**Essay #2: Contributing to a Critical Anthology**

**It is difficult**

**to get the news from poems**

**yet men die miserably every day**

**for lack**

**of what is found there.**

--William Carlos Williams

“I take it that the critic’s job in the first instance is to make people read, with intelligence and appreciation, the kind of things that they would not be likely to read otherwise.”

--Richard A. Posner

**Purpose:** This essay requires you to do something academic writing often requires: closely engage with a challenging text and connect that engagement with the text’s contexts. To practice this skill, you will present and illuminate a poem in a variety of ways: by reading it closely (explicating it), by helping readers understand the poem’s historical and biographical context, and by gesturing towards related literary critical scholarship. The poem you choose will also be added to the syllabus.

**Assignment:** You have been invited to contribute to a *Critical Anthology of War Poetry*. Choose a poem from *OBWP* (one that does not already appear on the syllabus) and write an essay that argues a claim based on your explication of a poem and (less importantly) on your exploration of the poem’s context. The poem will be your main exhibit; you should also engage with at least two other sources. Your essay should be about 1800 words and formatted according to the guidelines in the syllabus. It will appear in the anthology together with the poem you have chosen.

**Due dates**

October 4: 500 words of free-write explication (addressed to friend) & recitals

October 11 First draft due: \_\_\_\_\_ words + research questions & recitals, continued

October 18: Complete draft due

October 25: Final version due

**Comments:** Yourwork on this paper will begin with explication (models of which appear in sample papers and in Oliver, Winn, and Ricks [23-27]). When it comes time to formulate a claim, its early form might be something like “I recommend that we read this poem because it…,” with the rest of the sentence making some specific yet succinct case for (to use Samuel Johnson’s terms) the naturalness and novelty of the poem (though you need not say “novel” or “natural” at all). Simply deleting the “I recommend…” part may work for the final version of this claim, but the claim should also respond to the common ground established in the beginning of your introduction. And it should answer a question: What does this poem tell us about X? How does the *experience* of the poem help us understand the experience of x? Remember, everything that appears in your final version should somehow advance your thesis; your explication, that is, should be subordinated to your argument, as should your examination of the historical and biographical content and engagement with any other sources.

There is a library guide for our class at [http://guides.library.harvard.edu/warliterature](http://guides.library.harvard.edu/warliterature" \t "_blank)

We will discuss how to find and engage with sources midway through this assignment.

**1.** Read the poem at least three to four times in a row. Then read it some more, aloud. Consider its **sound** and shape. Does the poem’s general sense evoke any particular emotional responses?

**2.** Locate your immediate, **visceral reaction**. Forget the reasons why—What happens to you physically, mentally, spiritually when you read this poem? Does your heart bump and patter? Do your ears ring? Are you relaxed in a warm pool of memory? Your reaction may be dynamic; it may change from stanza to stanza, line to line, word to word. Now to determine just why...

**3.** Consider how you would describe the **form** of the poem. What does it look like from five feet away? Are the lines short, long, or middling? Are the line lengths obsessively consistent? Do they seem to follow, shadow, or break any sort of pattern? Or are they seemingly random? What kind of punctuation is/is not used? Is the poem written in complete sentences, or are its syntax and grammar somehow non-traditional? Are words or lines repeated? How are they positioned on the page? What is the effect of this positioning?

**4.** How would you describe the poem’s **diction**? What kinds of words does the author use? Latinate, erudite, snooty? Common, vernacular, Germanic? Is it slangy or vulgar? Is it in any sort of dialect? Does the poem contain verifiable vocabulary, or is it full of invented words/unusual combinations?

**5.** Is the poem located in a certain **place and/or time**? What ideas or feelings are typically associated with that place/time? Atypically? What is the relationship between when the poem’s action occurs and when the poem itself begins?

**6.** Does the poem have a **narrative**? What, if anything, happens? Is there an event, occurrence, or story informing the poem? Can you imagine it as a snapshot, or could you film it as a series of scenes?

**7.** Who are the players? What **characters/individuals/souls** participate in the existence of this poem? Who is speaking? What is the speaker’s gender, age, attitude? How would you characterize him/her/it? Who is listening? What are the levels of interaction between speaker/listener/addressee/you? Are you being accused? Invited? Scorned? Seduced?

**8.** What are some striking **images**? How much imagery is there? How do the images work—are they literal or figurative? Are they part of a narrative? Do they correspond to a real situation? Or are they musical—products of the poet’s imagination that evoke certain responses in the reader?

**9.** How would you describe the **tone** of the poem? Is its overall tone consistent with the tone of the speaker? Are there any traces of sarcasm or irony? What emotional state(s) does the speaker seem to navigate? What is his/her/its frame of mind?

**10.** What do you think the poem is “about”? Do any **themes** seem to dominate the piece?