

Ars Paradoxes

Archibald MacLeish's poem, "Ars Poetica," and John Ashbery's poem, "Paradoxes and Oxymorons," have a similar theme in that they are both poems pertaining to poetry. Each poem takes on a unique perspective of how poetry should be conducted. This essay explicates both poems in order to explore how content and form combine to create brilliant poetry as well as to compare and contrast the pieces. "Ars Poetica" dives into exactly what a poem should be and represents poetic structure, rules, and ideas, as "Paradoxes and Oxymorons" explores how a poem should be read and understood by the reader while exploring a new voice of poetry.

"Ars Poetica" by Archibald MacLeish is a 24-line poem, mostly iambic with varied meter, and is broken into rhyming couplets. Each couplet is a small burst of imagery and/or metaphor that pushes at the larger idea of what a poem "should be." This larger idea is clear due to the repetition of the phrase "A poem should be," which is used five times throughout the poem. This reinforces the arrangement of the poem as well as the main concept, without outwardly saying so. The piece contains excessive line breaks and therefore the ideas in the poem seem to be scattered and hard to follow. However, the breaks help tell the reader where to pause and reflect. It gives the reader a slight interruption as if to process what has been just said and to move on whilst remembering the previous couplet. Each individual couplet is enjambed to bring the holistic idea of the poem together.

The poem's content is broken into three main sections. The first section, containing lines 1-8, uses four similes in four separate couplets. Each simile appeals to at

least one of the senses. The first two lines are read as, “A poem should be palpable and mute/ As a globed fruit” (MacLeish 1-2). The definition of palpable, in this context, could mean either something that can be touched or felt, or something that is easily seen. This “palpable fruit” that MacLeish writes of appeals to touch, sight, and taste all at once. Moving on, MacLeish speaks of “...old medallions to the thumb” and “...the flight of birds” (4, 8). The imagery of old medallions brings the sense of touch to mind and as well as the image of a worn down piece of familiar metal. As for the other image, the flight of birds is a beautiful sight appealing to the reader’s sense of vision.

Though all the senses aforementioned seem to be cast in a positive, or at least neutral, light, the diction concerning sound is not as gently spoken of. Every reference to the sense of hearing is accompanied with a negative word such as, “mute...dumb...silent...[or] wordless” (1, 3, 5, 7). The connotation of these words, when speaking of poetry, are negative and paradoxical. Poetry is to be heard, if not aloud, then in one’s own mind. Poetry is the art of language and for it to be literally wordless and silent, there would be no art. However, this is not what MacLeish means by this. MacLeish’s use of paradox and diction is implicated in order to explore the idea that a poem should not directly state its meaning. As Mary Ruefle explains in her book of speeches, *Madness, Rack, and Honey*, “it is not what a poem says with its mouth, it’s what it does with its eyes” (Ruefle, 57). MacLeish’s poem embodies exactly this concept; it is not what you say, but how you say it.

The second section, lines 9-16, begin with a simile, reflecting the previous section and easing the transition between them. The lines, “A poem should be motionless in time/ As the moon climbs”, both start and conclude the second section, framing off the imagery

and meaning in lines 11-14, and launching an extended simile that reflects the content of this section (MacLeish 9-10). The moon seems to be motionless due to its slow progression through the sky. It begins and ends at a horizon, as the second section begins and ends with the same two lines. It frames two couplets each exploring the idea of leaving. As directly quoted,

Leaving, as the moon releases
 Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,

Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,
 Memory by memory the mind – (11-14).

The moon reveals intricate entangled trees and memories of the past, and though it brings this beauty into our lives, it is always leaving us. The moon leaves a person with images, emotions, and memories—it leaves an impression on those who observe it.

As Ruefle explores in her speech “On Secrets,” “We must be careful not to take the word as the meaning itself; words do not ‘capture’ a moment as much as they ‘communicate’ it—they are a bridge that, paradoxically, breaks isolation and loneliness without eradicating it” (Ruefle 95). The moon moves yet is motionless all at once, as should a poem. We, as humans and as readers, cannot capture the movement of the moon or of the poem, but we can communicate it. This poem moves like the moon, with ease, from one moment to the next bringing disparate things together in a way that conveys beautiful insight on poetic nature.

The third section takes on the idea that a poem should simply *be*, as a piece of art just *is*. Writing is, as well as other medias, a work of art. Uniquely, language can be used to take large abstractions and shrink them into understandable and relatable instances and images. This is exemplified in the poem when MacLeish writes:

For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf

For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea – (19-21)

The lines explore grief and love through simple imagery. Grief—a doorway with no one to fill it and a maple leaf illuminates the mind with cold sorrow, a longing for a person who once passed through that door. Love—long, unkempt grass like wild untamed love with two lights in the sky, the moon and the North Star; the moon with its romantic connotation and the north star offering direction and escape for the lovers. These two small images convey emotions that large abstracted words cannot. As William Carlos Williams said, “There are no ideas but in things.” A poet can only capture ideas, images and emotions of the human experience through the use of smaller more relatable examples.

The last line of the poem embodies William’s philosophy. It reads, “A poem should not mean/ But be” (23-24). Simply, a poem should not be forced into meaning. Readers find importance through suggestion and interpretation. A poem should capture the ideas of human experience by showing, rather than telling.

On the contrary, John Ashbery’s poem, “Paradoxes and Oxymorons,” tells rather than shows. This poem defies the rules of poetry by swapping the roles of speaker and reader. Contradictory to poetic norms, this poem analyzes the reader, controls the reader, and plays with their heads. The reader is eager to follow and to be controlled, because for once, it seems as though the reader is not forced to think. The poem is constructed with

four stanzas, each quatrains of free verse. There is no rhyme scheme and no set meter, though each line varies between 11 and 17 beats. As taught by Professor Green:

Lines longer than 10 beats can create a sense of grandiosity, prophecy, abundance, overflow, joy, immediacy, an unstoppable machine, a dreamlike associativeness, a wider space for reverie, a sound like you're talking to yourself, a sense of energy and brimming over, a feeling of extraordinary authority and power, poetic language—of language compressed—a sense of artificiality of what the poet can make rather than what she can say (Green).

The longer lines in the poem reflect a sense of grandiosity, immediacy, a sound like you're talking to yourself, and a feeling of extraordinary authority and power.

The simplistic form fools readers into assuming the poem will be straightforward due to its well-kept outer form. He also fools the readers through simple syntax, diction, and punctuation. From what the eye can tell, ignoring content, Ashbery seems to have written a poem in its most plain and basic form. It is not until the reader delves into the material that the poem's true colors show.

Starting in the first stanza, the first line begins with a paradox: "This poem is concerned with language in a very plain level." (Ashbery 1). Though this statement is literally true, it is not figuratively true. This poem uses simple diction throughout, yet it discusses seemingly random and unclear ideas. The next line dives into the use of second person, which draws the reader in: "Look at it talking to you. You look out a window/ Or pretend to fidget." (2-3). The narrator quickly calls upon the readers discomfort and acknowledges their reaction. The vague use of "it" is in reference to the poem itself, personifying the poem. By doing this, the narrator creates a tangible relationship between the reader and the poem. The last line, "You miss it, it misses you. You miss each other.", explores the poem and the reader talking past each other, misinterpreting each other, missing each other. The line clearly makes no sense, but through this, Ashbery

commands the reader to think on a different level. The first stanza has harsh punctuation with short sentences, three end stops, and only one enjambed line (in which the sentence is discussing discomfort). These short bursts bring upon agitation in the reader due to the contrast of short sentences with long lines. The reader feels as if they are constantly being jolted to a stop.

The second stanza has a combination of long and short sentences, resembling more of a conversation rather than a dictation. This stanza dives into an unclear message discussing the poem's feelings, plain levels, and the act of playing. The reader, spoken for by the poem, questions the poem and its meaning. The narrator gives the poem the ability of feel and understand emotion: "The poem is sad because it wants to be yours, and cannot." (5). This even further personifies the poem and forces the reader into feeling guilty, due to the reader's suggested inability to comprehend and personalize the poem. It moves the reader to question why the poem cannot be theirs, but asks in specific indirect ways such as questioning earlier lines: "What is a plain level?" (6). This is answered by the poem changing the topic to another random idea, "...a system of play. Play?" (7). This jolting from idea to idea causes the reader to become distracted and confused. This also calls attention to the connection of the words plan and play. The similar sounding, forceful words are used simply as a distraction. Ashbery is playing with plain language causing the reader to not only question the poem, but also him or herself. Poetry readers already often doubt themselves when attempting to uncover meaning, yet Ashbery *forces* doubt upon the reader, for he is more focused on the reader's experience, rather than the actual meaning of the poem.

Focusing on the third stanza, this section's structure is composed of two long sentences broken by a hyphenated, two word sentence. The stanza reads:

A deeper outside thing, a dream role-pattern,
As in the division of grace these long August days
Without proof. Open-ended. And before you know
It gets lost in the steam and chatter of typewriters. (9-12)

The first line is an oxymoron in itself. A "deeper" thing, when in reference to poetry, points toward the deeper meaning within something, not outside it. Also, describing something dreamed as a "pattern" is uncommon, as dreams are typically sporadic. This jumbled, unfollowable stream of ideas comes to a halt with the words, "open-ended." This phrase, conveying an idea of openness, is crammed into the middle of the stanza. The narrator then breaks the flow of next sentence to yet again, confusing the reader by changing what is expected. Instead of using the common phrase, "before you know it," Ashbery breaks the line after "know" which then, in context with the next line, changes the meaning of "it." This causes the reader to question the entire sentence, and the entire stanza, for it's twists are too distracting to follow the content.

The fourth stanza brings the poem to a close. This poem is not a poem, but a poet's conversation with their audience. The quatrain reads:

It has been played once more. I think you exist only
To tease me into doing it, on your level, and then you aren't there
Or have adopted a different attitude. And the poem
Has set me softly down beside you. The poem is you. (13-16)

We, the readers, have been tricked again. The narrator pulls the reader into a more poetic sense as the narrator confesses all he does is for his audience. The narrator again forces guilt upon the reader for not understanding, for changing their minds, their attitudes, and letting the poem down. But forgiveness is just around the enjambment. The narrator

acknowledges the fact that a poet cannot force meaning, and so the narrator ceases and lies down peacefully beside the reader. A poem is what the reader makes of it, no matter how deeper meaning, form, syntax, or diction is utilized. The narrator gives in to the idea of globalization; a poem is not a poem unless it makes sense to more than just the poet. It is not always necessary to explicate a poem, yet it is more important to enjoy the sense and feeling it gives to the reader in that moment. By implicating longer sentences with easier breaks in this final stanza, Ashbery becomes more lyrical. He then, finally, leaves the reader alone in meditation. The poem is you; the poem is what you make of it.

Both poems, “Ars Poetica” and “Paradoxes and Oxymorons” strive for great insight in the world of poetry. “Ars Poetica” follows many of the rules and represents the greater concepts of poetry, whilst “Paradoxes and Oxymorons” clearly does not. Due to the structure of each, it would seem that the outer forms of both should be exchanged. MacLeish’s broken form would seem to fit better for Ashbery’s choppy, strange, distractive poem and MacLeish’s easier to follow, understandable poem would seem to fit better in Ashbery’s simple form. However, each poet constructed this particular form for good reason. Each poem’s marriage of content and form deeply further the meaning of the poem. MacLeish’s broken poem helps the reader to think through each consistent idea and aids in the flow of the poem. Ashbery’s simple structure helps drive home the idea of paradoxes and oxymorons, because for such a simple structure to bring such chaos is the perfect combination for the content of his poem. Both poems, “Ars Poetica” by Archibald MacLeish and “Paradoxes and Oxymorons” by John Ashbery, are a work of genius.