

The Lure of Tradition*

Preface: Approaching Form

I thought I'd start this with a passage I recently ran across in Michael Schmidt's *Lives of the Poets*, where he describes Doctor Johnson's distinction between what he called "intrinsic and extrinsic forms." He says: "The complex association of words with thought, image, speaker and prosody we call form, intrinsic form; it may include conventional external form like the sonnet, which we recognize, but we respond only if intrinsic form is correct."

We can dispense with his 'intrinsic/extrinsic' terminology – but I think he makes a useful distinction here. If I understand him, he's saying whatever structural form we may choose for a poem, and however well we apply the rules for that structure, it's how we use words with the range of poetic techniques available to us, that will make or break the poem. This rings true to me, and I've found it helpful to keep in mind when thinking about different structures for different poems.

Also, before I talk about my own poems and process, it might be useful if I mention a few things that, along the way, have become important to me when writing to a set structure.

First, I see the elements for any structure more as guidelines than prescriptions. Sometimes I abide by all elements; sometimes I don't – depending on what it is about the form that attracts me, what I think I can achieve, or what might be most important for the particular poem I have in mind. And, on what I think will make writing it both a pleasure and a challenge.

* Talk given by **Sandy Shreve** to Kate Braid's Malaspina College form poetry classe: 2002)

The next thing I should say at the outset is that for me, form and content must work together. When I decide to write a particular poem in a given form, it's based on my sense that this will enhance meaning.

Finally, having a framework to write to seems to help more than hinder my poetic process. Managing the same techniques available to us in free verse – metaphor, image, music, line length, line break, etc., – within a set structure, seems to enhance rather than stifle creativity. Establishing a structure somehow demands that I balance and shape the free-flow of inspiration, not only in the editing stage but also as I go along in the first draft, much as I imagine a sculptor must do if she is not to ruin the stone she's chiselling. This seems to establish a kind of tension that can take the writing in unexpected directions.

First: The Sonnet

I'll start with a sonnet, "Susan Dixon's Sampler." I chose the sonnet for this poem because I wanted a common, traditional form to go with the theme of ancestors (the sampler is dated 1861). I wanted the pattern that a traditional form offers because samplers are patterns (the standard needlework is the alphabet and a homily, name & date; this one's homily is 'Forget not to do good'). Nonetheless, as you'll see, I took liberties with the form, to suit the needs of the poem – in some ways I stray from, and in others adhere to or mix and match, the most common sonnet rules.

SUSAN DIXON's SAMPLER: 1861 (*Norton, NB*)

An alphabet of thread hangs on my wall
its colour scheme maroon and celadon
embroidered by a young girl's hand
More than a century back, she began
to sew the space between the warp and weft
mending gaps of time — a work she left
in some old trunk where her daughters
decades later found and framed this treasure

See how the green has bleached Her signature
and motto almost blend into the mesh
as if oblivion is fate My eye can
just make out the message and recall

an ancestry of women, my mother's mother's mother's name
her stitched calligraphy a lineage I can ascertain

(from: *Belonging*, by Sandy Shreve; Sono Nis Press: 1997)

I kept the octave of a Petrarchan sonnet (which is two stanzas, octave and sestet). And here, as is traditional, the octave establishes the scene or problem that the rest of the poem comments on or resolves. But the final six lines consist of a quatrain and a couplet — which is how a Shakespearean (4/4/4/2) sonnet ends. I did this because I wanted the closing couplet to have a bit more emphasis than it seemed to have when left as the end of a sestet.

- Metrically, I decided to stick as closely as possible to a pentameter (5 foot) line, not only because it's in the sonnet tradition, but also because it would help keep the lines longer, which I wanted for a more thoughtful tone. The closing couplet is intentionally even longer, with heptameter (7 foot) lines. I didn't, however, want to

stick to a constant iambic foot, as that struck me as too monotonous. So, I focussed mainly on syllable count (the norm in the pentameter lines is 10, with a range of 8-11 per line) and heavy stresses (5 per line), both while I initially composed, and later while I edited, the poem. I didn't think about why I did this, it just felt natural. It never occurred to me at the time to scan the poem – instead, I tested how it worked by reading aloud. When, quite recently, I finally did scan it, I found there is considerable variety in the feet despite the overall heavy stress & syllabic consistency in the lines. [A note on what I see as the difference between metre and rhythm, because to me they do seem to be somewhat distinct. I can best explain this with a comparison to music: metre strikes me as the back-beat you hear in a song while rhythm involves more of the melody – in writing, this seems to be created by the sounds of the words you choose, and how they work in combination. So it involves, for example, techniques like assonance, consonance, alliteration, hard and soft syllables, longer and shorter words, caesura, repetition, enjambment, the relation of phrase to line to sentence as they work their way through the stanzas, and so on.]

- As to the rhyme scheme, I didn't pre-plan and then apply it. Rather, it came about as I wrote the poem. It is a(a) bb cc dd dcba ee, which is traditional only in that it has a maximum of 5 different rhymes, like the Petrarchan (abba/abba/cdecde), and there's a closing rhymed couplet, like the Shakespearean (abab/cdcd/efef/gg or abba/cddc/effe/gg: final couplet expresses central theme). Many of the rhymes are 'near' rather than 'true'.

Using near rhymes corresponds to what the poem is talking about: our almost, but not entirely, invisible female lineage. It occurred to me as I was writing the poem that if I linked the rhymes in the second stanza with those in the first, I could, very subtly through those rhymes 'stitch' the narrator's commentary about the sampler to its history (described in the octave). The second stanza rhymes are in reverse order from how they appear in the octave, which is intended to give a sense of moving back through history.

Next: Whatever Comes My Way

It wasn't until I was in my late 30s that I began to 'discover' other forms. Kate and I were both in the Vancouver Industrial Writers' Union for a number of years. In VIWU we often workshoped our poems, and at a meeting sometime in 1989, Kirsten Emmott brought her "Labour Pantoum." I admired the way the line repetition progressed through the poem, and especially how it worked so well with the content – which started out with a family travelling, the young children asking at the outset, "are we there yet? are we there yet?", their eager anticipation and the difficulty of having to wait – all this was interwoven with the experience of a doctor ministering to a woman going through labour. It was exhilarating to see how the repetition enhanced the feeling in the poem. I went home and looked up the 'rules' for the pantoum, anxious to write my own.

DUST

returns to touch the surfaces of things
A soft pollen of memory gathers, grey
as dusk, grafts us with its skin of sleep
embracing days with dreams

A soft pollen of memory gathers grey
invisible as ghosts who wander here
embracing days with dreams
particles collect to sheathe my lives

invisible, as ghosts who wander here
layer keepsakes with the stealth of time
Particles collect to sheathe my lives
until my hand picks up the cloth to dust

Layer keepsakes with the stealth of time
a thin shadow before my eyes
until my hand picks up the cloth to dust
around the room I waltz and gently touch

a thin shadow before my eyes
the ceramic ballerina's pose takes hold
around the room, I waltz and gently touch
the friend, who leaving, left for me a dance

the ceramic ballerina's pose takes hold
as dusk grafts us with its skin of sleep
The friend, who leaving, left for me a dance
returns to touch the surfaces of things

- from *Bewildered Rituals* by Sandy Shreve; Polestar Press: 1992

Pantoum: “A Malayan verse form which has been used in French and occasionally in English. There are an indefinite number of stanzas, each consisting of a quatrain rhyming *abab*. The second and fourth lines of each stanza become the first and third lines of the next. In the last stanza, the second and fourth lines are the first and third lines of the opening stanza reversed; thus, the poem ends with the same line with which it begins” (*A Reader's Guide to Literary Terms*, Karl Beckson & Arthur Ganz pp. 145-146).

Since it was the line repetition that inspired me, I simply ignored the rhyme scheme in this form. For some time I'd wanted to write about dusting, how when I touch each knick-knack, I remember the person connected to it. The pantoum seemed a good fit – the way the lines somersault over each other and into the next stanza, then are left behind as new lines take over. This seemed to incorporate my own movements around the room, daydreaming from one object and memory to the next, to while away an otherwise mindless, repetitive task.

I sat down with my blank piece of paper and sketched the line repetition pattern down the side of the page so I wouldn't forget it. By doing this, I could avoid interrupting the writing with frequent visits to my dictionary of forms to remind myself what I was doing. It worked well, keeping me aware of the pattern, but somehow at the same time letting me slip it to the back of my mind. This would become my standard approach for most other forms I attempted. Then, I just started writing – much as I would any free verse poem. Except, while writing "Dust" – and I know this is going to sound odd, but – I was in a kind of rhythmic trance, like floating on the ocean. With each swell, a line would arrive, then there'd be a lull; then with the next swell, another line... on and on until the poem was done. Now I was hooked on form poems – I wanted more.

Over the next year I looked for, or stumbled across, other forms, and tried them out – first a villanelle, then a triolet, a palindrome, a sestina. I continued to be mainly attracted to any form that involved repetition of some sort, and the challenge of matching a new form to a particular idea.

At some point someone in VIWU (I think it was Kirsten) suggested we all write an erotic poem. I was terrified, having never done anything like that before. I decided I might be able to write a love poem, and wound up doing one in free verse. Then I realized it was maybe, a little bit, sort of, erotic; that maybe the idea wasn't so scary after all. True to my passion at the time, I started looking for a 'form' to spur me on – and found the triolet.

Triolet: One of the French fixed forms of verse, used by English poets ... in the late nineteenth century. Containing only two rhymes, the triolet has a total of eight lines: the first two are repeated as the last two; the fourth is the same as the first. The rhyme scheme is *abaaabab*. (from *A Reader's Guide to Literary Terms*, Karl Beckson & Arthur Ganz, p. 220)

The New Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms adds to this: "The challenge of the form lies in managing the intricate repetition so that it seems natural and inevitable, and in achieving, in the repetitions, variety of meaning or, at least, a shift in emphasis." (p.319)

MAKING LOVE

making love with you I feel
my body wrap around the earth
a warm cocoon, content long after
making love with you. I feel
at home with everyone all day
cannot imagine indifference after
making love. With you, I feel
my body wrap around the earth

from *Bewildered Rituals* by Sandy Shreve; Polestar Press: 1992

Initially, I thought the phrase "making love with you" might work for the line used three times in this form, since making love is something we definitely want to keep repeating. As I tinkered with the considerable constraints of this little poem, I found that by extending the phrase by adding 'I feel' I could emphasize the first two, middle, and last two words differently each time I used the line, hopefully making the repetition less tedious. Also, once I was working with different emphases in the repeated lines, doors opened to ideas for the unrepeated ones. (By the way, I think of this as more of a love poem than an erotic one – while I wrote it, the intent to do something erotic was subsumed by what the poem wanted to be.)

Again, I ignored the rhyme scheme – in such a short poem, with so much line repetition, it seemed like overkill to me.

Sometime in spring or summer 1990, I picked up a chapbook of Pender Island poets – and read Gudrun Wight's "Garage Sale: A Palindrome." Until that moment, it had never occurred to me that the form of 'able was I ere I saw Elba' could be applied to a poem. I fell in love with the palindrome and instantly knew I had to try it. (Much later, a friend told me Bertolt Brecht used this form, which may be where Wight picked it up.)

It took awhile to come up with a subject, but after a few months, I remembered that I'd been meaning to write about two men who had danced beautifully, using marshal arts techniques, at an annual festival in the park near my home. It occurred to me the palindrome might be the right form for that, so I tried it and wound up with:

DANCE

this is how the body can move
with grace and fortitude
remember them, two men
to the beat of one drum
their gymnastic limbs swinging
over and under, around
in the soft night air of a park
karate kicks just this far from skin
never come to blows
hands open into air
slow motion, a precision pose
anger transformed to the beautiful
in a dance

in a dance
anger transformed to the beautiful
slow motion, a precision pose
hands open into air
never come to blows
karate kicks just this far from skin
in the soft night air of a park
over and under, around
their gymnastic limbs swinging
to the beat of one drum
remember them, two men
with grace and fortitude
this is how the body can move

from *Bewildered Rituals* by Sandy Shreve; Polestar Press: 1992

When I started writing this, I realized the start to finish to start movement of the lines in the form would help to evoke the way the men repeatedly approached, withdrew from and approached each other in their dance. As the poem took shape, the form gave the content an added shift, a kind of dialectic. The first part begins with the focus on the potential in men, using these two as an example, and ends with the transformative power of art; while the second part begins with the art and ends with the men. The two main elements of the poem, because of the form, become inextricably linked in a way that would not be possible if it consisted of just one of the stanzas. This is accentuated by how the lines work differently with one another

in each stanza – for example, in stanza one it's the karate kicks that never come to blows; in stanza two, it's the hands...

Regarding process, while writing a palindrome – even the first draft – I keep an eye out to see if the lines are working, or have the potential to work, both backward and forward. One of the biggest challenges in editing this form is that any alteration to a line end or beginning can derail the pattern.

Finally, I'll say a bit about one of two glosas I wrote in 1995, inspired by those in P.K. Page's book *Hologram* (1994). So really, each of mine is a 'glosa on a glosa'. Page, in her "Forward" to the book, says she used "this form as a way of paying homage to those poets whose work [she] fell in love with in [her] formative years." (pp. 9-10) This sparked my initial urge to write a glosa – I wanted to honour Page, whose work I'd read and admired for a long time. What made it possible for me to do this, though, was that her glosas deeply resonated with me – and there were content connections right at hand, in potential poems that had been on my mind for awhile.

Glosa: "...the opening quatrain written by another poet; followed by four ten-line stanzas, their concluding lines taken consecutively from the quatrain; their sixth and ninth lines rhyming with the borrowed tenth. Used by the poets of the Spanish court, the form dates back to the late 14th and early 15th century." (P.K. Page, *Hologram*, p. 9-10)

BIRD WATCHER AT DORCHESTER CAPE

*But occasionally, when he least expects it,
in the glass of a wave a painted fish
like a work of art across his sight
reminds him of something he doesn't know*

"Poor Bird"

P.K. Page

How could she miss them, pale tan on the mud flats,
a myriad of peeps here somewhere, come from away to feed –
she stands at the edge of a gravel road straining to see.
The tide nibbling in and the bright bluebells
twitching with Queen Anne's lace in the wind, at first
fill up her eyes. Then the land begins to lift.
Again and again, all those birds, blurred air, composed profusion
the perfect music of a fugue, this synchronicity
in a winged field. Something inside her shifts.
But occasionally, when she least expects it

a lone sandpiper stays behind, too intrigued
with its small patch of tidal land to fly
off in the hope of finding what it already has.
Dashing this way and that, it drills in familiar ground,
each spot offering something
undiscovered, something the whole flock missed.
The solitaire scatters prints along the shore
until suddenly, in the wash of the oncoming tide
it halts. Stares at the water as if
in the glass of a wave a painted fish

appears, brilliant fins stiff in its liquid home,
an exotic body rising from the depth of somewhere else
and with each breath of the bay, drifting closer
to the sandpiper's feet, a colourful puzzle.
She observes the stillness of the bird
imagines it will soon take flight
half hoping it will find
its designated place in the flock, returning now
a curvature of movement, brown and white
like a work of art across her sight

a restless sketch, sunlit into diamonds and topaz,
the radiance luring her gaze away
from the odd sandpiper enchanted, she thinks, by the tide.
She blinks in disbelief at jewelled air
the like of which she's never seen before.
The glitter flutters briefly, then the show
dissolves to camouflage. Her heart beats wild as wings
when the solitaire breaks its trance to race
straight into the multitude, whose safe shadow
reminds her of something she doesn't know.

(from: *Belonging*, by Sandy Shreve; Sono Nis Press: 1997)

The correlation between my poem and Page's is straightforward: Page's, a glosa on Elizabeth Bishop's "Sandpiper," is about the bird and includes a searching theme. I'd been wanting to write about the incredible flocks of sandpipers that stop near Dorchester Cape in New Brunswick on their annual migration, and of how I often feel more like a visitor than someone who 'belongs' when I go home to the Maritimes. In the writing, a second theme emerged – my fear of crowds.

Also, I should note that I 'cheated' a bit with the borrowed lines here: in Page's poem the pronoun is male; in my poem I changed it to

female. I did, however, follow the rhyme scheme in the glosa because it seemed a way to more closely link my own poem to the borrowed lines.

(Just an aside – call this an example of why poets lie' – had I been absolutely geographically accurate in this poem, the title would have been "Bird Watcher at Johnson's Mills" which is actually where people go to see the sandpipers (you can't easily get to nearby Dorchester Cape, even though it's kind of just around the corner – both are on Shepody Bay, off the Bay of Fundy). Anyway, no offence intended to the people who live there and, understandably, get frustrated when people call their area Dorchester Cape (which happens a lot), but "Johnson's Mills" just didn't work – it doesn't immediately give you the sense of shoreline or water and its sounds don't connect at all with "bird watcher", which alliterates so well with Dorchester Cape. And rhythmically it makes a less interesting title (dactyl iamb iamb as opposed to dactyl iamb anapest)... So, in the interests of poetry, I went with the inaccurate place name.)

Anyway, to get back to the glosa – Page describes far better than I can some of the challenges of this form, so I'll give her the final word on this.

She says: "the real work of writing the glosas proved to be [the] search for suitable lines." (pp. 11-12) And: "At first I had no clear understanding of what I needed from the borrowed lines – gradually I learned. They had to be end-stopped, or give the illusion of so being; as nine of my lines would separate them from each other, they had to give me nine lines' worth of space; as well, their rhythm had to be one I could work with, not from the level at which one does an exercise –

one can do anything as an exercise – but from that deeper level where one's own drums beat. Finally, and vitally, they had to parallel in an intimate way my own knowledge, experience, or – but preferably and – some other indefinable factor I could recognize but not name." (p.10)

Afterword: Tracking Changes

Kate asked if I'd be willing to walk through the editing process for one of my poems. I thought a quite short poem might be suitable for this, so I've chosen a tanka, "Woman Combing Her Hair – The Coiffure."

Unlike most of the poems I've written – whether applying a particular form or using free verse – this one reached its final version within a few days and very few drafts.

It's part of a sequence inspired by Toulouse-Lautrec's *Elles* series of lithographs (most are of the day to day life of prostitutes, not engaged in their profession – depicting them as ordinary people rather than as only erotic or immoral). I wrote each poem in the voice of a woman in the lithograph – either speaking from inside the picture, or viewing it herself, and commenting on it.

While I was writing this sequence, I decided I wanted one of the poems to be in a Japanese verse form – a nod to the fact that Lautrec's lithographs were influenced by Japanese block prints. According to the *New Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms* the tanka is "the definitive literary form in Japanese poetry" (p. 306) – so it seemed an appropriate choice. An added attraction was that I'd yet to try my hand at this form.

At the time, I was also reading Jane Hirshfield's *Nine Gates – Entering the Mind of Poetry*. She says that "behind every tanka stands the essence of a particular story, a set of circumstances" (p. 87). Later, she says that "The use of description of the natural world to explore human feeling is a basic attribute of Japanese poetry" (p. 90) and uses three tankas to exemplify this. In her essay on translation, where she does a lot on tankas, she identifies a Japanese device often used: the pivot word – which is "a word that can be read in two different ways, both intended to be part of the poem." (p. 76) As far as I can tell, tankas don't have to include a pivot word, but once I was editing this poem I decided I wanted to include one ... if I could.

A tanka is 5 lines – the first three, a haiku (5,7,5 syllables in lines 1,2 & 3 respectively), the last two, 7 syllables each. It's worth noting that often haiku in English use fewer syllables (though I usually stick to the given number) – largely because of the difference between the English and Japanese languages. There are lots of other 'rules' for traditional haiku and for tanka – which people follow or break, according to their own inclinations. *Dragonfly* (a haiku quarterly in the U.S.) for instance has a full page of rules for the haiku – all written in the negative, what it 'isn't' being their way of saying what it might be.

I'm not sure I can articulate why I chose this lithograph for the tanka, other than to say that from the start it somehow just felt right.

Woman Combing Her Hair — The Coiffure

I sit on the floor
alone, in my darkened room —
dream of sunflowers,
eyes on the ground, looking much
like mine; the wind in their hair.

I started out with the woman describing how she saw herself portrayed in the lithograph – as voluptuous, yet oblivious to her appearance, more intent on combing her hair. But this didn't work, didn't get past straight reportage, failed to include any reference to the natural world and, because of the words I chose, seemed to violate Lautrec's intention of not focusing on eroticism. (I didn't bring this very first draft – it's far too embarrassing!)

So, I started again, moving to the woman speaking from inside the picture, trying to imagine what she might be thinking. As soon as I started on this approach, it seemed to offer richer possibilities, and it opened the door to the sunflower image.

Draft 3

I sit on the floor
 alone, in my darkened room .
 thinking of sunflowers,
 their heavy heads, eyes as brown
 as mine; and my tangled hair

In drafts 3 & 4, I had syllable count difficulties with line 3, which I didn't resolve until draft 8 (when I changed imagine to dream of). In draft 4 I altered the simile in the last two lines, from comparing the brownness of the flower's and woman's eyes to a more general comparison (huge and brown). Not a lot of progress here....

Draft 4

I sit on the floor
 alone, in my darkened room .
 imagine ~~imagining~~ ~~thinking~~ of sunflowers,
 their heavy heads, ~~eyes as~~ huge brown eyes
 like as mine; and my tangled hair

At first I liked 'tangled hair' but then found it wasn't going anywhere. I was able to let it go by draft 6.

Draft 6

I sit on the floor
 alone, in my darkened room.
 Imagine sunflowers,
 their heavy heads, huge brown eyes
 like mine, ~~and my tangled hair~~ the wind in their hair.

By draft 8 I finally saw that the superfluous adjectives for sunflowers — 'heavy' heads and 'huge' eyes — were clichés and had to go. Here I shifted emphasis to an image of what the sunflowers were doing (looking at the ground) which paralleled the lithographic image of the woman. But now I faced the larger difficulty of how to get the eyes image right. (In the lithograph, by the way, the viewer cannot see the woman's eyes.)

Draft 8

I sit on the floor
 alone, in my darkened room.
 dream of ~~Imagine~~ sunflowers,
~~their heavy heads, huge brown eyes~~ looking at the ground, eyes brown
 like mine, the wind in their hair.

Finally, in draft 9 I took out 'brown', realizing that it's implied in 'sunflowers' as the eye colour. At that point it occurred to me that if I made 'looking' the pivot word, the poem might be more interesting and might strengthen the eyes image. This took me to the final draft. So 'looking' not only compares the woman's and sunflowers' eyes, it connects the direction of both gazes.

Draft 9

I sit on the floor
 alone, in my darkened room —
 dream of sunflowers,
~~looking at the ground, eyes brown~~ eyes on the ground, looking much
 like mine; the wind in their hair.

References

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Postscript: All the forms discussed in this talk – and many more – are explained, with various examples from numerous Canadian poets – in *In Fine Form – The Canadian Book of Form Poetry* (edited by Kate Braid and Sandy Shreve, with a preface by P.K. Page); Raincoast Books: 2005.