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A poetics of “Wind in a Box”

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Abstract: This essay is a re-application of the language codes of Roland Barthes and Jonathan Culler’s concept for Structuralist Poetics. The approach I use explores the codes demonstrated in Barthes’ well-known text, *S/Z* with slight modifications for their application to poetry. The concepts borrowed from Mr. Culler are from his book of the same title: *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (Cornell University Press, 1975). Culler’s main argument is that there must be other, un-attempted strategies combined with conventional approaches in literature of that time period. His answer to this problem was to develop a set of linguistic-based concepts to compensate for the reader in the analysis of literary works. I have applied in this essay my approach based on Culler’s methodology and the language codes of Roland Barthes: semantic, symbolic, cultural-referential, actional and hermeneutic. I apply Culler’s concepts to a reading of poetry followed by an application of the language codes as a further development of my work in revitalizing this never-before applied method.

Keywords: poetics; literary theory; poetry

When I was in college over twenty years ago, our Creative Writing instructor used a textbook by Robert Wallace titled *Writing Poems* (1990). In that book he included a section for supplemental study which contained various poems which illustrated a variety of forms, style and subject matter. Part of that assortment included one of his own poems to illustrate a point to all students of poetry. His poem had been accepted at five different journals in five variations. As a publishing writer myself, I have occasionally felt the need to revise part of a poem after its first appearance in print, maybe a line-break here or there, change a word or make an end-stop. I did not fully understand Wallace’s intent until I encountered this group of poems. *Wind in a Box* was published in 2006 and constitutes Terrance Hayes’ third book of poetry. In this collection, there are six poems sharing the book’s title, though strategically placed at the beginning, the last third of the book as well the very end. Usually when a writer uses repetition in such a manner they are justified in re-working a theme, addressing an issue of cultural importance or they intend some form of personal relevance.

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Here, the writer has given us genuine meditations on writing and life as this idea of 'wind in a box' becomes an analogy for various aspects of human experience. Theme in this sense ranges from the writing life, a love poem, family and relationships, mourning, a false will and a vision. All six can be said to comprise the poet's conception of life. Wind becomes breath and being, even blood – the writer's truth by which he lives. The box becomes all those things we use and need to enclose our lives, the context of love, anticipation, mourning, anger and hope. Both of these controlling symbols are reworked over and over by the writer through various themes. This paper is an application of the poetics of reading based on linguistic concepts of the first poem bearing that title combined with the language codes of Roland Barthes.

I will begin the discourse using Culler's conceptual model he outlines in the chapters of *Structuralist Poetics* (1975), proceeding through the poem in sets of lines. As I am doing so, I will also refer to Roland Barthes (1974), making appropriate reference to the language codes as necessary. The poem begins:

Wind in a Box

This ink. This name. This blood. This blunder.
 This blood. This loss. This lonesome wind. This canyon.
 This / twin / swiftly / paddling / shadow blooming
 an inch above the carpet – . This cry. This mud.
 This shudder. This is where I stood: by the bed,
 by the door, by the window, in the night / in the night.
 (Hayes 2006: 1, L 1–6)

Art, identity, being and folly are addressed in the first line. The deictics of context illustrates a series of personal expressions, though only becomes referential in line five at, "This is where I stood." All lines up to this point convey a flurry of metaphorical allusions, each a recharacterization of the poem's analogical theme of writing as life. An unconventional use of the line-break citation forces the reader to pause and consider each spoken word. Perhaps, the most striking feature of these lines is the author's use of parataxis in repeating the word "This," eleven times in the first five lines. Each of these lines express metaphor except the sixth. These references operate as analogy moving from phrase to phrase as each of them are variations of the central metaphor of writing. Each metaphorical word or phrase refers back to the implied reference of the title of the poem, which serves as a controlling metaphor of the work. All literal items are given metaphorical characterization; "ink," "blood," "blunder," "loss," "lonesome wind" and "canyon" as each refer back to the main idea of "Wind in a Box." The metaphorical language of this particular poem is not as hyperbolic as conventional, literary metaphor because the author instead turns common language back upon itself. The metaphors use

common terminology in their expressive forms. Following the model described by Jonathan Culler in *Structuralist Poetics*, the metaphors consistently illustrate synecdoche, part to whole, as in this case, self to society. They repeatedly operate from part to whole and exist through this single literary element as outlined in “Poetics of the Lyric” (180–181). Every word used in these lines refers back to the same phrase, each word recharacterizing a different aspect of writing and human experience; emotional, physiological, social and psychological. The cultural-referential code in this respect would consist of an English-speaking, main-stream, college-educated, monogamous, heterosexual, African American. The body of knowledge represented would seem to reflect the contemporary 21st century United States.

In the first six lines, the hermeneutic and actional codes serve to illustrate an ambiguity uncharacteristic for conventional, literary figurative language and an implied dramatic action. Typically, the hermeneutic is characterized by an enigma created through reader resistance which is a normal part of the reading process when figurative language or literary ambiguity is encountered in the text. In these particular lines, ambiguity has been established first through the series of analogies presented, then stalled when reading: “This/twin/swiftly/paddling/shadow blooming/an inch above the carpet – .” (L 2–4). This ambiguous, metaphorical language coupled with an uncharacteristic use of a visible break on the page is completely different from the use of simile or other rhetorical devices. True, metaphor is figurative and all metaphorical language operates based upon the same principle, however, in this particular poem the style of the language is common. All language in this expression would only meet resistance when the language takes on different connotations as in the above example. The scattered allusions throughout the poem reinforce the suggestion of internal conflict within the speaker; “blunder,” “blood,” “loss,” the use of obscurity in lines three and four followed by a hyphen and “cry” (L 1–4). This would seem to coincide figuratively, in context though, the reader is still left with the obscurity of “... blooming/one inch above the carpet” (L 3–4). Lines five and six return to context. However, the reader has nothing further so as to help grasp the meaning of these lines. Being associational in form, they produce instead, an enigma in the reader’s attempted comprehension and so the hermeneutic aspect becomes most prominent in this section as a result of that confusion. Late in the poem, the speaker returns to this notion of mortality with the phrases, “... This box. This body in a box ...” that when placed in the context of the repetition of “blood,” could reinforce the notion of abortion or still-birth (L 13). Also of hermeneutic importance is the writer’s use of the visible line-break symbol in lines three and seven. These control the pace of reading and are intended to draw the reader’s attention to these particular lines as opposed to others. In the semantic aspect, connotatively every reference refers to the idea of being a writer and this

code develops that theme. After the initial frustrating, searching language of the various characterizations, the reader gains a grounding clarity with the first action described in the poem. "... This is where I stood: by the bed,/by the door, by the window, in the night/in the night" (L 5–6). Family and the marital relationship now become relevant in the reading process of the work.

The next three lines more fully establish the emotive qualities and the nature of that relationship.

How deep, how often / must a woman be touched?
 How deep, how often have I been touched?
 On the bone, on the shoulder, on the brow, on the knuckle:
 (L 7–9)

These lines describe the nature of the relationship between the speaker and his wife as intimate as well as violent.

The last five lines of the poem shift back to a characterization of the writing life and his unstable relationship.

Touch like a last name, touch like a wet match.
 Touch like an empty shoe and an empty shoe, sweet
 and incomprehensible. This ink. This name. This blood
 and wonder. This box. This body in a box. This blood
 in the body. This wind in the blood.
 (L 10–14)

This series of similes illustrates the ambiguity of the relationship of the couple as stagnate, though alluring. The box metaphor here takes on the idea of constraints of varied forms; the relationship itself, writing, "ink," one's very identity, "name," and one's very being, "blood." No one can escape these human finalities as all of us have to engage them in living our lives. Formal models of unity are characterized through binary opposition, dialectical resolution, displacement and a series united by a common denomination. The binary opposition in this sense, lies between self and spouse. This ambiguous relationship takes on a highly emotive quality recapitulating some of the poem's opening themes and most centrally communicates symbolically as an analogy of the writer's life. The dialectical resolution in this regard is the acknowledgment of the ambiguous or problematic nature of marital relationships and the speaker's particular situation. Displacement remains an issue in the poem because there actually is no argument, only questions and an acknowledgment. The third term in this case would seem to be writing or the true source of the conflict in the relationship; all hypothetical interpretations of the ambiguous lines above apply. The series united by a common denomination is evident in the writer's use of repetition. The poem is actually a list of expression of all the different things associated with the title and theme.

Theme and epiphany emerge through repetition, ambiguity and thematic import. Various words and phrases repeat throughout which illustrate and recapitulate the analogy of the poem's title. "This ink" is linked through association to being through references to "This blood" and qualities of the written word characterized through voice as "wind" (L 1–2 and 12–14).

Ambivalence is characterized through analogies which develop its nature throughout the poem; "ink," "name," "blood," "blunder" (L 1–2). Much later in the work, similes characterize the ambivalence through comparisons. The writer uses diction such as, "touched?/On the bone, on the shoulder, on the brow, on the knuckle," which carries a connotation of pain or violence in the relationship (L 8–9). Phrases such as, "Touch like a last name, touch like a wet match" and "like an empty shoe" bear the symbolism of nullified potency. A last name is usually not remembered, especially considering the theme of intimacy in which people often use only first names as referents. A wet match cannot strike. An empty shoe has no person wearing them. The images which follow then turn the ambiguity toward intimacy with the phrase "sweet/and incomprehensible" (L 1112). In the thematic sense, "Wind in a Box" concerns the deeply personal illustration of an importance which is a reflection of self and society.

Resistance and recuperation in this work illustrate the standard varieties encountered in reading contemporary, American poetry. Resistance is moderate due to the writer's use of grammatical notations and line-break symbols within the actual poem. Use of the colon and hyphen exemplify standard, though meaningful usage in the work. Abstract reference in lines three through four could be interpreted in various ways due to its cryptic qualities. Literal and conceptual resistance exist because of the fact that the meaning of the entire work may change based upon what these particular lines actually illustrate. Recuperation is standard, though interference among these lines causes the poem's only abrupt, hermeneutic shift. In the remainder of the poem, the reader does not need to ask any specific questions nor be familiar with any extraneous texts so as to grasp what the writer says.

The narratological aspects of plot, theme and character present a common, human experience to the reader. Plot merely serves as a mirror in this regard as the writer expresses his reflection of the writing to the reader through the work of art. Theme concerns the speaker's ambivalent personal relationship as well as his relationship to the writing life. This theme is fully characterized through the writer in writing a poetry of inwardness. The character portrayed through the work illustrates the writer reflecting on the ambiguous nature and the emotive aspect of writing. The conflict central to plot are expressed where the speaker asks, "How deep, how often/must a woman be touched?/How deep, how often have I been touched" (L 7–8)?

Emotions are characterized through metaphor from member to class structure. In this type of line-function, the individual identifies with society.

The four general interpretive operations can be used here to summarize dualities, ambiguity, literary elements and aspects of formal unity. Binary relations of opposition here, represent the ambiguities of life. The ambiguity of form concerns the fact that "Wind in a Box" has the formal, visual appearance on the page as that of a Shakespearian sonnet. However, the poem does not illustrate any of the formal elements of the sonnet form. The writer does use alliteration, repetition, limited rhyme, metaphor, simile and personification. The work reflects a synecdochic quality in that the work represents the theme. In another sense, the practice of writing is here given emotive quality in being associated with all these various qualifications. Rhythm and enjambment are used as a way to express various qualities of meaning throughout the poem.

The formal qualities of the poem serve as a way for the writer to evoke ambiguity and emotional conflict of the writing life. The refrain, "This ink. This name. This blood ..." serves as a framing device for context and creates focus, circularity and closure (L 1 and 13). Having the appearance of a formal poem creates compression. Rhymes in this poem have been placed so far apart, the idea of disharmony seems to be the author's intent. The word "blunder" in line one rhymes with "wonder" in line thirteen, though they are so far apart their unity is defamiliarized and non-associational. The word "mud" in line four rhymes with "blood" in line two, twelve and thirteen. Rhyme in this poem has no effect, possibly reinforcing the idea of a failed or troubled relationship. Repetition operates as the device which recapitulates the focus of emotion on the writing life and the writer's relationship. Repetition operates as the device which recapitulates the focus of the emotion on the writing life and the writer's relationship. Only five lines exhibit enjambment, which contributes contrast and a carrying over of thought only at lines three, five, nine and eleven through thirteen. The remaining nine end-stopped lines add a sense of definite focus on the emotional qualities of the work. These "free" though formal aspects of the language structure of "Wind in a Box" reinforce the controlling metaphor of 'wind as breath' and the vocal aspect of writing, its emotive qualities in evoking authentic feeling in poetry. Hayes does not pretty things up. He is honest and genuine in expression.

The actional code of "Wind in a Box" serves two roles; first, as an implied dramatic action of writing, and second, the idea of writing as a profession. Actions only enter the work at lines three through five, seven to eight and ten through eleven. These actions of "paddling," "cry," "stood," and "touched" characterize the writing as well as the conflict. The dominant action of writing is central to the dramatic plot of the work. Lines seven through twelve illustrate the dualities of the ambivalent relationship. The semantic code connotatively centers upon the ide of

being a writer and develops the theme and action of the dramatic plot. All connotation serves to bind each aspect of language – literal and figurative. “Touch” and “Blood” prove most repetitive and function as signifiers which give depth to the writer’s description of life as a writer and his personal relationship. Throughout the poem connotation operates primarily in a metaphorical way. The writing shifts from metaphor in lines one through five, becomes more literal in line nine and then shifts back to metaphor in lines twelve through fourteen. Considering the aspects above and how Hayes uses repetition of theme, the symbolic code operates as an analogy of the writer’s life. The various groupings and configurations repeated in the text in their various ways evoke the idea of wind as breath and voice, of life and the expressive art of writing as one. Even though the idea of enclosure also finds expression through images of objects which have other things bound up within them, these expressions take on the greater theme of interconnectedness of all of these aspects repeated throughout the poem.

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