

Inhabiting the Form

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One of the things I often tell writers regardless of whether they are poets, fiction or nonfiction writers is that we must inhabit our form, live within it to understand what we can and can't do.

Here's a little example: When I was in graduate school, one of my professors (my favorite professor, Ben Kimpel, a wonderful teacher they named a building after when he died) walked into our classroom and looked at the quotation on the blackboard, "The proper study of man is man." He shook his head and said, "That's why nobody writes fixed form poetry any more." The line is from Alexander Pope's "Essay on Man" written in heroic couplets in the eighteenth century. The poem is a bit of a slog, I have to admit, but you're encouraged to take a look. More importantly, you might wonder, what's wrong with that line anyway?

Do you see the problem? It's missing a syllable. It should scan in iambic pentameter as, "The proper study of mankind is man." The guy who'd made that mistake was our department's eighteenth century specialist. And it's not that he should have known the quote from memory so much as his ear should have told him he'd dropped a beat.

That's what inhabiting a form can mean. You are attuned to your form (in this case a very specific form with very specific requirements) so that a mistake like this would be glaring.

Here are a couple of variations on the same lines of a poem by Sir Thomas Wyatt, courtier and clever politician. He helped Henry VIII wiggle out of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon so he might marry Anne Boleyn. He also was tossed in the Tower of London for a while because Henry suspected him of having an affair with Anne, and maybe he did.

We have these different versions because when Wyatt's poems were included in a sixteenth century anthology, Tottel's Miscellany. Tottel took the poems of Wyatt and others and regularized the lines into iambic pentameter.

Wyatt's version: "It was no dream: I lay brode waking."
Tottel's version: "It was no dream: for I lay brode waking."

Wyatt's version: "Into a strange fashion of forsaking."
Tottel's version: "Into a bitter fashion of forsaking."

You may be wondering at this point, how much can this matter? Well, it can matter as much as a form allows meaning to matter through its thoughtful use. At the time Wyatt wrote, the iambic line was being popularized (or you might say invented) as the go-to line in English poetry. Marlowe and Shakespeare would follow bringing iambic pentameter

into full bloom. (You can google an article on line by Peter Groves that chronicles the long march of poetic form from Chaucer to Shakespeare if you really want to full skinny on this question). Once you hear the line, you can hear the difference in Wyatt's imperfect lines and the more sing-songy lines Tottel gets by purifying the iambic pentameter. And you can see that Tottel plows over some of Wyatt's nuance in the process.

It's hard to guess how much Wyatt cared about meter of a specific line, but if we look at the two versions of the poem, we can see that the looser version is more subtle. The poet complains in more baffled terms in Wyatt's version rather than the sour terms of the Tottel version. Smart reader sound out the words of this pre-Elizabethan English as you go. Or if you want to wimp out, you can find a modern language version in just about any anthology of English poetry.

Wyatt's version:

They fle from me / that sometyme did me seke
with naked fote stalking in my chambre.
I have sene them gentill tame and meke
that nowe are wyld and do not remember
that sometyme they put themself in daunger
to take bred at my hand & nowe they raunge
besely seking with a continuell change
Thancked be fortune it hath ben otherwise
twenty tymes better but ons in speciall
in thyn arraye after a pleasaunt gyse
when her lose gowne from her shoulders did fall
and she me caught in her armes long & small
therewithall swetely did me kysse
and softly said dere hert how like you this
It was no dreame I lay brode waking.
but all is torned thorough my gentilnes
into a straunge fasshion of forsaking
and I have leve to goo of her goodenes
and she also to vse new fangilnes.
but syns that I so kyndely ame serued,
I would fain knowe what she hath deserued.

Tottel's Version:

They flee from me, that sometime did me seke
With naked fote stalkyng within my chamber.

Once haue I seen them gentle, tame, and meke,
That now are wild, and do not once remember
That sometyme they haue put them selues in danger,
To take bread at my hand, and now they range,
Busily sekyng in continuall change.
Thanked be fortune, it hath bene otherwise
Twenty tymes better: but once especiall,
In thinne aray, after a pleasant gyse,
When her loose gowne did from her shoulders fall,
And she me caught in her armes long and small,
And therwithall, so swetely did me kysse,
And softly sayd: deare hart, how like you this?
It was no dreame: for I lay broade awakyng.
But all is turnde now through my gentlenesse.
Into a bitter fashion of forsakyng:
And I haue leaue to go of her goodnesse,
And she also to vse newfanglesse.
But, sins that I vnkyndly so am serued:
How like you this, what hath she now deserued?

Isn't Wyatt's version the sexiest poem about getting dumped you've ever read?

By the time we get to Shakespeare and the sonnet writers who followed, the form has been set. The game is on, fourteen lines, ten syllables per line, iamb the dominant foot—but not offered in lock step, marching lines of iambs. Writers would write with that syllable count in their heads almost subconsciously.

Maybe more importantly, their audience would be on that same wavelength, too. If you were and they were, then writing an iambic line complete with the possible substitutions (mostly spondees and troches—there are also some more subtle substitutions, too), your reader would be right with you. And if you intentionally were to add a syllable or drop one, your readers' or listeners' ears would go up—they would hear it. And that alteration would have the kind of power a line break, whether enjambed or punctuated, would have on a listener's ear.

But as Dr. Kimpel pointed out years ago, that's not the world we live in. There are good sonnet writers out there right now, Marilyn Hacker and Mark Jarman come to mind. But whether the subtlety of the form works for us readers is another question. If we can't hear the line, we can't hear the richness of the variations.

All forms, even that messy form I like so much, the essay, require just what a sonnet does, that the writer inhabit the form, that the writer allow himself to grow and wander within the limits of the form. The sonnet is a tightly constructed form and maybe too

constrictive for most but it's worth considering what hitting the walls of a form can do for a writer's thinking. Condense it? Focus it? Give it something to keep the subject in bounds? All useful things for a writer to consider regardless of what his or her chosen genre may be.