

## Closure

Poets have been less drawn to techniques of closure than fiction writers because of their more casual use of narrative. Conventionally, texts that foreground narrative (movement in time) have a beginning, middle and end, a three-stage structure that corresponds to the human life: childhood, adulthood and death. One would think that the normal avoidance of death would produce a desire for texts that also resist closure; in fact, the general reader has preferred closed texts, ones in which the end signals that the chaotic events of the beginning and middle have been resolved, if not happily then in a way that can be accepted as plausible or just. People do not love things that end; instead, desiring control of their own fate, they are comforted by examples of power. At the turn of nineteenth century, William Wordsworth formalized and popularized the tendency then towards a poetry that presented a “recollection” of a past experience. Knowing the end of a narrative thus allowed for control of the end. Edgar Allan Poe, in “Philosophy of Composition” (1846), affirmed Wordsworth’s idea when he recommended that writing begin only after the ending has been decided; in other words, write as if you were remembering something that had happened.

Often poems do tell stories, but by the twentieth century many American poets had replaced the [287] “poetry as recollection” idea with a “poetry as composition” one (movement in space), which made poetry more open. The change occurred when poets rejected narrative structures as well as many of the traditional poetic forms and devices: sonnets or balanced antithesis, for instance. A traditional form was tied up with an oft-repeated content; therefore, to say something different the poet needed to construct a new form. Poets began espousing an open form poetics. The two great American poets of the nineteenth century, Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, while they tell stories and allude to some aspects of conventional poetry, were defiant: Whitman kept expanding his *Leaves of Grass* (1855), and Dickinson refused to publish, a decision that allowed her to revise her poems without ever settling on one definitive version. The open or “democratic” form of their poetry and their statements (in essays and letters) about a poetry that embodied the present circumstances, including the act of composition itself, were foundational for the Modernist poets of the early twentieth century. In general, modern (since 1800) poems have tended to have an open form, while the degree of closure in the content varies widely.

Examples of closure appear most clearly in “genre fiction” (detective, romance). The teleology inherent to detective fiction (which Poe helped to define), for instance, demands that the narrative end with the revelation of the murderer. Closure in poetry, however, happens in degrees of strength,

never entirely. Certain forms are closed, but even tightly defined forms like the sonnet or the elegy have a content that often plays up ambiguity or irony, so that as a whole the poem may have an openness. Poets have realized that in saying “closure” they mean “stability”; a poem can thus be full of unresolved antitheses (“Love is painful *and* pleasurable”) or test the limits of intelligibility and still put forward a stable meaning. One method of doing this has the poem end with a statement that the reader will accept as a self-evident truth. In *Poetic Closure* (1968)—still the only book-length study of the subject—Barbara Smith notes that “the conditions which contribute to the sense of truth are also those which create closure” (154). The best example of a closed poem remains John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1819): in the last two lines of a poem consisting of five tightly-wrought ten-line stanzas, the immortal urn tells each succeeding generation that “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” and the poet adds “—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” Truth can be messy, but if stated succinctly and authoritatively at the end, as in this Keats poem, the reader should feel a sense of closure.

In the twentieth century Gertrude Stein’s work stands as perhaps the most insistent case for “poetry as composition,” not “recollection.” Her poetry starts with a phrase and then responds to what those terms propose. The laws of genre are irrelevant because the poet owns no stock in what has been done in the past; all that matters begins now on the page; a poem defines itself only in the process of being written. Stein did not see beginnings or ends, only middles: poems open *in medias res* (into the midst of things) and stay there, instead of returning to the beginning and winding things up at the end, as poems like John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667) had done. In her *The Geographical History of America* (1936) Stein states that “any one writing knows that there is no finishing finishing in writing” (480). A poem thus remains unfinished even after a poet has stopped adding to a poem; one poem starts up where another had left off. Balachandra Rajan, in *The Form of the Unfinished* (1985), distinguishes between a “fragment” and something “unfinished.” Many Romantic poets were fond of publishing their work as fragments, and labeled them as such; Modernist poets, in contrast, published unfinished work. To say “fragment” connotes that the poem was once part of something whole, or aspired to be whole, while an unfinished poem defers wholeness. Stein and writers sympathetic to her made poetry a perpetually unfinished project, new poetry (and new truths) being needed as time goes on.

A poem composed “in the now” does not aim to present the truth about something because arriving at the truth usually depends on time having passed and a reflection on the difference between then and now. Twentieth-century poets more typically present their “observations” on

what they are seeing, feeling or reading, and they pass on to readers their vivid experiences with language as a highly charged and surprising medium. In a highly literate society nothing is, paradoxically, more taken for granted than language, and poets attempt to dispel that complacency. Charles Olson's "Projective Verse" (1950) was a loud call to poets to build on work of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, work that got "rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego" (247). Poetry for them still held a special position in the world, but poets themselves were to be regarded as ordinary craftspeople who refused to be complacent when they handled language. More than anything, though, this essay defines Olson's principle of "composition by field": according to him the poem must be an open and self-aware thing of energy that knows its direction only after it's under way. Susan Howe too, by the 1970s, was seeing the page as a field of energy, with each word an object at play in relation to the other words. Other poets, to reduce "lyrical interference" and go beyond the habits of the self, were using aleatory procedures or particular constraints: for instance, Christian Bök's *Eunoia* (2001) includes poems in which every word contains the vowel "e" and only that vowel.

Concurrent with Olson's call were ideas about "serial poetry." Jack Spicer, in a 1958 letter to [288] Robin Blaser, asserted that the point was "not to search for the perfect poem, but to let your way of writing of the moment go along its own paths, explore and retreat but never to be fully realized (confined) within the boundaries of one poem"; a "poem is never by itself alone" he concludes (54-55). Spicer learned this from Robert Duncan, who taught that poets should write books, not individual poems; in these books were "serial poems." More recently, in "The Rejection of Closure" (1983), Lyn Hejinian has observed that poems open themselves by involving the reader in the production of meaning; in contrast, a closed poem claims to be sufficient on its own, asking only that the reader gives witness. Parataxis, disjunction and "the swerve" (non-linearity) are techniques that open the poem. Hejinian notes that the Modernist poets let the content determine the form; doing so allowed the broken or incipient materials of the poem to overwhelm any tendency in the form towards closure. Finally, according to Hejinian, poems end without reaching closure because of the impossibility of exactly matching word and world, the word and the thing it represents; what poems reach for in their words will unendingly be grasp-less. And when writing *is* thinking (or listening), and no end to thinking exists, closure will again be deferred.

Proposals in the last century and a half about democratic, unfinished, projective, aleatory, and serial poetry were all made by writers considering the politics of poetic form: poems were not to be (closed) commodities but spaces open to all manner of language practices, not just "the poetic," and

to people historically excluded from elite literary culture. An “open form” poetics became the popular choice in the last part of the twentieth century, though one must note the artificiality of the binary “open / closed” and maintain a healthy skepticism of those who claim that an “open” poem always beats a “closed” one in interest. At the same time, skeptics of poets who choose an open form must keep in mind that such poets are not advocates of formlessness; instead, each poem demands its own form, one that suits the occasion of the writing and the content being expressed.

**Selected Primary Sources:** Hejinian, Lyn, “The Rejection of Closure,” *The Language of Inquiry* (Los Angeles: U of California P, 2000. 40-58); Olson, Charles, “Projective Verse,” *Collected Prose*, Ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Los Angeles: U of California P, 1997. 239-249); Smith, Barbara H., *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1968); Vincent, John, *Queer Lyrics: Difficulty and Closure in American Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

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