

# Poetic Closure

A Study of How Poems End.

By Barbara Herrnstein Smith.

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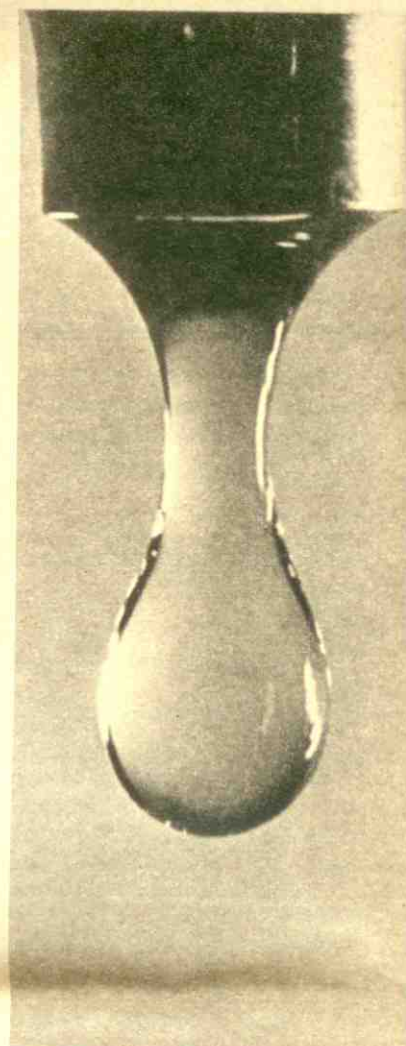
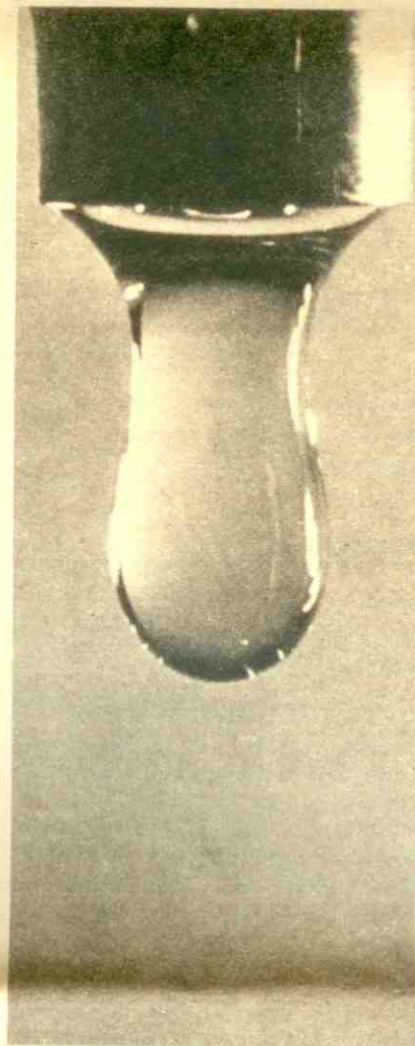
Ranging from the Elizabethan lyric through free and syllabic verse and concrete poetry, "Poetic Closure" is a learned, witty and richly illustrated study of the behavior of poems. It is Barbara Smith's method to show how poems end through examination of the total performances of these linguistic utterances, their queer turns of meter, metaphors, dictions, syntactical arrangements, the sequences of their thoughts. That poems imitate thinking as well as feeling and image-making behavior is one of her chief contentions and closure is here viewed as "a function of the perception of structure."

As her study moves from closure that "clicks like a box," in the words of W. C. Williams, to those tentative, off-balance, indefinite, often ambiguous, even serial breaks to be found concluding contemporary poems, the intellectual outlines of "modernism" come into better focus. The movement might be described as from moralizing to perceiving, with the poem becoming integral at the expense of its paraphrasable content. Mrs. Smith's wisdom and erudition allow her to be as aware of the strengths to be found in the earlier modes as she is keen to the charms of "modernist" poetry.

One of the minor seductions of this study—which was awarded the Christian Gauss medal of Phi Beta Kappa as the best critical book of 1968—are its examples. In far too many New Critical studies of poetry the examples are of interest only to the critic's exegetical eye, but Mrs. Smith's book contains a delightful treasury of English and American lyrics which is the mark, I think, of her love for her subject and her commitment to perceiving its excellences. "Poetic Closure" is a book for academic specialists, but it can be read, enjoyed, studied, I think, by people who like reading poetry, including—I would suspect—poets.

I mention the latter possibility somewhat tentatively because I am aware that so many writers of poetry suspect criticism, when they do not altogether despise it. What they despise is the critic's cold eye and tin ear. Mrs. Smith suffers from neither of these defects. Poetry, in her view, is verbal behavior, and she is as sensitive to the wiggings of its

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metrical vertebrae as she is to the ways in which it armors itself with meanings. From critics like Kenneth Burke and I. A. Richards, she has gained a respect for peculiarities within the behavior of individual poems; from Yvor Winters and J. V. Cunningham she has gained a talent for judgment, for precise readings and careful intellectual history.

Her study, while indebted to these and other critics, irreverently sets about investigating its own passions. Winters and Cunningham would, no doubt, find her aliveness to contemporary associational non-verbal poetry distasteful; and Burke and Richards might be chagrined by her insistence upon showing how traditional poems imitate arguments—meanings—as well as just being. Mrs. Smith's commitment is to literature as a means of representing experience so that it can be understood. It is essentially a demystifying approach.

"A poem," she writes, "allows us to know what we know, including our illusions and desires, by giving us the language in which to acknowledge it." For her discussion of clausal effects she is apt to draw upon examples from prose fiction along with poetry; and though she is intent on limiting her philosophizing to only those statements for which her examples can provide data, she is more searching, informed, in-

quisitive but discreet than most critics in mining what is in the poems, and in providing analogies from other modes of expression.

Having considered all the ways in which closure can provide climax, anti-climax, paradox, and surprise in the traditional poem, Mrs. Smith goes on to discuss anti-closure in the contemporary poem, again drawing analogies to fiction, drama, music, and art. She argues convincingly, I think, that anti-closure is not a means of abdicating thought but a way of asserting meanings in the absence of intellectual beliefs to enforce linguistic certitudes.

She also shows how some concrete poems are far more closed than earlier efforts in free and traditional rhythms, just as she has earlier shown how one of the chief devices of the contemporary "incertitudist" is to suggest grammatical resolution without providing a corresponding set of denotative meanings.

Mrs. Smith is my colleague and friend at Bennington. If her book had been widely reviewed, I would not now feel called upon to pronounce about it. But its knowledge, its reasonableness and vivacity are such that I am convinced it is at least as important to our understanding of, say, Keats as another biography of the poet, and I found I was a little better educated for having read it. ■