

## Comment on Neal R. Norrick, "Poetics and Conversation"\*

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I was fortunate enough to hear Neal Norrick's talk at the Gleimhaus in August of 2001, and now it is with renewed pleasure that I read the written version in *Connotations*. It is very ingeniously and professionally put together. It presents a systematic, linguistic way of looking at conversations. The only thing I disagree with is whether it constitutes a poetics of conversation. It seems to me to have nothing to do with poetics at all. The word "poetics" appears to be inherited from Roman Jakobson in the article cited, "Closing statement: Linguistics and Poetics." Norrick seems to be stuck with this term—he uses "poetic language" as an equivalent of Jakobson's "poeticity"—and his stated purpose is "to demonstrate just how poetic our everyday talk can be at times." From the examples of everyday talk he quotes in his article, it is definitely not poetic at all, even though the example that Norrick cites, "*boys and toys*," would score high on Jakobson's scale of poeticity, due to its alliteration, assonance and end rhymes.

This is the heart of the matter. Why does the use of devices connected with poetry like alliteration, assonance, and end rhyme make a text poetic? The poetry doesn't come out of the devices, and it is easy to imagine excellent poetry with no traditional poetic devices at all. Some of the conversational poetry discussed in the same issue of *Connotations* could certainly provide excellent examples of this.

To take a fuller sample from Norrick's transcripts, "HURRY AND GET RESTED," the pun and wordplay on "oxymoronic" have nothing specially poetic about them. I think Norrick is overly enthusiastic

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\*Reference: Neal R. Norrick, "Poetics and Conversation," *Connotations* 10.2-3 (2000/2001): 243-67.

when he says that "the two speakers here conspire to co-create a highly poetic little composition." Brandon says about his own phrase "Hurry and get rested": "That's oxymoronic." Ned, laughing, answers: "Can you imagine the ox?" and Brandon quips: "No, but I've spotted the moron." This is a little joke, but not a little poem.

Again, it is difficult for me to follow Norrick's reasoning when he says that "Conversation is the natural home of storytelling, and so it comes as no surprise that conversational narratives rate high on the scale of poeticity." Maybe Norrick is cleverly forcing me to argue with an unseen higher authority, since the whole linguistic idea of "poeticity" comes from Roman Jakobson. I can't fathom why conversational narratives should rate high on the scale of poeticity. Is there something inherent in conversational narratives that I am missing? The TWINS fragment that Norrick quotes is lively and witty, but it has no imaginable connection to poetry.

Of course, Norrick could argue that I am merely airing my arbitrary opinions about what poetry is and is not. There are no agreed on criteria, although the lines quoted from Frost's "The Figure a Poem Makes" on pp. 155-56 of *Connotations* 10.2-3 offer some stab at a definition. I could go on to suggest definitions from the history of the criticism of poetry—like Wordsworth's "emotion recollected in tranquillity"—but these would turn into a collection of solemn platitudes. Instead, I would like to offer, with sincere apologies, an exercise that I am sure Norrick would not approve of: to turn one of these sample conversations into a semblance of what I think of as poetry. I hope Professor Norrick will indulge my flight of fancy.

#### BIG BUG

[...]

Frank: It had a fuselage like **that**.

Ned: {laughs}

Frank: And a wingspan like **that**.

Oh man.

Never seen one like that.

Ned: So we're talking primordial here.

Frank: It was just slightly smaller than a hummingbird.

## BIG BUG REVISITED

Not a hummingbird, but almost a hummingbird,  
The hyperbolic big bug swam into view.  
Its fuselage, its wingspan, its hubris—  
An aerodynamic display ready to take off  
    with a payload of twenty tons.  
What shall we call this big bug?  
It is an aviary hapax legomenon,  
Primordial.

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