For an Assyrian Frieze Study Guide

For an Assyrian Frieze by Peter Viereck

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Introduction

Although his work is not read much today, Peter Viereck was one of the leading American poets of the 1950s and 1960s. But Viereck did not limit himself to writing poetry; he also became an important voice as a cultural critic, arguing for a sophisticated, intellectual model of conservatism. As a poet, Viereck was conservative: he opposed what he viewed as excessive experimentation and obscurity, and advocated a return to form, to rhyme, and to simple lyrics. In this, he was going against the dominant movement in poetry at the time□the allusive, free-verse modernist verse written by such poets as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams. "For An Assyrian Frieze" appeared in 1948, in *Terror and Decorum,* Viereck's first volume of poetry and one that won him the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. "For An Assyrian Frieze" takes a cue from Pound in that the poet immerses himself in a long-ago time, but, unlike Pound, Viereck narrates this picture of Assyrian society in a very regular, formal verse. The portrait of the violent blood-lusting Assyrian society, synechdochized as the "lion with a prophet's beard," is ironic, given the calm regularity of the verse form. Such techniques characterize not only Viereck's poetry but also his ideas of cultural conservatism.

Author Biography

Peter Viereck was born in New York City in 1916. He attended the eliteHoraceMann School for Boys and Harvard, from which he graduated *summa cum laude* in 1937. While at Harvard, he won both the Garrison medal for the best undergraduate poetry and the Bowdoin prize for the best philosophical prose□one of the few Harvard students ever to accomplish that. After doing some graduate work atOxford University in England, Viereck returned to the United States and completed a Ph.D. in history in 1942. He enlisted in the U.S. Army after completing his Ph.D. and worked in the Psychological Warfare Intelligence Branch, earning battle stars and also helping to monitor the wartime broadcasts that the eminent poet Ezra Pound made from Italy.

Upon returning to the United States, Viereck began teaching, first at Harvard and Smith and then, in 1948, at MountHolyoke, a women's college in South Hadley, Massachusetts. He was an active member of MountHolyoke's faculty until his retirement in 1987 but continued teaching as an emeritus professor until 1997.

Viereck continued to write poetry from his school days well into his retirement. His first book, *Terror and Decorum,* won the 1949 Pulitzer Prize for poetry. He continued to write poetry throughout the 1950s and 1960s, had his poems appear in a number of anthologies, and even published a "poem and a play (first of all a poem)," *The Tree Witch* (1961). Many of his earlier poems are collected in *New and Selected Poems: 1932-1967.* In the 1990s he experienced another burst of creativity, publishing a number of books that dealt with questions of death. In addition, Viereck has written books on philosophy, political science, and history, including *Conservatism Revisited: The Revolt Against Revolt, 1815-1949* (1950) and *Shame and Glory of the Intellectuals* (1953).

Poem Text

"I, the great king, the powerful king, king of the
world, King of Assyria, the king whose path
was a cyclone, whose battle was a flaming
sea, I am powerful, all-powerful, exalted,
almighty, majestic, all-important in
power,"□inscription of 670 B.C.
Sometimes, a lion with a prophet's beard
Lopes from a bas-relief to stretch his claws.
His bestial eyes are wonderfully sad.
Then he grow wings, the terrible king grows wings,
And flies above the black Euphrates loam,
Hunting for enemies of Nineveh.
His names are Shamshi and Adadnrari,
Tiglath-Pileser, Assurbanipal,
And the first Sargon of Dur-Sharukin.
"The day my chariots stormed the town, I waxed
My beard with oil of rose and waterlily,
And freed nine pearl-caged nightingales, and built
A pillar of skills so high it stabbed the sun."
(Was that the tomb's voice, or the desert-wind's?
Or ours?□what ghost is still our roaring priest?)
The scribes shall say: his will outflew his wisdom.
The saints shall say: his was the sin of pride.

The skulls say nothing. And the lizards grin.

This is the rapture that the Gentiles feared

When Joshua made music masterful.

Each sinew is a harp-string crouched to twang.

The treble of such bloodlust if he pounced

Would shriek an anti-social kind of beauty

Like parrots in a gypsy carnival.

Then back to stone. In stone he sleeps the least.

It's not with love his brooding glitters so.

Earth spawns no gangrene half so luminous

As the contagion of those molten eyes.

Plot Summary

Stanzas 1-3

In the first stanza, Viereck introduces the subject of his poem, a bas-relief (or a sculpture in which figures are carved so that they protrude out of a stone background) from ancient Assyria. Assyria was an ancient kingdom, very powerful in Biblical times (it flourished especially from 1000 B.C. to 606 B.C.) that stretched from the Tigris and Euphrates basin to m odern-day Syria, Lebanon, and Israel. The bas-relief shows "a lion with a prophet's beard" with "wonderfully sad" eyes. To the narrator, the lion appears to be coming out of the bas-relief to stretch its paws, just before "the terrible king grows wings." At this point, the narrator is imagining rather than simply transcribing what is in the sculpture. He sees the lion fly "above the black Euphrates loam, / Hunting for the enemies of Nineveh." Nineveh was an important city in the heart of the Assyrian territory in present-day Iraq. In the third stanza of this section, the narrator calls out some of the names of this lion; the names are the names of the powerful kings of the Assyrian empire, culminating with "the first Sargon of Dur-Sharukin." Sargon was one of the greatest kings of Assyria, ruling from 722 B.C. to 705 B.C, and built his palace at Dur-Sharukin, near Nineveh.

Stanzas 4-5

In these stanzas the narrator hears the voice of the lion□the lion who channels the spirits of the dead Assyrian kings□and begins to understand the character of Assyrian life. This lion speaks of luxuriating while his "chariots stormed the town" and of building "a pillar of skulls so high it stabbed the sun." Here, the poet is drawing a contrast between the personal luxury that the king enjoys and the savagery that was the hallmark of the Assyrian empire. The poet, after hearing this, questions himself: "Was that the tomb's voice, or the desert-wind's? Or ours?" He does not know where these voices come from, and fears that perhaps he will awaken this spirit of savagery and bloodlust in his own time (drawing an ironic parallel with the unimaginable, industrialized killing perpetrated in particular by the Nazis and carried out in general during the Second World War that had just ended).

Stanza 6

This stanza makes the central contrast of the poem□between the events of the past and how later people understand them□explicit. The poet talks about how four groups of "commentators" interpret the actions of this lion, the representation of the Assyrian empire. The "scribes" explain them as a political act; the "saints" see his actions in religious terms and condemn him; the "skulls" of his victims simply sit in silent witness; the "lizards," representing the unchanging nature of the desert, "grin."

Stanzas 7-10

The final stanzas of the poem bring the poet's own voice to the fore. Here, he explains how he understands the historical legacy of this dumb, yet eloquent, bas-relief. The narrator attempts to come to grips with the kind of violence that characterized the ancient world, but is unable to. He refers to the "rapture that the Gentiles feared / When Joshua made music masterful," alluding to the Biblical story of Joshua destroying the city of Jericho. In stanzas 7 and 8, the narrator compares the "sinews" of a warrior to musical instruments, again emphasizing the foreignness of the bloodlust of the ancient world. But even he is attracted by the primitive energy of this will to violence, saying that "Earth spawns no gangrene half so luminous / As the contagion of those molten eyes." The counterpoint of the terms "gangrene" (a blood infection that causes limbs to rot, and one of the most revolting conditions a human can contract) and "luminous" (an almost always positive term, referring to a lovely glow given off by something) epitomizes the combination of disgust at and attraction to violence and bloodlust that the bas-relief inspires in the poet.

Themes

The Ancient World

The remnants of the ancient world have always been an important topic in Western literature. For centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire, Europeans marvelled at the ruins left behind, not understanding how such structures could have been built because the knowledge of engineering and artistic techniques of the Romans had been lost. The Renaissance and Enlightenment were spurred on by continued discoveries of ancient artifacts Egyptian, Greek, and Roman.

Western literature springs largely from the Greeks, and for many readers a poet could not be considered "great" without somehow engaging in a dialogue with the father of Western poetry, Homer. During the Romantic period of the early nineteenth century, many of the most important poets took as their main topic the confrontation between ancient civilizations and the modern world. Goethe wrote a book on his time discovering the ruins in the city of Rome, while Keats's famous "Ode on a Grecian Urn" uses the decoration on an ancient Greek amphora to meditate on the fleeting nature of beauty and to suggest that the classical world put a greater premium on love, beauty, and pleasure than does modern society. But the most important precursor for Viereck's poem is Percy Bysshe Shelley's 1817 sonnet "Ozymandias." "Ozymandias" describes a half-destroyed statue in "an antique land," most likely in the Middle East or Egypt. Shelley's poem examines the transitory nature of arrogance and power. In his poem, Viereck goes even farther back, looking at a remnant of one of the first civilizations on earth, the Assyrian. Viereck is certainly responding to Shelley, saying that while the power may not last, the violent impulses that help individuals obtain and maintain power do not die out.

Poets and Violence

Poets seem to be noted for pacifism. Especially in modern America, we have a hard time thinking of poets as violent people. Our stereotypical image of them represents them as contemplating the beauties of nature, lost-in-thought, sensitive, and artistic. Artists are seen in much the same way in our popular imagination. In fact, we often oppose art and violence; the two have little to do with each other except that art often protests violence (as in Picasso's masterpiece *Guernica*or Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach"). But, in the not-too-distant-past, poets were closely associated with violence. Rudyard Kipling's nineteenth century verse advanced the imperial project and glorified combat. In revolutionary America and France, poetic odes were written to stir people to fight against governmental power. If we go even farther back, to classical times, poets were almost always conscripted to help incite warlike feelings among the populace of a given nation Virgil's great epic the *Aeneid* was written specifically to glorify the Roman state and its warlike ways. And finally, Homer, in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey,* celebrates the valour of men in combat.

Viereck's poem examines these conflicting emotions in the poet. Confronted by the implacable foreignness of this bas-relief, in which a "lion with a prophet's beard" represents all of the cruelty and bloodthirstiness of ancient societies, the narrator falls into a reverie, imagining the lion to be speaking to him. The lion is the stone embodiment of all of the warlike rulers of the Assyrian empire, from the early "Shamshi," who reigned in the eighteenth century before Christ, to Sargon, who held the throne one thousand years later. The narrator imagines this lion□who is a metonym for the whole Assyrian culture□to be speaking to him, telling him about the way he preened himself while his armies were slaughtering thousands. The narrator cannot understand this love for violence, but when the lion speaks of it he remembers that other people of that foreign time and land also gloried in violence and slaughter□even the Israelites who are the predecessors to the pacifistic early Christians. By describing the lion as having a "prophet's beard," Viereck makes this difficult-to-understand combination even more explicit. We must confront the fact, Viereck argues, that even those who followed the Hebrew God engaged in this sort of violence. It was not just the Assyrians, those villains of the Old Testament, but it was the Hebrews themselves who slaughtered on a massive scale. And, he concludes the poem by saying that "luminous" "gangrene" still lives on this earth□certainly a reference to the war just ended when this poem was written, a war that killed hundreds of times more people than were killed in any Assyrian war.

Style

"For An Assyrian Frieze" makes use of a regular line structure. The poem is constructed as a series of three-line stanzas of loose iambic pentameter. For the most part, each line has five feet that each consist of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, but as is customary today even among the most conservative practitioners of traditional verse, some lines will have eleven syllables and some might have even twelve, but almost every line has only five stressed syllables.

There is no end-rhyme in the poem. Had there been, this poem would have potentially been in the Italian verse form terza rima, in which the poet uses three-line stanzas with the rhyme scheme *aba bcb cdc* and so on. This would have been an especially appropriate choice, because the two best-known examples of terza rima are Dante Aligheri's *Comme-clia Divina* and Percy Shelley's "The Triumph of Life," two poems in which the poet examines the aftermath of a violent past. But terza rima can also sound like a singsong, and perhaps for that reason Viereck avoids actually using it while also gently suggesting it.

The poem can be broken into three parts. The first part is a description of the frieze and how it begins to speak to the narrator; the second part is what the lion has to say; and the third part is the narrator's interpretation and understanding of the importance of the lion's words. This tripartite division of content is mirrored in the three-line structure of the verses. Dante, also, used a tripartite structure in his lines and content, but for Dante that structure was also the structuring principle of the poem as a whole□after all, the tripartite structure was inspired by the Holy Trinity, which is the real subject of Dante's poem. In the *Commedia Divina,* there are three sections: the Inferno, the Purgato-rio, and the Paradise The first two sections have thirty-three "cantos," or chapters, while the third has thirty-four, so the poem has 100 cantos in total. Viereck does much the same thing here: he has nine stanzas of three lines each, emphasizing the tripartite structure, but adds a final one-line stanza to bring the total number to 10.

Historical Context

In 1949, poetry was a major issue in the public arena. Ezra Pound, one of the most famous and best-respected English-language poets in the world, was languishing in a Washington, D.C., mental hospital, having been found mentally unfit to stand trial on treason charges. During World War II, Pound had made broadcasts on Italian state radio, and many people felt that this was a treasonous act. (Pound argued that the content of his broadcasts was never determined by the Fascist authorities.) Disgraced, depressed, and shamed, Pound seemed to have departed the public eye, perhaps for good.

But that year, Pound published the latest installment of his long poem, *The Cantos.* This book, called *The Pisan Cantos* because much of it had been written while Pound was incarcerated in an Army detention camp in Pisa, Italy, won the first Bollingen Prize for Poetry, an award sponsored by the Library of Congress. Immediately a furor was sparked. How could Pound be given an award for a book of poetry that, on its first page, mourns Mussolini? How could a traitor be given an award by the same government that had so recently wanted to execute him?

The controversy soon stopped focusing on Pound and became a debate about the proper way to look at poetry, or art in general, and about what the relationship of art and politics should be. The Bollingen judges defended their decision, saying that the aesthetic value of the book was their only criteria. Others, such as the poet and critic Robert Hillyer, shot back that it was impossible for vile political sentiments not to detract from a book's aesthetic value. Hillyer, writing in the *Saturday Review of Literature,* argued that a new poetic orthodoxy, epitomized by T. S. Eliot, wanted to make poetry hermetic, closed, and to take it out of public life by drowning it in obscurity. Hillyer's "common-sense" approach to poetry came under fire by both left-and right-wing partisans, who felt that art must be given leeway to examine and express all political opinions.

Viereck's *Terror and Decorum* came out that same year, was probably also considered by the Bollingen committee, and ended up winning the year's Pulitzer Prize for poetry. Viereck also joined in the debate. He contributed a fifteen-page prose statement to the poems he included in John Ciardi's anthology of *Mid-Century American Poets,* laying out his opposition to the T. S. Eliot model of poetry. "Mine ... is a classicism of the industrial age," he wrote, "with an ivory tower built where the subway rumbles the loudest. Being classicist means that my poetry is equally interested in shaking off the vague sentimentalities of the pre-Eliot romanticism and the hermetic ingenuities of the post-Eliot version of neo-classicism. The former contains (1) no fun and (2) no humanness." This accusation of a lack of humanity was a common one levelled against both Eliot's and Pound's poetry. In a 1951 lecture, Viereck attacked the "debatable" *Pisan Cantos* and defended those poets, such as himself, who neither saw the value in such a book nor objected to it simply out of know-nothing middle-class Babbittry. "I am thinking," he says, "of good students or good writers or good readers, who approach such a work with a completely open mind about the Pound-Eliot schools but who with

the best will in the world cannot find it beautiful." He characterizes the worst excesses of the "Pound-Eliot schools" as "too much revolt ... the irresponsible cult of obfuscating for the sake of obfuscating and of shocking for the sake of shocking, whether in art, ethics, or politics." And in an article published in the conservative magazine *Commentary* in 1951, Viereck attacked Pound in particular.

The Pound-Eliot orthodoxy ruled the American poetry scene for decades, largely because the most influential cultural critics and literature professors had grown up in the era when Pound and Eliot were revolutionizing the literary world. These revolutionaries, as Viereck points out, became the institutions they had rebelled against. Viereck's lack of recognition is almost certainly a result of the enduring Pound-Eliot orthodoxy that he rebelled against—an orthodoxy that has softened but certainly still remains, in a residual form, today.

Critical Overview

"For An Assyrian Frieze" appeared in 1948 in *Terror and Decorum,* Peter Viereck's first volume of poetry and one that won him the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. *Terror and Decorum* was not Viereck's first published book, however; in 1941, while still a graduate student at Harvard, Viereck published *Metapolitics: From the Romantics to Hitler.* Critics and readers have understood Viereck's work to be a reaction against the modernist orthodoxy represented most forcefully by T.S. Eliot, and this is largely because Viereck explained his own work, over and over again, as being such a reaction.

Notwithstanding his opposition to the dominance of Eliot, Viereck's first volume of poetry was instantly hailed as the work of one of America's most promising poets. In the *Saturday Review of Literature,* Selden Rodman wrote that although none of the individual poems in the book was immediately remarkable for its brilliance, "his book as a whole is so rich in experimental vigor, so full of new poetic attitudes toward civilization and its discontents, so fresh and earthy in its re-animation of the American spirit, that it seems to offer endless possibilities of development." Rodman remarks that Viereck's main themes are the war and the poet in America.

The *New Yorker,* in its anonymous review, was less glowing. Identifying Viereck's aim as "to attempt reconciliation between 'heart and head, Id and Edo, love and law,'" the reviewer feels that Viereck "does not effect this reconciliation, because he is only too sympathetic toward the emotional terms of these oppositions and strongly on the side of decorum." Rolfe Humphries, writing for the *Nation,* felt that Viereck was promising but "has, I hope he knows, a great deal to learn." "He gives it too much of the old college try, shows off, I think, an awful lot; parades his information, sometimes his cleverness; offends against detachment, sometimes against taste." But Humphries did feel that Viereck had a "lushness" in his vocabulary. Viereck responded to his critics in his contribution to John Ciardi's anthology *of Mid-Century American Poets* in 1950: "Several critics of *Terror and Decorum* beamed upon what they called 'its wit'; others frowned upon 'its frivolous clowning around' ... The element of so-called wit or buffoonery is a means, not an end ... it is my means for expressing the tragedy inseparable from living and the terror inseparable from the shock of beauty."

Later critics have often used Viereck's own terms to analyze his poetry, looking at the poems in terms of his political ideas. John Lawlor, writing in a French journal in 1954, noted Viereck's "sense of historical timing" and his "conviction that poetry must achieve 'a difficult simplicity.'" Borrowing Viereck's own words, Lawlor remarks that the book is "Viereck's means of expressing the tragedy inseparable from living and the terror inseparable from the shock of beauty." In 1968, on the occasion of the publication of his collection *New and Selected Poems, 1932-1967,* Josephine Ja-cobson wrote for the *Massachusetts Review* that "Viereck's work has three qualities essential to any good poet. He has an individual, sustaining style ... poetic convictions, flexible in approach but durable in essence ... and an affinity for themes of inherent scope and power."

In recent years Viereck has been almost forgotten, even as he has begun again to produce new verse. In 1980, Idris McIlveen wrote about him in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* remarking that "Viereck argues for the importance of traditions and values that have functioned positively to protect man against his own irrational appetites and ego ... [his] political and poetic theories intersect and support one another, for he believes that man's salvation is through his cultural heritage, especially his literature and his imagination." Viereck, today an old man writing about how he is facing death, continues to be a model of the poet as an integral element of his culture's public life.

Critical Essay #2

Greg Barnhisel

Greg Barnhisel holds a Ph.D. in American literature. In this essay, he discusses how Viereck uses "For An Assyrian Frieze " to respond to some of his most important predecessors in poetic history.

Poets have always responded to works of art, and written poems about their responses. But ever since the Romantic era of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the discussion of or response to another work of art has become an extremely common topic in English-language poetry. The fact that this topic became so widespread in the Romantic era is partially due to that era's rediscovery of many lost works of Greek and Roman art from the classical period. The excavation of Pompeii and Herculaneum, beginning in 1748, and the slow rediscovery of the "Domus Aurea" (Golden House) of the emperor Nero in Rome (ongoing since the Renaissance, but in the Romantic period such writers as Goethe and Byron visited the half-excavated rooms and even wrote graffiti on ceilings) exposed artists and poets to the artistic accomplishments of prior ages. This often made these artists and writers consider not only the formal qualities of the artwork itself but also the difference between the mindsets of the people of the ancient time and the people of their own day.

Today, it is hard to find a poet who does not respond to artworks in his or her poems. William Carlos Williams, for instance, wrote an entire book of responses to *Pictures from Brueghel.* But the most famous responses to artworks in the entire history of English-language poetry are almost certainly two poems written within two years of each other: Percy Shelley's 1817 "Ozymandias" and John Keats' 1819 "Ode on a Grecian Urn." In his own "For an Assyrian Frieze," Peter Viereck is not only taking the same basic topic as Keats and Shelley did, but is in the process engaging in a conversation with them, a conversation that had specific aims given the poetic climate of the time.

In 1949, the world of Anglo-American poetry was dominated by one figure: T. S. Eliot. Although Eliot did not produce much poetry, many of the poems that he did write had become very popular and influential, and had also come to represent the entire era, an era defined later as "modernist." "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "Marina," "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," the "Four Quartets," and especially "The Waste Land" came to define the twentieth century. Their employment of different, often conflicting voices; their experiments with chronology, sequence, and structure; their extensive use of allusion, especially to medieval and Renaissance works; their portrayal of a world in which all certainties had been shattered and human beings wandered in a futile search for meaning; their fundamental pessimism about the state of human beings in a world that had seen two unimaginably destructive wars within thirty years of each other; all of these qualities came to be understood as the qualities of the time itself. Eliot, and Ezra Pound who came before Eliot and used many of the same techniques

but never found as much success in his lifetime, became the inspirations for almost every poet in the period from 1920 to 1950.

The modernist method and ideas had become almost an orthodoxy. Eliot had founded and edited a magazine, the *Criterion,* that powerfully spread his ideas. He also served as the managing editor for one of England's most important trade publishing firms, Faber and Faber. His influence dominated poetry and academia, and even left-wing cultural critics who loathed Eliot's conservative politics felt that his artistic innovations were brilliant. Novelists such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf were having success translating "modernist" techniques and ideas into fiction, and in painting, the cubists and surrealists and other movements were expressing ideas about their own art that were strikingly similar to Eliot's ideas about poetry and literature.

But there were dissenters. There were still poets writing who were optimistic about humanity, poets who wished to celebrate the good things about being alive rather than to bemoan man's folly. There were also poets who were unsure about the value of the formal innovations of the modernists. However, the dissenters lacked the strong public voice and following of the modernists.

The dissenters, having been largely shut out of the business of cultural criticism, had to strike back through their verse, writing poetry that did not follow Eliot's lead. On the one hand, the modernists, in their implacable drive to (in Pound's words) "make it new," had even prescribed which poets readers should read and which formerly "great" poets should be excised from the canon. Eliot privileged what he called the "Metaphysicals," or such poets as Sidney, Marvell, Herbert, and Ben Jonson, who were writing before Milton, during the English renaissance. Ezra Pound advocated the work of the medieval troubadours of northern Italy and southern France. On the other hand, the modernists had no love for the Romantics□the group that had been the inspiration for the poets of the late 1800s, against whom the modernists were most directly rebelling. Viereck, then, by simply joining in a conversation with Keats and Shelley, was committing a small act of insurrection.

But Viereck was not afraid of a confrontation with the Eliot-Pound orthodoxy. In a number of essays from this time, Viereck lays out the difference between his kind of poetry and what he calls the "irresponsible cult of obfuscating for the sake of obfuscating and of shocking merely for the sake of shocking." The poetry of Eliot's admirers (and, we are to understand, Eliot himself) has "no fun" and "no humanness." For Viereck, the cardinal sin of Eliot and the modernists is that they revile humans. They see no value in human pleasures, whereas the Romantics privileged the experience of the individual above all.

Dissenters, such as Viereck, also questioned the modernist attitude toward the value of art. Ezra Pound, for example, in a poem cursing the senseless destruction of World War I, sarcastically described cultural heritage as "an old bitch gone in the teeth," and dismissed the artworks of a culture as "two gross of broken statues [and] a few thousand battered books." However, the dissenter Viereck adopts the veneration of artwork of previous eras that was a particular characteristic of the Romantics, who were

attracted to ruins, to palimpsests, to fragments that could send the viewer into a reverie. Viereck responds to this and initiates a conversation with his poetic predecessors. Shelley's poem "Ozymandias" is a short poem, in 14-line sonnet form, about a "traveller in an antique land" who came upon "two vast and trunkless legs of stone" and a "shattered visage" in the desert. The pedestal reads "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: / Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" For Shelley, these words represent the pure vanity of Ozymandias's ambition. All of the greatness of Ozymandias's works have become nothing but a pair of sculpted legs and a broken face. But also for the poet, the term "despair" is doubly meaningful. Where Ozymandias wished the "Mighty" to look upon his works and despair because they could never equal them, the words now mean something entirely different: the "Mighty," looking upon Ozymandias's works, will now see the inevitably temporary nature of even the most permanent-seeming accomplishments.

Keats takes an entirely different lesson from his artwork, a "Grecian urn," or a Greek amphora. On this amphora is painted a pastoral scene, with a lover pursuing a beloved, musicians playing, and a religious sacrifice about to occur. Keats is sent into a rapture by gazing upon the beauty of the scene. He lovingly describes the figures painted on the vase, then says, addressing the vase, that "when old age shall this generation waste, / Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe / Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st, / 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty.'" For Keats, the artworks of the past do not emphasize the temporary nature of human strivings but rather the eternity of beauty. Humans themselves decline and suffer "woe," but a beautiful artwork is unchanging, always expressing the same "truth" to people.

Viereck's frieze also tells him something about eternal things, but it is not the eternity of truth or beauty that he learns from this Assyrian sculpture. Rather, Viereck sees the horrific blood-lust of the Assyrians, epitomized in the reference to "a pillar of skulls so high it stabbed the sun." Although it seems to be the sculpture speaking, after the statement in italics in the middle of the poem the narrator asks himself who, actually, has been talking: "Was that the tomb's voice, or the desert-wind's? / Or ours?" The "scribes" and "saints" both explain the Assyrian's motivations and downfall in their own terms, but the poet seems to feel differently than they do. From this frieze, Viereck takes the lesson that blood-lust is eternal, that it is a "contagion" from which no civilization□not the civilization of the Israelites, and certainly not the civilization of the twentieth century!□is immune.

The literary critic Harold Bloom theorizes that "great" poets engage in "agon," or competition, with each other, wrestling for the title of Great Poet. Competitors use various strategies, Bloom says, most of which derive from Freudian psychological tendencies in the human mind. The most important of these is the Oedipus complex. A poet with ambitions must symbolically "slay" his immediate predecessor (his father-figure), either by directly attacking him, by intentionally "misreading" his work, or by simply ignoring him. Yet, Bloom notes, the "son" poet will always bear traces of his predecessor's work, even if he desperately wishes to expunge those traces.

Viereck's "For an Assyrian Frieze" demonstrates Bloom's theory brilliantly. Viereck sees Eliot as his most important immediate predecessor; he feels smothered by Eliot, feels that only by symbolically "slaying" Eliot's poetic influence can he express himself. For this reason, he rejects Eliot's formal experimentation, and he responds not to Eliot but to the predecessor poets□the Romantics□that Eliot himself had rejected in his own bid for greatness. But Viereck's poem bears the marks of Eliot nevertheless. Like Eliot did when choosing, in "The Waste Land," to allude to Sanskrit literature rather than to a more traditional, classical predecessor, Viereck chooses to respond to an Assyrian artwork rather than to that of the Romans or Greeks (like Keats) or that of the Egyptians (like Shelley). Viereck also sees not beauty in the work, as Keats found in the urn, nor the futility of human vanity, as Shelley understood the "vast and trunk-less legs of stone" to represent. Rather, like Eliot, he conservatively and pessimistically sees the ancient evidence of human beings' bloodthirstiness in the "luminous" "gangrene" of the "contagion" of the frieze's "molten eyes." Even in attempting to rid himself of the pernicious influence of Eliot, Viereck cannot help but reproduce some of the qualities of Eliot's verse.

Source: Greg Barnhisel, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Topics for Further Study

Research the Assyrian Empire. Where was it? What were the characteristics of its culture and society? Who were its important leaders? What legacies did it leave to the modern world?

Dante's *Divine Comedy,* Shelley's "The Triumph of Life," and Viereck's "For An Assyrian Frieze" all use a similar verse form□three-line stanzas. How does this verse form help the poem to move along? What does the rhyme in Dante's and Shelley's poems contribute that Viereck did not want in his poem? Why do you think Viereck made that decision?

John Keats's poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and Percy Shelley's poem "Ozymandias," both written at approximately the same time, express very different impressions that a speaker obtains by looking at an ancient artifact. What does each speaker get out of his artifact? Viereck's poem also involves an observer gazing upon an ancient artwork and having particular feelings and ideas evoked in him by this artifact. How does his poem express an image of ancient civilization different from that of Keats or Shelley?

In the poem, Viereck's speaker looks upon a "frieze" that he also calls a "bas-relief." What are each of these kinds of sculptures? What are some famous examples of friezes and bas-reliefs? What cultures made these kinds of sculptures? Can you find examples of friezes or bas-reliefs at your school or in your town?

Compare and Contrast

1949: As Europe reorganizes itself after the mayhem of World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union become the world's dominant powers. The Soviet Union installs puppet governments in Eastern and Central Europe while the United States works desperately (and often covertly) to influence elections and the political climate in countries such as Greece and Italy.

2000: The Soviet "empire," having fallen in 1989-1991, has become Russia. By the year 2000, the transition to capitalism has impoverished Russia, transferring much of the wealth that was previously held by Communist officials to corrupt officials of the new government and mobsters. The countries of Eastern and Central Europe fare better.

1949: Because of the G.I. Bill, veterans returning from World War II are entitled to a college education. Swelling university enrollments change American society forever, and a college education comes within reach of families that could never have afforded one before.

2000: In the new economy, a college education now serves the same purpose as a high-school diploma used to: it is the bare minimum educational achievement required to enter most professions. More Americans than ever attend college.

1949: Ezra Pound, incarcerated in St. Elizabeth's mental hospital in Washington, D.C., after being found incompetent to stand trial on his treason charges, wins the first Bollingen Prize for poetry for his book *The Pisan Cantos.* The award ignites a controversy when many other poets and large segments of the public object to a man who made broadcasts on Italian state radio during the war being given an award by the Library of Congress. In the same year, Peter Viereck wins the Pulitzer Prize for poetry for his book *Terror and Decorum.*

2000: Poetry's public profile is increasing for a number of reasons. U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky travels the country promoting poetry, and, on this trip, compiles a CD of Americans reading their favorite poems aloud. At the same time, the performance-oriented "slam poetry" movement is gaining in popularity.

1949: President Harry S. Truman takes office after winning a surprising election victory over Thomas Dewey the previous year.

2000: Vice-President Al Gore contests the Democratic nomination for president with former Senator Bill Bradley of New Jersey. Among the Republicans, the leading candidates are Texas governor George W. Bush□son of former President George Bush□and Arizona Senator John McCain.

What Do I Read Next?

"For An Assyrian Frieze" first appeared in Viereck's first book, *Terror and Decorum* (1949). Viereck continued to publish poetry for decades; an excellent compendium and introduction to his body of work is 1967's *New and Selected Poems, 1932-1967.*

To see what other, similar poets were writing at this time, look at John Ciardi's 1950 anthology *Mid-Century American Poets.* In this book, both poetry and prose by poets such as Theodore Roethke, Robert Lowell, and Elizabeth Bishop are included.

Although somewhat dated, A.T. Olmstead's massive 1923 *History of Assyria* provides a great, and detailed, introduction to the subject. An even older book, George Stephen Good-speed's *A History of the Babylonians and Assyrians* (1915) tells the same story but is aimed at readers familiar with the Bible's stories of these cultures.

Viereck's poem responds to two of the most famous poems in the English language, both of which are structured as a modern man's meditations caused by gazing upon a work of art from the ancient world. John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" stresses the importance of beauty: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, □that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." Percy Shelley's "Ozymandias" takes a very different lesson from the artifact: his speaker, looking upon the crumbling statue that boasts the omnipotence of its subject, learns of the vanity and futility of the most ambitious human aspirations.

One of Viereck's best-known works of social and political commentary is his 1953 work *Shame and Glory of the Intellectuals.* Although this book centers on the challenges that the Soviet and Communist threat posed to conservatism (and is therefore a little dated), Viereck's ideas about the place of art in a truly conservative society still are interesting today. American conservatism has traditionally ridiculed intellectuals and been ashamed of intellectual achievement among its own members; Viereck suggests a way that conservatism can welcome intellectuals. Viereck's earlier book on conservative ideas, his 1949 work *Conservatism Revisited: The Revolt Against Revolt, 1815-1949,* is also an important source for his political ideas.

Further Study

Bradley, Sculley, ed., *The Arts in Renewal,* Philadelphia:

University ofPennsylvania Press, 1951.

This anthology collects statements on art by a number of writers and critics who were "against the grain" of the 1950s. At a time when the experimentation of modernism dominated the serious literary world, these writers argue for a return to conservatism and to art that appeals to a more popular sensibility.

Lawlor, John, "Peter Viereck, Poet and Critic of Values," *in Etudes Anglaises,* Vol. 7, No. 3, 1954, pp. 280-93. This discussion of the symbolic geography of Laguna mythology is crucial to any understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of the symbols in Viereck's writing.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

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Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

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The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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