

A Brief Guide to New Poetic Forms

Cascade

The Cascade form was inspired by the pattern by which jugglers keep three balls in the air. Despite distorted illustrations, the actual pattern is not a circle, but resembles an infinity-sign. In the poetic form, I have taken the idea of each line maintaining a discrete path through the poem, yet giving the appearance of being seamlessly connected to the lines before and after.

So in the poem entitled “Cascade 1 (Test)” the poem can be read in two ways.

Cascade 1 (Test)

Up in the air
looks like a night
where can I go
there is a place
made for mistakes
that I haven't been
I've only dreamed
too bad I'm out
nobody knows
made of satin and lace
at least for your sakes
the depth of my sin.

The poem is meant to be read from top to bottom, giving no hint of its internal construction (other than the title). But if one connects the first, fourth, seventh, and tenth lines, a complete sentence emerges: “Up in the air/ there is a place/ I've only dreamed/ made of satin and lace.” Similarly, the second, fifth, eighth and eleventh lines compose another sentence: “looks like a night/ made for mistakes/ too bad I'm out/ at least for your sakes.” Finally, the third, sixth, ninth, and twelfth lines compose a third sentence: “where can I go/ that I haven't been/ nobody knows/ the depth of my sin.”

The result is a double-poem, a poem that can, and perhaps, must be read in two different ways to be fully appreciated. If one does not recognize the poem that makes up the internal

structure of the work, nevertheless it influences the way the external poem has been written. It might even be possible to create two texts that contradict one another and yet are bound together.

To my mind, the poem is only a success if each track, as well as the complete poem, makes logical sense.. While this test version, the first Cascade I ever wrote, is a little rough, especially around lines 10-12, it still maintains a tenuous logical structure. It is possible to infer that the speaker is saying “nobody that, for your sakes, is made of satin and lace, knows the depth of my sin.” Not a great poem, but it suggests that the form can work.

Canon

This form was my attempt to emulate the great musical canons of Mozart. A canon is a single musical line that can be sung by more than one voice, with each entering at a different time. The example most people know is “Row Row Row Your Boat.” You can sing the whole song start to finish and it sounds just fine. But if someone sings, “Row, row, row your boat,” and as they begin the word “Gently,” a *second* person starts “Row, row, row your boat...” you end up with two musical lines that go together. Up to four people can sing the song this way, each a half-verse behind the next person. Other such canons, known as “rounds,” are “Three Blind Mice,” “Make New Friends, But Keep the Old,” and “Frere Jacques (Are You Sleeping).”

I wanted to create a poem that would have some kind of “harmony” based on added lines. Unfortunately there is nothing in literature that is equivalent to harmony. Simultaneous spoken words cannot be understood by most listeners, or perceived when typed over one another.

To solve this problem, I created a poetic form in which one takes the first line of a poem and intersperses a second line into it. The added words must make sense on their own, so that each line can be read independent of the other, but the combined words must also make sense (hence, harmony).

The shortest of my canons shows how the form works.

Canon 7

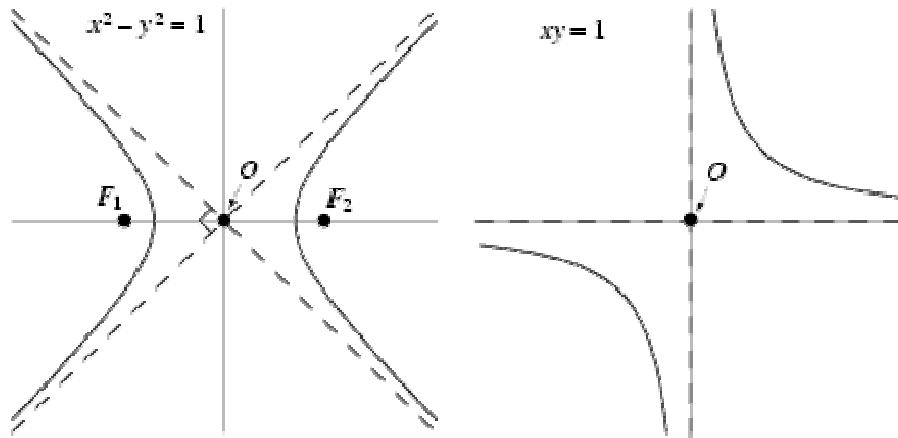
In God we trust

Trust in God. We trust God

Do you trust in God? We trust God.

Do what you will. Trust in God. We trust God.

Each line of the poem consists of a readable sentence. Taking the first line, “In God we trust” and adding the words “Trust God” to it, we end up with the second line, “**Trust** in God.



rectangular hyperbola

The curves in these pictures could be extended further and further, but they would never cross the dotted lines. Something about the idea of infinity intrigues me, and I wanted to explore it briefly in poetry.

The cube is a convoluted poem which rhymes and has logical meaning along a number of different vortices. I don't really think I succeeded with this form, but I offer that as an explanation of my explorations along those lines (no pun intended).

Other forms in *Hofstadter's Grandchildren* and *Distant Hofstadters* are either more established (sonnet, villanelle) or are freer in inspiration ("Prelude"). The reader is invited to explore the question of construction with these poems, but my ultimate aim is always to create a work that transcends its form. In the case of *Hofstadter's Grandchildren* I often attempted this transcendence by referring to the form itself, biting the hand that feeds me to see if it will let me go. You can decide if that effort had any meaning for you. I hope you'll share with me if it did.