Literature in the Digital Age: From Close Reading to Digital Reading

Video transcript

How can we close-read a poem? Part II

PHILIPP SCHWEIGHAUSER:

Let me return to a poem that we've already had a good look at. Here it is again, just for you. The apparition of these faces in the crowd. Petals on a wet, black bough. And let me briefly recapitulate what we found out about this poem through close reading it. Close reading helped us find that the poem works by way of an analogy between the human realm of culture-- that's the first line-- and the realm of nature-- that's the second line. We also realised that each line by itself is structured by the sequence of a plural noun, followed by a singular noun.

In the first line, the plural of the faces is followed by the singular of the crowd, and in the second line the plural of the petals is followed by the singular of the bough. The final thing that close reading helped us find out is that each line works in terms of an opposition where the plural-- the faces and the petals-- is brighter and foregrounded, while the singular-- the crowd and the bough-- is darker and backgrounded. And I concluded by asking, whence all these oppositions. Now let me take it from here and continue my close reading of this poem, and let's take a second look at the poem as a whole.

If you take a second look at the first line, you discover that the faces we get there aren't just any kinds of faces-- they are these faces. They are particular, specific faces. So what the first line of this poem shows us is the emergence of the specific, the emergence of the particular against the background of the crowd. What we're dealing with here is really the emergence of the beauty of the particular, of the beauty of the specific from a world of undifferentiated masses and crowds. And maybe we can already be more specific and say that what the poem bears witness to is the emergence of beautiful, particular bright faces out of a darker, urban world of anonymity and alienation.

Admittedly, this is already speculative, but the word crowd in the first line does suggest the possibility of such a reading. For which human realm, which realm of culture do we usually associate with crowds? With crowds we usually associate an urban world, the world of cities. But perhaps we're creating too stark oppositions here between the particular and the undifferentiated mass, between brightness and darkness. For after all, the beauty of the poem as a whole arises precisely out of tensions, out of tensions between

the plural and the singular, out of tensions between the foreground and the background, out of tensions between brightness and darkness.

So, in a way what you get in poems is very much a series of tensions that are sustained. In ordinary, everyday language, we usually try to resolve tensions and contradictions-- not so in poetic language, not so in literary language where tensions and contradictions are kept, are sustained, are sublated in the organic unity of the text. And this teaches us a more general truth about poetry. In poetry and literature more generally, tensions and contradictions form the very basis upon which literature is built. What makes literature 'literature' is precisely this-- ambiguities, ironies, ambivalences, paradoxes, contradictions, and tensions.

So, by reading this poem we've also glimpsed a more general truth about some of the most fundamental differences between literary language, and the way we use language around the dinner table. Now this concludes what I have to say about this poem. What I meant to show you is precisely how much we can get out of a poem without using any contextual information, how much we can get out of a poem without knowing anything about its author, without knowing its title, its year of publication, or anything about its historical context, how much we can get out of a poem by close reading it.