To Open the World to Another

In the common mind, poetry is regarded a form of expression that flows freely, unrestricted by formal properties in a way that allows for pure, emotive communication. However, very little about poetry is straightforward, and at the same time there nearly always exists at least some incarnation of formal structure within a piece. Formal properties make up the skeletal support of a piece of poetry, without which messages and thoughts could not be communicated. These same properties are often misinterpreted as being restrictive and oppressive to poetry, when in reality they do more to convey the true meaning of the piece than we realize. Rita Dove’s *Testimonial* is a piece that at first appears subdued by its structure, but upon closer inspection presents much to be appreciated.

The first thing to be noticed in *Testimonial* is the relative simplicity of the stanzas, all four lines each which are similar in length in the beginning. Syllables and stresses/slacks vary from line to line, though not wildly. The first two stanzas are concise, simple, and easy to digest, creating a rhythm that is easy to follow. This is altered in the third stanza, as the lines begin to last longer and vary more from one another in length. There is also a close to even divide between end-stopped lines and enjambments throughout. With a fairly steady meter, the lines before and after the central stanza flow in a manner that is almost songlike, regular and smooth.

The distribution of similar sounds lends itself to this gentle flow as well. As with before, it is the third stanza at which things begin to change. The first two possess no rhyme, but there is alliteration present. At the third stanza, we find our first rhyme between “gaze” and “sorbet”, the ends of the second and fourth lines respectively. Alliteration continues to be present, and a pronounced assonance surfaces that deepens the flowing quality of the lines, particularly the
fourth line, “swooned between spoonfuls of lemon sorbet”, providing a sleek slope into the following stanza.

Overall, the texture and movement of the lines greatly contribute to the serene attitude of the speaker, which I believe speaks to the meaning of the poem (insomuch as I have interpreted, at least). There has been discussion of this poem being representative of the memory of youth, and I can understand where support for that can be found. However, one line in particular completely changed the way I viewed the early imagery. That which we spent so much time lingering on for its technical qualities, the line “swooned between spoonfuls of lemon sorbet”, struck me as an odd commonplace occurrence to be dropped in the midst of all that existential imagery. It is also considerable that it is at a central position in the poem, marking it as a sort of anchor to the overall meaning. Going with my first instinct, the line immediately conjured an image of a pregnancy craving, both because I find lemon sorbet an odd treat and because “swooning” is something that can be attributed to morning sickness. It seemed a very deliberate way of grounding the reader in the “real world”.

I relate this to the surrounding imagery, which is at first quite abstract but still definitive of newness and inexperience, as the speaker relating the life within her to the early creation of mankind itself; as the world was new to us as a species, so the world would be new to an infant. I am particularly struck by the line directly preceding the “sorbet” bit, reading as “I caught my breath and called that life,“, which I find to mean that she called those early human experiences to her as she created a life herself. This is followed with the “pirouette and flourish/filigree and flame” comparisons, which as discussed before, are illustrative of strength, beauty, and an active life, all things that can be seen as representative of a successful modern woman. It should be noted that she speaks of possessing these qualities in the past tense, and there is the possibility that she has ceased to be as active and assertive now that she is going to be a
mother. While I might disagree with this transition on an ethical level, it is something that I have witnessed enough that it is quite possible.

However, she does not seem to mourn this transition. In the last stanza she speaks of luck and of hope:

*Back when everything was still to come,*

*luck leaked out everywhere.*

*I gave my promise to the world,*

*and the world followed me here.*

I find this optimistic; she is drawing on her past experiences of youth in a way that echoes the youth of the human species as speculated on earlier, and she seems pleased with the outcome of things. I understand how this interpretation can be disputed, but part of what makes poetry unique is the way it evokes feelings and thoughts that we would otherwise not have carried with us that day. These were the immediate images and feelings that this poem brought to me, and it is part of the reason I chose it for this paper.

Dove’s careful arrangement of images, the length of the lines, and her distribution of sounds have all crafted a gentle yet mesmerizing poem that speaks on an existential level that is grounded in the joy of everyday living. The lines are easy to follow, but their meaning complex, the way a parent speaks to a child, inviting them to explore the world in a safe, structured way. It is the way one human being testifies to another the wonder of the living world.