

ANGLICA

An International Journal of English Studies

32/1 2023

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Anglica An International Journal of English Studies

ISSN 0860-5734

www.anglica-journal.com

DOI: 10.7311/Anglica/31.1

Publisher:

Institute of English Studies University of Warsaw

ul. Hoża 69

00-681 Warszawa

Nakład: 30 egz.

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Typesetting:

TG

Cover design:

TG

Printing and binding:

Sowa – Druk na życzenie

www.sowadruk.pl

+48 22 431 81 40

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**Patrick Gill, ed. (2023). *An Introduction to Poetic Forms*.
New York and London: Routledge, 238 pages, ISBN 9781032154015.**
(Agnieszka Pantuchowicz, SWPS University, Warsaw,
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What *An Introduction to Poetic Forms* introduces is something more than a list of the standard forms and patterns of poetic expression. It in fact assumes that such forms are somehow culturally, or perhaps archetypally, present in readers' minds, though without necessarily being recognized or named by them. If, for Plato, forms were archetypes of all phenomena and their formative principle, their poetic expression was seen as already imitative. Modified by the adjective "poetic" and thus translated into "poetic form," Plato's form becomes opened to imitation, an imperfect repetition which, established as a pattern or a matrix, gives birth to even more imperfections. In the introduction to *An Introduction to Poetic Forms*, poetic forms figure as invitations to repetitions and variations, to the imperfection of the coexistence of "constraint and freedom," which coexistence inevitably brings in "the sense of continuity within human culture" (3). Though the book does not refer to Plato's expulsion of poets from the ideal state, it claims that poetic forms, however changeable, are patterns of human creativity in which the tether of repetition is loosened by art, by variation through *poiesis*. What any study of poetic forms may thus reveal is not their rigid categorization and unchangeability, but "culture's foundational impulse" seen as "the continued communication of ideas and imagined concepts across space and time" (3). What poetic forms do is a provision of "frameworks of references" which enable works by different writers and from different periods of time to be put "into fruitful dialogue with one another" and thus to activate "an additional level of meaning" (4). Forms are seen in the book as taking part in the construction of poems' senses and meanings, and the book's contributors do not take an "encyclopaedic approach" to the subject, but rather offer insights into "how a form shapes the topics that are treated in it" (5). Each chapter of the book does begin with an encyclopaedic definition of the kind of poetic form to which it is devoted, but what follows such a definition is its problematization which constitutes an invitation to the readers to construct their own responses.

The first section of the book is titled "Elements of Form" and introduces relevant terminology, simultaneously bringing in a general view on the mode of existence of poetic forms without classifying them into literary genres. The five chapters of this section discuss rhyme and meter, enjambment and caesura, persona and performance

of poetry. The discussion of rhyme with which this section opens raises the question of the dependence of text comprehension on the text type and the role of rhyme in the construction of senses. Another question connected with rhyme which the book discusses is the restrictive aspect of rhyme. As a “self-imposed constraint” (16), rhyme limits the freedom of choice of words, which limitation serves a few functions absent in what might be called free use of language. Though meter is a less constraining element of poetic form, its detailed discussion in the volume shows that its treatment as a “poem’s heartbeat” too strongly naturalizes it, and that it should be viewed as a “set of shared conventions between poet and reader” (36). The categories of enjambment and caesura are also exhaustively presented and discussed in this section as extralinguistic effects of “line-breaking” designed to prevent monotony and underline poetic argument. The discussion of persona included in the volume is in fact a reminder of the fact that the narrator of a poetic text should not be identified with the voice of the author. The concept is shown as “essential to poetry as a human action,” and yet one which can be always suspected of wearing a mask. Also seen as “the most significant concretization of poetry,” the persona is always a matter of the readers’ interpretation. Poetry in performance is an opportunity of an alternative interpretation of persona. The reading poet, seen as a “living medium for the poem” (62), is also a figure of embodied poetry speaking to the audience which allows for full appreciation of the dialogic quality of performed poems.

The elements of form are clearly presented in this part of the book, and constitute a foundation for the second part in which poetic forms appearing in the English language and literary tradition are taken up and discussed. This part – titled “Poetic Forms” – is in a way again returning to an encyclopaedic form as its chapters are in fact alphabetically listing the names of poetic forms in usually short articles which may be compared to long dictionary entries. The choice is, as it seems, dictated by an attempt at avoiding hierarchization of the poetic forms as one of the effects of the book is to show their mutual dependence and negotiability of their strict categorization. The effect of a strict order evoked by the alphabetic ordering and the system of cross-referencing is thus weakened through “complicating the story and illustrating how shifts in culture or individual artists have changed the form under discussion” (5). Though encyclopaedia seems not to be a poetic form in itself, the spirit of its poetics which Vincent Descombes saw as going around its subject and create an effect of totality speaks through *An Introduction to Poetic Forms* regardless of the relative shortness of the text. The chosen form of the book makes it easy for the reader to find particular categories within the text.

The choice of poetic forms discussed in the book is not limited to those whose names are the headings of the particular chapters (“The Ballad,” “Blank Verse,” “The Blazon,” “Concrete Poetry,” “The Dramatic Monologue,” “Ekphrastic Poetry,” “The Elegy,” “The Epic,” “Free Verse,” “The Heroic Couplet,” “The Long Poem,” “Mock-Heroic Poetry,” “The Ode,” “The Prospect Poem,” “The Sestina,” “The Sonnet,” “The Villanelle”) as numerous other poetic forms are taken up in the

discussions within the articles themselves. I will not discuss all of them here, just mentioning a few, so as to show the originality of the idea of the book and its usefulness as an introductory reading for students of literature and literary scholars, as a source of both the knowledge of poetic forms and as an inspiration to their original uses in interpreting poetic texts taking into consideration those meanings whose generation may be ascribed to their poetic forms. What this kind of approach as it were suspends is the traditional division of forms into prescriptive (like the ballad or the sonnet) and non-prescriptive form governed by internal argumentative structure of poems, so that the study of poetic form ceases to be a matter of counting syllables and recognizing kinds of rhymes. What thus also comes to the fore in the book is the cultural dimension of the meaning-generating potential of poetic forms and their social and political significance. The ballad, for instance, is presented in the book as a form whose easy memorability endows it with the democratizing power “employed by multiple generations for sharing content with each other” (75). The form of the ballad enabled regional identity to live also beyond published poetry, and as stemming from the familiar and recognizable, “to reveal something about regional identity and a sense of place” (75). Numerous examples of ballads given in the article devoted to them come from different times and places, and the variety of their sometimes transformed forms proves their still lasting possibilities without the “blind allegiance” (82) to their standard form. Be it the popular broadside ballads, or the poetic ballads of Wordsworth and Coleridge, the form of the ballad is their meeting point which proves the falsity of this traditional dichotomy (78). The article, like all the articles in the second section of the book, provides readers with encyclopaedic and traditional academic definitions of the ballad, simultaneously, in accordance with the general scheme of the *Introduction*, problematizing the term and showing sometimes divergent uses of the form of ballad in literary tradition. At the end of the article readers are directed to further readings linking the ballad with other poetic forms. This is also a part of the general scheme of the book which underlines its introductory intentions, where introduction means not only a beginning, but also an invitation and inspiration to further studies.

Though introductory, the book offers numerous original insights into the role of poetic form in literature. The chapter titled “The Blazon,” for instance, offers a feminist perspective on this form which “consists in cataloguing the physical attributes of a subject, usually a woman” (94). Enquiring about the violent nature of such a cataloguing, and exemplifying it with texts by Petrarch, Shakespeare, Spenser, Campion, Rossetti and Swinburn, the chapter shows that the violent male gaze involved in dividing and splitting the body was sometimes critiqued by poets themselves through the use of this very form. This chapter, like most of the chapters in the book, shows that interpreting poetry through its form may be a truly enjoyable activity, which simultaneously reveals social aspects of the choice of the form by the poet. The blazon is also a kind of ekphrasis in which parts of the body are translated into a poetic expression. In the chapter on ekphrastic poetry, however, the idea of the

possibility of translating an image into a text is questioned. “The gap between the visual object and its poetic representation” (125) is never fully bridgeable, and the article illustrates this dilemma analysing John Keats’s *Ode on a Grecian Urn* and Algernon Charles Swinburn’s poem *Before the Mirror*. The article reads ekphrastic poetry as “an inevitable failure to speak for the visual source by which it is inspired” (130) and proves Swinburn’s poem to be a reinforcement of the differences between them. Ekphrastic poetry is a non-prescriptive kind of poetic form, and the fact that it can take the form of an ode (as in Keats) makes it into a kind of writing depending on the source of inspiration in which the visual can be broadly understood, and though the author of the article does not state it, it also may well involve seeing with one’s mind’s eye. Keats’s choice of the form of ode in this respect is quite telling, as he is not really describing what he sees, but rather writing about the silence of the urn which, in turn, is the poetic voice of the Greek culture. The chapter on ekphrastic poetry thus sends the reader to the chapter on the ode (“The Ode”).

Such cross-references are, I think, a strong point of the book which does not offer an expert vision of the ways in which poetic forms work, but allows for wandering among the problems posed by their uses (and abuses) in various texts throughout literature’s historical changes. Since the authors of the entries/articles come from different countries and represent different theoretical attitudes to literary studies, it seems to be assumed by the editor that a uniform and a perfectly coherent view on poetic forms is really unthinkable. Doubts and uncertainties put academic research in motion, and one does not have to accept all the arguments and excurses of the particular chapters, and still become engaged in the pursuit of the possibilities of the proposed direction of reading poetic forms. If we go to the article “The Ode,” which already in the first line compares the ode to tragedy and elegy, we will read that on top of its standard sense of a meditation on some “worthy object” (184), it also has a meta-poetic dimension derived from its Greek sense of the song. The term synecdochally stands for “what we today call lyric poetry, and ‘poetic speech’ in general” (184), thus possibly positing the odist as a general figure of the poet who is licensed to choose the objects worthy of praising. Horace’s Ode IV:7, written in praise of life and nature, introduces the problem of the shift of odes’ 16th- and 17th-century imitations to a new form given to the ode by John Milton in *The Nativity Ode* seen as a transposition of the form into a Christian context. A brief presentation of the history of the ode in this article draws attention to the fact that canonical odes were written by “white men who, on account of their gender and race, spoke from a position of privilege” (191), then giving a few recent examples of reclaiming the form for less privileged ethnic and gender positions (Anaïs Duplan, Robert Colecott, Sharon Olds). One of the suggestions for further reading proposes to look at 18th-century parodies of odes as movement toward mock-heroic poetry to which another article in the book is devoted. That chapter (“Mock-Heroic Poetry”), in turn, discusses Alexander Pope’s *The Rape of the Locke* and *The Dunciad* as texts illustrating the passage from subtle irony to

harsh satire in the reading of the political and social reality of the Augustan Age. The heroic warfare of Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid* is turned into a critique of greatness and heroism which is made possible by the power of the mock-heroic poetic form to diminish the alleged and politically constructed magnitude of the state, its institutions, and its arts. Showing mock-heroic poetry as a strong tool of political criticism, the chapter interestingly suggests a possible affinity between the "apocalyptic ending" of *The Dunciad* and the gloomy atmosphere of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and inviting the reader to consult the chapter on the long poem.

Through such cross-referencing, *Introduction to Poetic Forms* informs its readers that there is always something more to say about the categories and notions it discusses, and for this reason it is also a highly useful guide to creative academicism. Though each of the articles is an example of an advanced individual research, each of them also underlines the necessity of academic modesty in which the work of others constitutes a crucial aspect of academic research. Perhaps in line with John Dewey's conviction that "the educational process is one of continual reorganizing, reconstructing, and transforming" (Dewey 54), *Introduction* itself is an example of such an attitude, simultaneously positing transformation of poetic forms, rather than forms in themselves, the relevant issue of study. Above I have tried to outline the scope of the book through a brief summation of only a few chapters in order to show why the book can be useful in further studies of the poetic form. On the whole the book is inspiring and insightful, but first of all, as I have already noted, it is an introductory guide to original ways of reading poetry which can be of value in academic writing, and in academic teaching of literature in general.

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