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'White Syntax': A Letter from Canada

Kevin Roberts, Emeritus Professor at Malaspina University College, British Columbia, Canada, was asked by the TEXT editors to comment further on a term he raised at the AAWP Writing 2000 conference. This is his response.

Dear *TEXT*,

The term 'white syntax' has its genesis in modern poetry with Pound, Eliot, Olson, Creeley, Levertov, and others. Lately in Canada, it has been the source of a debate about poetics involving Gary Geddes, Phyllis Webb and others. The term is part of an ongoing discussion in North American poetics. I'm not sure you'll find a definition of it in Geddes' own anthology (see below) but the concept lurks in the dark corridors of Creative Writing Departments, and I'll explain it as best I can.

'White syntax' has nothing to do with race, and could just as easily be 'blue' or 'beige' syntax. Its concerns have to do with paper, the enter key and the space-bar. It refers fundamentally to the space which may replace words on the page or create other syntactical effects. It deals with the time factor employed in or between lines or units or strophes of poetry. However it also has ramifications for fiction in terms of time jumps, or breaks or units or even chapters in the time flow of a novel. And, yes, the whole novel is 'bound' in a certain fashion, or enclosed finally, with 'white syntax'. But it's largely poetry I'm going to deal with here.

Mozart is reputed to have commented on music that it's not the notes themselves but the silence between the notes that is important. The duration of that silence or pause in poetry is the critical element in this notion of 'white syntax'. Because it clearly relates to the line in poetry, it's necessary to go back into that creaky, moldy old debate about free verse and metre.

Line structure in free verse hovers about Pound's early dictum that composition in the musical phrase was preferable to metred verse. This idea of poetry consisting of a 'voice' on the page was supported by Eliot and amplified by Olson's argument that the page was a 'field of composition', dependent upon the individual 'breath' or speaking pattern. Creeley added to the mix by contending that form ought to be essentially an extension of content - or what a poet wanted to say should determine how it turned out or looked on the page. Traditional form was demonized. Frost objected to this, declaring that free verse was like playing tennis with the net down, but he lost the argument. William Carlos Williams wrote about the need for new modes to suit the times and argued that old euclidian measures were incongruous with the relative order surrounding us.

The image of a constraining form, say a sonnet, in an iron mould of fourteen lines, into which the fluid of language was poured with predetermined rules, is rightly or wrongly spurned by most contemporary poets as a pointless restrictive force to be discarded in

favour of the open-endedness of free verse. Geoff Hill and a handful of other contemporary poets are the exception. Those of us who have dealt with first-year poetry classes know the awkward results of students engaged in inane end-rhyme chasing and jangling, sing-song rhythm.

The argument goes that when form guides or controls content, the writer's real or original intentions may be derailed or switched by the obligation to count syllables or awkwardly invert syntax in order to arrive with a rhyme at the end of a line.

For example (*pace* Shakespeare lovers) I suspect that even the great Will was tempted to string out, add on, twist and turn, and cunningly invert. Case in point, the second line of Sonnet 73:

> That time of year thou may'st in me behold,
> When yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang…

Okay. How many yellow leaves are actually on the trees? Not adding an iamb gratuitously? (Yeah, yeah, I've heard the argument that he took two looks at the tree.) Okay, what about the 'do' hang instead of just 'hang'. (Yeah, it adds the right iambic pentameter. So?) All right, it's more Elizabethan, more his individual voice, okay, yeah. And sounds better. (Maybe.) Anyway, I'm walking away from this. The main point is elsewhere.

T.S.Eliot claimed that 'no verse is free for the man who wants to do a good job.' (Innocent fellow, using 'man' like that.) Practitioners, from Pound onwards, derided the tendency of loose writing in free verse where the sentence was merely cut up and placed in short lines on the page without artistic benefit. Inevitably but gradually the revolt of free verse began to coalesce into a regime.

Denise Levertov attempted to codify the line breaks and their duration to establish a notation system similar to music where the value of line lengths, vowel versus consonant endings, colons, commas, and periods enabled the reader to follow the pauses intended on the page by the poet. This system doesn't always work out, but it is an interesting attempt to give free verse some kind of guide book to the speaking voice as demonstrated on the page. (see Geddes:920-925)

(Sidebar: After a lecture I gave some years back on the function of the line in free verse at a Canadian university on the prairies, a well-known Canadian poet in the audience undercut the whole basis of my attempts to rationalize the use of lines by announcing that she 'read her poems differently every time.' Another Milton scholar present announced that while rhyme was no ornament to verse, the return of odes and sonnets was inevitable. *Sic transit…*)

'White syntax' suggests that most prose devices like colons and commas can be compensated for, or even dispensed with, by the implementation of suitable spacing and pauses. Other effects can be more clearly delineated by the employment of syntactical space. The space should not be arbitrary, but rather an integral part of the syntactical development of the poem. As such, the line lengths become critical.

As the eye moves from left to right across the page, the poet, reading aloud, acknowledges the end of a line with a pause of slight or larger dimensions, obliging the listener (and hopefully, the careful reader) to follow the notation of the 'white' space at the end of the line - or the deliberate slide from one line to another, which rolls over the expected pause.

As we all know there are 'hard' consonant endings and softer open vowel lines which do not close at all but seem to continue on into the 'white syntax'. All these techniques contribute to emphasis and meaning. However, 'white syntax' can also work effectively in the middle of a line or elsewhere, as a necessary pause, or movement, extended or momentary. These pauses are common in traditional verse also, where commas and periods and caesuras guide the

reader to understanding. Perhaps 'white syntax' is more markedly evident and deliberately manipulative. When it works. Like all techniques, overuse turns into gimmickry.

The employment of space can introduce a pause in the thought development, an ironic counterpoint, a dramatic silence, a meditative moment, a kinetic movement, or simply a reflective, quiet break in a linked sequence of strophes or stanzas. There are also moments that are deliberately disconcerting or abrupt or challenging to the eye/ear.

A simple example might be Phyllis Webb's 'Treblinka Gas Chamber', where she parallels kinetically the falling stars of David with the children falling like petals to their death in the gas chamber:

Falling stars

'A field of

buttercups'

yellow stars

of David

falling

the prisoners

the children

falling (Geddes:346)

At another level, Atwood employs a number of syntactical devices in 'Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer (IV)':

By daylight he resisted.
He said, disgusted
With the swamp's clamourings and the outbursts
Of rocks

This is not order
But the absence
Of order.

He was wrong, the unanswering
Forest implied:

It was
An ordered absence. (Geddes:491)

In the first stanza, Atwood's use of end-stopped lines with a hard consonant or period suggests certainty, immediately undercut by the next long, noisy line which opens out the natural, sharp, untamable opposition to the pioneer's false conviction about order. A thoughtful pause leads to another attempted assessment, by the pioneer, of the absence of order. This is in turn denied by the silence of the forest and its totally open-ended implication of another sense of order, reinforced by the softer more open-line ending, 'absence'.

Not clear yet?

To make things more obvious, I'll throw in an exercise which may clarify what I've been talking about. The lines of the following poems certainly do not attempt anything much, but are merely designed as an attempt to show what can be done with 'white syntax'. The first version is a straightforward two line effort:

> A poem's a palomino, prancing under half a moon
> Shadows and white light amongst the ghostly gums.

If I take those simple lines and work on them a bit, the result could look like this:

A poem palomino

prances

under half moon

shadows white

light

in out ghostly

gums

The admittedly gimmicky and exaggerated second version shows how spacing allows for the omissions of inert connectives, employs more kinetic movement, doubles nouns as verbs, offers more of a possible visual glimpse, adds to the attempted definition of a poem and creates more tension, more a sense of the ineffable nature of poetry. (Okay, I can hear a chorus saying they like the first version better.)

While I'm writing here about traditional poetry published in little magazines, (*passé*, I'm told) I recognize the proximity 'white syntax' has to 'concrete' or sound poetry. I'm also well aware that the concept of time and space has been greatly developed by cyberpoetry and has moved many bytes away from the traditional page. Nevertheless, the poem on the page employing 'white syntax' clearly has potential.

I'm also aware that 'white syntax' can be effective in prose fiction transitions from units/chapters, by holding in suspense unresolved time/space elements. A simple example is that of a short story having a white break between time lapses or events or characters. However I think that the potential for that hesitation, uncertainty, that reluctance, indecision, reflection, inference, questioning, suspense, and thoughtful delay, is more effective in poetry in that it mirrors the uncertain voyage of the poet's struggling deliberations about the mystery of all that surrounds us.

There you have it!

Cheers,

Kevin Roberts

References

Geddes, Gary. *Twentieth Century Poetry and Poetics*. Toronto: OUP, 1996. Return to article

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