Tragic Vision in the Verse Narratives of New Formalism

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Abstract

This thesis explores mid-length verse narratives, written by Dana Gioia, Sydney Lea, and Robert McDowell and tries to undersand how we might better approach these poems, which represent the central experiments of the New Formalist enterprise. These verse narratives have remained overlooked by scholars and rejected by early critics on purely ideological grounds. Written over the past twenty-five years, they challenge Modernist experimentation, which had become the new orthodoxy that primarily focused on and exhausted the lyric mode of expression. This study combines close readings of the verse narratives together with a vast corpus of critical essays by the practitioners of New Formalism. It identifies a gap in narratological studies that renders the poetic aspect of the narratives irrelevant. By applying the Russian formalist concepts of *suzjet* to include the lineation and compression of time in these poems as it relates to the *fabula*, this study reverses that trend. As these narratives converge on the theme of violence, a Christian tragedy of possibility emerges, leading to the chief conclusion of this thesis: These poems *are* the story. It becomes evident that the tragic mode in which these poets write is perfectly suited to the compressed nature of their poems. The theme of violence is a metaphor for the broad cultural problem of illiteracy and abandoned literary forms and traditions, including rhyme and meter, that have rendered tragedy dead to contemporary poetry and threatens the total extinction of writing the epic of our time.

Dedication

To all those who violently approve of my work, especially my family, wife, and kids. And to those who will avoid becoming another tragic poet who when faced with a story of human violence looks the other way choosing the tyranny of silence.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Literary revolutions are delineated by artistic experimentation that at times, have sought to replace outmoded orthodoxy or antiquated diction with language better suited to contemporary audiences and, at others, sought to reconnect audiences with an abandoned literary past. Dating back to the ancient genre of Greek tragedy, Aristotle's *Poetics* provides early evidence of shifting literary tastes: "Sophocles said that he portrayed people as they ought to be and Euripides portrayed them as they are" (93; ch. 25). Timothy Steele, a postmodern practitioner of New Formalism writing in traditional forms of meter and rhyme, identifies a similarity between experiments from the Modern era with previous literary movements. He notes:

> [T]he modern revolution is essentially like earlier revolutions. The modern movement's leaders commonly argue, that is, that theirs is a rebellion against an antiquated idiom and is, as such, precisely the rebellion that 'modernists' of all ages have had to undertake to keep poetry vitally engaged with the speech and life of its time. (Gwynn, *New Expansive Poetry* 28)

Steele speaks for the general consensus among New Formalists noting that "[t]his is what good poets have always done; this is what Ford, Pound, Eliot, and their followers were doing when they urged that the styles of Victorian verse had grown creaky and run-down and needed to be replaced by an idiom more genuinely equipped to treat modern life" (29). Whereas previous literary revolutions would popularize certain poetic forms while others were suppressed, metrics changed but were never considered outmoded. Steele points out that Eliot and his followers "identified the vague and over-decorative lyricality

of Victorian poetry with the metrical system which the Victorians had used but which was not itself Victorian, having been used for centuries by a variety of poets working in a variety of styles" (31). As the practitioners of New Formalism claim to write with a diction that is more accessible to contemporary audiences, they share a lot in common with their Modern predecessors. However, unlike Modern poets who supplant meter with free verse in a radical break from the nineteenth century and traditional Western aesthetics, the New Formalists—while embracing the virtues of free verse as a viable and important contribution to poetry—also defend the virtues of meter and rhyme.

The New Formalists look to the notable innovations of modernism as monumental experiments that have had an unfortunate consequence on the decades of poetry that followed. Robert McDowell notes: "By the time the Modernist innovators had done their work and despite the fact that Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and William Carlos Williams left behind a few narrative poems of note, narrative no longer had a respected place among mainstream poets" (Feirstein 101). Ezra Pound, for example, stopped writing other poetry for his *Cantos* experiment, an interesting but incomplete long epic poem that Pound admittedly could not make cohere. In T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the fragmented almost incoherent narrative is far too experimental in nature for the New Formalist because, as Dana Gioia points out:

> [T]he long modern poem is virtually doomed to failure by its own ground rules. Any extended work needs a strong overall form to guide both the poet in creating it and the reader in understanding it. By rejecting the traditional epic structures of narrative (as in Virgil) and didactic exposition (as in Lucretius), the modern author has been thrown almost entirely on his own resources. He must not only try to synthesize the complexity of his culture into one long poem, he must also create the form of his discourse as he goes along. (*Can Poetry Matter?* 25)

For the New Formalist, it is not likely that Milton's blank verse epic, *Paradise Lost,* written in a Shakespearean iambic pentameter would have succeeded as the preeminent English epic without the dactylic hexameter of Homer's *The Illiad* and *The Odyssey* or Virgil's *Aeneid*, the hendecasyllables of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the ottava rima of Torquato Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*, or the iambic pentameters and hexameters of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. Whether in ancient Greek and Latin, Italian from the Middle Ages or Renaissance Italian and English, idioms, cultural complexities, and sensibilities changed, but meter in one form or another always helped the poet adapt the long poem to their time.

At the end of the 1970s and early eighties, a Zeitgeist in American poetry emerged called New Formalism (neo-formalism; expansive poetry). This movement aimed to reconnect poetry with broader audiences by returning to the central techniques of storytelling using rhyme and meter. These writers believed it was time to shift from Modernist experimentation in free verse autobiographical lyric, indulgent confessionals, and fragmented narratives to engage in what Dana Gioia describes as the "usable past" (*Can Poetry Matter?* 231). The usable past meant that the New Formalists would not repeat the epic experiments of Pound, Eliot, and Williams, but learn from them and look instead to Robinson Jeffers, A. E. Robinson, but especially the more manageable-length narrative poems of Robert Frost[1]. In 1992, Gioia pointed out that "[f]ew early critics . . . understood the centrality of narrative poetry to the New Formalist enterprise. Although superficially unrelated to the use of rhyme and meter, the revival of narrative verse allowed the young writers to address several of the same broad cultural problems that had

1. A view upheld throughout New Formalist criticism but also evinced by the poems themselves.

initially led them back to formal poetry" (229). For the New Formalist, the long overlooked narrative held the keys to unlocking evocative stories that could be placed in a shared cultural context while broadening but also unifying poetry's splintered audience. The evocative nature of their stories is culturally conditioned by what some argue is the biggest problem facing the world today: human violence. This violence is not the result of organized religion, politics, or race necessarily; rather, all of these things are affected by it. Human violence affects every continent for various reasons throughout history, but the mistakes seem only to repeat themselves. There is the real possibility of repeating the atrocities of the twentieth century. The New Formalists look back while moving forward, using traditional forms combined with Modernist themes to articulate a contemporary vision of the tragic that focused on the violence inherent in everyday life.

This thesis examines three contemporary mid-length verse narratives by American New Formalists that deal with the theme of violence. The first is "The Homecoming" by Gioia: a fourteen-page poem that questions the nature of good and evil in a story of a young man's descent into a life of crime culminating in murder. Narrated by the young man, the story takes us into a troubled interiority of a tragic character that is convinced he is predestined for eternal damnation. Gioia's poem was first published in 1989 in *Crosscurrents* and reprinted in *The Gods of Winter* (1991). The second is "The Feud" by Sydney Lea: a fourteen-page poem that questions the nature of revenge in a story of a man incapable of forgiveness. The character-narration is a first-person account of a man who is quick to judge and equally quick to condemn his neighbor. This judgmentalism renders the man seemingly incapable of assessing the true source of violence and tragedy in his life. Lea's poem was published in 1996 in *To the Bone: New*

and Selected Poems and reprinted that year in *Rebel Angels: 25 Poets of the New Formalism.* The third is "The Pact" by Robert McDowell: also a fourteen-page poem that examines the challenges of human relationships and marriage in a story about adultery, suicide, and separation that troubles a husband and wife's imperfect love. McDowell's poem was originally published in 1994 as a monograph but reprinted in *On Foot, in Flames* (2002). There are at least three novel-length verse narratives also dealing with the theme of violence: *Iris* published in 1992 by Mark Jarman, *The Diviners* published in 1995 by McDowell, and *Ludlow* published in 2007 by David Mason. However, it is a closer examination of the "The Homecoming," "The Feud," and "The Pact" that provide a better understanding of how New Formalists pare a sense of modern tragedy down to a manageable economy of language that coheres. The resulting narratives, largely ignored by scholars, attempt to produce a poetry whose tragic vision resonates with broader contemporary audiences at a time when story and tragedy are considered better served by prose.

Four central questions guide this research. Why are these poems being overlooked by scholars and why hasn't New Formalism resonated in the scholarly arena? How might we better approach these poems? What are the New Formalists attempting to do and how do these new verse narratives accomplish this? Finally, how do these mid-length verse narratives work to present a tragic vision relevant to contemporary audiences?

Background

New Formalist poets revived the traditional, but largely abandoned, verse narrative and critically defended this form as being one of the most important trends in

American poetry. Beginning in 1980 and continuing without compromise for at least the next twenty-five years, entire periodicals and numerous essays, committed entirely to New Formalism and the new narratives, meticulously detailed the tenets of this movement. The most important compilations include: *The Reaper Essays* by Mark Jarman and Robert McDowell, *Expansive Poetry: Essays on the New Narrative & the New Formalism* edited by Frederick Feirstein, and *New Expansive Poetry* edited by R.S. Gwynn. In *The Reaper Essays*, published in the early eighties, New Formalists Jarman and McDowell complained that "[p]oetry, more than ever, is harnessed by and subordinate to its criticism" and that "[c]ritics are creating an exclusive audience for poetry, which consists only of themselves and the poets they promote" (4). Jarman and McDowell spent the next ten years redressing the problem of squeamish editors succumbing to the tastes of prominent critics who, according to Jarman and McDowell, made careers out of abstract theorization.[2] The types of poetry best suited to the abstract theorization favored by critics, according to Jarman and McDowell, were poems lacking emotional substance, character development, or a subject. Jarman and McDowell pointed out that poets—like their critics—found an excuse to talk about their craft and write about words in a formless aesthetic. This formless, abstract aesthetic left poets without the tools to write about important subjects or tell stories at any length beyond the boundaries of lyrical or confessional free verse. Consequently, the narratives being written in verse by New Formalists were being edited out of view.

Early critiques of New Formalism rejected the poetry on ideological terms. In 1986, Diane Wakoski's, "The New Conservatism in American Poetry" published in the

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2. Paraphrased from *The Reaper Essays*, see "Where *The Reaper* Stands" and "Navigating the Flood."

May-June issue of *The American Book Review*, attacked New Formalism's aesthetics for what Wakoski viewed as its essential conservatism: "She actually believes those who use traditional forms could only be supporters of Reagan's conservative agenda" (qtd. in McPhillips 5). This view was reiterated in Ira Sadoff's critique of New Formalism in "Neo-Formalism: A Dangerous Nostalgia." In 1990, Sadoff wrote:

> Although it may cause discomfort to neo-conservatives, we live in a world of many cultures many voices; our poetries are enriched by otherness, by many different kinds of music and varieties of meters. Their [New Formalists'] narrow-minded appreciation of cadence and music unconsciously creates a kind of cultural imperialism. (par. 11)

Sadoff reiterated his view in 2010 in *History Matters: Contemporary Poetry on the Margins of American Culture*.

Supporters of New Formalism viewed the resurgence of meter and rhyme and the reinvention of verse narratives as an obvious expansion of contemporary poetry that could broaden its role in American culture. In 2001, April Lindner acknowledged the increasing acceptance of this movement:

> In the years that have passed since the advent of the 'Poetry Wars,' the New Formalist message has gained momentum and changed the face of contemporary verse. Today a reader finds formal verse in the most mainstream of literary magazines, and would be hard-pressed to hear of a poet taking pride in his or her unfamiliarity with traditional forms. (6)

A couple years later, Robert McPhillips—citing Lindner and others committed to the tenets of New Formalism—called for more research. In a critical introduction to New Formalism, he wrote:

> This book, then, is meant to serve as a starting point for a new generation of critics, whose task will be the writing of more comprehensive histories of the New Formalism, as well as more essays and books on specific aspects of the movement—the love lyric, the short narrative, the verse satire, the verse novel, the verse epic—and the individual poets whose work is still very much in progress. (xvi)

McPhillips' call for more research remains substantially unfulfilled.

To start, scholars of classical narratology could begin with the canon of New Formalist work focusing on poetry's relationship to narrative. In a 2010 issue of *Narrative*, John Pier explains how Gérard "Genette's *Narrative Discourse* filled a number of gaps in the emerging approach to the study of narrative" (8). However, Pier continues:

> All too frequently left out of account by narrative theorists is Genette's important work on transtextuality, poetics, aesthetics and the theory of art that succeeded the narratological studies and whose implications for narrative theory are rarely discussed . . . Included in the French edition of *Narrative Discourse*, but not in the English translation, are two essays, 'Critique et poétique' and 'Poétique et histoire,' that stake out the early stage of Genette's conceptual framework for narrative theory. (11)

Classical narratology still has much to gain in translation. But until Genette's work becomes more accessible or New Formalists are taken seriously, narratologists like Monika Fludernik will continue to wonder why "[s]carcely any attention has been paid to language and traditional stylistic and rhetorical devices in classical narrative theory" (64).

Coincidentally in the same year, narratologist Brian McHale echoed Fludernik in his essay, "Beginning to Think About Poetry in Narrative." McHale writes:

> We need to begin thinking about narrative in poetry—or perhaps to *resume* thinking about it—because we have not been doing so very much lately, and because, whenever we *have* done so, we have rarely thought about what differentiates narrative in poetry from narrative in other genres or media, namely its *poetry* component . . . Contemporary narrative theory is almost silent about poetry. (11)

Unfortunately, the poetry component remains subordinate and even irrelevant to many narratological studies. McHale cites what he considers to be the source of the problem: "Contemporary narrative theory's blind spot with respect to poetry is partly to be explained in institutional terms, as an artifact of specialization. Some scholars specialize

in narrative; others specialize in poetry; few specialize in both" (12). Because many of the New Formalists' work focuses on both narrative and poetry, their experiments in verse narratives are indispensable to serious scholarship on the matter.

Currently, researchers have limited access to close readings of the New Formalist narratives in question; however, McHale points to a noteworthy analysis of Robert Frost's "Home Burial" by narratologist James Phelan published in the 2004 issue of *Poetics Today*. But McHale also notes that "it requires only a little scrutiny to ascertain that the object of analysis is not after all the relationship between narrative and *poetry* but the one between narrative and *lyric*—which is *not* the same thing" (12). Nonetheless, Phelan's work is important despite McHale's further observation that "in the case of Phelan's analysis of 'Home Burial,' the poem might as well have been written in prose, since Phelan nowhere acknowledges the regular meter, the lineation, or the other less conventional features of spacing that differentiate Frost's poem from prose fiction" (13). The New Formalists do not ignore the metrics in "Home Burial" but consider them a viable model for narrative poems. In fact, McDowell's "The Pact," is unmistakably modeled after the regular meter, lineation, and less conventional features of spacing found in "Home Burial."

In order to explore the new narratives effectively, both classical narrative theory but also formal poetic theory must be taken into consideration. In terms of poetic form, Gioia is quick to the point: "The central difficulty of writing the new narrative poetry is easy to summarize—how does one create a compelling and credible story in verse without becoming prosaic?" (McDowell, *The Diviners* ix). In terms of narrative theory, Fludernik observes that "[t]here has been surprisingly little research into the way in

which narrative structure changed with the shift from verse to prose" (111). The answer to both Gioia's and Fludernik's inquiries can begin with a close reading of how the "regular meter, the lineation, or the other less conventional features of spacing" in New Formalists' verse inform the structure and themes of their narratives.

That New Formalist poets would converge on the theme of violence is particularly fitting given the compressed nature of their poems. In his chapter on "Tragedy and the Novel," Terry Eagleton observes, in *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*, that "[w]hether or not tragedy and the novel are incompatible, it is certainly hard in the modern period for heroism and the common life to intersect" (183) and "Tragedy . . . is more at home in the short story than the novel proper, a less well upholstered form in which . . . the narrative can be more easily pared down to a single moment of disruption or disclosure" (184). Eagleton's point, that it is difficult for heroism and common life to intersect in the modern story, in many ways echoes W. H. Auden's essay on "The Christian Tragic Hero." With the help of T.S. Eliot, Auden publishes his first book, *Poems*, in 1930 and well versed in Modern sensibilities, can provide a Modern view of tragedy. Auden's essay makes an important distinction:

> Greek tragedy is the tragedy of necessity; i.e. the feeling aroused in the spectator is 'What a pity it had to be this way'; Christian tragedy is the tragedy of possibility, 'What a pity it was this way when it might have been otherwise'; secondly, the hubris which is the flaw in the Greek hero's character is the illusion of a man who knows himself strong and believes that nothing can shake that strength, while the corresponding Christian sin of Pride is the illusion of a man who knows himself weak but believes he can by his own efforts transcend that weakness and become strong. (2:258)

As stated in the introduction, shifting sensibilities toward tragedy can be traced as far back as Euripides. But tragedy underwent several emendations starting with Homer. It

should not be surprising then that Modern and Postmodern views of tragedy have also changed. Tragedy, one of the most enduring forms of examining human existence, continues to exist in Gioia, Lea, and McDowell. The Christian ethic that each narrative is framed around can help test Auden's theory regarding the Christian tragedy of possibility and help better understand Eagleton's single moment of disruption.

To draw connections between the plot summaries and the poetics, the Russian formalists distinction between *fabula* and *suzjet* will prove useful. Narratologist Mieke Bal asks, "How is it that a narrative text comes across to the reader in a certain manner? Why do we find the same fabula beautiful when presented by one writer and trite when presented by another?" (78). To answer this, *fabula* is defined as the story the way it would play out chronologically in real time. *Suzjet*, however, are the flashbacks, jump cuts, and flash-forwards an author uses to tell the story. Therefore, one logically concludes that the same *fabula* presented with different *suzjets* is the difference between a beautiful and a trite story. The following plot summaries introduce poetic devices into the narratological formula as complementary to the *suzjet* of the narrative.

In "The Homecoming," a young boy is raised by a foster mother. The boy's general sense of unrest finds him breaking curfews and running away from home. His boyhood is disturbed by a chance encounter with his biological mother at the county fair. He recognizes her, but she stares at him only for a moment as if recalling a vague dream. The boy continues to run away from home and ultimately finds himself committing robberies. His crimes escalate with age until one day he escapes from prison on a murderous spree and returns home to murder his foster mother in cold blood. The story

begins at the end. The narrative then flashes back to an earlier point in time to explain the events leading up to the opening scene. This summary is part *fabula* and part *suzjet*.

"The Homecoming" is written in four hundred and nine consistently metered blank verse iambic pentameter lines told over eight sections in approximately forty-nine stanzas of varying length. The lines are consistently quantized to ten syllables per line but freely adding an additional syllable where useful. In fact, occasional breaks in the steady cadence help identify exceptionally important lines, which are usually increased or diminished in length. If fabula and suzjet are narrowly interpreted as story and plot respectively, these poetics add a third narratological layer to the resulting narrative. The same observation can be made of "The Feud" and "The Pact."

In "The Feud," a married man with two children encounters a troubling relationship with a long-time neighbor. After a recent hunting trip, his neighbor leaves deer guts rotting in a nearby field. The man, annoyed with the stench next to his house, retaliates by strewing the guts over his inconsiderate neighbor's dooryard and leaving a note. Not long after that, the man's mailbox is destroyed to which he retaliates again by taking his neighbor's stray dog to the pound. He then flings the dog's collar into his neighbor's dooryard. After seeing footprints in the snow around his dog run, the man suspects his neighbor again and retaliates by poisoning his neighbor's hog. The back and forth between the man and his neighbor continues without restraint as hatred escalates. After that, the man catches pneumonia. On his way back from a doctor visit, the man returns home to a chimney fire. Too sick to rescue his young son inside, he watches in disbelief as the burning house collapses on top of the boy while his young daughter giggles out back at their howling dogs. The story begins with the narrator flashing back to

a sequence of events he needs to share. There are occasional flash backs even further back in time, but the story runs chronologically until the final scene.

"The Feud" is written in one hundred and one stanzas of four lines each. Stanzas consistently run-over grammatically to the next, making the poem's four hundred and four lines one continuous poem without section, paragraph, or chapter breaks. Extra-metrical syllables occur frequently over the loosely quantized blank verse pentameter. A refrain of the poem's main subject occurs regularly drawing attention to particular lines. These poetics point to important aspects of the story and show strikingly similar creative choices to Gioia's. But should they be discussed as elements of *fabula* or *suzjet*?

In "The Pact," John-Allen returns home early from a business trip. He catches his wife with another man when she arrives home later that same night. He strikes her in a fit of rage. Then John-Allen and his wife, still in love with each other, struggle with forgiveness in the face of their adultery and violence. The young man that Sarah had an affair with is distraught and hangs himself in John-Allen and Sarah's barn. They decide it would be best to bury him under the new addition out back. Sarah does not move out right away as they try their best to live together with this terrible secret. This story begins near the end, but turns to memory bringing events current before returning to the final scenes.

"The Pact" is written in three hundred seventy-two lines organized into five sections indented like paragraphs. In all, there are approximately thirty-four stanzas of differing lengths separated by line spaces in most cases. Written in blank verse approximating ten to eleven syllables per line, this poem's dropped-lines running over one pentameter to the next are uncannily similar to Robert Frost's "Home Burial."

Clearly, these stories are not the poems. They could be re-told in prose with different plot points or recast for the screen without the benefit of a narrator, but they were told in mid-length blank verse narratives. Somewhere between the story, the plot, and the poem, the New Formalists search for a way to scale important subjects of human violence down to their most compressed and meaningful state and fill a need for American poets to tell stories replete with plot and character development.

Whereas there exists an intriguing canon of critical essays by the New Formalists themselves in defense of their own work, there also exists scholarship on the tragic mode and still more scholarship on narratological studies. However, the following chapters exemplify the type of close reading necessary for scholars to take New Formalism critically in order to close the gap between narratology and poetry.

Chapter II

Titular Treatment

In compressed narrative forms, even something as seemingly innocuous as the title becomes important literary real estate for the New Formalist. Without fail, Gioia, Lea, and McDowell put their titles to task. In this chapter, an examination of the titular treatment of each work reveals the aesthetics New Formalists use to develop their themes, leading to a better understanding of how the theme of violence services their vision of a tragic mode.

Trying to find a viable style and narrative form for the tragic vision is challenging without a workable contemporary version of tragedy—there are many divergent opinions on the matter. However, it is possible to trace W. H. Auden's reflections on the hubris and suffering of heroic figures versus those of the tragic figures found in the Christian frameworks of the new narratives. In an essay, "Three Men in the Boat of Damnation—Dr. Faustus, Macbeth and Mistah Kurtz," Dr. V.M. Madge addresses Auden's question of "whether in a Christian society, an entirely satisfactory tragedy is at all possible" (Mukhopadhyay 21). Madge offers a summary of Auden's observations derived from *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*:

> A Christian dramatist, therefore, has two options: in the first place, to show a noble and innocent man suffering exceptional misfortune, which would be more pathetic than tragic; secondly to portray a sinner who by his sins brings great misfortune on himself as well as on others. But then within the Christian framework there is no such thing as a noble sinner—for to sin is precisely to become ignoble. (21)

Auden's insight is vital but also capacious enough to provide the possibility of Christian tragedy: The Christian idea of suffering is not compatible with the suffering of a classical tragic hero. In "The Ironic Hero," originally published in *The Third Hour* in 1949, Auden delineates the suffering of the epic hero, the tragic hero, the comic hero, and the Christian saint so that by definition, the worldview of the tragic figure in Christendom cannot inhabit the pages of classical tragedy. He acknowledges differences between the classical and Christian conceptions then adds the Christian conception is very difficult to manifest aesthetically. In a comparative analysis of *Moby Dick*, Auden praises the work as "an heroic epic like the *Illiad*, an heroic tragedy like the *Oresteia*, an heroic quest like the legend of the *Golden Fleece*, and an allegorical religious quest like *Pilgrim's Progress*" (2:258) then compares the nineteenth-century novel to the tenets of classical tragedy. His observations can serve as rubric for examining "The Homecoming," "The Feud," and "The Pact."

To some, Auden's observations on the tragic vision as it pertains to the Christian saint leads them to denounce Auden in search of a workable view of Christian tragedy. For example, as a reaction to Auden, Madge writes: "T. S. Eliot in speaking about the novelistic innovation of Henry James draws attention to the English habit of apprehending Reality through character rather than through point-of-view. Evidently, Auden's comments on Macbeth also display strategies of the character-approach one associates with A. C. Bradley" (Mukhopadhyay 22). Auden's character-approach is accused of being "severely hampered" (28). As a result, Madge surmises a potentially workable vision of Christian tragedy: "Out of this double bind, where Christianity believes neither in man's innocence, nor in his victimization nor in the nobility of the

sinner, the best way seems to be presenting narratives of moral degeneration. The moment of temptation and sin would seem to hold immense tragic possibilities" (23). This concept of the tragic is not mutually exclusive to Auden's ideas. Auden simply puts a finer distinction on the possibilities.

Gioia's Titular "Homecoming"

An examination of the meter in three lines from the final strophe of section one establishes a pattern in this poem that reveals one of the most important differences between narrative in prose from narrative in poetry: namely, the expressive nature of lineation. In this story, the character-narrator is reminiscing through the parlor of his boyhood foster home when he stops suddenly to address what is presumably a homicide detective: "But you aren't interested in family heirlooms. / I know the reason that you're here is me" (Gioia, *Gods of Winter* 39). After establishing a consistent pentameter in the preceding strophe, this one opens with this uncharacteristically long line—it is the longest in the story—that hinges on ambiguous-metrical syllables in "interested" and "family." These ambiguous-metrical syllables seem to mimic an uncertainty surrounding our narrator's restless night in his boyhood foster home. However, as soon as the narration focuses attention away from his boyhood home, the poem returns to a steady pentameter. Then, only two lines later in the same strophe, a truncated line of nine syllables appears in all caps to emphasize—once again—the uncertainty and confusion that occurs whenever our character-narrator turns his focus homeward: "KILLER NABBED AT FOSTER MOTHER'S HOME" (39). To the intuitive reader, it appears as though these metrical variations in line length are Gioia's way of underscoring the ironic

underpinnings of what *homecoming* means to the narrator. But to the logical reader on the lookout for further evidence, there are fifteen other lines truncated to only nine syllables to which he is likely to dismiss concluding that a consistent pentameter cannot be sustained in a poem of this length; after all, slight variations in line length are to be expected. Whereas some line variations can be ignored in this poem, further analysis reveals that Gioia does in fact utilize line and meter variations consistently to develop the titular theme of coming home. The New Formalist would argue that this narrative should not be examined in spite of its poetics but that the poetics are inseparable from the story's theme.

The question of how the lineation and meter complement the narrative is clear, but the question regarding why these devices are being employed remains. It is ironic that the first strophe in section two is a relatively sustained pentameter of unwavering perfection, yet the theme evokes an unstable homecoming of peril and unrest for our narrator. The main character, at this point still under the care of his foster mother, decides to forego Sunday school for the state fair. He proceeds unchaperoned, without permission, and acknowledges: "[T]here would be hell to pay when I got home" (40). As the story unfolds, it becomes increasingly clear that the boy associates home with a type of hell. The more devious and malicious the boy becomes while away from home, the more stable the poem's feet. Therefore, the inversion of a stable poetic cadence to mean uncertainty and instability reveals a conflict within this character who seems to have mistaken right for wrong and presumably mistakes good for evil and evil for good. After all, the boy's fosterage and new home, bereft of biological parents, centers on the unattainable idea of a *true* family in his opinion. For the boy, home is no longer a place of

fulfillment but of disillusionment and disappointment. The lineation and meter are quick to highlight the moral and philosophical debate surrounding the nature and nurture of good and evil. For the New Formalist poet, the nature and nurture of violence is an important discussion—one they hope appeals to a broadened audience—requiring more tools than prose or the short lyrical poem can offer and is precisely the reason contemporary poets need to experiment more often with longer-length narratives.

Further examination of three more passages confirms a pattern of lineation that reveals one of the key tenets of New Formalists' verse narratives. While still young and under foster care, our character-narrator sneaks into a carnival on a Sunday afternoon when he was supposed to be in church with his foster mother. In a pivotal turning point, the boy encounters his biological mother for the first time:

> She smiled and winked at me, the intimacy
> of strangers at a summer fair, a smile
> without the slightest trace of recognition.
> I turned and ran the whole way home. (41)

At this unsettling moment for the boy, the poetic feet are perfectly steady. It is as if the boy is learning that the only certainty he has is that home is a fiction that might be encountered periodically only through willful acts of disobedience. In other words, running away from his foster home is the only possibility he will ever have of finding his biological mother or the similitude of a home. But she in turn will not be there for him. It is at this point that we lay any suspicion of the truncated lines to rest. The shortest line of the story, only eight syllables, occurs at arguably the most pivotal moment for the boy as he turns his focus homeward running away from any hope of being reunited with his mother. Once the boy returns home to his foster care, he is paddled for running away and for missing church: the steady pentameter returns as a figurative cage around the boy:

> That night I knew that I would go to Hell,
> and it would be a place just like my room—
> dark, suffocating, with its door shut tight,
> and even if my mother were there too,
> she wouldn't find me. I would always be alone. (42)

The extra foot in the final line draws attention to "alone" in a stanza of otherwise perfect pentameter. The emphasis on the word alone suggests that the boy's sense of abandonment is central to the choices he makes and that his foster home is a figurative window into the interiority of a character who has inherited a spirit of unrest where home and family are a living torment. It is not until he escapes from prison years later to murder his step mother that he can say in perfect pentameter, "I had come home, and there was no escape" (52). He had in fact murdered his step mother and sat in the parlor waiting for the police to arrive. As the meter draws attention to these passages and leads us to question the nature of good and evil, this part of the poem offers a possible cause for the boy's confusion. Whether the boy's sense of abandonment and loneliness can account for the extraordinary inversion of right and wrong is the poem's argument. For the New Formalist, that the theme itself is arguable is precisely the point for any poet wishing to talk at length about important issues.

Lea's Titular "Feud"

Metrical variations draw attention to the titular theme in Gioia's story and demonstrate in part what New Formalists are attempting to do with their narratives. Lea's narrative also demonstrates a key tenet of the New Formalist narrative, however, this verse presents itself more effortlessly as quantized stanzas compared to Gioia's strophes. By examining the musical-like refrain recurring throughout this narrative, an aesthetic for

violent revenge emerges that helps better understand the aurality of New Formalism while also developing Lea's theme of violence. The following three stanzas together provide an example of the poem's musical-like leitmotif.

> The whole thing's clear as Judgment in my mind:
> the sky was orange, the air so thick it burned
> a man out of his senses. I'm the one.
> And evening never seemed to cool me off,
>
> though I'm a man whose aim is not to truck
> in such a thing. I've lost most of my churching,
> but don't believe in taking up with feuds.
> I usually let the Good Lord have His vengeance.
>
> Nothing any good has ever grown
> out of revenge. So I was told in school
> when I slapped up Lemmie Watson, because he broke
> the little mill I built down on the brook. (Jarman and Mason 128-9)

Each stanza has its own *idée fixe*. The first stanza signals a critical point in the story as the narrator begins reflecting on a sequence of events from his past. The first *idée fixe* develops around the word *judgment.* This word, judgment, will be repeated specifically four more times and alluded to indirectly throughout the story. This judgmentalism is always associated with irrational and hasty behavior in our narrator to which the wages are an insatiable and highly destructive heat. The heat appears as a hot day in this passage but occurs elsewhere as a debilitating fever but also as a fatal chimney fire in another passage. Metaphorically, this unstoppable fire burns within our narrator's interiority consuming his own life but also, indiscriminately, the lives of those around him.

A close reading of musical qualities in Lea's text demonstrates the New Formalists' intuitive grasp of rhythm and sound in poetry. When this repeating metaphor of an all-consuming fire of judgmentalism reappears for the final time in the story, it serves as a musical-like coda and closure:

> One spring, the moon that big, a skunk came calling
>
> in the shed, and my fool tomcat gave a rush.
> The smell was worse than death. It woke me up,
> if I was sleeping (I'd been trying to),
> and till the dawn arrived, for hours I felt
>
> the stink was like a judgment: every sin
> from when I was a child till then flew back
> and played itself again before my eyes.
> High on the ridge, I felt I might reach out
>
> and touch that moon, it was so close, but felt
> that if I reached it, somehow it would burn.
> It was a copper color, almost orange,
> like a fire that's just beginning to take hold (135).

Whereas the first mention of judgment was a day thick with heat from an orange sun, in this passage the day is over, night has fallen with an almost orange moon. The full moon, that fills our narrator's head with "bad idea[s]" (134) a few lines earlier, echoes the burning of his senses from the first passage. And the fact that our narrator is unable to rest during this full moon proves his observation from the first passage that evening never seems to cool him off. In a moment of catechesis that helps understand the narrator, he associates the heat, the stench, and his unrest as a judgment rendered to him as retribution for past sins. The irony is that this self condemnation is characteristic of the narrator's hasty generalizations and ungrounded accusations, a potentially tragic flaw.

The idea of judgmentalism is only the first of three *idées fixes* in the larger *leitmotif*. The second *idée fixe* centers on the titular "feud":

> The whole thing's clear as Judgment in my mind:
> the sky was orange, the air so thick it burned
> a man out of his senses. I'm the one.
> And evening never seemed to cool me off,
>
> Though I'm a man whose aim is not to truck
> In such a thing, I've lost most of my churching,

> But don't believe in taking up with feuds.
> I usually let the Good Lord have His vengeance. (129)

In the second stanza, the titular "feud" is mentioned for the first time and will be repeated four more times throughout the story. It is here that the narrator associates a feud with vengeance—a violent and unforgiving retributive punishment. It also becomes clearer that our narrator's judgmentalism is a form of self-deceit. After all, what the narrator believes in word does not comport with the fatal feud of violent revenge that transpires. The story pivots on the unreliability of the narrator's hasty generalizations and the incongruence between his words and his deeds until the final two stanzas of the poem when he acknowledges his vengeful nature and begins to question his own judgment, bringing what he believes in word about revenge to bear on his actions. This story of violent revenge can come to an end only after a moment of self-introspection by the character-narrator, which draws the poem to its close in the final stanza of the poem:

> [. . .] Do I know what led to what
>
> or who's to blame? This time I'll let it go.
> No man can find revenge for a thing like this.
> They say revenge is something for the Lord.
> And let Him have it. Him, such as He is. (140)

The character's redemption comes at the cost of innocent lives and relentless destruction. At this point, he has changed. He originally states that "[he] usually let[s] the Good Lord have His vengeance," (129) but has now resolved to "let Him have it, Him, such as He is" (140). Furthermore, divine vengeance is understood more as a violent and injurious measure in the first passage but is called into question in the final passage as divine vengeance is the purview of "Him, such as He is." Whether our narrator has surrendered

to a forgiving and clement divinity or whether the price of revenge is simply too expensive for him right now is unclear.

The final *idée fixe* builds on the ideas of judgmentalism and violent feuds in the third stanza of the recurring *leitmotif,* which will provide insight into how the poem mimics the haunting aria of the main character's interior life:

> The whole thing's clear as Judgment in my mind:
> the sky was orange, the air so thick it burned
> a man out of his senses. I'm the one.
> And evening never seemed to cool me off,
>
> though I'm a man whose aim is not to truck
> in such a thing. I've lost most of my churching,
> but don't believe in taking up with feuds.
> I usually let the Good Lord have His vengeance.
>
> Nothing any good has ever grown
> out of revenge. So I was told in school
> when I slapped up Lemmie Watson, because he broke
> the little mill I built down on the brook. (128-9)

When this refrain occurs four other times, it is accompanied by an idea of rote repetition and unsettling inner dialogue. It recurs when the character-narrator, ruminating over his vengeful plan to kill, repeats the same words over and over, "Nothing good will ever grow from feuds" (134). He keeps up the sermon in his head repeating, "Nothing / any good from any feud [. . .]" while setting out on his malicious plan to poison his neighbor's livestock. The poetic refrain is a reminder that the main character is unable to refrain from making the same mistakes of hasty judgmentalism and violent revenge he has made since grade school. He knows revenge is wrong, but he continues to seek it.

Then, the story turns on a horrific chain of events stemming from the main character's actions. He is desperately ill with pneumonia that resulted, presumably, from his stealing away into snowy nights seeking vengeance on his neighbor. As he returns

home from a doctor visit, and barely able to hold his head up, his home is ablaze from a chimney fire that he is too sick to manage and hopelessly watches as his son "cried / from behind a big storm window, 'Daddy? Daddy?' / It sounded like a question . . ." (139). The man watches as his son is consumed by the fire and the house collapses. It would seem that this would be enough for the character to change—a potential moment of redemption. But then, he recalls the school-yard scuffle from his youth when the teacher made him write the same line fifty times each afternoon: "No good can grow from any feud" (140). This is an unsettling moment in the narrative as this refrain suggests this story will repeat itself again. Moreover, the narrator's lack of remorse in the retelling of this traumatic event supports the idea that the main character, a tragic figure, is destined to repeat the mistakes he has always made.

The theme of violence is framed around a pervasive Christian theme of judgmentalism. The Christian canon encourages followers to develop their conscience in order to discern right from wrong but warns:

> Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye. (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible,* Matt. 7:1-5)

Lea's poem explores the *what if* that could result from ignoring the Christian admonition. Clearly, the poem's refrain is quick to emphasize the repeated transgression. Additionally, the nature of judgmentalism is an important enough topic for the New Formalist wishing to broaden his audience. However, unlike the *home foot* in Gioia's poem, a *refrain* could function as effectively in prose as it does in verse.

There is a musicality to the refrain as it recurs throughout the poem like an operatic aria in quantized meter and phrasing based purely on sound that leads to a finer distinction between Lea's *poetic refrain* from a refrain that might otherwise be written as prose or free verse. This distinction shows the interconnectedness between Lea's form and his theme derived from the poem's *aural* components. When asked why "The Feud" is organized into one hundred and one four-line stanzas and how the stanzas work in service to the narrative, Lea responded:

> The plain fact is that metrical and stanzaic verse presents itself much more effortlessly than so-called free verse. I can 'hear' a five-stress line automatically and needn't pause to think about line breaks. The very first stanza presented itself to me fully formed. . .and I just took off until the tale was told, using the same blank verse and the same stanza form. The composition was a strange, perhaps a unique experience for me. That was my longest poem at that point, and, although I am at best agnostic about what is called inspiration, it was as though the entire story was dictated to me. ("Re: Question About The Feud.")

Lea elaborates on the strange and unique experience saying, "The poem had ended up at fifteen typescript pages—which I wrote in an hour, and uncharacteristically, revised almost not at all before publication" (*Sydney Lea's Blog*). Poetry that does not presuppose the written page is, of course, meant to be heard. The orality of a poem often utilizes meter and rhyme to create memorable language and performances. But aurality, as it pertains to sound and hearing, is more instructive when considering Lea's writing process. He effortlessly hears five-stressed meters and stanzas as being aurally dictated to him. Without the aurality of this unique writing experience, "The Feud" itself, its enjambment, the meter, and stanzas would not exist. But what about the refrain?

Lea's "Poetry and Criticism" can provide further insight into how inseparable his poem is from its refrain. Whereas refrains could be counted among an extended definition

of traditional prosody as mainstays in ballads, work poems, Elizabethan songs, Shakespeare, Spenser, Eliot, and Poe, Lea writes: "A common question I've heard over the years, from aspirant commentator, person-in-the-street, and academic specialist alike, is 'What is the poet trying to say?' It's as if she or he had some terrible throat disease. There's a way in which a good poem is itself what it is trying to say, in which the poem is its own 'meaning' (*Sydney Lea's Blog*). Therefore, one should consider the possibility of Lea's refrain as an allegory for trying to understand how a character—who has heard and also knows what the right thing to do would be—cannot stop the narrative in his mind that fuels his repeated transgressions: The character's deeds are intimately connected to his relentless inner narrative. In other words, there is an aurality to the drumming, interior dialogue in the character's judgmentalism—the words he repeats are themselves the problem. This of course has a very Christian background: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do" (Rom. 7:15). Everything about the poem is tied to an aural experience based on naturally occurring stresses, stanzas, meter, and refrains. It is not surprising then that a verse narrative such as this would resurface as New Formalism sees these formalities more natural to the trained poetic ear than free verse.

McDowell's Titular "Pact"

Taken as a serious literary device, *pun* helps better understand the poem's theme while also serving as a catalyst to considering the New Formalists' distinction between verse and prose narratives. At line thirty-five, John-Allen is the first character to speak when he asks his wife Sarah a simple question, "'Your packing done?'" (McDowell, *On*

Foot, in Flames 28). Because dialogue figures so prominently in this couple's conflict, the pun should not go unnoticed. The question is whether or not Sarah is *packed*, which establishes the pun between the homonyms *packed* and the titular *pact*—an agreement between two or more people such as the marriage pact between John-Allen and his wife. The pun is quick to draw attention to the denotative meaning of a *pact* but will take on more meaning as the poem progresses. Additionally, the pun echoes a very prominent and recurring argument throughout the canon of New Formalist essays expressed by Jarman and McDowell in "I Have Seen, I Know": "Narrative poetry can tell a story in less space than prose and more immediately" (74). In "The Poet in an Age of Prose," Gioia points out that "Ezra Pound maintained, '[poetry] is the most concentrated form of verbal expression" as he argues that "a poem can condense immense amounts of intellectual, sensual, and emotional meaning into a single line or phrase" (*Can Poetry Matter?* 221). Whereas pun is a technique used in prose, its relative weight as a literary device favors a narrative told in verse. For McDowell, the use of pun helps him combine the *fabula* (the story) with the *suzjet* (the plot and rhetorical devices) in a compressed, *packed*, form. New Formalists must condense meaning and time into a short amount of space in order to sustain their verse successfully. Prose does not have the same constraints of space. But since pun by definition operates on double meanings, it seems particularly useful in mid-length verse narratives.

A fuller understanding of the pun develops later in the story, which after closer examination, underlines McDowell's allusions to Biblical stories of betrayal where mankind seems fated to fail and incapable of satisfying covenantal pacts. Three-fifths of the way into the story, John-Allen and Sarah agree: "'We'll lay him down in the

addition,' he said, / 'Back by the window. Then we'll pour a slab. / I'll dig, and you can read the Scriptures over him'" (McDowell, *On Foot, in Flames* 36). John-Allen and his wife Sarah have vowed to keep silent about the suicide and secret burial of Sarah's illicit lover. But in an attempt to bury their problems and move on, the decaying corpse that lies beneath the life they've built together is an unforgiving reminder of the violence undermining their silence. Their dialogue with one another is strained and their actions belie their words. Their love is genuine but frail, imperfect, and even destructive. This is the titular *pact.* There is an agreement between John-Allen and Sarah to remain silent that, in the balance, threatens the already violated marriage pact between them. John-Allen and Sarah appear trapped by the inescapable truth of mankind's inability to enter a covenantal agreement by any power of their own.

Further connections between McDowell's Biblical allusions can be connected to the titular pact for a better understanding of the narrative's dark world view. The narrator observes a change in the weather "[a]nd rain that made the people speak of Noah" (37). After burying the decomposing body of Sarah's illicit lover—as if bearing all the weight of what John-Allen and Sarah had done—the weather figures prominently in the narrative as a bitter and unstable reminder of the figurative storm between them. When the passage mentions Noah, it is a reminder that God has made a pact with mankind to never literally wash mankind's mistakes away as in the days of Noah. By introducing a Judeo-Christian ethic into the fabric of this story, one wonders why the greater narrative of mankind seems to repeat the violent and adulterous mistakes of previous generations. Very little faith in the human condition is restored. In a sense, the poem confronts this difficult question of whether mankind has the power to redeem himself, to learn from the past and

to make sense out of his suffering. This has been the question from the first line of dialogue when John-Allen asked Sarah, “your packing done?” This is a rhetorical question that pivots on the pun between *packed* and *pact*: Is mankind’s packing done? Is mankind’s pact done? As the marriage pact between John-Allen and Sarah deteriorates from the secret pact between them, the narrative of salvation history is brought to bear on the situation as a tragic human story of broken covenants.

Tragic Possibility

Whereas the narratives are not overtly Christian texts, the conception of mankind’s nature is primarily framed around a Christian ethic. Auden would accept this narrative framework as establishing “the tragedy of possibility” where “a modern reader. . .instinctively asks, ‘Where and when did [the tragic character] make the wrong choice?’ and as instinctively answers, ‘He should not have . . .” (2:258). For example, Gioia’s character struggles with the choice of right and wrong in the poem’s examination of good and evil. One asks, where and when did the boy go wrong and the answer is clear: he should have accepted his foster mother. Moreover, he should have forgiven his biological mother. Lea’s ignoble character cannot seem to transcend his violent sins in a poem that questions the nature of hasty judgmentalism. When and where does the man make the wrong choice? Obviously, his hasty generalizations and the confidence he placed in violent revenge was his undoing. He should not have taken the law into his own hands. Perhaps he could have forgiven his neighbor. McDowell’s couple must learn to live with adultery, betrayal, and domestic violence in a poem that tries to understand the suffering of mankind. This conflict is more complex compared to that in Gioia’s and Lea’s stories,

but Sarah should never have committed adultery and John-Allen should not have hit her. It is more difficult to answer what John-Allen and Sarah should have done—after all, they exhibit fatally tragic human characteristics—but there is a sense that their suffering results from their own poor judgments. Auden compares this framework to that of Greek tragedy where "such thoughts would never have occurred to Sophocles or his audience" (2:258). The dark vision of reality underlying Greek tragedy and its heroes maintains that exceptional heroes always suffer hubris punishable by a tragic fate. The vision in these texts centers on mankind's inherent sinfulness but with the possibility of redemption. A sense of the tragic occurs as these characters remain unrepentant in the stories of Gioia and Lea; shameful and unrequited in McDowell.

Chapter III

The Metanarratives

With its origins in Greek comedy, the *act of going aside* to address audiences directly is now the purview of any playwright, screenwriter, director, or poet wishing to pierce the imaginary fourth wall between a work and its audience. For as much the new narratives are thought to have inherited some of poetry's oral past, it is difficult to imagine these works as performance. Like their Modern predecessors, the New Formalists' poetry—especially the mid-length and novel-length verse narratives—presuppose the written page. In a literary sense then, the mini asides found in the new narratives are similar to the ancient *parabasis* of the Greek stage, but they underscore what postmodern literary theory describes as metanarrative—a narrative about the narrative. Gioia's, Lea's, and McDowell's direct, but sometimes indirect, addresses to their audiences, highlights New Formalists' need to write about *important issues*, leading to the realization that the violence in their stories parallels a violence they perceive having hindered literature and the arts in American culture.

Gioia's Piercing the Literary Wall

An analysis of the first two lines of the third strophe of section one demonstrates Gioia's need to address his readers directly in order to defend his narrative, leading to a notable observation about how New Formalists view the narrator's role. The character-narrator is alone: "But you aren't interested in family heirlooms. / I know the reason that

you're here is me" (*The Gods of Winter* 39). This line draws attention to itself by its lineation, but also for its uncertain interlocutor and vague authorial voice. As stated in chapter two, there is a metrical ambiguity that hinges on the words "interested" and "family" as a poetic way to develop the theme. In this same line however, the ambiguity of our interlocutor, author, and narrator is an artful argument for how poets should tell their stories. Whereas the poem begins with someone pulling into the driveway as our narrator watches from the parlor window, there is nobody in the room as he continues the narrative. He seems to be talking to himself until this unexpected second-person vocative appears to address the reader. To quote and paraphrase from "The Elephant Man of Poetry" appearing in *The Reaper Essays*, Mark Jarman and McDowell discuss the poet's non-negotiable role of guiding readers to the doorstep of a story and then showing them through the front door into a place where the reader and poet discover what lies beyond the threshold together: "It means being there with him. On the same journey. In this way, he fulfills his need to tell the story" (50). The narrator acts as a witness to the action and dialogue as if hearing and seeing it for the first time. The question of the reader's need to hear the story is satisfied by including the reader as an observer in the dramatic examination of human complexities and conflict. In Gioia's poem, the need to explore the moral and ethical complexities surrounding his unredeemable protagonist is the reason the story exists and must be read. It is true that New Formalists complain about the self-reflexive nature of many poets and critics. Too often, such self-reflection by poets and critics leads to abstract theorization. It is also true that New Formalists demand that there be no more poems about writing poetry. But Gioia, as will be shown in Lea and McDowell below, avoid being overly self-reflexive. The important distinction to make is

that while these New Formalists posit mini arguments in defense of their work, the poem and the narrative remain superior to its criticism. That is to say, the New Formalists want to avoid critical explications that are so abstract, the poem never figures into the conversation and that, instead of unifying audiences, actually creates more specialized audiences.[3] Moreover, these arguments are not the entire subject of the poem, which might seem obvious, but to the New Formalist, compelling subject matter is an essential component in their experiments.

Whereas there is some ambiguity in the vocative case above, a closer examination of a line occurring at the end of the first strophe in section six is a conspicuous and singular moment when the character-narrator's voice is muted for Gioia's authorial voice. "Madness makes storytellers of us all" (*Gods of Winter* 47). Two-thirds of the way into the poem at line 263, Gioia borrows one of the most lucid memories of the protagonist as he alludes to act 5, scene 1 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to establish two essential arguments. First, the main character in the narrative is losing faith in the value of storytelling and imagination, which by his own admission is a form of survival and was once "the center of [his] life" (43). Second, Gioia himself—by referencing the poetry and narrative of Shakespeare—is arguing against the Modernist rationale that resulted in the extinction of storytelling in poems. On one hand, Theseus is an example of approaching life too literally without the benefit of imaginative stories; Shakespeare, on the other hand, is Gioia's exemplar of poetry's intrinsic relationship to the human imagination and narrative. In a stark similarity to the rational-minded Theseus, when our narrator eschews

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3. "Navigating the Flood" in *The Reaper Essays* details the New Formalists' complaint that critics discuss poems without referring to them and with such abstract theories that only highly specialized audiences understand the explications but, according to the New Formalists, not the poetry.

the stories of lovers, madmen, and poets as seething lies—and in this case, the character-narrator rejects Bible stories too—his eternal fate is sealed. Therefore, the unfortunate outcome of the character-narrator is Gioia's way of personifying the fate of Modern poets who seemed too disillusioned to trust traditional forms of storytelling in poetry. Whereas Theseus is at least entertained by stories, and all ends well in Athens, Gioia's main character agonizes and resents the unfinished stories on the shelf of his prison cell, which only leads toward an increase in his violence and destruction. That Gioia's voice suddenly appears at line 263 of 409 is perfectly unexpected—as is Modern poets' departure from traditional narrative.

Gioia is one of the most prolific supporters of New Formalism arguing for a revival of traditional forms in order for literature as a whole to regain ground ceded to other forms of media that—as personified in "The Homecoming"—leads to dire consequences for American society. In "Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture," Gioia writes:

> We are now seeing the first generation of young intellectuals who are not willing to immerse themselves in the world of books. They are not against reading, but they see it as only one of the many options for information" and "[t]he end of print culture raises many troubling questions about the position of poetry amid these immense cultural and technological changes. What will the poet's place in a society that has increasingly little use for books, little time for serious culture, little knowledge of the past, little consensus on literary value, and—even among intellectuals—little faith in poetry itself? These questions are all the more pressing in American academic life where the art of poetry is often put on the margins of scholarly inquiry in favor of literary theory and cultural studies. (5)

Once chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, Gioia spent much of his time gathering and collating data on American reading and literacy where he writes of the alarming and consistent trend of declining literacy as a matter of real national

consequence that obviously affects literature and the arts specifically. For these reasons, it is easy to conclude that the tragic figure in "The Homecoming" also represents a national economic, social, and civic setback that results from poetry's decline as a shared experience. Poetry's decline is due in part to new forms of media but also the result of Modernist experimentation taken too far.

The first sixteen lines of section five mention several works of fiction and a couple war memoirs, that upon a closer examination of the narrator's response to these books, provides better insight into how the character-narrator personifies the current but unfortunate state of literature and the arts.

> I used to read at night back in my room.
> I liked adventure stories most of all
> and books about the War—*To Hell and Back*,
> *The Death March at Bataan*. You know the sort.
> There weren't more than a dozen books at home,
> mainly the Bible and religious crap,
> but back in town there was a library,
> and it became the center of my life.
>
> The books I liked the best I used to steal.
> I filled my room with them—*Pellucidar*,
> *The Dunwich Horror*, *Master of the World*,
> *Robur the Conqueror*, *Tarzan the Untamed*.
> I didn't want them read by anyone but me—
> not that the folks I knew were in much danger
> of opening a book which had no pictures.
> The more I read the more I realized
> how power was the only thing that mattered. (Gioia, *Gods of Winter* 43-4)

Because literacy rates can be correlated to the number of books a person has access to, it is important to note that the narrator is raised in a home devoid of classical literature beyond the Bible. It is feasible to assume the Bible is not read as literature. As the boy seeks solace in science fiction, horror, and action adventures, he—arguably—is ill-equipped to handle the texts in a responsible manner. For him, there is no shared context,

no critical examination of the texts except that "power was the only thing that mattered." This passage is Gioia's capacious debate over literature's primacy in the nurture of good and understanding evil. The accusation against Modernist experimentation holds that without usable narratives, the void is not only an emaciated poetic output but that poets and poetic criticism have isolated their works. Shared experiences of poetry no longer exist. In fact, meter, rhyme, recitation, and shared cultural exchanges are the purview of popular audiences in Rap music and poetry slams, having the unintended consequence of alienating the verse narratives from serious critical scholarship as being unfashionable. The outcome for poetry and consequently the arts and literature, which in turn have profound consequences on society, are the same as the main character's self-prophesied perdition.

Lea's Piercing the Literary Wall

Before Lea hands the story off to the first-person, character-narrator—before readers know who is speaking—Lea's authorial voice pierces the veil of expectations between reader and author in order to defend the aesthetics of his narrative. The poem begins: "I don't know your stories. This one here / is the meanest one *I've* got or ever hope to" (Jarman and Mason 127). These opening sentences underscore three New Formalist arguments. First, "[He does not] know your stories" implies that poets are generally silent beyond short, lyrical poems or narratives that are too fragmented to understand or simply nonexistent. Second, Lea unequivocally claims that the poem that follows is in fact a story. Finally, a third argument pivots around the word "meanest." The first argument is the rally cry of New Formalists whose lament of the anemic output

of the Modern status quo forces them to look beyond contemporary poets where "editors envision a broader audience attuned to poetry that explores not simply the nature and possibilities of poetry but of human experience" (Jarman and McDowell xiii). Gioia notes: "American poetry may be bold and expansive in its moods and subject matter, but it remains timorous and short-winded in its range" (Feirstein 4). In other words, American poets are not writing or publishing verse narratives. Lea's poem fills that void. The second argument claims that the poem *is* a story. To the New Formalist, this means the poem contains a beginning, middle, and end along with narration, characters, a setting, dialogue, conflict, and a climax that are not subservient to the poetics but are results of the poet's writing process and rhetorical devices. Therefore, the story exists, not in spite of, but because of the poetics. The third argument states this "is the meanest [story] I've got or ever hope to." That is to say, *mean* is a calculated paring down of the language in order to compress time and meaning into memorable, weightier verse compared to that typically found in prose. As the story progresses, it is clear that *meaning* is layered by the cruelty and anger of the main character as a pun on the adjective *mean*. But meaning is also derived from the poet's compression of the story's plot through consistently metered lines. Therefore, the poet is arguing for an economy of language, derived from poetic form, that is not just well suited to the complexities of human violence and revenge but that is the best mode for these complexities of human experience. However, with very little in his usable past and nothing of note from his contemporaries, this is also an experiment in which Lea needs to reinvent a poetic means for telling important stories. For Lea, paring this singular most important story of violent revenge to its essence appears to be one of the challenges New Formalists face when

defining what a manageable and sustainable narrative is. In addition, the opening lines do not detract from the poem as readers are immediately drawn into the character-narrator's world on a journey of discovery that is shared with the poet. In this regard, it can be simply stated that the poem *is* the story. The arguments Lea makes in the opening lines serve as a defense for verse narrative but also as a challenge to American poets to *listen* to their own stories—to hear the aurality of their language—and to pare their subjects down to manageable-length narratives. The presumption is that if poets start listening to their language, the American output of verse narratives would increase.

McDowell's Piercing the Literary Wall

Gioia and Lea address their audience directly, but McDowell addresses his audience indirectly through subtle moments of extra-textual metafiction. From the first line of "The Pact," McDowell's narrator points to an even greater, unchanged, and mysterious story of humanity as being an essential inspiration behind his work that, upon closer examination, aligns his work with the most pervasive mission of New Formalists' experiments in mid-length narratives. The poem begins with a simile: "Rain bulled into the valley like a giant / Escaping from the pages of a book" (McDowell, *On Foot, in Flames* 27). Otherwise abstruse, "giants escaping from the pages of a book" forces readers to literally imagine possibilities beyond the written page but makes particular sense when we learn half way through the story—approximately 193 lines into the poem—that this entire story takes place on "Enos Lane" (33) and that—at line 302 of 372—the rain "made the people speak of Noah" (37). Enos is of the antediluvian line of

Seth leading to Noah. His name means *man*,[4] and is sometimes translated to mean frail or desolate mankind. Incidentally, Enoch, the son of Cain, lives at about the same time. His name means "walking with God," and as the story goes, he was not for this world. Thus, his progeny does not survive the Great Flood. These men lived extraordinarily long lives, walked hand in hand with angelic beings, and lived among giants. Those earthbound souls destined to survive the flood would become part of the greater narrative of mankind's repeated mistakes of adultery and violence. This greater narrative from Genesis is the cornerstone to understanding "The Pact." For McDowell, the bulling rain is not a fresh start for humanity as it was in Genesis; rather, it is a reminder of the most enduring problem facing the world today—an indispensible story in which the storm is an ongoing conflict that seems impossible to resolve.

The irony surrounding McDowell's meta story positions his work within one of the most pervasive arguments among the call for new narratives. In "The Reaper's Non-negotiable Demands," Jarman and McDowell list ten things poets must do:

1. Take prosody off the hit list.
2. Stop calling formless writing poetry.
3. Accuracy, at all costs.
4. No emotion without narrative.
5. No more meditating on the meditation.
6. No more poems about poetry.
7. No more irresponsibility of expression.
8. Raze the House of Fashion.
9. Dismantle the Office of Translation.
10. Spring open the Jail of the Self. (34)

Each item receives a paragraph to a couple of pages with examples for further study except for the terse and emphatic: "No more poems about poetry." To this point, they simply reiterate: "We mean NO MORE POEMS ABOUT POETRY" (40). Elsewhere,

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4. See www.jewishencyclopedia.com.

Jarman and McDowell complain that many poems are "an excuse to talk about words in a fashionable way" (13). For instance, they analyze Charles Simic's poem, "Painters of Angels and Seraphim," as an example of what not to do saying—with regard to compelling subject matter—"Simic never discovers it" (140). Their attention was also drawn to Simic's statement in *The Missouri Review*:

> *Interviewer*: Your work has always stood somewhere outside the narrative mode, but do you ever find yourself drifting in that direction?
>
> *Simic*: I hope not. Most of the so-called narrative poems just plod. They have no sense of the line, nor do they imagine well. When poets forget what imagination can do they get into these linear, prosy, redundant, long-winded poems. It's impossible to tell a story, the whole story, in twenty lines. The art consists of making a few details and images say everything. They should study Strand's 'The Untelling.' There's a masterpiece for you. (141)

Jarman and McDowell respond to Simic's remarks. While they do not directly address Simic's observation that "the art consists of making a few details and images say everything," McDowell's poem goes well beyond a few details and images. McDowell's metafiction is ironic. On one hand, his critical essays call for no more poems about poetry; but on the other, the meta-story in his narrative has the consequence of making "The Pact" sound, in part, like a narrative about narrative. Like Gioia and Lea, McDowell seems very self-aware of the need to defend his verse story. The metanarrative derived from Genesis is McDowell's challenge to poets of the sixties and seventies that had succumbed almost entirely to the fashionable free verse, lyrical poem to start thinking about the preeminence of narrative throughout the literary past.

A call for compelling subjects is one of the most pervasive arguments of New Formalism. McDowell points out that "[i]f the new narrative poets collectively believe in anything, they believe in the integrity of the story. Their challenge is to avoid repetition

and unintentional self-parody and continue to create the essential stories of our communal experience" (Feirstein 110). In "The Pact," by alluding to the narrative in Genesis, McDowell is subtly pointing to the long tradition of storytelling considered a cornerstone in examining a communal experience of sin and suffering. And while "The Pact" explores the frailty of mankind's repeated fall, the de-creation and re-creation inherent in the Noah narrative is a metaphor for poetry's current condition. The real story for McDowell is this: Just as the narrative in Genesis requires readers to remember the past, examine the present, and look to the future with an uncertain hope as a way of exploring the nature of human suffering, so to must the contemporary poet look to tradition, assess the current state of poetry, and look to future works as a way of exploring the nature of human suffering. This is McDowell's personal *pact*. The implication is that stories with a past, present, and future require a narratological beginning, middle, and ending.

Tragic Mode

Where does the story begin for the New Formalists? In an analysis of "Directive" by Frost, Jarman and McDowell explain how "The title of 'Directive' immediately puts the reader in touch with the narrator, for it is he who guides the reader, his companion, back to the beginning of the story. What is fascinating about the poem is that to do this the narrator must begin at the end" (Jarman and McDowell 49). Frost's narrator takes the reader back in time. In a similar manner, Gioia's, Lea's, and McDowell's narrators begin near the end of their stories. In other words, the *suzjet* implies the concept of time—something that lyrical poetry, for instance, does not necessarily elicit. In addition, the nature of mid-length verse narratives insists on a compression of the *fabula*. To recall

Eagleton's observations on the short story's relationship to tragedy, he writes, "Tragedy . . . is more at home in the short story than the novel proper, a less well upholstered form in which . . . the narrative can be more easily pared down to a single moment of disruption or disclosure" (184). Eagleton's first point claims short stories, like mid-length verse narratives, are likely to be more successful at sustaining a tragic plot. His second point about a single moment of disruption leads to further observations about the tragic possibility within a Christian framework.

To better understand the tragic mode within Gioia's, Lea's, and McDowell's Christian frameworks, consider the point about a single moment of disruption together with the New Formalists' views on beginning a verse story near its end. As cited earlier, "[t]he moment of temptation and sin would seem to hold immense tragic possibilities" (Mukhopadhyay 23). While this is true, Auden, in comparing *Moby Dick* to Greek tragedy, points out: "The hero, Captain Ahab, far from being exceptionally fortunate, is at the beginning, what in Greek tragedy he could only be at the end, exceptionally unfortunate" (2:259). Gioia's tragic figure is introduced after having committed murder. Lea's tragic figure is retelling the story of his son's demise. McDowell's characters have already suffered adultery on many levels. Auden points out that "What to the Greeks could only have been a punishment for sin here is a temptation to sin, an opportunity to choose; by making the wrong choice and continuing to make it. Ahab punishes himself" (2:259). The point here is that at any moment, the tragic figures in the new narratives are redeemable and damnable. The story is about the process of their becoming tragic figures. Greek tragedy, by comparison, is not about the process of becoming tragic but rather a fixed outcome resulting from the tragic heroes' hubris. In the present narratives,

the tragedy is the murder, suicide, and accidental deaths that result from the tragic figures' repeated mistakes.

Tradition in terms of meter and rhyme are only part of the New Formalists' story. Whereas Gioia, Lea, and McDowell wish to reoccupy ground ceded to the lyrical, free verse status quo, tradition in terms of aesthetics, history, and criticism help position their experiments in narrative among the swath of postmodern poets who consider Modern experiments a thing of the past. Gioia writes, "Free verse, the creation of an older literary revolution, is now the long-established, ruling orthodoxy; formal poetry the unexpected challenge" (Gwynn 16). While reacting to orthodox sensibilities, the New Formalists share a lot in common with their Modern predecessors. Eliot, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," is just as relevant to the New Formalists as he was to his Modern contemporaries. Eliot writes, "[w]e cannot refer to 'the tradition' or to 'a tradition'. . .Seldom, perhaps, does the word appear except in a phrase of censure" (47). Eliot views tradition as inseparable from the poet's mission, but adds this caveat: "[I]f the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, 'tradition' should positively be discouraged" (48-9). Clearly, Eliot does not want to repeat the poetry of the immediate generations but look to them, just as the New Formalists look for viable forms of narrative. He explains it like this: "No poet, no artist of and art, has his complete meaning alone" (49). "[T]he difference between the present and the past," Eliot continues, "is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show" (52). Benefitting from decades of hindsight into the Modernist experiments that have left verse narratives nearly extinct,

the New Formalist attempts to expand the possibilities of poetry through blank verse narratives.

The literary landscape for Gioia, Lea, and McDowell is a story that begins only where Greek tragedy could have ended. Gioia's tragic figure personifies the current state of literature, Lea's *feud* seeks to break the vicious cycle of relentlessly repeating Modern sensibilities, and McDowell has made a *pact* to de-create orthodoxy and re-create verse narratives. Each poet challenges contemporary poets to tell their stories thereby reinstating narrative as the most enduring mode for examining human violence, suffering, and tragedy. Poetry is the traffic figure in the metanarrative underlying each of these narrative modes.

Chapter IV

Conclusion

The New Formalists look back at a century of poets faced with world wars and egregious violence that has at some turns, in the New Formalists' point of view, left contemporary poetry in a state of fragmented literary ruin. To move forward, New Formalists rescue the verse narrative as if it had finally become a neglected casualty of war. The poetry wars meant New Formalists would have to fight their way into publication in a literary landscape that could, at times, be hostile toward traditional forms of verse narrative, meter, and rhyme.

A survey of American war poetry reveals a turning point that begins during World War I; after which, an unbroken trend away from the manners of traditional prosody help break a silence too often accompanying human violence.[5] Increasingly throughout the twentieth century, the voices of minorities, women, and children faced with domestic, race, and gender brutalities are added among the scars of war[6]. The self-reflexive, personal tone of the confessional and lyrical form seem to create a sacred space for victim-poets demanding sympathy from readers without sounding sentimental. This broadening of themes might perhaps be credited as one of Modernism's invaluable contributions to American poetry, but it comes at the expense of abandoning a tragic mode within verse narratives—one of the most enduring means of examining human existence.

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5. See Goldensohn *American War Poetry: An Anthology*.
6. See Edelberg *Scars: American Poetry in the Face of Violence*.

The New Formalists, like their Modern predecessors Pound and Eliot among others, are at times decidedly experimental. Therefore, New Formalists see verse narratives as an attempt to correct a mistake made in Modern experimentation. Where the early Modern poets react to outmoded diction and idioms of Victorian poetry, they also associate traditional forms of meter and rhyme with the former, antiquated period. The New Formalists consider this one of the unique differences between the Modern movement and previous literary revolutions. In previous revolutions, diction and idioms changed but meter, rhyme, and formal poetry remained the framework for expression. However, from the New Formalists' perspective, it is a mistake to think that a poet can write the epic or long poem of his time while also trying to invent a form for that expression. Moreover, early Modern experiments are noteworthy, but the decades of followers writing almost entirely in free verse, lyrical or confessional modes had gone too far and the American output of poetry had become too narrow and dogmatic. This point of view is supported by anyone on the lookout for traditional prosody among the poetry of 9/11, a violent event that was met with a staggering amount of unrestrained, emotional responses from amateur poets but also those of scholarly distinction. Therefore, New Formalists attempt to expand the possibilities for poetry in a literary scene that will inevitably force poets to face the broad cultural problem of human violence.

The New Formalists are correcting what they believe to be an unfortunate oversight in contemporary poetry, so why are their poems overlooked by scholars and why hasn't New Formalism resonated in the scholarly arena? With regard to the new verse narratives specifically, McHale argues that the poetry component remains subordinate and irrelevant to its narrative by scholars for the simple reason that few

specialize in both. The question of what differentiates narrative in poetry from that of other genres is not discussed. Pier, Genette, and Fludernik all corroborate the idea that narratology's silence with regard to poetry has left a gap in the study. To ignore the home foot in Gioia's verse, the aurality that Lea's work embodies, or the compact nature of McDowell's story would seem too narrow an understanding of the Russian formalist concept of *suzjet*. This is especially true since narratology concerns itself with trying to understand why the same story told by one author can be more appealing than the same story told by another. If *fabula* is the story as it would occur in chronological time and *suzjet* is the narratological devices used to tell the story, it would be reasonable to expect more discourse on the nature of lineation and the aural components of verse in relation to the narrative. After all, Lea's poem would not exist without its aural component. Perhaps Lea himself provides some of the best insight as he challenges poets to start telling their stories in "The Feud." Simply stated, if more poets wrote narratives, more narratologists would write about poetry.

With regard to the unfortunate oversight by early critics of New Formalism who dismiss the poems on purely ideological terms, a seeming contradiction arises. For example, Sadoff clearly does not understand the New Formalist enterprise when he states: "Although it may cause discomfort to neo-conservatives, we live in a world of many cultures many voices; our poetries are enriched by otherness, by many different kinds of music and varieties of meters. Their [New Formalists'] narrow-minded appreciation of cadence and music unconsciously creates a kind of cultural imperialism" (par. 11). It has been shown that the New Formalists are particularly adept and well-versed in all types of meter including the musicality of their verse. The New Formalists

are trying to reinstate forgotten voices into the canon, which results in a more inclusive and expansive poetic output than the early critics are willing to acknowledge.

Amid the literary landscape that can claim tragedy is dead and that traditional forms in poetry are outmoded, these mid-length poems work to present a tragic vision relevant to contemporary audiences. Whether one considers the genre dead or not, tragedy ceded to prose by the eighteenth century with only a few notable tragedies in the nineteenth century, including Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral,* written in verse. However, contemporaries of the New Formalists had, for the most part, stopped writing stories altogether, which in effect meant tragedy was dead in poetry.

The New Formalists inherited the eighteenth century idea of a domestic tragedy and the idea that protagonists could be more commonplace and of a lower class compared to the epic heroes of Homer or the tragic heroes of Greek dramatists. They also inherited the possibility of an antihero popularized in the twentieth century. Moreover, they converge on a Christian sensibility from which their stories would be told. But Auden questions whether "in a Christian society, an entirely satisfactory tragedy is it all possible" (Mukhopadhyay 21). Auden observes that the concept of a noble sinner is incompatible with classical tragedy, but that a sense of the tragic can still exist within a Christian framework as the *tragedy of possibility*. In other words, the Christian tragic figure is the story about choosing between right and wrong and always with a chance for redemption. In addition, suffering for a classical hero is a poignant reminder of the universal laws of justice. But for the Christian, suffering falls on the saint and sinner alike. The tragic figures in the verse narratives are not tragic heroes or antiheroes. Readers do not sympathize with the suffering of the figures but can identify with their

human imperfections. The sense of tragedy results from the banality of their transgressions leading to the violent demise of those around them: the step mother in "The Homecoming" is murdered, the young boy in "The Feud" is consumed by fire, and the illicit lover in "The Pact" commits suicide while the main tragic figures remain like the unrepentant sinner on the cross—tragic indeed.

The tragic figures in each verse narrative are allegorical figures in the sense that they represent the tragic state of literature and poetry. The state of poetry is, at the time New Formalists start writing, what it can be only at the end of a classical tragedy—exceptionally unfortunate. Hence, the tragedy of poetry is the tragedy of possibilities: the story of struggling between right and wrong with a chance for redemption. As readers ask where and when did the tragic figure make a wrong choice in "The Homecoming," they are in effect asking the question of the current state of poetry itself. In the mode of tragic possibility, readers instinctively answer: The tragic figure should not have lost faith in the value of storytelling and imagination as he does. He eschews the stories of lovers, madmen, poets, and also rejects narratives from the Bible, leaving him in an exceptionally unfortunate state. As he unexpectedly turns away from the stories on his prison bookshelf, his violence seems to escalate.

The figurative feud for Lea represents the struggle to be heard. If asking where and when did Lea's tragic figure go wrong, readers identify with the character's repeated sermon, "Nothing any good from any feud" and instinctively answer: he should have listened more closely to the narrative in his head. In a sense, poetry becomes a written cure for decades of poets who no longer tell their stories or listen to the aurality of five-

stressed lines. The result is as tragic as the fire that burns within the main character that destroys his innocent son.

The figurative pact McDowell has made aims to redeem verse narrative from a fallen state that mimics mankind's re-created condition following the Great Flood. Within the Christian tragedy of possibility one asks where and when did the marriage between John-Allen and Sarah go wrong. Instinctively, readers conclude that the answer to the transgressions and suffering of John-Allen and Sarah might be found in the narratives of Genesis. As the story of Noah figures into "The Pact" and as John-Allen and Sarah struggle to live with their sin and suffering, any chance of redemption will come at a great cost to them as they try to live with the dark secret they have buried in their backyard. The question of what they should do comes too late for John-Allen and Sarah, but it is not too late for poetry if narratives are restored to their former place among salvific literature.

The mid-length verse narratives provide a manageable way to start thinking about poetry in narrative. A close reading of these poems also satisfies the call for more serious research into the individual poets whose works are still very much in progress. There will be more histories on New Formalism as well as essays on specific aspects of the movement. Only time will tell whether New Formalism holds the answer to penning the epic poem of our time.

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