Introduction

> Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought / As doth eternity
>
> Keats, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' (1820)

Overview

Form is a poem's principle of life. It is protean, multiple, ever-changing. It presents itself under many different guises. It can tend towards the condition of an enabling space. The poet Meg Tyler, watching her small son crawl round her study, never repeating 'the same pattern of movement' or exactly the same sounds, feels she has found an analogy for the sonnets she writes.[1] Poetic form gives expressive shape to the runtogetherwords of e. e. cummings, the staccato, dash-divided phrasing of Emily Dickinson, the 'joking voice' (16) that half-belies 'disaster' (3) in the reinvented villanelle of Elizabeth Bishop's 'One Art' (1976). It bears witness both to poetry as an art with a common history and to the pursuit of individual accomplishment. It can sign ambiguous treaties with apparent formlessness (Ezra Pound), oversee playful serendipities (Paul Muldoon), underwrite an aching love of high order (Gjertrud Schnackenberg). If poetry is a series of verbal becomings that yearns to take on a final being, it is form that orchestrates the desired transformation. Or, as T. S. Eliot puts the matter, 'Only by the form, the pattern, / Can words or music reach / The stillness'.[2]

The present study argues that poetic form is the essence of poetry, possibly unanalysable when all is said, but always prompting analysis. Form deserves, the book argues, to be accorded centre stage in any discussion of poetry. Since Plato's attack in *The Republic* on poetry as, at best, 'two steps away from reality', poetry's delight in 'images' has always been on the back foot in philosophical terms, its fascination with what Plato would see as secondary 'forms' evidence of its potentially suspect nature.[3] All defenders of poetry have to 'come to terms with Plato's devastating attack on poetry as inferior and deceptive

1

2   *Introduction*

mimesis' and as possessing a siren-like sensuousness that may lead away from seriousness and truth.[4] Our own defence is based on poetry as a unique way of knowing, and on poetic form as enabling such knowledge-as-knowing through the experience of reading.[5]

Coleridge asserted that 'nothing can permanently please, which does not contain in itself the reason why it is so, and not otherwise'.[6] By virtue of its commitment to the particularity of poems, to a sense that any achieved poem 'Selves' (7) itself, in Gerard Manley Hopkins's arresting verb from 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire, Dragonflies Draw Flame' (1918), the assertion is valuable. Any poem of note answers to Hopkins's description of 'Each mortal thing' (5) in the same sonnet: '*myself* it speaks and spells, / Crying *What I do is me: for that I came*' (7–8). Form, seen as 'the reason why [a poem] is so, and not otherwise', as the manner in which a poem asserts '*What I do is me*', manifests its presence in local details connected with such matters as prosody, image, diction and allusion, and it also reveals itself in the poem's relationship to genre.[7] Here, the fact that the word *form* is an elastic term, necessarily so, comes into view. *Genre* refers to the poem's type or kind, whether it can be classified as a lyric or epic, for example; genres compose forms that prompt, inhere in and enable further works. Hence our decision to include genres in a discussion of form and under the rubric of form.

If our book is in agreement with and seeks to bring out the implications of Allan Rodway's view that 'form' is what 'contrasts with "paraphrasable content"', it ultimately offers a critique of the same author's view that form equals 'the *way* something is said in contrast to *what* is said'.[8] It is our contention that much literary criticism misrepresents the action and significance of form by applying a misleading distinction between 'the *way* something is said' and '*what* is said'. In common with much work over the last decade or so, we seek to recommend a critical mode that integrates formal observations into thematic critical narratives. Although it takes seriously the task of conveying essential information about, say, different types of rhyme, our book does not offer itself as a rival to the many valuable works that provide illustrative readings of form where that term is understood as an assemblage of techniques or devices. This book seeks to hold two seemingly contrary views in mind at the same time: that form and content are distinguishable for the purposes of analysis (as in accounting for a rhyme scheme or metre or the effects of syntax), and that poems when read fully as poems require attention to the fact that 'form' and 'content' provide the context for understanding each other, so that the poem's meaning emerges from their mutual transformation.

Form

In choosing forms, poets bring into play associations and expectations which they may then satisfy, modify or subvert. And yet the operation of agency is less straightforward than this way of putting it inevitably suggests; forms always and also bring their gifts to the poet, allowing, persuading and inspiring him or her to say things that could not be said otherwise.[9] Our use of *form* covers individual features of poetic construction. It also includes poems that can be fitted to three main genres identified by Aristotle in the opening of his *Poetics* – epic, drama and lyric – even while allowing for the fact that this very division has been endowed, as Gérard Genette points out, with a potentially misleading 'appearance or presumption of being eternal'.[10] We recognise that the notion of 'three major genres' is unhelpful if what is being claimed is an absoluteness of identity that rises above the history of genres and their continual re-inflection; yet we claim for the notion, as we apply it in a range of readings informed by awareness of such re-inflection, a pragmatic usefulness.[11]

Our book also studies particular 'forms of form', so to speak, choosing four exemplary instances. Thus, we include a chapter on the sonnet, a form that normally has a fixed number of lines (fourteen) and that has been used by poets from the Renaissance to the present.[12] It has been altered, undercut, subjected to many transformations. One example must suffice. Often associated with love poetry, the sonnet turns, in Keats's hands, in 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' (1816), into a poem about the poet's love affair with poetry and his discovery, through the medium of Chapman's energetic translation of Homer, of an object commensurate with his capacity for wonder.

The book also engages, in passing, with other instances of 'closed' forms, forms, that is, that are entirely pre-determined in their stanzaic arrangement (and are distinguished in Chapter 1 from 'open' and 'strophic' forms). These include the villanelle, discussed in the chapter on lyric, in a sub-section on lyric and elegy. This sub-section illustrates our sense of how impure and overlapping taxonomic categories are in relation to form, even as we are also alert to the danger of assuming that distinctions do not really matter (see the discussion in the dramatic monologue chapter on the difference between that form and lyric). Our second exemplary form is, indeed, elegy, not a form with specific rules affecting length or disposition, but an event-based form (the need to respond to the death of another human being or beings) that has attracted to itself a powerful body of conventions and attitudes. Our chapter looks, in particular, at the way in which elegies such as *Lycidas* (1645) have sought to move from lament to consolation. Individual poems play various and often

4   *Introduction*

surprising variations on this thematic movement, as when Shelley, at the close of *Adonais* (1821), finds consolation through an eloquent and haunting reversal of assumptions. Shelley concludes his elegy for Keats by presenting death as a refuge from the 'contagion of the world's slow stain' (356), not something to be feared, though it is part of the poem's tonal complexity that notes of fear are still discernible, as when the poet asks, 'Why linger, why turn back, why shrink, my Heart?' (469). Thus he is able to exclaim, 'Die, / If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek!' (464–5). The exclamation differs from the *contemptus mundi* of the Christian who has set his or her mind on higher realities. For Shelley, the only heaven that allures is the self-created fiction of 'the abode where the Eternal are' (495).

Elegy's formal identity might be thought of as a mode, that is, a means through which a specific function of poetry, here lamenting the dead and finding consolation, can be performed. Other such modes include satire and pastoral. In satire, private and public failings are mocked and castigated. In pastoral, the rural is explored as a place of temporary resolution of life's complexities, only for those complexities frequently to reassert themselves, as they do in sophisticated handlings of the form such as Marvell's 'The Garden' (1681). We do not attempt to study satire or pastoral in the detail we give to elegy, but our book contains examples of both, often in relation to other forms. The other two 'forms of form' that we address are 'soliloquy' and 'dramatic monologue', each of which we house under the second of our groupings, those derived from the Aristotelean division of literature into epic, drama and lyric. Soliloquy and dramatic monologue are not quite the same kinds of form. Dramatic monologue, featuring a speaker who is distinct from the poet, comes into its own in the Victorian period, following experiments in the Romantic era, especially by Wordsworth in some of his contributions to *Lyrical Ballads*. Soliloquy, a long speech in which the self attempts to communicate its innermost thoughts and feelings, is a presence in drama from Greek tragedy onwards, occurs frequently in the Bible and enjoys a flowering in Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy that has had considerable influence on later literature. We have chosen to study it in detail in order to analyse a central feature of poetic drama, one that allows us to see how lyric crosses over into drama just as drama is present in lyric, and one that permits us to give sustained and historically grounded attention to the development of blank verse, among the most durable of forms, using 'forms' in this instance to refer to the make-up of poetic lines (organisations and gatherings of lines feature in the forms included under our first definition of the term).

Our remaining chapters on lyric, epic and ballad and narrative address all three under the heading of forms. As noted above, the word 'form' is used to include genres or kinds of literature. Lyric, often thought of as short or shorter

poems displaying highly developed rhythmic intensity and expressive of strong feeling, provokes questions which are fundamental to thinking about poetry more generally. The previous sentence's working definition has been challenged by many writers, especially in the modern period, and we accommodate understandings of lyric that seek to escape, often with mixed results, what Charles Olson calls 'the lyrical interference of the individual ego'.[13] Our account of lyric is alive to, yet resists some of the implications of, the view that lyric underwent a fundamental reincarnation in the Romantic period, emerging as the real, if diminished, essence of poetry on the grounds of its supposedly being 'the one genre indisputably literary and independent of social contingency'.[14] Virginia Jackson is representative of those critics who warn against an unwary acceptance of such an idealised conception. Yet the lure and claims of lyric will not be banished simply by showing it to be enmeshed in processes of material production. Lyric's ability to take on new forms and build on expectations created by previous usages matches that of epic. We demonstrate how lyric thrives on differing possibilities of imagined life made possible by the re-working of form.

The same is true of our discussion of epic, in which we lay stress on the form's capacity to include other forms (such as lyric, pastoral and tragedy). We discuss, for all its sense of purpose, even mission, epic's ability to embrace and enable the expression of multiple and conflicting viewpoints. Epic also contains narrative elements, while ballad is closely linked with lyric. Yet we have chosen to hive off these two forms in the final chapter. There, we explore ways in which poetry accommodates through its forms the impulse to tell stories, an impulse that takes us from the private realm often associated with lyric (and sometimes simplistically so) into a social, more public space.

The book begins with a long chapter on the elements of form that lays the foundation for ensuing discussions. This chapter seeks to offer lucid help, but it does not shirk the fact that definitions of terms such as *rhythm* and *metre* require extended thought. The second chapter is our first chapter on a major large form, that of lyric. The third and fourth chapters address the sonnet and elegy, respectively, reading both forms as subsets of lyric. The fifth chapter explores epic. The sixth and seventh chapters focus on drama in the shape of soliloquy and dramatic monologue. The final chapter deals with ballad and narrative. It brings the book to a conclusion by virtue of its emphasis on the crucial role of narrative in all poetry. Lyric and narrative, on our accounts, are poles that often meet. Lyric communicates feeling; narrative conveys a plot. And yet the expressive individuality of lyric often has social implications, while the more social purview of narrative frequently concerns itself with individual feeling. A particular way in which narrative is important to our understanding of the reading experience is well caught by Coleridge when

he asserts: 'The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, or by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution; but by the pleasureable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself'.[15] The book's trajectory runs from local details of technique to more general issues raised by story, but it would be wrong to imagine that it is constructed to move in a narrowly linear direction. It is better thought of as seeking to engineer widening and yet overlapping circles of enquiry. Examples are taken from Old English poetry through to work written in the present century.

Form as Mirror or as Shaping Spirit

The book is wary of easy equations between, say, rhythm and mood; in this case, it argues, rather, that rhythm is what permits mood to exist. It is only in the context of the poem's total semantic and prosodic force field that the first line of Emily Dickinson's 'The Soul selects her own Society' (1890) will seem to use the calm evenness of its iambic stresses to convey a stance of complete independence. In another poem the same or similar arrangement of stresses will perform a very different function.

And what holds for rhythm holds, too, for sound, often cast as the docile mimic of meaning, a view supposedly maintained by Pope when he asserts that 'The sound must seem an echo to the sense' (*An Essay on Criticism* [1711], 365). The line appears to suggest that 'sound' must 'echo' 'sense', as though the latter had priority over the former.[16] Yet the poet's canny insertion of the word 'seem' should give us pause. Pope reminds us that form's mimetic function is a matter of seeming rather than reality. The way words sound will be part of their sense, just as in ordinary language use a person's tone of voice does not so much echo as establish sense. Analysis of formal effects turns out over and over to tell the reader why the poem could not be anything other than it is; it offers a window on the particularity of shaped meaning, onto poetry as a mode of achieved utterance and indeed as an aesthetic experience; we experience what the poem says through responding to how it works.

In this respect, the operations of syntax are essential. *Syntax* refers to the arrangement of poetry's constituent parts, its unfolding in time according to expectations created by the larger unit of sense to which words belong. It is a feature that reminds us that poetry involves attention to verbal process, words as they are shaped into phrases, clauses and sentences, referring forwards and backwards. The end of Shakespeare's sonnet 73 ('That time of year thou mayst in me behold' [1609]) is a case in point: 'This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy

love more strong, / To love that well which thou must leave ere long' (13–14). Concluding a poem which has concerned itself with the fading of what was once vital, but also the final 'glowing' of the 'fire' (9) still present in youth's 'ashes' (10), the couplet's movement dramatises the speaker's hope (cloaked as an assertion) that the lover, or 'thou', will 'love that well which thou must leave ere long'. The line settles on 'love that well' before, as the syntax unfurls, the inevitability of final departure (because of the speaker's sense of an ending of some kind that is imminent) draws the words into a clinching rhyme.

Again, when Geoffrey Hill opens 'September Song' (1968), his elegy for a child deported to a concentration camp, with 'Undesirable you may have been, untouchable / you were not'(1–2), the poetry's capacity to arrest owes much to its deployment of syntax. The effect would be quite different had Hill written, 'You may have been undesirable, but you / were not untouchable'. Hill's ordering sets up tensed and ponderable relations between 'Undesirable' and 'untouchable', and between 'You may have been' and 'you / were not', relations that require the reader to imagine inflections of tone as the voice rests on the different words and arranges them into an utterance, or into a written script that demands to be read with what one might call the voice of the mind. The first line's journey from 'Undesirable' to 'untouchable' enacts the shocking pathos of the child's life in a culture that decreed it abhorrent and physically expendable because of its race. The voice apparently pauses over 'may have been' and then undermines seeming hesitation with the brutal compactness of 'were not'; the result is a sardonic, austere seriousness. Syntax, as these lines show, involves the reader in a continual process of making sense of the way in which a poem is making sense.

As its discussions of syntax, among other formal elements, reveal, the present book does not regard form as serving a merely mirroring or imitative function, and is in qualified sympathy with Yvor Winter's famous indictment of 'the fallacy of … imitative form'.[17] Our sympathy is qualified, in part, because of the narrow way in which Winters sometimes used his idea, cudgelling many modernist poets for falling foul of the 'fallacy' and failing to see that they were using form as something to be experienced through localised fractures and surprises. Moreover, we recognise that the impression of 'verbal mimesis', the impression words can give of imitating meanings in their rhythms and sound, can work valuably as a critical 'mode of trope', in John Hollander's phrase.[18] We would agree with Helen Vendler when she writes (with T. S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* [1917] in mind) that 'Good free verse always matches its rhythms to the emotional content of its utterance'.[19] The perception is valuable and it is impossible to avoid the often pleasurable impression that form seems to 'imitate' content, to fit it like a glove or indeed to be calculatedly,

8   *Introduction*

cunningly at odds with it.[20] But, as an example will show, the word 'matches' and the idea of fitting and fittingness it implies require further thought. The free verse that shapes H. D.'s 'Oread' (1915) does more than 'match' the longing for inundation by the metaphorically altered sea; it conveys it, organising the poem round a series of imperatives:

> Whirl up, sea –
> whirl your pointed pines,
> splash your great pines
> on our rocks,
> hurl your green over us,
> cover us with your pools of fir.[21]

H. D. takes on the voice of the classical figure of the 'Oread', or mountain nymph, to communicate a powerful wish for transformation, a wish that is expressed through the verse. The writing builds itself round lines that all begin with emphasised imperatives, with the notable exception of the fourth line, 'on our rocks'. This fourth line follows the only enjambed line in the poem, helping to capture 'our' submission to the power 'we' are invoking. At the same time, through invoking this power, 'we' assume a power vicariously, and the poem, like so many poems expressing desire, embodies its wish through its very mode of being. This mode includes the ability to move immediately from simple statement ('Whirl up, sea'), to metaphor ('whirl your pointed pines'). The speaker-as-Oread turns the sea into an image of her own surroundings, much, perhaps, as the modernist female poet confronts and re-describes the 'sea' of traditional male poetry.

Again, we would not wish, for example, to take issue with Anne Barton when she asserts that 'A preference for poetic forms which echo the diffuse and sprawling pattern of human existence is the natural consequence of Byron's attitude towards art, and one of the reasons why he was generally unsuccessful with lyric verse'.[22] Barton is right to suggest that forms, when that word is understood to mean genres of poetry, bring with them accumulated associations. But we would add to her formulation the proviso that those 'poetic forms' (in this case the *ottava rima* of *Don Juan* [1819]) do not exist in some absolute, uninflected state, so that to any poet who chooses them they will express 'the diffuse and sprawling patterns of human existence'. Rather, Byron's use of the form ensures that it turns into the medium through which he can express the view that 'existence' is 'diffuse and sprawling', even as that view takes on a 'pattern' in poetry.

Yeats's use of *ottava rima* for serious meditative contemplation, albeit shot through with colloquial vigour, shows how forms constantly mutate and take

on different inflections in the hands of later poets. It is a surprise to realise that the same stanza form is able to find space for the following apostrophic utterances: Yeats's thought-baffling question at the close of 'Among School Children' (1927), 'O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, / How can we know the dancer from the dance?' (63–4), and Byron's mocking interrogation in the first canto of *Don Juan*, 'But – Oh! ye lords of ladies intellectual, / Inform us truly, have they not hen-pecked you all?' (175–6). Yeats's choice and use of form here exhibit a characteristic daring, not least in the way his question demands consideration of the unentanglable nature of form and content. An admirer of Byron's energy, he is claiming kinship as well as asserting innovative difference.

Form and History

In Andrew Marvell's 'An Horatian Ode, Upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland' (1681), there is a continual if suppressed undercurrent of qualification. To the degree that it ever wholly manifests itself, it does so most overtly in the lines describing Charles I's noble demeanour at his execution: 'He nothing common did or mean / Upon that memorable scene, / But with his keener eye / The axe's edge did try' (57–60). The last line 'seems', to use Pope's word, to find in its sounds an echo or mirror of the sense; the open vowels force the reader to slow down in mouthing the words, as though to capture the king's 'keen', unblinking confrontation with his imminent death. Yet it is less that the sounds, here a salient aspect of form, *reflect* meaning than, as is argued throughout our book, that they *inflect* it. Here the phonetic quality of the language is inseparable from other features of the poet's handling of language that result in the poetic event which is the stanza (the idea of poetry as an event occurring in time is crucial to our readings). Such features include the poem's concern with action, which is pointed up by the use of 'try'. The verb makes Charles, the object of the executioner's intention to sever his head from his trunk, into a 'royal actor' (53), able to 'try' or test 'the axe's edge'.

In turn, this detail gains resonance from its existence within the larger structure of the poem. Cromwell will be praised vicariously by the poet (who with seeming absence of irony attributes the phrase to the Irish) as a man 'That does both act and know' (76). But Charles, at the moment of death, reveals that in the very manner of his submission to the inevitable, there are possibilities of action. They also do, who 'act' their part well, bowing their comely heads and waiting for axes to fall.

In this instance, poetic form prompts the reader to think in larger terms about poetry's role in relation to history. Poetry is – the poem may say to us – no more an echo of history than sound is ever simply an echo of the sense. It is through the poem's form that Marvell's independence of mind is asserted. In this case, the fact that he is writing 'An Horatian Ode' allows further possibilities of invention and re-invention. Marvell's title invokes the example and practice of the Roman poet, Horace, and the poem by Horace that is likely to have left its mark on Marvell's Ode is Ode 37 of Book I. There Horace rejoices in Octavius's victory over Cleopatra rather as Marvell appears to celebrate Cromwell's victory over Charles. But Cleopatra earns a great deal of sympathy from Horace. There is a comparable graciousness of response to a defeated adversary in Marvell's bold and affecting tribute to Charles. Marvell thus claims a precedent for his practice, even as he may be doing something slightly different from Horace. His lines strike the reader as more enigmatic in their contribution to any final alignment of the speaker's sympathies or attitudes. Forms bring with them historical associations that the poet can activate, ironise or re-invent.

Form and Metaphor

The idea of form has generated many metaphors, implied and explicit, both in poems and in criticism, and these metaphors tell us much about the viewpoints of critic and poet. Form is often seen, in relation to content, as playing a role that is meekly submissive or ornamental, or, in more sophisticated critiques, as suppressing or resolving 'real' and intractable contradictions. On such accounts form is either the container whose function it is to hold the content, a decorative vessel into which the fermenting wine of ideas and feeling is poured; or it is equivalent to a censorious super-ego, art's enforcer of ideological harmony. Among the most pervasive of images is the idea of 'organic form', the idea that the form of a poem grows and takes on its identity in a way that is analogous to the developing life of a body or plant. This notion of 'form' sees it as 'innate', in Coleridge's words; 'it shapes itself', such organic form, 'as it develops itself from within'.[23] It is a deeply beguiling conception, but it has its own limits, struggling fully to do justice to the element of will and making in the artistic process.

Certainly, however, the idea of organic form underscores the inseparability of poetic form and being. On another metaphor, form is the spirit which gives life to the body of content, that without which poetry cannot exist. Robert Herrick, in 'Upon Julia's Clothes' (1648), implies a comparison between the