

ON FORM IN CONTEMPORARY POETRY

Janna King^{*}

I have been a most unappreciative reader of contemporary verse. For years I picked up books published by the universities, or magazines with state funding, which is the primary way our economy will publish poetry. Now anyone who bothers to read poetry is wishing to be enlightened emotionally—to be touched, to be moved. But as a rule, to a maddening degree, I was only moved to ask “What does this mean?” or “Who cares?” or most distressing of all “Why is this poetry?”

For much of this century, people who care about poetry have been involved either verbally (by what they discuss) or artistically (by what they make) in a philosophical debate on the uses of, and the validity of, form. Perhaps in the interests of limiting this essay I had better say “forms” as that will direct us toward the mundane instead of the ineffable. And heaven knows that’s complex enough. The battle line may be very shakily drawn between what is called “free verse” and “formalism.” But it is sensible to acknowledge that perhaps no poet will admit to serving in either camp. And yet the skirmish continues.

In a recent issue of *The American Poetry Review*,¹ the Pulitzer Prize winning poet Louise Gluck observed that today tone primarily carries out the function that formal rhythms once did: “This is the great advantage of formal verse: metrical variation provides a subtext. It does what we now rely on tone to do.” Let us use the terms voice and attitude as well for clarity. I agree that the shift she suggests has taken place—that tonal control provides an order that traditional rhythms used to provide. As I see it, this is indicative of a larger breakdown in the working parts of traditional poetry—forms losing effect. Why voice in a technical sense has grown so powerful, I don’t yet know. But I have a few ideas on why traditional forms have grown inadequate.

Forms work in some ways as machines do. So the ballad, the sonnet, the villanelle, the haiku, sestina, etc., accomplish specific jobs with a varying degree of efficiency depending on the artist’s ability. Poems writ-

^{*} Address for reprints: Box 747, Bryn Athyn, PA 19009.

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ten in the past in various forms work partly because we have an historic or cultural self active within us that can still respond as contemporaries of the poet did. In addition, formal poems written in the past can move us because we have memorized them and therefore invested them with affection. If you love Housman's "With Rue My Heart Is Laden," or "Meeting At Night" by Browning, or "Now To The Marriage" by Shakespeare, it is partly because you have taken them into you willingly in a period of belief or innocence. So these poems work for you partly on account of your own investment.

Forms work as machines do in other regards as well. They may wear out. Eventually most forms stop being used. There are ancient forms that may never be written in again, simply because they no longer work emotionally. This is not entirely, as some would suggest, because our poets are not good enough to use them. There are millions of bad poets from all ages—more and more of them all the time. They grow like fungus on any sappy subject. But I think it essential to say that the configurations themselves are flawed, or perhaps more accurately, that all artistic forms are limited and therefore in need of growth, or mending or replacement eventually.

The sonnet, because it is an unbelievably powerful machine, can still do many (not all) kinds of work. A sonnet by Shakespeare, or either of the Brownings may work, to all intents and purposes, perfectly today. And yet if we imagine a current poet of similar stature (and yes there probably are a few), he or she could produce a powerful sonnet. But I maintain there will be a certain squeakiness, a certain inefficiency that is not due to the skill of the poet, but to the nature of our contemporary psyche and its needs. For me, the last "perfect" villanelle composed was "Do Not Go Gentle" by Dylan Thomas. Others would argue that Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art," written some ten years later, worked completely effectively. Where one draws the line of judgement doesn't matter as much as that one believes there can be lines drawn—finish lines provide for both boundaries and victories. I think the essential question here is, can a villanelle, can a sonnet, or whatever form we discuss, work in 1993 as a current machine? When was the last startlingly effective sonnet written? Is culture outgrowing this form?

Forms are like machines in that they are an assembly of parts working together. So various elements can cause problems or make noise. The most visible poetic element (in English at least) has been rhyme. And rhyme has become harder and harder for the contemporary ear to accept. The nature of rhyme is to provide echo and repetition—to highlight pattern and confirm expectation. Philosophically speaking, heavy use of rhyme bears the implication that experience is orderly and predictable—a thought that runs counter to contemporary perception of reality. So poets alter direct rhyme to indirect or off-rhyme. They move rhymes away from power places such as the ends of lines and bury them elsewhere. They rely on assonance, alliteration and consonance—any partial sound construction. And when poets grow discontented enough by rhyme, they drop it altogether. When one poetic element falls into the storage area of the archaic, other elements must be used better. This is like the human machine where different bodily faculties compensate for blindness, weak muscles or habitual pain. When society outgrows a form, or many forms, it must develop new ones. But this takes ages. I affirm it is a legitimate need that calls new forms into existence, and not just an indication of corruption or some sort of jaded, cultural lust.

Readers of Swedenborg should never be surprised that all things in our culture are being made new. The Last Judgement and the New Revelation demand this, and the Lord both wills and provides for it. I suspect that each revelation of truth eventually generated specific and appropriate forms in all the arts. The forms, or the machines, of one dispensation can work in other ages if used well. But they cannot do the work of a new age, or fill the needs of a new mind entirely rightly, anymore than the revelation of one church can serve as the crowning truth of the next. There will be a deficit—the machine will be heard to squeak as the work load increases in quantity or subtlety. Given a great enough burden it will eventually collapse. The Use will not be rightly served.

In a sense, each poem, or painting or song is one of a kind. Some contemporary poets would claim that this is all we can aspire to—that each expression is the final form. But I don't see it this way. Besides this individual expression, there must always be a universal or non-personal form that the individual expression exists upon, or against, or within—

choose your own preposition! I observe that contemporary poetry for the most part has not discovered universal forms appropriate to the Truth of the Second Coming. Or if we are at this time enunciating those forms, we still haven't recognized or named them to any degree. This produces a great anxiety in any genuine poet.

I would like to end on the wish that any people of a thoughtful disposition and with a tendency to admire and preserve the cultural achievements of the past, will at least attempt to discover virtue in the present. It is unconstructive to dismiss contemporary society and its products as being outside of ourselves or hopelessly worthless. And those who have the additional blessing of having been informed by some knowledge of the Writings of Swedenborg bear a particular vocation in this. I know many fine contemporary poets who struggle with an inner conflict that shows immense human wisdom and compassion.

It is the anxiety of inner belief that there must be order even though there is so little of it discernible. Society owes a great debt to individuals who continue to swim in the flood without giving up, or stomping off or going under. To write without the full benefit of culturally accepted norms and forms takes courage. To be willing to build temporary dwellings during a horrendous storm is civilized—and if they're not utterly beautiful dwellings, they do keep the deluge off our backs. □