

Adventures in Form

Edited by Tom Chivers

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A Compendium of Poetic Forms,
Rules & Constraints

Edited by Tom Chivers

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Introduction

The line-break is the most obvious visual characteristic of poetry. It's one of the things most people, I bet, will mention if asked to define a poem. Yet the earliest poetry in the English language – that of the Anglo-Saxons – had no visible line-breaks, but was instead written in continuous blocks of text. After all, why waste good vellum? It was, in effect, prose poetry.

Skip ahead a few centuries, and you'll find some of the earliest examples of 'text speak' in the highly abbreviated Latin of the medieval scriptorium. For instance, 'spiritus sanctus' (The Holy Spirit) might be written *sp̄s s̄cs*. With its space-saving contractions and obscure diacritics, this ecclesiastical language was more like code than text; it's tempting to imagine the monkish scribes at home in the Twittersphere. I have always been interested in how the *form* of a piece of writing might be influenced or even determined by the means of its production and/or dissemination, as well as by individual creativity and literary fashion.

In *Adventures in Form*, I hope to show how form can be employed as a framework for innovation. The Oxford English Dictionary defines *adventure* as 'a perilous or audacious undertaking the outcome of which is unknown'; for good use of form should never be predictable.¹ Adventures take you to exotic, faraway places; and I initially envisaged this book as a bestiary of exotic textual creatures: some as strange as the mantichore or anthropophagi were to the medieval traveller; others, modified versions of familiar forms.

The *form* of a poem is the deliberate and sustained organisation of

¹ The Oxford English Dictionary, www.oed.com, 2011.

visual and aural elements such as line length, metre, rhyme, the distribution of certain letters and sounds, and so on; but can also manifest as its guiding principle, as in the case of a poem which adopts the character of a road sign, a shopping list, or a family tree. A poem's form is distinct from, yet inescapably related to, its content (the *volta* or 'turn' of the sonnet being a good example of this dynamic). As the poet Charlotte Geater put it (writing on my Facebook wall), form is 'what is not said that works for/against what is said'.

Formal poetry (as opposed to form in general) tends to refer to the use of established templates – the villanelle, or the iambic pentameter, say – which impose pre-determined rules regarding metre or rhyme and which, through repeated use, have become codified; in some cases, these forms have come to designate the 'correct' way to write, even to take on specific political or nationalistic connotations (take, for example, the importance of the Ghazal in the artistic identity of Pakistan). In this context, one can understand why some consider free verse to have been a 'liberating' force, unshackling poetry from the weight of literary tradition.

The imposition of form and the desire to escape or reinvent it is, of course, the eternal paradox of art. As Paul Muldoon, has said, 'Form is a straitjacket in the way that a straitjacket was a straitjacket for Houdini.'² For a poem is something like an illusionist's trick, and its form describes the organising principles by which this trick is performed. In Muldoon's analogy, form is a kind of willing restraint: an instrument of control wielded by the poem against its author.

As you navigate the fifteen categories of this anthology, you will find that some poets have provided an explanatory note, whilst others have chosen to let the poem speak for itself. This inconsistency reflects the

² *The Irish Times*, April 19, 2003.

varying degrees to which form makes itself visible in a text. Sometimes we encounter form head-on; and sometimes it is imperceptible, the poem's carefully hidden under-wiring.

Whilst established poetic forms continue to be employed in their thousands, what has caught my attention is the way these hand-me-down templates are being modified, deconstructed and rebuilt in new and exciting ways. I was encouraged to initiate this project by reading *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets*: an extraordinary, cross-generational anthology which approaches one of English literature's most revered forms from a distinctly avant-garde perspective, and which has changed my understanding of the relationship between tradition and experimentation.³

Accordingly, the first section in *Adventures of Form*, TRADITIONAL REVISED (p.17) presents a range of brilliantly bastardised sonnets, sestinas and villanelles. Ruth Padel's 'Revelation' is especially intriguing, as it fuses a poetic form, the sonnet, with a biological form, the DNA molecule.

The boundaries of what constitutes a poem have always been porous. FOUND MATERIALS (p.31) introduces the collage poem, a literary form whose progenitor in the visual arts is the surrealist *objet trouvé* (made famous by Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* of 1917). This section posits the artist not as creator of 'something from nothing', but as arranger or curator of pre-existing texts, often recovered from unexpected situations such as advertising, signage, newspaper headlines or, in the case of Simon Barraclough's poem, the artistic manifesto. The juxtaposition of text and context in the collage can be very funny, as in Chris McCabe's 'Contains Sulphites', which skilfully reclaims the absurd language of parenthood.

The next two sections, DIRECTIONS, INSTRUCTIONS AND POLICY

³ Jeff Hilson, ed., *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets* (Reality Street Editions, 2008).

DOCUMENTS (p.55) and ACADEMIC (p.63), describe, quite loosely, a kind of found poetry in which the form or tone has been lifted from other textual practices, whether bureaucratic, informational or medical. These forms tend especially toward comedy, as in McCabe's 'Submission Policy' or James Wilkes' sequence 'The Review Pages', a surreal parody of the academic review. CORRESPONDENCE (p.67) presents poems written in the form of letters or notes. Direct address to an imagined or real interlocutor can give real momentum to a poem and, as in the case of Patience Agbabi's two sonnets, make space for imaginative satire.

The explosion in mobile, digital technologies and social networking in the early twenty-first century provides new opportunities for poetic form. TEXTS, TWEETS AND STATUS UPDATES (p.81) captures such experiments in short form, and offers a creative rebuttal to those who blame 'text speak' for declining standards of written English. In the text poems of George Ttoouli and Hannah Silva, language often appears damaged or distorted, generating that sense of defamiliarisation – of 'making strange' – that is one of poetry's principle qualities, but which is more often located in the site of metaphor.

Nathan Penlington's 'unpredictive' is an interactive poem; it provides us with only a numerical code, asking the reader to decipher the text. Nathan and I deliberated the inclusion of this poem, as its deciphering requires access to software now made obsolete by smartphones. But I hope this will send readers scrabbling around in the attic for old handsets.

The poems in SITES OF EROSION (p.95) enact various methods of reduction. Whilst reduction is arguably the natural state of poetry – it being already a condensed form of expression – the poem rarely incorporates the actual process of erasure into its own text, as occurs in these examples. The exception here is Sam Riviere's 'Austerities' sequence, where the precise form is looser and not immediately visible, but the impulse to reduce no less urgent. His approach, writing in response to government funding cuts,

‘deprive[s] the poems of formal characteristics, typical sentiments and subjects, by acting out a kind of hostility towards poetry.’

The primary objective of a translation is usually to transfer the *sense* of an original text from one language to another. The poems in *TRANSLATIONS AND VERSIONS* (p.105) explore more unorthodox strategies, applying formal methods concerned with a text’s aural or visual elements, or which introduce randomness/automation into the translation process. They ask us to consider the differences between inspiration, originality and creative plagiarism, the author proposed as a collaborator working with a source text.

N+7 (p.119) and UNIVOCALIST (p.129) showcase two such strategies or *constraints*, both creations of the French post-/anti-surrealist writing group Oulipo, whose practices are experiencing a revival of interest in modern British poetry. N+7 is a translation process in which each noun in the original text is replaced by the seventh noun after it in the dictionary (the results vary depending on the length of your dictionary). Ross Sutherland’s translation of Little Red Riding Hood is one of the best examples of the form, although he had to look a little further than seven places: ‘The Liverish Red-Blooded Riffraff Hoo-ha’ is written using N+23. The Univocalism is a poem written using only one vowel, whose consequent musicality lends itself particularly to performance and comedy.

EMERGENT (p.135) takes its name from Edwin Morgan’s description of a concrete poem in which one text appears to *emerge* from another, often by breaking the poem down into its constituent words, phonemes and/or letters, and rearranging them into a dense pattern. The effects of these poems are startlingly visual and musical, assuming the quality of a mantra. Paul Muldoon’s ‘Eating Chinese Food in a Straw Bale House, Snowmass, Colorado, January 2011’ is one of several poems in this book which employ unorthodox typography (others include Roddy Lumsden’s time-splice poem and Ira Lightman’s ‘Worduko’). I am keen to emphasise the visual

possibilities of form, but considering this project's already-wide scope, decided to avoid fully embracing concrete poetry; that meeting point of text, type and visual art which has developed into a distinct artform of its own.

A newer phenomenon that extends the possibilities of the poem is 'internet poetry', where the forms (memes, screenshots, multimedia collages) echo and comment on the rapid proliferation of content online. They exploit absurd, ironic and wildly inappropriate juxtapositions, feeding a mash-up culture where everything can be hacked. As Theodoros Chiotis has noted, 'digital poetry splices together informational spaces'.⁴ Theo has contributed one of his own innovative poems to *CODE IS POETRY* (p.143). The title of this short section is a well-known programming adage – one I've been keen on ever since I taught myself to write BASIC and HTML code in the mid 90s. Poetry and computer code do have a lot in common: syntax, semantics, economy of expression. Both can be somewhat esoteric, and depend on their success on the precise placement of a word, letter or symbol.

The use of digital and scientific technology in generating writing challenges Coleridge's notion of poetry as 'purely human'⁵. The author becomes a co-author, open to random acts outside his or her control. In *NUMEROLOGY* (p.147) Valerie Laws' 'Quantum Sheep' demonstrates the poem as a scientific experiment whose outcome is unknown. Other poems in this section borrow mathematical structures from the Fibonacci sequence and the football pitch.

Whilst writers and publishers often grumble about poetry's marginality, a love of language and wordplay continues to express itself throughout popular culture in crosswords, puzzles – even the British

⁴ Theodoros Chiotis, 'These Terabytes I Have Tried to Shore Against Our Ruins', in Tom Chivers, ed., *Stress Fractures: Essays on Poetry* (Penned in the Margins, 2010).

⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'On Poesy and Art' (1818).

obsession with the pun. The playful poems in *WORD GAMES* (p.155) make use of collective nouns, anagrams, Scrabble and Sudoku. Here poetic form becomes, in the words of Jon Stone (again, writing on Facebook), ‘a playground climbing frame’.

The final section of this book, *AND OTHER INVENTIONS* (p.161), is partly inspired by the Scottish poet and editor Roddy Lumsden. Roddy is a serial inventor of new forms, with names like the Sevenling, the Hebdomad and the Ripple Poem. These forms combine linguistic playfulness with the obsessiveness of the puzzle writer (Roddy is a trivia buff and has worked as a puzzle and quiz writer). Perhaps in ten or fifty years time, the Wilson, the Sudo and the Yvette Carte-Blanche will be as popular as the haiku and pantoum are now. After all, every form must start somewhere.

Form is not something merely to be ignored as irrelevant and old-fashioned or, conversely, defended at all costs against the barbarians of free verse. In any vital literary culture, form must be subject to repeated renewal. In showcasing a wide, though far from exhaustive, range of new forms, this anthology speaks, I hope, to the enduring biodiversity of contemporary poetry. If form is, as *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines it, a ‘critical term with a confusing variety of meanings’, then this collection embraces that variety and celebrates confusion.⁶

Tom Chivers
London, February 2012

⁶ www.oxfordreferenceonline.com

TRADITIONAL REVISED

Once

COLETTE BRYCE

*Some words you may use only once.
Repeat them to some newer heart
and all your accuracy is gone.*

Sweetheart, Darling. Years on,
how the old terms fail;
words that we loved with, once.

Older, on our second chance,
we stand, faltering hearts
in hands, inaccurate

and passionate, in love's
late, unfurnished rooms,
full of the words we cannot use;

and drive home, the same
streets, drop through the gears
to steer around the gone

words, the known
words, the beautiful outworn
words, those we may use only once,
all our accuracy gone.

「 A skinny villanelle. The lines in italics are from Denise Riley's poem 'Two Ambitions to Remember'. 」

Hello my friend

HANNAH SILVA

I am contacting you with something urgent,
you have always been a good friend.
I need to inform you of the following:
It is important that we remain connected.
It is important we don't avoid the subject.
Please switch on your TV and watch the news.

Nothing happens in the world that isn't in the news,
nothing happens in the news that isn't urgent,
nothing happens until there is an urgent subject
and I would not be contacting you my friend
if it wasn't for the importance of remaining connected,
if it wasn't that so many are following.

There is perhaps something sinister about following
with such attentiveness the many faces of the news.
Sometimes I wonder if we really need to be connected
to an idea, a chink in history that only now is urgent.
I wonder why I feel the need for a friend
when friendship has become a meaningless subject.

Yet I am asking you to stand alongside me on the subject,
I ask you to confess that we have been following
the instructions of a face we both called a friend
and I ask you to smile with me as we state that the news

of this latest update is a shock and that retraction is urgent
and we celebrate the fact that minds have connected.

There was a time when people became connected
when we connected them, became subject
when we subjected them, their ideas were never urgent
until we believed them. They followed and kept following,
we told our stories and our stories became news.
Keep dancing and you will always have a friend.

I understand the world through faces I call friends,
every day I ensure to remain connected.
There are many sources from which I glean news
in the space above my thoughts I leave 'no subject'.
There are hundreds of people who are following
my brief statements and their replies are always urgent.

Hello my dear friend there is no subject no winning numbers
I am keeping you connected and I am following you
I've told you the good news and now await your urgent respond.

┌ A sestina whose εννοι (repeated phrase) is from spam emails. ┐
└ ───┘