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Learning to Dance: On Teaching Form Poetry

*True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learned to dance.*
- Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*

Abstract

This is the biography of a class - or since the teacher is writing it - the autobiography. In the fall of 2000 and again in the fall of 2002 I taught a course on writing poetry in given forms (with traditional metre and rhyme) to second year creative writing classes of twenty students each, at Malaspina University-College in Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada. The format of the courses was three hours of class time a week for fourteen weeks. In both classes the students had virtually no previous experience in this style of writing. The second course, at least from the teacher's point of view, was far more successful than the first. This article explores why.

When I graduated in 1997 with a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, I had never heard the term, "formalism". Perhaps that's a marker of how unfamiliar formal poetry is in Canada. I had heard about "form" poems from a fellow poet; I'd even tried a few - a glosa and a triolet - years before, but like almost every other poet I knew, I thought of "poetry" as free verse. However, a chance reference to "formalism" from one of my writing teachers intrigued me. A few months later when I was teaching my first creative writing course and a student was having trouble writing about a painful issue I advised him - on some Muse-given hunch - to try it in a given form. Up to this point he'd been an extremely slow writer but now a sonnet poured out of him; it was the best poem he wrote all term. So it was as much out of my own curiosity as for student edification that when I began a regular job teaching creative writing in 1998, I routinely assigned the writing of a form poem to my first year poetry classes.

Definition. Please

"Form" is one of the vaguest terms in poetry. Here I'll define it as simply the shape or structure of a poem. By this definition, every poem has a form. Free verse, for example, is usually characterized by a varying right margin (as opposed to, say, a sonnet that because of its regular metre, has a boxy appearance). Free verse also often uses white space creatively. The term "formal" poetry is usually reserved for any poem written in a *given* form, such as sonnet, sestina, or haiku, including self-created forms (sometimes called "nonce"). Form poems are also noted for their traditional use of rhyme, metre and stanza. Most verse written in Canada today is free verse but there is a steady trickle now turning into a stream of published poets experimenting with form.

As a teacher I found it curious that writing in a restricted form released something in emerging writers; the form poem was often their most interesting work. But I didn't pursue it until the chair of our program asked if I would teach an entire course on Writing in a Variety of Given Forms. It had been in the calendar for years but no one had ever taught it. I said yes.

Then I panicked. I knew nothing except the "rules" of how to write in form, as given in any dictionary of literary terms. You could count on one hand the formal poems I'd written myself and not one of them was metred. "If you want to know something, teach it," the chair reminded me.

By good luck I heard that a former professor of mine was about to teach a course in prosody - the study of poetic metre, rhyme and stanza. I signed up and persuaded several other poets to do the same. When the course fell through, it was desperation that drove me to suggest we carry on ourselves, and for the next seven weeks in one of our living rooms, one of us gave a talk each week on some aspect of form. I did the introduction (on the importance and power of rhythm) and others talked about syllabics, metrics, the experience of writing and revising poetry in given forms, quantitative poetry, how specific outstanding poets (Marilyn Hacker in the US and Barbara Nickel in Canada) used form, and line break. But the test came that fall when I taught the first course.

The First Dance

"Start with what students know," I thought, and happily assigned as their first exercise, the writing of a sonnet.

It was a disaster. The sonnet form terrified them. Metre terrified them. With one or two exceptions, student ears seemed stoppered with some modern wax - most of them couldn't hear a strong stress. When I backtracked I discovered that most also didn't know what a syllable was. You can't appreciate a metred poem let alone write one, without being able to hear stress and knowing what a syllable is. Worse, they all knew what a sonnet *should* sound like - they'd been forced to read them to death in high school - and now, painfully, they wrote love poems that were battered leftovers from the 18th century.

I backpedaled furiously but the damage was done. The villanelle, sestina, glosa, ghazal and pantoum that I assigned after, did little to relieve the general levels of fear and certainty that they could not do this. I began to feel an enormous reluctance in the class - reluctance to speak up, reluctance to engage with the sample poems we were reading every week, reluctance to turn in assignments on time and reluctance to engage with the final oral assignment to analyze a form poem. Worst of all from my point of view as teacher, most of them seemed reluctant to write at all.

Final student evaluations for the course were surprisingly generous and - I thought - unmerited. By the end of the term, several students still could not scan a basic line or write in metre. With one or two exceptions their poems were weak and the rules of form were broken far more often than they were kept. But what felt worst to me as the teacher was that most had little or no curiosity or excitement about forms. This, by my standards of teaching, marked a clear failure on my part.

The Second Dance

When the course was scheduled again for fall 2002, I entirely reorganized it. This time I knew not to make assumptions. In the interim I'd been reading extensively and had come to understand metre much more profoundly - physically - which meant I'd come to be excited rather than just curious about it. I'd also written many more form poems myself so I understood the problems - and pleasures - better. My "form group" of writers had continued to meet and I regularly discussed prosody with a friend and poet, Sandy Shreve, who writes consistently and beautifully using given forms. Most of my learning and excitement about form and metre was coming from these discussions, from hearing myself think out loud. If this helped me, why not students?

The first step in reworking the course was an intensive search for a text. For the first course I'd used the Norton anthology by Mark Strand and Eavan Boland, *The Making of a Poem*. It has an excellent selection of poems within each form but there were not enough of the forms I wanted: no palindrome, no ghazal, and far too much space (for my purposes) on the ballad, elegy, pastoral and ode. The descriptions of each form were extremely brief and the metre section, very limited. It was a book more for readers than writers and it was partly because of this that I felt I'd ended up spending too much time teaching *about* the forms, and not enough on teaching metre. My other problem with the book was that, like most American texts, it didn't include a single Canadian poet. For this second course I seriously considered as an option, a new publication by a Canadian, Robin Skelton, called *The Shapes of Our Singing*. This is a marvelously comprehensive guide to, as its subtitle says, "verse forms and metres from around the world", but there is only a single poem, written by Skelton, to illustrate each form and again, the briefest of explanations.

At the last possible minute I received a desk copy of *An Exaltation of Forms: Contemporary Poets Celebrate the Diversity of Their Art* by Annie Finch and Kathrine Varnes. This book addresses a major rift between U.S. Formalist and Free Verse poets by covering every kind of form, from given forms to free verse and rap. There is a short, informative essay on each form by a poet writing in that form, and a superb selection of poems to illustrate each. Even better, there's a lengthy section on the various aspects of metre. Still no Canadian poets, but this was going to be as good as it got and I could supplement with handouts.

As optional additional texts for the course I ordered Mary Oliver's *Rules for the Dance: A Handbook for Writing and Reading Metrical Verse* which is the most succinct, clearest explanation of metre I have ever read, and Stephen Adams' *poetic designs: an introduction to meters verse forms and figures of speech*. The Adams book was more complex but a superb treatment of metre for those who wanted to venture into deeper water.

I had my texts. Now I talked to every teacher I knew who'd taught or written form poetry. There weren't many, but they gave me two vital pieces of information:

1. Start with what students know. (I'd only half-understood this the first time; now I'd learned better than to start with the sonnet.)
2. Make clear the difference between rhythm and metre.

I added two guidelines of my own. The first was: be rigid in following the rules. By letting students break the rules of metre and form at random in the first class, I felt most had never pushed themselves hard enough to see what they might achieve with it.

The second guideline was: make it colloquial. The Romantic poems have already been written. What interests me about form is what we can do with the tools of tradition inside a 21st century context. The use of contemporary language around contemporary issues within traditional forms, would be a marker of the success of this class.

I knew the class was going to be hard work for students who'd written almost entirely in free verse. To the best of my knowledge, most would only ever have written a single, loose form poem in a previous first year poetry course with me. I also knew students tend to resent rules as being anathema to "creativity". Somehow I had to gain their confidence, have them trust me with the paradox that rules can be liberating. I was helped by the unusual coincidence that three first year courses were all funneling into this one second year (form) course. Creative writing courses at Malaspina are usually first come, first served, but this time the Chair of the program suggested we reserve six of the twenty seats for students who had previously shown excellence. This we did.

Let the Music Begin

Given that some (most?) students were in this class because it was the only second year poetry credit available, I wanted them to know what was coming. On day one I gave as fierce a description as I could of how hard the class was going to be: this was no "just spew it out" poetry, they were going to have to memorize vocabulary, struggle with metre and rhyme, etc.. It felt like a fine line between terrifying them and challenging them but it seemed to work. Two students immediately dropped the course, which left room for two more from the waiting list who, it turned out, were excellent and committed writers.

I again started with what everyone knew, only this time it wasn't a sonnet but free verse. I spoke about the form of it. We looked at a draft and final version of a free verse poem by a poet well known for her experimental use of language. It was clear by the end of the discussion that this was not what students had expected as "form". Good, I thought; I had their attention and I hadn't scared them. Yet.

I waded in a little deeper, defining form. From day one I used Mary Oliver's metaphor of dance. In her book on metre, *Rules for the Dance*, she says that "the metrical poem has a quality that is unbreakably and reliably musical" (Oliver 7). Form and free verse, I told the class, are two branches of the same art, like ballroom dancing and rock and roll, or classical music and jazz. "Remember how awkward you felt when you first learned ballroom dancing," I reminded them. Their first form poems would feel like that. My experience as a poet - both student and teacher - is that the more pressure and expectation on the writer, the worse the writing. I hoped that by keeping the atmosphere in class as light as possible, for example by calling the assigned poems "exercises", students would take a more relaxed and hopefully more creative approach to their work. I told them "awkward" is to be expected when you're just learning to dance. Most important was that they learn the steps, the rules of the dance - of

the form. You can't break the rules until you know them, I repeated over and over again. No exceptions. I also frequently repeated why I was doing this: not to torture them but to let the forms push them, to see how their poems would deal with confinement. Here was a wonderful new tool that - when this course was over - they could choose to use or not. I was asking them to suspend their hostility to "rules" for one term, to trust me.

I stressed working out loud. Poetry for me has always been about learning to listen but never more so than when working in metre. To stress this oral aspect, their homework assignment on day one was to write a song lyric. I borrowed the exercise from an American formalist, Dana Gioia, in that wonderful book by Robin Behn and Chase Twichell, *The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises from Poets Who Teach*. Students were asked to write new lyrics to a known tune with a strong beat; the catch was that they couldn't write anything down until they'd completed at least two verses. The point was to begin to have to listen, to become aware of syllable and stress, though I didn't use those words yet, not until we went over their lyrics in the second class. Then for the first time I used "syllable" and "stress" to help explain why something didn't quite fit. (I also ran into an unexpected generational gap: I'd expected folk song lyrics or Beatles. Instead, I got modern and pop singers whose names - and tunes - I'd never heard of. It turned out to be a good lesson for my ear, too.)

In this second class we began to approach metre by tackling syllable. Sure enough, many were unfamiliar with syllables and unsure how to find or use them. Their first formal assignment was to write a poem ("exercise") in syllabics, that is, one in which the syllables in each line were counted. In class they warmed up with haiku written outside in the garden (it was a hot evening). We also started a class renga, a Japanese form of linked syllabic lines.

Syllabics poem
by Raymond M. Geisler

Bukowski is a Fraud

Bukowski, the bard of
booze and broads is a fraud.
Your nasty little tales
of excess and exploits
grow tiresome and drear.
Anyone can get drunk,
go downtown and find some
one to have bad sex with.
You give it a title
and call it poetry.

I bought four of your books
before I realized
you are a pale coward.
You pretended to be
content with your lonesome
existence but you lacked
courage to write sober,
the bravery to be real,
to find the value of life
outside the bottle.

I have set you down, friend.
Like a bottle warm and

flat was my love for you.
 You are a sad old man
 with little to offer.
 You gave yourself still less,
 but you know that, don't you.
 I can't merely endure.
 I need real heroes, Hank.
 You were a passing phase.

Most days there were group exercises in class: first, simply dividing words into syllables; then finding two then three syllable words with the stress on a certain syllable; and simple rhyming exercises. Working in groups was new for most of us in a creative writing class and I did it for two reasons: one, to encourage students to work out loud, hoping it might help develop their ear, as it had helped mine. And two, because I hoped that working cooperatively might dissipate some of the fear and mystery that seem inherent when moving from the free verse world into metre. There's also a certain competitiveness inherent in the workshop process that I wanted to forestall as long as possible. In class exercises I encouraged talk and silliness and laughter. The one time I encouraged competition - asking groups to find how many two-syllable words that rhymed with a given word - I felt that poetry-killing demon, Fear, creep in. I backed away from competitive exercises.

I introduced the vocabulary of metre by labeling what they were already doing in their group exercises: the two-syllable word you just found with a stress on the second syllable, is called an iamb. I gave a mini-lecture on the omnipresence of rhythm in the world, starting with our heart beat - lub DUB (the first iamb). To encourage colloquial language, another early homework assignment was to bring into class sentences they'd heard during the week that had three, four and five strong beats. We went over these in class together, out loud. I was still asking them to find only strong stresses. They were getting comfortable with syllable.

We began to talk about stanza and the impact of rhyme, true and slant, and how to make it subtle. Every week they read sample poems from the text to talk about in class. The focus was on craft: how successful is the poem? How did the poet achieve it? How have they used stanza? line break? rhyme? stress?

Their next two assignments - writing a rhyming stanza and then a limerick - were designed to begin to move (playfully) into combining rhyme and metre. I was surprised when several students stumbled on the limerick. They seemed startled by the realization they could actually craft iamb, anapest, anapest, ("There ONCE was a GIRL from Hong KONG") and have it come out a poem. Laughter helped; many of their limericks were very funny.

Limerick
 by Katia Mieduniecki

Infidelity

Part 1
 I hear the next bed keep on squeaking.
 A couple of lovers start peaking.
 She screams the name "JILL"
 but his name is Bill
 and now all I hear is him freaking.

Part 2

I listen as Bill keeps on freaking
 about how his wife is sex sneaking.
 She had sex playing twister
 with Jill who's Bill's sister
 divorce is what Bill is now seeking.

Every week now we spent one hour workshopping the assigned exercises. At first this was difficult. Most had never before been asked to be so conscious of craft. We focussed on the form, on how closely they'd followed the rules of syllable and rhyme, enjambment and stress, and only secondarily on how it worked as a poem.

I had to admit that this was an odd order. Shouldn't we always be looking first to how it works as a poem, they asked? They are only exercises, I repeated. You're learning to dance. Get the steps right and later we'll speed up the music. (At the end of term and after some class discussion, I allowed that in their final portfolios they could make one exception, break one rule, in each poem. Surprisingly in the end, few actually did this, and I think one of the reasons was that they worked so hard at "getting the steps right".)

Rhyming Stanza
 by Deb McVittie

Unearthed

I carefully adjust the angle
 of the shovel, hardened steel
 poised to slice the earth, reveal
 the soil beneath the surface tangle.

Acarina, millipede
 free to weave through silt and sand
 'til thrust of metal tool upends
 their world, tumbles earth and weed.

Carabid and isopod
 squeeze out from under the disaster
 insect hearts beating faster
 insect eyes raised up to God.

High above the grave commotion
 set to gouge the earth anew
 I hesitate, see midnight blue
 of carabid, a bright explosion

caught in sunlight on his wings.
 Turbellarians slither, wriggle
 rhythmically, as if to signal...
 the shovel falls, cicada sings.

By now for a short time in every class we were working intensely on metre, including an exercise suggested by American formalist Marilyn Hacker, of writing ten nonsense lines in iambic pentametre, "just for fun". We continued to review these exercises out loud, on the blackboard, together. For those who quickly caught on to metre, this got a bit tedious but I persevered because so many had *not* yet got it. Only once did I notice someone in the back come close to tears of frustration. This is not to say there weren't at times, I'm certain, high

levels of impatience. Then, and whenever I felt frustration building - that old Sonnet-Anxiety - I backed off, put students into groups again, did silly rhymes. I tried to make metre as simple as possible. When scanning I asked only for strong and weak stresses and I roughly followed Robert Frost's dictum of there being only two kinds of metre: iambic and loose iambic. Looking first for iambs seemed an excellent centring and calming technique. I also found it useful, when asking someone to scan a line out loud on the blackboard, to simply follow the student's direction on where the stresses were, whether I agreed or not. Then they'd read it back - "like reading music" - and when they stumbled, I'd ask the class to help. In this way metre too, became a group exercise. It also gave an opportunity to see that there can be more than one way to scan a line.

I kept a small drum in class to beat out strong stresses. Another way I used music was when I made the crucial distinction between rhythm and metre. This was, indeed, a major stumbling point. Learning to scan a line for its metre, its pattern of soft and strong stresses, requires working on two audio levels at once: one, the rhythm of how we would ordinarily stress words in a line, and two, the hidden bass line of metre. The difficulty seems to lie primarily in getting used to the odd way metre will stress unimportant words or syllables. Reading a sentence like "The yellow bird is on the wall" rhythmically, as in everyday speech, we'd stress it (at least in Canada) thus:

The yellow BIRD is on the WALL.

But reading metrically, it would be a regular iambic tetrametre line:

The YEL ow BIRD is ON the WALL.

"Why 'on'?" students asked.

It was Sandy Shreve who gave me the idea of using Bach to explain this important difference. I found a version of J.S. Bach's "Air" (from *Orchestral Suite No. 3*), played with two instruments: cello and piano. I played it once to familiarize the class with the tune. The second time, we listened for the piano: this was the metronome, metre, absolutely steady. To underline it, I beat my drum to the piano's steady beat. The third time we listened for the cello, soaring all over the piece. This was rhythm, a voice singing over the reliability of the metronome piano beat, the metre.

This exercise felt like a turning point. Two thirds of the way through the term, individual students now started saying how useful their knowledge of form had become. Their poems were focussed, beginning to shine. When we workshopped, I was forgetting to call them "exercises". Most students were beginning to understand metre but were still not very confident and we continued to review metre orally in class, scanning lines both in the study poems and in their own work. Their fourth exercise/poem was their choice of a form using repetition or refrain: a villanelle, rondeaux (or roundel), traditional ghazal, glosa, sestina or pantoum. They were working very hard by now within the constraints of rhyme and stanza and I hoped that by giving them some choice of form (unlike in the first class) they would feel a small sense of "freedom". Around this time also, Sandy Shreve spoke to the class about her practical experience of writing in form: how she chose a form to suit the poem's content, coordinated the juggling of metre, rhyme and line in rewriting, and so on. I hoped this would give students a sense that the struggle was worthwhile - that a living, breathing, published poet (teachers, of course, don't count) - was wrestling with it, as they were.

In the fifth assignment we finally stared metre directly in the face: the assignment was to write a sonnet, terza rima or ottava rima, in iambic

pentametre. (We'd spent some time discussing how substitution in iambic pentametre is part of its attraction so "breaking the rule" of strict metre here was part of following it.)

Terza Rima (iambic pentametre)
by Diane Picket

Fog

Across the street the mall's afloat, the shift
of fog the only certainty. Lights glow,
dislodged from their accustomed mooring, drift.

The gauzy air obscures the cues that show
connection, lulls the waves of sound and space.
I move through cloud, suspended in the flow.

The sidewalk trees are close - fog can't erase
the dark lines rising from the solid ground;
a clarity of black amid the greys.

Upon a nearby branch an oval mound
resolves into an owl, alert, dark-eyed.
All fog and night reorient around

new gravity. The tranquil shape's denied
by stabbing eyes that rake the earth and sift
each secret way for prey. The wings spread wide,

but not to offer haven. Mark the swift
attack through fog, now thick with shapes that shift.

For the sixth and final assignment, I let the class go; they could write in any form they wanted that was in the text, including free verse. Surprisingly, only two of the twenty chose free verse and one chose a self-created form. Everyone else chose a traditional form - either one they hadn't tried yet, or one they wanted to try again.

At the end of term instead of a final class, we held a reading. The mood was almost exultant. I found a beautiful venue in a local art gallery. Students asked if they could bring food - a good sign that they were in the mood to celebrate - and one persuaded a local coffee shop to donate a huge thermos of hot coffee. The reading was wonderful, starting with their class renga. (Though it hadn't quite gotten around the entire class, it felt like a perfect closing of the circle.) It was obvious the students were proud of their work, as was I. There was something else, too, something I had overlooked. Formal poetry, with its emphasis on rhyme, stanza, metre and repetition, is based firmly in the oral traditions of poetry and the pleasures of sound shone in that reading. The students had clearly gone beyond the awkward phase of learning the steps, many of them to real grace. The poems sang. The class ended with me confirming what we all knew by now, "You are all dancing".

The Morning After

This class was not evaluated under the university's requirements but part way through I asked for students' anonymous comments. I include several of them here to show how they - free verse poets until now - perceived the use of form.

Comments on "What was working" for them in the class included the following: "I love the challenge of writing form. I love the initial impossibility of writing a good form poem and after writing, rewriting, etc. coming up with something. I feel more accomplished almost, after writing a form poem over a free verse." "I enjoy the challenge of writing with restrictions and rhyming. I feel as though my ideas are more diverse than personal and because of this, I like my writing better." They generally liked the text and the exercises, and working together - "Practice over and over again" was "very helpful." "Operating outside one's comfort zone," one comment read, "forces one to learn." "I look forward to writing free verse at the end of semester," one wrote, "just to see what formal poetry has done for my writing." Other comments were: "There are many uses of metre and rhythm used in everyday speech that I was unaware of." "I'm finding this valuable." "Working with so many different forms has not only exposed me to a wide variety of poems, but has forced me to write in ways I would never have tackled on my own."

Comments on what was *not* working for them included that some would have liked even more lecture time in class while others wanted more workshop time. Two seemed to sum up this conflict by suggesting that we run two courses on form: one, a first level course like this one with more lecture, and an upper-level course that focused more on writing and workshopping student work. Two-thirds of the way through the course, several were still unsure about scanning and though, with four weeks to go, I hoped this would get easier, it's certain that more work could have been done in this regard.

After their final reading several students took me aside and urgently repeated how important learning to write in form had been for them: the constriction has been liberating, they said. Following the rules had given them more choice. They felt better about their poems in general. One had discovered that a "free verse" poet she adored had in fact written extensively from a formal base. They were excited. One student who had consistently challenged me on why he had to keep to the rules, wrote later, "I think it will prove invaluable. So thank you for busting my chops on occasion."

The riddle of how certain poems are freed by restriction is an issue that calls for a separate article. But a carpenter doesn't question that the sharper the chisel and the firmer the hand on it, the finer the work.

By my criteria, this class was a success. Almost without exception, every student produced poems - often several - that went beyond "exercise" in being not only musical and "poetic" but true to the rules of form and metre in a thoroughly colloquial voice. And there was a growing sense of excitement and satisfaction with form and the options it gave them.

On the other hand, I know the course wasn't equally successful for every student. One student in particular grew increasingly lost and by the time I realized it, I couldn't bring her back. Although the final oral presentations were strikingly interesting and carefully done, I would in future encourage group presentations as an additional way of encouraging interaction. I also think the reserved seat policy gave the entire class a boost and made my job easier. I will continue to encourage group work, exercises and oral work. Emerging writers have so much to teach each other, starting with respectful audience. The longer I stand in front of a classroom, the more it seems to me that my role is to find the balance between teaching - What is an iamb? What is the difference between rhythm and metre? - and standing back to let the learning happen. I continue to seek ways to integrate them.

Italian Sonnet
by Joel Perry

Leap of Faith

For three days now the weather's changed;
the sky has worn a bluer face, the light's been thin,
seems cleaner. Winter's surely coming in
and I've been feeling odd and don't know why.
It's like my body has been pruned, my eye
well-scrubbed, the sackcloth lifted from my skin.
The air is empty like a violin
and like the bow and strings my breath is dry.
Today I'm present, tightened, tuned. The rail
beneath my forearms only slows me down
if I decide to jump. I turn: physique
subservient to will, and then inhale,
and with my coat undone, wild hair a crown,
I stand here in the ringing air and speak.

NOTE: All poems in this article were written for this class and are reprinted here with students' permission.

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