5 The Wachowskis, *The Matrix*

The film is surprisingly similar to *King Lear* at least in a formal sense. Like the play, it begins with a device that defamiliarizes the world. *King Lear* begins with a false world that appears true. In the film, the world the characters inhabit is first presented as real then revealed to be false, and the first part of the narrative is organized around the slow revelation to the primary character of the falseness of the world he at the outset took to be real. Anyone seeing the film for the first time would, like the primary character, assume the world on the screen is a real world, not a computer-generated one in which deluded humans only apparently live full lives. The device of defamiliarization functions, as in the play, to disrupt the audience's assumptions about what constitutes normal reality.

The world that *The Matrix* takes for granted is very different from the Renaissance aristocratic world assumed by *King Lear*, and the effect of defamiliarization is also of another order. In the early twenty-first century, western society is overwhelmingly commercial. It is dominated by large corporations that limit the range of behaviors considered appropriate, especially amongst young employees, who must subordinate to the imperatives of the corporate order urges that until recently had been given relatively free rein in their lives. They must show up on time, obey rules regarding dress and speech, and curtail freedom of movement for the sake of performing tasks that benefit others more than they do themselves. In exchange for a steady salary and a predictable life in which one's material needs for shelter and food are met, young people sacrifice freedom, pleasure, and a sense of their own independent dignity and importance. One becomes a person in a cubicle and ceases to be a significantly different individual.

The film creates a metaphor for this "reality" in the computer-generated imaginary world of the matrix. The matrix is not real, but it seems real enough to its human inhabitants, who inhabit it in mind while their bodies remain in pods that generate energy for the computers running the matrix program. The wit of the metaphor resides in the fact that the computer-generated world so closely resembles "normal" life in a corporate-run society. The redundant brown suits and neat hairstyles that make everyone look alike are a young person's nightmare fantasy of what corporate life feels like. Additional force is gained by the metaphor from the fact that one's life is literally sucked out of one by one's corporate employers, much as it is by the electricity-devouring computers that run the matrix in the film.

Young people in the corporate world maintain an antinomian alternate reality organized around the urban club scene, music, drugs, and mildly illegal behaviors such as computer piracy that is in some senses more "real" than the world in which they work. There they can act

freely and creatively without having to obey rules imposed from without. The movie grants that alternate universe a more substantial reality than the corporate world by portraying it as the gateway to the outside of the matrix program in which all humans in the movie live their imaginary lives. It defamiliarizes the corporate world not so much by making it seem strange or new as by making it seem almost too familiar and mundane while yet being entirely false and unreal. The conventions, codes, and routines of the everyday corporate world that many in the audience for the film inhabit suddenly come into focus as so many forms of discipline and control that operate in an authoritarian fashion to subordinate independence of thought and action to the greater good of the corporation.

The point of defamiliarization in *The Matrix* is therefore much more insidious than in *King Lear*. Consider the opening scene. Police arrive at a building and send up a team to retrieve a suspect. We as viewers have no idea what is going on or what crime has been committed. By placing us in the point of view of the police, the film aligns us with the fairly unexceptional assumption that laws are worth preserving, that law-enforcers are worthy of respect, and that crime should be punished. We are placed on the side of the disciplinary apparatuses that maintain social order. But that placement assigns to us the assumption that the social order is virtuous and worth preserving. In *The Matrix*, of course, this is not the case. It is a huge machine for cannibalizing humans. As yet, we do not know this, and one important formal feature of narrative is the way it defers knowledge so that one assumes false positions initially that later are revealed as such. At the outset of the film, we are in one such false position. We are, as it were, in the matrix.

As the opening scene evolves, we witness a criminal suspect fight and kill the police team sent to retrieve her. That one of the agents below on the street predicts that the team is “already dead” even though no such news has arrived suggests that the suspect operates outside normal expectations. She inspires awe, perhaps even respect. In the chase scene across rooftops that follows, the point of view of the film subtly shifts until it is lodged in her perspective. We now begin to sympathize with her as she flees the cold-looking and somewhat robotic agents and performs feats that defy normal expectations such as leaping from one building to another. As the scene ends, she magically escapes a huge, very menacing-looking truck that further recodes our initial valuations of criminal and police. The police now are aligned with images of murderous power while the suspect appears vulnerable and worthy of our empathy.

What might be called one’s “normal” understanding of what police are is defamiliarized in this scene. As further scenes are added, the entire world the police protect and preserve comes to appear to be menacing.

The social order they preserve suddenly seems criminal, harmful, and dangerous. Seemingly harmless young people are mistreated by robotic agents of social order who harm them with impunity and deposit surveillance devices in their bodies. *King Lear* asks for a slight shift in values within a world whose basic premises and founding assumptions are taken by the play to be good and worth preserving. Indeed, one could say that the entire purpose of the play is to advocate the restoration of those assumptions so that they continue in force. *The Matrix* uses defamiliarization to dislocate one's allegiance to the very idea of founding assumptions and basic premises. In the world of the film, they are depicted as malevolently disciplinary apparatuses for securing obedience from participants whose lives are subordinated to the will of the corporate machinery in which they do not so much live as allow themselves to be consumed. A slight shift in values of the kind performed in *King Lear* from obligation to feeling would do no good in such a world. The only alternative is to break the machine.

Yet *The Matrix* could also be seen as drawing on the same well of assumptions and meanings as *King Lear*. The play was written at a time when "humanist" values were coming to the fore in western culture. Those values favor the individual's freedom of thought and action over the imperatives of such institutions as the Catholic Church or the monarchy. Old value systems that dictated that one should obey those with institutional power were giving way to more "liberal" values that advocated freedom or liberty of expression both intellectually and politically. These values joined with the republican assumption that one should choose one's own political leaders and even participate oneself in the government of one's society. The play records a changeover from an older, more authoritarian style of political organization to a more modern, liberal, humanist, and republican style in which everyone is free to participate. Initially, Lear rules in an authoritarian manner, but by the end of the play, the assent and consent of the governed is depicted as important to successful rule. Feeling, a trait associated with liberal humanism, is depicted to be as valuable as obligation and duty, two hallmarks of the older monarchical form of political organization. Monarchy is restored and preserved in the play, but it must compromise with the liberal humanist aspirations that were coming to the fore at the time. By noting the importance of feeling (as opposed to obligation) and by, at least in Cordelia's case, accepting the right to dissent from authority, the play moves toward a more modern, more liberal justification for political organization.

*The Matrix* draws on a similar set of themes and ideas to criticize a corporate order that in some respects is not that different from the religious and political orders that early humanist, republican liberalism opposed. Liberalism advanced the ideal of individual freedom in

all arenas of life, from politics to economics, as an alternative to social systems premised on authority and obedience. The modern corporate order depicted in the film thwarts the individual's freedom and makes him submit to authority. In the alternative world to the matrix, a more republican style of government is in force, and everyone participates equally in running the society. On a personal or individual level, Neo's path to liberation from the world he has left behind is only complete when he learns to rely on his own insights and powers instead of relying on what others tell him. The Oracle tells him he is not "the one," but he himself, exercising his freedom of will and relying on his own abilities, arrives at a different conclusion. He comes to assume control over his own world, his own life, and his own destiny.

That is the ideal of humanist liberalism, and later in this book we will discuss what is wrong with it. But for the moment let's take it for granted as a legitimate theme of a contemporary film whose semantic limits are shaped by the founding assumptions of the culture in which it is made.

In pursuing a formalist reading of the film, you might test some of the formalists' assumptions by asking if it is indeed possible to do a strictly formal analysis independent of issues of meaning. You might also ask if the New Critical contention that "great" literature is characterized by an organic unity of form and meaning applies to film. Pick a scene from the film and try to determine how it might fit organically into its larger themes. You might also ask if the film contains paradoxes that are especially significant for its meaning.

Another question you might pursue is universality. Does the film contain universals? Does it enunciate ideas that might plausibly be said to apply to everyone everywhere? You've probably noticed already that there are clear religious themes in the film. It is a "Christ story" about someone who is chosen to save the world and who must die and be reborn in order to do so.

Finally, pick out a scene and try to do the kind of close analysis of form that one normally does with a work of literature. The opening scene is especially interesting in the way it uses camera positions to locate the audience in different points of view. Pay attention to the placement of the camera and note how it "sees" the world from different characters' perspectives. You might even look at a film that opens with a similar rooftop chase and that concerns the confusion of image and reality – Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. Why might the makers of *The Matrix* summon this obvious comparison?