

The Single Poem in Context¹

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The order of poems in collections is worth more attention than it has received. It is bound to be a sequential one, and this sequence is often narrative.

As literary theory has emphasized, the range of potential meanings that a text has depends on the method of reading applied to it. Its selection is in turn guided by the readers' literary competence, in Jonathan Culler's terms, or their belonging to a particular interpretative community, according to Stanley Fish's more sceptical view—that is, the reading is guided by certain conventional expectations. (Culler 113–30; Fish 303–71)

These conventional expectations are strikingly different with narrative and with lyrical poetry. In *Structuralist Poetics* Jonathan Culler prints a piece of journalistic prose, the report of a car accident, in the shape of a poem, with short lines and an uneven right margin, and shows how the reading of this version is affected by the expectations with which we conventionally approach a poem.

Culler summarizes a wide consensus among the practitioners of literary criticism concerning these expectations: the poem is atemporal; it is complete in itself; it should cohere at a symbolic level; it expresses an attitude; and its typographic arrangements can be given spatial or temporal interpretations (Culler 160). But once we have recognized the roots of these expectations in the Romantic tradition, we should hesitate to consider them to be more than a historical phenomenon.

The conventions summarized by Culler are clearly inadequate where the collection of poems is concerned. The assumption that poems are atemporal and complete in themselves blinds us to the problems of arranging poems in a book, and to their possible interdependence in the reader's experience. These conventions are mirrored and reinforced by the editions commonly used: Critical editions and anthologies, in which poems are usually ordered according

¹ Under the title "Narrative Links in Non-Narrative Poetry," SPELL (Swiss Publications in English Language and Literature) 1 (1984), 63-71. Revised 2025.

to the chronology of their composition (more on this below), offer indices of titles and first lines that cut across the sequence of the texts and make it easy to pick single poems for reading and discussion.

It may be stated with confidence, however, though it may be difficult to prove it empirically,² that people outside the academic community, whose reading has not been so strongly shaped by the formalist doctrine of the poem's autonomy, usually read collections from beginning to end. Any reader who reads a volume of poems in this manner will try to perceive some kind of order in their sequence — not only because of a psychological urge to see the collection as a unity, but also because he has every reason to assume that the editor of the collection the first reader of the poems in it — has imposed an order on the sequence. Often the kind of order is implied by the title of the collection, as in *The Pageant of English Poetry*.

If the poets are their own editor, there is an additional element that emphasizes the importance of the arrangement — to the extent of subverting the autonomy of the single poem. The poets may start to think of publishing a collection at a time when they have ready about two thirds of the poems that will eventually go into it. The rest of them will be written in order to complete the collection³ — that is, the poets work at developing and reinforcing the structure of the whole volume; and the poems written for this purpose are to that extent editorial.

The claim that the arrangement of poems in collections has not met the critical attention it deserves may rightly be challenged where sonnet sequences are concerned. As a short glance at Rollins's Variorum edition of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* (Shakespeare, *The Sonnets* 74–116) shows, their arrangement has been a favourite topic of critical discussion for more than 150 years. According to Stephen Booth many of these attempts to re-order the unsatisfactory 1609 sequence were prompted "by suppositious biographies which they were thereupon said to support. They warrant only sociological attention" (Shakespeare, *The Sonnets* 546)— a dismissal of the problem, which shows the narrowness of his notion of the reader in the text. Another approach to the problem of arranging

² My confidence is based on conversations with poets and journalists. Cp. also Wordsworth in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, who reckons with «readers that "persist in reading this book to its conclusion." (Wordsworth (*Literary Criticism* 70))

³ The poet Dannie Abse has drawn my attention to this (private communication)

Shakespeare's *Sonnets* has been to order them, not according to some storyline, but in groups sharing formal or thematic characteristics. A recent attempt of this kind has been Brents Stirling's *The Shakespeare Sonnet Order*. He reads the *Sonnets* as a "miscellany," made up of several independent poems (each consisting of one or more sonnets), and groups of poems, which "by themselves have a strong internal unity," due to formal and thematic links. (Stirling 42)

The independent poems and the groups remain discrete; where they interrelate, they belong together not like chapters in a novel or parts of a long poem, but more like Shakespeare's three plays on the reign of Henry VI. Poems 2 and 3, and Group II appear to represent earlier phases of the poet-friend relation; Groups III and IV, with Poem 5, appear to represent later phases; and Poem 6 is "terminal" (Stirling 43).

Even though Stirling rejects the reading of the *Sonnets* as a single story, some narrative elements are retained in the "phases" in which the poems and groups are arranged — for reasons to which I shall return.

Shakespeare's *Sonnets* offer an interesting but, for several reasons,⁴ a special case, and we must be cautious in applying the results of their discussion to other collections of poetry. But two general patterns of how poems can be ordered emerge: juxtaposition and temporal sequence.

The poems can be arranged in groups, according to some of their characteristics: sharing the same form (e.g., sonnets), the same central theme (e.g., love, or religious devotion), the same internal situation (e.g., address to the same person), etc. The groups are defined by convention, but also by the editor's desire not to make any of the groups too large and therefore monotonous. Each poem in such a group is representative of a type: its relationship to the other poems is a paradigmatic one, that is, each poem in the group can take its place.

The forming of groups, however, cannot offer the ultimate solution to the problem of arrangement. The single poems making up the groups as well as the groups constituting the collection still have to be ordered in a sequence, due to the characteristics of language and the reading-process.⁵

⁴ The role of the Petrarchan tradition should be mentioned in particular.

⁵ Other kinds of order like symmetry or numerology can be superimposed on the sequential one but cannot replace it. They

Wordsworth's preface to *The Excursion* (1814), perhaps the most famous statement by a poet on the problem, uses an architectural image to describe the arrangement of his poems. He compares the future collection of his works to a Gothic church, with his poems like "cells, oratories, and sepulchral recesses, ordinarily included in those edifices." (Wordsworth, *Literary Criticism* 171) But the description of *The Prelude* as an "ante-chapel" to the church makes it clear that the building is to be seen in terms of a tour, of the sequential experience of its parts, before it is viewed as a whole.

Discourse analysis offers us categories that are useful in the discussion of a sequence. They describe how sentences are related to each other, and we can adapt them to our purposes by considering the poems in a collection like the sentences of a text.

Egon Werlich has distinguished five types of texts, according to the purposes they serve. (Werlich 3–38) Obligatory signals at the beginning (the "initiators"), the meaning of which is reinforced by other signals and confirmed by a "terminator" at the end, establish the dominant structure of the text. In a collection of poems, the title may serve as an initiator, and, unless it is contradicted by later signals, it will determine the reading. Werlich's five types are the following:

1. descriptive texts: They are characterized by local signals, like *here, there*, etc. A title of a poetry collection that may be read as a local signal is, for example, Donald Davie's *The Shires*.
2. expository texts: They are marked by signals indicating analytical relationships, like *namely, for example, also*, etc.
3. argumentative texts: Here the signals indicate contrast: *but, conversely, however*. Sandburg's title *The People, Yes* may be read as such a signal.
4. instructive texts: They are characterized by signals indicating enumeration, like *first, second, third*, or the letters of the alphabet. A title like Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* may suggest an "instructive" arrangement.
5. narrative texts: Here the signals are temporal: *once upon a time, then*, or the use of the preterit. Meredith's title *Modern Love* may serve as an example here.

can only become effective when the sequential experience has been completed.

A collection can be arranged according to any of these five types; and often they appear in combination. Again, Wordsworth may be used as an example. In his *Preface to the Edition of 1815*, which serves the reader as an "initiator" in the reading of the collection, he explains his (often questioned) procedure in arranging his poems:

poems, apparently miscellaneous, may with propriety be arranged either with reference to the powers of mind *predominant* in the production of them; or to the mould in which they are cast; or, lastly, to the subjects to which they relate. From each of these considerations, the following Poems have been divided into classes [...]. (Wordsworth, *Literary Criticism* 177)

The poems in these groups are related to each other, in Werlich's terms, rather like the sentences in an instructive text. At the same time the classes are arranged like a narrative:

that the work may more obviously correspond with the course of human life, and for the sake of exhibiting in it the three requisites of a legitimate whole, a beginning, a middle, and an end, [they] have been also arranged, as far as it was possible, according to an order of time, commencing with Childhood, and terminating with Old Age, Death and Immortality. (Wordsworth, *Literary Criticism* 177–78)

The most interesting cases, however, are those where there are no obvious signals of the kind mentioned, or where their message is confusing. They are also the cases with which we have been most familiar since the Romantic period: the collection of poems that seem to claim autonomy for themselves. To discuss these, we have to establish criteria different from the ones formulated by Werlich, in particular to distinguish between narrative and non-narrative texts — for reasons which will appear below.

According to Seymour Chatman, who summarizes a wide consensus, narratives are distinguished from other types of text by the presence of two elements (Chatman 19): the story ("the content or chain of events (actions, happenings), plus what may be called the existents (characters, items of setting)") and the discourse ("the expression, the means by which the content is communicated"). This reflects a distinction earlier made by Scholes and Kellogg, between the story and the storyteller (Scholes and Kellogg 4).⁶

⁶ Chatman introduces the confusing term "nonnarrated story"; but it stands for a narrative in which the narrator is only *minimally*

The term “story” can further be defined as a sequence of events which are linked with each other so as to indicate a change of state.

In semiotic terms, the distinction between narratives and other types of texts can be reformulated as follows: Narratives, unlike other types of texts, involve two speech-situations, one of which is embedded in the other. The first includes the storyteller and the reader/listener, the second, embedded in the first, the figures of the story. Being embedded, this speech-situation is closed — a characteristic often expressed by the use of the preterit. (Kahrman 23–25)

Scholes and Kellogg, in their pioneering study, contrast the conventions of narrative and the lyric. The lyric

is a direct presentation, in which a single actor, the poet or his surrogate, sings, or muses, or speaks for us to hear or overhear. (Scholes and Kellogg 4)

This definition alludes to John Stuart Mill (Mill 9) and makes its romantic origins clear. It is also close to Culler’s set of expectations quoted earlier. But the authors go on: “Let the speaker begin to tell of an event, [...] and we move toward narrative.” (Scholes and Kellogg 4) In other words, the speaker becomes a storyteller, story and discourse emerge.

We can now return to poetry collections that do not offer any clear signals in the text of how they should be read. We may be surprised to find that the characteristics of narrative just discussed are present in them and will, in the absence of other textual signals, guide our reading. We have the two speech-situations: the poet, as the editor of his collection, addresses his volume to his readers; and the author implied in the poems addresses his words to an addressee. The single poems represent the events that form a closed sequence in the embedded situation. The covers of the volume, we might say, have the same function as the use of the preterit in narrative. It should be emphasized that we are dealing with poems *as* events, not with events *in* poems; the two levels may, of course, show many similarities — especially those between the speaker in the poem and the author.

One of the elements listed earlier as constituting narrative is still missing: the links between the events that indicate a change of state. But the presence of all the others creates

present. The logic of narrative makes it impossible to discard his function. Chatman 146–95

what we can call a *narrative impulse*, to which the reader who reads the poems in sequence will respond by supplying possible narrative links between the events.

There is one more point that should be remembered here: The narrative impulse is not only felt by the reader of the printed collection, but also by the poet preparing it. It is no coincidence, therefore, that poets often arrange their poems along a narrative line, e.g., that of biography, or then deliberately frustrate any attempt by the reader to perceive them in such a sequence.

W. H. Auden offers an interesting example here. In 1944, when he first collected his shorter poems, he arranged them in the alphabetical order of their first lines. Later, in the foreword to *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957* (1966) he offered an explanation for this:

This may have been a silly thing to do, but I had a reason. At the age of thirty-seven I was still too young to have any sure sense of the direction in which I was moving, and I did not wish critics to waste their time, and mislead readers, making guesses about it which would almost certainly turn out to be wrong. (Auden 15)

In other words, Auden expected his readers to read the sequence of his poems quite naturally as a narrative, and he deliberately forced them, by introducing contrary signals, to read it as an instructive text.

If editors are ready to let readers yield to the narrative impulse, there are basically two lines they can follow. The poems (or groups of poems) can be arranged in a sequence that corresponds to one of the basic stories we share, to one of our myths: poems on frustration will precede those on fulfilment; poems on love will precede those on death—unless love is shown to overcome death; but this is a different story.

The second, and more common, storyline is that of biography; we may be offered the autobiography of the poet, in some cases also the one of the speakers in the poems. In most collections since the Romantic age, we will get something in-between: the poets remove some poems from their collection, revise, that is, edit, others, and arrange the rest of them according to the -image they would like to project—their personal myth.

Auden continues in the passage quoted above:

To-day, nearing sixty, I believe that I know myself and my poetic intentions better and, if anybody wants to look at my writings, from a historical perspective, I have no objection.

Consequently, though I have sometimes shuffled poems so as to bring together those related by theme or genre, in the main their order is chronological. (Auden 15)

He divided his poems among four sections, each representing a new chapter, a new stage, in his life (Auden 16)⁷.

In conclusion we can return to two examples introduced earlier: critical editions and Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. In arranging the poems in the chronological order of their composition, the editors of a critical edition may be guided by two motives: they may be trying to tell the story of the development of a poet's mind;⁸ but they may also choose this arrangement because it does not force them to impose their own story on the material they are presenting. Even anthologies follow this pattern, but there the need to select obliges editors to commit themselves: *The New Oxford Book of English Verse* prepared by Helen Gardner tells a different story about English poetry than its predecessor, edited by Arthur Quiller-Couch.

We can also see now why readers of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* who tend to consider the single poem to be an autonomous entity are bound to read them as a narrative—especially as they can be read as sharing the same speaker, if not the addressee, and as autobiographical. Any attempt to deny the sequence its narrative quality has to struggle, in the absence of any other explicit order, against the narrative impulse described.

Perhaps a final note of caution is necessary: I do not claim that the single poem cannot adequately be experienced outside the context of the collection (many poems, after all, first appear in magazines). The editorial dimension of the collection links it with other poems and subtly transforms it to become part of a larger entity. These links deserve our attention; and once we pay it to them, we will notice that, more often than not, they are narrative ones.

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⁷ Edward Mendelson, in his Editor's Preface (Auden 12) points out that all but one of these chapter-divisions "mark events in the public realm."

⁸ For arguments favouring the date of publication rather than composition as a criterion, see E. de Selincourt's "Preface" to Wordsworth (*The Poetical Works* 10)

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