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Structure and Surprise

A New Paradigm for Teaching Poetry

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When we categorize a poem, we typically do so according to its form, according to its music, its patterns of meter, rhyme, and repetition. Thus many poetry anthologies and handbooks include chapters on poetic forms such as the ballad, the ghazal, and the pantoum. While such categorization is valid and helpful, it is only one way to understand poetry. *Structure and Surprise*, a book forthcoming from Teachers & Writers Collaborative, proposes that there is at least one other significant way to categorize a poem: as a structure, that is, according to a poem's pattern of turns. *Structure and Surprise* is based upon, recommends, and pursues the idea that an understanding of structure can be particularly helpful for learning to write poetry.

That poems turn is a concept familiar to anyone acquainted with the sonnet tradition; a sonnet often contains a "volta," or a turn, a marked shift in the poem's narrative, drama, or argument. However, all sorts of poems—from sonnets to haiku to free verse—turn, beginning in one particular rhetorical mode and ending in quite another. Poems turn from premises to conclusions, from observations to considerations, from—as Christopher Bakken shows in the selections from his chapter "The Ironic Structure"—set-up to punch line. Recognizing that a poem contains such shifts, that it takes such turns, means recognizing its structure. Recognizing *how* exactly a poem turns allows us to see the structural category to which the poem belongs. Just as there are formal categories, such as the sestina and the villanelle, there are structural categories, such as the emblem poem, a poem that turns from the description of an object to a meditation on the meaning of that object (think of Oliver Wendell Holmes' "The Chambered Nautilus," Robert Frost's "Design," and Mark Doty's "A Display of Mackerel"), and the dialectical poem, a poem that turns twice: from thesis to antithesis, and from antithesis to synthesis (think of Emily Dickinson's "I cannot live with you," D. H. Lawrence's "To Be Superior," and Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Love is not all . . .").

Structure connects poetry with language as we actually use it. Whereas form, traditionally taught, almost always seems foreign to students, a strangely singular poetic activity, structure is, if not obvious, then to some extent familiar, and it can be taught as one more activity students do all the time. That is, while it is not natural for us to speak in villanelles or sestinas, much of our everyday speech has structure, contains turns. For example, even if one has never heard of the ironic structure before, it is not a

Grain silo, Churchill, Northern Manitoba

foreign concept to anyone who has heard or told a joke. In fact, it is the ordinariness of these structures, their connections with the ways we actually think and communicate, that can offer helpful ways to evaluate and respond to poems: if we recognize that a poem works like an argument, we can discuss whether or not its argument actually is successful; if we recognize that a poem works like a joke, we can discuss the effects of the poem's build-up, timing, and wording to see what works best to deliver the punch line.

Because most students no longer study argument and rhetoric as a matter of course, instruction in such details of ordinary language usage is appropriate and necessary. Poet and critic Mary Kinzie notes that "the current generation of writers in America has less command over, because less acquaintance with, the reasoning, the rhetoric, and the distinctions that were basic equipment for poets." A focus on structure in the poetry classroom is thus a crash course in Kinzie's "basic equipment." Terms such as "argument," "reasoning," "rhetoric," and "distinctions"—the terms structure most often is linked to—may sound anachronistic, stodgy, or boring, but they need not be. A schooling in structure is a schooling in making poems leap and move in new and sometimes subtle, counterintuitive ways that many younger writers might not have conceived of before.

"The true aim of structure is not more structure, but surprise."

In fact the true aim of structure is not more structure but, rather, surprise. Structure, says poet and critic A.D. Hope, is what gives poems the "power to return without lapsing into dullness." In her essay, "The Rhapsodic Fallacy," Kinzie states that forsaking structure in poetry, ". . . entails the loss . . . of the very keystone of logic, namely, the art of making transition—the art of inference and connection, the art of modulation and (hence) surprise."

The notion that a poem is a combination of structure and surprise is challenging; it actually requires that the poem go somewhere, that it do something more than fulfill some formal requirements. But such a notion also helps make the composition of such poems possible by offering direction, by indicating where in fact a poem might go. Though at times this may be more difficult than writing in form, it need not be, or it need not be for long; structures will seem strange and difficult as long as they are not actively encountered and engaged. Once the conversation about structure gets under way in journals, books, and classrooms, teaching and learning structures will not seem so difficult. And while structure cannot and never should replace other kinds of poetic training, be it training in poetic forms—needed to teach music and rhythm, all the values of repetition and variation—or training in poetic experimentation—needed to uncover new material and to make new connections among that material—structure must be released from its obscurity into the vital position it deserves. For structure gives much of the guidance of form and allows, and even demands, the surprise of experimentation even as it offers something new and necessary to today's poetic milieu: a schooling in modulation and transition, in the patterns to be found in the dramatic unfolding of thought and feeling, and in the achievement of (seemingly) unanticipated arrival.