Title of the Course: The Universal Language of Poets and the Shape of Meaning

Alternative Title: Poetese and the Shape of Meaning

Description:

In any literate culture, poetry is placed language. Poets decide where on the page to put questions, long words, light or dark vowels. This course aims at explaining the basic elements and processes of “Poetese” (such as rhyme, metaphor, etc.) and also at showing how corridors – lines of similar elements – can add visual harmony to poetic impact. They can add to beauty.

Objectives:

This course will aim at familiarizing students with the types of devices that poets can use to make their work transcend the usual bounds of language – that can give it a huge heave-ho towards the eternal. Of course, there will be discussion of such traditional topics as rhyme, alliteration, meter, metaphor, etc. But above and beyond these well-known devices, there are a number of others which have emerged in my research on this topic in the past three decades. Some of these are named in the outline which follows below. I will not try to go into the details of what these terms mean in this brief overview. They are defined in the papers of mine that I have listed below, which I will be happy to furnish, should there be interest in them. Most of the terms, such as sectioning, co-sectioning, splitting, lonering and sore-thumbing deal with the distribution of linguistic elements. Some of these originate with me, but even if original, they are not revolutionary.

This is not the case with what I call corridors. Some poets place similar linguistic items in ways that “make sense” visually. An obvious example: on the left margins of many poems there is a vertical corridor, because the poet had decided to have a number of the lines
of the poem start in exactly the same way. A quick example is the
Irish blessing shown below:

May the road rise up to meet you
may the wind be always at your back
may the sun shine warm upon your face
and the rain fall soft upon your fields.
Until we meet again my friend
may God hold you in the palm of His hand.

What I have discovered in my work is that such corridors can
be in many different parts of the poem, and that they can not only be
straight lines, but also curved, and that they can also be closed curves,
or polygonal in shape. My intent in this course is to teach the
students not only about the more traditional ways of structuring a
poem, but also to offer them something like a research seminar,
introducing to them the possibility of corridors and other visual
devices, an area of research in which I have published nothing to date.
Thus I hope to engage the students as co-researchers, and to make our
course as discovery-centered as possible. No one in the room, least of
all me, will know what “the right answer” might be – we will all only be
looking for next steps in what seems like a promising direction.

Topical Outline:

Week One: Some basic concepts of poetic structuration:
parallelism, and the kinds of repetition it depends on
how it leads to sectioning, co-sectioning, splitting,

Poems: The Twenty-third Psalm; Dhammapada;
Martin Luther King, “I Have a Dream”; The
Declaration of Independence; Stallings,
“Explaining an Affinity for Bats”; (May the
road rise up to meet you); Hopkins, “The
Windhover”; Frost, “The Road Not Taken”;
Frost, “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy
Evening”; Lennon, “Imagine”

Assignment: find a sore-thumbed stanza in Dylan
Thomas’s “Fern Hill.” Discuss the parallels in
the “Serenity Prayer.” Diagram the parallels in a
selection from a religious text of your choice.

Week Two: Rhyme schemes revisited. Hologramming and
numerical rhyme. Repetition revisited. The “eye” of a
poem. The importance of line-initial and line-final
positionings. Enjambement.

Poems: Paz, “Viento, Agua, Piedra”; W. C. Williams,
“To Waken an Old Lady”; Frost,
“Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening” (revisit)

Assignment: find arguments for sectioning Mark Smith-Soto’s “Manhattan Buddha” and Frost’s “Mending Wall.” Find a chapter of a book (not too long) that you are reading and section it.


Assignment: What is the rhyme scheme of Dylan Thomas’s “In my craft or sullen art”? Is it connected in any way with the impact of the poem?


Poems: Dickinson, (The gleam of an heroic act); Levertov, “Living”; Sandburg, “Fog”; Frost, “Fire and Ice”

Assignment: Find three poems which have left-edge corridors.


Assignment: Consider Charles Olson’s “These Days.” Is it corridored? Does it contain partial anagrams? Are there corridors in Thich Nhat Hanh’s “Please Call Me By My True Names”?


Poem: Blake, “The Tyger”

Assignment: Is Hopkins’s “Pied Beauty” co-sectioned?

Poem: Stevens, “The Well Dressed Man with a Beard”

Midterm take-home exam.

Week Eight: Closed-form corridors revisited.

Poems: Drummond, “Canção Amiga”; Cabral, “Rio e/o Poço”; Stafford, “Traveling Through the Night”

Assignment: How might Kenyon’s “Let Evening Come” be sectioned? Is there a warrant for postulating corridors for it?

TAKE-HOME MIDTERM

Week Nine: Repetition revisited. The one-end-of-line :: other-end-of-line :: back-to-first-end-of-line gesture.

Poems: Stevens, “So-and-so reclining on her couch”;

Assignment: How might Stevens’ poem, “The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm” be sectioned? Is there a warrant for postulating corridors for it?

Week Ten: Polygonal corridors.

Poem: Hicok, “Other Lives and Dimensions and Finally a Love Poem”

Assignment: See if you can find a poem in which corridoring (or some other kind of visual structure) can be warranted.

Week Eleven: General discussion of the elements of Poetese, and of the kind of argumentation required to justify the postulation of a new one. For instance, how would you justify the addition to the theory of poetics of a new kind of rhyme (say, a rhyme in color, in which “chalk” would rhyme with “snow,” “bucktooth,” “salt,” “Kleenex,” and “sugar”)? A new kind of alliteration? A new kind of trope? “Sloppy” sonnets (say “sonnets” with 17 lines) or villanelles? Free verse? Sound poetry? Concrete poetry? Does the addition of the notion corridor to the inventory of tools on the poet’s workbench reduce to the claim that all poetry is (partially/virtually) concrete poetry?

Assignment: See if you can find a poem in which corridoring (or some other kind of visual structure) can be warranted.
Weeks Twelve – Fifteen

All will be more or less like the eleventh week, except that the discussion will revolve around either poems that I bring in, or those that the students bring in, as possible examples of vision-influenced texts. However, as the thumbnail description of Week Eleven suggests, a larger issue is always in the wings of the discussion, namely: what happens in a culture when a new form of poetry becomes recognized? Or a new form of art? Say, rap. Or electronic music. Or wrapping bridges or islands, as in the art of Christo.

There will be a final paper to turn in at the last class meeting, the topics to be arranged individually for each student in consultation with me. The grade will be a function of the work on the mid-term, the final paper, and class participation.

Reading List for the course

Papers by Haj Ross:


Books


The good news: Any tests will be open book – any books or other materials may be brought to the tests. More likely, they will be take-home. You will be able to consult more there than you can carry.

The bad news: None of your materials will help much, if you have not learned to think for yourself about the course. This course is not about memorization of a set of concepts and definitions. Rather, what is required is a general openness of mind, and the exercise of intelligence and creativity. What is not required, but is fervently hoped for, is that you become fascinated with language and poetics, and find that you cannot live without it. [BTW: you can’t]

Grading policy: To be discussed in class.

Disabilities: In accordance with the terms and spirit of Public Law 101-336 (Americans with Disabilities Act) and Section 504, Rehabilitation Act, I will cooperate with the Office of Disability Accommodation to make reasonable special arrangements for students with disabilities. If you have a disability which will require some accommodation under the
terms of these acts, please come to me and discuss your individual needs, or give me a written statement. If you have not registered yet with the Office of Disability Accommodation, I encourage you to do so. Their telephone number is (940) 565-4323; TDD access (940) 565 2958.

General:

Insofar as this is possible, nothing is written in stone. No significant learning is possible in contexts which are not as kind and flexible as possible. We are all humans, trying to learn from each other. If there are special problems for you, come and talk to me about them.

“...It is in fact nothing short of a miracle that modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry; for this delicate little plant, aside from stimulation, stands warmly in need of freedom; without this, it goes to wrack and ruin without fail.”

Albert Einstein

The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of true art and true science.

Albert Einstein

*The World As I See It*