

THE CONTENT OF THE FORM

Doug Nufer

TABLE OF FORMS

Dominique Fitzpatrick-O'Dinn

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Even though few books provide such thorough explanations of their principles of composition as this book does, *Table of Forms* revels in deception. It is, to begin with, a Spineless Book with a spine that has nothing on it. The author, Dominique Fitzpatrick-O'Dinn, is a patently fraudulent pseudonym for William Gillespie. The "fourth edition," with a 2006 copyright date, is the first fully revised edition, and was released in the spring of 2007. Anyone who has noticed Spineless Books, with its 2,002-word palindrome story *2002* (2002) by Nick Montfort and William Gillespie and its Fitzpatrick-O'Dinn Prize for rule-driven literature, might be prepared for this audaciously ambitious and beautifully realized collection of poems written by formal constraints, and yet even the most devoted followers and practitioners of such work may cringe at the prospect of having to deal with procedural poetry.

Formal work poses two problems: will the forms overpower the poems, making these pieces more interesting as puzzles than as works of art; and, will the act of reading be reduced to a guessing game, in which the reader must solve the puzzle behind the poem or feel stupid at being left out of some joke perpetrated by the poet? Gillespie solves the latter problem by providing a glossary, with definitions and etymology of the methods he uses, and identification of which poems follow which methods. Even when the forms are traditional and obvious (sonnet, sestina, palindrome), this is an essential key, particularly when so many poets take liberties with certain forms, such as the sonnet, as to defy definition. Relieved of having to play the guessing game, I found myself going back and forth from glossary to text, but eventually the elegance and panache of the poetry kept me from checking the glossary until later.

Although formal constraints have been around for centuries, Gillespie works in a contemporary tradition whose foremost practitioners are members of the Oulipo, the Paris-based group of writers and mathematicians founded in 1960 by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais. Gillespie's poetry can seem as feverishly wrought as some works of Ian Monk and at other times as stylishly refined as some works of Harry Mathews, but *Table of Forms* more resembles Queneau's 1947 classic, *Exercises in Style*, where he retells the same vignette in different ways, branding each version with the rhetorical device he uses, as well as the recently re-released *Oulipo Compendium* (2005) edited by Harry Mathews and Alastair Brotchie, with its definitions and demonstrations of a wealth of formal devices. Occasionally, Gillespie's terms and definitions vary from what other rhetorical guides offer, but these variations, along with their examples, amplify rather than confuse the issue at hand.

As Georges Perec, particularly in his novel *Life: A User's Manual* (1978), seems disinclined to limit himself to using "only" one constraint at a time, Gillespie often uses more than one form at once,

sometimes combining them, such as in the following heimlich (haiku plus limerick).

Maneuver

Newspoem 16 March 2000

there is a forest
on fire, flames spreading higher
and higher. do I

stand around, while it
burns to the ground, this deadly
maniacal pyre?

For that matter, the entire newspoem series not only introduces another layer of constraint to many of the poems here, but also addresses a complaint poets often hear when forms are as evident as content: by forcing readers to adjust to an unusual mode of expression, the writer is being effete or hermetically self-indulgent.

Using reports of current events, Gillespie began writing newspoetry in 1995, and from 1999 to 2002, he and Joe Futrelle edited a newspoetry site at <http://www.newspoetry.com> that offered a poem a day. These poems show that a level of personal engagement with the world at large is more moving and effective than the emotional slop political feelings too often inspire. After all, using their own table of forms, "embedded" journalists that call mercenaries "contractors" render events in an authoritative cant that is more intent on protecting the status quo than with revealing what really happened. A writer using formal devices can emphasize the insidious linguistic patterns people have come to accept, whether it comes from the newspaper of record or some broadcast of fair and balanced propaganda.

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Using the pantoum, Gillespie retells the story of people sent to prison for protesting the School for the Americas in "Dan and Doris Sage." As the second and fourth lines of each stanza become the first and third lines of the stanza that follows, the pattern highlights the pathetic absurdity of the protesters' plight, as they are trapped in the government's scheme of justice. In another pantoum newspoem, Gillespie and Andy Gricevich commemorate a presidential encounter with a former adversary, but in "Clinton Does Vietnam," the form takes on a breezier, hilarious tone as it plays with the mode of speech of a consummate politician.

Many of these poems express a certain personal stake, either in political or social matters, and many do not express a stake in anything Gillespie or his pseudonym might care to reveal. The advantage of working with a variety of demanding rules is not that you get to say whatever you feel like saying, but that you get to say whatever the rules allow. The freedom such restriction allows can lead the writer to write works she or he never would otherwise think of writing.

One disadvantage of working with a variety of demanding rules is that the objective of meeting the demands of the rules can overpower all other concerns. I don't mind if the forms take over the poem,

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but some of the poems here (e.g., "Joey Zoey" and "Poetry Class") strike me as more interesting in the ways they follow their rules, while others, such as the above-mentioned newspoems, reach out to readers to make them alternately forget and appreciate the rules of their construction.

One danger of working with rules is the rule of taking a constraint to the limit. That is, to tap the potential of a particular constraint, a writer tries to test all of the possibilities such a constraint offers. After spending time on a project, it's tempting to publish the outtakes as well as the more refined work. Gillespie avoids this pitfall. If he sometimes provides only brief illustrations of constraints that others have applied to more fully realized projects (why attempt lipograms, after Georges Perec wrote a novel without using the letter "e" and Christian Bök wrote a long poem in univocal sections, practically exhausting the words that contain only one kind of vowel), his facility at combining constraints sets and meets additional challenges.

Rather than repel readers by cloaking its procedures, *Table of Forms* invites anyone to participate. This is a generous and welcome addition to the literature of constraints.

Doug Nufer mostly writes works based on formal constraints. He's the author of five novels and a forthcoming book of poetry, We Were Werewolves (Make Now).