WHY RIGOR?: EXAMINING THE USES OF INVENTED FORMS

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I certify that this document fulfills the requirements for the critical paper in the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program, Antioch University Los Angeles.

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Introduction

In the mid-nineteenth century, Walt Whitman gave us Leaves of Grass. When Whitman self-published this book in 1855, there were few full collections of free-verse poetry readily available to readers. Whitman's book sparked the wildfire of free verse that would sweep across American poetry well into the now, remaining one of the most popular modes of poetry today. At the time of its publication, however, Whitman and other proponents of free verse, like Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, H.D. and T.S. Eliot, felt they were fighting to break from the constraints of meter well into the twentieth century. In Amy Lowell's preface to "Some Imagist Poets," she lays out a few essentials to the style. She writes, "To create a new rhythm—as the expression of new moods—and not to copy old rhythms, which merely echo old moods. We do not insist upon "free verse" as the only method of writing poetry. We fight for it as a principle of liberty. … In poetry, a new cadence means a new idea" (vii).

Many poets turned to free-verse poetry as a way to break away from the tyrannical reign of traditional forms and their formal requirements. In the past fifty years, however, we have seen a resurgence in writing in and adapting traditional forms and formal elements, including meter, rhyme, and repetition. These writers have been dubbed by many the New Formalists.

Interestingly, we have seen this return to formalism once before. In September of 1960 in Normandy, France, a small group called the Ourvoir de Litérature Potentielle, or *Oulipo*, emerged with a rolodex of invented forms that both mimicked previous poetic traditions and stood entirely on their own. Led by Raymond Queneau and Francois le Lionnais, the group intended to develop writing constraints that would mimic the

minimalist approach becoming popular in painting, sculpture, and design, e.g. Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, and Charlotte Posenenske, by imposing mathematical, aesthetic, and philosophical constraints on potential writing. Unlike minimalist design, Oulipians were defining themselves by their self-made sets of rules for writing and process, stating the goal of which was to furnish writers with techniques to allow the dismissal of inspiration from their affectivity, maintaining that writing constraints were not in place to confine, but free the writer. Raymond Queneau, when proposed the idea that Oulipian writing was arbitrary, stated, as translated by Warren Motte:

> We are not concerned with … aleatory literature. [A] false idea in fashion nowadays is the equivalence which is established between inspiration, exploration of the subconscious, and liberation; between chance, automatism, and freedom. … The classical playwright who writes his tragedy observing a certain number of familiar rules is freer than the poet who writes that which comes into his head and who is the slave to other rules of which he is ignorant. (10)

For writers within the Oulipo, the constraints were self-imposed as a way to write against the tradition observed within the literary canon.

In more recent years, the revival of received and invented form has been highly popular among poets of color, like Terrence Hayes, Franny Choi, Jericho Brown, and Nicole Sealey. These poets often engage with received form, poetic tradition and its politically and racially charged history by making the past tangible and visible, exhibiting a formal mastery, all the while breaking it, subverting it, or doing away with it entirely. New forms have been created, like Terrence Hayes' golden shovel, and Jericho Brown's

Duplex. Old forms have been co-opted with re-imaginings, like Natasha Trethewey's sonnets and Nicole Sealey's centos. In this examination on the return to form within the past fifty years, I will be looking at poets, and especially poets of color, to explore what is to be gained by returning to formal poetry. If we consider what Lowell outlines in "Some Imagist Poets" again, the creation of new cadence, new flow, and rhythm is the production of new ideas and literary epistemologies. I believe that the return to rigid poetic tradition and inventing new forms are, in fact, acts of dismantling: these poets seek to reclaim and to make new space within the literary canon.

Dismantling the Master's House

Amidst the number of poets returning to the rigor of form, we see a countless number of Black poets who innovate and subvert tradition via language, narrative, and subject matter. In her essay *The Master's Tools Cannot Dismantle the Master's House*, originally published in 1984, Audre Lorde writes, "It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (2). However, a number of Black poets are calling that sentiment into question. A wonderful example of this would be Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard*. The title poem of this book, a sonnet sequence written from the perspective of a formerly enslaved person, exploits the legacy of slavery to illustrate how Black people have been bound to the dominance of white people, in both the past and present. "Native Guard" hurls slavery back into the present of the formerly enslaved person, who, at the time of writing, is fighting as part of the Native Guard in the battle against the Confederacy. Simultaneously, Trethewey's speaker understands that there are far more underpinnings.

The poem is somewhat of an amalgam, a weaving of identity between enslaved person and their owner. The speaker journals in a book seized from an abandoned home of a slaveholder:

> We know it is our duty now to keep
> white men as prisoners—rebel soldiers,
> would-be masters. We're all bondsmen here, each
> to the other. Freedom has gotten them
> captivity. For us a conscription
> we have chosen—jailors to those who still
> would have us slaves.

The inversion of roles does not change the fact their ties to one another throughout history. Roger Reeves, in his article "What Black Poets are Doing to Poetry," argues that by using this form, with the additional constraint of this passage, Trethewey throws away the master's tools, forging a new toolset to subvert the traditional sonnet. In the reading of the work, neither the words of the former slaveholder, nor the received form seep through the words of the speaker. Consequently, Trethewey breaks the fourth wall, so to speak, to make a case for poets of color engaging with master narratives, forms, and traditions.

Like Trethewey's sonnets, Gwendolyn Brooks' "We Real Cool" is an innovative take on the ballad (Boland, Strand 99). The short lines are ironic and satirical, still following the rhyme scheme and sharing many characteristics of the ballad form, though diverting from common subject matter of love lost or supernatural occurrence.

> The Pool Players.
> Seven at the Golden Shovel.
>
> We real cool. We
> Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

The short lines here cut like a line of daggers. There is a music of strength which joins with a stark reality in the last line. It reminds us that the ballad can serve as moral—staking a powerful and mysterious claim to whoever is reading. Gwendolyn Brooks, in "A Capsule Course in Black Poetry Writing," writes,

> 1966. 1967. 1968. Years of explosion. In those years a young black with a pen in hand responded not to pretty sunsets and the lapping of lake water but to the speech of physical riot and spiritual rebellion. Young blacks went to see "The Battle of Algiers" rather than the latest Rock Hudson movie. Young blacks stopped saluting Shakespeare, A.E. Housman, T.S. Elliot. … Music was very important. It influenced new pens. There were veerings from Charlie Mingus, Charles Earland—from "I'll Be Seeing You" to "Soulful Strut" (3—4).

Like Brooks writes, there is, thematically, a turning away from tradition to write about topics that have not been readily studied in the canon. By innovating styles and rhythms, poets of color convey a power within poetry that is equally personal, political, and resistant.

In Nicole Sealey's debut poetry collection, *Ordinary Beast*, she writes in a number of forms: the sonnet, ars poetica, cento, and sestina. "Cento for the night I said, 'I

love you'" is composed entirely of works from 101 writers, including Cornelius Eady, Blas Falconer, Adrienne Rich, and Langston Hughes. The cento, an ancient form that dates back to the 3rd or 4th century C.E., borrows lines from various works to create an entirely new poem. Sealey takes this rubric one step further, imposing additional constraints to govern her writing process. Sealey explained the project in a 2018 interview with the Paris Review:

> The cento had to comprise a hundred different lines by a hundred ethnically diverse poets, of which only fifty percent could identify as male. I was concerned that the cento might read like disparate voices vying for a place, so I was very careful about the selection and arrangement of lines, and equally careful about the arrangement of each section and the poem's placement in the book itself.

I think this particular statement is especially important in understanding why poets may choose to impose constraints on their own writing. A cento, in particular, combines voice of other works to reflect the voice of the composing poet. By incorporating constraints of race and gender on the selected works from which Sealey pulls lines, she is able to draw from a pool of historically marginalized writers, manipulating the form to establish a unified voice and tone that may echo the themes of race and trauma that are ever-present in the tone of her book's speaker.

Experimenting with Form

Some poets, rather than manipulating traditional forms, are creating their own. Terrence Hayes invented the golden shovel, its name coming from the Gwendolyn

Brooks poem, "We Real Cool," and first appearing in his 2010 book *Lighthead*. To create the golden shovel, a writer has to take another writer's poem or one individual line, and use those words in that order as the last word in each line of the new poem. In Hayes' 2017 *The Golden Shovel Anthology: New Poems Honoring Gwendolyn Brooks*, we see that many writers choose to place the borrowed words at either the beginning or end of their lines. Here is a short section of Terrence Hayes' poem, "Golden Shovel" as it first appeared in *Lightfoot*, so you may compare it to the Gwendolyn Brooks poem from the previous section:

> When I am so small Da's sock covers my arm, we
> cruise at twilight until we find the place the real
>
> men lean, bloodshot and translucent with cool.
> His smile is a gold-plated incantation as we
>
> drift by women on bar stools, with nothing left
> in them but approachlessness. This is a school …

In this specific golden shovel, Hayes aligns the last word of each line to pay homage to Brooks' "We Real Cool", cited earlier. One thing that must be noted, is that Hayes would suggest the poem used in the golden shovel should, in fact, be a Brooks poem, though other poets have taken the form and used it more broadly. In his foreword to *The Golden Shovel Anthology: New Poems Honoring Gwendolyn Brooks*, Hayes writes, "This project is first and foremost a tribute to Gwendolyn Brooks. Because where do poems come from if not from other poems? Where do forms come from if not from other forms?"

Jericho Brown has invented a form as well, which he calls the duplex. The duplex is sort of a take on the sonnet, being fourteen lines—seven couplets—with a rhyme

scheme of aabbccddeeffaa. It involves repeating the second line of each couplet in the following line. The fourteenth line is a repeated line of the first. The form combines elements of both the sonnet and the ghazal. In an interview with the Rumpus, he explains,

> I feel completely in love with and oppressed by the sonnet. You know, because I'm a poet. I can conjecture about my obsession with the sonnet. I mean, I'm educated in the sonnet. It's been pushed down my throat the entirety of my life. There is something in me that doesn't like that, and doesn't trust that, because I'm a rebellious human being. I need to be a rebellious human being because I'm black and gay in this nation and in this world which has not been good to me or anybody like me.

What feels most interesting about this statement is that the "oppression" of the teaching and studying of the sonnet felt by Brown hasn't encouraged him to turn to free verse like the poets at the turn of the century. Instead, we see the creation of an entirely new form, which requires a new set of tools. The rigor hasn't been lost, just re-routed. Here is Brown's "Duplex" in full, from his 2019 book *The Tradition*:

A poem is a gesture toward home.
It makes dark demands I call my own.

Memory makes demands darker than my own:
My last love drove a burgundy car.

My first love drove a burgundy car.
He was fast and awful, tall as my father.

Steadfast and awful, my tall father
Hit hard as a hailstorm. He'd leave marks.

Light rain hits easy but leaves its own mark
Like the sound of a mother weeping again.

Like the sound of my mother weeping again,
　　No sound beating ends where it began.

None of the beaten end up how we began.
　　A poem is a gesture toward home.

If we look at the poem, we can see that is does take on some of the characteristics of the sonnet and the ghazal. You could also compare it to pantoum; as in a pantoum, Brown's duplex must begin and end with the same line, or a variation of that line, and the lines are of an unspecified length.

Arguably the most celebrated mode of formalism in poetry is the sonnet. The sonnet originated sometime between the 13th and 14th century in Sicily, its name derived from *sonnetto* meaning "little song." Only fourteen lines, often written in rhyming couplets and iambic pentameter, there are three traditional types of the sonnet: Petrarchan, Spenserian, and Shakespearean, each with their own rhyme scheme. Robert Hass, in *A Little Book on Form* sums up the sonnet's content as a blend of psychological and erotic, with roots in the Neoplatonic tradition of courtly love (122). In the first eight lines of the sonnet, or the *octave*, the poet states the sonnet's goal. The last six lines, or the *sestet*, holds the *volta*, meaning "turn" in Italian, in which the poet dances the undoing of the initial gesture. In the 20th and 21st centuries, however, we began to see any poem of 14 lines as sonnets in their own right, often written in blank or free verse, with less emphasis placed on the volta; however, we still consider the sonnet to be an intense gaze at the subject.

It should be understood that every writer may make any essential amendments to any or all constraints of a given form without sacrificing the integrity of said work. Thus,

there is no true distinction in the attitude of the writer who writes a Shakespearean sonnet in its received form, or the writer who attempts to dismantle said work to create something new. Specifically, when we speak of the sonnet, it is important to consider the move away from original content matter so be a subversion of form in its own way. In his 2018 book *American Sonnets for my Past and Future Assassin*, Terrence Hayes subverts the sonnet using contemporary subject matter and language. In one sonnet from the book, Hayes philosophizes about Jesus' sister:

> Something in the metaphor of the bow
> Which is never close enough to see the arrow
> Hits its mark. I remain a mystery to my father.
> My father remains a mystery to me.
> Christianity is a religion built around a father
> Who does not rescue his son. It is the story
> Of a son whose father is a ghost. No one
> Mentions Jesus' sister. Nothing is written
> About her. She had no children, she was in her
> Forties the first time she turned water into wine.
> A late bloomer, she began a small wine business
> And traveled all over the world selling her wine.
> Her name was the name of the wine.
> I don't recall the name of the wine.

From what we know about the sonnet's traditional form, this sonnet is a clear departure in terms of rules of meter and rhyme. It is a free-verse sonnet. On first glance, our only indication is the number of lines. Looking more closely, we can argue that this sonnet holds the intense gaze that should be expected by readers. It is a philosophical poem about the way we historically subjugate women to the margins of history and religion, and, in turn, how we overlook the shortcomings of fathers in search of their acceptance. Most interestingly, is that this poem does possess the volta. At the eighth line, Hayes departs from the conversation about masculinity and fatherhood via

Christianity, to examine the character of Jesus' sister. Even the final two lines of the poem possess similarity to the final two lines of a traditional sonnet, in that they, arguably, rhyme.

Leaving Tradition Behind

Having a slightly deeper understanding of where this subverting of traditional forms comes from, we can now try, as with the sonnet's volta, to dance its undoing. Why turn to rigor in order to achieve this departure? Why write against tradition at all? The desire to somehow become estranged from hegemonic culture, to reject assimilation to dominant forms of writing, and to adapt received forms to better fit the writers' voices as outsider poets is an act of false compliance—it is defiance. If we can learn anything about created form and why poets decide to thoughtfully classify, identify, and create rules within a new form, we may want to look back to the Oulipo.

While the Oulipo were not poets of color, they adopted a perspective of "other" or "outsider" by writing against tradition. The group maintained that constraint is freeing for the writer, since it provides structure wherein which it's easier to apply the rules that language naturally provides. Stated differently, constraint brings the structures and forms that underlie conventional language into light, making the writer more inclined to use readily observed rules in the work. Jouet, in his essay, "With (and Without) Constraints," writes that the methods developed by the Oulipo are a sort of vaccination against writer's block. The form alone provides a sense of momentum for the writer. Hass states that we have used the word "form" as if it meant the sets of preconditions that made a "container" for the crafting of poems in one particular way (3); however, we have to also consider how each poem embodies the energy of the gesture of its making—like that of the sonnet

as the “intense gaze.” Just as each form has its own predetermined set of rules, each writer may further apply their own concepts of form and constraint upon that work—be it a minimal constraint of language, e.g., English, Spanish, French; or an intermediate constraint of form, e.g., sestina, sonnet, tanka—and they may make essential amendments to those constraints without sacrificing the integrity of said work.

One of the Oulipo’s founding members, Raymond Queneau, is widely known for his work, *Cent Mille Milliards de Poèmes*, which, upon first glance, resembles nothing more than a collection of ten sonnets; however, they are much more an interactive guide of combinatory lines. The title, which translates to *One Hundred Thousand Billion Poems*, is just that. Any one line in any one sonnet of the book may be substituted by or for its counterpart in any other sonnet of the readers choosing; thus, the reader could, potentially, create a sum of one hundred trillion sonnets through the act of this combinatory process. Raymond Queneau and cofounder Francois le Lionnais regarded the sonnet as the form most worthy of celebration. Le Lionnais, in the group’s first meeting, stated “Nine or ten centuries ago, when a potential writer proposed the sonnet form, he left, through certain mechanical processes, the possibility of choice.”

Similarly, Terrence Hayes has spoken about the goal of his own rigor as a poet. At a 2015 reading, covered by Stephen Burt of the *New York Times*, when Hayes opened for questions, the audience asked a variety of questions about form: To be a poet, do you have to write in traditional poetic forms? Do you have to write in iambic pentameter? He responded, “If you can breakdance, that’s cool, but if you can breakdance in a straitjacket, that’s even better” (Burt 2015).

Reclaiming the Canon

Other poets since the emergence of the Oulipo have continued to use algorithms to create poetry. Franny Choi's 2019 *Soft Science* contains a number of poems that are algorithmically created to evoke the persona of a cyborg or AI. Most notably in this book is that each of the six sections begins with a Turing Test, meant to mimic the tests performed on different AI to see if they are capable of human logic and rationalization. What is interesting about these poems is that they feel like they were algorithmically created. In "Turing Test: Empathetic Response," the lines have a stream of consciousness feel that feels more like random word association than coherent thought.

> // have you ever questioned the nature of your reality
>
> stop me if you've heard / this one / once / upon / upon a nation / everyone got what
>
> they / were asking for

The strangeness of the text in the Turing Tests bleeds into other poems, like "The Cyborg Meets the Drone at a Family Reunion and Fails to Make Small Talk":

> and what do you do ; for the living ;

The wrongness of that phrase when we compare to the original: "What do you do for a living?" is humorous but brain-breaking. In an interview with the *Iowa Review*, when asked about the variety of forms incorporated throughout the book, Choi explains,

> It's partly why the book is wide-reaching in form—why there are poems in a lot of different shapes. I think it has to do with a cyborg mentality of trying to shift and evade and play outside of expectation—the desire to be slightly uncategorizable. And the form of a poem, after all, works out somewhere between the "organic" and the structure you impose on it. There's a push

> and pull between structure, meter, the tools of the poem and that weird organic spooky part (2019).

Much of this play with form has to do with an outsider perspective. In Choi's case, the speaker, a cyborg, tries to fit into the human world, but is ultimately unable to. For many other poets of color, this outsider perspective is incorporated as well—in taking on the rigor of form, a writer can reclaim a place within a canon that has formerly made them feel marginalized. In Hass's words: "The poem is about—among other things—the stupidity of that idea of form" (355). He continues by citing a nameless poet who brought a poem to one of his workshops, who composed a poem by producing a computerized list of all the words in English that could be formed from rearranging the letters that comprised the name "Ambrose Bierce" (374). Nothing in the poem made reference to the name, and much of the poem's lines were decided by sonic effect of certain words, like *sere* and *amber*.

This sonically pleasing combination of word pairings is what may be referred to as a "cratylic affirmation," the autological, the self-defining—similar to the phrase "and what do you do ; for the living ;" from Franny Choi's poem. We, as writers, can create work based on sonic interest without any constraint or use of form: pairing *sere* and *amber* for the sheer sake of making a pleasant sound when spoken or heard inside a reader's mind. The cratyllic affirmation can also be referred to as intuitive form, occurring when we invent new form without inventing new rules. We may rely on the coincidence of certain word couplings, or we may include colloquialisms of a particular culture, or exclude punctuation or capitalization. There is a magic in creating new means of forming poetry. Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux, in *The Poet's Companion*

describe this magic as something ineffable, beyond words; the magic of invention is "pure" poetry in that there are no rules to make it what it is: it just is (129).

Conclusion

I would be greatly mistaken if I did not note the return to form by so many poets of color can be observed greatly both within and outside the confines of these margins, and while many of these forms have been created by poets of color, their use is for all poets who want to take a crack at the exploration of form. This paper only begins to investigate why form has become so prevalently adopted in recent years. The outsider perspective from which these newly received forms spring is one that we, as a society, should begin to open up the canon for. While free verse has remained among the upper rungs of popularity for nearly one hundred years, this resurgence of interest in more rigid forms simply cannot be overlooked.

I set out to answer the question: Why this return to rigor? Through the examination of various poets' works, and a brief look at other poetic innovators, what is most certain is that, in both subverting old forms and inventing new forms, one may choose to write their own rulebook. Rather than obtaining the master's tools to dismantle the house, as in Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard,* poets of color can forge something entirely new, such as Jericho Brown's duplex or Terrence Hayes' golden shovel. With a new set of rules, we can all engage in the act of building a bigger, more inclusive house.

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