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Jay Curlin

*Ouachita Baptist University*, [curlinj@obu.edu](mailto:curlinj@obu.edu)

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**“The World Goes On”:  
Narrative Structure and the Sonnet  
In Vikram Seth’s *The Golden Gate***

**Jay Curlin**

It has now been almost ten years since the publication of Vikram Seth’s *The Golden Gate*, a decade in which we have seen a gradually increasing appreciation of such poetic movements as have been variously dubbed “New Formalism” or “Expansive Poetry” and in which such studies as Timothy Steele’s *Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt against Meter* have encouraged poets and readers alike to reconsider the virtues of traditional forms.<sup>1</sup> Yet despite what this recent interest may indicate about an ever so gradual change in taste, the reader of today cannot but be surprised, and considerably disoriented, when he opens *The Golden Gate*, on the jacket of which he has found Gore Vidal’s blurb describing the work as the “Great California Novel,” and finds instead a narrative poem in the tetrameter sonnets of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*. In *Missing Measures*, Timothy Steele has discussed what he calls “the triumph of the novel” (89) as a shift of importance from metrical fiction to prose fiction, a dichotomy that has been so firmly established in our own century that Seth’s description of his work as a “novel in verse” seems almost an oxymoron.<sup>2</sup> But almost equally bewildering to one new to *The Golden Gate* is what one would nonetheless ex-

pect of a novel set in California: a chaotic array of characters, episodes, and images that seems to be a convincing enough caricature but which hardly presents, at first appearance, a carefully structured narrative. While immersed in the dizzying action of an almost hopelessly complex plot, one sees merely a random series of mixed images and faces, as Seth shifts continually from crowded parties and bars, to nuclear-arms protests, to migrating whales. When one backs far enough away from the story, however, when one views the whole of Seth's world through, to use one of his favorite metaphors, a "wide-angle lens," one sees that Seth has actually brought to his comprehensive vision of life in the San Francisco area the type of order and precision that Dante gave to his far more encyclopedic *Commedia*. While Seth is hardly so ambitious as to attempt to describe all of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven with mathematical perfection, he manages on a much smaller scale a thing almost equally extraordinary: he presents us a novel that, while composed of sonnets, proves ultimately to be a single sonnet in itself.

If this striking fact is not immediately apparent to the reader, it is because Seth deliberately immerses one in a sea of images that reflect not only the comprehensiveness of his scope but the disconnectedness of a society very much in need of cohesion. Representing a melting pot of ethnic groups and religions, the motley cast of characters contains, just to name a few, a computer engineer, an artist, a lawyer, an activist, a priest, a physician, a viola player, a professor, and a winemaker, in addition to assorted children and cats. The relationships connecting these characters alternate between love and hatred, between Platonic and Romantic, between homo- and heterosexual. On a variety of shifting stages, we go from the "throttled yelp" of the Liquid Sheep in concert, to espresso cafes and singles bars. In one chapter, we

harvest and pickle olives; in another, we prune vines and bottle wine. We move from the domestic violence of a cat's hatred for his master's lover to the passive resistance of a demonstration against nuclear arms.

Nor is the coherence of this society any more apparent to the central character. A twenty-six-year-old computer engineer working in the Defense industry, John distracts himself from his loneliness by thinking of "or-gates and of and-gates, / Of ROMs, of nor-gates, and of nand-gates, / Of nanoseconds, megabytes, / And bits and nibbles" (1.2). He seeks comfort in a bedtime reading of a wild variety of titles: "*Life's Little Ironies* by Hardy, / The gloomier sermons of John Donne, / *The Zibaldone* of Leopardi, / *The Queen of Spades*" (1.19). On Route 101 each morning, John is endlessly distracted by the babble of morning disc jockeys and the images of billboards and bumper stickers:

"Honk for Jesus." "I  
Swerve to run over little creatures."  
"The President is a lesbian spy."  
"Nuke the nukes," "Fan of David Bowie"  
Or "Here today—and gone to Maui,"  
"I ♣ winos," "I ♥ L.A."  
Or "Have you hugged your whale today?" (2.12)

When John relates his woes to his friend and former lover Janet Hayakawa, she suggests that he needs a lover and recommends that he find one through the classified ads, a "venue" John describes as a "meat market" of "Goats and monkeys, bears, bulls, bidders, / Buyers" (1.34). When Janet ignores this objection and places an advertisement for him, John's suspicion is confirmed by an "avalanche" of letters largely pornographic: "The half-enticing, subtly vicious / Burblings of Belle from Burlingame, / And

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then from Eve of San Francisco, / 'Six novel ways of using Crisco,' / Or the Tigress of Tiburon / Who waits to pounce on hapless John" (2.17).

After John complains to Janet, "The zoom lens of my zest is blurred. / The drama of my life's absurd" (1.23), she suggests that he needs to "choose a richer lens to see with" and urges him to "Reach for a vision more complete. / Trade in that zoom for a wide angle" (1.24), advice which the reader must follow as well if he is to make sense of the complex tapestry of Seth's novel. Though it is hardly apparent at first glance, Seth has given us that "wide angle" in the Onegin sonnet that forms the tables of contents for his novel:

1. The world's discussed while friends are eating.
  2. A cache of billets-doux arrive.
  3. A concert generates a meeting.
  4. A house is warmed. Sheep come alive.
  5. Olives are plucked in prime condition.
  6. A cat reacts to competition.
  7. Arrests occur. A speech is made.
  8. Coffee is drunk, and Scrabble played.
  9. A quarrel is initiated.
  10. Vines rest in early winter light.
  11. The Winking Owl fills up by night.
  12. An old affair is renovated.
  13. Friends meditate on friends who've gone.
- The months go by; the world goes on.

Initially, so fragmented a series of descriptions is hardly helpful, seems, in fact, to render all the more graphic the seeming disorder of Seth's narrative. The rapid tetrameter of the Onegin sonnet, which Seth describes in one of his few narrative digressions as "this marvelous swift meter" (5.4), makes this illusion of frag-

mentation all the more complete, for the brevity of the line requires a paratactic syntax that compels the reader to find connections between seemingly uncoordinated images and ideas. Nor, of course, does it afford the novelist much room for development. Conversations, speeches, descriptions are all necessarily abbreviated and compressed within the narrow confines of both the tetrameter line and individual stanza, making for a fast-paced but necessarily fragmented narration.

But if one approaches this thumbnail synopsis of the novel's plot as a *sonnet*, as a structure with clear stanzaic divisions, an otherwise disconnected series of scenes begins to display a clear pattern. If Seth means to suggest that his plot conforms to the structure of an Onegin sonnet, he is saying, to begin with, that the reader should be able to find four connected but distinct sections in the narrative; for Pushkin's unique form is, like the English sonnet, a combination of three quatrains and a couplet. Unlike the English version, however, Pushkin's sonnet, in addition to being in tetrameter, employs a rhyme scheme that links the alternating ABAB quatrain of the English sonnet with the ABBA quatrain of an Italian octave. Between the two is a single quatrain of combined couplets, so that the final scheme of the Onegin sonnet is as follows: ABAB CCDD EFFE GG. Secondly, since each strophe within the Onegin sonnet is unique, one would also expect to find different types of correspondences between the individual chapters of each of the four sections. For example, in the couplet quatrain of section two, one would hope to find parallels established between the pairs of chapters making up each "couplet." Thirdly, one would have to consider if the development of the narrative led to the traditional "volta" of a sonnet, that dramatic turn in thought one expects to find between the octave and sestet of an Italian sonnet and at the couplet of an English sonnet. With the varied rhyme

scheme of the Onegin strophes, one often finds slight shifts in thought with the transition to each new quatrain, but the most frequent position for a strong volta is still at line thirteen, as one moves from the series of quatrains to an epigrammatic couplet. If *The Golden Gate* could be said to have a "volta," then, one would expect to find it in the thirteenth chapter.

To ask of a novelist such ingenuity, such intentional structural complexity, would ordinarily, I admit, be outrageous and, perhaps, perverse; but I believe the evidence indicates that these are, indeed, the very concerns that have gone into the structure of Seth's narrative. As the central metaphor of the Golden Gate Bridge carries Seth's message of the need to "link shore to shore" (9.28), to bring both nations and individuals together, the sonnet structure of the narrative indicates a pattern of connections and separations in a world of seasonal change and renewal, a rhythm of life by which the world goes on even in the face of death and the potential of global annihilation. The novel begins and ends with a man alone, but the pattern of relationships it has taken him through leaves both him and the audience with the assurance that the future is hardly without hope. Indeed, rather than concluding the novel with a fourteenth chapter, and thus corresponding exactly with the length of the sonnet, Seth concludes with a lengthy thirteenth chapter, as if to remind us that the story is not, in fact, complete, that a story of the cycle of life and seasonal change can never really end.<sup>3</sup>

The temporal structure of the narrative is underscored by both beginning and ending in the month of September, though the time period of the novel spans two years. We come to the end of the first year very close to half way through the novel, in the 267th of 590 sonnets. In this sonnet, we find the first statement of the refrain with which the second year, and the novel, will

close: "The world, for all its grief and grame, / Goes onward very much the same" (6.34). This sonnet also marks the first anniversary of the despair with which John Brown's story begins, a state in which we now find Janet Hayakawa, the friend who has comforted him the year before. Though John has initially resented Janet's having taken out a classified advertisement on his behalf, the method has proved successful; for he is now happily involved with Liz Dorati, one of the eighty-nine women who responded to the advertisement. A year later, however, when Janet finds herself in similar need of consolation and advice and calls to request her friend's company, John responds that he is presently busy with other commitments and promises merely that he will give her a call when he can find the time. The following September, the novel closes with John once again alone and very much missing Janet, who has been killed in a car accident. While two years have passed, we leave John as we have found him, though he is reaching for the telephone to begin the cycle anew.

But the narrative is structured far more on patterns of relationships than on the progress of time. Seth centers his novel around the lives of five people, all very much alone and searching for companionship. John Brown and Janet Hayakawa are former lovers and current friends, and Phil Weiss is John's old college roommate from Berkeley and former coworker. Both John and Phil are computer wizards whose skills have been employed in the Defense industry to manufacture better bombs, a position which Phil has left to campaign for nuclear disarmament. When Janet advertises John as a "*Young handsome yuppie, 26, / Straight, forward, sociable, but lonely*" (2.3), the avalanche of responses leads to the eventual introduction of the attorney Liz Dorati, who has responded to the advertisement, and her brother Ed. In the first four chapters, the English quatrain of the Onegin



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structure of the narrative, Seth brings these five characters together. The first chapter is devoted to the lonely John and his conversation with Janet; the second describes Janet's machinations and introduces Liz; the third flashes to Phil and Paul Weiss, a father and son grieving over a wife and mother who has abandoned them, and closes with John and Liz meeting Phil at a concert and inviting him to their house warming; and the fourth describes the party celebrating John and Liz's moving in together, where Phil is introduced to her brother Ed, with whom he falls into an immediate affair. This first "quatrain" of the novel, then, begins with loneliness and ends with romance. By the end of the fourth chapter, four of the five characters are romantically involved, John with Liz and Phil with Ed.

As the novel moves from this opening English quatrain to the quatrain of couplets, Seth makes the division all the more apparent by allowing his narrator his first extended digression, a monologue on the purpose of the very form his narrative mirrors. After a brief discussion of his fondness for tetrameter and the debt he owes Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, the narrator focuses on the relationship of Phil and Ed, and we immediately find that a definite turn has occurred between the first and second quatrains of the novel. While the first has developed the union of the two romantic pairs, the second immediately reveals the problems of relationships based chiefly on physical attraction. Phil, a non-practicing Jew, learns that Ed Dorati is a devout Catholic who cannot reconcile his homosexuality with his faith. Since this section of the novel mirrors the couplet quatrain of the *Onegin* sonnet, we expect the following chapter to correspond closely in matter with Chapter 5, and we indeed find Chapter 6 devoted to the problems between the other couple. Here, though John finds Liz "dynamite in bed," he cannot tolerate her cat Charlemagne,

an animal determined to expel the intruder from his master's bed, and Liz begins to grow weary of John's intolerance of virtually any taste or opinion he does not share. The first couplet of the second quatrain, then, pairs the troubles eroding the two relationships.

The second couplet begins, as with the first, with a monologue from the narrator, this time a pessimistic disquisition on what will be the focus of the chapter, the arms race. Directly in the center of his narrative sonnet, Seth has placed the scene that appears most incongruous in its relation to the rest of the plot, for the demonstration against nuclear arms that makes up Chapter 7 chiefly focuses upon the speech of the minor character Father O'Hare and the actions of his fellow protesters, who have staged a demonstration at the ominously named Lungless Labs. And yet, in many respects, the chapter is the most essential of the thirteen. Throughout the novel, Seth's recurrent theme is the hope one finds in the fact that "the world goes on"; but the stirring speeches of Chapter 7, including the narrative monologue with which the chapter begins, remind one that the arms race has created a situation in which one can no longer be sure of the world's permanence. It is here that we find the strongest indictments against the "Irradiated beast" known as man (7.3) and the most urgent calls for unity among disparate groups

Catholic and Episcopalian,  
Lutheran, Baptist, Methodist,  
Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, atheist,  
We are all here; no one is alien  
Now radiation's common laws  
Impel us into common cause. (7.22)

Yet the demonstration also serves as the backdrop to the first pri-

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vate meeting of Phil and Liz, who begin to learn that they have much in common.

The second couplet concludes with what seems, at first, a radically dissimilar scene, as the narrative shifts from the public protests and arrests before a laboratory to the privacy of Phil's home over a week later, where Phil drinks coffee and plays scrabble with Ed. But if the first couplet of the quatrain compares the similarities between troubled relationships, the second draws its comparison by contrast, though not in the way that the table of contents would appear to suggest. Rather than contrasting the noise and violence of a public protest with the quiet domesticity of a scrabble game, Seth wittily shows the home to be the far more dangerous place. Though Ed and Phil begin with a friendly game of scrabble, their conversation over the game and Ed's request that the physical side of their relationship end leads to the actual scrabble of a fist fight and their subsequent separation. The protest at Lungless Labs, in contrast, is the scene of passive resistance and the bonding of those united in a common cause. Protesters are dragged singing to yellow school buses, in which they sing, "Give Peace a Chance" as they are driven to jail. If the first quatrain, then, has been devoted to the coupling of mates physically attracted to one another, the second shows the incompatibility that leads to their dissolution. By the end of the second quatrain, only John and Liz, of the two couples, are still living together; and it appears that their days are numbered.

It is no surprise, then, that the final quatrain rearranges the five characters into more enduring pairs. In this, the "Italian" quatrain of Seth's structure, one looks for correspondences between the ninth and twelfth chapters and between the tenth and eleventh, a pattern mirroring the ABBA rhyme scheme of the quatrain. Here, the correspondence is again one of contrast, as the

separation of one pair of friends is counterpoised by the union of another. In Chapter 9, Phil's revelation to a surprised and disgusted John of his now defunct relationship with Ed leads to an angry exchange of words and the end of a friendship that began in college, a separation offset in Chapter 12 by John's reunion with his former lover Janet. In Chapter 10, the first line of the couplet of the Italian quatrain, the relationship between John and Liz ends when John finds a letter from Phil to Liz and immediately assumes that she has been unfaithful to him, while Chapter 11 finds Liz uniting with and quickly marrying Phil, for whom she has no romantic feelings but with whom she knows herself to be far more compatible. By the end of the final quatrain, there are again two couples from the original five characters, with Janet replacing Ed in the equation. As with the English quatrain with which the novel has begun, the Italian quatrain closes with yet another party, this time at Janet's house, at which Janet hopes that John will agree to be reconciled with Phil and Liz. But as the house begins to fill with guests and Janet is late for her own party, John does his best to avoid any contact with his former friend and lover. As the tension builds between the former friends, the telephone rings, and the quatrain closes in a room suddenly still, as John gasps into the telephone "Three words that gradually sink in / As he repeats them: 'Next of Kin?'" (12.36).

The surprising death of Janet in a car accident, along with Phil's friends Matt and Joan Lamont, certainly represents the dramatic "volta" of this narrative sonnet, and it issues in the final chapter that serves as Seth's closing couplet in his table of contents. As this final section begins, we find that a month has passed since the party, bringing the time of the novel to almost the second anniversary of its beginning. In this final couplet, we find another series of parallels, indicating both endings and begin-

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nings. The two most stable families in the novel, the Lamonts and Liz's parents Mike and Marie Dorati, are suddenly dissolved in the tragic accident and the loss of Liz's mother to cancer. Before Mrs. Dorati dies, however, Liz gives birth to a son, whom she and Phil name "John" in honor of the friend who still refuses to speak to them. They also adopt the Lamonts' son Chuck, the only survivor of the accident, and Janet's cats Cuff and Link. As two families disappear, therefore, another is born containing elements of both. Phil, a lonely bachelor with a single son the year before, suddenly finds himself in a home with a wife, three sons, and three cats. John, however, is once again alone and grieving over Janet, the novel closing with him sitting in his empty house at her desk and crying over a note he has just received from Liz:

*It says, Dear John, We have a son.  
We hope that you'll be his godfather.  
We've called him John. We would far rather  
Have you than any other friend.  
Please speak to us, John. In the end,  
We'll all be old or dead or dying.  
My mother died two weeks ago.  
We thought perhaps you might not know. (13.51)*

As the voice of Janet seems to speak to him, urging him to follow the dictates of his heart and pick up the telephone, the novel closes.

Vikram Seth has done more than simply tell a modern story in a sequence of 590 sonnets, and more than pour into the new bottle of the modern novel the old wine of formal verse. He has shown how the narrative genre of the novel can achieve the complex structure and beauty of a lyric poem. If we approach the novel as an extended Onegin sonnet, we find that Seth has actu-

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ally brought something like the following extraordinary order to the seeming formlessness of his characters' lives:

<b>I. ENGLISH—Union</b>	John and Janet Liz Phil John and Liz, Phil and Ed	The world's discussed while friends are eating. A cache of billets-doux arrive. A concert generates a meeting. A house is warmed. Sheep come alive.
<b>II. COUPLETS—DISCORD</b>	Phil and Ed John and Liz	Olives are plucked in prime condition. A cat reacts to competition.
<i>Peace</i>	Phil and Liz	Arrests occur. A speech is made.
<i>Violence</i>	Phil and Ed	Coffee is drunk, and Scrabble played.
<b>III. ITALIAN—Separation</b>	Phil and John John and Liz	A quarrel is initiated. Vines rest in early winter light.
<i>Union</i>	Phil and Liz John and Janet	The Winking Owl fills up by night. An old affair is renovated
<b>IV. CLOSING COUPLET—Endings and Beginnings</b>		Friends meditate on friends who've gone. The months go by; the world goes on.

Of course, the one potential flaw in this structure is the fact that there are but thirteen chapters; as I have suggested above, however, I suspect this was no less intentional on Seth's part. To have "concluded" the sonnet with a fourteenth chapter would have been to suggest that there can be an ending in such a cyclical vision of life as Seth has presented us. Moreover, such structural perfection would have belied the simple reality of the story. In a perfect world, Janet would not have died, and John would not have been, as a consequence, left incomplete himself. In the view of life that Seth has given us, there can really be no closure, not even in death, which is so intimately associated with birth that it merely serves to remind one of new beginnings, of the endless renewal by which "the world goes on."

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Seth dedicated *The Golden Gate* to Steele, indicating that Steele was not only a key editor of earlier drafts but the source of influence with which he must credit anything particularly engaging about the work. Four years later, Steele, in turn, gave special acknowledgment to Seth upon the publication of his *Missing Measures*, a friend “whose interest in the project and whose good-natured prodding kept the author going when otherwise he might have dropped by the way” (ix).

<sup>2</sup> In one of his infrequent narrative digressions, Seth confesses that “Professor, publisher, and critic,” whom he sardonically describes as the “Gods of Taste,” have expressed doubts in so dubious a venture as a verse novel in a modern age (5.2). In the fifth chapter of the novel, Seth describes for us a party at a publishing house, where an editor anxiously asks him about his current project. When Seth begins to say that he is writing a novel, the editor interrupts with an enthusiastic “Great!” But when Seth adds “In verse,” the editor turns yellow: “‘How marvelously quaint,’ he said, / And subsequently cut me dead” (5.1).

<sup>3</sup> Seth has also suggested, in the dedicatory sonnet to Steele, that the thirteen chapters mirror the thirteen months in which the novel has been composed: “Labor that has exhausted me / Through thirteen months, swift and delightful,” a period roughly half of that covered in the novel.

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