

# Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

November 7, 2016

A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



*I will put Chaos into fourteen lines*

I will put Chaos into fourteen lines  
And keep him there; and let him thence escape  
If he be lucky; let him twist, and ape  
Flood, fire, and demon — his adroit designs  
Will strain to nothing in the strict confines  
Of this sweet order, where, in pious rape,  
I hold his essence and amorphous shape,  
Till he with Order mingles and combines.

Past are the hours, the years of our duress,  
His arrogance, our awful servitude:  
I have him. He is nothing more nor less  
Than something simple not yet understood;  
I shall not even force him to confess;  
Or answer. I will only make him good.

Edna St. Vincent Millay<sup>1</sup>

## Reflections

To talk about form is to talk about shape. It is the physical structure that holds a poem, the word we use to talk about the length of the lines, rhythm, rhyme and repetition, the shape of a poem on the page.

The poet Jack Gilbert had an incredible influence on my ideas about craftsmanship, about what poetry can mean, how it can work, and the ways in which form can be the vehicle that carries the heart of a poem. In writing about form he was drawn to the very last definition for it in the Oxford English Dictionary, the 62nd definition, which says: “form, meaning the hole in which the rabbit sits.”

Familiar forms to us might include the one presented here, the sonnet. Other popular ones are the limerick, the ballad, haiku, and one I bet we all know—the acrostic! (You may remember this exercise from grade school where you likely wrote your name vertically and then wrote an adjective that began with that letter...) There are many others, and the function of all of them is essentially this: form gives us the illusion that our subjects are containable.

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<sup>1</sup> “I will put Chaos into fourteen lines” by Edna St. Vincent Millay from *Mine the Harvest*. Public Domain.

You might think about it this way: Liturgy is form. Formula. Ritual. Ceremony. But the *subject* of Liturgy is God, communion, the mystery of faith. If you think about mystery, or God, you don't necessarily associate with it things like order, pattern, formula, structure, sequence. Mystery seems formLESS, shapeLESS, structureLESS. The subject of mystery would not seem particularly suited to such predictability, such a fixed and even rigid pattern of elements. So our attempt to contain the vastness of mystery, the depth and breadth of God no less, is actually an attempt to understand what surpasses us.

In Millay's poem, she makes a similar argument: it is as though if we could but simply get Chaos inside a form, have him act right and rhyme like he's supposed to, stay within the lines we have made (even if he "twists" or "strain[s]...in the strict confines / of this sweet order"), then Chaos, could be contained, controlled. Of course, if it were possible to contain chaos, it would no longer *be* chaos. So, on one hand, of course chaos is not in fourteen lines because, well, it can't be. On the other hand, Millay does exactly that — she does indeed put chaos into fourteen lines because that is what the poem says it does and that is the work of form. We have a sonnet to prove it.

Of course, it probably matters very little whether we can identify form when we see it. Identification, after all, really isn't the *point* of poetry. But the pleasure in being able to notice and appreciate craftsmanship enhances and enriches the subject of the poem itself. One might argue that form is indivisible from content. I appreciate the way the poet Linda Gregg talks about this; she distinguishes a poem's "garmentry" from its "life blood," saying essentially that garmentry can be attractive, useful, decorative, even beautiful, but that without life blood, it doesn't do much to expand our lives.

Form reconciles internal and external forces; form is external and the subject is internal. Form is the hole in which the rabbit, the living subject, sits. Form is the shape that contains for us what cannot otherwise be contained. Form, essentially, is the vessel by which the news of the spirit is delivered.

### ✂ Other questions to consider

1. The notion of external structure containing internal life is a metaphor we know by heart; it is the difference in private and public worlds, outward and interior selves. But, just as an acrostic poem about your name is not your Real Self, the *definition* of love is not actually love. Perhaps it is the work of a lifetime to navigate the space between what we appear to be and what we actually are. Do you believe it is possible to extricate the form of you from the subject of you? I wonder if this is one way of thinking about the difference in the body and the soul.
2. Galway Kinnell says that poetry is nothing if not the human cry of existence. In other words, poetry is the witness for our lives. Jane Hirshfield says it this way: "It is in poetry's words that life calls to life with the same inevitability and gladness that bird calls to bird, whale to whale, frog to frog, Listening across the night or ocean or pond, they recognize one another and are warmed by that knowledge." What *else* might be

considered a “human cry of existence”? How else do we document/curate/witness/authenticate a life being lived?

3. Can you name something you desire to contain but recognize you cannot? Many people turn to poetry, or song, as a way of managing subjects that feel overwhelming or inexplicable. In fact, some say there are only two subjects: love and death. How do you respond to this? What might other uncontainable subjects be?
4. Why do you think Millay uses personification to explore notions of Chaos? In other words, what do you think is her purpose for giving Chaos human attributes? Many say it is a tendency of human psychology to assign familiar traits and behaviors to that which we find difficult to understand. What are other examples? (You might remember Aesop’s fables, or recall certain pieces of art that depict God in human form.)

### ✧ Writing in response

1. Write about an experience of containment. This might be an experience about comfort and sanctuary, about being held in light or love. Or, it might be an experience about being held *back*, or restrained. Consider sensory details in your recounting; what did it *sound* like, for example, to be held?
2. Personification and anthropomorphism have ancient roots in story-telling and have been used in the arts throughout the ages. Both are artistic devices that assign human characteristics to abstract concepts (typically emotions and natural forces, such as Old Man Winter, for example). Millay’s poem personifies Chaos as a man; often, God is depicted as a man. Explore this use of figurative language in your own writing. You might start by listing as many abstractions (love, anger, poverty, justice, guilt) as you can and then noticing which *human* images come to mind.

### ✧ About the poet

Edna St. Vincent Millay (February 22, 1892 – October 19, 1950) was the third woman to win the Pulitzer Prize in poetry. An American poet and playwright, she was also known for her feminist activism and her mastery of the English sonnet. Interesting fact: It was she who coined the phrase “My candle burns at both ends” in her poem, “First Fig.”



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