

## Conversation, Poetics, and the "Found Poem": A Response to Neal R. Norrick\*

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### 1. Low and Rustic

Norrick emphasizes the literariness of conversation rather than the fidelity of literature to "true conversation" (244) and asks for "a good description of everyday talk" (243). Like Wordsworth's "real language of men",<sup>1</sup> everyday talk and normal (meaning non-heightened?) language reflect the criteria we must (artfully) establish in order to define our wild garden of language. If we set "poetic diction" and other heightened linguistic effects against what we call "everyday talk," we set up a *trompe l'oeil* picture of sorts. Everyday conversation is what *seems* to be relaxed or otherwise free of constraint, at least when compared to forms of communication that foreground the rules producing intelligibility. Norrick calls for a description of "everyday talk" that collects the salient conventions of such a form, but the heightened formalization of this procedure (e.g., presenting the conversation in carefully transcribed visual units of which an actual listener would not be cognizant) *produces* an effect it seems to *find*. As Norrick argues, the observer's paradox will not go away. Norrick persuasively argues that people within the conversations he records become less concerned with the tape recorder in the room as time goes by, but the pressure of observation upon meaning returns when we recall that Norrick's transcriptions of "everyday talk" are hardly the same as the communication experienced by his original speakers.

A nice circularity enters here, and we might think of Wordsworth's "low and rustic life"<sup>2</sup> when considering this problem: "rustic" has be-

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\*Reference: Neal R. Norrick, "Poetics and Conversation," *Connotations* 10.2-3 (2000/2001): 243-67.

come, through disuse in ordinary conversation, a word to describe a heightened appearance rather than an ordinary one beneath notice. But for Wordsworth it was meant as the antithesis of flagrantly artificial language.

## 2. Alas, poor Norrick!

Hamlet, leaping into the middle of things, expostulates on the skull of Yorick, and what we are most amused by is the transformation of death into lively memory. Clearly the transformation (or, actually, the illusion of such a transformation) could not occur if the two phases Death and Life, which as words can strike us as pure opposites, did not share common elements. Death is composed of non-death elements, life is composed of non-living elements, and so, with a bit of dusting and the polish of words, the skull of Yorick becomes an emblem of life. When we look to the transformations between ordinary, lowly conversation and the heightened state of poetry, we will, in a mock-epic way, leap into the grave of conversation and discover there emotion recollected in tranquility fashioned out of "the real language of men."

Let us jump into the middle of things. The middle of Norrick's paper concerns the "found poem" (a bit of language that is taken out of its worldly context and repackaged, with a hefty mark-up, as Literature) entitled "HURRY AND GET RESTED."<sup>3</sup> By looking at the literary features of everyday speech, by giving one line to each intonation unit (thus making it look like a poetic verse), and by using indentation on the page to give the language the appearance of an actual poem, Norrick challenges us to see the ways in which "poems" exist in our everyday lives, though they are undetected. Thus, a snatch of speech can be read as a poem:

### HURRY UP AND GET RESTED

Lydia:            We had such a nice day today,  
                       so you hurry and get rested.  
                       Because you're going to have  
                       a nice day tomorrow.

Brandon: Hurry and get rested.  
 Ned: {laughs}  
 Brandon: That's oxymoronic.

Ned: {laughing} Yeah.  
 Can you imagine the ox?  
 Brandon: No, but I've spotted the moron.  
 Ned: I see. {laughing}  
 You'd think as dumb as oxes are,  
 to call one a moron  
 would be tautological. (Norrick 254)

The mother's repetition of "nice day" sets up a pattern from which Brandon departs, and Ned engages in the competitive and playful spirit. When Brandon says "I've spotted the moron," we do not know for sure if he is looking at his mother (Lydia) or if the competition is now between the two brothers. Ned responds "I see" and may be looking at Brandon, just as the cursed child in the movie "Sixth Sense" is looking square at the camera when he says "I see dead people. All the time." The meaning becomes fluid; it begins to extend from the original text and into the reader with continued attention.

### 3. Turning Words

Dance, we may say, is a patterned fall. We usually expect a beginning, a middle, and an end in the formal version. The slip on a theatrical banana peel will have these parts, as will the retelling of my Fall or yours. To create surprise out of the cloth of sameness, we sometimes mix things up, such as when we begin in the middle and end in the beginning.

Middles. Have you noticed how Annie makes extensive contributions but receives corrections from Lynn on almost every detail she adds? Norrick has noticed this, on page 265 of his essay, among other conversational switches and reversals. Meanwhile, "Lynn further cements her own authority as teller by strategically deploying details only she could have access to, for instance the bag thrown up the stairs" (265). Like "HURRY AND GET RESTED," "POODLE" has both competitive and cooperative elements, but the greater stress in Nor-

rick's treatment is on the cooperative element: "collaborative narration serves to ratify group membership and modulate rapport in multiple ways" (265). We recall that "con-versation" is "turning together." As Norrick points out in several of his readings, conversation is a kind of verbal dance; it begins, has crescendos, and moments of clear punctuation to signal an end, at least temporarily.

Endings: Conversations do not have explicit agendas (the proverbial "woodshed" talk or the experience of "being read the riot act" are two-party communications with explicit agendas; they are not conversations), and a conversation need not have a clear "sense of an ending." One of the transformations we notice in the conversational portions Norrick has presented in his article is the punchline ending. Consider the last seven lines of "BIG BUG":

Frank:       It had a fuselage like **that**.  
 Ned:         {laughs}  
 Frank:       And a wingspan like **that**.  
               Oh man.  
               Never seen one like **that**.  
 Ned:         So we're talking primordial here.  
 Frank:       It was just slightly smaller than a hummingbird. (256)

The concluding line of this found poem shifts the register, abruptly turning away from the "crescendo sequence" (250) into a strictly literal and precise description of the size of the insect in question. Gary Snyder's poem "Elwha River," a poem which mixes up the real and the imaginary, ends similarly with a percussive ecological fact to take us, at least in an imaginative sense, beyond the mindset in which everything is subject to conversational or imaginative reevaluation: "There are no redwoods north of southern/ Curry County, Oregon."<sup>4</sup>

Beginnings. In my end is my beginning. Where does poetry begin? In conversation? The language samples that Norrick and his colleagues have transcribed do not seem like poetry "at first glance." One might say they do not exist at all "at first glance," and the act of transcription is the beginning of a set of transformations, or ritualizations, or, my spell-checker suggests, reutilizations. As Gertrude Stein once

said, "Hemingway, remarks are not literature." But in contextualizing this comment as she did, what was once a remark became "literature" and is thus rescued from the grave. The bit of conversation that was taped has undergone a formal change in being prepared for the written page, and the line breaks especially are significant in our recognition of poetry. Are they Norrick's impositions on the text? He might argue they are not, and that he has merely expressed intonation units that can be found in the taped discourse. But in my rewriting of the poem above, I have broken "HURRY UP AND GET RESTED" into two stanzas, each of which is seven lines long and ends with shift from low and rustic language (oxes [sic], morons) into the highfalutin discourse of oxymoron and tautology. Through such formalities do we help remarks along in their quest to become literature.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>"Preface to *Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems* (1802)." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: Norton, 2001) 648-68, here 648.

<sup>2</sup>Wordsworth 650.

<sup>3</sup>See for an example of a "found poem" Annie Dillard's "Mayakovsky in New York: A Found Poem," *The Atlantic Monthly* 274.3 (September 1994) 64. Dillard's poem is a reshaped prose text, and the poem begins with this headnote: "Lifted, with permission, from Vladimir Mayakovsky's 'My Discovery of America' (1926), in *America through Russian Eyes*, edited and translated by Olga Peters Hasty and Susanne Fusso."

<sup>4</sup>Gary Snyder, "The Elwha River," *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint Press, 1996) 32.

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