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DAVID MALCOLM

**“IT IS AMERICA I CAN’T CONTAIN”:  
POETRY AND IDENTITY IN ANNE STEVENSON’S  
*CORRESPONDENCES***

**Abstract**

*Correspondences* has a particularly important place in the work of the Anglo-American poet Anne Stevenson. Subtitled “A Family History in Letters,” the text gathers together a variety of documents (not just letters) to tell the history of the Chandler-Boyd family of Vermont from the early nineteenth century through the 1970s. Stevenson sees the poem as an attempt to come to terms with an American identity and an American history. This essay offers a phonosemantic analysis of three passages from *Correspondences*, and indicates that while rhythmic, phonological, and syntactic order is hinted at, this is always undermined and denied. Thus, American identity is seen as disrupted and disjunctive. Rhythmic, phonological, and syntactic features are reinforced by enjambment, genre polymorphism, lack of textual cohesion, and fragmentariness of documentation.

**Key words**

*Anne Stevenson; Anglo-American poetry; U.S. identity; phonosemantic analysis*

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Born in 1933, Anne Stevenson is a U.S.-British poet who has produced a very substantial body of work over the last fifty years.<sup>1</sup> Her *Poems 1955-2005*, published by Bloodaxe in 2005, runs to some 400 pages. Stevenson’s reception has been very positive, although she is probably not as well known as she should be either in the United Kingdom or in North America. For example, reviewing *Poems 1955-2005*, Bruce Bawr writes in the *Hudson Review* that the volume contains “a surprisingly high percentage of moving and memorable verses” (Bawr 2006: 147). Writing of Stevenson’s work in *Poetry Wales*, Sarah Corbett declares: “Here is poetry of clarity and beautifully framed insight, a reliable, if questioning

intelligence” (Corbett 2001: 70). Earlier the distinguished poet and critic Peter Levi declares: “I have greatly admired Anne Stevenson’s poems for twenty years because of her competence and strength and her personal projection.” “But,” he asks “where are the trumpets and acclamations that she deserves? I have not heard them.” Levi continues: “She is one of the greatest women artists in the country [Britain], and I cannot help thinking that if she had been a man she might have been sooner recognized” (Levi 1987: 38).

*Correspondences: A Family History in Letters* (1974) has a special place in Stevenson’s oeuvre. In *Poetry* in 2006, D.H. Tracy describes it as “Stevenson’s jewel” (Tracy 2006: 170). Levi is less convinced, but still applauds. “The most dazzling of her poems [*Correspondences*] is the least convincing because it is a fiction, but it has a cumulative power, and patches of extraordinary brilliance” (Levi 1987: 38). *Correspondences* is a history of the Chandler-Boyd family from Vermont. In letters and other relevant documents, the poem (or the ensemble of poems and documents in prose) presents the experiences of several members of the family from the 1820s through the 1970s. The collection of texts is framed by the death in 1968 of Ruth Chandler Boyd, wife of Professor Neil Arbeiter, mother of a young man, Nick, and two women, Eden Ann, the elder, and Kay, who has fled America for exile in London. The frame contains a report of her death and her husband’s son’s, and daughters’ responses to that death. *Correspondences* contains the utterances, in various forms, of a wide range of family members, from Adam Ezekiel Chandler, Calvinist minister, in the 1820s, to Nick Arbeiter, rebellious son of Ruth Chandler Boyd, in 1968. It presents a host of figures from 150 years of U.S. and family history, and especially worthy of note is its focus on women’s voices. For example, Part II is entitled “Women in Marriage 1930-1968,” and offers the voices of Ruth and her English lover, Kay, under her earlier name of Katherine, and her former husband’s lover, Mrs. Lilliam Culick. The poem ends with Kay’s refusing both her sister’s and her father’s invitations to return to America, and insisting that she will stay in London.

In 1979, Stevenson commented of *Correspondences* that “It was a book I couldn’t avoid,” and that it is “about more than women’s predicament in American history” (Stevenson 1979: 167, 170). In 1996, she remarked: “In *Correspondences* I set forth the drama of my own (and some of America’s) contradictions” (Stevenson 1996: 1079). She concludes her comments on *Correspondences* in 1979 with a resounding “I’m proud of it” (Stevenson 1979: 175).

Thus, Stevenson understands *Correspondences* as both a personal poem, and one with a wider purview. It is, for the author, an attempt to come to terms with U.S. history, society, and culture. We should note that she does so in terms of contradictions. Contradiction is apparent in the collection’s title: very often voices do not correspond with each other. The reader has either only one side of the correspondence, or it is evident that there has been no real exchange of views, but rather unreconciled confrontation of perspectives. For example, Ethan Amos Boyd’s letter to God, Ruth Arbeiter’s letter to her English lover, Mrs. Culick’s letter to Dr. Frank Chattle, and Professor Arbeiter’s letter to his dead wife have

no answers. Indeed, contradictions run throughout the entire text: order clashes with disorder, completeness with elision, genre with genre, and discourse with discourse. Men’s voices and women’s voices clash insistently; hegemonic male *mentalité* is queried by female dissent. *Correspondences* is an examination and dissection of *an* American identity, and *some* aspects of the U.S.A. It looks at one family from a particular social, cultural, and regional background. But the text does present itself as addressing not just a specific family, but a specific American family, that is seen as representative of at least part of the American manifold complexity.

I wish to start with an examination of poetic substance and technique. Should this require justification – which I hope it does not – then Stevenson’s own words may serve as such. In 2007, she wrote, in an essay in *Poetry*, of the importance of the phonological and, in consequence, phonosemantic aspects of her work.

Although I rarely write in set forms now, poems still come to me as tunes in the head. Words fall into rhythms before they make sense. It often happens that I discover what a poem is about through a process of what its rhythms are telling me. (Stevenson 2007: 485)

Let us start with the last lines, a discrete and obviously conclusive passage, of the last poem in *Correspondences*, the “Epilogue: Kay Boyd to her father, Professor Arbeiter.” The letter is dated “July 5, 1972,” thus the day following the U.S. Independence Day holiday, and it is sent from an address in North London.

It is a poem I can’t continue.  
It is America I can’t contain.

Dear Father, I love but can’t know you.  
I’ve given you all I can.  
Can these pages make amends for what was not said?  
Do justice to the living, to the dead?

The six lines of this excerpt show no clear phonological or rhythmic patterning. The number of syllables per line varies from 9 to 12. The number of main stresses per line also varies substantially: four lines of the passage (1, 2, 4, and 6) have 3 main stresses; line 3 has from 4 to 5 (according to whether “Dear” receives a full stress); and line 5 can receive from 4 to 6 main stresses (depending on whether one stresses “these” and “what”). The very inconclusiveness of the stressing of these two lines (3 and 5) contributes to a sense of disorder.

There is, however, noticeable phonological patterning in this passage: the /k/ sounds of lines 1-2, which are carried forward into lines 3 and 4; the /n/ sounds in lines 2-5; and the /d/ and /t/ sounds of line 6. One should also notice that lines 5 and 6 rhyme, and that the rhyming sound is reflected in the central vowel sound in “amends.” There are no rhymes in the other lines however. Further patterning

is apparent in the syntactic parallelism of lines 1 and 2 (“It is . . . I can’t . . .”) and of line 6 (“to the living, to the dead”). Rhythmic patterning is weak. One can break these six lines into 22 feet (although there are other possible divisions). Of these feet, 9 are iambs. Line 5 is complex in this respect: “make amends” is an iamb; “for what was not” can certainly be read as a diamb; the first four syllables of the line can be scanned as an iamb followed by a trochee. This scansion makes sense, but is not the only possibility. (The inconclusiveness of any scansion is itself significant, and not a mark of incompetence on the part of poet or reader. If a line is unresolved, that surely bears meaning, and here suggests a disorder, a hesitation.) Thus, less than half the feet in these lines are iambic. The remainder can be designated thus: 4 amphibrachs (x / x), 3 paeons of varying kinds, 2 trochees, and 1 anapaest. Notable are one empty foot (“It is”) and 2 single stressed feet (the semantically loaded “all” in line 4, and “said” in line 5).

Thus, in this key passage (a summation, a conclusion, a farewell) no clear rhythmic or phonological pattern is observable although there are hints at order, gestures in the direction of regularity. The number of syllables per line and main stresses per line vary considerably. There is evidence of phonological orchestration, and this is prominent in lines 1-2, but there is only one rhyme in the passage. There is some syntactic parallelism, at the beginning and end of the passage. In terms of rhythm, the poem hints strongly at an iambic substrate, but moves away from this constantly. The last line is representative of this movement. Its 10 syllables invite an iambic pentameter scansion, which is possible although it would involve stressing prepositions (which, in my view, is only permissible under certain limited circumstances). It seems more reasonable to read the line as an amphibrach, followed by a third paeon, followed by an anapaest: x / x | x x / x | x x /. Here there are hints at the iambic: the last foot ends in a stressed syllable. There are hints at a further order: an anapaest is, one might say, a third paeon waiting to happen (but, of course, it does not). There is a gesture toward order, but order is denied and undermined.

A second passage shows similar features. It is taken from Part 1, “In the Hand of the Lord, 1829-1929,” and is entitled “A family blunder: Elizabeth Chandler Boyle writes to her brother Reuben on the occasion of his engagement to a Southerner.” It is dated and headed “September 25, 1838/Clearfield, Vermont.”

In truth, beloved brother,  
     this news of your “heart’s arrangement”  
         martyrs the best affections of my own.

Engaged!  
     And to a Southerner!  
         And how, pray, tell father?

If only you could see him . . . all but  
     nailed to *The Emancipator*,  
         racked by the Judas-justice of this land!

Four of our “midnight Quakers”  
 passed amongst us in a month  
 and with precious, brave Marie so near her time,  
  
 the burden as usual,  
 devolved absolutely on me!  
 I suppose there must be some good Southerners.

Pattern is immediately apparent in this part of the poem. It consists of three-line stanzas, laid out in a downward-leading step shape. All 24 stanzas of the letter are printed thus. However the length of line varies considerably. For example, the first line in the second stanza is “Engaged!” and contains only 2 syllables, while the first line of the next stanza, “If only you could see him . . . all but” contains 9. This is the case throughout this part of the poem. The only pattern observable is that the third line of each stanza is generally longer than the previous two (although this is not always the case). The number of main stresses per line is also unpatterned. Thus, in the second stanza, the first line has 1 main stress, the second line has 2, and the third line has 4. It continues this way throughout the section.

Scansion reveals that there is an iambic substrate or skeleton to the part. The chosen extract can be divided into 44 feet. Of these 10 can be classed as iambs, but there are also 7 amphibrachs, 6 trochees (including one ditrochee (“Judas-justice” in line 9)), and 5 anapaests. Indeed, “absolutely” (line 14) can possibly be scanned as a ditrochee too, although it is probably more sensible to see it as a third paeon, there being, in fact, four other paeons in the extract – “(to) a Southerner” (l. 5), “you could see him” (l. 7), “of our midnight” (l. 10), and “and with precious” (l. 12). The phrase “to a Southerner” (l. 5) can be read as a five-syllable foot (an unusual length of foot in traditional scansion), and “to *The Emancipator*” (l. 8) is an even more unusual, even monstrous, foot of 7 syllables. Therefore, rhythm demonstrates no regularity at all. Iambs make up only less than a quarter of the feet in this extract; other feet make up substantial numbers. There is no prevailing meter. Any hint at order in the extract (and the part as a whole) – the visually echoing three-line stanzas, an iambic underpinning – is denied through varying numbers of syllables and main stresses per line, and a lack of any rhythmic patterning.

The final passage I wish to consider is taken from one of the most moving parts of the poem, Ruth Arbeiter’s letter to her English lover – “A Love Letter: Ruth Arbeiter to Major Paul Maxwell/September 3, 1945/Clearfield, Vermont.” The first verse paragraph is as follows:

Dearest,  
  
 You must know that I think of you continually,  
 often entering unexpectedly  
 that brighter isolate planet where we two live.

Which resembles this earth – its air,  
 grass, houses, beds, laundry, things to eat –  
 except that it is articulate,  
 the accessory, understanding, speaking of  
 where we are born and love and  
 move together continually.

Once again, this passage gestures toward some kind of order and yet denies that gesture simultaneously. The number of syllables per line varies from 7 to 12. The number of main stresses per line, however, does show a marked regularity. All lines have either 3 or 6 main stresses. This is even the case with the first two lines, “Dearest, / You must know that I think of you continually.” The first line contains 1 main stress, and the next 5, but it is legitimate to read these two lines as one unit, thus giving 6 main stresses. Lines 3 and 5 also have 6 main stresses, and the remainder has 3. Line 8 might be read as having 4 main stresses, depending on how one reads the phrase “we are born.” It could be scanned as an anapaest (x x /), but it would also be legitimate to see it as a bacchius (/ x /), and, of course, the point is that the phrase hovers between the two possibilities. But deviation from the 3/6 pattern is minor, if it exists at all.

In this excerpt, a further degree of patterning is observable. There is local phonological ordering. For example, in lines 5 and 6 /s/ and /z/ sounds recur. The sound /t/ recurs in lines 3, 6, and 8. There is no thorough sound orchestration in this paragraph, however. A degree of (important) lexical repetition can be seen. “Continually” is repeated in the semantically loaded positions at the end of lines 1 and 9. There is also syntactic parallelism: the list of lines 4-5, and the homoeoteleuthon (“understanding,” “speaking”) in line 7. Nonetheless, if we scan the chosen passage, the only pattern observable is that there is no pattern. The 33 feet in my scansion are very varied: 5 are iambs, 6 are trochees, and 4 are paeons. There are 5 single syllable feet (most appropriate to a poem about absence): “live” (l. 3), “grass” and “beds” (l. 5), “where” (l. 8), and “move” (l. 9).<sup>2</sup> Thus, again, what can be noted in this excerpt is consistent with the observations made about the two other extracts: order is insinuated, and order is clouded.

At this point, one can briefly point to two letters/texts in the poem in which there is a much greater degree of ordering and cohesion than elsewhere. These are, surprisingly, two sections from the latter parts of *Correspondences*: “Mrs. Lillian Culick, divorcée, to Dr. Frank Chattle” (May 21, 1954), and poem VII of the text “Nick Arbeiter writes poems on the road” (July-August 1968). Both parts, written by a woman under treatment for psychological disturbance and a rebellious young man (in 1968 too!), show, despite huge fracturing disorders (especially radical enjambment), a tendency to a kind of order. One should note the half rhymes of Mrs. Culick’s lines. In the last four lines of the first paragraph, one can note: “through”/“not to,” and “discuss”/“confess.” In the second paragraph, “swear” and “never” chime. In the sixth paragraph, “you” is repeated at line end four times, and rhymes with “do” in the third line. The end words “dolphins” and

“skin” nearly rhyme in the seventh paragraph, as do “drop in” and “prescription” in the eighth. The word “guilt” is repeated at line end in the ninth paragraph, and in the tenth, “agony,” “angry” and “lonely” are close to being rhymes. Nick Arbetter in the seventh section of his poems produces verse with much Whitmanesque and Ginsburgesque syntactic parallelism and repetition, with (unlike the verse of his models) a tendency to drift toward weak rhymes. Note in the first paragraph of VII the recurrent “We accuse you” and the structure “of + gerund.” Notice, too, the semi-rhymes of “lies” and “Compromise,” “fuel” and “rule,” “massacre” and “wire” and “are,” and “savage” and “mirage.” Only the mad and the dissident seem to get it together in Stevenson’s America.

My argument so far has been to point to the radical disorderliness, combined with suggestions of order, at a local level in *Correspondences*. At a global level, we find many features of the text pointing in a similar disordered direction. This can be observed on the level of device (enjambment), genre, textual coherence, and fragmentariness of documentation.

Enjambment is rife throughout *Correspondences*. Its presence has been noted in the earlier stages of this essay, but it occurs virtually *passim*. Its presence is especially powerful as Stevenson is writing a type of free verse, in which line endings are at the author’s discretion much more than in fixed forms. For example, in the excerpts analyzed already, we can see radical enjambment in “A family blunder” in lines 7-8: If only you could see him . . . all but / nailed to *The Emancipator*.” Another example, from “A Love Letter” is again in lines 7-9: “the accessory, understanding, speaking of / where we are born and love and / move together continually.” This is surely a device promoting a sense of disorderliness; syntax is disjunct and fissured.

Further, *Correspondences* is a concatenation of genres. Its subtitle, “A Family History in Letters,” is sufficiently odd, given that the text is largely a poetic one. Critics have noted the genre complexity of the text. For example, David Mason calls it “a long dramatic poem or polyphonic novel” (2009: 333). Ray Olson refers to it as “a veritable novel in verse” (2006: 47). Indeed, a survey of the kinds of texts that occur in *Correspondences* confirms its polymorphism. The 2005 edition of Stevenson’s *Poems* offers, *inter alia*, as parts of *Correspondences*: a chronology, a genealogy, two obituaries, a newspaper article, a travel report in prose (Jacob Chandler, 1867), maxims (1895), several prose letters, a notice of insolvency, and a *Poetry Review* rejection slip.

Such lack of coherence on the level of genre is matched by an incohesion in several of the texts that make up *Correspondences*. They are fragmentary, items drawn from longer sequences of letters, items that are part of longer exchanges. A clear and representative example of such incohesiveness is “Fragments: Mrs. Reuben Chandler writes to her husband during a cholera epidemic,” dated August 1849. The letter exists only in shards; “page torn” is repeated four times after each verse paragraph; individual lines are incomplete. The speaker’s terrifying experience of disease and death and displacement is embodied in the text’s shattered state.

Finally one should note the motif of silence in *Correspondences*. There are silent figures in the family history, voices the reader never hears. The Genealogy of the Chandler family published in the 2005 edition of Stevenson's *Poems* (192) gives a range of family members whose versions and responses are mute. The story is incomplete *ab initio*. The motif of silence is apparent, too, in unanswered letters. The reader does not have the Chandler patriarch's response to his son Reuben's letter of June 23, 1832. Nor, in turn, is there the reply of Reuben to his sister Elizabeth's accusatory letter of September 25, 1832. This feature recurs throughout the text. The account is, to say the least, fragmentary and partial. Silence is paradoxically marked clearly by the presence of a letter from an unexpected source, a non-family-member, Kay's husband's mistress, Mrs. Lilliam Culick (May 21, 1954). How many other voices have fallen silent, been silenced, or were inarticulate from the start? The collection of documents advertises its own lack of overview, its own insufficiency, its own disorder.

At this stage, my argument concerning the function of local and global configurations of text should be apparent. All hints at order and cohesion (and they exist certainly) are denied: on the phonosemantic layer of the text, through enjambment, via genre diversity, and as a result of the collection's fragmentariness. No story, no account, is complete. Lost voices sound loudly in their absence. Thus, this poem about America, American history, and an American identity sees the nation, its constituent occurrences and their record, its *mentalité* as disrupted, uncontainable, fragmentary, contrarious, and replete with elisions and oclusions. It, that history, that identity, is also incomplete. The constant device of enjambment suggests this. Nothing is finished. The collection's final foot is an anapaest, which lacks the final unstressed syllable of the preceding amphibrach and third paeon. The narrative is, in any case, open ended. The final piece of punctuation is a question mark.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Stevenson was born of American parents in England, grew up and went to university in the U.S.A., but has lived, worked, and published in the U.K. for most of her life. Her Anglo-American status is marked by the publication of her collected poems in the U.K. in 2005, and by the Library of America edition of her poems published in 2008.
- <sup>2</sup> An alternative scansion of lines 8 and 9 would suggest that "and love and / move" might be with justice read as a diamb fractured by enjambment. This is a level of detail beyond the scope of the present essay, but one can immediately see that such a scansion would be appropriate. The diamb is broken; the lovers are parted; order is hinted at but denied.

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