

## TEACHING THE ART OF POETRY

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### THE CENTO

by Linda Black

The Cento, an historic poetic form, relies entirely on other poets' published words. Ausonius (c310 – c395) was the Roman originator of the form; the ancient Greeks assembled centos in homage to Homer; the Romans in homage to Virgil. When you read a poem and find a line you admire, or wish you had written, or which appeals to your sensibilities, take it – it can be yours! The Cento gives permission to appropriate or borrow the words of others. The name itself comes from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century Latin word meaning 'patchwork garment', so it is a collage of sorts – a quilt, a mosaic. The word 'cento' is also Italian for 'one hundred' – some are exactly 100 lines long, culled from one poet's work by another as a tribute. Using other people's words can be liberating; by taking a break from the constraints of your own mind, you are free to play, to make connections. Of course your own unique 'voice' will come into play.

#### THE EXERCISE

The first step is to read–this exercise is also an extension of your reading. You may choose poems/poets that you are familiar with -there may be a poem you go back to again and again -or go for ones you haven't read before. Here is a chance to dip into some of those books you have been meaning to read! In Virgil's time it may have been seen as 'raising one's credentials' to quote from a well-known literary figure. This may create a frisson, as lines that are chosen may be well known, but will read differently out of their usual context.

Next, choose your lines, taking only 1 or 2 from each poem–go with your instincts, and keep a note of where the lines come from. I would suggest choosing quite quickly rather than deliberating, as you can't know at this stage how the lines will interact with each other (you may have an inkling but that is all), nor can you anticipate the final result; there is a challenge ahead of you which could be exciting. Compile around 2 pages of lines from which to select. You may want to print out these pages and cut them into strips for arranging. Although there are no restrictions regarding the number of lines a Cento can consist of, I would suggest at least 10. David Lehman's Cento 'The Oxford Poem' (see below) runs to 49.

Once chosen, the crafting is of course in how you arrange the lines –here, all the considerations of writing any poem come into play. Do you want a through line, a narrative of sorts, a sense driven poem-or will you go for disjuncture, unusual juxtapositions, where the mind can fly in different directions? Will you focus on images or abstracts (yes, that is permitted!), or surprise, humour, rhyme, rhythm? You may, for example, want to mix the lyric with the more experimental. Here is an opportunity to be adventurous with your syntax, to do something different, to challenge yourself. Put your own take on it –reinvent and enjoy.

#### YOU MAY

- Play with lineation/enjambment so that selected lines are not always one complete line –in other words, different source lines can mix
- Change tenses (or not)
- Add conjunctions/prepositions (or not)
- Use traditional punctuation –or none at all
- You may discard some lines

You may not add your own words!

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### CENTO EXAMPLES

1. [The Dong With the Luminous Nose](#) by John Ashbery
2. [To a Waterfowl](#) by John Ashbery(1961)
3. [Wolf Cento](#) by Simone Muench(2011)
4. [The Oxford Cento](#) by David Lehman
5. *Ode: Salute to the New York School 1950-1970(a libretto)* by Peter Gizzi

Gizzi's poem is an abecedarian cento of New York School poems—it is 43 pages long. He says 'First, I put together a chronological bibliography of over 100 books published by New York poets from 1950 to 1970. Many of these books are deeply out of print so I had to do some real digging. Then I extracted lines from each book to compose the cento ...The cento also works as an index to the bibliography.'

### 'I COULD NOT SAY I TRIED' CENTO BY LINDA BLACK

I set out bowls & plates which become a house  
 make an evening pass quickly enough  
 — compare it to a plateaux Sleep above  
 to get to other places chopping & fitting  
 hair dishevelled — no gleam & tinkle in it  
 — like a hand of which the arm  
 is not visible Sometimes I come ready  
 in pieces My face I think is my own  
 How thirsty I am still sat meaning  
 to ask — already sick of summer  
 It is a quiet room & the green of the park  
 could be touched I rise from the table  
 abruptly Some of us scream  
 as the weather changes

Sources: Peter Redgrove, [John Ashbery](#), [Maria Tsvetaeva](#), [Lee Harwood](#), [Tom Raworth](#)

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