Incomparable Poetry

Robert Kiely

Published by Punctum Books

Kiely, Robert.  

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/84195

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2919758

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
During the boom there was a turn to accounting in certain Irish poems, as illustrated by Flynn’s title again, which names an account just as Joyce’s “Capital Accounts” does. The *Oxford English Dictionary* entry for the phrase *profit and loss* notes that it comes from accounting and bookkeeping, and primarily refers to the “profit and loss account,” or “the net gain and loss made in a commercial transaction or series of transactions,” or “an arithmetical rule by which the gains or losses on commercial transactions are calculated.” Reviewers have noted that Flynn’s title is lifted from T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, published in 1922, and in particular section IV, “Death by Water,” in which “Phlebas the Phoenican” has died by drowning and so forgotten “the profit and the loss.”¹ But Eliot’s text offers us a rather bland observation: profits and losses will be forgotten when we die, living is important and the precondition of monetary concerns. Going back further in literary history, the phrase *profit and loss* typically denotes veniality and in particular anxieties about class. For example, one of its earliest uses is in Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of D’Urbervilles*, published in 1891, where Mrs. Brooks is described by the narrator as follows: “She was too deeply material-

ized, poor woman, by her long and enforced bondage to that arithmetical demon Profit-and-Loss, to retain much curiosity for its own sake.”

Here, paying attention to money entails a loss of intellectual curiosity. And in Jane Austen’s *Emma*, published in 1815, Emma says of Mr. Martin that in the future he “will be a completely gross, vulgar farmer — totally inattentive to appearances, and thinking of nothing but profit and loss.” The farmer will not come off well, he will not care about *appearances* but *money* and other pragmatic things. Thus, the phrase originates in a need to denigrate the petite bourgeoisie from the perspective of a *haute bourgeoisie*. The petty or petite bourgeoisie are a class of semi-autonomous peasantry and small merchants whose political stance often reflects or imitates the high bourgeoisie, small-scale capitalists who often work alongside their laborers. As a liminal class stratum who feel threatened from below but excluded from above, they are prone to turn their ire on scapegoated immigrants, those who do not fit the definition of a fantastical community of national belonging. Insofar as the phrase *profit and loss* is frequently used to describe a petty-bourgeois mindset, I want to suggest that Flynn’s title is better served by thinking about Austen’s *Emma* rather than Eliot’s *Waste Land*.

Sometimes Flynn’s “Letter to Friends” silently quotes Auden and Eliot — but the main touchstone for the poem is Auden’s “Letter to Lord Byron,” published in 1937. In *The Matter of Capital*, Nealon argues that there are “two poetic emphases” that “form the parameters of ‘the matter of capital’” in twentieth-century American poetry. These derive from, on the one hand, the modernist poetics of Pound and “the importance of poetry as a stabilizing editorial arrangement,” and on the other, Auden’s notion of “poetry as the medium for registering obliterateable life.”

Trevor Joyce is a Poundian poet. But what, for Flynn, is obliterateable life? What life makes it into her poem and what is periph-

---

eral? I want to come back to this question after looking at the
overlays between Auden’s poem and Flynn’s.

Critics have remarked that “Letter to Friends” takes its form from Auden’s “Letter to Lord Byron,” despite the fact that Auden writes in rhyme royale (abaccdd in iambic pentameter), and Flynn composes in stanzas of ten lines with the rhyme-scheme ababcdecde. Auden and Louise MacNiece published Letters from Iceland in 1937, which contained “Letter to Byron.” The book is a mix of poetry, logbook, correspondence, quotation, travel guide, and collage. Flynn notes in the first stanza of the third section of “Letter to Friends” that Auden and MacNiece couldn’t have predicted that Iceland would be a “key” part in “all this mess”—that is, the mess of the financial crisis.5 Flynn’s impulse to rebut this idea implies that the thought occurred to her that Auden and MacNiece should have foreseen the financial crisis. But it also assumes that Iceland’s role in the global financial crisis was “key.” The Icelandic financial crisis involved the default of all three of the country’s major privately-owned commercial banks in late 2008, because those banks were unable to refinance the privately-funded banks’ short-term debt and because of a run on deposits in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Iceland’s systemic banking collapse was the largest experienced by any country in economic history relative to the size of its economy.6 Iceland’s crisis led to a severe economic depression from 2008 to 2010 and with it, significant political unrest. The idea that Iceland played a key part is demonstrably false. However, comparisons between Ireland (in particular the Republic) and Iceland were common during the crisis, neatly summarized in the following anecdote by a trade unionist: “I’m sure you’ve

5 Leontia Flynn, Profit and Loss (London: Cape, 2011), 43.
all heard the joke: what’s the difference between Iceland and Ireland? One letter and six months. Well, here’s the real difference: they brought down the government and we didn’t.”

I’d like to go back to Auden’s interest in Iceland, because I think that Flynn’s namecheck of Iceland is ultimately because of Auden’s interest. Flynn’s choice of precursor implies that we should read this poem in light of Auden’s comments. In his lecture “The World of the Sagas” delivered at University of Kent in October 1967, Auden states that people have both a desire to know about the primary or real world, and a desire to build secondary worlds, of myth, story, fiction — a kind of playpen or act of wish-fulfillment. Auden takes these terms from J.R.R. Tolkien, and he dubs the first the impulse of the “Historian,” the second the “Poet.” It is Auden’s view that only since industrialized society have the historian and poet impulses been divorced. The divorced historian is left with mere statistics, the divorced poet “can find materials for building his secondary worlds only in his private subjectivity.” This leads to narcissism in the poet. It is safe to say that if Auden were consulted as to his assessment of Flynn’s poem, he would place it far from realism and close to narcissism. Auden notes that the medieval Sturlunga Saga is more like History than Poetry. He turn to the Icelandic prose sagas as examples of what he calls “Social Realism” and says that they are extraordinary for their early date and their literary merit, which for Auden surpasses the realism of nineteenth century novels. He claims Iceland was a “rural democracy” very early on: because it was a small and almost classless society, realism was possible. In his 1965 foreword to Letters from Iceland, Auden notes that Icelandic society is “still the only really

9 Ibid., 73.
10 Ibid., 74.
11 Ibid., 48, 51. Auden says that the objectivity of the sagas is “astounding” at 65.
12 Ibid., 54, 55.
classless society I have ever encountered.” For Auden, Iceland is a kind of political fantasy — where historian and poet are reunited, where there are no classes. It was also somewhere he went during the rise of fascism in Europe for respite.

All of these interests have a role in Auden’s “Letter to Lord Byron,” because the poem is a meditation on what has happened to art since the Industrial Revolution, written with an eye on the aftermath of a Wall Street Crash and the rise of fascism. In Section I, Auden states that “novel writing is / A higher art than poetry altogether / In my opinion, and success implies / Both finer character and faculties.” It is now, he tells Byron, “the most prodigious of the forms.” And a touchstone of the novel’s rise, in Auden’s view, is Jane Austen. Addressing Byron, Auden writes that “You could not shock her more than she [Austen] shocks me” and that James Joyce is “innocent as grass” compared to her, because she reveals the “economic basis of society.” Austen is more offensive and shocking to Auden than Byron, because she explores the relationship between love and money. The economic basis of society weighs heavily on Auden’s mind because of the Great Depression of 1927, just as it weighs on Flynn’s in the aftermath of the crisis of 2007–8.

Auden characterizes John Bull, symbol of England and the English, as a “secretary” to the “ogre” of fascism:

He dreads the ogre, but he dreads yet more
  Those who conceivably might set him free,
Those the cartoonist has no time to draw.
  Without his bondage he’d be all at sea;
The ogre need but shout “Security,”

15 Ibid., 40.
16 Ibid., 41.
To make this man, so lovable, so mild,  
As madly cruel as a frightened child.¹⁷

In times of difficulty, and especially after the Great Depression, fascism (now as a dragon) rises:

When a man sees the future without hope,  
Whenever he endorses Hobbes’ report  
“The life of man is nasty, brutish, short,”  
The dragon rises from his garden border  
And promises to set up law and order.¹⁸

This, then, is how fascism arises, for Auden — people endorse Hobbes’s theory that life is competitive (or “nasty” and “brutish”) and begin to only care for what lies within their garden wall, and from that garden wall the dragon of fascism arises. Echoing Jordan B. Peterson’s injunction to get your house in order, people are encouraged to not think beyond their private property or private sphere — their “garden.” Byron, who the poem is addressed to, is the polar opposite:

You never were an Isolationist;  
Injustice you had always hatred for,  
And we can hardly blame you, if you missed  
Injustice just outside your lordship’s door:  
Nearer than Greece were cotton and the poor.  
Today you might have seen them, might indeed  
Have walked in the United Front with Gide,¹⁹

There is some weird anacoluthon, or syntactical reversal, in the second line there to make the rhyme work, and we will see a more suspect example of rhyme enforcements in Flynn’s poem. The poem praises Byron for not being small-minded but criti-

¹⁷ Ibid., 53.  
¹⁸ Ibid., 55.  
¹⁹ Ibid., 54.
cizes him for spotting injustice in Greece before he saw injustice at home in the form of poverty. Auden notes that today Byron would have noticed poverty at home and abroad and joined the United Front. Though for Auden it may have been better to start with charity at home and poverty in Britain, he is also clearly sympathetic to Byron’s leanings. The United Front referenced here is probably a nod towards the USSR’s 1935 International Writers’ Congress, at which Gide was present to pledge assistance in the struggle against fascism.  

Like Keatinge and O’Driscoll, Flynn’s poem mainly takes aim at consumerism. Her critique of consumerism runs as follows:

Belfast aspires to be, then, every place where shopping is done less for recreation (this might apply to all the western race) than from a kind of civic obligation.

But here we have, unproblematised, the notion of a “western race.” And if one were to offer the excuse that it is simply there to fulfil a rhyme scheme, it would simply further indict the glibness of the poem in both form and content. Flynn’s poem does not think beyond its garden border, the apparently self-contained form of its rhyme scheme. From Flynn’s rhyme scheme, if you look closely, you can see a dragon rise. And it comes through forcefully in the poem’s close.

---

20 Orlando Figes, Revolutionary Russia, 1891–1991 (London: Penguin, 2014), 295–96: “Through the United Front the Soviet Union won over many sympathizers in the West. Soviet propaganda portrayed the USSR as the leader of ‘progressive humanity,’ as the world’s only socialist state, and as its main hope against the fascist threat. Western intellectuals were taken in. In June 1935, a Moscow-financed International Writers’ Congress for the Defence of Culture was held in Paris at which famous writers such as André Gide, E.M. Forster and Aldous Huxley declared their solidarity with their Soviet comrades in the struggle against fascism.”

21 Flynn, Profit and Loss, 41.