

STRUCTURE & SURPRISE:
Engaging Poetic Turns

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Introduction

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Poetic structure is, simply, the pattern of a poem's turning. As such, poetic structure identifies a vital feature of poems: the best poems very often include convincing, surprising turns. T.S. Eliot calls the poem's turn "one of the most important means of poetic effect since Homer," and in a lecture called "Levels and Opposites: Structure in Poetry," Randall Jarrell claims that "a successful poem starts from one position and ends at a very different one, often a contradictory or opposite one; yet there has been no break in the unity of the poem." More than almost any other aspect of poetry, it is structure that reveals how poems remain whole and unified even as they move, leap, turn.

And yet, for all its importance, structure has received very little attention in recent poetry-writing pedagogy. In part, this is because structure often is considered, at best, synonymous with form. The occasional chapter called "Poetic Structure" in a poetry handbook usually contains information on poetic form, the musical and rhythmic aspects of poems. And, generally, to whatever extent structure and form have been thought to name separate aspects of poems, structure is considered ancillary to form. For example, when taught at all, the turn most often is taught as a part of the sonnet, and so the sonnet's turn—or *volta*, as it is sometimes called—is treated as just one more feature, along with rhyme scheme and line count, of the sonnet's many formal demands.

However, the turn does not belong solely to the sonnet tradition. In fact, as suggested by poet-critic Ellen Bryant Voigt in her essay "The Flexible Lyric," all kinds of poems turn and these poems can be classified according to the ways they turn, regardless of form. Whereas form provides one set of categories for classifying poems—one that includes categories such as sonnet, villanelle, pantoum, and ghazal—structure introduces new

categories, including, but not limited to, the kinds explored in this collection of essays: ironic, emblem, concessional, retrospective-prospective, elegiac, dialectical, and descriptive-meditative.

Structure's taxonomy categorizes poems in a way that is at once radically new and strikingly familiar. Structure's taxonomy is new in that it makes connections between many seemingly disparate poems. For example, poems with radically various forms can be linked by a common structure. One of the following chapters links, among other forms, a sonnet and a haiku; another joins an epigrammatic two-line poem with a long poem of incantatory repetitions.

For all its ability to make unfamiliar connections, structure itself is not unfamiliar, and this is what makes structure so vital. Whereas form can so often seem a strange, merely "poetic" activity, structural turning is, if not obvious, then to some extent familiar. Almost no one regularly thinks or speaks in sestinas or pantoums, but almost everyone regularly engages in structured thinking and speech, and many everyday speech acts enact particular structures, contain effective turns. For example, even if one has not consciously considered the retrospective-prospective structure, anyone who has ever confessed anything about their past—privately or to another person—in order to then make new resolutions about the future has employed just this structure in their thought or speech. So this structure can be efficiently and effectively pointed out, shown to be relevant, and put to use in poems. Similarly, even if one has never heard of the ironic structure, its turn from set-up to punch line is not a foreign concept to anyone who has heard or told a joke. Structure offers a whole new way to conceive of poems that is at once paradigm-shifting, highly sophisticated, *and* readily apparent and available.

As suggested by the reference to the structure of jokes, structure does not necessarily mean simply order and rationality. Rather, structure's primary concern is the art of the turn and often this means making *surprising* turns. Some structures, even logical structures or structures with very pragmatic ends, can be wonderfully counterintuitive. For example, it seems detrimental to employ concessions that admit certain weaknesses in an argument before trying to make that argument. However, poems that make use of such a concessional structure strengthen arguments by establishing the goodwill of the speaker and limiting the scope of debate. Structure reminds and encourages us to see and to make poems that maneuver in such surprisingly new ways.

But structure in a poem is not necessarily built out of conventional logic. As Randall Jarrell notes, "Poetry constantly uses logic for the details of structures . . . constantly haunts about the shape of logic. . . . But for poetry logic is merely one method of organization, one among many others. . . ." Poetic turns also can be narrative or dramatic. Just as a turn might signal a move from premise to conclusion, a turn might also consist of a transition from one emotional state to another. In fact, poetic turns can even consist of mistakes. Jarrell states that "We can learn more about poetic structure from logical fallacies than from logic," advising poets to "go to the political orator, the advertising agencies . . . but let the logician molder in his icebox."

Numerous significant thinkers recognize that structure's primary goal is to lead to surprise. According to poet-critic A.D. Hope, "the art of modulation" is "key" to composing longer poems, and his list of "all the architectonic skills" that depend on this art includes proportion, harmony, connection, and surprise. Poet-critic Mary Kinzie says, "The very keystone of logic" is "the art of making transition—the art of inference and connection, the art of modulation and (hence) surprise." *You don't have to look wrong.*

The notion of poetry as a combination of structure and surprise significantly challenges some longstanding, deeply-ingrained ideas about poetry. It also offers an alternative to—a counterpoint for—some current poetry-writing pedagogies. Still very much embedded in a late-Romantic phase, poetry often is conceived of as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," as William Wordsworth so famously wrote more than 200 years ago. As such, poetry is thought of as a kind of magical process in which a poem springs forth from the poet's inner self. More than a century after Wordsworth's claim, the surrealist practices of psychic automatism and automatic writing—writing processes through which a poet supposedly can make direct contact with the subconscious—developed from theories such as Wordsworth's. The writing that issued forth flowed, moving quickly, enacting skittering movements of mind. By the 1960s, Allen Ginsberg's poetic dictum "First thought, best thought" praised the immediacy and impulsiveness of poetry.

But just as Wordsworth's formulation is incomplete insofar as it does not indicate the fact that most poems flow *from* somewhere and *to* somewhere, Ginsberg's formulation is incomplete insofar as it does not indicate, as do each of the many poems included in *Structure & Surprise*, that poems often contain *second* and *third* thoughts. And whether or not *those* thoughts are "best" usually has a great deal to do with structural issues,

with how they relate to—how they leap away from yet connect to—initial thoughts.

Such structural concerns have not been taken up by much current poetry-writing pedagogy, which more often focuses on poetic flow and form. Many books and Web sites give writing exercises designed to generate text via largely surrealist procedures and offer a host of forms for shaping the raw material generated. While such methods very usefully encourage production and invention, incorporating an understanding of poetic structure into these exercises pushes “exercise” to a deeper art. Knowledge of structure gives both writer and reader a vital perspective and means from and with which to read, understand, assess, and reconceive one’s own—and anyone else’s—work. Knowing poetic structure makes new demands on poets and poems, but it also offers a useful new tool. Acquainted with turns, one can better see and even *imagine* a draft’s structural possibilities, and further draft, critique, and revise accordingly.

To the extent that it is true, as Stephen Dobyns writes, that “We write, finally, to be free of things, not to express ourselves; to become articulate, not to mumble to ourselves; to drive our feelings and vague ideas into consciousness and clarity,” it also is true that “Structure is our primary means of achieving articulateness and consequently of communicating our discoveries.”

Structure & Surprise has three interconnected and increasingly sophisticated goals:

- To increase awareness of the significant presence of structure in poetry, thus further revealing the many dimensions of poetry.
- To allow for better, more complete readings of poems, thus creating new expectations in poetry readers.
- To inspire and guide the creation of new poems.

To achieve these goals, each of the first seven chapters in *Structure & Surprise* presents a poetic structure. The first five chapters present two-part structures: ironic, emblem, concessional, retrospective-prospective, and elegiac. The sixth and seventh chapters present three-part structures: dialectical and descriptive-meditative. Each chapter provides a succinct definition of the structure; a brief historical examination, if available; close textual analyses; discussion of any structural variants; and a section of sup-

plemental poems. The eighth and ninth chapters do not provide information on specific kinds of turns but rather, developing from very recent investigations into structure, highlight peculiar characteristics of the turn. “The Mid-course Turn” emphasizes how radical poetic turns can be, and “Substructure” is a reminder to pay attention for subtle structures in seemingly “difficult” poetry.

Structure & Surprise, however, is in no way intended to be the final word on poetic structure; rather, it is meant to be a revealing and generative introduction. In fact, it is virtually impossible to imagine a final word on poetic structure. Structures intersect and overlap to such an extent that there are too many connections for any one effort at organizing the various structures to be the only organization possible. Additionally, there are, of course, countless other structures than those presented here. The structures presented in this book are simply some of the most common. As a recognition of the existence of other structures, this book includes a section called “Endless Structures,” composed of fourteen short texts written by some of today’s most exciting poets. In this lively section, poets whose work is wildly diverse each discuss one of their own poems and its structural concerns. Some of this section’s essays refer back to structures already examined in earlier chapters. Others are new and demonstrate how idiosyncratic and yet universal poetic structures can be. As this section suggests, there are endless possibilities for poetic structures.

In order to show as clearly as possible how the ideas in this book can be used to encourage new writing, the last chapter, “Inspiration, Guides, Exercises,” gathers together ways for the practicing poet to play with structure in both early and later drafting stages. Ideally, a larger notion of structure, combined with these specific exercises, will invite writers to try new ways of both generating and working with their raw material.

Finally, it is a pleasure to direct readers of *Structure & Surprise* to other writers who already have revealed, explored, established, deepened, and complicated the vast world of structural possibilities: T.S. Eliot, Randall Jarrell, A.D. Hope, Mary Kinzie, Ellen Bryant Voigt, and Stephen Dobyns. *Structure & Surprise* is the pragmatic outgrowth of their work and hopes to further the conversations begun so eloquently by these articulate thinkers. Please read the works listed in “Further Reading” for deeper exploration, to understand where many of the ideas examined in this book came from, and to continue the dialogue begun here.