

Principles of Literary Study  
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Office hours: Mondays 2:00–3:00 or by appointment

February 25, 2021. Some open forms.

## reminder

- ▶ draft introduction, following assigned template, due next Weds.
  - ▶ (you might want to write about *American Sonnets*)

## review: speakers/addressees

### ▶ Wheatley

- ▶ speaking situation shapes what can and can't be said
- ▶ not just the content but the form too
- ▶ but: limits can give rhetorical advantages ("Remember, Christians")

### ▶ Melville

- ▶ takes advantage of the freedom we allow lyric speakers
- ▶ speaking from nowhere, to no one
- ▶ Warner: but then again, speaking very particularly to a historical situation

### ▶ Warner

- ▶ he says "I"
- ▶ his audience: people who share assumption that violence is bad
- ▶ uses "Shiloh" to show the dilemmas this produces

open forms

# open forms

- ▶ poems making their own rules
  - ▶ look for organizing principles within the poem
- ▶ doesn't mean no form at all
  - ▶ “Lycidas”: rhyme (also: series of speakers)
  - ▶ Ramanujan's tercets
  - ▶ narrative progression in “Diving into the Wreck”
  - ▶ geographic survey in “An Octopus”
- ▶ a form for what resists being pinned down?
  - ▶ Moore: a glacier
  - ▶ Ammons: a shoreline

## octopodal form

Quoted descriptions of scenery and of animals, of which the source is not given, have been taken from government pamphlets on our national parks.

Moore, notes to "An Octopus," 107.

## the form of a walk

the walk liberating, I was released from forms,  
from the perpendiculars,  
    straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds  
of thought  
into the hues, shadings, rises, flowing bends and blends  
    of sight:

Ammons, "Corsons Inlet"

## What is Ramanujan made of?

- ▶ What defines the “I” who speaks in “Elements of Composition”?



## formal alternatives

In the course of a casual conversation, he showed me the draft of a poem called 'Elements of Composition', which was then a single, long poem of a few hundred lines arranged in about twenty-five sections. It was a meditation on what we call the 'nature' of self and poetry, interspersed at various points with passages reflecting on certain 'epiphanic' moments in his life. I thought that it was a major poem... But Ramanujan was sure that his readers would misread it if he published it as it stood, because they would look in it for traces of earlier poems of a similar kind, from Wordsworth's *The Prelude* to Eliot's *Four Quartets*. He also felt strongly that the formal and thematic unity asserted by the long poem contradicted one of his central insights in it, that his own 'truth is in fragments'.... When he prepared the final manuscript of *Second Sight*, Ramanujan broke up the poem into fourteen relatively short poems [of which "Elements" is one].

Vinay Dharwadker, [introduction](#) to *The Collected Poems*, xxxvii.

- ▶ What language is English literature written in?

## a distinctive relation to language

As we grew up, Sanskrit and English were our father tongues, and Tamil and Kannada our mother tongues. The father tongues distanced us from our mothers, from our own childhoods, and from our villages and many of our neighbors in the cowherd colony next door. And the mother tongues united us with them....

Sanskrit stood for the Indian past; English for colonial India and the West, which also served as a disruptive creative other that both alienated us from and revealed us (in its terms) to ourselves; and the mother tongues, the most comfortable and least conscious of all, for the world of women, playmates, children, and servants....Each had a literature that was unlike the others'. Each was an other to the others.

“Telling Tales,” *Daedalus* 118, no. 4 (Fall 1989): 241–42.

Ramanujan writes from within English yet as if outside it.

Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 77.

caterpillar on a leaf, eating,  
being eaten.  
("Elements of Composition")

And what eats is eaten,  
and what's eaten, eats  
in turn.  
(*Taittirīya-Upanishad*, AKR's translation)

## Rich's wreck

- ▶ What defines the “I” who speaks in “Diving into the Wreck”?

We are, I am, you are  
by cowardice or courage  
the one who find our way

We circle silently  
about the wreck  
we dive into the hold.  
I am she: I am he

whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes  
whose breasts still bear the stress  
whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies  
obscurely inside barrels  
half-wedged and left to rot  
we are the half-destroyed instruments  
that once held to a course  
the water-eaten log  
the fouled compass

We are, I am, you are  
by cowardice or courage  
the one who find our way

next

- ▶ Hayes, *American Sonnets*, complete
  - ▶ choose one poem to re-read carefully
  - ▶ some of you will be called on
- ▶ Rowell's interview with Hayes (pre-AS)