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April 2007

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The following essay originally appeared in *American Poet*, Volume 32, Spring 2007; 9-12 published by the Academy of American Poets.

Poetic Structure and Poetic Form: The Necessary Differentiation

by Michael Theune

> I shall have to disregard the musical structure of poetry: metre, stanza-form, rhyme, alliteration, quantity, and so on. I neglect these without too much regret: criticism has paid them an altogether disproportionate amount of attention….I am going to talk, primarily, about other sorts of structure in lyrical poetry.
>
> —Randall Jarrell, "Levels and Opposites: Structure in Poetry"

Think of some of the greatest lyric poems in the English language. Consider what they have in common. Besides the fact that they are written in English, what other traits do they share?

While it is interesting to consider the specifics of your list, it is even more pertinent here to consider what you thought of, what questions you asked yourself, when considering what these poems have in common

Perhaps you asked yourself about content, and so you discovered that you like a wide variety of topics in your poems: desire, death, hope, nature, relationships, nightingales. Perhaps you asked yourself about form, and so you discovered that you like a lot of forms—a lot of sonnets, some villanelles, a smattering of sestinas. But one question you probably didn't ask yourself was: do these poems turn? If this question, which likely only arose if you had a number of sonnets on your list, in fact seems strange, then it is imperative to investigate this strangeness for it indicates that the turn, a significant shift in the poem's rhetorical progress, which is so vital in poetry, is rarely recognized as such.

In "Levels and Opposites: Structure in Poetry" [*Georgia Review* 50.4 (1996): 697-713], Randall Jarrell clearly is talking about something like a turn when he reveals what is necessary for a successful poem: "a successful poem starts from one position and ends at a very different one, often a contradictory or opposite one; yet there has been no break in the unity of the poem." In "Andrew Marvell [*Selected Essays: New Edition* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1950), 251-63]," T.S. Eliot goes so far as to call the surprising turn "one of the most important means of poetic effect since Homer." Indeed, it is likely that in your list of greatest lyric poems in English one of the most common aspects shared by the poems is their inclusion of a turn. And yet, for some reason, this vital part of poetry does not immediately enter our consciousness when we think about poems in general. In terms of the sheer amount of turning in poems, the amount of thinking about turning in poetry is disproportionately small. Clearly, we need to investigate the

interrelated issues of the importance of the turn, the reasons the turn isn't a more significant part of our sense of what poems are and do, and what we can do to correct this oversight.

One of the main reasons we don't acknowledge the ubiquitous turn as fully as we should is the simple fact that we don't have a more encompassing, generally accepted term for it. This is no small matter. Terms are important; they are the markers of and signposts for our attentiveness. The term *form* encourages attention to aspects of the poem including meter, rhythm, and rhyme; *content* asks us to consider more carefully what a poem is about; *syntax* turns our attention to the role of sentence structure in a poem's meaning-making pattern. The term *turn* is inadequate; because of the turn's strong associations with the sonnet, *turn* indicates one part of a poem's, or rather just a sonnet's, formal concerns—*turn* is just one more item on par with the facts that the sonnet is fourteen lines long, written in iambic pentameter, in possession of a particular rhyme scheme, and so on. Thus, we need a larger, more encompassing term to mark the presence of the turn in poetry.

The most appropriate term available is *structure*, the term most often used by the few commentators—among them: Randall Jarrell, Ellen Bryant Voigt, and Stephen Dobyns [in "Writing the Reader's Life," from *Best Words, Best Order: Essays on Poetry* (New York: St. Martin's, 1996), 35-52]—who have attempted to significantly differentiate between structure and form. However, the term *structure* also entails many difficulties. It is somewhat confusing, because generally often is considered synonymous with form. For example, if in a handbook of poetry there is a chapter called "Structures of Poetry," that chapter will very likely be about forms: villanelles, sestinas, ghazals, pantoums, blank verse.

Additionally, save for the facts that they believe structure is something other than form and that structure refers in some way to a poem's organization, previous commentators on nonformal structure do not agree precisely on what structure is. Especially concerned that structure not be equated with only "the skeletons of poems," Jarrell states, "There are *many* different sorts of structure in poetry, *many* possible ways of organizing a poem; and *many* of these combined in the organization of a single poem," noting that while some animals wear their skeletons "on their outside," "some manage…to have no skeleton at all," and concluding, "So poems." In an essay that draws upon Jarrell's work ["The Flexible Lyric," in *The Flexible Lyric* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 114-171], though Ellen Bryant Voigt refers to structure very largely as "the purposeful order in which materials are released to the reader," she clearly favors a deep skeletal view of structure, likening mere "formal conventions" to "exoskeletal structures."

In part, it is the continuing imprecision of the use of *structure* that keeps *structure* from being substantial and significant. Thus, *structure* needs a strong definition, and I believe that defining *structure* clearly and decisively as *the pattern of a poem's turning* provides a way to name and reveal an essential characteristic of structure. That is, I believe Jarrell, Voigt, and Dobyns would agree that the pattern of a poem's turning is at least one part, if not a key part, of any nonformal definition of structure. Admittedly, this definition of structure focuses more on the skeletal aspect of structure, and, admittedly, we should be aware of all the significance-making

components in a poem, whatever they may be called (indeed, other terms may need to be invented), but structure as a pattern of a poem's turning is vital not only because it is essential but also because, so defined, it is tremendously useful.

In "The Flexible Lyric," Voigt suggests that structure has the power to offer a whole new taxonomy for poetry. Comparing the classification of poems to zoological taxonomy, Voigt states, "… [T]he record of lyric evolution, from words performed on the lyre to written document to expanding adaptations (ballad, sonnet, public and private odes), long ago became a taxonomy of verse forms—formal conventions and exoskeletal structures—which, like those silhouettes of birds in the field guide, no longer seem helpful out in the field, with new species on the wing or in the nest." According to Voigt, there are, thankfully, other ways to classify and identify poems, ways that do not discriminate according to outward appearances but rather organize by deeper connections, and such classification will begin to clarify matters in poetry as it clarified matters in science, as when "[i]n the eighteenth century, naturalists commonly used a classification of 'quadrapeds' which excluded lizards and salamanders but included bats and walruses, liberties no longer needed once the class was renamed 'mammal.'"

Although Voigt does not develop such a taxonomy she herself suggests, *structure*, when it is defined decisively as the pattern of a poem's turning, offers a new way of classifying poems, regardless of their form. Whereas *form* offers categories for poems such as sonnet, villanelle, and ghazal, *structure* introduces new kinds of poems, or kinds of poems perhaps better known in scholarship than in creative writing, including *ironic* (poems turning from set-up to punchline), *emblem* (poems turning from description to meditation), *concessional* (poems turning from initial concessions to making a positive argument), *retrospective-prospective* (poems turning from past to present or future), *dialectical* (poems turning from thesis to antithesis to synthesis), and *descriptive-meditative* (poems turning from a description of a scene to a meditation that arises from the initial description to a re-description of the scene).

Even if not necessarily superior to but merely other than other classification systems, the power of this new taxonomy is considerable, as are the effects it could have on the teaching of poetry and poetry writing. The new taxonomy makes us see poems in new ways, making very new connections among seemingly radically varying poems, forms, schools. There is an ironic poem that is an epigrammatic, two-lined poem by a Language poet Charles Bernstein ("Shaker Show") and another that is a twenty-line rhyming poem by Robert Frost ("The Most of It"). There is a concessional poem that is a sonnet (Shakespeare's "My mistress's eyes are nothing like the sun") and another that is a haiku (Issa's "The world of dew / Is the world of dew— / And yet, and yet—"); still another is Marianne Moore's terse "Poetry," as is Ariana Waynes's "To the Patriots and Activist Poets," a much longer free verse slam poem.

But for all of its seeming newness, structure's great strength really is its familiarity. Especially for younger students of poetry, where form can seem an especially singular poetic activity—no one speaks or thinks in villanelles—structure's turning is something people do all the time with and in their language. Anyone who has ever told a joke is familiar with the ironic structure.

Anyone who has ever confessed anything about their past—privately or to another person—in order to make resolutions about the future already has employed the retrospective-prospective structure. Structures can be efficiently and effectively pointed out, shown to be relevant and revealing, and put to immediate use in analyzing and creating poems. Students can appreciate and compose poems as terrific examples of speech acts they use every day.
But it is not just students who need to become familiar with structure. The professionals need it, as well. Without a concept like structure, even experienced poets make mistakes in how we represent poems. Mark Strand's and Eavan Boland's anthology, *The Making of the Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), of course focuses forms, but it also includes what might be called poetic *modes*, the larger traditions of poetry that include elegy and ode. And so the anthology suggests that it—and, through it, form—provides a comprehensive accounting of important means for making poems. Nevertheless, even though the emblem poem has long been a significant part of poetry production, and even though two other structures, the ironic and descriptive-meditative, have been discussed in important twentieth-century works on Romanticism—including Anne Mellor's *English Romantic Irony* and M.H. Abrams's "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric," respectively—structure is completely unrepresented as a means for crafting poems. Of course, many turns appear throughout the anthology, but the effect is that, without being highlighted, the turns seem like insignificant, incident parts of the poems and not, as they really are, truly major component of what it takes to make a poem.

The absence of structural focus—or even consideration—is perhaps even greater in the realm of poetry-writing pedagogy. As a result of being at the end of major conflict in the poetry wars, after the battles between camps variously defined as New Formalist/lyric/traditional and Language/experimental/avant-garde, there is now an increased tendency to teach poetry as a mixture of form and experimentation, with form serving as a procedure for generating text. Such procedures constitute the basis for, for example, "Principles for Formal Experimentation," the final section of *An Exaltation of Forms: Contemporary Poets Celebrate the Diversity of Their Art* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), a recent book on poetic forms edited by Annie Finch and Kathrine Varnes. "Principles for Formal Experimentation" includes discussions of Billy Collins's hoax-form, the paradelle, Oulipian methods, and Charles Bernstein's take on form, "Nude Formalism: A Sampler." While such methods can be very useful for encouraging production and invention, when considered after some attention has been paid to structure, it is clear that these methods are limited insofar as they completely exclude concern with structure and, thus, result in carelessly structured work. Only by incorporating attention to poetic structure in such exercises can these exercises be transformed into a deeper art.

inly, knowing about structure makes new demands on poets and poems, requiring that poems be organized to maneuver significantly; however, structure also offers a tremendously useful tool for recognizing or even imagining a draft's structural potential—it is relatively easy, for example, to imagine stalled drafts inspired by a familiarity with structural traditions. In this regard, however, structure should not be confused with logic. As Jarrell notes, "Poetry constantly uses logic for the details of structures…constantly haunts about the shape of logic….But for poetry logic is merely one method of organization, one among many others…." Poetic turns also can be narrative or dramatic, subtle or radical. A turn might signal a shift from

premise to conclusion, but it also might mark the transition from set-up to punch line, or from one emotional state to another. Rather than thinking about structure in terms of logic, it is far more accurate to think of a poem's structural potential as the poem's further potential to surprise, and structural tradition should encourage not a slavish adherence to that tradition but structural experimentation, a willingness to try out new manifestations of structural maneuvers. Structure is more than logic; it organizes and encourages a poem's leaps and landings, it arrivals at places at once prepared-for yet seemingly unexpected.

It is of course fruitless to try to dictate linguistic developments; language will do what it wants. However, whether or not the terms and meanings presented here actually will be more generally employed, it at least should be clear that we need a term to designate the importance of the turn in poetry, and that term, despite all its difficulties, should be structure. Only in this way will we even begin to understand what Randall Jarrell meant when he said—over six decades ago—that "[i]n our time there has been comparatively little work on poetic structure." And only in this way will we be encouraged to undertake that still neglected work, to further investigate what surprises a turn to giving more attention to structure in poetry may reveal.