## The Literary Anatomy

# Teaching the Pantoum

## Descending a Spiral Staircase

JASON SCHNEIDERMAN

### I. Introduction

THE DEMANDS OF THE PANTOUM present a challenge to writers of every age and skill level, but the form also offers a nice continuum of difficulty. For beginning students, the pantoum can be quite simple, the repetitions isolated from each other as the poem builds. For more advanced students, the pantoum can become a crucible of language, an excellent way to explore the conventions of English syntax and the possibilities of sound.

Because the form sort of tumbles forward, students of any level often enjoy the way that it can seem to write itself. I would recommend that it be taught to students in middle or high school, though particularly sophisticated students in the upper elementary

*Jason Schneiderman is the author of* Sublimation Point, *a Stahlecker Selection from Four Way Books, and* Striking Surface, *winner of the 2009 Richard Snyder Prize from Ashland Poetry Press. His poetry and essays have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, including* American Poetry Review, The Best American Poetry, Poetry London, Grand Street, The Penguin Book of the Sonnet, Story Quarterly, *and* Tin House. *He has received fellowships from Yaddo, The Fine Arts Work Center, and The Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. He was the recipient of the Emily Dickinson Award from the Poetry Society of America in 2004. A graduate of the* MFA *program at* NYU, *he is currently completing his doctorate at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.*

school grades might enjoy it as well. The form is also best if done multiple times—it demands a savvy reader and writer—so the more pantoums a student attempts, the more its possibilities will open up.

### II. Forming the Pantoum

Reading a pantoum is a bit like walking down a spiral staircase. Writing a pantoum is more like playing a game of pick up sticks. Since each line repeats twice, every line has to be worth repeating. But the repetition also requires that each line be modular; it has to fit in more than one place. I use a worksheet to help myself remember the pattern. Let's look at the form by starting with the first stanza:

A_____

B_____

C_____

D_____

Then the second and fourth lines become the first and third lines of the next stanza, and new lines are written to fill the rest of the stanza.

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A_____

B_____    →    B_____

C_____          E_____

D_____    →    D_____

                   F_____
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The third stanza builds the same way from the second stanza:

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A_____

B_____    →    B_____

C_____          E_____    →    E_____

D_____    →    D_____          G_____

                     F_____    →    F_____

                                          H_____
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This stair step pattern could go on forever, theoretically, with as many stanzas as the poet wants. The final stanza continues the pattern, repeating the second and fourth lines of the previous stanza as its first and third lines, then brings back the first and third lines from the first stanza to conclude the pantoum. The first line of the poem becomes the last line of the poem, and third line of the poem becomes the third-to-last line of the poem. It may be easier to look at the diagram than to try to keep all those numbers in your head:

The pantoum's quatrains often follow an *abab* rhyme scheme, but many poets dispense with the rhyme. The rhyme was an integral part of the Malayan pantun on which the pantoum was modeled. The form that we now recognize as the pantoum is essentially a 19th Century French invention based on the Malayan form. Students may be interested to know that the technical term for a repeating line is "*repeton*."

In helping students learn the form, it is best to give them some examples, and then explain the pattern. Even though a pantoum's repetitions cannot be hidden, figuring out the pattern can be quite difficult. With advanced groups you can give the students pantoums and then have them try to figure out the form on their own (either individually or in groups). Then have them explain the pattern to the class and see if there's agreement among all the students about the form. You'll want to present them with strictly formal pantoums. Eavan Boland and Mark Strand's anthology *The Making of a Poem* has a nice selection of pantoums for classroom use. The American Academy of Poets and the Poetry Foundation also have a few pantoums (along with an explanation of the form) on their websites. Because pantoums are often named "pantoum" or have "pantoum" in their title, you can find pantoums in literary journals and anthologies fairly quickly. But be

```
A_____

B_____    →    B_____

C_____          E_____    →    E_____

D_____    →    D_____          G_____    →    G_____

                     F_____    →    F_____          C_____

                                          H_____    →    H_____

                                                               A_____
```

sure to review the pantoums carefully before using them in the classroom. Pantoums often break the rules, and you don't want to confuse students until they understand the form. You'll want to save the rule defying pantoums until the students have a fairly good grasp of the form.

## III. What do with the Pantoum

The repetitions of the pantoum force the students to play with language. The easiest way to write a pantoum is with each line being it's own sentence, and to just let each line mean the same thing each time. But what's more fun is if the same string of words can come back with different meanings.

One way to transform the line is by altering the punctuation. A period can become a question mark, or a comma, a period. Sometimes adding a period can change the line's meaning completely. For example, Patricia Carlin's "Yes, They Were Beautiful" is able to use punctuation to allow the poem's forward motion. The line

> **There will be time to fondle the baby.**

returns as

> **There will be time. To fondle the baby**
> **is a group project . . .**

The assertion changes shape as the punctuation changes the syntax. And the baby that initially seemed promised to one character is now shared by the group.

A really strong pantoum demands a reworking of syntax, and an awareness of how words combine to form clauses, phrases and sentences. Challenge your students to end (or start) a line with a conjunction or a preposition. See if they can use a noun that will come back as a verb at the end of the line. What if they use a comparison that will have to change its terms? Have the students see if it gets easier or harder as the line gets longer or shorter.

Another great pleasure in the pantoum is to discover other words in the sounds of a line. Linda

Bierd's poem "DNA" takes the phrase "spiral-flung alignments" and brings it back as "spiral-flung, on line meant." J.D. McClatchy's pantoum "The Method" plays with sound so that the line

> **Seem to pee more often, eat**

returns as

> **Sympathy, more often than not**

Greg Williamson plays with both syntax and sound in his "New Years: A Short Pantoum." Only two stanzas long, his first couplet:

> **The sunlight was falling. A part**
> **Played out in the deep snow**

returns as

> **Played out in the deep snow.**
> **The sunlight was falling apart.**

Perhaps the most critical question for students to explore in terms of the pantoum is how much can be changed for the line to still feel like the same line when it returns. Many poets will change words within a line. In Denise Duhamel's "Lawless Pantoum," the line

> **as long as the animals are female**

returns as

> **as long as the fish are female.**

Is changing one word too much? What about rearranging the words' order? How much change can a line sustain and still be recognized as a repetition?

The pantoum can be a great way to show students the versatility of sound and syntax. The poem is structured a like a puzzle, with the repetitions interlocking each stanza. If students are encouraged to think of the syntax and the sounds in their poem as a kind of puzzle, that will help them develop the flexibility needed

for writing a pantoum.

The pantoum is also good for group composition, especially in pairs. Having students take turns writing lines is very challenging, since they have to fit new lines to the repeating lines. Every line in a pantoum has to make sense in two contexts. It's best to treat this challenge like a game, and not a chore.

## IV. The Movement of a Pantoum

The movement of a pantoum tends towards either dreamlike wandering or dogged problem solving. In the first case, the pantoum seems to stray about, to meander over landscape made only of digressions. When it returns to its beginning, the dreamer rediscovers their original position. In dogged, problem-solving pantoums, there's an analytic mind at work, and the repetitions feel like evidence under constant review (like the clues on a cop show). Linda Bierds's use of the pantoum form in "DNA" is so effective because she allows the puzzle quality of the form to show us James Watson's process of discovery. She keeps returning to the same tools that Watson returns to. As readers, we know that Watson is on the verge of the discovery of DNA's structure, but Bierds leaves the discovery outside of the poem. We see the mind at work, folding back onto itself, staring at the evidence until it yields its secret. The epiphany that we know will come is not the end of the pantoum—it's what comes after. Everything Watson needs is in front of him, he just has to keep going back to it to make the discovery.

The pantoum is a very demanding form. I started by saying that reading a pantoum is like walking down a spiral staircase. You keep looping back, but you also make progress—you descend in place. You can also get a bit dizzy. My own experience is that students prefer forms that are built on repetitions rather than rhyme, and that the pantoum is the most complex of the repetition forms. This is an excellent form for helping students discover that language is a material that has to be manipulated, rather than just a transparent medium for expression. ☻

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