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How to Play a Poem by Don Bialostosky

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Rev. of *How to Play a Poem*, by Don Bialostosky.

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Don Bialostosky has long been admired as a writer of dense texts aimed at theory-minded academics and addressing Bakhtin and rhetoric. With *How to Play a Poem*, Bialostosky plays to a different audience, positioning himself as “something of a popular entertainer,” to use T. S. Eliot’s improbable self-description in the wake of *The Waste Land*. Aimed not at theoreticians but average teachers of poetry, Bialostosky’s text attempts to make Bakhtin accessible for the college and high school classroom. For my own audience here, I offer a conflict-of-interest disclosure: Bialostosky directed my dissertation over twenty-five years ago, but there is little overlap in our professional lives now. As it turns out, I am happy to offer a positive review simply because this is an important and engaging book.

Bialostosky’s primary concern is changing the pedagogical environments, underwritten by formalism, that “ask alien questions about poems and make students distrust their feelings about them” (xiv). Instead, Bialostosky’s method employs the kinds of discourses, exchanges, and rhetorical situations in which students participate all the time: the speech genres of apology, warning, greeting, curse, taunt, etc. (One reason why I am an ideal reader for this book is that in graduate school, Bialostosky encouraged me to teach poetry using Bakhtin’s notion of speech genres, a pedagogical approach I still use to great effect.) Bialostosky’s text extends the applicability of Bakhtin from the speech-genre-as-useful-tool to the entire set of assumptions governing the toolbox.

Bialostosky's definition of a poem is markedly different from those formalist approaches that treat poems as holy kinds of utterances whose meanings are protected and policed by a tribe of academic-priests. For Bialostosky, poems are "utterances designed and packaged for pleasurable reanimation" (10). In the chapters that follow this definition, he unpacks each of those words, slowly unfolding the consequences of what it means to read and teach poems in this way. This pedagogical project bespeaks—to use one of his favorite words (41, 43)—a lifelong engagement with student learning, poetry, and rhetoric.

Since students generally encounter poems on the cold page, they experience such utterances as shorn of the markers to which human speech has accustomed them: a live voice speaking in a particular tone for a determinate reason, a speaker with a defined relationship to a listener. Confronted by such obscurities, students who are harangued about metaphors and similes will not make much headway in a poem when they cannot make out who is speaking or why. Bialostosky is especially good at explaining the difficulty *and* importance of reanimating tone from the printed page. Even versification—the humble pulsing of iambs—can help gauge the axes of tone. Those academics who have followed Bialostosky's career will recognize here the practical applications of his earlier reorganization of Aristotle's hierarchy, where tone appears at the bottom of the heap, a merely technical component of delivery.

Some of Bialostosky's explanations are so interesting and useful that you will want to slap yourself for not having thought of such clear, pedagogical interventions on your own. Other, visceral responses induced by reading this text may include blushing with shame when you delete the nearly useless terms "denotation" and "connotation"

from your midterm exams (51-52); instead, you will add Quintilian's oft-overlooked distinction between trope and figure to your lesson plans (35). You may also find yourself donning sackcloth and ashes, resolving to complement the inadequate terms "omniscient" and "limited" narration with Bialostosky's limpid explanations of how the fluctuating distance between speaker and hero/topic illuminates tone. In the wake of this book, you may find yourself reciting love poems to your beloved, more fully aware of how the utterance itself has been provoked by an earlier utterance, a "precedent speaker" (48) in Bialostosky's terminology—a fourth angle in the Aristotelian triangle of speaker, topic, listener. Finally, (though it will not bother your beloved as you recite the poem) you will become oddly self-conscious of how distant the spaces are between your own voice, the voice of the poem's speaker, and the position of the poet, and aware, too, of how the measurement of those spaces can bear exegetical fruit. The conclusive proof of the book comes in Bialostosky's application of his methods to the sublime peaks of Milton's "Lycidas" and the jagged rocks of Charles Bernstein's wittily deranged experiments.

Bialostosky's recurrent references to Cleanth Brooks' *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947) ask us to consider his own text as a riposte to that seminal study in New Critical method, and indeed as an alternative to the Chicago School's resistance to Brooks (220). The problem is that the *Urn* sits on a sturdy shelf propped up by Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's *Understanding Poetry*. That popular textbook made its first appearance in 1938, getting fatter and more canonical with each subsequent edition; the Authorized Version was a staple of the college classroom well into the 1980s, and it is still in print. Bialostosky's text is a commensurate response to *The Well-Wrought Urn*, but it does little

to destabilize *Understanding Poetry*. Although it has been written in an admirably clear style, Bialostosky's book seems to be pitched mostly to other teachers and interested non-specialists, rather than to students. Given that most people who teach introductory literature courses are underpaid adjuncts who have little time (and receive no professional reward) for reading, writing, or reviewing theoretical texts, I fear that Bialostosky's book will not find the wide audience that it deserves, however well-wrought and convincing it is.

It needs a companion volume, its own *Understanding Poetry*, some textbook-anthology that is crowded with poems and whose apparatus is explained in bullet points and short examples. This companion anthology that I am imagining would begin with a boiled-down version of this book, a section that spells out its method in simple, early chapters aimed at students; this would be followed by another section of heavily annotated poems, using the terms and devices previously articulated; finally, a much longer section of poems, many of them appended with questions for students, exercises that point them in the direction of noticing tone, relations, distance, speech genres, and other signs of life and design. It would be a thick volume, ideal for smashing urns and the shelves that support them. I'm not volunteering for the job, but given the near-contempt and oblivion into which poetry has fallen in our culture, it is a task that desperately needs doing.