

Textual Analysis

Analysis = an attempt to understand the parts of something
individually, in relationship to each other, & in relation to the whole
(Will Evans, "'The Elements' of Hopkins Expos")

Around the poem below: Jot down (1) *everything you notice*: the language, length of lines, sounds of the words, number of syllables, meaning of the words, line breaks, white space, use of upper case letters, use of punctuation and clauses, what the words & phrases remind you of, where you see change(s) happening in the poem, what seems odd or surprising, and so on. Also, jot down (2) *the questions you have*.

Since you are mortal,
don't prophesy the quality of tomorrow's dawn,
and when you meet the man of the year,
don't try to read his life line,
for swifter than a dragonfly,
pfft

a change.

Danielle S. Allen, "The Podium: Since You Are Mortal"

For my own pleasure, I recently translated a short poem that Simonides, better known for his Olympic victory odes, wrote about 2,500 years ago:

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don't prophesy the quality of tomorrow's dawn,
and when you meet the man of the year,
don't try to read his life line,
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Danielle S. Allen

a change.

Perhaps you recognize the argument. Simonides is restating what the Athenian legislator Solon once said: "Call no man happy before his death."

Solon had visited the great king Croesus, who asked him, "Who is the happiest man you have ever seen?" Solon did not name Croesus. When the king angrily demanded why he didn't rate, Solon responded, "Take seventy years as the span of a man's life: those seventy years contain 26,250 days [reckoned by the Greek calendar], and not a single one of them is like the next in what it brings. You can see from that, Croesus, what a chance thing life is. You are very rich, and you rule a numerous people; but the question you asked me I will not answer, until I know that you have died happily."

Croesus eventually lost his empire and his children, and died an unhappy man. When you meet the man of the year, / don't try to read his life line.

But then, in the second half of his little poem, in the midst of reflecting on the alarmingly unpredictable nature of human life, Simonides marvels at the speed and grace of dragonflies. He is not uttering a pessimistic cry of despair in the face of our mortality; he is counseling us to draw on the resources of wonder--on beauty--to sustain ourselves even as we confront necessity. For swifter than a dragonfly / pfft / a change.

--from a commencement address at
St. John's College, Santa Fe, May 22, 2004

Work Cited

Allen, Danielle S. "The Podium: Since You Are Mortal." *American Scholar*, vol. 73, no. 4, Sept. 2004, p. 184. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aft&AN=504009999&site=ehost-live&scope=site.