

## The Tritina

Certain repetitive verse forms, such as the villanelle and sestina, have been part of our poetic toolkit for centuries. George Szirtes talks of the sense of ‘community’ a poet feels when working in a traditional form; for me it’s like walking along a footpath which is familiar, well-worn, but in the end, the destination is never the same. Szirtes says that the ‘community is, by its nature, a community of ghosts’. In that statement is the ambition to keep form alive (and for each generation to bring new ideas) but sometimes the presence of all those other ghostly poets littering the footpath can be a burden as well as an incentive.

It’s useful to remember that the villanelle and sestina were created for musical accompaniment; inherent in the form is the notion of chorus or refrain. But the refrain better be worth repeating, otherwise the poem becomes predictable, static. In the case of the villanelle, each of the 2 refrain lines is repeated 4 times in the space of 19 lines. In the case of the sestina, the poet must select 6 strong words, each to be repeated 7 times, and keep them moving naturally through the poem, which must keep going, out of necessity, for 39 lines. A lot of sestinas run out of steam around the fourth stanza (where most good ones attempt to make a turn). I quote a well-known poet, who says that ‘life is too short for the sestina’. I have to say I agree; there are very few that don’t outstay their welcome.

Of course there is, in any poem, the tension between what you want to say and how to structure it; sometimes the form can defeat the intention. So how do you utilise the interesting constraints that a villanelle or a sestina provide without feeling straightjacketed by them? This is a great age of poetic improvisation, where new forms are being invented by poets who like the challenge of formal structure but want the freedom to make their own rules (in other words, to stray off the path); all in the spirit of continuing traditions, but revitalising them and adapting them to our modern voices.

The American poet Marie Ponsot invented the tritina, which she describes as the square root of the sestina. Instead of six repeated words, you choose three, which appear at the end of each line in the following sequence: 123, 312, 231; there is a final line, which acts as the envoi, which features all three words in the order they appeared in the first stanza. So the poem is structured as three tercets and one single line in conclusion. There is often a turn between the ninth and tenth lines, which gives the tritina similar properties to the sonnet. Ponsot says that poetic forms like the tritina are ‘instruments of discovery. The forms create an almost bodily pleasure in the poet. What you’re doing is trying to discover. They are not restrictive. They pull things out of you. They help you remember’.

Here is her tritina, ‘**Roundstone Cove**’:

The wind rises. The sea snarls in the fog  
far from the attentive beaches of childhood —  
no picnic, no striped chairs, no sand, no sun.

Here even by day cliffs obstruct the sun;  
moonlight miles out mocks this abyss of fog.  
I walk big-bellied, lost in motherhood,

hunched in a shell of coat, a blindered hood.  
Alone a long time, I remember sun —  
poor magic effort to undo the fog.

Fog hoods me. But the hood of fog is sun.

(Marie Ponsot, *Springing: New and Selected Poems* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2002))

Look at how the circular motion of the poem reflects the various roundnesses; the name of the place, the return to childhood, the pregnancy of the speaker, the hood. ‘Hood’ is a great choice for repetition; it gives us ‘childhood’ and ‘motherhood’, thus echoing the circularity of generations. The form has a simplicity that you can’t achieve with a sestina, because of its length, and it feels less ‘rigid’ than a villanelle, although it suits a similar circular argument. Another main difference between the tritina and the villanelle (which makes it perhaps more similar to the sestina) is that you are not locked into end rhyme, which again, gives the poem a freer, more natural movement, although Ponsot has kept to a fairly regular metrical line.

Here is another example, ‘**A Bowl by Lucie Rie**’, by Susan Watson:

It’s there. A curve of opaque light. Pure form.  
The subtlety of not quite white. It’s clear  
that emphasis has been erased in making.

The pressure of the hand, the marks of making,  
the language and the stories that inform  
the rhythm of its shape, spin clear

away. A rim that dips and climbs and forms  
a perfect imperfection in its making.  
Perched on a graceful foot, the light curve clear.

Making form light, single and clear and there.

(from *A Room to Live In: A Kettle's Yard Anthology* (Salt, 2007))

The choice of repeated words is interesting: ‘making’ and ‘form’ could apply to the crafting of the bowl (and also of the poem), whereas ‘clear’ is a statement on what is created. The enjambment between the second and third stanzas suggests a movement away from what is made to what it represents. And there are lovely internal repetitions, such as ‘light’ and ‘perfect’ (which is contrasted with ‘imperfect’) which keep the structure lively and alert throughout. What a great form for the object it’s describing! Yet another kind of circularity.

Here’s a final example, a recent poem of mine called ‘**Floor**’:

I walk your surface, over nicks and scars.  
I want to finish. I find my image in your varnish.  
My bones are weary pearls.

I fell hard for your pack of lies, your pearls  
of wisdom; when in truth you scar  
foundations, hold the faces of the vanished

in your face. Their eyes are varnished,  
they come to me in dreams, like salvaged pearls.  
You undermine me, you are never scared;  
your pearly words will scar then vanish.

(In *Magma* 52, March 2012)

The poem is based on an installation by the artist Susan Collis, who set pieces of mother of pearl into the wooden floor of the gallery, so visitors had difficulty finding the art work, sometimes treading on the precious substance before they realised it was beneath their feet. I wanted to use the tritina to suggest going round in circles trying to locate something which remains hidden, mysterious, strange. I've taken a few liberties with the form, allowing variation from 'varnish' to 'vanish' (words which both express invisibility) and 'scar' to 'scare' (I think of 'scared' as a turning point in the poem). I also used 'scar' to suggest the violation of the floor in Collis's piece, and 'pearl' to refer to the medium; important ideas in both poem and artwork which bear repeating.

So there are some examples of a relatively new form on the block. It embraces the trinity of villanelle, sestina and sonnet: it is perfect for the circular argument often found in a villanelle, but has the more conversational feel of a sestina and the proportions (and turn) of a sonnet. It wears its formality loosely, but then the reader is surprised to find a pattern emerging from the page. It is a perfect form for both contemplation and playfulness.

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