

## Afterword: Form in Poetry of Place

### I. "Place" in Poetry

The idea of "place" has been considerably devalued in American culture, to the point at which it functions more as a metaphor than a reality. Few people see themselves as part of a particular landscape of geographical hills and valleys, indigenous plants and animals, and generations of stories embedded in every road, phone pole, and warehouse. Rather, we see ourselves as inhabiting very transportable "places"—look-alike Starbucks, cars, ranch houses, condos, Costcos, concerts, conversations. "Place" is more an idea—"That's not a place I'm comfortable at," we say of a course of action we're considering—or it's more an event, as in going to a barbecue or going on a beach vacation. *Which* beach may play some small role in planning a trip, but often the choice is decided more upon the services than upon what's actually there.

"Place" in literature tends to be dismissed as "regionalism" or "local color," something that went out with Bret Harte and Sarah Orne Jewett. Often local color writing or regionalism becomes little more than boosterism, an adjunct to the chamber of commerce, akin to cheering the local college team. *Windfall's* idea of "place" differs from this traditional view of regionalism. "Place," in our view, embodies the unique flora, fauna, history, geography, and people who have lived, loved, sweated, sorrowed, altered the landscape, and created a way of living slightly different from the dominant culture's.

We're not championing the Pacific Northwest over other areas of the country or the world; it's just that we live here, and it's the duty of poets to faithfully represent their specific time and place. *Windfall* is regional only in the sense that the Columbia River or Cascade mountain range or Boise or Sequim or Coos Bay is regional: they have to be someplace. Poets who forget we each live in a particular time and place tend to produce generic poetry about events that ostensibly could take place anywhere—a one-size-fits-all poetry, easily marketable on a national or international scale, because it's unanchored to the specifics of its genesis. "In a poem one can use the sense of place as an anchor for larger concerns, as a link between narrow details and global realities," Maxine Kumin writes. "Location is where we start from" (170).

*Windfall* is founded on the idea that every locale is so unique that the experiences a person has are partly shaped by the locale in which they're experienced. An evening walk in Cannon Beach is fundamentally different from an evening walk in Klamath Falls; house-hunting is different in Astoria and Bremerton. We are what we are because of the landscape we live in—the air with its peculiar scents (and pollutants), the particular kinds of skies and weather that shape our moods, the manners and customs and idiosyncrasies of the long-time local inhabitants. With the consideration of houses and customs and neighborhoods, "place" is just as much a matter of urban concern as of rural concern; it's not just about nature, although "nature" contributes to the make-up of a place.

The goal of poetry is to realize the universal through the particular—"To see a world in a grain of sand," as William Blake says—and place modifies, informs, and constitutes the particular. A poet can't err in choosing the particular; when a poet is exact about a particular place, the result is the universal. Mary Oliver emphasizes the importance of the particular when she asks, "What is poetry but, through whatever particular instance seems believably to be occurring, a mediation upon something more general and more profound?" (70).

## II. Ethnopoetics

We can ask a question pertinent to all poets who live in a particular place: "What is the appropriate poetry to be written *here*?" "Here" could be interpreted to mean a bioregion, defined by Peter Berg as "a place that has a continuity of watersheds, river valleys, continuity of landforms, of climate, of native plants and animals, and that had in the past, by at least some people, been defined as a home place" (quoted in Oelschlaeger 440). We've identified the Pacific Northwest—the area west of the Rockies, north of San Francisco—as *Windfall's* bioregion. Specific locales may be the point of reference, town or city, mountain, valley, river drainage, or as Gary Snyder would have it, watershed. Or specific plants, animals, weather conditions, local businesses, or turns of phrase might be designators of place. Clearly, the Pacific Northwest is not England, nor even the rest of America, so the poetic traditions associated with those distant entities may be less relevant when we respond to the question of what sort of poetry is appropriate *here*.

In the Pacific Northwest, European presence goes back only about two hundred years, so poetic tradition imported with that presence lies very thinly on the land. Native American cultures have inhabited this bioregion for more than ten thousand years, so we might expect that any poetic traditions associated with those cultures would have much to suggest about what kind of poetry is appropriate here. As it happens, the Pacific Northwest is represented by some of the best-attested literary remains from these cultures in the form of myths gathered by linguists, anthropologists, and others in the first half of the twentieth century. Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, Melville Jacobs, Elizabeth Jacobs, and John Swanton found ways to write down these myths, often in the original languages. A subsequent generation of interpreters, such as Dell Hymes, Robert Bringhurst, and Judith Berman, have learned how to read these "fossil texts" in terms of the cultures wherein the texts originated, a process which has come to be called "ethnopoetics."

Canadian poet Robert Bringhurst insists that the mythtellers were poets, and that the myths, as they were recorded from oral performance, preserved within them certain structural features. Since cultures of the mythtellers assumed balance as the default condition of existence, and the restoration of balance the essential story, it follows that the structural features of their poetry were governed by an acute consciousness of symmetry and parallelism. Parallelism can take many forms in poetry, including metrics and rhyme; however, parallelism in Native American mythtelling was not based on either rhythm or rhyme. Rather, the primary sources

of parallelism in such oral poetry are sentence structure (syntax) and thematic symmetry.

For instance, “syntax” as an organizing principle in Haida poetry means to Bringhurst that “a line...is essentially a clause. The number of lines in a given passage therefore coincides, more often than not, with the number of verbs in the original (though one Haida verb may become two or three in English translation)” (Ghandl 28). Thus the opening lines of Sghiidagits’s story about the grizzly people consist of five sentences (clauses), the verbs moving the action swiftly forward with the sparse but vivid detail we recognize in myth:

Wiidhaw qaada tluquugha nang gaayaangaghan.  
Wiidhaw nang jaadas lla gi agang kingguusghaayaaghan.  
Nang itttxhaagidas dajing yuuwan gu dajaaghan.  
Dajingaay ungut llagha xhitiit ngataaystlgaangaghan.  
Saghadila’u hanhaw ll kighaayaghan.  
Now someone sat offshore in a canoe.  
Now the woman hollered to him.  
He was wearing the big dancing hat of a headman.  
Perched on the hat was a flock of waterbirds.  
His name was Going Ashore. (Bringhurst 122)

Rarely does the line-to-sentence ratio work out this neatly, because a sentence may contain more than one clause or more than one verb and may require more than one line, just as sentences overflow lines in free verse in English. However, this basic clause-per-line parallelism provides Bringhurst the main rationale for printing orally-based text in lines. He also quotes Mary Jane McGary on why she switched from prose to lines for translating myths:

The line and stanza format makes it possible to include more information about the way the stories were told than a plain prose presentation would. It also seems to make reading the stories more like hearing them, perhaps because we read verse lines more slowly and with more concentration than we read blocks of prose. (Quoted in Ghandl 29-30)

Bringhurst also says, “The purpose of the typographic form is to reveal an order that is there, implicit in the text, and thus to give more information—but not to give too much of it up front. It is to give the information without using up the breathing room it needs” (Ghandl 31).

Since oral poetry comes in no typographic form whatsoever, Bringhurst and many others (following the lead of Dell Hymes) choose the form—lines—that can help readers more readily imagine the effect of the original performance by revealing its implicit patterns. Since these parallel clauses tend to group themselves in terms of the sacred numbers of a given tribe, such as five or ten, here we find a rationale for arranging groups of lines as stanzas on the page, and these stanzas often serve parallel narrative functions as well, as Dell Hymes in particular has demonstrated in many Northwest myths.

The other primary source of symmetry in Haida oral poetry which Bringhurst identifies is theme (or meaning). This cannot be demonstrated in a few lines, but only over the performance of an entire myth, or of an entire myth cycle. Here Bringhurst summarizes some of the symmetries in mythteller Ghandl's poem, "In His Father's Village, Someone Was Just about to Go Out Hunting Birds":

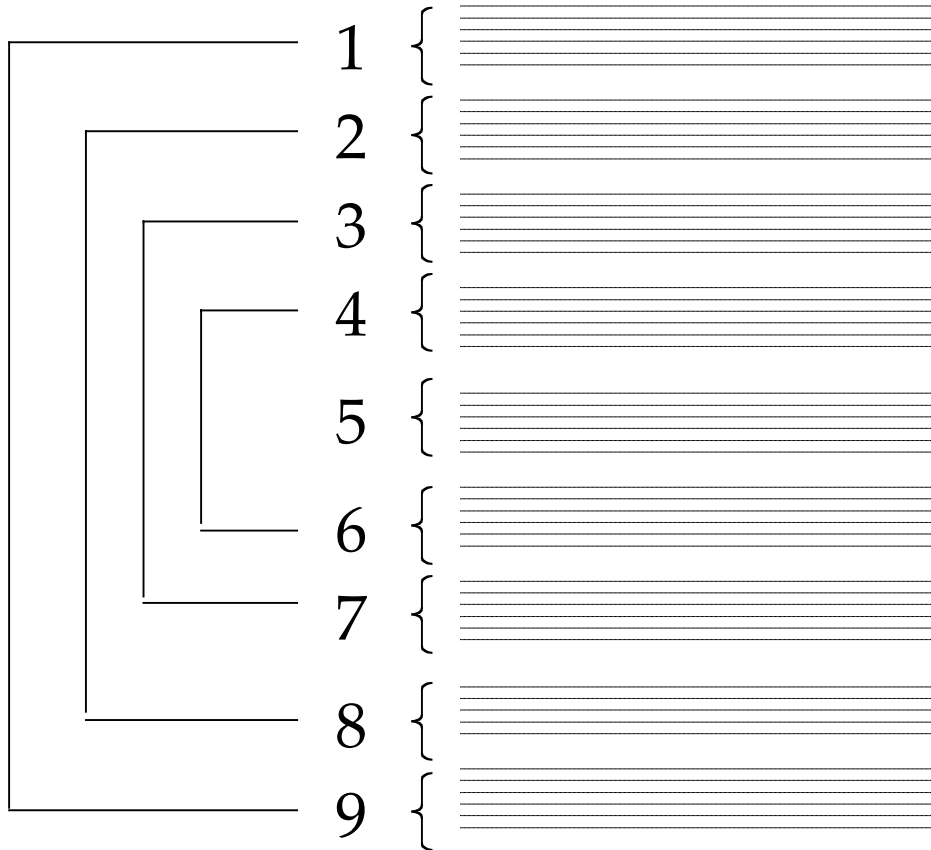
It begins at a lake—a patch of water surrounded by land—where a young man falls in love with a soft-spoken, beautiful goose. It ends with the same man marooned on a reef—a patch of land surrounded by water—where the man himself is squawking like a loudmouthed gull. At the center of the story is a pole that links the earth and sky. Either side of the pole is a series of tests and exchanges, and framing these sequences are the two domestic scenes. The first is in the groom's father's house, where a vegetarian bride, who cannot speak directly to her mother-in-law, is offered food she cannot eat. The second is in the bride's father's house. There the omnivorous groom, who cannot speak directly to his father-in-law, tries to eat the same restricted diet as the birds. In the groom's village, the people insult the bride, whose connections to the skyworld have saved them from starvation, and the bride flies off. In the bride's village, the groom insults the people, who nevertheless respond with perfect courtesy, offering to fly him back to earth since he cannot fly himself. (Bringhurst 50- 51)

Bringhurst first identifies the complementary parallels between the beginning and the end of Ghandl's poem (so that in the course of events, the young man's situation is reversed). Then Bringhurst finds the figure (here a pole) at the center of the poem, which is where indigenous myths usually reach a climactic point, instead of at the end, as in most European stories. Bringhurst then isolates the parallel episodes leading up to and away from the center of the poem.

### III. Applications

This structure and variations upon it are so widespread in oral poetry throughout the world that it could be deemed "universal." As noted above, such symmetry in oral poetry reflects a general Paleolithic (hunter-gatherer) outlook, wherein balance is the "default condition" and its restoration is the essential story. This structure prevailed in Old Europe, long before poets began to "farm" their language in terms of meter and rhyme, and it persisted when oral-based texts came to be written down. Cedric H. Whitman (who calls the structure "geometric" after Greek vase painting) has demonstrated it in the *Iliad*. Charles Martin discerns a brilliant application of it in the long poems of the Roman poet Catullus. We find such structure in *Beowulf* and in *Parzival*, the legend of the grail as written by Wolfram von Eschenbach, circa 1200. Symmetrical structure faded from writing as the Renaissance and widespread literacy lead to conscious abandonment of the oral cultures of the past, including their medieval survivals. However, we believe that contemporary lyric poets can find inspiration in these ancient forms and can adapt them to new uses.

Though many variations are possible, an illustration of the kind of thematic structure that Bringhurst describes might look like this, using Bill Siverly's poem "Salmonberry Song" from the first issue of *Windfall* (31-32). The lines of verse are indicated on the right and the structure on the left:



Stanza 5: The center stanza presents the Chinook people living in harmony with their rainy environment at the mouth of the Columbia River.

Stanzas 4 & 6: The stanzas enveloping the center stanza deal with those who feel alienated in this same country—Chinook myth-figure Blue Jay (in the land of ghosts) and Lewis & Clark.

Stanzas 3 & 7 and 2 & 8: The stanzas enveloping those stanzas present the past and present as evoked by 85-year-old Betty McDowell, including the first white inhabitants' efforts to modify the environment.

Stanzas 1 & 9: The outermost envelope presents the oceanic embrace that claims us all (except Coyote!).

This diagram of parallel elements in a symmetrical structure could apply at other levels of a poem: lines within a stanza, terms within lines (as in chiasmus), or, in a larger context, whole poems in a cycle.

*Windfall* favors poems that utilize lines and stanzas, not only for their ethnopoetic pedigree in Pacific Northwest culture, but because they provide greater opportunity than open form or columns of lines for interesting and complex structures for poems. Syntactic parallelism and thematic symmetry as compositional principles offer an infinite number of possibilities for structural play in poetry. As a poem develops, the poet often discovers modes of development—recapitulated images, extended metaphors, variations of whole lines—within the poem itself, discovery which serves the values of compression and economy of means.

*Windfall* looks forward to publishing the work of Pacific Northwest poets who care to take up the ancient challenge that our landscape and our history lay before us.

Bill Siverly  
Michael McDowell

**Works Referred to in this Afterword:**

- Berman, Judith. "Oolachan-Woman's Robe: Fish, Blankets, Masks, and Meaning in Boas's Kwakw'ala Texts." *On the Translation of Native American Literatures*. Ed. Brian Swann. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992. 125-162.
- Bringhurst, Robert. *A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida Mythtellers and Their World*. Vol. 1 of *Masterworks of the Haida Mythtellers*. Lincoln: University Nebraska Press, 1999.
- Ghandl of the Qayahll Llaanas. *Nine Visits to the Mythworld*. Trans. Robert Bringhurst. Vol. 2 of *Masterworks of the Haida Mythtellers*. Lincoln: University Nebraska Press, 2000.
- Hymes, Dell. *"In Vain I Tried to Tell You": Essays in Native American Ethnopoetics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981.
- Kumin, Maxine. "A Sense of Place." *In Deep: Country Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1987. 157-80.
- Martin, Charles. *Catullus*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.
- Oelschlaeger, Max. *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991.
- Oliver, Mary. *Rules for the Dance: A Handbook for Writing and Reading Metrical Verse*. New York: Mariner-Houghton, 1998.
- Snyder, Gary. "Coming into the Watershed." *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Watersheds*. Washington: Counterpoint, 1995. 219-235.
- Whitman, Cedric. *Homer and the Heroic Tradition*. 1958. New York: Norton, 1965.