

**Illinois Wesleyan University**

---

**From the Selected Works of Michael Theune**

---

2007

**The Non-Turning of Recent American Poetry on  
David Caplan's Questions of Possibility:  
Contemporary Poetry and Poetic Form**

Michael Theune, *Illinois Wesleyan University*



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/theune/7/>

THE NON-TURNING OF  
RECENT AMERICAN POETRY  
on David Caplan's *Questions of Possibility:  
Contemporary Poetry and Poetic Form*  
Michael Theune

It is virtually impossible to overstate the significance of the poetic turn in the history of poetry in English. While the turn is widely recognized as a key feature of the sonnet tradition, its presence actually is everywhere in poetry: in the elegy's stately turn from grief to consolation (or its disruptive turn from grief to deeper grief), in the emblem poem's didactic turn from observation to meditation, in the ironic poem's witty turn from set-up to undercutting punchline. In part, the presence of the turn in poetry is obscured by the ways we typically classify poems; if, rather than classifying poems by form, as, say, "ballad," "villanelle," and "sestina," we instead classify poems by structure, by patterns of turns, as, say, "emblem," "ironic," "dialectic" (a poem that turns from thesis to antithesis to synthesis), or "descriptive-meditative" (a poem that turns from description of a scene to a meditation then back to a re-description of the scene), we more clearly can see the existence of the turn and recognize it as a significant feature of poetry outside of the sonnet tradition. We might even come to agree with T.S. Eliot who, in his essay "Andrew Marvell," writes that the poem's ability to turn surprisingly is "one of the most important means of poetic effect since Homer."

Almost all significant poems have turns in them, and these turns are significant features of such poems. Recognizing such facts means understanding a poem as something that moves, that accumulates, that retracts, that works to gain assent, that eddies, that bursts forth. It means recognizing, as does Randall Jarrell in his essay "Levels and Opposites: Structure in Poetry," that the structure of a poem "...make[s] the poem, however unified, end at a very different place from the place it began." Such an understanding places high demands on poems, requiring that they actually deliver their turns both surprisingly and

convincingly. And, equipped with such an understanding, readers are permitted to look into such movements, to examine and consider whether they believe the poem's structural turns are in fact successfully accomplished—a rare occurrence, according to Jarrell, who states, "...most poems are badly organized; ...the most brilliant language or imagery is far more common than even fairly good organization..."

However valuable the poetic turn was in poetry, it is now—at least in theory, and, perhaps more significantly, in current pedagogy—nearly defunct as a significant feature of poetry. There is almost no significant discussion of structure, of the art of the poetic turn, in current poetics and pedagogy. For evidence of this disappearance, one need only turn to the final section of *An Exaltation of Forms: Contemporary Poets Celebrate the Diversity of Their Art* (Annie Finch and Katherine Varnes, eds. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002). In this final section, called "Principles for Formal Experimentation," this new handbook of poetic forms incorporates chapters on some of the newest thinking about form, including Oulipan procedures, Alice Fulton's fractal poetics, Billy Collins' paraded hoax-form, Charles Bernstein's nude formalism, and so seemingly provides the most current thinking on form in poetry. This current thinking, however, apparently excludes consideration of poetic structure, omitting any interest in assisting the crafting of the turn. That is, if poetic structure used to have a toehold in poetic form, in, say, the sonnet's turn or the pantoum's concluding circularity, that toehold is now gone in the future formulated and featured in *An Exaltation of Forms*. Though, of course, significant structural features exist in some of the poems published in the various chapters of "Principles for Formal Experimentation" (it is hard to imagine how structure could be so totally excised), these features are never recognized and discussed as significant. Instead, pure, structure-less form is presented as the means of proceeding with poem-making.

"Principles for Formal Experimentation" is not an isolated instance but rather is indicative of a larger trend in American poetry. After the end of major conflict in America's poetry wars, the fights between camps variously defined as main-

stream/lyrical/Formal and avant-garde/experimental/Language, many theorists and poets began writing about and from a “middle space” that borrows techniques and goals from the two camps. Though it does not recognize itself as such, as is indicated by its title and its contributors—the avant-garde Bernstein, the mainstream Collins, and the self-professed poet of “the between,” Alice Fulton—“Principles for Formal Experimentation” is another representation of the middle space in recent American poetry. And it shares with these representations some (problematic) features. While there is nothing necessarily wrong with occupying or engaging the middle space—and while it likely is good and right to do so, as the poetry wars in fact left open so much middle space—so far that theorizing and writing has been problematic. As actually theorized by thinkers, poets, and editors such as James Longenbach, Alice Fulton, and Reginald Shepherd, the middle space has been used as a space to valorize poetic failure. Though it often poses as a neutral space where various kinds of poetry can meet, and though it eschews making value judgments (there seems no surer way to dissolve any sense of the supposed neutrality of the middle space), the middle space has become a ground for highlighting and thus endorsing as interesting and new some very problematic poetry. (For more detailed critiques of middle-space theory, see *Pleiades* 25.1 (2005): 120-9, and 25.2 (2005): 89-104.)

The same is true for *An Exaltation of Forms*. In “Principles for Formal Experimentation,” it seems a neutral, middle space is established for the joining of form and experiment; however, replete with bad poems, half-baked fragments, that never accumulate, never turn, never surprise, “Principles for Formal Experimentation” actually ends up championing some weak poetry, providing elaborate excuses for very uninteresting poetry, poetry that, at least, has little to offer in terms of delivering surprising, complex structures, a kind of poetry that can succeed only when readers do not read with structure in mind—precisely the kind of reading promoted by “Principles for Formal Experimentation,” which not only avoids issues of structure but also ultimately covers them up.

As a book on poetic forms, *An Exaltation of Forms* is a good

book—I assign it as a text in many of my poetry writing classes. However, to the extent that it serves up to our time exactly the kind of (problematic) picture of poetry we generally are used to and does not challenge that picture, to the extent that it participates in the obfuscation of structure via the continued privileging of form over structure, it seems radically limited. The same analysis and assessment applies to *Questions of Possibility*.

David Caplan's *Questions of Possibility: Contemporary Poetry and Poetic Form* (Oxford University Press, 2005) is a good and necessary book that teaches or reinforces some vital lessons about poetry and poetic form. According to Caplan, his book is a necessary corrective, a check on "our current understanding of poetic form, especially contemporary metrical verse" which Caplan describes as emerging from the ever-perpetuated, and -perpetuating, over-simplified binaries of the poetry wars—open/closed, Language/New Formalist—and which Caplan labels simply "inadequate." With chapters on the sestina, the ghazal, the love sonnet, the heroic couplet, and the ballad, *Questions of Possibility* systematically attempts to revise any notion of form as a closed container, or as a specifically conservative poetic methodology. Rather, by examining the specifics of form—its practitioners, the facts of its reception, its traditions and innovations—Caplan presents form as dynamic, a mobile, shifting, binary-breaking quantity—not merely a traditional, historical object but a properly postmodern entity.

Though a relatively short book, *Questions of Possibility* is an astute book that offers much, supplying a generous amount of information on the details of recent poetic history. For example, in his book's introduction, "On Claimed Verse Forms," after noting William Carlos Williams' declaration that the sonnet was "fascistic" and T.S. Eliot's prognosis that the sonnet had no real future, Caplan tracks the wild, dynamic history of the reception of one sonnet, Claude McKay's "If We Must Die," through the many lives of its various manifestations: its denunciation in the Congressional Record as "Negro extremism," its use by Winston Churchill has a source of inspiration during World War II, its being in the possession of a white American

soldier who died in battle, its memorization by innumerable schoolchildren, its circulation among the inmates of Attica prior to the September 1971 uprising, its use by McKay to establish himself as a “real poet.” Caplan concludes this terrifically insightful history by stating, rightly, that “[t]hese brief episodes in the sonnet’s long history resist any single value one might ascribe to the form.”

Caplan further thwarts any attempt to assign a single value to form (or experiment) by making explicit the complex interactions between form and experiment. Caplan often works to link seemingly disparate poets and schools of poetry, emphasizing “...other kinds of exchanges, where poets associated with different verse traditions inspire and inform each other’s work.” For example, he links more-traditional poet Donald Justice (who once called John Cage “the Enemy”) and experimental poet John Cage, noting how Cage inspired Justice “to try his own version of chance-based composition methods.” And, noting that “[s]hrewd poets are opportunists, drawing from diverse influences,” that “[t]heir wanderlust frustrates those who seek to map uncomplicated lines of affiliation,” he links—even while noting the many ideological and institutional forces that try to keep separate—experimental darling George Oppen and experimental whipping boy Philip Levine, citing a letter to Levine in which Oppen writes, “Phil I’m so glad to be a contemporary: happy to share the language.”

The chapters on distinct poetic forms in *Questions of Possibility* all use specific historic details to complicate lines of affiliation and to emphasize the variability of form—the many uses to which it is put, the many kinds of effects it can create, even the ways the form is received. For example, in “Why Not the Heroic Couplet?” Caplan opens with standard complaints—here, lodged by poets Eavan Boland and Stephen Dobyns—against the heroic couplet, which Caplan then shows to rest upon what boils down to three main assumptions: “the heroic couplet belongs to a more orderly, artistically refined age,” “contemporary society is too rigid for such a rigid poetic form,” and verse form cannot stand “in contradiction to the values of the society that produces it or the themes the poem expresses.”

Caplan's response is plain; he states, "Ironically, all three of these assumptions are themselves anachronistic," and he aptly summons evidence to support his views. While Caplan clearly is correct in his judgment, his analysis seems especially astute and subtle when he shows that part of the misunderstanding of the heroic couplet comes from the simple fact that "[m]ost writers remain unaware of recent scholarship on the heroic couplet and the possibilities it raises....[N]ews of 'the new 18<sup>th</sup> century' has reached few poets." In this way, Caplan uncovers the significance of a subtle relationship seemingly outside of the concern of poetry—here: the knowledge creative writers do or do not have of recent scholarship—and shows how this affects the actual production of poetry.

Of course, for all of its critical acuity, Caplan's work has its blindspots, including, especially, a fuller appreciation of trends in recent American poetry, trends of which Caplan seems very aware but to which he contributes problematically unreflectingly.

As indicated by some of the above quotations from *Questions of Possibility*, Caplan's book is very interested in getting beyond the American poetry wars and establishing a middle space for contemporary American poetry. The book's final chapter, called "Prosody after the Poetry Wars" (which opens by quoting Oppen's letter to Levine), argues against the tendency in recent American poetic history to "...split a diverse literary culture into two halves, each of which pretends that the other exists only as its foil." According to Caplan, even (supposedly) after the poetry wars, the "wars" continue but in more subtle ways; he notes that "[a] collection of essays considers the state of American poetry 'After New Formalism'; a symposium contemplates the same situation 'After Language.' Neither explores the possibilities that exist 'after'—and *between*—both movements." Caplan's effort in *Questions of Possibility* clearly is to help create this between, to establish this middle space; he writes, "Prosody after 'the poetry wars' demands a less antagonistic, more nuanced model of creativity, one capable of acknowledging how writers echo even the ideas they dispute," and *Questions of Possibility* largely is just one such "more nuanced model of creativity." However, as another effort to establish the middle

space, *Questions of Possibility* falls victim to many of the problems to which other paradigms of the middle space fall victim: it validates poetic failure, doing so in part by obfuscating the significance of poetic structure.

Caplan clearly recognizes the importance of the poetic turn in a successful poem. Although, unlike with the sonnet, the turn is not an integral part of the form of sestina, the turn is noted as a significant feature in Caplan's discussion of the sestina. He recognizes a "dramatic turn" in one sestina, and he notes in his discussion of another poem, Elizabeth Bishop's "A Miracle for Breakfast," how that poem's avoidance of an expected turn is a significant feature of the poem, enacting "an antimiraculous epiphany" completely appropriate for the subject of the poem.

Though Caplan sees the turn as a vital part of the experience of two of the sestinas he discusses, he never discusses more fully the importance of the turn, and he is not at all consistent in his demands that a good poem have a convincing and surprising structure. Or, worse, he bypasses issues of structure altogether, even as such issues appear to take on great importance. For example, in his discussion of the ghazal, Caplan breezily refers to, and thus bypasses, the ghazal's structure by calling it both "argumentative" and "associative, fragmentary"—and, in fact, Caplan often simply refers to the ghazal's structure as an unproblematic mixture of both, referring twice to the ghazal's "fragmentary argumentative structure." But successful arguments rarely are fragmentary, and fragments rarely accumulate into arguments without structural guidance. When such magical melding occurs, it should be duly noted and inspected to see how it works. However, this inspection likely will have more to do with structural issues, concerned with the actual arrangement, the ordering of the ghazal's stanzas, rather than the details of the ghazal form, such as its use of repeated end-words. But Caplan never performs such an inspection. The results of this failure are twofold: all the ghazals Caplan cites somehow, magically, seem (or are assumed) to work, and they work not because of the sophisticated, subtle organization of carefully crafted turns, but because they simply happen to be written in the form of ghazal.

And this leads to the most problematic conclusion that could be drawn from Caplan's book, from his version of the middle space, a middle space that neglects the significance of structure: it too-easily allows for (pardoning and making space for) poetic failure, for poems that are carelessly arranged. That is, one implication of Caplan's book is that if one wants a good poem, one could simply write whatever, slap on a coat of form, and the writing will sparkle like *The New*. The magical admixture in Caplan's view simply is the combination of content and form; Caplan agrees with poet H. L. Hix who states, "Great poems speak with greater wisdom than the poets who wrote them possessed. The catalysis for such alchemy comes from form," citing this formulation twice in his concluding chapter, even employing it as the last word of his book, where he calls the citation's notion "...more than an *ars poetica*; it is a challenge to develop the strategies, patience, and openness necessary to access this wisdom."

But this call to insight and to action actually is little different from the type of thinking Caplan, and, perhaps, Finch and Varnes, so want to be rid of by being beyond (or between), the thinking embodied, for example, in a brief essay like Christian Bök's "After Language Poetry" (<http://www.ubu.com/papers/oei/bok.html>). Bök states that

...for young poets...the conceit of entropy has defined the millennial anxieties of our own belatedness, particularly in the face of the exciting, but imposing, precedent set by Langpo, whose broad and varied innovations have so thoroughly exhausted the field of experimentation that the notion of a poetic "beyond" must seem virtually untenable: we can no longer generate any new forms of poetry since every option has been tried; yet we must not simply preserve the old ruins of writing since this option is simply too staid.

According to Bök, one means by which poetry might inch its way into the future is for poets to "adapt...themselves to the mechanical procedures of automatic writing, aleatoric writing, and mannerist writing—poetry that no longer expresses our attitudes so much as it processes our databanks." Such specifi-

cally post-Langpo techniques, however, seem no different from the Midspa techniques presented in “Principles for Formal Experimentation” in *An Exaltation of Forms*, and, seemingly, endorsed by Caplan. In fact, if one considers Bök’s further claim that “[w]e may exalt the poets of the future, not because they can write great poems, but because they can program devices that can write great poems for us, doing so automatically within a digital economy of unrestricted expenditure,” we might see “Principles of Formal Experimentation” as offering one bit, a single byte, of the code that may make those future poems, and Caplan as offering us the code by which we can celebrate such text—no matter what it does, no matter how boring, no matter how unmoving—as “great.”

However, consider an alternative. Consider as a requirement of any “great” poem that it make at least one convincing and surprising turn, and now try to conceive of trying to program a device so that it consistently creates such poems. Unlike the relatively easy task of programming a device to churn out endless ghazals and infinite pantoums, the task of trying to program a device to produce convincing and surprising turns, if even possible, itself would take an extremely long time. One might as well just sit down and try to write the damn poems oneself. And such a task is worth doing; it is a task in pursuit of a truly worthwhile goal, and yet a goal that continues to be covered up by otherwise well-intentioned, well-written, and helpful books such as *An Exaltation of Forms* and *Questions of Possibility*.