Virtual Muse

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START WITH POETRY

Start with the idea of juxtaposition, which has come to be a fundamental principle of poetic structure. It's easiest to see at work in small, isolated examples, such as short Imagist poems from the first part of this century. Or here, at the climactic moment in a poem by Ezra Pound, translated from the Chinese as "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter":

> You dragged your feet when you went out.
> By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,
> Too deep to clear them away!
> The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.
> The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
> Over the grass in the West garden;
> They hurt me. I grow older.

Here's another translation of the same lines, by Witter Bynner (who calls the poem "A Song of Ch'ang Kan"):

> Your footprints by our door, where I had watched you go,
> Were hidden, every one of them, under green moss,
> Hidden under moss too deep to sweep away.
> And the first autumn wind added fallen leaves.
> And now, in the Eighth-month, yellowing butterflies
> Hover, two by two, in our west-garden grasses. . . .
> And, because of all this, my heart is breaking
> And I fear for my bright cheeks, lest they fade.

What's striking about Pound's version is the jumps. The details are juxtaposed—placed side by side without transitions. He doesn't ex-

plain what the moss, the leaves, the butterflies, and August have to do with each other or what any of them have to do with the woman speaking in this "letter" to her husband, the "river-merchant."

In contrast, Bynner is very anxious to cover up the gaps. Look at all those *and*s. He takes great pains to tell us every point where we are and how we got there. "And now," for instance, is a signal to tell us that the woman is through talking about the past and therefore that the poem has reached a turning point. "Because of all this" instructs us to review everything that's come before. It's meant to prepare us for the emotional climax.

It does seem useful to keep readers informed about where they are. (It's certainly a primary rule of technical writing.) How does Pound get away without all those signposts that Bynner is so careful to provide for us?

Pound solves the first problem—making the switch into the present—by the simple expedient of switching to present-tense verbs. In other words, he uses a signal built into the structure of the English language to replace Bynner's awkwardly explicit transition. In comparison, how much does "and" really mean in Bynner's lines?

Bynner's "Because of all this" seems like a more substantial, expedient gesture of connection. Yet Pound reduces Bynner's last two lines to just six words: "They hurt me. I grow older."

Why does this work? It works because we readers deduce. (Think of all we deduce from Pound's title.) In reading this terse line we begin (without thinking about it) by identifying "they" as the butterflies. To understand how the butterflies can "hurt me," we have to recall that they are paired and the speaker isn't, which in turn evokes the whole history of the marriage that earlier stanzas have told. So Pound finds a way to make his readers do automatically what Bynner insists on waving a big flag about.

Because Pound doesn't supply the connections, we do. That's the basic idea. Through juxtaposition the poet lets the structure of the language do the work of a lot of explanation. And in the process the poet enlists the reader's help in making the connections that make meaning. Enlisted, we become engaged.

Pound, T. S. Eliot, and William Carlos Williams all discovered important variations on the principle of juxtaposition. Local effects like the ones we've just seen were only the beginning. These poets went on to use juxtaposition in building new kinds of long poems: Pound in the *Cantos*, Eliot in *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, and Williams in *Paterson*. In these big works, the most influential poems in the first half of this century, they set whole sections next to each other without transition. The sections often differ strikingly in subject, voice, and form. The links of narrative, history, and logical implication that hold the poem together are left for us to supply, guided by the arrangement of the pieces. The coherence of the poem and, finally, its activity of meaning reside in these gaps the poet leaves in the structure. In Beethoven the silences are no less important than the notes; in Modernist poetry the juxtapositions say as much as do the lines themselves.

In fact, juxtaposition became a kind of trademark, a defining characteristic of Modernism in poetry, beginning before World War I and continuing into the present. Yet the principle is older than that. Poets since before Homer have valued the special kind of eloquence that comes from silence. We're all good enough rhetoricians to know that reticence and understatement can be more powerful than exaggeration.

John Lennon and Paul McCartney probably learned this trick from the old ballads that are every English-speaking person's poetic heritage. Think of the final verse of "And I Love Her," which juxtaposes bright stars and dark sky with undying love. Logically, what do these astronomical commonplaces have to do with the declaration of eternal love? Yet the conviction we hear in the song comes partly from the juxtaposition between an obvious universal truth and what might, all by itself, be a more dubious human affirmation. Any attempt to make an explicit transition would just turn it into a lie.

Again, it's we who supply the sense of conviction. The poet seems to do nothing but state the facts. Juxtaposition makes the reader an accomplice in the poem, forging the links of meaning. In the process we supply a lot of energy, and that involves us in the poem.

It follows that the bigger the gap, the more powerful the effect (as long as we can cross it at all). Metaphor works the same way. If the two things a metaphor compares are very close to each other to begin with, the metaphor doesn't do very much. "This car's a pile of junk" is emphatic but not revelatory. If they're more different, the metaphor seems to release a larger amount of meaning. When Marvell speaks of oranges on the tree as "golden lamps in a green night," the echoes resound in the chasm we've had to leap.

Eventually, though, the gap would get to be too big to cross. What happens then? When we can't make the leap, we call what we're reading *nonsense*. It doesn't make sense, or more accurately, we no longer know how to make sense of it.

In this context, the term "nonsense verse" is something of a misnomer. Lewis Carroll's poems work, not by failing to make sense but by teasing our ability to make sense of them. Some, like "Jabberwocky," depend simply on made-up words:

> 'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
> Did gyre and gimble in the wabe . . .

We don't know what "brillig" means or "slithy toves" or "wabe." Yet we can guess a lot quite easily. "Toves" have to be animals of some kind (the movements that "gyre and gimble" connote are too active for plants waving in the breeze). "Brillig" has to be a season or weather, and a "wabe" an item of landscape or time of day. The syntactical system of English, which Carroll leaves intact while disrupting the vocabulary, carries a far greater proportion of the meaning of a sentence than we're usually aware of.

(Actually, many of the apparently new words in "Jabberwocky" turn out to be archaic or obscure words that Carroll, knowingly or not, partially redefined. "Gyre" means "spiral"; gimbals, sometimes spelled "gimbles," are pivots on which things like lamps swing back and forth. Often the original meaning seems to have at least some influence on his invented usage. The inertia of a language system is really enormous.)

Other poems from the Alice books disorient our reading more

subtly. The "paper of verses" read by the White Rabbit in evidence against the Knave is full of stanzas like this:

> I gave her one, they gave him two,
> You gave us three or more;
> They all returned from him to you,
> Though they were mine before.

Some kind of "plot" is still clear here. The consecutive numbers contribute. So do cues like "though" and "before." And there's a constant movement *away*, toward the third-person him and them, and *returning* to you and me. If it weren't for these continuities, the poem wouldn't be just "nonsense"; it would be gibberish and uninteresting. Carroll simply obscures his language's *reference* to anything in the familiar world by the disorder he lets loose among the pronouns.

"Serious" poets disrupt the ordinary patterns of meaning, too, sometimes in ways that strikingly resemble Carrollian "nonsense." Here's the beginning of John Ashbery's "The Grapevine" (from his 1956 book, *Some Trees*):

> Of who we and all they are
> You all now know. But you know
> After they began to find us out we grew
> Before they died thinking us the causes
> Of their acts.

Like Carroll, in this and many other poems, Ashbery obscures his references to the nonlinguistic world we think we all know in common. Yet the sense of the language, its internal relations of syntax and semantic categories, remains largely intact. Again "they" are ranged against "we" and "you." And words like "know," and "find out," and "thinking" suggest a train of thought.

The result, as Alice says of "Jabberwocky," is that "it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don't know exactly what they are." So this kind of language is a little like music, which refers to nothing but which no one would call meaningless. And it's clear why poets need to do this. Our daily use of language is made possible by habits

and conventions, but habit makes our language boring and dead. Humpty Dumpty says the question about words is "which is to be master—that's all." As a critic, Roger Holmes, remarked, "In one sense words are our masters, or communication would be impossible. In another we are the masters; otherwise there could be no poetry." Language working on autopilot lets us talk our way through our days. But the aerobatics that teach us what the craft can do require an alert hand on the controls.

Understanding isn't additive. Meaning doesn't accumulate word by word as we trudge through a sentence. It precipitates, as rain precipitates out of air under the right conditions. (In the recent language of Complexity Theory, meaning is an *emergent phenomenon*.) Reading takes place within a context, and the context is present at the reading because the reader brings it along. We readers are always helping supply meaning, which suggests that juxtaposition is at work in all acts of sense making. Sense is never absolutely continuous; there are irreducible gaps. (Bynner's anxious *and*s were futile from the start.) Poetry tends to make us more aware of the gaps than does conversation or political speeches. Some poets emphasize the gaps among single words, as in the "Jabberwocky" style of nonsense. Others emphasize the gulf that separates one whole sentence from the next. Most poetry stays between these extremes, surprising us most frequently on the level of the phrase and the line.

Take Laura Jensen, a strange and exemplary poet, whose sixth book, *Memory*, was published in 1982. It contains a wonderful spooky poem about a cat, called "The Clean One." Jensen begins with the animal's pretty fastidiousness—

> He gathers them close, the pads of his paws,
> Like a nosegay of kisses.

—and ends with the violence of its predation:

> But instead, in his teeth he carries
> the bird to some private corner,
> slits the breast with his claw, a razor,
> and the light of the heart spills into time.

Looking just at three lines, the first two and the last, let's see what a dance the reader does at the poem's instigation.

In a way, everything seems simple enough in the first line. It's easy to visualize the cat flexing its paws as cats do. The next line adds a simile, which shouldn't be a problem. But actually we take some bigger steps than we expect, like missing one stair on the way down. The paws resemble a nosegay, a bouquet of flowers. Yet paws are more like hands holding a bouquet than the bouquet itself; two things have gotten blended. And it's a nosegay not of flowers but of kisses. So there's a metaphor (kisses for flowers) within the simile (paws like a nosegay). The echo between "nose" and "kisses" may evoke the cat washing its face, justifying the name, "the Clean One." Furthermore, if what the cat gathers the paws close to is his mouth, then the "kisses" seem not just three steps removed from the beginning but also a return to the beginning.

The kind of attention we're called on to pay here makes us notice that the first line, too, was a bit peculiar after all. "The pads of his paws" now seems an odd phrase, as if the pads and paws could be detached from each other. The nosegay is suddenly exploded into separate flowers. It's often this way: Strangeness radiates from certain areas of a poem and suffuses the language of the whole thing—and sometimes, for a while, our feeling for language outside the poem.

In the final line, "the light of the heart" has a different kind of density. It might be a phrase describing something abstract, like true understanding—"enlightenment," we say. But also when the cat "slits the breast" of the bird, exposing the heart, he literally brings light to the heart, which is also death. Hearts need to do their work in the dark. At the same time, the verb "spills" makes the "light" the heart's blood. And while the blood spills "into time," into mortality and decay, this exiles the heart's owner, the bird, out of time into death. Reading a line like this, we're aware of how much is being brought together; but that depends on things being split apart by our sharpened attention.

Jensen's work capitalizes on technical discoveries—discoveries about uses of language—that have been made by a couple of genera-

tions of modern poets. Some contemporary poetry goes still farther in pursuing the attention to gaps in sense and the complicity between poets and readers in the making of meaning. In the last couple of decades, some poets have pursued these insights into language, not just as a poetic method but as the content or subject of their poems.

Barrett Watten's "Complete Thought" is built from fifty pairs of sentences. The poem's topic is the relation between these pairs, and often their topic is themselves. Here's XVI:

> I am speaking in an abridged form.
> Ordinary voices speak in rooms.

We can't read this without thinking in an unaccustomed way about the treacherous depths of the little word "in." And do the two sentences, juxtaposed, imply an equation between "I" and a "voice"?

In Rosmarie Waldrop's haunting line, "The proportion of accident in my picture of the world falls with the rain," we can hardly tell where we stumbled. On "with"? Back on "falls"? Or only at "rain"? Or did we not miss any turning at all—in which case, why does the sentence feel so odd, and does all language potentially feel just as unstable? (In this book, *The Reproduction of Profiles* [New Directions, 1987], Waldrop is also splicing and revising phrases from the language philosopher Wittgenstein, which adds still more disorienting echoes.)

Ron Silliman (whose book of essays called *The New Sentence* offers the best explanations of this kind of poetry) has a thirty-page prose poem called "Sunset Debris" (in *The Age of Huts*) made entirely of questions, ranging all the way from "Ain't it a bitch?" to "Why is it that painters now are so obsessed with the elimination of space, that composers want to obliterate time, that writers feel compelled to remove the referential?" This massive consistency shifts our attention to the nature of questions themselves. Each sentence, rather than asking something (like questions in conversation) begins to *exemplify questioning*.

This shift resembles the distinction that linguists make between *use* and *mention*. If I say, "The vixens protect their dens," I'm *using* the

word "vixens" to talk about female foxes. If I say, " 'Vixens' is a great Scrabble word," I'm *mentioning* the word "vixens." One effect of poetry can be to shift its language from use toward mention, making us aware of words and sentences partly *as* language and not simply as references to nonlinguistic things. This need not be trivial or a retreat from human concerns. Much of the mystery in our relation to the world is embodied in language's mysterious relation.

Again, the movement of poems like these resembles the movement that gives meaning to music. The unfolding of one phrase into the next, the rise and fall of sound and feeling, the shifts and contrasts, mean something in themselves, beyond the propositions the poem offers about the world. But if poetry is like music, music is also like mathematics. And again Lewis Carroll, a mathematical logician whose poetry and fiction were hobbies, showed the way toward the poetry of logic.

In the long Romantic period—perhaps not over yet—poetic truth and logical truth often seemed opposed. (So did science and literature, the "two cultures." So would computers and poetry.) Looking back at Lewis Carroll's work in the middle of the nineteenth century, though, we begin to see the potential similarity of logical and poetic structures. His exercises in symbolic logic lead up to surrealistic conclusions like "No hedge-hog takes in the *Times*." Here's the set of propositions he uses to prove that "I always avoid a kangaroo."

1. The only animals in this house are cats;
2. Every animal is suitable for a pet, that loves to gaze at the moon;
3. When I detest an animal, I avoid it;
4. No animals are carnivorous, unless they prowl at night;
5. No cat fails to kill mice;
6. No animals ever take to me, except what are in this house;
7. Kangaroos are not suitable for pets;
8. None but carnivora kill mice;
9. I detest animals that do not take to me;
10. Animals, that prowl at night, always love to gaze at the moon.

The temptation to read these sentences as a poem is strong. Just so, a poem by David Antin called "Stanzas" is made up entirely of the artificial logical structures we call syllogisms. They begin simply enough:

> if the street is sprinkled there is no dust in the air
> the street is sprinkled
> there is no dust in the air

But by the second page we're getting this:

> pillows are soft
> pokers are not
> pillows are not pokers

True, and logically valid—but somehow all wrong. We don't tell pillows from pokers by syllogistic reasoning. This mode of argument seems bizarre when it bumps against our real world. And it isn't just logic that's threatened:

> if war is declared the country will be invaded
> war is not declared
> the country is invaded

This doesn't follow. We know that some logic has been violated. Later, when we read

> if war is declared the country will be invaded
> war is declared
> the country is invaded

we know that (1) the logic is correct and (2) the conclusion may be true, but (3) there's no connection between the two. The conclusion follows from historical necessities on which formal logic has no realistic grip. By the end of Antin's poem, he can show how this gap admits incredible (but chillingly familiar) reasoning like this:

> all Germans are white men
> all civilized men are white
> all Germans are civilized

Syllogisms pretend to be impersonal language—the objective voice of truth. But any real use of language resounds with voices that aren't impersonal or objective at all. Antin's poem sets the language of logic (the syllogistic form) against the logic of language (the content determined by personal and historical circumstances). The struggle between these two voices and among all the voices that inevitably resound in his language *is* the meaning of the poem. It's a political meaning; political interactions are linguistic.

Poets working in this area are often called, reasonably enough, "language" poets. Many of them are interested in linguistics. Before this century, linguists mostly studied phonetics and the origins of words. Modern linguistics begins with Ferdinand de Saussure's idea of language as a "structure of differences." Saussure's approach has turned out to be a useful way to think about at least some poetry.

Language is a "structure of differences" in the sense that words don't get their meaning directly from referring to things in the world. They get their meaning from their relations to other words, most basically from their distinctions. Phonetically, *cat* is different from *bat* because of the difference between the sounds *c* and *b*. If it weren't for that difference, the two words couldn't refer to different animals. So the words are defined in the first place by their places within a self-contained system of language. Many words have meaning *only* because of their relations within that system: *which*, *the*, *only*, and so on.

This idea sometimes puzzles people. How can a self-contained system mean anything? This turns out to be similar to another puzzle: How can computers store and manipulate information? From a logical standpoint, a computer is just a box full of switches. Each switch is either on or off. We can call *on* 1 and *off* 0, though that's just a convention. (It's also a convention to call each 1-or-0 switch a "bit" of information, for "binary digit.") Inside the box, *on* is a certain electrical voltage, and *off* is a different voltage. How can two levels of voltage, or even 1's and 0's, refer to anything outside the box, such as planes approaching an airport?

If you ask a computer what it's thinking, in its own terms, the

answer will be 1101000101111010110110101001101. . . . There has to be a prearranged code to translate this into our terms (and vice versa, of course). One popular code says that the pattern 01000001 will stand for a capital *A*, 00101011 for a plus sign, and so on. There are 128 of these "ASCII code" equivalences. Another code, known to the CPU (the central processing unit) and used for calculation rather than data, says that 01000110 will stand for the instruction "add one to the number found at such-and-such a place in memory." The computer knows which code to apply from the context.

What does this have to do with poetry?

Maybe nothing. Maybe it's just a suggestive analogy, and maybe only my own quirk makes it even that. But there's a common thread running through everything we've looked at in these preliminary chapters. How do grand structures of meaning get built up out of bits and pieces? Chorales and constitutions and cathedrals are products of human thought, which seems to be the product of brain cells, but the path from one end of this chain to the other is remarkably devious. Poetry is one way of exploring the maze of mind. It's time to go back and retrace how I came to use computers in that exploration.