

Lewis Turco

The New Book of Forms

A Handbook of Poetics

“Belongs in the hands of every poet, student,
and teacher, for the greater good of the art”

—James Dickey, Poet and Professor, University
of South Carolina

“Turco’s *New Book of Forms* will confirm his
reputation as first and foremost in this field”

—H.R. Coursen, Poetry Director, New England
Writers’ Conference

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A Handbook of Poetics



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The New Book of Forms

A Handbook of Poetics

For old friends:
Charlie Davis and Hyatt Waggoner,
and in memory of Loring Williams.

Preface

Like the original *Book of Forms*, which was published in 1968 and subsequently became the standard in its field, *The New Book of Forms: A Handbook of Poetics* is intended as a text and reference work for students and teachers of poetry in general and of verse composition in particular. Although the accent is on the forms of poetry, this volume contains all the information essential to a study of poetics ranging from the Middle Ages to the present.

The volume begins with a “Handbook of Poetics” arranged in “levels”—the typographical, the sonic, the sensory, and the ideational levels. These chapters survey the two *modes* of writing—prose and verse—and various prosodic and metrical systems, clarify terms such as *rhythm*, *cadence*, and *meter*, and provide clear explanations of the processes and methods of versification. Figurative language is defined and discussed, as are considerations such as diction, style, syntax, and overtone.

The second part of the volume is called “The New Book of Forms,” and it begins with a “Form-Finder Index” in which all the forms contained in the volume are listed and divided, first into *specific forms*, and then into *general forms*. Under “specific forms” there are further subdivisions, beginning with *one-line forms* and working through to *two hundred ten-line forms*.

Should you wish to know the form of a poem you are studying, rather than leaf through all the forms in the book, you can first determine (1) the *rhyme scheme* of the poem or stanza in question and (2) its *meter*. Then you can (3) *count the lines in the form* and turn to the Form-Finder. There, under the appropriate heading, will be a short list of stanza and

whole poem patterns, from which you can determine the exact name of the poem form in question.

Similarly, should a student of verse composition wish to use a form of a specific length, he or she can consult the Form-Finder to discover an interesting structure. Many students find there is no quicker way to improve their writing than through formal experimentation and attempts to solve specific technical problems.

Following the Form-Finder is the most comprehensive compilation of the verse forms traditionally used in Anglo-American prosody ever gathered between covers. Over three hundred forms are listed alphabetically, dozens of which have been added for this edition of *The New Book of Forms*.

Our heritage of forms is rich. We are heirs not only of British metrical systems, but also of systems derived from Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Our history of verse forms goes back to the Normans, the Anglo-Saxons, and the Celts, and we have derived much from the systems of the Hebrews, the Greeks, the Italians, and the French. The verse forms set forth here have all been utilized by poets of the English-speaking world. During every period of English letters, craftsfolk and bards have explored the possibilities of the formal structure of verse and extended the range of those structures.

This new version of *The New Book of Forms* adds a feature the original edition did not have: *examples of poems written in each form by poets from all periods*. Each form is described succinctly in prose. Where necessary, a unique schematic diagramming system lays the pattern of the form out on the page so that its structure is clear. Generally, there follows at least one poem exemplifying the form, always in a modern English version; or, if the form is a relatively common one, the reader will be referred to a specific author or to an anthology where examples can be found. The entry ends with complete cross-references so that readers can discover rela-

tionships and similarities among many of the forms. It is my hope that users will find this edition even more useful than the original version of *The Book of Forms: A Handbook of Poetics*.

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L. T.

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I A Handbook of Poetics

1 Introduction

Poetry is a literary **GENRE** or *type* of literature. Other genres are fiction, drama, and essay (among other kinds of “non-fiction” such as journalism, biography, autobiography, pedagogy, and so forth). Fiction can be defined as *written narrative*; drama, as *theatrical narrative*; and the essay, as *written rhetorical exposition*.

Fiction. All writers use language for various purposes, but in general the fiction writer’s purpose is to tell a story; he or she thus uses language to carry a narrative. To tell a story the fiction writer needs four basic elements: *character*, *plot*, *atmosphere*, and *theme*, as well as a number of narrative language techniques. For further information about this genre, see the entry for **NARRATIVES**.

Drama. The dramatist’s purpose, like that of the fiction writer, is to tell a story using character, plot, atmosphere, and theme; however, he or she can ordinarily use only the narrative language techniques of dialogue, monologue, or soliloquy. Unlike the fictionist, however, the dramatist can supplement these written narrative techniques with theatrical techniques such as representation (scenes, costumes, and physical actions). For further information about this genre, see the entry for **DRAMATICS**.

Essay. In its modern sense, an essay is a written discussion or exposition of a particular subject or an argument in favor of or against a point of view. In either case, the essayist has a point to make regarding a subject, and the focus is on the subject he or she is considering. The techniques of the essayist are generally rhetorical rather than narrative. The ele-

ments of an essay are likewise four: the *subject* being examined, the *thesis* or statement to be made concerning the subject, the *argument* or the logical proofs and data required to back the thesis statement, and the *conclusion* reached, which is usually identical with the thesis. For further information about this genre, see the entry on DIDACTICS.

Poetry. Since the poet can tell a story using either written or theatrical techniques, or can treat a particular subject by means of written rhetorical techniques, his or her primary focus must be on something other than the narrative or argument. In fact, what differentiates the poet from other writers is the *focus on mode*, on language itself. The poet focuses upon the literary resources of language in the same way a musician concentrates upon sound, the painter upon form, or the dancer upon movement.

Poetry can thus be defined as *the art of language*, as distinguished from fiction which is *the art of written narrative*, from drama, *the art of theatrical narrative*, or from the essay, *the art of written rhetoric*. The poet is specifically the artist of language; his or her concentration is upon the language itself. To concentrate upon the material of this genre, the poet, like the other writers, must utilize four elements, but in this case they are elements of language, on four different *levels*, rather than elements of narration or argument. The levels of poetry are the *typographical*, the *sonic*, the *sensory*, and the *ideational*. A fifth "level"—that of *fusion*—is a part of all genres. Fusion considers the question, "How do the elements of this story, poem, essay or play come together to achieve a final effect?"

2 The Typographical Level

Several things about a poem can be ascertained merely by looking at it on the printed page. First, one can generally tell in which of the two *modes* of language a poem is written; second, one can tell the *proportion in figure* of a poem; that is, whether it is written in *strophes* or *stanzas*.

Mode. There are only two modes in which any genre can be written, *prose* and *verse*. Prose is *unmetered* language; verse is *metered* language. Any of the genres can be written in either of the modes; that is, there are *prose narratives* and *verse narratives*, *prose dramas* and *verse dramas*, *prose essays* and *verse essays*. Likewise, there are *prose poems* and *verse poems*. Depending upon the poet's culture, a poem can be written primarily in prose, as in the Hebrew Old Testament, or in verse, as in the Anglo-Saxon poem, *Beowulf*. There is, thus, only one logical answer to the question, "What is the difference between poetry and prose?" *Poetry is a genre, and prose is a mode.*

On the typographical level, it is usually possible to distinguish, from the lengths of the lines, whether a poem is written in prose or verse. Prose poems generally have lines of various lengths; verse poems ordinarily show lines of similar length. Sight, however, is not always accurate, and lines ought to be *scanned* to discover whether or not *meter* is present.

To meter means to count. In verse, what is usually counted is syllables—all syllables, only stressed syllables, or all syllables *and* stressed syllables. Meters will be further explained when I discuss the sonic level of poetry. *To scan* means to as-

certain the number of syllables in a verse-mode poem. Scansion will also be discussed later.

Sometimes an entire poem will be built primarily upon the typographical level of language. Such poems are called *spatials*, and they achieve their primary effect on the level of sight. There are two kinds of spatial poetry, the *calligramme*, an otherwise normal poem written in a shaped stanza, and the *concrete poem*, which achieves its effect mainly through its configuration. For more information about such poems, see the entry on SPATIALS.

Proportion in Figure. A poem can be written in sections and even in subsections. Larger sections are called “cantos,” “fits,” “movements,” or other terms. Smaller sections are either *strophes* or *stanzas*. Stanzas are short sections of a single poem, each made up of the same number of lines. Strophes are short sections of a single poem made up of differing numbers of lines.

Various other things can be discerned simply by studying the appearance of a poem, aspects having to do with *layout* and *punctuation*. Prose poems are sometimes mislabeled “free verse,” but this misnomer is a contradiction in terms, as we have seen, for there are only two modes of language—prose and verse. Either language is metered, or it is not metered; it cannot be both simultaneously. If language is not metered, it is prose; however, prose poems are sometimes laid out on the page so that they appear to approximate verse.

Longer-lined prose poems are often laid out by the sentence, printed on the page as a visible unit rather than as part of a paragraph. This practice was used by the eighteenth-century English poet Christopher Smart and the nineteenth-century American poet Walt Whitman in their prose poems. Such works are often built on a system of grammatic parallels (to be discussed later). Poems constructed on this principle can often be easily distinguished by running your eye down the left-hand margin of the poem. You are likely to

discover that each line begins with the same word or phrase—again, such as in the work of Smart, Whitman, Carl Sandburg, Robinson Jeffers, and many poets of the twentieth century. Shorter-lined prose poems are often laid out by the clause or the phrase, each clause or phrase being allocated its own line. This construct is called *line-phrasing*, and it occasionally omits punctuation at the ends of lines entirely, the end of the line serving as *sight punctuation*. See the entry on the TRIVERSEN for further discussion of line-phrasing.

Verse poems might exhibit *end-stopping*, which means there is terminal punctuation—an exclamation point, a question mark, or a period—at the end of a line (“stich” in older English terminology) or of a larger unit such as a couplet (“twime”), triplet (“thrime”), or quatrain (“tetrastich”). If there is no punctuation and the line runs onto the next line, the poem is *enjambéd*. A *verse paragraph* may or may not coincide with a stanza or a strophe. Like the prose paragraph, the verse paragraph is a group of lines in a metrical poem that deals with matters that have logical relationships with one another and a common focus. If the verse paragraph does not coincide with the end of a stanza or a strophe, the poet will often drop down a step typographically within a line to indicate that a new paragraph is beginning. The device of *stepping* is also sometimes used to indicate a caesura, or a pause in the *center* of a line. Rather than stepping the line, a poet might, on occasion, use sight punctuation in the form of an extra space within a line to indicate the caesura. More will be said about the caesura in the chapter “The Sonic Level” and in the entry ANGLO-SAXON PROSODY.