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## THE TURN: WORDS AND MATTER IN THE SESTINA

Uniquely among poetic forms, the sestina is defined exclusively through its pattern of repetition.<sup>1</sup> The constant return of its six end-words (or teleutons) invites the question once posed by John Hollander in relation to refrain, namely whether repeating something makes it less important, or more so.<sup>2</sup> It also invites a larger question concerning the relationship of a poet's word-choice to his subject-matter. As Mutlu Blasing has demonstrated, poetic language is radically material: it draws attention to the non-rational, associative qualities of language that other types of discourse seek to suppress.<sup>3</sup> Repetitions make those qualities visible; their insistent presence renders them conspicuously non-transparent, so that they cease to function purely as signifiers. As Thomas M. Greene has argued:

The meaning of each verbal work of art has to be sought within its unique semantic matrix, what might be called a *mundus significans*, a signifying universe, which is to say a rhetorical and symbolic vocabulary, a storehouse of signifying capacities potentially available to each member of a given culture.<sup>4</sup>

1. For the rules of the sestina, see M. Strand – E. Boland, *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*, New York, W.W. Norton, 2000, p. 21.

2. J. Hollander, *Breaking Into Song: Some Notes on Refrain*, in C. Hosek – P. Parker, *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 75.

3. M.K. Blasing, *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and the Pleasure of Words*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2007, pp. 1-24.

4. T.M. Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1982, p. 20.

This chapter will argue that a sestina lays bare not only its cultural semantic matrix, but also the process of generating new signifying capacities within the context of the poem. Focusing first on two sestinas whose departures from the standard pattern of repetition draw particular attention to the effects of obtrusive repetition, it will go on to examine how the contemporary poets Peter Scupham and Paul Muldoon turn these effects to their own ends. Although Scupham's and Muldoon's approaches to the sestina form are markedly different, both demonstrate how memory operates on a verbal level as well as on the level of subject-matter, as the teleutons themselves become the things that are remembered, and – through their repetition – generative of meanings that could not have been arrived at by any other means, or form.

The sestina *Dear John* makes the effects of obtrusive repetition helpfully visible – though less because of its form than because of its misprints.<sup>5</sup> These came about because the book was published just on the cusp between physical and digital print technologies. The editors were given a copy of the poem typed on almost translucent paper, and when this was scanned, words and phrases that had been whited out with tippex showed through. These were accidentally reproduced in the printed version, so that the third, fourth and fifth stanzas were run together by pairs of letters that reveal where the poet began typing the first word of a new stanza after hitting return once rather than twice, creating a duplication, or stuttering effect:

I'd rather admit writing  
's a hit and miss affair; it might be appropriate  
to  
to picture the author as duchess, honing an appropriate  
wit from a flurry of flamingoes shaping the formal-  
ly perfect game of croquet – but hoops and all, writing  
is less imperious: surely it depends on the occasional,  
light-fingered stroke of luck? Beginning a poem,  
you can't say whether later it'll seem nonsens-  
ic

5. J. Griffiths, *Dear John*, in B. Cokeliss – J. Fenton, *Jellyfish Cupful: Writings in Honour of John Fuller*, [no place of publication], Ulysses, 1997, pp. 27–8.

ical, or whether what started out as nonsense will take wing.

Here, because erased words and syllables – those that had no matter, and didn't matter – retain a real presence, these misprints introduce the question of the relationship between words and subject-matter in a very material way. The nature of the visible erasures, or ghost words, leads neatly to the question of repetition and how this affects meaning. Although repetition is precisely what the sestina depends on, its repeats should occur in a predictable pattern at the ends of lines, not erratically and unpredictably in between them. Because they are formally unexpected and unfortunately conspicuous, the misprints draw attention to the structuring principle of the sestina – recurrence, echo – more than the correctly repeating words do. Being so obviously meaningless, they call into question the value of the formally correct repetitions too.

In *Dear John*, this effect was entirely accidental, but there are sestinas which seem deliberately to invite that question. Barnabe Barnes's *Sestine 4* from *Parthenophil and Parthenope* (1593) is a case in point.<sup>6</sup> This is constructed around the figure of echo, so that each full line is followed by repetition of its last few syllables. The opening lines show how this works in practice:

*Eccho*, what shall I do to my Nymph, when I goe to behold her?

*Eccho*, hold her.

So dare I not, least she should thinke that I make her a pray then?

*Eccho*, pray then.

Yea, but at me she will take scorne, proceeded of honor?

*Eccho*, on her.

Me beare will she (with her to deale so saucilie) neuer?

*Eccho, euer.*

Although superficially this looks like dialogue, it is no such thing: Eccho replies what she has to because she has to, responding mechanically to the speaker's words. Hollander has argued that one of the attributes of echo is «decay or diminution», and Barnes's lines seem to display

6. B. Barnes, *Sestine 4* from *Parthenophil and Parthenope*, in Strand-Boland, *The Making of a Poem* cit., pp. 27-9.

precisely that.<sup>7</sup> The onus of making meaning is put entirely on the human speaker: his questions determine the answers he receives, and these are always partial. Yet Eccho does have a degree of freedom. While the final words of the questions inevitably repeat, according to the rules of the sestina, Eccho's answers sometimes repeat and sometimes differ, and this makes some of her responses seem more uncanny than decayed. Sometimes, the teleuton of the question is «answered» by a word with a different meaning entirely, for example when «honor» is echoed by «on her» in the lines just quoted, or – later in the poem – when «regard so» is echoed by «guard so», or «deserve so» as «serve so». What is more disturbing, however, is that words with opposite meanings may receive identical responses (for example, both «ever» and «never» are echoed by «ever»), and that the echo may entirely reverse the sense of the word it responds to, as when «dishonour» is echoed «honor». Establishing aural clusters of interchangeable sounds with entirely incompatible meanings, the poem becomes a literal representation of automatic writing – or a *performance* of the literal representation of automatic writing. Being mechanical, the repetitions don't so much *make* sense, as actively deny it.

On the face of it, then, the accidental effects that came about in the printing of *Dear John* and the deliberate use of the figure of echo in Barnes's sestina both seem to exemplify what is often identified as one of the main problems with the sestina: that its repetitions detract from rather than enhance the sense, and that it is an arid, arbitrary, games-playing form, whose repetitions are by definition «not important». As Anthony Hecht puts it, sestinas are:

bound [...] by the shackles of those six terminal words. Indeed, something about those compulsory repetitions seems to prohibit the possibility of a sestina developing in the way other kinds of poem do. A familiar lyric freedom is curtailed; richly detailed descriptions are pretty firmly excluded; narrative development, above all, is difficult to accommodate. The resources of the sestina seem astonishingly circumscribed.<sup>8</sup>

7. J. Hollander, *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1981, p. 34.

8. A. Hecht, *Sidney and the Sestina*, in J.F.S. Post, *Green Thoughts, Green Shades: Essays by Contemporary Poets on the Early Modern Lyric*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002, pp. 50–1.

Hecht, however, goes on to identify instances of «triumph over the form», and even in an uneven sestina such as Barnes's, some of the repetitions are significant. Because Eccho's self-repetition occurs in response to diverse prompts, it can be understood not just as nonsensical, but also (in another of Hollander's terms) as «revisionary», revealing what the first speaker leaves implicit: even though the sounds repeat, the repeated phrases have the capacity to mean very different things in their different contexts, or different juxtapositions.<sup>9</sup> They create a play between sameness and difference: between what is heard and what is understood.

One of the ways in which such play can be created is the «turn». Eleanor Cook identifies the word as one that holds a particular significance for poets. It is a word that, as a kind of material pun:

cannot be used at the beginning or end of a line without remembering the tradition of wordplay on *turn*. «Turn», which is what *verse* means etymologically. «Turn», which is what *trope* means etymologically. *Turn*, which in enjambment describes what the reader is doing, albeit with an eye rather than the etymological leg of enjambment, as it walks the line, and strides or limps or hops over the end of the line, and back, westward, to the start of the next line.<sup>10</sup>

Cook, of course, is talking here about the *structural* turn from one line to the next, and this is something that is important to sestina-writers, as they decide to what extent they will allow their six teleutons to dominate the poem: whether their lines will lead up to them and pause, or whether the repetitions will be played down by the running on of the sentence across the line break. But because of their repetitions, sestinas very often also contain a series of *semantic* turns, deriving from the recurrence of the same words in different patterns and – almost inevitably – different senses. As Marianne Shapiro puts it:

The verbal recapitulations within sestinas call on the resources of memory, and the reader becomes involved in a spiralling extension of the words, without establishing for any one of them a simple, fixed meaning. The uncentered struc-

9. Hollander, *Figure of Echo* cit., pp. 24, 27.

10. E. Cook, *Against Coercion: Games Poets Play*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 176.

ture of the sestina is thus carried out in the continuous metonymies created by the rhyme words.<sup>11</sup>

Even though the first senses in which the teleutons are used remain hauntingly visible on the page, such semantic turns extend them to include additional senses, creating a palimpsest that is at once cumulative and recursive.

This process can be traced in detail in a sestina that, on the face of it, shapes its content very neatly to fit the technical requirements of the form: one that seems to resist Cook's structural turn, but proves nonetheless to create semantic ones. This is Peter Scupham's *War Games* from his collection *The Air Show* (1988).<sup>12</sup> One of several poems in the book that remember Scupham's childhood in the Second World War, it focuses specifically on a child playing with toy soldiers, in a scene established in the opening stanza:

The armies are parading on the carpet.  
Spilled from their call-up papers, coloured boxes,  
They master dressings, drill-books, about-faces.  
Peace was Christmas ribbons, *light wing'd toys*;  
War a sad teddy-bear who feeds on dust  
And fixes bayonet eyes upon the soldiers.

The poem appears rigid on the page, all but one of its six stanzas self-contained like the «Nest upon nest of empty Chinese boxes» that Scupham alludes to at the beginning of the sixth stanza, in an image of container within container that perfectly reflects the way the structure of the sestina encloses and gives form to the speaking voice that ghosts through it. Almost all its lines are grammatically complete in themselves: they form an entire statement or – at the very least – a full clause. The result is that, typically, the pause demanded by the punctuation and the pause implied by the line-break fall together. Although there is enjamb-

11. M. Shapiro, *Hieroglyph of Time: The Petrarchan Sestina*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1977, p. 4.

12. P. Scupham, *War Games*, in Id., *Collected Poems*, Manchester, Carcanet, 2002, pp. 289–90.

ment, even between stanzas, it is underplayed and non-obtrusive: in consequence, the verse form dominates (or at least punctuates) the speech pattern.<sup>13</sup>

This effect is further emphasised by Scupham's use of iambic pentameter, even though it is a slight variant on the metre. Because four of the sestina's six teleutons («carpet», «boxes», «faces», and «soldiers») are two-syllable words with the stress on the first syllable, four of the six lines in each stanza are hypermetric, with an unstressed 11<sup>th</sup> syllable following the last full iambic foot. This means that the pentameter is oddly off-beat, and because the teleutons change position within the stanza, so too do the hypermetric lines: they do not appear in a regular pattern. This affects a reader's aural experience of the sestina, quite literally impacting their sense of finding their feet: ironically, in a poem that repeatedly returns to marching soldiers, the metre is permanently slightly out of step. Nonetheless, it is *recurrently* out of step, and its variation occurs within strict limits: each line is either 10 or 11 syllables, either 5 standard iambic feet or 4 standard feet plus a final hypermetric one. In combination with the coincidence of form and grammar – the self-contained lines and the downplaying of enjambment – these limits place particularly strong emphasis on the six teleutons. Each line – metrically, grammatically, and as naturally spoken – leads up to one of those words and pauses there. And this apparent lack of forward momentum is emphasised by the fact that all six teleutons are nouns: «carpet», «boxes», «faces», «toys», «dust», and «soldiers». Each line ends with a *thing*, as well as a pause. It looks as if there is no «turn», either structurally or semantically.

This appearance of stasis is deceptive, however. There *are* «turns» in the poem, and many of these are generated through the cumulative effect and the interplay of the repeated teleutons. The most obvious way in which this appears is in the fusion of two distinct time-scales: the poem is spoken as if in the child's present («The armies *are* parading on the carpet» [*italics mine*]), but it soon becomes apparent that this is a remem-

13. For the interplay of different types of sound pattern, see further A. Welsh, *Roots of Lyric: Primitive Poetry and Modern Poetics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1978, pp.190–242; cf. A. Leighton, *Hearing Things: The Work of Sound in Literature*, Cambridge, MA, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018, pp. 226–50.

bered present: a scene in the mind of an adult for whom the toy soldiers seamlessly merge with the memory of real armies. Repetition is a particularly economical way of creating such double vision: it ensures that there is no need to spell out the fusion of the two time-frames. Reading from the very end of the second stanza through to the beginning of the fourth provides an example of how that fusion is brought about; the speaker declares that, looking at his soldiers:

I cannot see into those empty boxes,  
*These antique fables nor these fairy toys,*  
 But search for something missing in their faces

And search again, for all familiar faces  
 Are blotted out by rank on rank of soldiers  
 And icy winds which cry *All is but toys,*  
 Lifting the corners of the playroom carpet  
 To show me in the boxroom with the boxes,  
 Watching the tiny parachutes of dust

Marching a leaden army through that dust  
 Towards an enemy with equal faces  
 As dull as mile on mile of cardboard boxes. (ll. 10–21)

Here, at first, the faces of the toys merge with those of soldiers out in icy winds – but even as the real war ghosts through the play war, those same winds lift «the corners of the playroom carpet», and the scene returns to childhood. It is the repetition of «faces» in the last line of the second stanza and first line of the third stanza that enables the movement away from childhood: this re-visits and qualifies the faces of the toys, reinscribing them as soldiers' faces. Similarly, it is the stubborn (and structurally inevitable) resurfacing of the carpet that draws us back to the child's playroom. And throughout the rest of the poem, this movement back and forth keeps recurring, so that it ceases to register *as* a back-and-forth, but instead keeps all time eternally present – or, in the words of the poem, in the only line in which one of the teleutons changes its part of speech (turning from noun into verb): «The past is only what their future faces».

This sestina thus creates a microscopic version of the *mundus significans* that Greene describes as a cultural phenomenon. Each of its redefinitions



is peculiar to this poem: possible only on *this* poem's terms, within *this* poem's stanzaic rooms. But *War Games* is unusual in that its echoes are created not just by internal repetition, but also by allusion, since Scupham takes each instance of the word «toys» from a Shakespeare quotation: «light wing'd toys» (*Othello*, I, III 268); «These antique fables nor these fairy toys» (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V, I 3); «All is but toys» (*Macbeth* II, III 93); «dreams are toys» (*The Winter's Tale*, III, III 38); «silence you airy toys» (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, V, V 41); «Triumphs for nothing and lamenting toys» (*Cymbeline* IV, II 194). Similarly, the final line of the poem, «The soldiers are the figure in my carpet», alludes to the title of a short story by Henry James, in which a novelist likens the «secret» or vision that underpins his work – the one important thing that he is constantly but implicitly «trying to say» – to the pattern or «figure» in a Persian carpet. In consequence, each of these phrases arrives in Scupham's poem already freighted with meaning, and that fact that the quotations are such short snippets that it is not always immediately possible to pin them down only makes them the more haunting; even on the page, their italics materially single them out as not fully belonging.<sup>14</sup>

Once their sources have been identified, these quotations feed into the poem on a thematic level: Shakespeare is part of the culture the toy soldiers of World War II are dying to defend – just as, in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, Septimus Warren Smith volunteers for World War I «to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square».<sup>15</sup> But because the toys of the quotations both qualify and are qualified by the toy soldiers, they also reflect the way that the poem's teleutons create a «culture» unique to this sestina through cumulative repetition. Scupham's choice of nouns for all his teleutons is key to this effect. What Marianne Shapiro observed of Auden's sestina *Have a Good Time* (which – like *War Games* – uses nouns for its teleutons) is equally true of Scupham's poem: «Objects do not summarize thoughts but reflect and complete them».<sup>16</sup> This is more rad-

14. On allusion, see further Cook, *Against Coercion* cit., pp. 99–106, and Hollander, *Figure of Echo* cit..

15. V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, London, The Hogarth Press, 1960, p. 95.

16. Shapiro, *Hieroglyph of Time* cit., p. 196.

ical than it sounds. Although recent work has increasingly emphasised the extent to which poets, still more than other writers, both depend on and foreground their language's "storehouse of signifying capacities", to the extent that their subject-matter is governed by their word-choice, among non-writers there is still a widespread assumption that choice of subject-matter precedes choice of words, and that a poem is capable of being "about" something that is not dependent on its language.<sup>17</sup> In this view, words are the material things that render apprehensible something otherwise intangible – but they are also, by definition, secondary. In Scupham's sestina, however, words and things are equally the stuff of the imagination. It is not that the things come first and are clothed in words, but that words and things are rendered inseparable, as repetition of the teleutons adds the dimensions of time and (shared) perception to the objects. The final line of the poem directly reflects that process. Read in light of James's short story, the statement that «The soldiers are the figure in my carpet» implies that carpet and poem are one and the same, held together by two-timing soldiers.

In *War Games*, then, repetitions create an effect whereby apparently stable, repeated words refer to different entities, and so collapse the distinction between them, providing new ways of thinking about – and thinking *through* – those entities. And they do so by making a virtue of the apparent formal and metrical boundaries of the sestina: it is the stability of the form that makes visible the shape-shifting it contains. In contrast, Paul Muldoon's sestina *The Misfits* defies those boundaries – and in doing so, it conspicuously foregrounds an effect that is implicit in *War Games*: the way in which word-choice and word-transformation may generate a poem's subject-matter.<sup>18</sup> Like Scupham's, this is a poem of childhood memory and of the refashioning of that memory. Its title refers to one of the characters in the poem, a former priest who

17. For the primacy of language in poetic composition, see for example Blasing, *Lyric Poetry* cit.; R. Gibbons, *How Poems Think*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2015; D. Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000.

18. P. Muldoon, *The Misfits*, in Id., *Moy Sand and Gravel*, London, Faber & Faber, 2002, pp. 9–11.

– it is hinted – has paedophile tendencies; it may also refer to the child, the speaker's younger self. But beyond that, it refers to Muldoon's own peculiar take on the sestina. The way the poem appears on the page confirms that it is a «misfit», with its content inappropriately matched to its form. Its line lengths are wildly varied: the shortest are a mere four words; the longest is nineteen; the remaining lines are anywhere in between, and there is no regular pattern of alternation. The poem thus breaks two unwritten rules: that a 20<sup>th</sup> or early 21<sup>st</sup>-century English-language sestina makes a grid-like pattern on the printed page, and that it scans. Instead, the almost outrageous length of the longer lines means that they run over – and this, combined with the lack of any standard pattern of scansion, conceals the line endings and the repetition of the teleutons both visually and aurally; it takes time and a suspicious mind to establish that the poem really is a sestina. Whereas Scupham's poem haunts through the stubborn and visible persistence of words and things, Muldoon's haunts through what is half-heard and what doesn't meet the eye.

Muldoon's relentless transformation of his teleutons («blue», «lift», «seam», «lead», «bend», and «rich») contributes significantly to the effect of shape-shifting. In contrast to Scupham, he varies their parts of speech throughout the poem, and sometimes even changes one into part of a different word altogether. «Blue» shifts from being the second part of «gray-blue» to being a colour in its own right, part of a book title and the Blues; «lift» slips from noun to verb and back again, twice, before becoming the larger part of the Christian name «Clift»; «lead» is both noun and adjective and – once – the second syllable of the past tense «misled»; «bend» remains a verb except when it is part of «South Bend», but (in an echo of Eccho) once appears as its opposite, «unbend». «Rich» does even stranger things. It first turns into «ostrich» and then into the lettering on an apron which, we're told in the third stanza «read, in capital letters, RICH». In the fifth stanza, however:

the RICHARDSON'S TWO-SWARD suddenly began to unbend  
in that distinctive pale blue  
lettering as the seam  
of his bag-apron unstitched itself. (ll. 26–9)

This unexpectedly reveals that the «RICH» of the third stanza was not, in fact, a word, but the first syllable of a printed name. It is a fragment of material text, divorced from its context and made meaningless by being literally misfitted around the waist of the speaker's father, and then re-produced in the text that is the poem, where it «fits» only in its truncated form. This brilliantly exemplifies what Hecht calls «a bravura sense of ridiculousness».<sup>19</sup> Shapiro has suggested that pun and metaphor are rarely occur in the sestina, and that:

Poets are more likely either to produce oscillations of meaning by maintaining lexical constancy and altering the context, or to introduce semantic nuances that transgress but do not obliterate boundaries. The association between sound and sense accordingly develops cumulative meaning.<sup>20</sup>

In Muldoon's case, however, boundaries are quite literally obliterated, as he treats his teleutons like the luck-of-the-draw letters in Scrabble: they are sets of possibilities, rather than entities, and rather than develop cumulative meaning, they propose alternative meanings – and with them, alternative *things*.

This occurs most spectacularly in Muldoon's treatment of the ostrich, in which a fully-fledged bird is generated entirely from word-play. In the sentence that runs from the first into the second stanza, it is introduced as a simile; the speaker informs us that:

I would bend  
my knee and bury my head in the rich  
  
black earth the way an ostrich  
was rumored to bury its head. (ll. 5-8)

Introduced purely for the sake of its second syllable, in the fourth stanza it returns, improbably, in the compound «ostrich- / sized» (ll. 22-3), used – it seems – to allude to the priest's testicles; in the sixth stanza, it becomes an unlikely term of abuse applied to the priest: «Bloody popin-

19. Hecht, *Sidney and the Sestina* cit., p. 56.

20. Shapiro, *Hieroglyph of Time* cit., p. 23.

jay. Peacock. *Ostrich*.» (l. 33). Here there seems to be a kind of back-formation of birds, as the poet's need to end the line on «ostrich» (or rather, «rich») prompts his father's use of other bird-names as name-calling. For «ostrich» to work as the cumulation of the string of abuse, it has to be even more improbable than the previous names – but its effect may also depend on its warped echo of the verb «ostracise», which is precisely the punishment the group of men in the poem are visiting on the priest. This effect is purely aural – divorced from any «genuine», literal sense, just as Barnes's echoes were in the sestina from *Parthenophil and Parthenope*. But although it is apparently meaningless, it is also revisionary, as is strikingly apparent from the way the final manifestation of the ostrich, in the *tornada*, ceases to be just a word, and becomes the thing itself:

All I could think of was how the Monk was now no more likely to show me  
how to bend  
 that note on the guitar [...]

than an ostrich to bend  
 its lead-plumed wings and, with its two-toed foot, rip out the horizon-seam  
 and lift off, somehow, into the blue. (ll. 34-5, 37-9)

Repeated use of the word «ostrich» has created an image of the bird it refers to with a life of its own. It isn't just that the ostrich turns from a figure of speech into the image of a real ostrich speeding along the horizon. It is also that although the ostrich is – famously – a flightless bird, and Muldoon acknowledges this (saying that the priest was «no more likely» now to teach him the guitar than an ostrich to fly), he nonetheless creates a mental image of the bird taking to the sky. And as this imaginary bird «rip[s] out the horizon seam and lift[s] off, somehow, into the blue», it reflects back on the generation of the poem itself, embodying a process of invention that veers in unexpected directions, or that strikes (in the more usual version of the phrase) «out of the blue». It is not surprising that the teleuton «seam» (noun, the join between two material things) once turns to «seem» (verb, to appear to be).

Stephen Burt has suggested that: «The less a strict form can be made to look natural, the less it looks like an inevitable consequence of a poem's apparent content, the more it looks like a conscious choice – or a game».<sup>21</sup> In this view, Scupham's poem – with its perfectly visible adherence to the formal rules of the sestina, including the unwritten rule of metrical regularity – should look less natural and more like a game than Muldoon's, and its repetitions should (in Hollander's terms) be «less important». But is that true? In *The Misfits*, Muldoon's care to ensure that the *sounds* repeat according to the rules while not just punning but – often – incorporating the repeating word as the final syllable of a new one does (at first sight) make the poem appear «natural», by concealing its adherence the rules of the sestina, and seeming to spill across the page as the bird sings. Yet in prioritising sound over sense he also ostentatiously *follows* these rules: he pushes them to their absolute limits, but never actually breaks them. We see this again in the second sestina in *Moy Sand and Gravel, The Turn*.<sup>22</sup> Its teleutons are «sands», «lay», «Sahara», «scent», «out» and «turn», and in comparison with those in *The Misfits*, they behave with relative decorum: «scent» once slips into «fluorescent», «out» once into «spout», and «turn» once into «return», while «lay» switches from verb to noun to adjective and back again, as well as once concealing itself in «re-play» – but these are the exceptions. Most words retain the form they were assigned in the first stanza, and the choice of the inflexible and very noticeable word «Sahara» as one of the teleutons manifests a different kind of confidence: a flamboyant accommodation of the unaccommodating.

Yet although Muldoon here resists spectacular transformations, his use of «turn» as one of the teleutons, as well as the title, means that the poem enacts the self-consciousness identified by Cook in every stanza. The transition from the first to the second stanza, where the word appears twice in the space of two lines makes this particularly clear. We are told that the child at the centre of the poem had a habit of:

21. S. Burt, 'Sestina!' or, *The Fate of the Idea of Form*, in «Modern Philology», 105 (2007), p. 222.

22. Muldoon, *The Turn*, in *Moy Sand and Gravel* cit., pp. 69–70.

going out  
and taking a turn

about the house, sometimes not bothering to return  
for an hour, two hours, a week, a year perhaps (ll. 5–8)

To «take a turn» is to take a brief excursion with no particular end in view. It is also to end where you began. In these lines, the teleutons both set such an excursion in motion and defer its completion (a deferral that will occupy the rest of the poem until the final line). First, the movement implied by «turn» at the end of the first stanza, visually emphasised by the blank space that interrupts the sentence, creates the impression that the poem will be striking out into the unknown – until the reader is wrong-footed by the qualifying clause «about the house», with the domestic containment which that implies. This sets up the contrast between confined space and unbounded imagination that is the governing principle of the sestina as a whole, and that is also exemplified by the way the movement that it introduces is partly cancelled by the appearance of «return» as the next teleuton. Although this is in the context of a statement that the return may not occur for some time, the position of the word at the end of the line means that formally it does the very thing that the child in the poem won't yet do: following hard on the «turn» at the end of the first stanza, it re-turns, or turns again. It thus signals in two directions: on the one hand, it leads forward into the first of the poem's flights of fancy, in which the normal progression of time is suspended, as «an hour» or «two hours» are loosely equated with «a year perhaps». On the other hand, because it so closely echoes the previous «turn», the reader's attention is directed back as well as forward, and thus contributes formally to that suspension of time.

This double movement is replicated throughout the sestina by words that are not teleutons, and do not pun on the title of the poem, but that nonetheless generate a series of semantic turns. They enable Muldoon to spin out his narrative by introducing qualifying clauses, some of which are left hanging (filling out the line to enable the teleuton to chime in its correct place), others of which provide the setting or metaphor that will

be carried forward, so that they too signal both forwards and backwards simultaneously. The opening lines show how this works in practice:

In those days when the sands  
might shift at any moment, when his mother might at any moment lay  
into him, he thought nothing of getting up half-way through a story about  
the Sahara,  
the one about the tribesmen following the scent  
of water to a water-hole, thought nothing of getting up and going out  
while he was still half-way through a sentence, going out and taking a turn  
about the house [...] (ll. 1-7)

Here, «getting up» (l. 3) is swiftly followed by «getting up and going out» (l. 5) and «going out and taking a turn» (l. 6), in a sequence where each phrase looks back to its previous use, but also leads on (either aurally or lexically) to a new, connected phrase and, with it, a new stage in the narrative. At the same time, however, the verbatim repetition of «thought nothing» creates a suspension of time comparable to that generated by the juxtaposition of «turn» and «return»: it is the first of a series of internal parallelisms on which the sestina structurally depends, and which create a recursive effect at least as pronounced as that of the teleutons. Thus, in the third and fourth stanzas, «yard»: is repeated and repeatedly qualified; it is:

the yard through which Ned Skinner had moaned «Saahaara, Saahaara»,  
the yard in which, after seeing *The Four Feathers*, he'd taken it upon himself  
to turn  
a stack of pear boxes still redolent of the scent  
of pears into a bolster-humped camel (ll. 12-15)

and also «the yard in which he'd [...] learned to spout / most, if not all, of the main languages of the Sahara» (ll. 19-20). In the fifth and sixth stanzas, «light» is given the same treatment, and so too is «featureless room»; the speaker imagines himself:

shielding his eyes from the hen house's fluorescent  
strip of light, under which he could make out a couple making out



in a featureless room in the old Sands,  
 or a featureless room in the Sahara,  
 a light by which he could make out every twist and turn  
 in what would have seemed to a lay

person a featureless hotel room (ll. 25-31)

These «superfluous» internal repetitions are so conspicuous that they contribute to concealing the repetition of the teleutons. Yet, like the juxtaposition of «turn» and «return» in the first two stanzas, they also reveal something about how repetition generates meaning – and this applies to the other teleutons as well. To read the whole poem from beginning to end is to discover that its narrative is a kind of daydream that takes place in no time, halfway through the sentence that the unnamed speaker abandons in the last line of the first stanza and picks up again only in the final line of the *tornada*, when he is compelled to «turn back inside to pick up his own sentence, to hear himself out» (l. 39). The structure of the poem as a whole is thus a larger version of that double turning movement introduced by the turn from the first to the second stanza: its excursion ends where it began, in a suspension of time is that perfectly reflected in the way the entire sestina is composed of a single sentence. This is such a virtuoso effect that it reminds us that «turn» can also mean «performance». But what enables that performance, and generates the entirely imaginary narrative, is the way the repetitions allow for a pause, a gathering of thought, a change of direction, from literal to metaphorical, real to imaginary – and back again.

As in *The Misfits*, then, the apparent «naturalness» of *The Turn* is only another kind of artifice. Muldoon and Scupham are both performers, but they give different kinds of performance, or different kinds of «turn». In *War Games*, each line reaches the teleuton and pauses, dwelling on it and considering (cumulatively) what it means. In Muldoon's sestinas, the teleutons are concealed by appearing at unpredictable intervals and by being metamorphosed to such an extent that they are effectively glossed over. Rather than dwelling on the repetitions, these sestinas seem almost to attempt to deny that the teleutons do repeat – but nonetheless they contain aural catches, or incomplete echoes. Scupham's deceptively sta-

ble-looking teleutons function like full rhyme, creating perceptions of connections through formal resemblance whilst on the surface remaining apparently unchanged. In contrast, in Muldoon's sestinas, rather than the repetitions of the teleutons drawing our attention and demanding cumulative redefinition, their sameness-in-difference haunts the edges of consciousness. They are less like full rhyme than ghost-rhyme: the phenomenon that Cook identifies as a by-product of near-rhyme, which «can [...] suggest a possible full rhyme that is not there, and yet is there as a ghost».<sup>23</sup> In *War Games*, then, the turn enabled by the teleutons is semantic and imaginative; in *The Misfits* and *The Turn* it is formal and imaginative. Scupham makes the awkwardness of repetition a virtue; Muldoon creates virtuoso riffs on the awkwardness. But for both, the sestina form creates a double movement, simultaneously forward and back: the repetitions simultaneously enable the creation (or discovery) of new meanings, and attest a haunting by previous ones. They are material traces of something that has gone before, like the misprints in *Dear John* and the textual fragment «RICH» that appears on the apron in Muldoon's *The Misfits*. Scupham's nouns realise that haunting, while Muldoon seeks to over-write it through compulsive metamorphosis, but for both, the haunting is vital: it is the play (or «turn») where meaning comes into being. To return to John Hollander's question: in the sestina, what is repeated is never not important; it is just repeated differently.

23. Cook, *Against Coercion* cit., p. 224. Cf. Hollander, *Figure of Echo* cit., p. 35.

## ABSTRACT

## THE TURN: WORDS AND MATTER IN THE SESTINA

This paper addresses the relationship between words and matter in the sestina. Taking as its starting-point John Hollander's question, «Does repeating something at intervals make it important, or less so?», it will consider different ways in which the sestina's repetitions have been treated. Focusing on Peter Scupham's 'War Games' and Paul Muldoon's 'The Misfits' and 'The Turn', it will argue that, in the former, the repeated end-words appear deceptively stable, whereas in the latter they are re-worked to such an extent that the reader is struck by the poet's virtuosity rather than by the repetitions themselves. Comparing these very different uses of repetition, this paper will consider the kinds of memory and invention that are activated by full or by partial repetitions. It will suggest that, despite their differences, both techniques demonstrate the inseparability of words and matter, showing how the poets are led to discoveries that could not have been made in any other words.

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