

STRUCTURE & SURPRISE:

Engaging Poetic Turns

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The Ironic Structure

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W.B. Yeats famously claimed that "We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry." A poem with an ironic structure is, in essence, a poem that has an argument with itself. It offers two points of view, or two conflicting attitudes toward a single subject, and allows the playful tension of those contradictory impulses to stand.

Poems employing an ironic structure begin with positive assertions and assumptions of truth but end by undercutting such assertions and certainties, sometimes rather abruptly and surprisingly. This decidedly simple poetic mechanism—which might be thought of as the process of rising and falling, or inflating and deflating, or dreaming and waking—is capable of producing great intellectual and dramatic energy. Though examples of poems employing an ironic structure date back to the beginnings of poetry, the ironic structure has proven especially popular in the poetry of the last two centuries, embodying as it does a particular attitude toward the world that we associate with modernity.

The manipulation of tone is at the heart of any poetic activity, which makes irony a crucial weapon in any poet's arsenal. Yet there is an important distinction between the most common type of irony we encounter—*verbal irony*—and the kind of *structural irony* under consideration here. *Verbal irony* is produced by saying one thing while meaning or implying the opposite. Perceptive readers or listeners will "hear" irony because they understand that the truth of what's being said is intentionally undercut by the context in which it is said. For example, if you step outside your house on a February morning into a diagonal sleet, with a ten-below-zero wind chill churning in your face, and you say to your wife, "Nice day!," she'll know, because she is just as disgusted as you are, that you are not pro-

posing a picnic. In *An Introduction to Poetry*, X.J. Kennedy explains that this kind of irony is "a manner of speaking that implies a discrepancy. If the mask says one thing and we sense that the writer is in fact saying something else, the writer is using an ironic point of view." Often this disparity results in good-natured humor, since what is actually said differs from the straightforward truth in such an exaggerated way. But of course this kind of irony can be exaggerated even more, so it moves away from sarcasm into ridicule and scorn.

Structural irony, in contrast, is a way of organizing a series of utterances so that what is first proclaimed is suddenly or systematically undermined by what follows. Charles Bernstein's tiny poem "Shaker Show" enacts this in two lines:

Now *that* is a chair
I wouldn't want to sit in.

The irony emerges when we perceive the contrast between these two utterances, when we perceive the imbalance between them. In this way, structural irony suspends and stalls a conclusion. If verbal irony is to be immediately perceived, structural irony will typically surprise us more gradually. This is not to say it cannot happen quickly, as in the Bernstein example or in the moncar poem included in the Supplemental Poems at the end of this chapter. In these examples, we recognize the same kind of reversal that works to fuel the punch lines of jokes or gives limericks their signature finish. Such comic forms help remind us that we often have debates with ourselves over things that are decidedly silly and mundane, as in: "I will floss today. No, I will not floss today." But for such mundane facts to rise to the level of thought-provoking irony, a kind of wit and comic timing must be at work and the structure must be built upon enough of a reversal to surprise the reader at the outcome.

Of course, structural irony is not in any way limited to the comic or absurd, as is demonstrated by Margaret Atwood's arresting little poem "you fit into me." Atwood's entire four-line poem is built upon a basic ironic structure and a single simile. In fact, this simile is offered to us twice, with startling modifications:

you fit into me
like a hook into an eye

a fish hook
an open eye

The first line of this short poem effectively introduces us to the poem's context: the fitness of a "you" and a "me." With the title in mind, it's hard not to read the poem, at least initially, as a love poem, one with a decidedly erotic edge. The opening two lines build the title's statement into a figure of speech: the fitness of "you" and "me" is likened to that of a "hook" and an "eye." Such a declaration can be taken quite positively. What kind of connection could be more symbiotic and comfortable than a hook and eye fastener? The hook and eye require one another to serve their combined purpose of drawing together two pieces of fabric or the two lapels of a jacket. Read sexually, as an image of penetration, the first two lines suggest erotic fitness of the very best kind: compatibility, natural rightness, pleasure.

But the final two lines deflate such possibilities violently and entirely. We may not, these lines announce, read "hook" and "eye" with any ambiguity at all. If the opening lines might be thought to define the terms of a relationship, the last two lines radically redefine those terms, since they redefine the simile itself. What could be more awful than a fish hook with its barbed tip encountering a vulnerable "open eye," which must watch itself being destroyed? There is no humor to this reassessment. The reader is left grasping at an image of utter incompatibility, of sexual violence. The ironic comparison of these two viewpoints—one affirmative, one profoundly negative—might even be thought to mimic two perspectives on the same relationship, bringing new meaning to the old cliché that "love is blind." The power of such a poem resides in part in the simplicity of its ironic structure, the surprise of that harsh undercutting, which resonates beyond the brief space of the poem.

Dorothy Parker's short poem "Comment" is another example of a poem employing a basic ironic structure. This poem drives toward its final undercutting with a limerick-like quickness:

Oh, life is a glorious cycle of song,
A medley of extemporanea;
And love is a thing that can never go wrong;
And I am Marie of Roumania.

The first three lines constitute rather broad assertions about decidedly broad and abstract concepts—"life" and "love"—and Parker understands that we might *want* to believe such positive truisms. After all, don't we turn to poetry for wisdom and truth? But clearly Parker herself cannot believe in

them at all, since she is certainly *not* Marie of Roumania. With the outright lie of the poem's fourth line, the false truths of the first three lines suddenly light up like neon platitudes. This is not merely a statement of two points of view, of thesis/antithesis, because antithesis clearly has the last word here. The actual sentiments of a poem organized with an ironic structure, then, almost always rest upon the poem's conclusion. Here the poem's final "Comment" is to disclaim any absolute, positive certainties about life or love. According to the logic of the poem, any attempts to comment so broadly about existence will be facile, if not foolish, about as close to the truth as her last line.

This kind of philosophical skepticism represents a decidedly modern attitude. According to literary critic Anne Mellor, in her book *Romantic Irony*, this kind of skepticism became central to artistic production beginning with the Romantic poets—those artists who had to recreate the terms of art after the cataclysmic French Revolution and American War of Independence. These poets no longer took for granted the idea that the world was divinely ordered, that God was ever-present in the natural world, that religion shaped the backbone of society. We still see great spiritual longing and questing in Romantic poetry, but in the context of an increasingly secular world.

This paradox informs the very structures of Romantic poetry, resulting in what Mellor calls "Romantic irony." Mellor claims that the Romantic ironist "must acknowledge the inevitable limitations of his own finite consciousness. . . . Even as he denies the absolute validity of his own perceptions and structuring concepts of the universe . . . he must affirm and celebrate the process of life by creating new images and ideas."

Such poetry reflects the ongoing tension between disbelief and belief, between rejection and celebration, and often the very structure of a poem helps the poet exhibit this tension creatively. "The artistic process," Mellor continues, "must be one of simultaneous creation and de-creation." The ironic structure—with its building up and knocking down, its dreaming and waking—becomes the perfect instrument for a great Romantic ironist like Lord Byron, whose long poem *Don Juan* exemplifies this complicated problem.

Byron's poem is composed in a seemingly unstoppable series of *ottava rima*, an elegant eight-line stanza rhymed in an ABABABCC pattern. The energy of the first six lines—which are propelled forward by the alternating ABABAB rhymes—comes crashing up against the final rhyming couplet,

which is designed to bring the stanza to a conclusion, to close with certainty. Byron adapts *ottava rima* to his own purposes, however, often turning the stanza into an ironic structure by forcing the first six lines to build toward a concluding statement, then dismantling the possibility of settled conclusions in the final couplet, often to great comic effect. As critic Hoxie Neale Fairchild once said, Byron had a mind "too idealistic to refrain from blowing bubbles, and too realistic to refrain from pricking them."

Byron's protagonist, Don Juan, is at the outset too earnest, naïve, and ordinary to be taken very seriously by the poem's wildly rhyming narrator, or by the reader, no matter how profound some of the poem's themes might appear to be. The ironic structure of the stanzas alone makes this abundantly clear, as in this stanza from Canto I describing Don Juan's meditations upon love:

He pored upon the leaves and on the flowers
And heard a voice in all the winds; and then
He thought of wood-nymphs and immortal bowers,
And how the goddesses came down to men.
He missed the pathway, he forgot the hours,
And when he looked upon his watch again,
He found how much old Time had been a winner.
He also found that he had lost his dinner.

The first six lines of the stanza place Juan in the realm of an idealized pastoral landscape—an Arcadia this young lover wanders while contemplating his beloved, Julia. What he projects upon that landscape is the dreamy stuff of pagan Greece and Rome, the kind of things any reader of Homer or Virgil might imagine. But Juan's longings are hopelessly overwrought and silly, purely conventional. The bubble of that kitschy pastoral daydream is burst by the entirely mundane final two lines—bringing our hero, now hungry, having "lost his dinner," back to earth.

Structural irony actually helps Byron produce the stanzas that make up his lengthy poem; every burst bubble is followed by another breath of affirming inflation. Byron addresses this idea in this stanza from Canto IV of *Don Juan*:

Nothing so difficult as a beginning
In poesy, unless perhaps the end;
For oftentimes when Pegasus seems winning
The race, he sprains a wing, and down we tend,

Like Lucifer when hurl'd from heaven for sinning.
 Our sin the same, and hard as his to mend,
 Being pride, which leads the mind to soar too far,
 Till our own weakness shows us what we are.

For Byron, the problem of beginning—and ending—in “poesy” has ultimately to do with knowing how far the poet should reach. The first six lines of this stanza contrast the two case studies of Pegasus and Lucifer. Pegasus, our mythic symbol of rising, represents artistic aspiration, the ambition that makes poets want to reach for the stars. Lucifer, our mythic symbol of falling, represents the consequences of reaching. Though these feel at the outset like contrasting examples, in the end both attempt to rise and both fall, landing upon Byron's final couplet. The problem is “pride,” the couplet claims, since it “leads the mind to soar too far.” Our “weakness” is overreaching, a flaw that eventually “shows us what we are,” namely creatures of the earth, of the low. This stanza sums up Byron's philosophy and his aesthetic. Although he maintains an ironic understanding of the universe, Byron knows we are not ever satisfied with earth. For him poetry will be made out of endless attempts to rise but it will also reflect the ever-leveling force of gravity, which pulls even the greatest poets back to earth.

Here's a famous stanza from Canto VII of *Don Juan* where the author ponders the purpose and aim of his poetry another way:

And such as they are, such my present tale is,
 A non-descript and ever varying rhyme,
 A versified aurora borealis
 Which flashes o'er a waste and icy clime.
 When we know what all are, we must bewail us,
 But, ne'ertheless, I hope it is no crime
 To laugh at all things, for I wish to show
 What after all, are all things—but a show?

The idea of the world we are being offered here is not very optimistic. If we live in the equivalent of a “waste and icy clime,” and we understand this fact, “When we know what all are,” what is left to do but “bewail” our situation and even ourselves?

Byron's declarations here are both shocking and disheartening. He sees the poet—like the rest of us—living in a fallen world, and he understands it would make sense for poets to expend their creative energies lamenting our fallen condition. But in truth, much of *Don Juan* is dedicated to ridiculing

poets who make this kind of whining, this “cant,” their central project. (His contemporaries William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge get skewered several times.) The thrust of this stanza may first move us toward a sobering sense of existence, but the final couplet begins dismantling that notion, rejecting it. Why must we “bewail” when we could be laughing? If our existence is nothing but “a show,” an illusion perpetuated to keep us miserable, then all we must do is realize that fact and laugh at it! Clearly Byron believes, at least in part, that the world is at best disorderly, and at worst “a waste,” but he hopes to produce a poetry that “flashes” over that wasteland like the famous Northern Lights, the *Aurora Borealis*.

At every step in the long progress of *Don Juan*, closure is avoided. This applies to individual stanzas, but also to the narrative itself. Our hero cannot rest for long before circumstance, fate, or just the author's own restlessness puts Don Juan back on the path of another adventure. Byron is like a shark: if either he or his poem stops moving he'll suffocate. As Byron himself once put it, “I can't stagnate.” As the example of Byron proves, this process of creation and de-creation can be very productive for the poet. Rather than being a dead end, the rise and fall of the ironic structure can lead to a kind of improvisational poetic momentum.

For a poet like Byron, the quarrels with himself tend to work their way out humorously. The narrator of *Don Juan* has the courage to admit his own limitations, and to laugh at his own foolishness and that of others. A high proportion of the stanzas that make up *Don Juan* remind us of the importance of humor in a world where most hard conclusions come at the expense of living without the blindfolds of overwrought idealism and existential clichés. This kind of ironic reversal operates so insistently in Byron that we cannot help but understand it as the author's unique and hilarious perspective.

As we have seen, the ironic structure imitates or enacts a sense of uncertainty about the world. The following poem, Constantine Cavafy's “Waiting for the Barbarians,” records a series of questions and answers between two speakers who are poised on the very edge of such uncertainty:

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?

The barbarians are due here today.

Why isn't anything happening in the senate?

Why do the senators sit there without legislating?

Because the barbarians are coming today.

What laws can the senators make now?
Once the barbarians are here, they'll do the legislating.

Why did our emperor get up so early,
and why is he sitting at the city's main gate
on his throne, in state, wearing the crown?

Because the barbarians are coming today
and the emperor is waiting to receive their leader.
He has even prepared a scroll to give him,
replete with titles, with imposing names.

Why have our two consuls and praetors come out today
wearing their embroidered, their scarlet togas?
Why have they put on bracelets with so many amethysts,
and rings sparkling with magnificent emeralds?
Why are they carrying elegant canes
beautifully worked in silver and gold?

Because the barbarians are coming today
and things like that dazzle the barbarians.

Why don't our distinguished orators come forward as usual
to make their speeches, say what they have to say?

Because the barbarians are coming today
and they're bored by rhetoric and public speaking.

Why this sudden restlessness, this confusion?
(How serious people's faces have become.)
Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,
everyone going home so lost in thought?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.
And some who have just returned from the border say
there are no barbarians any longer.

And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
They were, those people, a kind of solution.

The stage setting here—forum, praetors, emperor, barbarians—helps us place this poem in the ancient world, or at least in a society simplistically divided between a distinguished “us” and a barbaric “them.” In this poem, the ironic structure serves to build suspense and then deflate all that suspense in the final lines. The simple question-and-answer format illustrates

the fact that civilization as the speakers know it is about to be destroyed. Each of the questions points to the strangeness of the situation, since every common activity of life in this place is being disrupted. The senators aren't legislating; the orators aren't orating; and everyone, even the most bureaucratic among them, is dressed to the nines. All of this is happening, the answers tell us each time, because “the barbarians” are coming closer and closer with each passing minute. The poem is structured to build toward the arrival of these barbarians, to make us yearn to see what their arrival will bring. After all, they are barbarians!

But all the energy of that suspense dissipates suddenly in the poem's final lines when Cavafy reveals his surprise: “night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.” This is the first of three deflations really, since we fall even farther upon reading the next lines, which reveal that perhaps “there are no barbarians any longer.” And the first speaker—always full of questions—finds he must answer his own question in the poem's final gesture: indeed, what will happen to these people without barbarians? “They were,” he concludes, “a kind of solution.”

After so much building up, this feels like a rather flat, enigmatic conclusion. Clearly, the meaning of the final line emerges from the ironic structure itself. Almost every gesture of the poem illustrates the way this culture defines its idea of itself, in this case by relying upon a group of other beings, “the barbarians,” to serve as examples of what they are not. Each question, with its underlying assumptions about the lowly barbarians (those easily bored beings simple enough to be “dazzled” by jewels), betrays the speaker's desperate need to reaffirm his culture's superiority, its assumed difference from the barbaric barbarians. But all that comes crashing down in the poem's ironic final gesture: the barbarians don't come at all, and what's left in their absence? What “solution” did the barbarians serve? The meaning of that final line arises out of this irony—the speakers, so dependent on the fact that they are *not* barbarians, haven't taken the time to define themselves in any other meaningful way. When the barbarians don't arrive, these citizens prove hollow, and their idea of what defines them collapses inward. The ironic structure allows Cavafy to illustrate poignantly this shallow, racist mentality and at the same to satirize it and to reveal its emptiness in these citizens' own words.

Uncertainty—or more specifically a desperate longing for certainty—is also the central theme of the next example of the ironic structure. If Cavafy's poem was primarily social, Robert Frost's poem, “The Most of

It," is primarily philosophical and spiritual. Like many of us, the character depicted in this poem begs to know what's "out there," wants desperately to see into invisible places, wants an answer from the universe:

He thought he kept the universe alone;
 For all the voice in answer he could wake
 Was but the mocking echo of his own
 From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake.
 Some morning from the boulder-broken beach
 He would cry out on life, that what it wants
 Is not its own love back in copy speech
 But counter-love, original response.
 And nothing ever came of what he cried
 Unless it was the embodiment that crashed
 In the cliff's talus on the other side,
 And then in the far-distant water splashed,
 But after a time allowed for it to swim,
 Instead of proving human when it neared
 And someone else additional to him,
 As a great buck it powerfully appeared,
 Pushing the crumpled water up ahead,
 And landed pouring like a waterfall,
 And stumbled through the rocks with horny tread,
 And forced the underbrush—and that was all.

The irony in this poem is suspended until the very last moment. In order to understand how this poem comes to its conclusion, it is helpful to think of the poem as having an introduction and conclusion (or lack of conclusion), even if they are not divided by a stanza break.

The first nine lines act as a kind of preface, providing us with the background information we need to register the importance of what happens in the rest of the poem. Already with the opening line, we know we are dealing with a character who stands at a rather odd angle to the universe. "He thought he kept the universe alone," we are told. Shall we take this as a statement of ultimate solitude? Or shall we emphasize that word "thought," and realize that such a "thought" is rather preposterous—after all, none of us keeps the universe to himself. In either case, the next lines offer us a reason for why he might think this. When he stands at the edge of a lake, upon a "boulder-broken beach," the only voice he hears when he cries "out on life" is his own echo, come back to him from the "tree-hidden cliff across

the lake." He is never satisfied with that "mocking echo." Clearly he wants more than that. He is tired of "copy speech," of echo, and wants instead "counter-love, original response." "And nothing ever came of what he cried," we are told, "Unless . . ."

This depressing pattern of behavior—his forlorn shouting and echoing—is finally broken in the remaining lines of the poem, which consist of one long, suspended sentence. With this prefatory information behind us, we are now prepared for the surprise arrival, but of what? We cannot be sure that what follows actually "came of what he cried," since that word "Unless" keeps us from being very certain, but what comes is at least an "embodiment that crashed / in the cliff's talus on the other side." We are meant to imagine the man's astonishment here. After all, he's been repeatedly asking the emptiness for an answer for his cries "out on life" and at last he might be receiving one. Frost maintains suspense by postponing the arrival of this "embodiment," letting it swim slowly toward us, employing comma after comma to slow this revelation.

The buck that emerges from the water, though beautifully "pouring like a waterfall," is not immediately satisfying. There is a note or two of disappointment: what arrives is not even human, is not "someone else additional to him." And how is "a great buck" an answer to the man's appeal? Here, the power of the ironic structure comes into play. We are invited to ponder the meaning of such a strange *crescendo*. Perhaps we wish to see the buck, a creature of enormous grace and strength, as confirmation that a being—a god?—with such attributes controls the universe? Perhaps we are tempted to see the buck as an image of wildness, or nature's unflinching power over man, but still a response of some kind. Frost carefully orchestrates the poem's final lines to allow us such inflated interpretations, but he will not be content to let them stand. The buck does not stop and utter any satisfying moral—even Keats' Grecian Urn at least gets to speak! The buck has already moved on, having "stumbled through the rocks with horny tread." Frost's frank four-syllable conclusion, "and that was all," brings us crashing back to reality. All we get in answer from the universe—if we get anything—is this: either it was just a buck, or it meant something more, or it was nothing at all. There is simply no way to tell. Like Byron, Frost has an ironic understanding of the universe, one that allows for the possibility of mystery and wonder but at the same time checks such possibilities with recurring notes of skepticism. His poem enacts this philosophical attitude

right before our eyes, playfully baiting us into believing more, or perhaps less, than we should.

If skepticism were a religion, and believing *less* was one of its central creeds, the English poet Philip Larkin would have been at least an archbishop. One final example, Larkin's astounding poem "High Windows," is worth brief consideration here, since this poem illustrates a variation on the ironic structure. Each of the poems we have considered so far has followed a by now familiar pattern: inflation followed by ironic deflation. But the ironic structure can also proceed in the opposite direction, whereby a series of deflations and mundane reckonings are undercut by a sudden and illuminating inflation.

Larkin's poem begins low—even the poem's diction is low, marked by words we're more used to hearing in locker rooms—and it continues to descend from there. Published in 1967, in the midst of a sexual revolution, "High Windows" explores the complicated relationship between sex and religious morality. The poem depicts the progressive loosening of sexual mores by giving us the perspective of three generations—the speaker finds himself right in the middle, caught between the "kids" and "everyone old":

When I see a couple of kids
And guess he's fucking her and she's
Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,
I know this is paradise

Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives—
Bonds and gestures pushed to one side
Like an outdated combine harvester,
And everyone young going down the long slide

To happiness, endlessly.

For the old, it might seem like paradise to be freed from the "bonds and gestures" of religion, to put such moral strictures out to pasture like some use-less farm machinery. The "long slide" that once led (where else?) to hell, now appears to lead, through a clever enjambment, to "happiness."

But the speaker remembers that his own generation once pursued its own freedom, pushing against the moral constraints passed on to them by another generation, and he steps back to gaze from that even older perspective:

I wonder if
Anyone looked at me, forty years back,

And thought, *That'll be the life;*
No God any more, or sweating in the dark

About hell and that, or having to hide
What you think of the priest. He
And his lot will all go down the long slide
Like free bloody birds.

The poem has offered us two "slides," two descents into what could have been depravity and damnation, if seen from a fundamentalist point of view, but that are instead descents into happiness and freedom. These double descents have also revealed something earth-shattering to the speaker: all sexual restriction is predicated on a fear of God, but even the previous generation recognized the possibility that there is "No God any more." Just as the poem is about to come to rest upon that gigantic deflation, leaving us to expect a declaration of sensual anarchy, or nihilism, the poem swings upon the hinge of an ironic reversal:

And immediately

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.

The terms of this sudden rising are deeply ambiguous. We should not mistake the radical shift in tone for absolute certainty or a symbolic religious conversion. Nor can we entirely dismiss the sublimity of this attempt to peer through "the sun-comprehending glass" into what's beyond. Just as the speaker recognizes his freedom from the idea of divinity, religious guilt, and fear, the poem is blasted with awe. In "High Windows," the speaker is tempted to believe more than he should—or is it less? What we are offered is nothing more and nothing less than an image: the air beyond the glass "shows / Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless." Whether we read this as a statement of affirmation or negation, of an instinctual impulse toward belief or the final banishment of it, we recognize that the poem has lifted off from where it started with the kind of power that can only come from the deepest kind of surprise.

This wide array of examples demonstrates the flexibility and power of the ironic structure, which helps produce the comic levity of the transparently clear short poems, but also the gravitas of the more filigreed longer

poems. While the ironic structure's pattern of rising and falling is easy to recognize, and while it might seem rather easy to employ, these poems also demonstrate how different poets use an array of complicated poetic and rhetorical devices to build upon that simple foundation. It is important to recognize that in each case, what is undermined at the poem's finish has been first built up to (or slid down into, as in the case of Larkin's "High Windows") very concretely and convincingly, in such a way that allows the reader to become engaged in the poem's affirmations, and therefore deflated by the conclusions. Cavafy uses his highly rhetorical series of questions and answers and his extravagant Hellenistic setting, for example, while Frost chooses to concoct an elaborately philosophical preface, with its almost convoluted syntax and diction, to draw us into the quarrel at hand. Byron titillates and teases us with the wild rhymes of his *ottava rima*, over which he has achieved a mastery that is hard not to find irresistible. As many of the poems in Supplementary Poems will demonstrate further, with subjects ranging from fast-food coffee and Caribbean schooners to hedgehogs and the Holocaust, what the ironic structure offers poets is an occasion for complicated simplicity. This simplicity will more often than not produce poems nimble enough to juggle weighty ideas—conclusions and decisions that can be suspended in air, or playfully bobbled, or decisively dropped, or laughed right off the stage.

SUPPLEMENTAL POEMS

For Once, Then, Something

Robert Frost

Others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs
 Always wrong to the light, so never seeing
 Deeper down in the well than where the water
 Gives me back in a shining surface picture
 Me myself in the summer heaven godlike
 Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs.
 Once, when trying with chin against a well-curb,
 I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,
 Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,
 Something more of the depths—and then I lost it.
 Water came to rebuke the too clear water.
 One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple

Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,
 Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?
 Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something.

The Mower

Philip Larkin

The mower stalled, twice; kneeling, I found
 A hedgehog jammed up against the blades,
 Killed. It had been in the long grass.

I had seen it before, and even fed it, once.
 Now I had mauled its unobtrusive world
 Unmendably. Burial was no help:

Next morning I got up and it did not.
 The first day after a death, the new absence
 Is always the same; we should be careful

Of each other, we should be kind
 While there is still time.

ohio

m loncar

besides spilling the better half, as well as the steamier half,
 of mcdonald's best try at a cup of coffee on my crotch,
 the ride out of ohio passed without incident.

Incantation

Czeslaw Milosz

Human reason is beautiful and invincible.
 No bars, no barbed wire, no pulping of books,
 No sentence of banishment can prevail against it.
 It establishes the universal ideas in language,
 And guides our hand so we write Truth and Justice
 With capital letters, lie and oppression with small.
 It puts what should be above things as they are,
 Is an enemy of despair and a friend of hope.

It does not know Jew from Greek or slave from master,
Giving us the estate of the world to manage.
It saves austere and transparent phrases
From the filthy discord of tortured words.
It says that everything is new under the sun,
Opens the congealed fist of the past.
Beautiful and very young are Philo-Sophia
And poetry, her ally in the service of the good.
As late as yesterday Nature celebrated their birth,
The news was brought to the mountains by a unicorn and an echo.
Their friendship will be glorious, their time has no limit.
Their enemies have delivered themselves to destruction.

Berkeley, 1968

History

Tomaz Šalamun

Tomaz Šalamun is a monster.
Tomaz Šalamun is a sphere rushing through the air.
He lies down in twilight, he swims in twilight.
People and I, we both look at him amazed,
we wish him well, maybe he is a comet.
Maybe he is punishment from the gods,
the boundary stone of the world.
Maybe he is such a speck in the universe
that he will give energy to the planet
when oil, steel, and food run short.
He might only be a hump, his head
should be taken off like a spider's.
But something would then suck up
Tomaz Šalamun, possibly the head.
Possibly he should be put in formaldehyde, so children
would look at him as they do at fetuses,
protei, and mermaids.
Next year, he'll probably be in Hawaii
or in Ljubljana. Doorkeepers will scalp
tickets. People walk barefoot
to the university there. The waves can be
a hundred feet high. The city is fantastic,

shot through with people on the make,
the wind is mild.
But in Ljubljana people say: look!
This is Tomaz Šalamun, he went to the store
with his wife Marushka to buy some milk.
He will drink it and this is history.

The Dancing

Gerald Stern

In all these rotten shops, in all this broken furniture
and wrinkled ties and baseball trophies and coffee pots
I have never seen a postwar Philco
with the automatic eye
nor heard Ravel's "Bolero" the way I did
in 1945 in that tiny living room
on Beechwood Boulevard, nor danced as I did
then, my knives all flashing, my hair all streaming,
my mother red with laughter, my father cupping
his left hand under his armpit, doing the dance
of old Ukraine, the sound of his skin half drum,
half fart, the world at last a meadow,
the three of us whirling and singing, the three of us
screaming and falling, as if we were dying,
as if we could never stop—in 1945—
in Pittsburgh, beautiful filthy Pittsburgh, home
of the evil Mellons, 5,000 miles away
from the other dancing—in Poland and Germany—
oh God of mercy, oh wild God.

What I Did on a Rainy Day

May Swenson

Breathed the fog from the valley
Inhaled its ether fumes
With whittling eyes peeled the hills
to their own blue and bone
Swallowed piercing pellets of rain
Caught cloudsful in one colorless cup

Exhaling stung the earth with sunlight
Struck leaf and bristle to green fire
Turned tree trunks to gleaming pillars
and twigs to golden nails
With one breath taken into the coils
of my blood and given again when vibrant
I showed who's god around here

Sea Grapes
Derek Walcott

That sail which leans on light,
tired of islands,
a schooner beating up the Caribbean

for home, could be Odysseus,
home-bound on the Aegean;
that father and husband's

longing, under gnarled sour grapes, is
like the adulterer hearing Nausicaa's name
in every gull's outcry.

This brings nobody peace. The ancient war
between obsession and responsibility
will never finish and has been the same

for the sea-wanderer or the one on shore
now wriggling on his sandals to walk home,
since Troy sighed its last flame,

and the blind giant's boulder heaved the trough
from whose groundswell the great hexameters come
to the conclusions of exhausted surf.

The classics can console. But not enough.

CHAPTER TWO

The Emblem Structure

MICHAEL THEUNE

The emblem structure has a rich history with roots in significant traditions of Western art, theology, science, and philosophy. A two-part structure, it begins with an organized description of an object and culminates with a meditation on that same object. In this way, the emblem structure moves from sight to insight, from perception to reflection.

The structure's curious name refers to a genre of Renaissance art that combines a brief, often cryptic motto, a visual image—typically a print derived from an embossed surface, or an *emblema* in the original Latin—and a poem explaining the meaning of the image. Collected in *emblemata*, or emblem books, the emblem poem, the shorthand name for poems employing the emblem structure, was incredibly popular. These poems were used for all manner of entertainment and instruction: to assist priests in prayer and meditation, to give political advice, and to teach children proper manners.

At the center of the emblem tradition is the philosophical and theological concept of an ordered universe, a universe that can be both observed and "read," its meanings deciphered. Many Western doctrines and concepts embody, reflect, and convey this idea. One such doctrine is that of the "two books." According to many Christian thinkers, God wrote two books for humankind's edification: the book of scripture, that is, the Bible, and the book of nature. Just as one might turn to scripture for understanding, guidance, or healing, one might also turn to nature. In *Religio Medici*, a seventeenth-century memoir and spiritual testament, Sir Thomas Browne states, "There are two bookes from whence I collect my Divinity; besides that written one of God, another of his servant Nature, that universall and publik Manuscript, that lies expans'd unto the eyes of all."

In the following nineteenth-century emblem poem, Oliver Wendell Holmes clearly believes that the things of this world are signs of the divine: