

## THE POEM'S ARGUMENT

By Jeffrey Harrison

For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, American poets shunned rhetorical language, often favoring instead a poetry that relied on the image to do most of the work. By now, imperatives like “Go in fear of abstractions” (Pound), “No ideas but in things” (Williams), and “Show, don’t tell” (every high-school creative writing teacher in America) have become so ingrained that we would be forgiven for losing sight of this fact: most poems—perhaps all poems—offer arguments of one kind or another. Sometimes the argument is largely implied and does not rely heavily on rhetorical language, but many poems do use at least a modicum of this kind of language—which I also want to call the language of statement—to make their arguments. Even William Carlos Williams’s iconic imagistic poem “The Red Wheelbarrow” famously begins with a snippet of statement—“so much depends / upon”—without which it would not be a poem at all. That initial bit of argument gives the poem an organizing principle, acts on the images that follow, and provides the stance of the speaker, the “angle of entry” into the poem, so to speak. You could say the whole poem depends on it.

The Romantic poet John Clare, perhaps, comes closest to refuting the notion that every poem has an argument, especially in his sonnets. The sonnet form is justly famous for developing complex arguments in a small space, but Clare’s sonnets are almost pure description. Still, even a poem as straightforward and elemental as his “Emmonsails Heath in Winter” contains an argument, albeit one so compact it is contained entirely in the first four words, “I love to see”:

I love to see the old heath’s withered brake  
Mingle its crimped leaves with furze and ling  
While the old heron from the lonely lake  
Starts slow and flaps his melancholy wing....

All the nuggets of rich description that follow are strung on the simple thread of that candid bit of statement, which enacts a direct angle of entry into the poem and clearly gives the speaker’s heartfelt stance on his surroundings.

The argument in Wallace Stevens’s “The Snow Man” is slightly more complicated, weaving through the poem in intermittent strands of statement:

One must have a mind of winter  
To regard the frost and the boughs  
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time  
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,  
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think  
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,  
In the sound of a few leaves....

In these first three stanzas, the argument-making statement comes in three main passages:

One must have a mind of winter  
To regard...

And have been cold a long time  
To behold...

...and not to think  
Of any misery in....

What comes between these pieces of statement is description. Here is the description alone, as if the first part of the poem had been written without an argument:

The frost and the boughs  
 Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;  
 The junipers shagged with ice,  
 The spruces rough in the distant glitter  
 Of the January sun; the sound of the wind,  
 The sound of a few leaves. . . .

This has a Chinese or Japanese feel, and in those traditions all of these images would have specific (though not entirely fixed) connotations, giving this passage more meaning and emotional resonance than it has in English. In English, it feels incomplete—and not only because it lacks any main verbs. That problem could be solved in several different ways, but even then this passage would not feel like a poem.

A poem could begin this way, but something else would have to happen afterward to make it a poem—for instance, the introduction of a first-person speaker who has thoughts or feelings about this scene. Many very good poems do begin with description and then expand from there—but Stevens happens to introduce his “something else” at the beginning, finding his way into the poem through an argument. One of the remarkable things about this poem is how seamlessly the argument runs through the imagery, like intermittent stitches. The other remarkable thing is the mysterious and visionary place where the poem arrives: “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.” The poem might never have arrived there without the argument that Stevens set up at the beginning and then pursued. In other words, what might be thought of as the mundane language of statement or the rational language of argument has led to discoveries quite beyond the rational and mundane.

Robert Hayden’s “Those Winter Sundays” is a different kind of poem, a recollection from childhood presented in the first person:

Sundays too my father got up early  
 and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,  
 then with cracked hands that ached

from labor in the weekday weather made  
 banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I’d wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.  
 When the rooms were warm, he’d call,  
 and slowly I would rise and dress,  
 fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,  
 who had driven out the cold  
 and polished my good shoes as well.  
 What did I know, what did I know  
 of love’s austere and lonely offices?

The most obvious part of the poem’s argument comes in the last two lines, which are an example of the language of statement framed in a rhetorical question. But they are much more than that, too. As we read through the poem and arrive at those lines, we feel the power of their intonation as a heartfelt lyric utterance emanating from everything that has come before: the images, the memory and the emotions associated with it, and the argument.

The same is true of the next most obvious statement in the poem: “No one ever thanked him,” at the end of the first stanza. This goes right to the heart of why the poem was written and is a key part of the argument: it raises the emotional stakes. In doing that, it obviously provides the speaker’s stance on the recollected scene and helps give the poem a structure beyond the simply narrative.

However, the argument of the poem begins earlier, and more subtly, in the poem’s very first line, with the word “too”: “Sundays too my father got up early.” This small word single-handedly turns the first line from simple recollection into part of the poem’s argument. It makes a slight but very important adjustment of the angle of entry into the poem. Farther down, at the end of the third-to-last line, the phrase “as well” is

doing something very similar. And this additional realization finally triggers the utterance that releases the accumulated pressure of the poem.

These seemingly insignificant words and phrases like *too* and *as well*—and a slew of others like *otherwise*, *yet*, *nor*, *still*, *even*, *only*, *if*, *if only*, *but*, *when*, *that*, *so that*, *then*, *because*, *though*, *although*—these little words and phrases (most of which a grammarian would call adverbs or subordinating conjunctions) can be very important in establishing and modulating a poem’s argument. Sometimes we distrust a poem that relies too heavily on such small rhetorical moves, and it is true that their overuse can signal a weak poem. (It should also be acknowledged that in certain kinds of contemporary poems—for instance, many of those written by John Ashbery—these logical connectives and the language of statement are used to thwart referential meaning rather than to enhance it, creating a kind of “empty” argument rather than one that “adds up.”) But in other cases these markers help the poet bring into focus what the poem—or its speaker—is actually saying. Thus, they help establish something beyond tone: the sense of the speaker as a character. By fine-tuning the speaker’s attitude as the poem progresses, they dramatize the psychology of the speaker while also serving as signals that help the reader to follow the thread of the poem.

The following poem by the contemporary poet Peter Schmitt (from his book *Hazard Duty*) turns on a number of these small words and phrases while framing its argument with a series of subordinate clauses:

#### A DAY AT THE BEACH

If he had been paying more attention  
to whatever my mother was saying  
from under her hat beneath the umbrella,

or watching more closely over my brother,  
off playing somewhere with his shovel and pail,  
or me, idly tracing my name in the sand,

if he hadn’t had that faraway look,  
gazing out to where the freighters crawled along  
the horizon—so that when he suddenly

pushed up and off, sand in his wake, visor  
taking wing behind him, you could believe,  
as he churned toward the glassy water,

that it had just come to him to chuck it all,  
this whole idea of family, and make  
for those southbound freighters and the islands—

then he might have never seen the arm heaved up,  
the lifeguards running just as my father  
was lifting the old man out of the surf

and bearing him ashore, the blue receding  
from his cramped limbs. And as a crowd closed around  
the gasping figure struggling to his knees,

my father turned back to us—sheepishly,  
almost, back to the endless vigilance  
of husband and of father, which was all

he had ever asked for in the first place.

The poem begins with a line and a half of what I’ve been calling the language of statement: “If he had been paying more attention / to whatever . . .” But in terms of argument, the important word is “If.” Functioning as a subordinating conjunction, it sets up the first subordinate clause and creates a kind of grammatical suspense as we wait for the main verb, which we know will come as a kind of answer in a “then” clause. The “then” doesn’t come until the sixth stanza, with “then he might have never seen”—more language of statement taking up the main argument of the poem. However, between the first “if” and the “then,” we get a handful of secondary parts of the argument and more syntactic markers, including a series of further subordinate clauses, the phrase “so that when” in line

nine, and the clause “you could believe” followed by “that it had just come to him to chuck it all, / this whole idea of family.” All of this further suspends the main clause and adds to the release when we get there: “then he might have never seen.” After that, we get “just as” in the following line, “And as” at the beginning of the poem’s second sentence, and then finally “back to the endless vigilance / of husband and father, which was all // he had ever asked for in the first place”—three instances of the language of statement that makes up the poem’s argument.

This is a poem that sticks quite closely to the scene at hand, but the argument running through it gives it a syntactic dynamism and a structure that it wouldn’t have if it were just recording the events of the episode. That poem might begin something like this:

My mother was saying something  
from under her hat beneath the umbrella,  
my brother was off playing somewhere  
with his shovel and pail, and I  
was idly tracing my name in the sand.  
My father had that faraway look,  
gazing out to where the freighters crawled  
along the horizon—but suddenly he was  
pushing up and off, sand in his wake, visor  
taking wing behind him....

This version has a simple narrative structure. There is nothing wrong with narrative, and I am not advocating one particular approach to poems. Different poems call for different methods, and sometimes straight narrative is the way to go. Nevertheless, something is clearly felt to be missing in the above rephrasing, and what is missing is the argument that provides the actual poem with a structure beyond the narrative, as well as the sense of a compelling speaker.

As Schmitt’s poem reminds us, the poems that are most successful, the ones that convince us and will matter to us, are the ones whose

arguments enact the drama of a speaker trying to say something. In these poems, emotional and structural integrity become one and the same. Another such poem is “Lemon Moon” by Jessica Greenbaum, whose second book, *The Two Yvannes*, has just been published:

We almost remembered living it, the lemon turning  
around the orange, which also turned, day in  
and day out, and, while rolling over through the seasons  
in the school’s basement, the Science room,  
gave wide berth to the grapefruit sun. Another year  
a brawny beach ball took center, while the tennis ball  
fuzzy with ground cover, circled like a ball  
never does, and the ping pong ball tagged along above it  
like a clockwork gear at the edge of the world.

Beneath a sheet, thumb-tacked dome-shape into a planetarium,  
one of us was chosen as the star, planet, moon.  
Sneakers squeaked, and we almost remembered these paths  
from below the skin of our life, the way you move a skater  
by a magnet underneath the mirror. Melville says  
the structural body of the whaleboat mimicked  
the body of the whale, and as we circled those also circling  
(a pattern I later admired in the migration of two-steppers  
around a south Texas dance hall) I think we almost

remembered the concentric moving bodies  
we came from, to come here, a wedge reappearing to flavor our sky.

The first clause of this poem, “We almost remembered living it,” is the partial statement that provides the poem with its angle of entry. This is an independent clause, a declarative structure, but because of the past tense of the verb and, especially, the word “almost,” the angle of entry is more oblique than if the poem had begun simply with “I remember.” Still, since this main clause is followed by a series of subordinate clauses, it has, in a sense, the opposite syntactic structure as the first sentence of Schmitt’s poem, and it initiates the poem’s argument more directly. Yet the syntax

of what follows is still complex and dynamic. The second sentence has a similar structure, and there is a sense in both sentences that the initial main clause is a fixed body around which the subordinate clauses orbit like planets or moons, mirroring the poem's subject matter. The poem's remaining sentences vary in structure, but other elements further reinforce that circling effect. For example, in coming back a second and then a third time in the poem, the phrase "we almost remembered" gives the sense that this poem about planets and children is itself revolving around the repetitions of that phrase—or it's as if that phrase, that recurring partial statement, were giving the poem its rotation, its spin. We feel the argument turning on that phrase which, in its second appearance, negotiates the transition into the figurative ("we almost remembered these paths / from below the skin of our life...") and in its third appearance helps the poem to circle around to its mysteriously powerful ending.

There is no formula, of course, for getting the argument of a poem right. That challenge is complicated not only by the fact that different poems call for different methods but also by the many interrelated factors within a single poem: syntax, the language of statement, tone, the creation of a credible speaker. When we are stuck in a poem, the solution may be only an adjustment in the angle of entry, which in turn will change the way the poem is organized. In other cases, we may have lost hold of what we are trying to say, our stance on the subject, or the modulations of our feelings through the small words and phrases that track an argument. Or there may not be enough of an argument, with the result that the poem feels inert and seem to lack a focus, an organizing principle, and a voice, leaving the reader with nothing to go on in terms of how to read it.

What is true, though, is that the clarity of a poem often depends as much on the coherence of its argument as it does on the precision of its imagery or description. At the same time, the emotional integrity and

structural integrity of a successful poem are intertwined: the two will always be found together, manifesting themselves in the poem's argument, whether that argument is implicit or expressed explicitly through the language of statement. The movement of the argument, in turn, is what, to a large degree, establishes the sense of the speaker as a character. Often, small adjustments in the argument reveal the drama of a speaker struggling to say something, and it is through that struggle that the reader finally sees both who, exactly, is speaking—and why.