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The new formalism : patterned verse in the 1990s : a creative and critical study

Robin de la Llata
San Jose State University

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de la Llata, Robin, M.A.

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The New Formalism: Patterned Verse in the 1990s
A Creative and Critical Study

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Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Robin de la Llata
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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Dr. John Pollock

Dr. Virginia de Aratjo

Professor Alan Soldofsky

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

to Gabriel

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ABSTRACT

The New Formalism: Patterned Verse in the 1990s

A Creative and Critical Study

by Robin de la Lata

The New Formalist movement is based on the desire to revitalize formal verse as it melds a modern sensibility with an historical appreciation of form. This thesis explores this return to form, and reassesses the free verse movement as it considers current practices in prosody. The new formal verse is fundamentally experimental. Form is used as a platform: a point of expectation and departure. This issue of expectation is central to the return to form, just as creating recognizable patterns is essential to being innovative with form. Through her discussion, the author works in a variety of forms, providing original poems as examples as she explores the distinctions between traditional and modern approaches to patterned verse.

Everyone is familiar with the comfort found in sound, the pleasure of a well-patterned phrase, the security of repetition. Sound can overpower us: repetition can comfort us, rhythm can capture us, cast a spell. In the same way, formal patterned verse can capture and fix our attention, cast a similar spell. Today, many contemporary poets are realizing the power of patterns as they once again explore the possibilities of form. But they are not merely reviving traditional forms; they are revitalizing them. Ironically, the New Formalist movement may be based on the need to revitalize free verse, as there has been "relatively little formal innovation done by the mainstream [poets] either in metrical or free verse" for nearly 30 years (Gioia 401).

Free verse emerged in the early 1900s. In a society at odds with itself, the poet of that period abandoned the facade of order by abandoning form. The placement of words upon the page became the form itself, dynamic and direct. But today much of free verse has lost its force. Robert Hass, a free verse practitioner himself, acknowledges that there are formal elements in free verse that should be considered, as he believes that free verse has "lost its edge, become neutral, the given instrument" (70). Just as their predecessors rebelled against the tyranny of form nearly a century ago, so many of today's poets rebel against its antithesis. Order has been redeemed (for how else can we reconcile ourselves to the current "yuppie" movement?), but more importantly, the free form itself suffers from loss of affect. What else can explain the success of the prose poem, a form whose dominant element is semantic rather than phonetic and syntactic? Honing down the poem to its barest essentials has finally created a prosody in need of retrieval, retrieval of elements which have been lost over the years through the practice of free verse.

Many poets and critics have entered into the debate as to why young writers have begun to experiment in form. A close look at the present state of prosody, with free verse as the primary verse form, may lend some insight. For though free verse began as a response to rigidity and regulation, it too has its rules, and consequently its limits. You cannot practice one form almost exclusively without losing some of the elements of prosody. In looking at free verse in 1990, it is apparent that much has been lost.

Though free verse in Eliot's day might have maintained the traditions of metrical or accentual verse, by the present day the break with the lyric is more complete, and more profound. Today the music has gone out of poetry; the lilt and surface surprise of rhythm, the anticipation of meter, the satisfaction of internal rhyme have all been let go. Increasingly, that felt harmony has been replaced with a calculated dissonance. But rather than relying on near-rhyme or imperfect meter, today the free verse poet relies almost exclusively on enjambment to create that dissonance. Of all the tools of prosody, enjambment "remains as one of the few 'tricks' to be pulled from the crumpled black hat of the free-verse writer" (Leithauser, "Confinement" 7). Having abandoned rhythm, meter, and rhyme, the surprise of line breaks has become the poet's primary emotional device. The result is a poetry that "seeks to build most of its energy by breaking its lines at whatever points appear most confusing or disruptive. One sees again and again an attempt, in Richard Wilbur's words, to 'throw a monkey / wrench into the poem'" (Leithauser, "Confinement" 7).

If we have lessened the emotion of the poem by diminishing its music, we might also have weakened the heart of the poem by forgetting its genesis. Just as traditional prosodic devices have been relinquished, the traditional

approach to writing poetry has also been abandoned with the institutionalization of the poetic process. No longer does the poet work in solitude with his elusive muse. Instead, poetry has become a group effort. The cloister has been replaced with the classroom.

Leading the latest pack of want-to-be poets down a surprisingly fixed path, the university is unwittingly fostering an ignorance of form and denying the importance of technique, churning out "workshop" poets who write by communicating their direct emotional experience exclusively. In an era seeking to curtail its emotional indulgence with a revival of form--allowing the confessional poets to come of age--the university-trained poet is given a limited, narrow view of the possibilities of prosody as she is encouraged to write exclusively in a form that is nearly a century old. The student's lack of skill and basic knowledge of prosody becomes glaringly apparent when she tries her hand at formal verse. Invariably most produce what Dana Gioia has called "pseudo-formal verse," a stalled and stilted, ill-produced attempt at form, having finally little to do with either rhyme, meter, stress, or rhythm (404).

The emergence of pseudo-formal verse is noticeable in many periodicals today. You will recognize these poems first by their appearance; they will be laid out on the page like formal verse. Then as you peruse the poem, trying to identify the form, you will first note the absence of rhyme scheme, then you'll notice the irregular meter. Finally, you'll wonder just what form the poet is attempting to use. And you will admit that theirs is another free verse poem, trying to pass for free-form formal verse. In short, the sound and shape of the poem have little if any connection with each other (Gioia 404).

But these "pyrotechnical monstrosities," as David Wojahn has called them (70), do reveal a desire to change the popular approach to prosody. Though some of the new formal poems seem to be mere exercises in form, others are memorable, fine and carefully made. The recent anthology of poetry written in traditional forms, *Strong Measures*, attests to the resurgence of form and suggests its current staying power.

How can we explain this renaissance? Perhaps there has been a realization of the importance of history and an acknowledgement of what the past has allowed us. It's about time for such a turn. Or perhaps there is a desire to go beyond personal experience, to see the poem's text not as simply experience, but as the ordering of language into pleasing syntactic and phonetic patterns. For this finally is what form brings to the poetic experience.

In either case, the most prudent response to the New Formalist movement is to finally develop a balanced view between the two schools of prosody, one that acknowledges the benefit of a range of styles and does not view formal verse from a political stance, and one that integrates the freedom and inventiveness of free verse. When reading New Formalist poetry, you don't sense an abandonment of all that was gained through the free verse movement. Rather, you see an attempt to further explore past forms with a modern sensibility--a sensibility built on the foundation of "open" forms. Form is used as platform: a point of expectation and departure. The new formal verse is fundamentally experimental, as Phillip Dacey and David Jauss point out in their introduction to *Strong Measures*:

Contemporary poets have not just repeated the forms of the past. They have adapted the old forms to current attitudes about poetry, language, life, and order. As a result, perhaps the most

obvious and pervasive characteristic of contemporary formal poetry is that it experiments with traditional forms. (7)

In their text, they identify nine principal methods of experimentation prevalent in today's formal verse:

1. disguising forms
2. grafting free verse onto traditional forms
3. alternating between formal and free verse
4. shifting stanzaic patterns
5. creating hybrid forms
6. inventing forms
7. truncating forms
8. extending forms
9. inventing nonce forms

The discipline of form can create surprising dexterity; the inherent order imposed on the poet can create new challenges, and, consequently, new options. The poet's sense of expectation is altered; each poem more readily takes on a shape of its own as the poet meets demands imposed by both the form and content. A surprising word that fits the form of the poem and is also magically appropriate for the content produces an experience for the poet of spontaneous discovery sometimes absent in free verse writing. And the understanding of technique gained from working in form can only enhance the poet's efforts, regardless of which form she ultimately works in.

The benefits of working in form are well documented by the older generation of poet-critics such as Robert Graves, Yvor Winters, John Hollander, and Richard Wilbur, and the younger generation of poet-critics such as Frederick Turner, Timothy Steele, Thom Gunn, and Alan Shapiro. What is less acknowledged is the loss modern prosody has suffered based on an ignorance of form. For even the successful poets have been guilty of producing "finger exercises" (Wojahn 71). Primary to the less than successful transition to form seems to be a basic ignorance of the purpose of meter, and

the intention of form and content when working simultaneously toward theme.

Dacey and Jauss have allowed for the absence of a metrical line with their second method of experimentation, "grafting free verse onto traditional forms." They explain that even though the poet will follow the form's "rhyme scheme, refrain requirements, and so forth, she will depart from the form's 'required' meter" (9). They also note that this particular method of experimentation is the rule rather than the exception in formal verse today--an observation that speaks more to an ignorance of meter than to a cleverness of invention.

Both Gioia's observation of "pseudo-formal verse" and Dacey and Jauss's observations of the new rules of form deal with the issue of meter. One blames a lack of metrical precision on a lack of education and practice; the other allows metrical imprecision as a deliberate technique, a modern adaptation of traditional forms. Though they might disagree on the artistic validity of imprecise meter, both positions seem to acknowledge that meter is one of the primary points of contention among the critics of modern formal verse.

Brad Leithauser has made a similar observation. However, he believes that "metrical illiteracy is, for the poet, functional illiteracy" ("Metrical Illiteracy" 46). Though I don't agree that a pure metrical line is the primary distinction between successful and failed formal verse, I do believe he makes a strong point regarding meter's place in formal verse and the resulting confusion when it is absent. A poet must have a reason to break meter, and that reason needs to be discernible to the reader.

Perhaps a more serious problem facing the modern formal verse poet arises from the fact that meter serves to establish the rhythm of a poem. While the free verse poet has been using caesuras and enjambment to shape the cadence of a poem, the poet's ear has changed. Rather than sensing the lilt and sway of a word or phrase, the poet may only view a group of words as a "line," without any sense of its internal rhythm. And as rhythm builds the integrity of the line, and, consequently, the poem, when one is writing formal verse, it is easy to see how the fundamental precept of form can be lost if rhythm is absent. Perhaps the visual orientation of free verse has dulled the poet's ability to perceive the oral traditions of metrical verse, so that she "can no longer hear it accurately" (Gioia 407).

One of the primary distinctions between free verse and formal verse is the establishment of expectation inherent in working with form. Rhythm and meter work simultaneously to create that expectation. The rules of rhythm and meter allow for deliberate variation, and in each variant lies the ability to surprise and the subtle potential to stir the discerning reader. The play on expectation is one of the most satisfying aspects of working in form, just as creating recognizable patterns is an essential aspect of being innovative with form. We can assume reader satisfaction will increase as the new formal poet's proficiency with rhythm and meter increases.

Though the current work in form is sometimes raw and seemingly uninformed, it is also at times achingly precise and effecting. Whatever the present consensus, the New Formalist movement has satisfied a desire to return to form. Its impact attests to the creative ability of the poets working within the movement, and the fundamental success of their shared impulse. Even though this period of time late in the twentieth century may one day be

considered their apprenticeship, they have already invented a wide range of new forms, and created a new movement which challenges the unexamined dominance of free verse poetry. Instead of weakening the popularity of free verse, the present experimentation in form seems to confirm its staying power. Like formal verse, free verse has also been revitalized. For as the free verse poets assess the new movement, they reassess the free verse movement itself. The New Formalists aren't offering an either/or option; rather, they are adding to the possibilities of prosody, and adding to the potential affinity poets may have for form in the coming era.

* * * *

To understand the New Formalist movement, one must develop an appreciation of the distinctions between traditional and modern formal verse. The most beneficial method of studying form itself is to actually work in a variety of forms. With this in mind, and with David Wojahn's adage, "poets need models; they don't need rules" (80), I will now take a closer look at form. In the following pages I will be using my own verse to demonstrate ways in which the demands of traditional form can be wedded with the vital voice of free verse to explore the expanding possibilities of prosody.

The Japanese haiku may be a good form to work with initially. It is a brief form, but it is very demanding and rigid in its structure. The writer uses this form to capture a moment, referred to as the "haiku moment" (Yasuda 5). The purpose of the seventeen syllable structure is to limit the observed experience to what can be expressed in one breath. The intention, then, is to capture that moment of "ah-ness" (Yasuda 31), the moment of realization and insight which is triggered by the observed experience. The observed

experience should be conveyed objectively, but there should be an underlying subjectivity; the surface of the poem should act as a mirror, subtly reflecting the subjective experience.

Its three-line structure is based on the need to express the three elements of object, time, and place, respectively. These elements are used to convey their relationship to the experience. Combined, they should create a unified whole, the complete experience of the moment. And so the haiku is an organization in perception.

It is most commonly divided into a 5-7-5 syllable structure. A sense or thought pause, a "turning" to indicate a shift in perception, should occur either after the initial five syllable line or after the seven syllable line (Yasuda 60). However, to maintain the objectivity of the poem, the pause should be felt rather than specifically stated.

Objectivity is sometimes subverted when writing haiku poems. It is difficult to resist defining the moment, or coloring the experience with metaphor or simile. Yet in this form the speaker must remain absent. The presence of concrete images alone must convey the feelings of the moment; the concrete images act to couple the objective with the subjective experience. The writer's ability to convey the complication of feeling inherent in the observed experience by working within these aesthetic limitations determines the success of the haiku.

The following is an example of the form, which I composed following the traditional requirements.

Moonlight is broken
by the shadow of a hawk
In the winter sky.

The next haiku facilitates a more abstract image and includes a pronoun--two adaptations to the form which give it a modern sensibility, but do not detract from the traditional intentions of the form.

In the morning chill
you first feel incantation
beneath the skin: spring.

* * * *

The repeating forms are also interesting to work with as you begin exploring the possibilities of formal verse. However, the content of the poem isn't dictated by the form, as is the case with the haiku, though the fixed line repetitions do determine the poem's emphasis. The challenge of these forms is to expand meaning while staying within the requirements of repetition and, as with all formal verse, to make the framework of form seem natural, spontaneous.

One of the brief repeating forms is the triolet, a French "fixed" form. It is composed of an octave that has two recurring rhymes and two recurring refrain lines. Using a capital letter to denote repeated lines, it is schematized as AB aA ab AB. The poet must select the two repeating lines very carefully, as they account for five of the eight lines. However, subtle changes in meaning can be achieved with the use of caesuras and enjambment.

The following is an example of this form.

The sadness in our lives gathers the folded air.
We breathe shallow prayers worn by memory,

fretted thin. We keep a diary of despair, wear
 the sadness in our lives, gather the folded air.
 In the dark we hold our mysteries, at dawn stare
 through solemn eyes. We rely on theosophy.
 The sadness of our lives gathers. The folded air
 we breathe: shallow prayers worn by memory.

The use of repetition suggests the theme of futility as it supports the idea of the constant human search for mystical comfort. However, as this is a very brief form, I didn't want the pattern of repetition to be exclusively responsible for the development of the theme. By alternating the form of pause, I gained more control of the subject and enabled the additional lines to become more essential to the poem. In this way, the message of the poem mimics its treatment; as the theme overlaps and expands, it is also limited by the form itself. The form supports the theme as it develops the ramifications of the prayers: going nowhere.

* * * *

Another repeating French form is the villanelle. It also has two recurring lines. Composed of five tercets and a quatrain, the traditional rhyme scheme is as follows (using numbers to indicate the repeated lines):

A1bA2 abA1 abA2 abA1 abA2 abA1A2

The lines may be of any length, though a regular meter is usually used. As in the triolet, the poet needs to vary the meaning or shift the emphasis of the repeating lines. However, this is traditionally done only by varying the context.

A modern "grafting" technique, as mentioned by Dacey and Jauss, would allow the villanelle's rhyme scheme to be replaced with a free verse

line. This enables the poet to create free verse rhythms within the traditional structure. The following is an example of this form.

A sad, stretched hope rises through the heart of memory
when summer gives in to winter, then again to spring.
What you know cannot be given, cannot be forgotten.

Green, then blue, then gold: summer sways in moist shadow.
You surrender to that swaying, then lie silent as
a sad, stretched hope rises through the heart of memory.

This is not the first hour of regret or knowing,
not the first attempt to fool your fate. Time discloses
what you know cannot be given, cannot be forgotten.

Autumn has shrunk your shadow, narrowed your vision.
You sit looking out windows for hours, knowing
a sad, stretched hope rises through the heart of memory.

Winter spreads silence over the fading sky,
shrouds the cold stretched hours. You close your eyes, seeing
what you know cannot be given, cannot be forgotten.

Finally, when the hills groan then fill with fragile flowers,
spring saves you. Yet within that curled and buffered falling,
a sad, stretched hope rises through the heart of memory.
What we know cannot be given, cannot be forgotten.

Traditionally, the poet finds comfort in the seasons; the cycle of repetition creates a sense of certainty, and anticipating spring is most frequently likened to anticipating rejuvenation and renewal. However, while using the subject of the seasons to support the villanelle form, I was most interested in establishing a counter theme, something to juxtapose the predictability of the seasons and, so, the form, against. The "truism" introduced in the third line created the tension in the poem, and enabled the

treatment of the theme to be non-traditional and more satisfying to the modern sensibility.

Line repetition is the fundamental characteristic of both the triolet and the villanelle. The challenge of the repeating forms is to extend the possibilities of meaning within the form's parameters. The modern poet can combine modern technique with traditional requirements to further extend those possibilities.

* * * *

A form used frequently today is the couplet, a simple two-line rhymed form, identified by its aa rhyme. The heroic couplet, composed of two lines of iambic pentameter, is the most traditional form. However, today the poet writes couplets of any line length and may employ any meter. An example is split couplets, or irregular line couplets. Though it is usually accentual-syllabic, the line lengths may vary.

Perhaps more than any other form, couplets bend to the modern poet's needs. The following is an example of dimeter and tetrameter split couplets.

When did I go?
That time after dusk when the low
hum of crickets
and the sweep of sprinklers emit
their lonely sum-
mer song. Scattered lilac blossoms
glowed on the lawn,
their sweet, damp scent pressing down on
the evening air.
Why did I go? While I stood there
in the doorway
I felt the mysterious sway
of the coming
dark. I remembered my aching

desire as a child
 to conquer the dark, reconciled
 by the tenure
 of time to this urge to enter
 and embrace it.
 Then on a near tree, a bird lit,
 distracting me
 from my reverie. When I heard
 his bleating song,
 I noticed how it echoed on
 the wavering air.
 In that moment I wavered. There
 from the doorway,
 I took my first step away.

The split couplet form works well for the subject of this poem. The dimeter line is suitable for emphasis or simple directness. I particularly appreciate the simple entry into the poem the dimeter line allows. The tetrameter line permits elaboration, and also enhances the mood of the poem. In this way, the form creates a continual play between simplicity and elaboration, which mirrors the treatment of the theme, and also works simultaneously to establish a balanced treatment of the subject.

The fifth line of the poem employs a modern poetic technique: the use of a hyphen at the end of a line. This serves as a form of end-stop, visually bringing to mind the dash, and also as a form of enjambment. The effectiveness of the technique is heightened by using a word which can be interpreted contextually first as one word then as another as the reader's eye travels to the next line. In this case, both "their lonely sum" and "their lonely summer song" contribute to the meaning of the poem. In the poem, the mood of the evening acts as a catalyst. The use of the hyphen at this juncture in the poem serves to emphasize the mood and image both words create.

* * * *

The following is a nonce couplet form, of varying line length.

Mosquito Song

If I could or would write
you a poem love it might
seem strange me speaking with words
what I only say with my hands

on your hair or skin
my secret silent a shift within
my stomach inside my insides
or out at my eyes

I light my look stare a caress
hover you a gentleness
but no look talks like song la la
to sing a heart to tell it all

(sing) when you are or are not near
you are that buzzing in my ear
(sing) mosquito you itch and itch
on my hand to touch

(sing) and my heart thrumps
my elbows twitch my arms bump
(sing) all my body physically sees
dances sings jumps for thee.

This is a reluctant love poem. The speaker's awkwardness is conveyed by diction, lack of punctuation or regular meter, and by the irregular line length; but the couplet's aa rhyme effects a simple harmony. The nonce form becomes suitable to the clumsy presentation, creating a degree of gracefulness appropriate to the subject of the poem. The stanza form is suitable to the

development of the theme, and reinforces, by virtue of the narrative quality, the immediacy I am hoping to convey.

* * * *

The four-line stanza, a quatrain, is one of the most popular stanza forms. Though it is a primary unit of other forms, it is also a form in its own right. It can be of any meter and line length, and may be rhymed or unrhymed. The alternating quatrain, with its abab rhyme scheme, is the most commonly used form. The following is an example using a variable rhythm.

I might have slept in,
or reached into my stack
of unread magazines,
instead of drawing back

the covers and heading
for the shower. I could
have decided drinking
reheated coffee would

suffice for breakfast.
But I woke with the thought
of waffles steadfast
in my mind, and a hot

cup of coffee with cream.
And then I had to choose
between the Moonbeam
Cafe or the Santa Cruz

Shop (one had the service,
the other, fresh beans).
And then the curious
decision of which scene

I'd prefer, which street
to walk, which side, and how

often I'd stop. Would I seat
myself or allow

the waitress to find me
a table once I got
there? Such a high degree
of chance and random thought

has brought me here to
now. Calm, sitting down
—just enough time to
be looking around.

Just in time to see
you look up and smile over
the top of your coffee
cup. Because of your

pivotal glance
(my sweet), suddenly
here I am, ready
to take another chance.

The short line length, varying between five and six syllables, emphasizes the simplicity of the poem's primary premise. The mood is whimsical. The form, however, imposes a structure on the mood, which in turn imposes a structure on the events within the poem. Ultimately, the form supports the final message of the poem, that nothing in life is based on chance.

You may notice the poem ended with another quatrain form, the envelope quatrain, which rhymes abba. The alteration in form emphasizes the poem's counter-theme and creates a greater sense of closure.

* * * *

The following is an example of the envelope quatrain form, written in iambic tetrameter.

Ten O'Clock

Let's take the phone off the hook.
 The guests are gone, our duty's done.
 (I didn't think that last one
 would ever leave.) We'll overlook
 the clutter and glass, let the room
 rest. But leave that music playing.
 The moon's window-light is slanting
 down the hall. Why don't we resume
 tomorrow what tonight we've barely
 begun? All the postponed rush
 of cleaning is worth the quiet hush
 of our legs moving across cool sheets.

The staggered layout of the poem is more dynamic than the traditional left justified or partially indented stanza form. Borrowing from free verse by utilizing space in a different way, the shape of the poem better supports the poem's mood by visually lengthening the line. It supports the poem's theme as it suggests a chain of events, implying the causal relationship between action and inaction central to the poem. The envelope quatrain is disguised by the free-form treatment, yet its rhyme scheme adds to the sense of order and control, acting against the theme of the poem as it adds to its sense of ultimate harmony.

* * * *

The subject of my next poem was originally developed in prose poem form. Wanting to use the narrative technique fundamental to the prose form, I began exploring my theme, with the following results:

This is another kind of dying poem. The sort you write when you're all out of gin and all that's left is the anger staring back at you with a smirk in the dark. You try moving toward shadows but something tells you morning will come and with it that iridescent emptiness. Maybe better than this rage you tell yourself as you knock against furniture, slip on well-placed rugs. It's not like you hadn't thought of this a million times, what you would do, where you could go. Starting over, what-a-relief. But not like this: bang.

Though I was pleased with the direction of the poem, I wasn't satisfied with its somewhat random development and its lack of thematic focus. In analyzing the poem, I sensed that anger, the primary emotional element, was acting as a catalyst in the narration. I was intrigued by the idea of developing that anger and taking it to an extreme, but thought that kind of emotional level could only be sustained by a sense of counter-balance. Thus, I considered the counter-theme of emotional control. Realizing form could impose a fundamental sense of control as it imposes order, I decided my theme wasn't suited to the prose poem form, and so began considering other forms which might better enhance my treatment.

At this point in the development of my theme, I perceived three things: that the action was going to begin *in medias res*; that the poem was going to sustain a high level of emotion; and that as the emotional control diminished, I wanted the sense of order to increase. I also wanted to maintain the sense of narrative fundamental to my original conception.

At this juncture, I initially considered the ballad form. Linked to western folk ballad roots, the ballad is a highly dramatized form which tells a story. It focuses on a single dramatic situation and usually begins at a high point of action or emotion. The antithesis of the haiku, the ballad is a subjective form; few concrete images are employed, as the primary focus is the emotional response to the situation the story line projects.

I realized this form would support and enhance my desire to maintain a narrative development, and would allow me to maintain the subjective nature of the original poem. The ballad form would also provide suitable opportunity for the development of my counter-theme, as it employs a refrain and parallel development. Additionally, considering the primary themes of the form, which are tragic love, the supernatural, and physical courage (Myers 30), provided a fresh perspective on my subject and triggered ideas for its thematic development.

But though the ballad form was initially considered, it was the related French form, the ballade, which finally best suited my theme and treatment. The ballade is a 28-line form composed of three 8-line stanzas and a 4-line envoi, and uses only three rhyme sounds. It is schematized as follows, with the capital letter indicating the refrain: ababbcbC bcbC. The lines may be of any single length. It is syllabic, usually using an iambic tetrameter or pentameter line.

The following is the final version of the poem, in ballade form, written in iambic tetrameter.

I Shall Wear Purple

Tonight I said goodbye, a frail
affair. They asked me to sedate

myself for the service. Fairy tale,
really. You would appreciate
all the care they took, what a fete
your funeral was. For your sake,
I'll do my best. I'll delegate
(I shall be faithful, for your sake)

who gets what and goes where. Nail
the list to the wall. None will bait
me, no bribes. But I won't impale
these puny fists, won't fabricate
a gentleness. This death won't sate
me. I will say make no mistake:
this death calibrates me, lubricates
(I shall have power, for your sake)

my rage. On my skin I inhale
the bitter stench of neophyte hate.
No veil of tears; my loss impales
my grief. If I can't dominate
this death, I can sedate my fate.
In my eyes they'll see fury break.
Beware the widow. She'll placate
(I shall sublimate, for your sake)

your death with madness. Her estate
will transform her into a mandrake,
leave her her woman shape, sublate.
(I shall wear purple, for your sake.)

Though this poem follows the traditional precepts of the ballad regarding theme and development, it is recognizably modern in its treatment. Its imagery is very vivid, its language is emotionally charged, its mood, dark. I selected the 3-stanza ballade form because it was well suited for my story line, allowing a 3-part, tiered development, while demanding a more tightly woven theme.

With each stanza, the emotions of the speaker are further extended, while the sense of control over those emotions is systematically abandoned.

The alternating refrain acts against this excess of emotion by providing an underlying sense of deliberation and order. Fundamentally, there are 2 forces working against each other in the poem: the abandonment of control central to the development of the theme, and the control imposed by the form itself.

* * * *

The Spenserian Stanza is a 9-line form invented by Edmund Spenser for his poem *The Faerie Queene*. The first 8 lines are written in iambic pentameter; the final line is written in iambic hexameter, otherwise known as an alexandrine. Its rhyme scheme is ababbcbcc. It is a variation of the ottava rima form, which is schematized abababcc. The rhyme scheme is very subtle, and the form is thought to adapt well to both brevity and elaboration. As it was originally used for a long poem dealing with heroic exploits, the stanza suits both narrative digression and sharply sketched action. With this flexibility, it offers the modern formalist poet a good foundation for experimentation.

The following is an example of the Spenserian stanza form.

The first frost has come. The morning sun
can no longer warm this hallowed ground.
Though the fruit does not willingly come
from the vine, now is the time to compound
the harvest. Persimmons and pomegranates bound
by earth can mature in shadow and still be sweet.
The need to cultivate and care is profound,
and if the brief season seems incomplete
it can be extended, though the harvest be bittersweet.

As this poem is written in metaphorical language and its theme invites elaboration, I feel it's well suited to the formal treatment the Spenserian stanza offers. However, I wasn't satisfied with the logical transition that occurs in the middle of line 5, and though I felt the content of the poem was essentially complete, I was concerned that the form itself may carry expectations for a more extensive treatment of subject. It was time to reconsider my purpose and the form's ability to fulfill my intention. Initially, I began rewriting the text. Ultimately, however, I ended up resolving the issue by altering the form itself, adapting the form to the content.

The final version of the poem is what Dacey and Jauss refer to as a nonce stanza form, based on the Spenserian stanza. It is an 8-line form, employing 6 lines of iambic pentameter and 2 lines of iambic hexameter. It is schematized as follows: a5 b5 a5 b6 c5 b5 c5 c6. The initial hexameter line, occurring in line four, makes the transition more subtle and is more flattering to the language of the line. More importantly, the elimination of the internal couplet enables the stanza to be more effective as a single stanza poem.

The following, then, is a nonce stanza form, the final version of the poem.

The first frost has come. The morning sun
 can no longer warm this hallowed ground.
 Though the fruit does not willingly come
 from the vine, persimmons and pomegranates bound
 by earth can mature in shadow and still be sweet.
 The need to cultivate and care is profound,
 and if the brief season seems incomplete
 it can be extended, though the harvest be bittersweet.

* * * *

Blank verse is one of the most distinctive forms in English poetics. Unrhymed iambic pentameter is known as the poetic line most approximate to human speech--excepting free verse (though some free verse employs blank verse). As it lacks rhyme but imposes meter, experimenting in this form may allow the poet to develop a greater sensibility toward meter than she would experience using free verse.

One response to the New Formalist movement is that poets should "generally diminish their interest in working in rhyme and elaborate forms and instead apply themselves to a greater understanding of meter" (Wojahn 79). Working in blank verse would satisfy this proposal, would satisfy the desire to work in form, and would satisfy the modern ear. Of all the forms, it is the most accessible to the modern formalist poet.

The following is an example of blank verse, utilizing internal rhyme.

I lie in bed reading, unable to write,
 while in the cradle next to me she sleeps.
 Her head is still that awkward acorn shape,
 pulling its weight--the counter balance to any
 movement that she makes. She finds her fingers
 in her sleep; a part of my body aches.
 She bends her knees and arches her back, stretching
 before she wakes. Now she's feeling her face:
 pale thin-veined cheeks, pink pouting lips,
 a nose that hasn't shown its shape. Legs curl
 beneath her, seat rises high. She's just about
 to open her eyes. Hearing my voice, she turns.
 Toes curl against the covers, fingers flex
 then fist. I talk and talk just for one
 morning look. A foot loses the covers,
 a wobbly head rises. She looks at me and smiles.

As the poem traces the waking moments of an infant, the blank verse form supports the sense of pattern, an element of the infant's behavior, and predictability, the observer's perspective. Combined, they lend the experience a sense of ritual: the infant's waking moment represents every infant's waking moment. More importantly, the poem captures the observer's perspective: distracted from normal activities, captivated, and counting on that moment when the baby wakes and the parent's need for a gratifying smile can be fulfilled.

The use of internal rhyme gives the poem a greater sense of unity and strengthens the effect of pattern and predictability. The simple diction of the poem supports the simplicity of its message. Though this is a simple poem, its message is universal. Everyone who has had a baby is familiar with that feeling of wanting--and waiting for--a smile.

* * * *

Like blank verse, the sonnet forms traditionally employ an iambic pentameter line. However, their rhyme scheme makes them challenging to work with. They are also considered the most rigid forms, and as such, are sometimes deliberately avoided by contemporary poets, being considered too far from the modern sensibility to be used effectively. Yet if there is a testing ground for technique, it is the sonnet, and as a means of proving dexterity and inventiveness, the sonnet may still be considered a likely vehicle. There are two primary forms: the English or Shakespearean, and the Italian or Petrarchan. Both are 14-line forms written in rhymed iambic pentameter, and like the haiku, both use a turn or volta.

The English form is divided into three quatrains, ending with an heroic couplet. The three quatrains are often used to develop either a progressive pattern of reasoning, or to present variations of a single theme. The turn should occur after the third quatrain and before the closing couplet. In effect, the couplet should work to resolve or briefly state the issue developed in the three quatrains. Its rhyme scheme is abab cdcd efef gg.

The following is an example of the English sonnet form.

Your arms across your chest try to contain
 the fear and age that beats there. Whole, alone,
 you lie beside me letting silence explain
 your loss. In his death you saw your own.
 Outside the moon is rising. Inside, shadows
 lengthen across our bed. While I listen
 to you breathe, the quiet night grows
 around us. Softly, I speak your name then
 turn toward you in the dark. Tentative,
 I touch your shoulder, offer my embrace.
 You look at me a moment, sad and elusive,
 then lift a hand to gently touch my face.
 Our bodies join as you seek your relief,
 speaking the lonely language of love and grief.

The first quatrain provides the situation and setting of the poem. The second quatrain uses visual images to allude to the emotions of the characters, enhancing their sense of isolation. The strongest image, which occurs at the beginning of the second line of the quatrain, is highlighted by the use of a trochee. Another trochee is used at the end of the third line, emphasizing a second image which supports the sense of alienation and separateness. At the close of the second quatrain, a spondee is used to indicate a significant transition in the development.

As the third quatrain begins, individual initiative is first introduced. Here, the poem changes from passive to interactive as the emotional repercussions of the situation, introduced in the first quatrain and heightened in the second, are subtly explored. The turn occurs neatly between the third quatrain and the closing couplet. The couplet begins with the word "our," indicating the union of minds absent in the earlier quatrains. Breaking meter, the final line of the couplet begins with a trochee, heightening the irony of the resolution as it alludes to the lack of verbal communication, and, so, the theme of alienation which develops throughout the poem.

Though the theme of alienation and its resolution through physical means was central to the genesis of the poem, the phrase which triggered my initial inspiration was not included in the final version. The poem began as two lines:

You turn as my body begins its narrative:
arms invent words, legs, whole phrases.

These lines inspired the notion of an inability to communicate verbally, being resolved by a desire to comfort physically. Though the idea was fixed, the form did not come so willingly. I first experimented with the terza rima form, thinking the theme would lend itself to its interlocking aba bcb cdc rhyme scheme, while considering the momentum the form would provide to a context which I thought would be thematically stubborn to resolve. However, the form itself proved most stubborn. After many futile attempts with the terza rima form, I began working with the Italian sestet form, using an abcabc rhyme scheme. Again, I was stymied. It wasn't until I considered, with reservation, the English sonnet form that the theme and its development began falling into place.

The structure of the English sonnet demanded that I approach my theme in a different way. It required progressive thematic development or three variations on a single theme. It also required a somewhat hidden turn to occur between the final quatrain and the closing couplet. As I began exploring the sonnet form, I had a good idea how my resolution would occur, but needed to reconsider the catalyst. At this point, my first quatrain was written, introducing the idea of death and its affect.

I've always felt visual images work particularly well in sonnet forms, so the second quatrain was created to extend the emotional effect of the first quatrain. This was done almost exclusively with isolating images.

As I approached the resolution of the sonnet, my original lines of inspiration finally found their place. The third quatrain initially read as follows:

beside you in the dark. Tentative,
I touch your shoulder, offer my embrace.
You turn as my body begins its narrative:
arms invent words, legs, whole phrases.

Once I wrote the closing couplet, my original "inspiring lines" seemed over-written. As I reviewed my sonnet, I realized overstatement might undermine the final image of the couplet, whereas understatement could be used effectively to enhance the final image. Replacing those two lines was the most difficult creative task of the poem; as I felt the content moved gracefully without them, that is, the opening lines of the third quatrain effected the turn which lead to the couplet, I needed to create a new idea which would add to the treatment of the theme without repeating or detracting from what was already achieved.

The two lines which replaced the "arms invent words" segment turned out to be perfectly metered in relation to content, and added a gentleness to the poem that had been absent. They also affected a more successful turn, as their own sense of understatement enhanced and expanded upon the final couplet.

The final version of the poem stands as a good example of theme finding its most appropriate form. In effect, the poem developed as I simultaneously considered form and content. Without the integration of the demands of thematic development central to the sonnet form, I don't believe it would have developed into so sound and fixed a poem.

* * * *

The Italian form is divided into two sections, an octave and a sestet. Thematically, it is the most challenging of the two sonnet forms. The octave develops an issue by stating its proposition in the first quatrain and elaborating on it in the second quatrain. The turn occurs between the octave and the sestet. The sestet begins by either giving an example or meditating further on the theme, moving toward resolution. The last three lines succinctly reinforce the turn by logically resolving the issue. The octave's rhyme scheme is abbaabba; the sestet's rhyme scheme is often, though not always, either cdecde or cdcdd. (Myers 281)

The English sonnet, most notably used by Shakespeare in his sonnet sequence, is frequently considered as a vehicle for love poems. The Italian sonnet, however, is notable for its wide use and adaptability to many themes. As it is the most challenging of the two forms, it may be considered by some to be the "intellectual" sonnet form. Considering the traditions associated

with each form, I thought it would be fitting to compose an "intellectual" love poem, using the Italian sonnet form. The following is the result.

When flesh first quivers on the bone, its own
 forgetting quick with memory, dull roots stir
 the bending rod. That planted sepulchre,
 forgotten, forces convex dreams unknown
 as cauldron transmutes blackened seeds half-grown
 across the barren hill. No challenge blurs
 the chalice tongue as choice and cross occur.
 The touch sings as skull is overthrown.

The fresh vibration vaults as tangled skin
 transforms the doubled force. A moment moves
 the monolith, disturbs its ancient plane,
 as water mixes salt and blood within
 the heated vein. Remembered rite approves;
 the spirit separates against its rein.

Internal conflict is traditionally explored in terms of the head and heart. Here, it is more basely stated as between the skeleton and the skin. The first quatrain introduces the issue of sexual arousal and the inherent physical response, a response that is buried within the consciousness of the individual.

The internal conflict is further complicated by the corresponding religious imagery which develops into the second quatrain. As it supports the side of the intellect, it also acts to introduce the idea of the spirit which is further developed in the sestet. Like the skull, the cauldron is a receptacle of transmutation and germination, but it represents the baser forces of nature, namely, the physical response. In the second quatrain, the religious conflict is overwhelmed by the force of the physical response. The physical presence sublimates the intellectual presence as the turn occurs.

The sestet opens with an image that corresponds to the sonnet's initial image, as the "doubled force"—the intellectual and religious forces—have been surmounted. Man, whose basic composition is of water and salt, is brought to life by the addition of blood, as passion makes man human. The last two lines logically resolve the conflict as the sexual act allows man to fulfill his destiny. Religious imagery lends to the sense of ritual as the spirit is harnessed, hence, governed, by the flesh.

* * * *

Several contemporary poets have begun experimenting with the sonnet form, creating hybrid forms by combining forms and by creating nonce forms. In this way, the form lends itself more readily to the modern sensibility and acts as a model for experimentation.

The following is a nonce sonnet, which borrows its rhyme scheme from the English sonnet form.

I carry your absence in my pocket, little boy eight years old.
 I rub it like a worry stone as I walk through the woods
 after a late autumn rain. It is something I hold
 against my chest when I step over fallen branches, as if I could
 protect you even now from the mishaps of chance and nature.
 In the dampened quiet, I listen to water fall from leaf.
 I watch busy gray squirrels with full jowls scuttle from shelter
 and hear impatient blue jays flap their wings dry. Grief
 surfaces like a bruise. As I raise my eyes I see an opening
 in the canopy above me, and a pale blue sky breaking through.
 I remember your pockets, filled with bits of stone and string,
 the small secrets and sacred stuff you carried with you.
 All the water of the heavens sits on the rim of my eyes.
 As I look for you in the forest after the rain, no rainbows rise.

The irregular meter and line length contribute to the idea of distracted thought, and disrupted life, as the poem explores a father's sense of loss. More important to the play between theme and form is the break in the traditional developmental pattern of the sonnet. The first quatrain overlaps the second, just as the father's thoughts overlap. Each act triggers memory, each observation triggers grief: each experience returns him to thoughts of his young son. Between the second and third quatrain, "grief surfaces like a bruise" as the father acknowledges his loss. In the final quatrain, the quick shift between subjects enforces his sense of lost equilibrium.

As the father shifts between thoughts of heaven and the world in the closing couplet--the only place in the poem that follows the traditional developmental pattern of an English sonnet--he is left alone, with no hope, no miracle, no magic. The couplet represents a return to reality as it represents a return to form. Its strong rhyme creates the final impression of the poem as it reinforces the finality of its content.

* * * *

After working with the sonnet form, the formalist poet may appreciate working in syllabic verse, also known as syllabic meter, which is verse organized according to the number of syllables in a line. As no attention is given to the number of accents, the structure does not control the rhythm of the poem. There are two types of syllabic verse: normative and quantitative. Writing in the normative form, each line of the poem contains the same number of syllables.

The following poem is written in normative syllabic verse, using seven syllables per line.

Peacetime

A whisper opens the wound.
Your fingers carefully curl
around my wrist. I stand still

thinking of the baby and
the sound of rain. Remember
to say a prayer when you go.

You will tell me now we can't
go for our ride. Your face will
look sad, then away from me.

I won't be looking at you.
He always cries at this time
of day. Your mouth opens. I

want to kick the hell out of
you. He won't stop crying. What
can I do? I can't leave him.

Just take your cock and walk out
of here forever. Eighteen
years old. Go get your rifle.

Put the barrel in your mouth.
Hold it there until you can
hear him crying.

Pull the trig
ger. Kill me, kill me. Can you
hear him? I'm coming, honey.
Momma's coming.

An almost hidden form, the syllabic structure provides a superficial sense of control in this poem exploring madness. As the woman's sense of reality shifts between her husband and her dead son, the form provides just enough structure to create a sense of narrative. The absence of rhyme or

regular meter enhances the fragmentation of her perspective, while the framework of the syllabic form supports the idea of control. The break in the last stanza occurs at the emotional peak of the poem, representing the woman's final break from reality.

* * * *

Quantitative syllabic verse allows the poem more variety in establishing a form. Each line of a stanza contains the same number of syllables as the corresponding line in all consecutive stanzas. Therefore, the poet can vary line length and sometimes achieve a more subtle treatment of theme than she would using normative syllabic verse.

The following is an example of quantitative syllabic verse, with a 9/8/4 syllabic stanza structure.

The firebrand flickers in the wide dark.
Purple sparks spit into the air.
The night is cold.

Someone will see my signal, fragments
of light drawn by wind. They will come.
I will not be

alone. As soon as they see the sign,
they will begin to imagine
the journey, caught

by heresy. Their own hope of rescue
will be rekindled by my flame.
Salvation comes.

They will lean toward my flickering light.
Their chest will expand with power,
with desire. Then

for a moment they will remember
their own fear. They will feel the cold,
measure distance.

The desert is wide, unforgiving.
Yet within them a great hope will
rise. They will gain

their salvation by their sacrifice.
Already they walk with purpose
across the plane.

Each step fans my flame. Ember becomes
fire. My form rises from the edge
of ash and smoke.

I burn for them. I feel their longing.
Who would believe a bush could speak?
They will. They will.

The first and second line of each stanza are closely related contextually, which is emphasized by the 9/8 syllabic line. The second line adds a sense of balance, and of the three lines, it is thematically the most affirmative. The third line of each stanza, which is four syllables in length, works to create a sense of synopsis. The layout of the poem, each stanza being reduced from a nine to four syllable line, enhances the sense of logical reduction and the inherent simplicity upon which the conclusion is based.

* * * *

No modern study of prosody would be complete without the inclusion of free verse. It is free verse that gave the twentieth-century poet her voice. It is a form governed by invention. It allows the poet to work with a subject based on her own formal terms, not limited to the form and meter of the past or bound to form for form's sake.

Within the range of the New Formalist movement, the poet may enhance free forms by emphasizing meter or presenting the poem on the page in a way reminiscent of formal verse. The following is an example of free verse which borrows from the split couplet form. By doing so, it plays on the couplet's sense of balance and aesthetic logic.

In the aquarium
the fish swim, darting under rocks when I
enter the room.
They only sway to the surface when I
sprinkle food
above their heads. Then their appetite
makes them forget
everything. The strength of the biggest,
the jealousy
of the second biggest, the fear of the
smallest, and
the hand, lowering the glass, that carries
the food away.

The next poem, also free verse, relies heavily on meter. The rhythm strengthens the sense of ritual central to the theme.

From my desk, I hear my husband
playing with our child. His voice
rises in surprise, hers breaks
then barks. They are chanting
a song as old as the dark
and as fresh as the frame
of her tender fingers,
embracing his new face.

* * * *

Writing patterned verse may not make you a better poet, but I am convinced it does make you a better reader. Often throughout the course of an education, we are asked to read poets of various eras and are expected to appreciate the forms in which they write. Yet in today's writing classroom, we are rarely required to write formal verse. This is our loss. It is not enough to read poetry; though the eye may appreciate what it surveys, the ear cannot hear what it has not been trained to listen for. It is an old argument: to understand does not require direct experience. But in writing programs we are not speaking of simply gaining an education; we are dealing with the challenging business of becoming better writers.

I proposed this thesis because this particular form of instruction, writing patterned verse, was not offered to me through the traditional classroom experience. As I review the final product of this thesis, I realize I have gained much more than a few more poems for my portfolio. Having worked with various forms of verse, I feel I have accomplished a legitimate form of self-instruction.

As someone schooled in free verse, I have been taught to appreciate the subtleties of word placement, to appreciate punctuation as a means of conveying the rhythms of thought and speech, and to appreciate line breaks as a dynamic means of creating emphasis. I have been taught the craft of surprise and the importance of expressing my experience in a novel way. My eye has been taught to look for the opportunities of concrete shape and to consider the subtle influence of white space. But paramount to all considerations is the fundamental lesson of modern prosodic instruction: novelty.

The alibi of novelty has created an approach to prosody which denies the importance of tradition. In the classroom, as we read poetry we consider what is intelligible in the poem: tone, rhythm, meter, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, diction, imagery, and so on. We usually also consider the poet's place relative to a tradition. But what of our own place? It is a sad irony that so little is done to allow the modern poet to see herself within the context of history. If we deny the importance of tradition, if we refute its place in modern prosody, we allow the modern writer to exist in a vacuum. Often, the poet's subtle shift from a set tradition, whether it be based on allegiance or rebellion, is a deliberate cue to the reader: at once both a signature and a play on expectation. Yet today's poet must consider her audience more carefully than any of yesterday's poets, because her audience shifts between two entirely different planes: an awareness or an ignorance of traditional forms. Today, the play of expectation is often missing from the transaction between poet and reader.

When I write, I would prefer to make a choice between the influence of history or the blank plane of modern free forms. But this would be a choice, a deliberate, informed decision, not based on whim, on chance, nor on the sometimes narrowed vision of the modern writing classroom. When I write, I would rather begin from the standpoint of tradition--tradition abandoned or embraced. Writing in form has allowed me to become more aware of prosodic traditions, and so, more appreciative of my choices.

As writers, we acknowledge that experience is malleable; what we may have forgotten is that the form of poetry is also malleable. The pattern of our words can create a frame for our experience, can reinforce or act against the shape of our experience. But the free forms of the past 90 years allow

breathing space only; they are finally not tied to a particular tradition; they cannot, by shape alone, convey a wider experience. Today's free verse poet deliberately conveys only one tradition: *vers libre*. When writing formal verse, the writer can expand the connotations of her poem by shaping her experience in a particular way. The expanding moment of the poem expands yet again as the modern formalist poet reminds the reader of a past almost forgotten, of a tradition shaped by history.

While composing the poems for this thesis, I have explored the subtle nuances of form, the patterns of development, the historical perspective. Writing formal verse enabled me to become better informed of the evolution of poetics as I studied the changing shape of each form. Working in form has allowed my "poet's ear" to become more finely tuned. It has enabled my approach to prosody to become more deliberate, my development, more logical. In short, it has strengthened my abilities as a poet. My experience reinforces Yvor Winters's statement on poetry:

Poetry, alas, like painting and music, is an art--it is not a form of happy self-indulgence; and to master an art or even understand it, one has to labor with all of one's mind and with at least a part of one's body. (149)

Writing is a solitary art. Whether bent over a blank page or facing a blank computer screen, the writer is ultimately alone, attempting to reconcile experience in a singular way. Working in form fills the room with shadows and friendly ghosts, creates a brotherhood. Though we work in solitude, no one exists in a vacuum. We are a part of all that has come before. As the modern formalist poet experiments in form, she acknowledges her past, and as the 1990s begin, she charts out a new tradition.

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