"Line(-Break) Dancing": Jeffery Donaldson's Developing Relationship with Formalism in *Waterglass*

by Matt Robinson

Jeffery Donaldson is something of a poetic oddity. Both his most recent book, *Waterglass* (1999), along with his earlier work, *Once Out Of Nature* (1991), are peculiar in a Canadian poetic context because of their indebtedness to American Formalist influences. Donaldson's embrace of these influences and of the more formal aspects of poetry, while not entirely unique in Canada, is certainly not what could be termed normal. In fact, in reviewing his first book, Cynthia Messenger had the following to say:

> To write in the tradition of the American formalists, as Jeffery Donaldson does, is almost an indictable offence. Even though Donaldson was born and raised in Canada, his influences are not Canadian. He learned from James Merrill, Elizabeth Bishop, Richard Howard, John Hollander, Anthony Hecht, Charles Tomlinson, and Mark Strand, to name a few. Donaldson's poems first appeared in *Grand Street, New Republic, Partisan Review, Salmagundi, Yale Review,* and *Shenandoah.* (111)

Thus, it would seem that Donaldson's formalism, or at the very least his relationship to that poetic, deserves some consideration when examining his work. This paper will first attempt to situate Donaldson and his book, *Waterglass*, in a Canadian poetic context through a brief examination of some commentary on his earlier work, particularly that on *Once Out Of Nature*, and then briefly outline some of the formalist characteristics that are evident in his poetry. Through a close cross-examination of two poems in particular: "One For Safe Keeping" and "What Goes Without Saying" it will then examine how, over the course of his re-writing and editing, Donaldson has made a conscious poetic move in his writing to a more formal poetic voice and engagement with language. Further,

it will examine how Donaldson also works within the structure of an essentially formalist poetics to create a heightened diction and language that also takes full advantage of the resources available to a poet in terms of both enjambment and line breaks by looking at a number of poems in *Waterglass*. Finally, a brief examination of why Donaldson chooses to embrace a formalist poetics, as well as how such an aesthetic stance functions in his work, will be undertaken.

In many ways, Donaldson's use of formalist strategies is the defining characteristic of his work and the characteristic that makes his poems slightly different than most contemporary Canadian poetry. Messenger goes so far as to assert that Donaldson's embrace of a more formal poetics gives him an advantage of sorts over some other Canadian writers:

> Most Canadian poets have eschewed formalist strategies and have, as a consequence, failed to understand how formalist poetry concentrates (in a more self-aware way than free verse ever could) on the relationship between a poem's surface—the configurations of its words and rhythms—and its depths. (Some might address this problem through the terminology of signification.) Donaldson's play with rhetoric, rather than reflecting what many would consider the ideology behind "outmoded" structures, shows instead (in "Floating Garden at Giverny," for example) a renewed engagement with, and awareness of, language. (111-12)

It is this same poetic engagement that causes Fraser Sutherland to observe of Donaldson's use of rhetoric and formalist techniques that: "[l]ess painter than cabinet-maker, Donaldson is all solid craftsmanship and smooth joinery" (178), and to add later in the same review that "he leans towards the Makers of the Modern Era" (178). And indeed, in his leanings, Donaldson demonstrates his skill. Eric Ormsby, in a less-than-glowing review of the poet's first book, is even forced to concede that, whatever the poetry's weaknesses or shortcomings, "Donaldson can write skillfully. He handles certain traditional forms well" (244).

This last comment is worth bearing in mind, for much of *Waterglass* is filled with poems that are extremely formal in their structure, tone, and diction, if not actually bonafide traditional forms such as the sonnet. Of the poems in *Waterglass*, only one, "The Last Session," does not adhere to a rigid stanzaic pattern or length, but even that poem, with its heightened rhetorical voice, is highly for-

malized in at least one sense. "The Last Session," for all intents and purposes, is a form of dramatic monologue with its speaker and interlocutor functioning much as they do in the works of poet Robert Browning and others. In this case, Donaldson presents the reader with a patient of Freud's who is undergoing a final session of psycho-analysis. As is often the case with Donaldson, there is the use of wit evident in the poem: the title, followed by the date, cues the reader into the fact that the session may well be one of Freud's last, as well as the last for this particular patient. Thus, even in the case of this poem with little stanzaic structure, Donaldson is still employing the highly organized, or formalized, genre of the dramatic monologue in his work. The wit, as evidenced by the title, is also synonymous with a more formal poetics as well. So then, formalized structures abound throughout the entire collection. There is the use of the haiku as in "Two Haiku," the poetic engagement with the sestina as a form as evidenced by both "The Occasion" and "Deep River, Ontario, Population 4,325." As well, the book includes a number of poems written in what can best be described as partially-rhymed quatrains, such as "One For Safe Keeping" and "What Goes Without Saying." There are also poems written in stanzaic forms such as the 4 4 3 3 4 4 3 3 of "The Word on Cootes Paradise." The villanelle also has a place in the book, appearing in "The Wedding Cake," and Donaldson employs terza rima in "Above the River." But, above all, Donaldson's preferred form or poetic shape would undoubtedly have to be that of the unrhymed three-line stanza or tercet. This construction is the one employed most often throughout the collection. It is put to use in a number of ways including sequences of linked poems such as in "Annunciation." Indeed, even in his earlier work, that of *Once Out Of Nature*, Donaldson's preference for (and ability with) the form was noticeable enough to cause Cynthia Messenger to comment: "Donaldson's skill is most in evidence in his tercets, but we should not be fooled into thinking that he is striving for absolute symmetry, for although his lines are divided into units of three, they are often linked through enjambments that express sometimes uncomfortable connections between one phrase, one action, one line, and another" (114). This analysis by Messenger is also important when considering not just Donaldson's use of tercets, but also his relationship with formalist poetics as a whole—he seems, especially in the poetry of *Waterglass*, to use the resources of formalist poetics as

opposed to being, as cliched as it may sound, used by them. It is this dynamic that leads Messenger to conclude her commentary on Donaldson by 'hoping' that: "with the arrival of Jeffery Donaldson on the Canadian literary scene we may soon be seeing from other young poets a new kind of poetry—formal, allusive, intertextual, literate" (115). It would seem, from reading through the poems of *Waterglass* that, if nothing else, the poet has kept at the same sort of highly formalized work himself.

Donaldson's attention to and use of a sort of formalism in his work is easily identified when comparing successive versions of some of his poems. Two poems from his new book, the ones we have here, were also published earlier, in slightly different forms, in the Canadian literary journal *The Antigonish Review.* In *TAR* No. 110, (Summer, 1997), Donaldson published early versions of both "What Goes Without Saying" and "One For Safe Keeping." In the case of each of these poems, the journal version differs from the later book-including incarnation. I believe that these differences are both representative and the result of changes the poet made consciously while making a considered move even further into the realm of formalized poetry. While the differences between the two versions of "One For Safe Keeping" are not as major or extensive as those in "What Goes Without Saying," they are, nonetheless, significant.

In "One For Safe Keeping," both the book version and the earlier journal version use an arrangement of four quatrains as their overall shape or form. In this, Donaldson is embracing, in both cases, the formalized concept of set stanza length. The syllabic counts of the lines in this poem appear at first to be inconsequential, but, it is important to note that they do seem to stay somewhat true to a base of five syllables per line. This is certainly not open page poetry by any means—this poem cannot be mistaken for free verse. The two changes made to the poem, changes I suggest show Donaldson adjusting, or tweaking, his poetry to further accentuate a sort of formalism, involve the first and last stanzas. In the first stanza, line two is changed from its original "the red maple in the field" to the more simple "the maple in the field." This alteration, while slight, accomplishes two things. First, it changes the syllabic count of the line from seven to six: a count now closer to the seeming base of five syllables per line. It also simplifies the diction of the line and strips down the descriptive language—allowing, and resulting in, a more simply stated, elegant tone. The second version of the line, without

the additional syllable "red" also scans more smoothly, thereby accentuating the stately music of Donaldson's syntax. The second change is that of the choice of line breaks in the fourth and final stanza. From his initial decision to break the lines: "I could watch the last one chime / and shimmer with the rest" (7) after "chime," Donaldson moves to an earlier break after "last one." This re-writing of the poem does a couple of things. First, it ends the third line of the fourth stanza with the seemingly more appropriate concluding phrase "the last one," thereby heightening the effect of the language. The new line break also adds weight to the final line of the poem by altering the syllabic count of the fourth and final stanza from 6 6 7 6 to a more definitively end-weighted count of 6 6 6 7. The new line break functions, then, as a way in which to more fully end weight and conclude the piece.

It is perhaps also important to note what changes Donaldson did not make in editing this poem. In keeping with his formalist tendencies, the poet did nothing that would affect the use of rhyme in the second and fourth lines of each stanza. Thus, in both versions, Donaldson was sure to leave "sun" rhymed with "own," "off" with "duff," "unseen" with "green," and "was" with "rest."

In "What Goes Without Saying," Donaldson's changes from the initial journal version to the book version of the poem indicate, in this instance, an even more overt move towards a formalist poetics. Again, as was the case with "One For Safe Keeping," the initial shape of both versions of the poem is the same. In this case, that shape is of a poem with three partially-rhymed quatrains. Important to note as well in the case of this poem is the subtitle: "An Asphodel for Amy Clampitt." An asphodel is, of course, a mythical flower that was supposed to grow in Elysium. Thus, the inclusion of the term in the poem's subtitle is evidence of Donaldson's attempts to situate the poem in a very particular way. It works to establish the heightened, elegant tone that such a classical reference results in—a tone that is certainly a characteristic of some more formalist poetry. As with the earlier example, the changes made between versions of this piece concern the first and last stanzas. In the first stanza, the second line metamorphosizes from: "Leaf shade and gold are uncarpeted clear" (9), to the book's version: "A leaf-shade glosses the trail's goldenrod clear." The revision's move to a heightened vocabulary is evidenced by the use of words such as "glosses" and "goldenrod." This move to a more elaborate use of

vocabulary and language is further reinforced by the change made in line three of the same stanza. The journal version's line ends with the rather flat "saw," whereas the updated book version employs the more evocative and interesting term "glimpsed."

The change in the second line also has important implications in terms of the syllabic working of the poem. In the initial version, the stanzas are a closely-related grouping of syllabically measured lines. They run as follows: 10 10 10 10 /10 11 10 10 /10 9 10 10. However, as a result of changes made to both the first and third stanzas, the more recent version of the poem is an even more strictly syllabic entity, running: 10 11 10 10 /10 11 10 10 /10 10 11 10. Thus, through revisions of the poem, Donaldson has moved even further in the direction of strict adherence to some sort syllabic pattern or unity—an adherence that speaks to the ever-developing formal bent of his poetry.

In comparing the final stanzas of the two versions of "What Goes Without Saying," this inclination towards formalism becomes all the more apparent. The earlier, *Antigonish Review*, stanza reads as follows:

> When I look now for the wood you showed me,
> it is you, alone, are posied to find
> where you left them, the flown nuthatch, the dried
> hepatica in the nearer one's mind.
>
> (9)

Whereas the later, revised book version of the poem concludes in this manner:

> Now out of the blue, hepatica falls
> from between the leaves I pull down, look up
> one other name in the dark, what with no gloss
> on the flower, and the wood's a closed book.
>
> (41)

In looking at the page, one difference becomes immediately apparent: the second version's lines are more uniform in length and as a result seem more visually cohesive. These final lines of the second version are also, as mentioned before, more 'true' to the overall syllabic structure of the poem. In the *Antigonish Review* journal version

they run 10 9 10 10, but in the *Waterglass* version they are 10 10 11 10. This four-line stanza with three ten-syllable lines and one eleven-syllable line is consistent with the pattern established in the first two stanzas of the poem with only a minor alteration in terms of the placement of the eleven-syllable line. Syllabically then, the second version of the poem is certainly more rigidly structured.

As was the case earlier with the changes in the first stanza, these alterations also involve a move to a more elaborate or heightened diction and tone. The word "gloss" is repeated in line eleven, echoing its earlier use in the revised line two. Even the use of rhyme, evident in the second and fourth lines of each stanza in both versions, becomes, in the newer version, more elegant and complicated. The hard, obvious rhyme of "find" and "mind" is softened slightly, replaced in the revised version by an embedded rhyming of "look up" and "book." There is also the more subtle inclusion of rhyme in the first and third lines of the new stanza with "falls" gently playing off of "gloss." Thus, what we see in the transformation of these two poems, from their early incarnations to their later, book-included versions, is a move by the poet in the direction of a more pronounced formalist poetics.

While Donaldson is concerned in many ways with a formalist poetics, it is important to realize, as noted by Messenger in her commentary on his use of the tercet cited earlier, that the poet also moves freely in and around the structures he creates. In particular, Donaldson's ingenious uses of enjambment and line breaks provide evidence of this very poetic versatility and play. As well, Donaldson's play with traditional form shows his willingness to expand upon the possibilities of a more formal poetry. This play with traditional form is best evidenced by his work with the sestina in poems such as "The Occasion" and "Deep River, Ontario, Population 4,325." In "Deep River, Ontario, Population 4,325," the repetition of the end line words and rhyme is toyed with and brilliantly altered so that the aural qualities are echoed as the form dictates while at the same time allowing the poem to experiment with interesting word choice. As Messenger writes in a review of earlier work: "he is not so foolish as to take language for granted" (113). The result is a rhyming of "distil" with, in sequence: "Stille," "hostile," "stills," "still" and finally, "still." In effect, this distilling of the first stanza's language echoes the tone of the poem as it describes (or develops a dialogue with) a young boy found dead in a river. The choice of

words used in this sequence of rhyme seems chillingly appropriate. The poem begins with the poet announcing his intention to distil the poem's language and the rest of the piece works through this hinted at distillation, a distillation that mirrors the subject's journey in the poem. The victim in question moves gradually from the "forsaken Stille" to the "hostile" environment that allows his unfortunate end. The last three rhymes, with their successive uses of "stills," "still" and "still" serve as a sort of refrain that works almost as a haunting lament for the boy's loss. In this way, Donaldson tweaks the form of the sestina to his own poetic ends, and in doing so takes full advantage of a more formalized poetics in the process.

Enjambment is also important in Donaldson's work, as evidenced earlier in some of the changes he made in versions of poems as they progressed from journal to book publication. Just as the line break after "last one" in "One For Safe Keeping" serves to heighten the effect of the poem's language, many of Donaldson's line breaks are crafted to take full advantage of the potential of the vocabulary involved. For example, in "Annunciation," the final tercet contains the line break: "fills and then / empties back." This visual space between "then" and "empties" heightens the suspense, or sense of suspension, that is echoed in the meaning of the language itself.

This use of the line break to increase or supplement the impact of language in Donaldson's poetry is also at work in the poem "The Gift of a Waterclock," where there are instances of lines broken to just this poetic end. Donaldson chooses, in this instance, to break lines in the third stanza on the page as follows:

> and water; you took it as separate,
> distinct, raised it briefly to the level
> (5)

and:

> My German was too much like breaking off
> phrase-length sticks of wood.
> (5)

In both cases the line breaks again function to heighten or compliment the already evocative language in the poetry. In this way, Donaldson uses enjambment and line breaking techniques to open up his formalist poetic structures. The results of this dynamic rela-

tionship between formalist poetics and a finely-honed use of the line break are often quite interesting.

While Donaldson's various uses of the mechanics of a more formalist poetics are, in and of themselves intriguing and worthy of examination, especially to readers concerned with the mechanics of poetry such as other poets, it is also important to step back from the nuts and bolts of the writing and aesthetically and critically interrogate why the poet has chosen this particular poetic style and voice. The question in terms of Waterglass then becomes 'why a formalist poetics?' The answer lies in the poetry's content as much as anything else.

In Donaldson, and especially in the poetry of *Waterglass*, it seems the concern with formal structure, diction, tone, and rhetoric serves a very specific purpose. That purpose, most obviously, involves the subject matter of the poems themselves: what the poet has chosen to write about. Donaldson's poems are centred around, for the most part, versy ordinary everyday events and situations. His poems deal with the touristy concerns of two travellers in "The Gift of a Waterclock," as a gift of a watch "bought us three days more in town, / in the little Pension by Schonbrun" (7), as well as the sound of the wind against an old house in "Wind." Even a bathtub becomes the central concern and eventual point of departure at one point in the poem "Annunciation" as the reader is told at the start of section II that "The tub is useless now, won't keep the water / it was made to keep" (12). These examples are evidence of the seeming quotidian concerns of Donaldson's work. Much of his poetry chooses these everyday entities only to attack or approach them in such a way as to infuse them with a grandeur of sorts. In fact, what the poet undertakes for much of *Waterglass* is the discovery of the fantastic, amazing, or transcendent qualities and aspects of the everyday. This is where the formal tone, structure, diction and rhetoric play an important role. For Donaldson, a highly formalized poetic voice and structure provides access to, or a key for the unlocking of, the everyday events. It is through the use of rhyme and the tercet that Donaldson is able to raise the quotidian to the level of the near sublime. The stanzaic patterns and syllabic counts of the lines serve as a way to enhance the content of the poems. What the formalized characteristics of the poems in *Waterglass* do, in effect, is invoke the grace and gentility of the average, everyday objects and subjects the poet chooses to focus his attention on.

For example, in the highly-structured and finely-crafted elegance of the repeated tercets of "The Gift of a Waterclock," with their near-perfect adherence to a ten-syllable line count, we are presented with the tale of two travellers, who, through their interaction with an old Viennese woman, come to learn something about the nature of time and our appreciation of it as humans. By the end of the poem, even the notion of certainty in terms of time has been brought into question. The poem, as the tercets and their syllabic counts build on each other and gain associative strength in the process, gradually attains a sort of grandeur or highly-stylized beauty that then functions to raise the level of the poem's content so that its discussions of the more philosophical concerns involving time can be taken seriously. So by the time we reach the section of the poem that reads:

> My German was too much like breaking off
> phrase-length sticks of wood, ever to manage
> the fine vernacular of graciousness
> and high courtesy; I was old enough
> to know at twenty-one that the language
> of disavowal is the last to come . . .
>
> (5-6)

the combined effects of the tercets, the syllabically-measured lines, the highly-formalized and elegant language, the ingenious use of slant rhyme, as well as the rough iambic pentameter scansion of the verse have allowed us to seriously consider, and indeed believe, that the speaker has come to such pseudo-philosophical conclusions based solely on the situation at hand. The formalized nature of the poetry allows us as readers to believe that the speaker has actually considered "the fine vernacular of graciousness" and that he can now, through both his experience and the passage of time, as well as through this formalized poetic structure, comprehend that "the language / of disavowal is the last to come."

In the same way, the highly-stylized form of the villanelle, a form brilliantly handled by one of Donaldson's influences, Elizabeth Bishop, in "One Art," as well as the poet's play with it, raise a seemingly light piece written to take the place of a wedding cake (both symbolically and figuratively as it turns out) to another level. The poem becomes, rather than a simple funny piece on the cake, a more

in-depth and serious consideration, a sort of pseudo-philosophical discussion, on the nature of love and the appetites associated with it, as well as their interaction with memory. So, while the poem begins in witty fashion, playing on the cliché: "you can't have your cake and eat it too" in the first stanza: "If memory's food alone would ever do / to satisfy the appetites of love, / we'd simply eat our cake and have it too" (46), it gradually moves toward a deeper understanding of the complexities of the interaction of memory, love and appetite, using the refrain-like qualities of the villanelle to its advantage until the piece ends on a more serious note. The sombre tone of the end dampens the final play on the cliché, and the poem ends:

> Take this instead — upon our word — in lieu
> of the varnished crumb. Let its hunger give
> to the memory-feast alone its lasting due,
> and love will eat its cake. Have it too.
>
> (46)

Thus, for Donaldson, the embrace of a voice and aesthetic approach that is in many ways both much more formal, and indeed influenced by American formalists, than most of his contemporary Canadian counterparts, is important for both the external structure and shape it gives his work as well as the freedom of movement it allows within. The formalism that characterizes so much of the poetry in *Waterglass* is not a deferral to older poetic form or tradition, but rather a well thought-out set of techniques that function as a sort of lens through which Donaldson is able to view his quotidian subject matter; a magnifying glass that serves in many ways to heighten and intensify the initial experiences as well as what the reader can come to understand (or question) as result of interaction with them. It is this sort of invocation of the sublime qualities of the everyday that drives the editing and re-writing that characterize the development of many of his poems.

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