Afterword

The Question of Form

What is the role of form in poetry in our time? The question comes to mind because it is such a rare question to ask in 2014 CE, when free verse, or interchangeably, open form, has become the unstated assumption among most writers of poetry in English. Opening any magazine featuring poetry, or almost any book of poetry, we find irregular lines, often in unbroken columns, sometimes grouped in irregular sections. Often the lines themselves are without any particular rhythm or tension beyond ordinary speech, and they read like broken-up prose—and are often read aloud that way by their authors, as if written without any line breaks at all, but only in terms of prose sentences. The intent, or at least the effect, of free verse appears to be to avoid any kind of elevated language in favor of intentionally conventional expression. The kind of free verse poem we have just described is so common that it has in some quarters been called "McPoem" as if to compare its generic qualities to mass-produced assembly-line hamburgers.

Nothing we've written so far should be taken as a rejection of free verse. Rather, we have tried to describe how common it seems to a reader of poetry in 2014. Remarkable things have been done in the free verse mode, when compression and economy of means are achieved and when the unique form of a particular poem has become truly "organic" to its content, as mid-twentieth-century poets such as Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, and Denise Levertov have so inspired us to produce. However, according to this aesthetic, the struggle to find the form that a poem should take must be generated anew according to the contingent needs of each poem. Some poets are able to maintain the variety of form that we could come to expect for each poem they write, but for many poets this expectation is too great, and their poems tend to resemble each other to the degree they would as if the poets were actually using a predetermined form, like Shakespeare's 154 sonnets. More likely than discover a new form for each poem, we are humanly inclined to find the

kind of poem that works for us individually, and deploy it repeatedly because it suits who we are and what we write. It is still free verse, but only in terms of the standard of attempting to start anew each time in search of contingent or "open" form.

Regarding alternatives to free verse, let's exclude traditional received forms, such as sonnets, villanelles, sestinas, and their nonce manifestations. We recognize the exquisite use some poets have made of these traditional forms, as in the work of Robert Frost, W. H. Auden, James Wright, Theodore Roethke, Marilyn Hacker, William Logan, and others. Students in creative writing are often eager to try such forms, as if demonstrating the ability to write in them would confer authenticity. Students who try writing in received forms are often disappointed in the struggle and its outcomes, which prove too difficult. In reality, these forms are dead; they are fossils of past cultures wherein the practice of writing them was either being developed, like sonnets in sixteenth-century Britain, or common in literary subcultures, like sonnet contests among the Romantic poets of nineteenth-century Europe. No such common practice exists in our own culture, and metrics and rhyme schemes have largely fallen away.

Indeed, the professed intention of Ezra Pound was "to break the pentameter," because iambic metrics had dominated poetry in English for the previous five hundred years. Totally non-metrical verse was never Pound's intention, but he admitted that with the radical experimentation that followed his free verse revolution, it was "good that the field should be plowed." With the rapid development of free verse, traditional forms were indeed "plowed under" for the foreseeable future, because modern culture does not sustain them and because no poets could or would devote years of their craft to mastery of those forms, which is what is required for any form to become effectively functional in a poet's work. The occasional display of cleverness in writing in traditional form is just that—occasional—and usually not central to a poet's body of work, which these days occurs in terms of free verse.

A hundred years after Pound's revolution, we can ask: What is it about

free verse that makes it so attractive to modern and contemporary poets? The most obvious answer is that free verse is easier to write. Basically anyone can do it, which comports with our general attitude towards many arts and crafts in which we would like to bypass the difficulties of learning the craft and simply express what we think or feel. Some poets, such as William Stafford, actively promoted the idea that everyone is a poet, everyone has something to say. Some creative writing programs are based upon a similar rationale, wherein no particular craft is taught or learned, but one merely puts on paper (sometimes in lines) what one can already think or write. Some aspirants to writing poetry decline to read much poetry by others for fear that their own practice will be affected to the point that the outcome will not be authentically theirs.

Acute individualism is a feature of our times, a cultural development that has expanded since World War II. The validation of the individual through free expression is the primary purpose of American culture, and this resonates in poetry. Much poetry, like jazz, is based on improvisation. Spontaneity is the primary value, and whatever comes out first is considered the final product—as Allen Ginsberg famously repeated, "First thought, best thought." The process of revision, so essential in the traditional practice of poetry, comes as a shock to contemporary students. Sometimes they come to appreciate revision once they've undertaken it and discovered how much more they have to learn about writing, including their own, but the initial shock is that writing that will interest others doesn't automatically spring from their keyboards.

Why has self-centeredness become so prevalent in poetry, rather than, say, any combination of community, nature, or place? Sometimes our own deepest experience will open up the external realities of our lives, but all too often our own experience doesn't include the reader, and the poem depends only on its own cleverness for effect. Language Poetry takes this to the extreme, wherein the subject and form of the poem depend on acute self-consciousness about language and the way we use it. Poetry about language or poetry itself is of limited interest

to readers who are not poets. At the same time, many non-poets can identify with any radical experiment as emblematic of the individual, no matter how opaque the poem itself might be (the Dylan Thomas effect). Surrealism, evolving beyond its origins in exploration of dreams and the unconscious, leads to purely individual expression detached from any psychological construct.

Martin Heidegger uncovers another dimension to the acute individualism of our culture and our time. He alludes to Nietzsche announcing in 1882 that "God is dead." Heidegger says we should keep in mind that by "God" Nietzsche was indicating the supersensory world in general: "God is the name for the realm of ideas and the ideal." Hence, what Nietzsche meant by "God is dead" is that "the supersensory world has no effective power. It does not bestow life." God had long served as the ground and structure of being, in terms of which people of the medieval past had interpreted nature, culture and salvation.

So if God is dead, what have we replaced Him with? What could serve this unquestionable foundation in human existence? Even as Nietzsche made his pronouncement, God's replacement was already assuming its place. Heidegger says we had replaced God with a radical subjectivity, that is, ourselves. In the process, we had objectified the sensory world for the productive purposes of science and technology. We have even objectified each other, while each of us serves the interests his or her own subjectivity. As objects, nature and things mean less. Rilke captured this process already underway in 1925, when he wrote:

> Even for our grandparents a "house," a "spring," a familiar tower, yes even their clothes, their coat: infinitely more and infinitely more Intimate; each thing, almost, a vessel in which they found the human, and preserved and added the human to it. Now, from America, empty indifferent things, sham things, *counterfeit life*, are pushing their way across . . . . A house, in the American sense, an American apple, or a vine over there, has *nothing* in common with the house, fruit, grape, into which the hope and solicitude of our ancestors had gone.

Since Rilke wrote this, the objects with which we build our lives have

become mere commodities, disconnected from our historical meaning, purchased and soon replaced.

II

We should consider that free verse has been an artifact of poetry for almost exactly a hundred years (most of Pound's essay "A Retrospect" setting out do's and don't's of free verse, was published in 1913). Poets and readers live within a culture wherein culture is no longer the privilege of a few; rather, people have previously unimagined access to culture, and above all, they have the possibility of participation within it on an unheard of scale. William Stafford was not merely being "democratic" in extending the capacity for writing poetry to everyone; he was reflecting the fact that more individuals than ever have the education, the leisure, and desire to be read and heard. The use of fossil fuels may seem like a remote cause, but in fact, our entire culture is made possible by the infrastructure of travel and communication, education, and consumption that we now assume. Anyone with a computer is potentially a poet or a "published" writer of some kind. Reference need not be made to community, nature, or place, when economic reality becomes a virtual reality. These constitute enormous changes in cultural perception since Pound sat shivering and hungry in London in 1912, dreaming of new kinds of poetry.

This span of time is entirely coincident with the economic expansion made possible by the exhaustive use of fossil fuels. In terms of fertilizer, transportation, and "green revolution," fossil fuels have made possible the tripling of world population within a single lifetime. I mention this only to underline the fact that we live under an arc of development that is unprecedented and most likely an anomaly in the history of culture. An "arc of development" has a long foreground, a high point, and a long decline. Much has been made of "peak oil," the point at which the world's oil supply achieves its maximum production and begins to decline, said by some to have been passed in 2008. However, much else has begun to pass over that peak besides oil supply. If the world we live in was unimaginable to anyone living a hundred years ago in

Ezra Pound's day, one could assume that the world a hundred years from now will be equally unimaginable to us.

However, with the decline in the use of fossil fuels, certain features of the future descent will resemble the steps that were required to build the culture we now have. With less petroleum, there will be less fertilizer, meaning lower production of food, leading to lower populations. Deaths outnumbered births in Russia after the economic shocks of the 1990s, and that country has still not recovered from the decline in the growth of population. Mobility of populations will decline and people will be obliged to live locally. If culture becomes more locally determined, then writing as such may also become a feature of small communities, rather than national or global in scope. Poetry, for instance, may become even more addressed to local audiences than it is already.

The dimensions we can discern about the future are few. According to John Michael Greer, two common competing visions of the future are: 1) the myth of progress, in which humanity always overcomes limits set by nature, especially given the scientific and technological development of the last three hundred years; 2) the opposite vision of apocalypse, in which the complexity of society fails to come to terms with natural limits and comes crashing down, clearing the way for truer and more responsible modes of living. Greer says that finally both of these vision are manifestations of the idea of progress, because each assumes a kind of utopia to be achieved. Greer maintains that neither one describes the likely future.

Greer foresees a slow process of decline, which he terms "catabolic collapse." We can predict with some confidence a future of declining energy availability, economic contraction, collapsing public health, and political turmoil. Greer imagines that people will face "a period of crisis, followed by a period of renewed stability, with another round of crises waiting in the wings." In other words, the same sort of alternating periods of crisis and stability and more crisis that got us where we are. But the overall direction of development will be downward, the way fracking and tar sands extraction has delayed a crisis in energy availability, while the inevitability of that crisis awaits us after the short

life-span of fracking and tar sand extraction. Radical conservation of energy might also bring stability, but when the limits of conservation have been reached, further crisis will be at hand. Ultimately, generations and a couple of hundred years or more after us, stability might be achieved, which Greer terms the "ecotechnic future," when appropriate technology, population balance, and available resources reach a kind of equilibrium. The days of binging on fossil fuels will be over—if they aren't already—and the material world will look much different than it does now.

That world will slowly "deindustrialize," as Greer puts it, and many occupations, now done by machines, will once again be done by humans. Consider computers. Greer says:

> …the reasons our descendants a few generations from now won't be surfing the Internet or using computers at all are economic, not technical. If you want to build and maintain computers, you need an industrial infrastructure that can manufacture integrated circuits and other electronic components, and that requires an extraordinarily complex suite of technologies, sprawling supply chains, and a vast amount of energy—all of which has to be paid for. It's unlikely that any society in the deindustrial dark ages will have that kind of wealth available; if any does, many other uses for that wealth will make more sense in a deindustrialized world; and in an age when human labor is again much cheaper than mechanical energy, it will be more affordable to hire people to do the routine secretarial, filing, and bookkeeping tasks currently done by computers than to find the resources to support the baroque industrial infrastructure needed to provide computers for those tasks.

Since so many aspects of writing—from creating poems to sending them out for publication, to producing books and magazines—are technologized by computers, we and our descendants are likely facing a return to earlier means: typewriting, handwriting, postal services. Greer calls this an example of "rehumanizing" our relations to the

world. The isolated individuality made possible by computers will be instead become a more interactive life, in which people come together to work and communicate, in which poetry is part of a locally organized community.

Greer, as well as those devoted to the myth of progress and to apocalypse, tend to discount climate change in their assessments of the future. This is not surprising, because climate change is the wild card in anybody's game. We learn lately that climate change is happening with greater rapidity than scientists expected, and the reports can hardly keep up with the rate of melting ice, the warming of the oceans, and the vast amount of CO_2 that we pour into the atmosphere. What the changes wrought by climate change may amount to tend to be speculative, but people may well be on the move in order to adjust to drought and other climactic changes. Again, living in smaller groups in smaller communities may become the norm. Meaning will be found not in the remote or supersensory but in what's local and contingent.

III

If the future direction of culture is away from the radical subjectivity Heidegger refers to, or the acute individuality we are heir to, and towards a closer identification between the individual and community, then we can reasonably ask, what is the future of free verse? The answer is "unlikely." That is, free verse emerged and developed as an epiphenomenon of the fossil fuel culture that is now in decline. Free verse as described at the beginning of this essay is itself declining into "McPoem." If we can anticipate what future audiences might need in the way of poetry, we can ask, what kind of poetry might follow free verse?

Perhaps we need to return to originary thinking by considering a renewal of form. Having rejected the idea of a return to traditional forms of European verse, which are antiquated and not culturally viable in the Pacific Northwest, we are free to rethink the kind of form that might be most appropriate to us in the Pacific Northwest and to the emerging culture of limits ahead of us. We can start with the basics: line and stanza.

"Stanza" we define as Lewis Turco does: a repeated unit of a set number of lines—as opposed to what he calls a "section," a unit of an irregular number of lines not necessarily repeated within a poem. Free verse commonly makes use of sections, when, that is, it does not consist of a column of lines without breaks. The breaks between stanzas and sections are important because they open the possibility of a variety of relationships between the groups of lines.

The major advantage of stanzas over sections is that with stanzas the poet agrees to an arbitrary limit upon the number of lines available. This limit tends to focus the poem's expression, encouraging compression and economy of means. Language itself becomes "elevated" in the sense that it must say more with less, which a mere conversational tone does not lend itself to doing. All preconceived form accomplishes this effect to an extent, and, as noted above, the best free verse does so as well, when compression and economy of means are achieved.

The arbitrary limits of the number of lines in a stanza is something that the poet must work out personally. Most common in English poetry are quatrains, and many poets still find four or five lines the ideal length of a stanza, probably because a single sentence can be sustained in a stanza that long. The poet John Witte in his book *Second Nature* writes entirely in triplets, three-line stanzas that he uses with great flexibility. Beyond six lines, the stanza is often broken into two or more internal sentences to control syntax. Poets find that the limits of stanzas concentrate more power in the lines and more resonance between stanzas.

Poets writing in free verse worry that formal limits like stanzas might inhibit the power of "discovery" that is so highly prized by poets today—perhaps as an outgrowth of individualism. That is, the poet begins writing ("free writing") by not knowing where the poem will ultimately lead—which must be discovered in the process of writing. This approach is influenced by early surrealism, in which the unconscious plays a role in writing, in that we learn from the process what we don't yet know. For such poets, accepting the limits of stanzas in advance, or any other constraints of form, are anathema to discovery and spontaneity.

In reality accepting the limits of form is no more inhibiting of discovery than free verse. If a poet has invented the form being deployed, he or she has already agreed to work within those limits, and developing the outset of a poem does not necessarily determine where or how it will arrive at the end. Some poets also accept a limit on the number of stanzas that a poems will have—say, for instance, the number of four- or five-lines stanzas that make a single page of poetry. In such a case, the poet may have a better idea of where the poem will go, or may work out the first stanza very carefully for the implications it may carry for how the poem as a whole will come out. But even this anticipation does not inhibit discovery, because writing poetry is always a question of finding the right expression in language, which is contingent on every moment of writing.

A poet who works in formal stanzas may in fact bring more consciousness to bear in generating the poem. Maybe the poet conceived of the ending of the poem first, or of the poem as a whole, the way Mozart imagined whole symphonies at a time, and yet this preconception of the poem still does not inhibit discovery. In reality, we poets are using the conscious and the unconscious at all points of creation, whether we would like to admit it or not. We know and we don't know what we are doing, and both states of mind are operative. The privileging of the unconscious in writing poetry is a feature of our over-individualized concept of poetry, but does not reflect actual practice.

So far we have spoken of stanzas, but not of lines. Of lines there is less to say. As Pound anticipated when he spoke of "breaking the pentameter," the most enduring heritage of free verse is the free verse line. It can be long or short, even within the same stanza, or it can be relatively regular in length stanza to stanza. Without metrics (or syllabics, or accentual verse), the line has been liberated from numbers and counting, what Robert Bringhurst calls "farming verse in neat rows." The line is not likely to return to that condition. The line remains, however, the greatest challenge in writing poetry if our aim is to make it lively, fresh, and new. It is the very vehicle of voice and control of

rhythm, which all poets seek to achieve.

If discovery remains much the same in free or formal verse, we can ask, what novel advantages are there in writing in stanzas? For that we have to reach back to an earlier dispensation, perhaps before poetry was written down. The tradition of orality is a long one, but by its very nature evanescent and mostly evident to us only is in later manifestations in the earliest written poetry, such as the *Iliad*. Some techniques of early oral poetry are also retained in American Indian myths written down by ethnologists over the last two centuries. It is here that a tradition of Pacific Northwest poetry has its beginning, one that does not depend on European sources directly, though, as noted above, the *Iliad*, as an oral remnant, carries some of the structures that are common to oral poetry everywhere, as described by Walter Ong in his *Orality and Literacy*. The ethnography of Pacific Northwest mythtellers is some of the best attested anywhere in the Americas through the work of Franz Boas, John Swanton, Melville Jacobs, Elizabeth Jacobs, and others. Robert Bringhurst, Dell Hymes, and Judith Berman have developed rich modes of interpretation.

The principles of ancient oral poetry, whether American Indian or ancient Greek, are basically two: parallelism as a basic technique, and balance as an overall structure. Parallelism is a common feature of poetry made possible by stanzas in several different ways. One could say that metrics (a regular syllable count for each line) and rhyme schemes are a form of parallelism as repetition. More obvious forms of parallelism have been deployed in poetry and song lyrics, such as refrains, lines repeated whole or in part, by repeated syntactical structures, and chiasmus.

However, a more sophisticated kind of parallelism was used in ancient oral poetry of the Northwest, which Robert Bringhurst identifies as *thematic parallelism*, or *noetic prosody* ("noetic" meaning "of, relating to, originating in, or apprehended by the intellect"). Bringhurst finds such parallelism operative in the stories told by the Haida mythtellers, as recorded by John Swanton. Bringhurst summarizes *some* (by no means all) of the symmetries in 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 with 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 first identifies the complementary parallels between the beginning content and the ending content 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; then he isolates the parallel episodes leading up to and away from the center of the poem.

Bringhurst's point about "parallel episodes leading up to and away from the center of the poem" brings us to the second principle governing the overall structure of ancient oral poetry: balance. The *Iliad,* the long poems of Catullus, and other written works close to oral sources are structured this way. The symmetry in oral poetry reflects a general Paleolithic outlook, wherein balance is the "default condition" and its restoration is the essential story. A poem written with this in mind might begin with an imbalance of some kind, and then conclude with a restoration of balance. Or, a poem might begin in balance, lose it along

the way, and regain it by the end. Or, a poem might begin with balance, and see it lost in the end. There are numerous possibilities once the poet is aware of the potential of the structure. The pivot in the middle line is another possibility for structure, wherein the central value, action, idea or image is hinged between the parallel halves of the poem. Essentially we are applying epic structure to a lyric scale, because we live in a time of epic challenges.

It is fair to say that our time is out of balance, frightfully so. The consequences of the decline of material culture and the rapid advance of climate change may be overwhelming to deal with, often leading to denial and fear in many people—the last thing wanted as a source of poetry. And yet, the power of the ancient awareness of balance restored may again serve us as a way of thinking and writing about the unthinkable. The big question is how we dwell on earth, and this is the source of poetry in our time. In the "ecoctechnic future" when, as John Michael Greer predicts, appropriate technology, population balance, and available resources reach a kind of equilibrium, the poetry of balance may be as obvious as the imbalanced individuality of free verse is today. Perhaps we can begin to work out the possibilities of poetry that goes beyond the individual voice and enters the world anew, engaging place, where community and nature meet, where we dwell and have our true being. Greer speaks to balance: "While Utopia is not an option, societies that are humane, cultured, and sustainable are quite another matter." Let's write toward that.

Bill Siverly and Michael McDowell

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