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It Not Do Fall For: on The Parabelle

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It Not Do Fall For

on *The Paradelle*, edited by Theresa M. Welford
by Michael Theune

According to Rebecca Warner's helpful analysis of poetry hoaxes in her essay "Imp of Verbal Darkness': Poetry Hoaxes and the Postmodern Politic" (*The Writer's Chronicle* 36.3: 58-66.), poetic hoaxes work by feeding off our lack of critical standards—"What...hoaxes demonstrate is how easily any reader may be fooled, which in turn reminds us how unstable our critical standards may be. We have few reliable criteria for determining meaning, value, or authenticity, and secretly we know it"—and though they often "tend to target avant-garde writing," hoaxes also employ some tactics of experimental writing, including a reliance on "elaborate theoretical justification to persuade their readers." Additionally, differentiating a hoax from forgery and plagiarism, Warner notes that a hoax, to succeed, needs to be found out eventually: "A hoax has to be good enough to first deceive its audience, but must later be revealed (or at least suspected) in order to fully succeed. This is especially true if the hoax's purpose...is to deliver a statement of literary criticism."

With the invention of the *paradelle* form by poet Billy Collins and the furtherance of the *paradelle* in Theresa M. Welford's *The Paradelle: An Anthology* (Red Hen Press, 2005), a new hoax has entered poetry's domain. However, while somewhat similar to Warner's hoaxes, the *paradelle* hoax is in many ways unique, and uniquely problematic—though increasingly interesting. For example, while most hoaxes effectively end when the hoax has been revealed—when the critics and theorists take over and begin the dissection—the *paradelle* very early on was recognized to be a hoax, or, rather, a prank; additionally, Collins initially intended to fool no one, but this revelation did nothing to stop the *paradelle*'s advance, and instead, just a few years after the creation of the first *paradelle*, there is now a *paradelle* anthology. The phenomenon of the rise of the *paradelle* is especially interesting as the *paradelle* was first created to spoof by example bad formal poetry, and, for the most part, this is what the hoax

tends to create: more bad formal poetry. While one might imagine such a hoax succeeding because it involves the “elaborate theoretical justification” of so many hoaxes, the *paradelle* in fact has very little elaborate theoretical justification. An investigation into the *paradelle* thus promises to reveal much about some deep beliefs about what poems are and do, revealing what critical standards we do—or don’t—have, and our willingness to apply them—or not.

The first *paradelle* ever written was Billy Collins’s “*Paradelle for Susan*.” First published in 1997 in *The American Scholar*—and subsequently republished in *Picnic, Lightning* and in *Sailing Alone around the Room: New and Selected Poems*—the *paradelle* included, in each of its printings, the following false, cheeky explanatory note:

The *paradelle* is one of the more demanding French fixed forms, first appearing in the *langue d’oc* love poetry of the eleventh century. It is a poem of four six-line stanzas in which the first and second lines, as well as the third and fourth lines of the first three stanzas, must be identical. The fifth and sixth lines, which traditionally resolve the stanzas, must use *all* the words from the preceding lines and *only* those words. Similarly, the final stanza must use every word from *all* the preceding stanzas and *only* those words.

If you think that such form would lead to a garbled mess of a poem, you’re right. Consider the first and last stanzas from “*Paradelle for Susan*”:

I remember the quick, nervous bird of your love.
I remember the quick, nervous bird of your love.
Always perched on the thinnest, highest branch.
Always perched on the thinnest, highest branch.
Thinnest love, remember the quick branch.
Always nervous, I perched on your highest bird the.
...
I always cross the highest letter, the thinnest bird.

Below the waters of my warm familiar pain,
 Another hand to remember your handwriting.
 The weather perched for me on the shore.
 Quick, your nervous branch flew from love.
 Darken the mountain, time and find was my into it was
 with to to.

Though Collins's poem is a mess, it is intentionally, and even artfully, so. As Collins makes clear in "A Brief History of the Paradelle," an essay included in Welford's anthology, he was pulling a prank. Collins's effort was to create with the paradelle—which he defines as "parody + villanelle"—"an ironic display of poetic ineptitude, and more broadly, a parody of formal poetry itself, at least the inflexibly strict kind." According to Collins, the poem and the note—itsself "a parody of the dry, authoritative entries in the usual dictionaries of poetic terms"—were designed to create the sense that the work was by "a moon-struck poet who had bitten off more than he technically could chew." This technical ineptitude is revealed through Collins's technical proficiency: the real humor of "Paradelle for Susan" is concentrated mostly at the end of each of the stanzas and at the poem's end—locations, as hinted at in the explanatory note, where stanzas and poems resolve themselves. At these points in the poem one detects the comic build-up—from the first stanza's extra "the" to the second's "to with it is to" to the third's "you letter the from the" to the final stanza's "into it was with to to"—of irresolution, of what Collins calls "the pile-up of remainder words...as if the poet hoped no one would notice." Collins assumed that readers, or "smart readers," would get this, would "see the poem for what it was," would be in on the joke, but, as Collins himself states, "Boy, was [he] wrong."

While, according to complaints received by *The American Scholar*, some readers just didn't get the joke and disliked what they found to be a bad formal poem; once "Paradelle for Susan" appeared in *Picnic, Lightning*, things, according to Collins, "took another turn": the paradelle suddenly became a legitimate form. According to Collins, "although it was hard to tell how much of the joke these writers were in on," people started writ-

ing their own paradelles, and workshop teachers were assigning the parabelle to their students. According to her “Editor’s Note,” Theresa M. Welford was one of those assigned a parabelle in workshop, and eventually she became, in her own words, “addicted” to the form. Though initially skeptical of the form’s authenticity, Welford was taken in by the parabelle’s purported pedigree, and she approached Collins with the idea of a parabelle anthology. Collins agreed, and Welford then invited over 150 poets to contribute to the anthology. However, when one of the potential contributors asked if the parabelle was a legitimate form or not, Welford approached Collins and found out that he’d made up the parabelle form. Welford informed all the contributors of the prank. Though, according to Welford, “[s]ome poets weren’t quite as enthusiastic as others,” many of the poets stayed with the program.

More suggestively than elaborately, Welford explains the poets’ rationales for sticking with the parabelle as a combination of “an intellectual interest in the meaning of the form, along with an enthusiastic, often tongue-in-cheek appreciation for the sheer fun of it.” She cites contributing poet Annie Finch—who herself has helped to promote the parabelle by including a chapter on the form, by Collins, in her book *An Exaltation of Forms*—who writes, “Clearly it’s a form whose time has come: challenging as a puzzle yet it makes full use of the random liberties postmodernism has allowed us.” And Welford cites contributor Quentin Vest, who writes, “Might I add that I categorically *reject* the vulgar notion of the parabelle as an ‘artificial’ form? For me, the parabelle is mysticism pure and simple. I believe all paradelles already exist in cyberspace, and that one need ‘only connect.’” Welford herself concentrates on the parabelle’s power to enact certain meanings, noting that the parabelle’s “scrambled words perfectly capture the way a person can become frantic with yearning, pain, and frustrated passion.”

While the parabelle can sometimes work to portray traumatic or ecstatic repetitions, this ability is not the main justification for the form. Rather, it is the form’s supposed “fun” that has emerged as the central rationale for the parabelle. Though Welford admits that she initially “wasn’t sure the parabelle form

could do much more than be funny or strange,” she does state that she sees in her anthology’s paradelles “plenty of humor,” that she is “dazzled” by her contributors’ “wit.” She finds various paradelles “humorous and poignant,” “funny and edgy.” And Welford clearly believes that the parabelle’s form specifically can enact humor. She states, “[T]he parabelle form decidedly does lend itself to humor.” The reason for this is the form’s enforced word scrambling: “The rules for the parabelle don’t explicitly say that the words must be scrambled in certain lines, but all the poets who’ve worked with the poem have taken that requirement as a given, often with hilarious results...”

Welford’s reading of the work in her anthology is extremely generous. Unlike the badness of Collins’s first parabelle, which is an intricate part of the poem’s humor, the paradelles in *The Parabelle*—with very few exceptions (among them: Catherine Carter’s “Years Away: Parabelle for Diminishment,” Dana Gioia’s “The Shepherd’s Parabelle,” and David Hernandez’s “Parabelle for Insomniacs”)—mostly are just bad. While some of the fault for this can be attributed to decisions made by contributors, much of the fault belongs to the parabelle form itself. Because of the demands of the form, the parabelle writer very often has to decide where in the poem to aim for effect: does the final stanza get the focus, get composed first, and then one works backward to make the poem, or does one create the initial, repeating lines with some effort at making coherence in the scrambled lines of the first three stanzas and then, still later, see what becomes of the final stanza? While, of course, the composition of the parabelle ultimately requires some negotiation, one almost always can see the compromises made. Very often there is a place in the parabelle where the poem obviously breaks, trying to cram in a necessary word or make up for an omission. The poems in *The Parabelle* are filled with the kinds of inversions—“Laden with belonging we are,” “where windows protest her to open”—that almost all readers and writers of poetry have decided are terrible in other formal poems where a poet, for example, might strain to achieve a rhyme.

Though it is terrible to hear the echo of Yoda in some language that is meant to be traumatic or ecstatic, such inversions

are not the worst of it. Some poems simply allow complete nonsense. Forced to recombine its elements, the *paradelle* should not be used for narrative purposes, but some poets tried this. Though Gerald Locklin's "paradelle: gothic pastoral" opens with the somewhat promising, repeated lines, "the morning brought a dismal gargoyle soup of aching mandibles" and "i strolled the garden in byronic horsehair like a cloud," this narrative just crumbles in lines five and six: "i brought a dismal horsehair soup like a byronic garden. / the aching cloud strolled in gargoyle mandibles." By its end, the poem—in which some "byronic mandibles" are doing the strolling—is simply hopeless.

Some poets tried to address the *paradelle*'s difficulty by employing cliché subject matter, trusting that then, when the words are recombined, something new might be said. This is not the case. Rather, we get badly-spliced stock footage. In Madeline Bassnett's "Paradelle on a Documentary Film: Hiroshima" the opening lines, "Flameball tumbles toward camera, white" and "Silence. Black shadows etched in concrete" become "Silence shadows flame. Ball tumbles toward / white concrete. Etched in camera. Black." The bad writing here just adds atrociousness to atrocity. Vivé Griffith's "Paradelle for My Parents" only reshuffles familiar images to wind up merely muddled; the opening lines, "My father, my mother says, is the sweetest man she's ever known" and "Sweet, after years, after treachery and tragedy," turn into the following bad and ultimately nonsensical lines: "Treachery is sweet, my father says, after my mother. / After the sweetest years and man, she's tragedy ever known." Gaffs such as "[b]all tumbles" and "she's tragedy ever known" are everywhere in *The Paradelle*.

And nowhere are such gaffs more apparent than in Jon Deckert's "Paradelle for Fire Safety," R. S. Gwynn's "Paradelle of Easy Assembly," and Dina Hardy's "Dryer Needs." These poems, which Welford points to as examples of poems that can produce "hilarious results," all work on the same principles: begin with instructions in the poem's repeated lines as the straight man's set-up, and let the recombinations serve as the fool's punchlines. If this sounds good in theory, it does not happen when put into practice. Rather, the tedious directions turn

into slightly more manic but no less tedious recombinations. For example, “Paradelle for Fire Safety,” which includes lines such as “Burn safety matches everywhere” and “Don’t forget to stop, drop, and roll,” concludes with the insignificant and deeply unfunny: “Adults stop. Don’t drop children / away from fire flames. If you forget / to call, use matches, blowtorches, / and gasoline. To smoke, you must force / hands to roll and burn cigarettes. Keep / away from safety everywhere. Please Burst!” If this conclusion seems interesting, that is only because it is more interesting than the mostly boring, dry lines that precede it. The poem incorporates its own straight man as a straw man, but its supposed humor doesn’t really overcome the straw man but instead just leans another dummy up against it, hoping that a thought or a real laugh will form between them. Not one does. And so no one should call these poems humorous or hilarious, and we should not, as no one has—not Collins, not Welford—call them great.

Some of the contributors seem to recognize the troubles with the paradelle, and, realizing how binding the form can be, take steps to try to fix it. But these steps—including Colette Inez’s invention of the “Demi-Paradelle,” Henry Sloss’s invention of the “Paradello,” the opening up by a number of writers of the paradelle’s typically endstopped lines with increased enjambment, and Fred Chappell’s liberal use of homonyms (an example of his repeated lines is “Interrogate accepted form. / Enter a gate, accepted Form”)—are usually just re-rearranging deckchairs on the Titanic. The paradelle’s form is so binding that any variation on the form turns out to be insubstantial—the essential demands, the repetition of so many words, of the paradelle are too much (Collins himself calls the form’s rules “ridiculously exacting”) *especially* to create wit in writing.

Wit—recognized as one of the rarest of all poetic achievements; in his essay “Andrew Marvell,” T.S. Eliot calls wit “something precious and needed...”—is such a precious achievement because in order to create it one must create a sense of fitting surprise, a state in which language both delivers on expectations yet leaps beyond them. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith notes in *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End*, “A hyperdetermined conclu-

sion will have maximal stability and finality; and when these qualities occur in conjunction with unexpected or in some way unstable material...the result will be *wit*—which, as many have observed, occurs when expectations are simultaneously surprised and fulfilled.” And any joker knows it takes a great deal of effort to write the fitting surprise of a punchline. As comedian Mel Helitzer notes at the conclusion of his fifteen-page chapter on comedic brainstorming in *Comedy Writing Secrets*: “This seems like an awful lot of labor just to create a few one-liners. Well, it is. No humor writer will deny that associations are laborious, tedious, time-consuming, and frustrating when it doesn’t come out right.” And he notes as a kind of warning at the beginning of his chapter on the surprising art of comedic reversal that “[p]ro writers sometimes spend hours polishing that important last line.”

The difficulty and the desirability of wit is precisely the appeal of the *paradelle*: the *paradelle* seems to enable the comparatively easy production of wit. The *paradelle* is popular because it seems like not just another kind of machine made of words but rather like a machine, or a program, for making wit. After all, don’t the form’s recombinations, located at the ends of stanzas and at the end of the poem—precisely those places where a reader expects witty turns—seem to offer wit’s fitting surprise? As the recombinations share the same words with their repetitive set-ups, they clearly fit what came before them, and precisely their recombination makes them surprising.

Yet, as has been shown, what is thought to be wit really is not; the *paradelle* form is mostly really a machine for creating only the *semblance* of wit. This is because the words in the first four lines of a *paradelle*’s first three stanzas set up images, perspectives, concepts, and ideas beyond their language that comprise the real field of expectation for readers, and it is then simply too binding, too hobbling to be confined to such a limited set of words when trying to significantly remark on, reverse, or leap beyond established expectations. Imagine having to create a great punchline for “Why did the chicken cross the road?” using just those seven words, and *all* those seven words. Or imagine having to create a punchline for “How many lawyers does it take to screw in a lightbulb?” out of *all* those eleven words. Though

there may be a few silly bursts—like “Chicken did the cross,” or “Many lawyers screw a lightbulb”—none of the answers, especially the *complete* answers like “Many lawyers screw a lightbulb how it does to a in,” are that funny. For real wit, one simply needs more room to maneuver, to adjust timing, to play with the conceptual and imaginative opportunities of the set-up. Compared to the constraints of the *paradelle*, Byron’s *ottava rima* seems like free verse.

Collins himself seems to recognize the shortcomings of the *paradelle* form. For example, he did not contribute a new *paradelle* to the anthology, writing to Welford: “Theresa, I’ve written one *paradelle*, and that’s the only one I’m ever going to write.” And even more significantly, one can see Collins’s own prolonged wrestling with this issue in his “A Brief History of the *Paradelle*.” Committed in part to the form he invented but also committed to humor and real pleasure in poetry, Collins struggles when he tries to describe the possibility—“however recent, however self-invented”—of the *paradelle* as a viable literary genre. After briefly discussing the uses of literary forms, the way that “[e]very fixed form tends to invite certain kinds of expression,” that “the rules of every poetic genre are hospitable to some expressive needs and unsuitable for others,” Collins asks, “But what good was the *paradelle*? What kind of expression could fit into its suitcase?” The answer he gives is that “[t]he uniqueness of the *paradelle* lies in its most distinctive feature, that is, the sudden escalation of difficulty in the rules.” Although, according to Collins, it is “the jumpy double nature of the *paradelle*” that makes it “so unsteady, so schizo, so right for our times,” the only time—beside a single nod to the effect created by the *paradelle* in which Collins refers only to his original use of the *paradelle*: “This disproportionate...intensification of difficulty was meant to have a comic effect”—all of the *paradelle*’s appeal is for the writer. Collins states, “For the writer, the *paradelle* is a lobster trap: easy to get into, nearly impossible to get out of.” And when he states, “The *paradelle* invites you in with its offer of nursery-rhyme repetition, then suddenly confronts you with an extreme verbal challenge,” the “you” is the poet, and not the reader, for whom there is no verbal challenge, but rather often

just a bit of a mess to try to decipher, if she wants. Collins's half-hearted support for the paradelle, however, initiates a shell game that ends with Welford's mistaken assertion that the form creates lots of fun for the reader.

Ah, The Reader. Whereas the paradelle seems very happy to forget the reader, wit—real wit—always reminds us of the reader's presence. Wit is always directed at the reader, aiming to move the reader toward laughter with well-orchestrated surprise. The paradelle succeeds in a poetry scene that does not have very high demands of poetry—definitely not high enough to even demand wit's quicksilver effects, and perhaps, too, not high enough even to attract an audience beyond the coterie of working poets. And it is the demand for wit that can serve as a charm to help protect readers from literary pranks or hoaxes. The demand for wit could have allowed Theresa Welford herself to question the paradelle. According to Welford, when she first read Collins's "Paradelle for Susan" she had many questions about the authenticity of the form. However, she was finally convinced by the seeming "authority" of the note—itsself underwritten (though Welford does not acknowledge this layer of authority) by the fact that it was used by the soon-to-be U.S. Poet Laureate. Had Welford expected wit from her poems perhaps she might have felt freer to question the paradelle form right away. And subsequent readers might never have had to suffer the bulk of *The Paradelle: An Anthology*.

But, of course, readers don't have to put up with the paradelle. Having seen now how the form so hobbles wit, no one needs to be persuaded by it—no matter how seemingly official and authoritative the paradelle seems to become. And the paradelle is only becoming more authoritative; even though the paradelle has shed its authority—it has revealed it's a joke—in doing so it has increased its authority: there's an anthology of the things, and so everyone who reads *The Paradelle* and writes a paradelle thinks they can be in on the joke. But they're not really, for even though "in" on the paradelle hoax, these participants become victim to a deeper, more insinuating kind of hoax: the kind that offers a way to make bad writing yet call it, for some reason, successful poetry. No one should fall for this.