Forming and Meaning: Writing the Counterpoint Essay

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Although many composition teachers talk about the need to find "organic" forms in composing, students are often content to organize their writing in formulaic ways, frequently resorting to the five-paragraph theme—an introduction followed by three or four supporting points and a summary conclusion. Most students have internalized this form to such a degree that it has become the "default drive" for expository writing. When teachers ignore the form that student writing will take, they are not necessarily allowing students to produce organic structures but are generally encouraging conformity to standard patterns of exposition.

Much of our resistance to discussing form with students comes from a romantic view of composition that posits form as a product of inspiration and suggests that specifying a form for composition, therefore, inevitably limits a writer's individual genius. In other words, form is often associated with conformity, with rigid rules and "boiler plate" prose.

However, as students become aware of different options for organizing discourse, they are not simply learning alternative methods of arrangement; they are learning new ways of thinking about their subject. A growing recognition that form serves a generative purpose in writing, that it liberates rather than limits many student writers, is evident in the scholarship of such writers as Chris Anderson, Richard Coe, Frank D'Angelo, Keith Fort, and Ross Winterowd. Further, Ann Berthoff argues that form is the creative force behind composition:

We encourage [the] experience of writing and thereby the auditing of meaning by providing linguistic forms, syntactical and rhetorical structures, not for imitation but for use as speculative instruments. Forms are not cookie cutters superimposed on some given, rolled-out reality dough; forms are not alien structures that are somehow made appropriate to "what you want to say." Forms are our means of abstracting; or, rather, forming is abstracting. (77)

By recognizing form, students learn to think in abstractions, to govern the chaos of experience.

But one of the difficulties of teaching form is that students may focus on a particular form's requirements and lose sight of its function. For example,
Berthoff discovered that her students were submitting prewriting "with the appearance of sketches for a painting of the Martyrdom of St. Sebastian, because they were under the impression that 'she likes arrows'" (76). Similarly, most composition teachers have encountered students who memorize the conventions of a formal outline but fail to understand the basic principles of coordination and subordination.

Berthoff found that double-entry notebooks provided a form that helped students creatively order the chaos of their impressions. Opposing observation and analysis in these notebooks initiated students into the process of critical reading and thinking. Berthoff emphasizes both the simplicity and flexibility of the oppositional arrangement:

Opposition is a highly generalized term covering juxtapositions, alignments, echoes as well as antitheses, opposites, and counterpoint... It is a concept to think with; it is quickly grasped by all students because it is a name for what they are already doing when they judge size and distance and degrees of all kinds. Opposition is the principle informing every phrase they utter, every step they take. (76)

Although Berthoff emphasizes the double-entry journal as a means of exploring oppositional structures, this form appears in "finished" prose as well as in prewriting. As William Zeiger observes, many essayists, such as Charles Lamb, Russell Baker, Annie Dillard, Garrison Keillor, and Alice Walker, integrate a "dialectical" form in their writing ("Dialectical Model"). In such essays, an antithetical viewpoint may be overtly expressed through an imagined dialogue, or it may be introduced more subtly through metaphor and irony. In Hegelian fashion, then, a synthesis begins to emerge from these opposing viewpoints, a synthesis that may embrace both and reshape them in a larger understanding.

John McPhee's Counterpoint Essay

One way students can discover the importance of form in developing discourse is by imitating another writer's form. Imitation has, of course, largely fallen out of favor as a method of instruction in writing and, as Dale L. Sullivan notes, is often thought to stifle student creativity. However, as I have been arguing, students do not become imaginative because we fail to provide models; rather, they may fail to imagine because they have so few models. That is, they may settle for "a stated thesis and three supporting points" because it is the only form they know.

As an alternative to this standard form, I often bring models of unconventional arrangements to class, many of them "literary nonfiction" experiments taking new approaches to the standard essay. Because the forms used by these literary nonfiction writers—sudden disjunctures, shifts of time and place, unexpected conclusions—are jarring to a reader unaccustomed to this genre, students frequently begin to "see" form that was previously transpar-
ent to them. They also begin to sense the importance of form as something more than the "container" of knowledge.

One particularly effective model is John McPhee's "The Search for Marvin Gardens." In this essay, McPhee blends an imaginary account of a Monopoly tournament with descriptions of actual locations in Atlantic City made famous by the game. His alternating style—what my class came to call "counterpoint"—is illustrated by the opening of this essay:

Go. I roll the dice—a six and a two. Through the air I move my token, the flatiron, to Vermont Avenue, where dog packs range.

The dogs are moving (some are limping) through ruins, rubble, fire damage, open garbage. Doorways are gone. Lath is visible in the crumbling walls of the buildings. The street sparkles with shattered glass. I have never seen, anywhere, so many broken windows. A sign—"Slow, Children at Play"—has been bent backward by an automobile.

As this excerpt reveals, "The Search for Marvin Gardens" is a splendid example of what Chris Anderson has termed the "rhetoric of gaps." No thesis statement announces the essay's purpose. No however's or furthermore's guide the reader through the discourse. In fact, some students were a page or two along in their reading before they realized that McPhee was alternating two narratives. Even after they discovered the pattern, they still struggled to supply a purpose for this "odd" arrangement. That is, the counterpoint structure forced students to look for a purpose in the essay—not a stated thesis, but one implied by the form itself.

Some students complained that McPhee's essay was "difficult to follow" and "disorganized." In fact, it is highly organized. As Jack Roundy observes, McPhee's "apparently artless organization requires a good deal more planning than a simple formal arrangement" (71). The attention McPhee gives to organization is also apparent in his own description of his approach to writing. In an interview with Roundy, McPhee drew a "V" to describe the structure he used for "A Roomful of Hovings," and he described other essays as circular in structure, or as spirals (73-74). Roundy himself places "Marvin Gardens" with McPhee's organically formed essays, suggesting that it is "structured around the board game Monopoly" (73).

Although the Monopoly board is one of the organizational schemes that McPhee uses in "Marvin Gardens," it is one of the least important. The dominant structure is the contrapuntal arrangement of two narratives, a structure similar to the one McPhee used in an earlier essay, "Levels of the Game." In this early essay, McPhee alternates background information about Arthur Ashe and Clark Graebner with descriptions of their encounter on the tennis court, smoothly weaving descriptions of the tennis match into the profiles of Ashe and Graebner. However, in "Marvin Gardens," he shifts back and forth between the two narratives after virtually every paragraph,
and the connections between the narratives are less apparent. The overall effect is much more disorienting.

The structure of "Marvin Gardens" resembles a ladder: the sides of the ladder represent the two parallel narratives that are essentially independent except for their conceptual connections, represented by the "crossbars" of the ladder. In the "A" narrative, McPhee traces the progress of a best-of-seven tournament in which the narrator is pitted against a "tall, shadowy figure," a Harvard Law School graduate who plays the game quickly and ruthlessly. After gaining an early advantage, the narrator loses to this shadowy opponent in the seventh and deciding match. In the "B" narrative, McPhee begins by describing the urban blight that has settled on many of Atlantic City's avenues, and he goes on to discuss the city's early development, its golden era, and its subsequent decline.

Although the "A" and "B" narratives are essentially independent, my students discovered several conceptual connections. They noted, of course, McPhee's use of place names to make transitions from one narrative to the next. For instance, after McPhee's opponent moves to St. Charles Place on the Monopoly board, the "B" narrative takes up with a description of the actual St. Charles Place in Atlantic City, with its cracked sidewalks and broken glass. However, these transitions are more than superficial devices; they draw attention to the stark contrast between the glitz of the board game and the bleak reality of the city. Several students remarked that it was easy to become swept up in the excitement of the Monopoly tournament, reveling in the narrator's victories and suffering in his defeats; most of all, they felt his temptation not only to win but to monopolize, to dominate the opposition. But they also recognized the irony of deploring the conditions of the "real" city and yet wanting to win the "make-believe" game at all costs. And they realized, finally, that the ruthless economics of Monopoly have been played out in the streets and properties of Atlantic City. McPhee himself never explicitly condemns the speculators and financiers that built the city, but he does describe them as "masters of the quick kill" (312). As my students observed, these are precisely the words used to describe the narrator's opponent in the Monopoly tournament.

**Writing Counterpoint Essays**

Reading "Marvin Gardens" allowed my students to participate in the making of meaning as they made conceptual connections between the two narratives. I also asked them to find their own meanings, to discover their own abstractions, by imitating the form of the counterpoint essay in their own writing.

Although many of them followed McPhee's pattern closely, staying with the "game" versus "real life" theme of "Marvin Gardens," their debt to McPhee was a good deal less than, say, Shakespeare's to Plautus in *A Comedy of Errors*. Ultimately, their use of McPhee's form was not so much imitation
as what Burke terms the "individuation of form" (181-82). Understanding the principle of counterpoint structure enabled them to harness it for their own purposes. Specifically, using counterpoint helped them discover connections and contradictions, instead of simply recounting their experiences. For example, one student wrote an "A" narrative recalling her first encounter with her new stepmother and a "B" narrative describing a game of Sorry! that she had played with her little brother. In the beginning of the essay, we learn that she is eager to meet her new stepmother. We also discover that her brother is reluctant to play the game with her because she has a habit of yelling "Sorry!" when she lands on one of his tokens. At the end of this essay—entitled simply "Sorry"—the writer draws the two episodes together in a dramatic climax:

Finally, they arrived. I had built up so much excitement and expectation that I was near bursting. When she got out of the car, I came flying into her full force, wrapped my skinny arms around her waist, and turned my best sun-shiny smile up to her. "Welcome home," I shouted. She was obviously taken aback. She stared at me with big, shocked eyes for a minute, then disdainfully disengaged herself from me as if I were an old, soiled garment. "What is going on here?" I thought. Maybe I did something wrong. I should try again.

I readily agreed to these restrictions, and we began to play. However, as the game progressed, and I began to win, I forgot my earlier promise. Not only did I react in my usual enthusiastic manner when I put his man back to the start, I actually got up and danced a jig while calling out in an obnoxious voice, "Sorry, Sorrrey, SORRRRY!" Boy, was I sorry.

She had turned and was retrieving her luggage from the trunk of the car. I came up beside her and said open-heartedly, "Can I call you Mom?" Realizing that I hadn't gone away, she resignedly turned slightly toward me and said, "No. Call me Carey."

Jason threw the board up in the air, frogged me on the arm, and refused to ever play with me again.

Slamming the trunk shut, she turned, linked arms with my Dad and made her way into my house. I looked around at my three silent brothers, and they at me. "You shouldn't have said anything," said Jason. And one by one they turned and walked inside.

As this essay indicates, counterpoint is clearly what Roland Barthes calls a "writerly" form, one whose intention is "to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (4). Counterpoint invariably forces the reader to make connections between the two narratives. In some cases the author may consciously choose those connections, but in many cases the connections are less direct, more like a web of rural roads that provide a dozen alternate routes for those traveling through the territory. Is the main point of "Sorry" that childish enthusiasm leads inevitably to regret? Or is it that the joy of conquest is counterbalanced by the agonies of rejection? Possibly, the essay is about the way in which silence comes to dominate speech as the central force in our lives. Of course, any essay is open to similar acts of interpretation. As a writerly form, however, counterpoint demands such interpretations from the reader.

Clearly, the "writerly" form of an essay can undermine the writer's
authority to determine its meaning. In "Bored Games," Tina compared the
tedium of playing games with her children to the thrill she had experienced
as a child playing checkers with her father. The paper is largely self-
condemning. Tina's father had always found time to play with her, but Tina
avoids playing games with her children. However, as Tina read the paper to
the class, everyone was quick to point out that her father may have dreaded
these games as well. Perhaps Tina had simply projected her own interest in
the games onto her father.

Although the counterpoint form seems simple, it admits many vari-
atations. My students found, to borrow Berthoff's phrasing, "juxtapositions,
alignments, echoes as well as antitheses" (76). For instance, some writers
began with two narratives that seemed completely unconnected, only gradu-
ally bringing the two together. One student began her essay with an account
of a tennis match and switched abruptly to a description of a hospital; only as
the story progresses do we learn that the tennis partner is a cancer victim.
And while in most counterpoint essays the two narratives carry roughly equal
weight, this needn't be the case, as Greg's essay demonstrates. In "The
Pursuit of the Trivial," Greg alternated questions (What 1983 hit movie
starred Tom Cruise as an adolescent who gets in trouble when his parents
leave home?) with lengthy narratives about events of his high-school days
(for example, when he and his friends "trashed" his grandparents' home).
Thus, even though students were working with a required "form," they were
creative in applying it. As Zeiger notes, any dialectical model is "both a set
form and a method of inquiry" ("Dialectical Model" 16).

Jim applied the form creatively by alternating information from his
training as a security guard, an exceedingly dull affair, with a description of
the actual apprehension of a shoplifter:

"Once a subject has returned the merchandise he is considered, by law, under arrest. If
the suspect makes any offensive moves toward the law enforcement official, the penalty
is increased from a misdemeanor theft to robbery conviction. A robbery conviction
carries a Felony B charge with a possible prison sentence."

The suspect turned to me, and I identified myself as a security officer. I asked him
to return the Nintendo game to my partner. Just as the suspect handed the merchandise
back, he turned and hit me in the chest. . . .

"Wilson, if I ran from you, and you were carrying a weapon, what would the charges
be?" "Well, Officer Powe, I'm not quite sure." In a stern and disappointed voice, Officer
Powe told Wilson, "The charges would be Felony C charges of escape. The offense is
punishable by a minimum sentence of $200.00 and/or fifteen days in jail."

Mall Security drove their vehicles to the entrance of the west parking lot and parked
sideways to block the fleeing suspect's line of travel. I knew he was going to
try to reach his car on the other side of the mall security cars. At that point in time, I leaped and
catch the cuff of his jeans, causing both of us to fall to the ground. Two mall security
officers held him down while I handcuffed him. I ran a warrant check through LPD.

"ONE ALPHA LEMA, WARRANT COMES TO A GONZALES, FRANK.
D.O.B. 6-22-60. WARRANTS FOR RAPE IN DALLAS COUNTY. WARRANTS
FOR AGGRAVATED ASSAULT AND ROBBERY. PROCEED WITH CAU-
TION."
I returned the dispatcher's call, "One Alpha Lema clear on the warrants," and the game was over.

The counterpoint form encouraged Jim to plunge immediately into the action, providing readers with procedural information as the story develops, instead of boring them with lengthy exposition. More importantly, the counterpoint form led Jim to explore the relationship between knowledge and experience. Although, Jim's story about arresting a shoplifter would have been exciting in its own right, by interspersing his training instructor's comments, Jim provides a frame for this experience. He raises larger questions about the law (What constitutes an arrest?) and police procedure (Is it wise to chase an armed fugitive through a crowded mall?). In other words, the essay is not only about Jim's arrest of Frank Gonzales, but about justice in America.

Implications for Pedagogy

As these essays show, composing in counterpoint necessarily involves students in abstract thinking, providing a bridge between what D'Angelo calls syntagmatic and paradigmatic expression. As D'Angelo elaborates, the syntagmatic element of discourse "manifests itself as being concrete, particular, and unique," whereas the paradigmatic is "abstract, general, and universal" (79). Ideally, an essay works on both levels. Most composition teachers would agree that good writing contains clear description, sensory detail, and specific language. But we also know that good writing has a purpose, that all of the detail somehow adds up to a general meaning. Student writers often struggle with both elements, sometimes failing to provide sufficient detail, sometimes lacking a sense of purpose. When purpose statements are required, they often run to the trite and the obvious: "I've learned that shortcuts don't pay off" or "I've changed a lot since I was a child."

The counterpoint essay encourages the use of detail and the elaboration of meaning. Although the individual narratives are syntagmatic, the ratio of the two creates a paradigmatic statement. Generally, the paradigm surfaces through hints and allusions rather than through explicit statement (just as McPhee suggests that avarice is the downfall of Atlantic City without specifically drawing this conclusion).

One weakness of the five-paragraph theme and its thesis-and-support structure is that it begs for conclusionary evidence. William Zeiger argues that students are too often forced to come to conclusions on topics that admit no simple solution; counterarguments, or even reservations, are typically ignored or concealed. He advocates a more open, "exploratory" essay that "refrains from concluding, not so much because its goal is out of reach as because the best resolution of its issue is multiple: any reduction to a definitive conclusion would distort the truer complexity of the vision" ("Exploratory Essay" 463). Counterpoint, by its very nature, requires a
weighing of opposites, a juxtaposition of alternative cases. Instead of "definitive" conclusions, my students began to understand the complexity of relationships that prevented once-and-for-all solutions. For instance, Pat, one of my older students, described a family ritual in which she chanted a silly rhyme while tickling one of the children's hands. If the child could remain sober faced through it all, she was rewarded with candy. In the beginning, Pat was only interested in describing the game as she had learned it from her mother. In the end, however, she realized that the rhyme was a rite of passage for women in her family: adulthood meant never letting on, never letting your feelings show. The very simplicity of the act had shrouded the complex implications it held for her.

Of course, any form can create limitations as well as encourage exploration for writers. Coe notes the danger of pro/con argumentation in reinforcing "binary dualism and other reductionist tendencies in modern Western culture" (20). Clearly, the counterpoint essay obviates some of these dangers because the two narratives do not represent "sides" of an issue but facets of experience. Still, the counterpoint essay is fundamentally dualistic. Perhaps other writers will explore their themes with a cacophony of voices, with multiple independent narratives. For now, at least, finding connections between two narratives has been enough of a stretch for my students and myself.

Another question addresses the counterpoint essay's viability outside the classroom. Is counterpoint a legitimate form of writing or a literary curiosity? One reason for using "Marvin Gardens," of course, was to validate the legitimacy of the form. Many of my students noted the similarity of counterpoint to cinematic techniques, in which such techniques as sudden breaks in the narrative and shifts of scene are the norm. It is quite possible that counterpoint writing reflects the influence of visual media on print culture. But regardless of its literary acceptance, the oppositional structure of counterpoint is a fundamental mode of human expression and thought. Burke observed that "a form is a way of experiencing; and such a form is made available in art when, by the use of specific subject-matter, it enables us to experience in this way" (181). Validation of the counterpoint essay comes from its usefulness in providing a "way of experiencing" for students as they look for intersections of meaning in parallel experiences.

Works Cited


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