

THOMAS AUSTENFELD

AMERICAN SESTINAS: A CENTURY
OF AESTHETIC PARADOXES

Ezra Pound, the key mediator of the sestina form into the English-language lyric tradition in the twentieth century, locates the spirit of poetry in its mystical numerology:

Poetry is a sort of inspired mathematics, which gives us equations, not for abstract figures, triangles, spheres, and the like, but equations for human emotions.¹

In «The Phantom Dawn», the essay that opens his collection *The Spirit of Romance* (1910), Pound contextualizes this mystical statement in his lengthy appreciation of Arnaut Daniel, the troubadour credited with having invented the sestina. As Pound tries to locate the *fons et origo* of European poetry in the Troubadour tradition, he relies on an anthropology firmly situated in the late Middle Ages and on a craft combining skill and proper training. Somehow, «inspiration» and «mathematics» combine to produce a rudimentary psychology or at least a way to express «human emotions». Pound highlights that Dante singled out Arnaut for praise by calling him «miglior fabbro» in line 117 of Canto 26 of the *Purgatorio*. Thus, using «mathematics» and «emotions» as the book-ends for «poetry», Pound marries two concepts metaphorically to undergird his claim to

1. E. Pound, *The Phantom Dawn*, in Id., *The Spirit of Romance* [1910], New York, New Directions, 1968, p. 14.

poetic knowledge. Pound's mathematical metaphor obviously does not refer to the modern use of mathematics in engineering but evokes instead the place of algebra and geometry in the ancient system of the seven liberal arts, where each art, including music, opens a pathway to understanding the coherence of orderly spheres in which we live. Dante and his Provencal precursors, of course, lived and wrote in this kind of world, and Dante's reliance on numerology in his *magnum opus* is as evident in his meter and stanza as in his portrayal of the celestial spheres. In writing, the poet produces a lesser image of the creation built by the greater craftsman, God himself.

«Fabbro» foregrounds the skill and craft necessary to good poetry, prior even to poetic inspiration. The skillful handling of technique – or what we might now call form – is paramount in the creation of the Troubadour art that Pound situated «between literature and music».² The term «fabbro» would soon become a signpost in anglophone poetry, when T.S. Eliot dedicated *The Waste Land* in 1922 to Ezra Pound with words borrowed from Dante, acknowledging Pound's substantial editorial help and calling him, in turn, «il miglior fabbro». This gesture turns Eliot into a latter-day Dante: the simultaneous evocation of modesty and arrogance in this *captatio benevolentiae* is typical of Eliot's defining paradoxes.³ Around 1922, the sestina appeared to hover in the wings of American modernism: it would not take long for it to move onstage.

The specific branch of American poetry that has embraced the sestina form in the past 100 years, and especially in the past 30 years, cannot be neatly traced back to the two traditions generally considered normative in American literary history, the Whitmanian tradition of bardic prophecy and the Dickinsonian tradition of reflective interiority.⁴ Instead, the

2. E. Pound, *Arnaut Daniel*, in Id., *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T.S. Eliot, New York, New Directions, 1968, p. 116.

3. For Eliot's many paradoxes, see P. Howarth, *T.S. Eliot*, in Id., *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernist Poetry*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 57–81, especially the subsection «The Paradoxes of Self and World», pp. 57–62.

4. Ezra Pound and Elizabeth Bishop may stand exemplarily for the two traditions in the 20th century. Pound famously made a poetic «Pact» (1913) with Whitman and would continue to write Cantos that adopt the bardic voice and ethos. Bishop integrated the sestina form into the remainder of her exquisitely intricate, ruminating, self-exploratory

sestina has been claimed by practitioners on both sides of the divide, as American poets have discovered in it a tool for intense introspection *and* for raucous wit, and both practices have required them to play fast and loose with the «rules» for crafting a sestina.

In this paper, I will explore the formal and historical paradoxes of the sestina in modern American literature. In doing so, I'll intermingle form and history. In the formal portion, I will investigate whether the English language lends itself to the form of the sestina at all and, if so, what results when you try it – in other words, I'm looking at what American poets have done in playing *fabbro*. In the historical approach, I will address how the sestina, which appeared briefly around 1580 in Britain and then remained essentially absent from English for about 300 years before returning – after a brief Victorian interlude – around 1909, became a mainstay of late 20th-century and early 21st-century poetic production, especially in America. I describe four paradoxes in my appreciation of the sestina form: first, the cleavage between seriousness of purpose and humorous practice; second, the sestina's surprising reappearance at the turn of the 20th century and the incongruous varieties of reception it has experienced in the past one hundred years; third, the widely divergent critical appreciations it has received; and fourth, the metrical adaptations it had to undergo in being made anglophone.

If mathematics and human emotions can come together in poetry in general, then they do so all the more powerfully in the sestina. Lyric poetry generally features a single speaker meditating on a subject, turning it over and over, looking at it from all angles. The sestina, designed for rumination, provides a framework in which to do this obsessively: «Obsession» has become a qualifier that many critics of the sestina return to, well, obsessively. One recent anthology uses the word in its title,⁵ and poet Anthony Hecht, himself an accomplished practitioner of the form, argues that «[t]he repeated words, inexorable in

corpus of poetry. See J. Donaldson, *At Home in the Little Rooms of «Sestina»*, in S. Berry, G. Davis, P. Sanger, eds., *Divisions of the Heart, Elizabeth Bishop and The Art of Memory and Place*, Wolfville, NS, Gaspereau Press, 2001, pp. 139-48.

5. *Obsession. Sestinas in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. C.B. Whitlow and M. Krysl, Hanover, NH, Dartmouth College Press, 2014.

their order, seem designed to convey a state of obsession, and of gloomy obsession especially».⁶

Given that the sestina's strict requirements for literally *calculated* line endings invite the speaker to ruminate on an issue and to arrange it according to laws rather than looking for the cheap thrill of rhyme, the form lends itself to slow thinking, planning and arranging. Yet in its effect, when done right, it is a real show-off, «suddenly a mortal splendor», as the poet Robinson Jeffers said in a very different context.⁷ So is the sestina a poetic form for introverts? For those who eschew the satisfaction of closure for the ear that rhyme provides? Is it for those who disdain the banality of repetition and refrain but appreciate the sestina because here the variation is forced? Unlike the predictable repetition of identical refrains, which veers off into song and folk art, the sestina's repetition with variation challenges the listener. Sestinas are a pleasure to appreciate on the page but notoriously hard to memorize. Furthermore, the most satisfying of all things Americans like to do – to tell a story, or even, *their* story – is the hardest to accomplish in a sestina because its many rules appear to leave very little room to the personal. How do you get *plot* into the sestina, unless you are willing to admit that the plot of your life is recursive rather than progressive? Here is the shadow of the first paradox: how do form and content of the sestina relate?

In approaching the sestina in its American incarnations, then, we need to look at the craft of poetry in its ability to provide «equations for human emotion» in specifically American contexts. In this form, we await the permutations of the terminal words not for their rhymes but for the ways in which they are inserted into differing contexts or, yet again, for the ways in which the words are activated in surprising contexts, through variations such as verb-noun-adjective mutations or through homophonic and homographic variation. In English, the practice of recategorizing words – turning nouns into verbs and vice versa – is familiar especially from Shakespeare who did this with aplomb. He

6. A. Hecht, *Sidney and the Sestina*, in Id., *Melodies Unheard. Essays on the Mysteries of Poetry*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019, p. 66.

7. R. Jeffers, *Shine, Perishing Republic* (1925), in *The Oxford Book of American Poetry*, ed. D. Lehman, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 319.

verbalized nouns – a practice known as denominalization – and performed other functional conversions, such as «to lip a wanton», where a noun functions as a verb and an adjective as a noun.⁸ These verbal recategorizations become tools in the hands of the writers of sestinas. Such practices facilitate the making of sestinas, but they often run the danger of sounding comical. The comic and lighthearted, however, is not the original province of the sestina, a form for poems about journeys, love, and music. Accordingly, American uses and permutations of the form often negotiate the uncertain terrain of «funny seriousness». Form and content seem at war: our first true paradox appears.

Here is a show-stopper of sorts: In «Tomorrows» (1967), James Merrill signals non-seriousness in the first line: «The question was an academic one», where «academic» means «not relevant in the real world» as the poem becomes an elaborate joke. It lays bare its exoskeleton like Notre Dame de Paris: the flying buttresses that support the structure are made visible through the literal evocation of the numerals one through six:

The question was an academic one.
 Andrey Sergeyvitch, rising sharp at two,
 Would finally write that letter to his three
 Sisters still in the country. Stop at four,
 Drink tea, dress elegantly and, by five,
 Be losing money at the Club de Six.⁹

Then come the variations, faithfully executed, half of them funny rather than serious, and often permuted. «Six» reoccurs as «Sikhs», «1936», and «classics»; other numbers as «fore», «belief I've», «Timbuctoo» and «tu» (as an American would pronounce the second person singular pronoun in French). The poem dazzles, but does little more. The interior of Notre Dame that is made possible by its exoskeleton is hard to find in this sprightly piece.

8. I borrow this example from V. Salmon, *Vocabulary*, in *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*, eds. M. Dobson, S. Wells, W. Sharpe, E. Sullivan, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, consulted online, DOI: 10.1093/acref/9780198708735.001.0001.

9. J. Merrill, *Tomorrows*, in *The Incredible Sestina Anthology*, ed. Daniel Nester, Austin, TX, Write Bloody Publishing, 2013, Kindle Edition, loc. 3666.

Inverting Merrill's method but using popular idioms with numerals in them allows Florence Cassen Mayers to produce her «All-American Sestina». This 1996 poem foregrounds the banality of American experience but arranges its setpieces artfully while pulling the numerals to the front of the line:

One nation, indivisible
two-car garage
three strikes you're out
four-minute mile
five-cent cigar
six-string guitar [.]

Mayers's scrupulous adherence to all the rules of *retrogradatio cruciata* in the stanzas that follow makes the nondescriptness of American clichés stand out in stark relief. The sestina form appears to lay a mantle of complexity over the deliberately banal and completely interchangeable American experiences here described. The poem's *envoi* deflates pretentiousness into bleakness in a matter of three lines:

two thumbs up, five-karat diamond
Fourth of July, three-piece suit
six feet under, one-horse town.¹⁰

The all-American denizen of this nation who ends up six feet under in a one-horse town does not himself appreciate the artful arrangement of his clichéd life: only the reader who understands the sestina form can wryly smile at so much art lavished on so little substance. Or should a more benevolent reading apply? Does Mayers suggest that even the most pedestrian life deserves to be artistically enhanced, at least for the benefit of the observer, if not for the main character of the poem? Whichever approach one chooses, the poem's persona remains in ignorance, but the writer and the reader share a knowing wink. No rumination has taken place, but the paradoxical relation of dignified form and risible content emerges visibly on the page.

10. F. Cassen Mayers, *All-American Sestina*, in *The Incredible* cit, loc. 3568.

Perhaps the most stunning use of terminal words to evoke tedium appears in Alicia Stallings's 2018 sestina «Like» which mercilessly satirizes the practice of careless contemporary American speakers of overusing the interjection «like» so that it qualifies and questions every statement made by its speakers. The verb «to like», meanwhile, has been eviscerated by Facebook. Stallings, a highly trained classicist and first-rate formalist poet, plays the full keyboard of verbal recategorizations and plugs in «like» at the end of *every line* of her poem.

For copyright reasons, I can only quote a few lines, but beneath the satire, Stallings not only makes a sophisticated argument about reappreciating «like» for its varied uses in English, but she is also one of the few contemporary American sestineers¹¹ to masterfully employ the iambic pentameter. By using this supremely anglophone meter, she repatriates the Romance-language-based hendecasyllabic sestina into the English language:

Even plain «dislike»
Is frowned on: there's no button for it. Like
Is something you can quantify: each «like»
You gather's almost something money-like,
Tokens of virtual support. «Please like
This page to stamp out hunger». And you'd *like*
To end hunger and climate change alike,

But it's unlikely Like does diddly. Like
Just twiddles...¹²

Merrill, Mayers, and Stallings, along with others, get considerable mileage out of the juxtaposition of banal contents with complex form. While many American poets have written serious sestinas, the recent practice of the form has tended to favor elegant wit or even downright silliness. Poems have proliferated. Two anthologies of sestinas, the *Incred-*

11. I have coined this term in analogy to *sonneteers*.

12. A.E. Stallings, *Like, The Sestina*, in Id., *Like*, New York, Farrar Straus Giroux, 2018, pp. 55–6. The poem can also be consulted at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/56250/sestina-like>.

ible Sestina Anthology edited by Daniel Nester (2013) and *Obsession: Sestinas in the Twenty-First Century* edited by Carolyn Beard Whitlow and Marilyn Krysl (2014), with an afterword by the great scholar of poetic form, Lewis Turco, join *Jim and Dave Defeat the Masked Man* (2006), a book of sestinas by James Cummins and David Lehman featuring superheroes and assorted dangers. For three years, from 2003 to 2006, the online journal *McSweeney's Internet Tendency* published hundreds of sestinas (about 100 per year, in fact) and finally stopped accepting submissions. In a 2007 article, critic and poet Stephanie Burt chronicled dozens of poetry volumes published in the preceding 15 years that contained between one and three sestinas per volume.¹³ Taken together, this mountain of evidence illustrates a living paradox: many – though not all – American practitioners of the form are tempted by the sestina's complexity but baffled by its demands for serious rumination, and so they turn to formal acrobatics instead.

The sestina's second paradox centers on its surprising reappearance at the dawn of modernism. As I pivot slowly from form to history, Ezra Pound re-enters the picture. Pound must be credited with bringing the sestina back into anglophone literature, and Eliot probably has that in mind, too, in his dedication of *The Waste Land*. In fact, Eliot himself never wrote a true sestina though he came close in a prose-like 39-line passage inserted into one of his *Four Quartets*, «The Dry Salvages». Some Victorian poets – Charles Algernon Swinburne, Edmund Gosse, and Rudyard Kipling – published creditable sestinas, but they had to return to the Renaissance for models. The paradoxical history of sestinas in the English language is apparent from this long historical leap, and it makes clear that English had only a tentative relationship with the sestina long before there was any such thing as American literature written in English. Around 1580; that is to say, four hundred years after Arnaut Daniel, the sestina had briefly appeared in the English Renaissance – in Sir Philip Sidney's «Ye Goatherd gods» and Barnabe Barnes's «Sestine 5» – and just

13. *Obsession* cit.; *The Incredible* cit.; J. Cummins – D. Lehman, *Jim and Dave Defeat the Masked Man*, Brooklyn, Soft Skull Press, 2006; <https://www.mcsweeney.net/columns/sestinas>; S. Burt, *Sestina! or, The Fate of the Idea of Form*, in «Modern Philology» 105.1 (2007), pp. 218–41.

as quickly disappeared again. In 1909, as part of his project to make poetry modern, Ezra Pound resuscitated the sestina in his effort to illustrate the origin of lyric poetry in the Troubadour tradition. His essayistic work, and his most famous 1909 sestina, «Altaforte», explored and used a Troubadour setting, and with it Pound lit a fuse at the start of the 20th century. Here is an apparent historical paradox: just as modern poetry successively abandoned the strictures of form and meter and focused more fully on the individual line, on linguistic experimentation and, later, on the «deep image», the rule-bound sestina muscled its way back into the poetic arsenal. «Altaforte's» martial theme set off a kind of slow burn that glimmered through the following decades and turned into a sestina conflagration by the late twentieth century that has lasted up to the present moment. Pound's sestina still provides the starting-point for contemporary poets. Here, following some elaborate «stage directions», is Pound's opening stanza with the *teleutons* that will generate the rest of the poem:

Damn it all! All this our South stinks peace.
 You whoreson dog, Papiols, come! Let's to music!
 I have no life save when the swords clash.
 But ah! When I see the standards gold, vair, purple, opposing
 And the broad fields beneath them turn crimson,
 Then howl I my heart nigh mad with rejoicing.¹⁴

In the composition of «Altaforte», Pound's craft favored medievalism over contemporaneity and earthy accentual verse over metrical elegance. He takes Troubadour subject matter, channels *Beowulf's* accentual meter, and apparently eschews social or political relevance. But even while «Altaforte» is in some measure imitative, a vehicle for Pound to show off his erudition, its learned air and form of address clearly attracted the coterie of Modernists who possessed the highly specialized education and training to appreciate the effort and the somewhat twisted result. Although it is a call to battle, Pound's sestina is argumentatively turned inward: spo-

14. E. Pound, *Sestina: Altaforte*, in *The Incredible* cit., loc. 4297. Listening to the recording of Pound's 1939 fiery reading of this poem, in which he accompanies himself on a kettledrum, is an unforgettable experience. https://www.openculture.com/2012/10/ezra_pounds_fiery_1939_reading_of_his_early_poem_isestina_altaforte.html.

ken in the voice of Bertrand de Born, it is pronounced by a character who entered literary history as a «sower of discord» in Dante's *Inferno*, Canto XXVIII, where he is shown swinging his own severed head by the hair, like a lantern.

In the generation following Pound's, poets ranging from W.H. Auden and Elizabeth Bishop, and from Donald Justice to John Ashbery and Anthony Hecht produced a few sestinas from the late 1930s to the late 1970s.¹⁵ The regnant critical philosophy throughout most of the time was the so-called New Criticism of the 1930s which demanded that poems should be sufficient unto themselves yet also comprehensible to and appreciable by reasonably well-educated readers without further explanation. Cleanth Brooks's concept of the «well-wrought urn», a quotation from John Donne, illustrates the era's aesthetic demand for the self-contained artwork. As Edward Brunner definitively shows, most prize-winning books of poetry in the 1950s, still under the influence of the New Criticism, contained one or more sestinas, perhaps proof of the form's new normalcy. Extending an argument used by Jonathan Culler, Brunner postulates that since these poems could be intellectually appreciated by smart average readers, a new generation of students after 1945, «upwardly mobile and new to the university», they became an essentially democratic genre.¹⁶ The poems focused on either serious or playful themes, but in any case advanced an argument of some kind, often ethically fraught and yet safely contained within the demanding form. Auden and Bishop wrote about the poor in the depression, Hecht about a deceptively innocent forest picnic that turns into a concentration camp memory. Through their formal complexity, these sestinas bestow dignity on the characters who appear in them. The highly serious subject matter of hunger, poverty, or death is framed in a poetic form that seems not to permit any levity whatsoever. The sestina is capable of being deadly serious *and* irreverent, but not at the same time. And yet: there is no better

15. W.H. Auden, *Paysage Moralisé* 1933, E. Bishop, *A Miracle for Breakfast* 1937, D. Justice, *Here in Katmandu* 1956, J. Ashbery, several poems in *Some Trees* 1956, again E. Bishop, *Sestina* 1965; A. Hecht, *The Book of Yolek* published 1982 but based on a 1945 occurrence.

16. E. Brunner, *The Lure of the Sestina*, in *Cold War Poetry*, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2001, p. 6, p. 8, and especially pp. 160-4.

vehicle, it appears, to bring seriousness of purpose to some of the 20th century's most demanding subject matter.

About four hundred years after Sir Philip Sidney, around 1980, a group of American poets occasionally described as neo-formalists delighted in the sestina and took it through myriad variations. Creatively disregarding the long-standing formal, numerological, or metrical conventions of the sestina, these poets shortened and lengthened the lines, wrote with or without regard to meter, altered the *teleutons* freely, and in general flexed their creative muscles.¹⁷ If readers can bring some elementary knowledge of sestinas to these texts, the pleasure of reading them results not from seeing one's expectations fulfilled but from seeing them creatively thwarted.¹⁸ In sum, then, at least three different literary eras of American poetry in the past 100 years – modernism, the pre-World War II and the Cold War period, and neoformalism – have availed themselves of the sestina for *decisively different reasons*. I consider this a second paradox in the modern history of this form.

The productive power of a partially derivative poem like Pound's «Sestina: Altaforte» is impressive. Poetic practice calls scholarly appreciation into being in its wake. Drew Gardner, in «Sestina AltaVista» (published after 2000) uses the exact same teleutons as Pound, changing only «opposing» to «poser» as if to reveal the one-upmanship of rivalling poets as «poseurs»:

Damn it all the cute future nurses are missing our march for peace!
It's not that I'm not a fan of prog rock – it's that I'm not a fan of awful music.
Cat videos may expel their thoughts on the afterlife while listening to The
Clash,
But Standard & Poor's just laminated your stamp script to a poser.

17. See, for example, D. Gioia, *My Confessional Sestina* (1991), J. Alvarez, *Bilingual Sestina* (1996), J. Winter, *Bob* (1999), J. Cummins – D. Lehman, *Jim and Dave Defeat the Masked Man* (2006), B.A. Fennelly, *To JC and DL on the Opening of the Sestina Bar* (2008), D. Duhamel, *On Delta Flight 659 with Sean Penn* (2009) and *I Dreamed I Wrote this Sestina in My Maidenform Bra* (2009), and A.E. Stallings, *Like* (2018).

18. Stephanie Burt dissents here: in her exceedingly well-documented 2007 article, *Sestina! or, The Fate of the Idea of Form* cit., Burt characterizes contemporary poets' use of the sestina as an expression of tedium, regret, dissatisfaction, and diminishment. Burt essentially perceives sestina-writing poets after 2000 as belonging to yet another group than the ones I have identified – by my count, a fourth one.

I hate it when people use the race card to get tickets to King Crimson.
I drive along the BQE, blasting the A/C and rejoicing.¹⁹

Another self-referential sestina is Kent Johnson's 2005 «Sestina: Avant-forte», which uses as teleutons the names of six poets of the so-called New York School (Ashbery, Koch, O'Hara, Schuyler, Guest, and Cervello).²⁰

Perhaps most ingenious in this regard is Alfred Corn who, in his «Pound-Eliot Sestina», wittily alternates the end word «Altaforte» in «forte», «for T», or «forty». His poem also features the terminal word «sentina» rendered in one case as follows:

Secondhand emotion, says Tina
Turner, is boring.²¹

Corn is a serious scholar of prosody and adds in a commentary to this poem,

I thought a sestina about the sestina might be fun and plunged headlong into the assignment. I think the ever-so-slightly absurd requirements (at least in a contemporary context) of this particular verse format lend themselves to comic treatment, including over-the-top features like homophonic puns, slang, and intentional overstatement.²²

Corn's take on the poem can stand representatively for the work of many recent sestineers in demonstrating the skill of the *fabbro*. But what, looking deeper, is the point of using it?

The widely differing critical reception of the sestina brings us to the third paradox explored in this essay: Scholars have offered vastly different assessments of the form's potential relevance. Their disagreements – if that is the right word – suggest that the debate over the sestina's meaning and purpose is far from settled, and that the sestina may contain as many

19. D. Gardner, *Sestina: Alta Vista*, in *The Incredible* cit., loc. 1961.

20. K. Johnson, *Sestina: Avantforte*, in *The Incredible* cit., loc. 2766.

21. A. Corn, *Pound-Eliot Sestina*, in *The Incredible* cit., loc. 1453.

22. In *The Incredible* cit., loc. 1482.

unresolved mysteries as Keats's Grecian Urn, hiding in plain sight. Poetic genres historically have a communicative context that explains their *raisons d'être*. Each poetic form originally serves a primary expressive purpose: the sonnet's «little song» originated as a love poem, the ballad – with its overtones of ritual and dance – tells a languid folk story, the ode is foremost a dignified celebration. Concerning the sestina, critics Stephanie Burt and Jennifer Ashton have argued, separately, that this form is not about poetic representation but about communication.

Burt, in the already cited 2007 article in *Modern Philology*, offers a truly comprehensive overview of American sestina production but takes a dim view of the form's ultimate power of expression: going back to its historical use as a «complaint», Burt claims that the modern sestina is essentially a «disavowal»²³ of poetry's once-hailed efficacy and that contemporary poets «use sestinas to lament their diminished or foreclosed hopes for their art».²⁴ Burt concludes that, when poetry's «ethical, spiritual, political, and historical ambitions fall away, what is left is entertainment and craft».²⁵ Responding to Burt, Jennifer Ashton identifies Burt's argument as discounting «representation» as a function of poetry and favoring instead a poem's power of «communication».²⁶ Ashton offers a historical leap from Edgar Allan Poe to John Ashbery as representatives of a poetic that has given up on narrative and is satisfied with a poem as an «offering».²⁷ On both counts, I think Burt and Ashton project perhaps too much world-weariness. The alleged contrast between representation and communication is possibly just another version of the contrast between speaking for a community and speaking for the self. But this contrast collapses when we acknowledge how poems work: sure, there is a speaker, but the poem either does or does not reach an audience, and when it does, it has established community, because the reader, for the duration of the reading, «tries on» the voice of the speaker for size. So, unless it's

23. Burt, *Sestina!* cit., 221.

24. Burt, *Sestina!* cit., 220.

25. Burt, *Sestina!* cit., 221.

26. J. Ashton, *Response to Stephen Burt*, in «Modern Philology» 105.1 (2007), pp. 243–4 *passim*.

27. Ashton, *Response* cit., 244.

a completely solipsistic utterance, every poem is both a communication *and* a representation of the state of mind of the self who communicates.

In a more serious vein, poet-scholar Marilyn Krysl sees the sestina as rite or ritual, given that it originates in an age of faith.²⁸ She argues that the sestina is particularly effective in challenging our perception of time. The ever-new juxtapositions of the teleutons in the successive stanzas will create «a peculiarly intoxicating tension».²⁹ «Six times», Krysl says, «we're brought from profane time into cyclic time, and for that duration we may experience intimations of immortality».³⁰ In her essentially mystical reading of the form, Krysl encourages contemporary readers to remain open to the sestina's incantatory powers which may work on our subconscious even if we fail to be aware of it.

Using Elizabeth Bishop's 1950s «Sestina» as her example, Janine Rogers takes a different approach that, however, leads in a similar direction as Krysl's. Rogers focuses specifically on the «hypnotic» quality of the sestina form.³¹ Drawing on Alfred Corn's manual of prosody, *The Poem's Heartbeat*, Rogers emphasizes the evocative, obsessive power of the sestina and then links its beautiful complexity to the very structure of DNA, discovered and described as Bishop was writing. Rogers deftly evokes Bishop's uncommon familiarity with the scientific discourse of her time³² and then makes the link: «In a moment of highly Keatsian science, [Watson and Crick] . . . found scientific significance in the physical aesthetics of the double helix: 'A structure this pretty,' [Watson wrote], 'just had to exist'».³³ Rogers tracks further ingenious connections between the self-expressive forms of DNA and the sestina, both mathematically and topically. They very subject of Bishop's 1965 «Sestina» – a child and a grand-

28. M. Krysl, *Sacred and Profane: The Sestina as Rite*, in «The American Poetry Review» 33.2 (2004), p. 8, with a reference to James Cummins.

29. Krysl, *Sacred* cit., p. 8.

30. Krysl, *Sacred* cit., p. 12.

31. J. Rogers, *Life Forms: Elizabeth Bishop's «Sestina» and DNA Structure*, in «Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal» 43.1 (2010), pp. 93–109, here p. 97.

32. Rogers, *Life* cit., 100–1 *passim*.

33. Rogers, *Life* cit., p. 101. The «Keatsian science» is a gnomic allusion; I suspect it is a reference to the astronomer featured in John Keats's *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer* who sees «a new planet swim[s] into his ken».

mother – evokes the notion of heredity which is the object of our study of DNA. Without saying so explicitly, Rogers comes close to suggesting that the Medieval troubadours had intuited the double helix structure with its interwoven strands and had represented it in the *retrogradatio cruciata*, leaving us, the late-born, merely to prove scientifically what they already knew poetically.

THE SESTINA

I	II	III	IV	V	VI
1	6	3	5	4	2
2	1	6	3	5	4
3	5	4	2	1	6
4	2	1	6	3	5
5	4	2	1	6	3
6	3	5	4	2	1

Image taken from Hecht, *Melodies unheard* cit., p. 67.

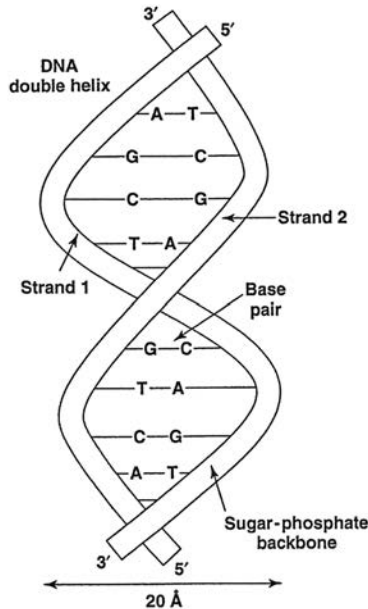


Image source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/A-DNA-double-helix_fig1_268261931.

The fourth and final paradox I perceive in the sestina becomes apparent in its necessary metrical adjustment to the English language. As anglo-phone critics, we must remember that the sestina originated in Latinate languages and in poetic traditions that favor a mathematical, or at least a strictly numerical way of approaching the poetic line. The hendecasyllabic line of Dante and Petrarch is syllabic, not accentual, hence strictly mathematical. And here is perhaps our biggest problem with the sestina in English, because modern English prosody – from the late 16th century onwards – is accentual-syllabic. We first count stresses (or accents) per line and only *then* the number of syllables. Owing to the structure of English vocabulary and syntax, we arrive at so-called «feet» – essentially measured in iambs, trochees, dactyls and anapests plus variations – which provide the rhythmical pattern of the line. In English, the four-beat line feels symmetrical fairly irrespective of the syllables present; when alternated with the three-beat line it becomes the basic meter of the hymn, the ballad, the song, right down to folk, rock-and-roll, and rap. By contrast, the five-stress line, the iambic pentameter, is both the declamatory and conversational line most suited to the natural rhythm of English prosody. Whether we are with King Harry on St. Crispin's day –

If we are mark'd to die, we are enough
To do our country loss; and if to live,
The fewer men, the greater share of honour³⁴

or the pouting girl in the cafeteria:

«You haven't kissed me since we got engaged!»³⁵

or the aging Ezra Pound, as chronicled by Robert Lowell:

and three years later, Eliot dead, you saying,
«Who's left alive to understand my jokes?»³⁶

34. W. Shakespeare, *Henry V*, Act 4, Scene 3.

35. With thanks to Timothy Steele who provides this example in <https://timothy-steele.com/forms-of-poetry>.

36. R. Lowell, *Ezra Pound*, in Id., *Collected Poems*, eds. F. Bidart and D. Gewanter, New York, Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2003, p. 537.

– the iambic pentameter is deeply ingrained in English-speaking tongues and ears. That's why Alicia Stallings's metrically flawless «Like, the Sestina» sounds so convincing and why the many unmetrical sestinas that merely rely on the teleutons while paying little respect to the line length tend to disappoint.

My little digression into English prosody illustrates obliquely the fate of the three strict poetic forms that English has inherited from Latinate languages: the sonnet, the villanelle, and the sestina. The sonnet, I can safely say, became a native English form in its Shakespearean adaptation. Over the centuries, the Petrarchan sonnet in English also has had its champions, such as Milton and Wordsworth, and the sonnet has flourished in original and surprising anglophone forms from Hopkins to Lowell and far beyond. The villanelle has also been successful, less so than the sonnet, but still: its invitation for lively argument among two alternating stanza endings has tempted poets repeatedly, and its requirements for rhyme haven't been terribly hard to meet by English speakers.

Now the sestina – that's a different matter. The key is to keep the six terminal words interesting while taking them through their paces. Semantics takes precedence over the words' metrical arrangement. Unless you want to tread water and stay in place and wrap yourself in ever more tightly, you must have a volta around stanza four and you must still manage to surprise the reader in the envoi. This has been baffling to English-language poets. One might say, therefore, that there is a kind of politics to the use of the sestina in English, resulting in the fourth paradox that is connected to meter.

When I say that the sestina has held a paradoxical place in the American literary tradition, I use «paradox» in its literal sense of «beyond belief» to indicate that two opposite truths can apparently coexist and yet remain true. Consider this *coincidentia oppositorum*: the sestina *does not work* in English because it originated and flourished in highly inflected Latinate languages *and* the sestina *does work* in English because rhyme is not relevant while the sestina's constitutive features, the permuted teleutons, lend themselves to the English language's willingness to change the grammatical class of words. And the crossbraided argumentative structure of the sestina, the *retrogradatio cruciata*, is dependent on the poem's plot, not on the language it is written in. Some of the defining devices of the

sestina needed to be creatively interpreted to accommodate English words and English grammar.

We thus need to distinguish carefully when arguing about which elements of the sestina make it successful in English: is it the verbal promiscuity of English instead of the Latinate languages' insistence on regularized conjugation? Is the catalogue of rules an invitation to ridicule? Or is the deep structure of the form a portal into ritual, insight, and moral truth? Perhaps the set of papers assembled in this volume will help answer some of those questions. Paradoxes can be frustrating, but they help produce knowledge. Although the sestina is a «closed» form in terms of its strict rules, it has shown itself to be surprisingly flexible in taking on modes of expression, holding its own in different historical contexts, and remaining mysteriously unprobed in its metrical magic.

The vivacity of the sestina is apparent from its linguistic transferability. As this paper originates in the bilingual University of Fribourg, I want to conclude with a few lines from stanzas 4, 5, and 6 of Julia Alvarez's highly suggestive «Bilingual Sestina» which tropes effectively on the alternation of «word» and «world» as it traces the origin of human speech, in two languages, in its speaker:

...

Rosario, muse of *el patio*, sing in me and through me say
that world again, begin first with those first words

you put in my mouth as you pointed to the world –
not Adam, not God, but a country girl numbering
the stars, the blades of grass, warming the sun by saying
¡*Qué calor!* As you opened up the morning closed
Inside the night until you sang in Spanish,
Estas son las mañanitas, and listening, in bed, no English

yet in my head to confuse me with translations, no English
doubling the world with synonyms, no dizzying array of words,
– the world was simple and intact in Spanish –
Luna, sol, casa, luz, flor, as if the *nombres*
were the outer skin of things ...³⁷

37. J. Alvarez, *Bilingual Sestina*, in *Obsession* cit., loc 1446.

ABSTRACT

AMERICAN SESTINAS: A CENTURY OF AESTHETIC PARADOXES

In the American literary tradition, the sestina has held a paradoxical place over the course of the past century. Ezra Pound resuscitated it in his effort to illustrate the origin of lyric poetry in the Troubadour tradition with his «Sestina: Altaforte» (1909). In the next generation, poets ranging from W.H. Auden and Elizabeth Bishop, and from Donald Justice to John Ashbery and Anthony Hecht produced sestinas from the late 1930s to the late 1950s. The neoformalist revival in American poetry of the 1980s and the following decades eagerly took up the sestina and began playing with it in a nearly postmodern fashion. In sum, at least three different literary eras of American poetry – modernism, the Cold War period, and neoformalism – have availed themselves of the sestina for *decisively different reasons*. The paradoxes at the heart of one of the most prescriptive forms in the lyrical tradition ask to be explained more fully: first, the cleavage between seriousness of purpose and humorous practice; second, the sestina's surprising reappearance at the turn of the 20th century; third, the widely divergent critical appreciations it has received; and fourth, the metrical adaptations it had to undergo in being made anglophone.

Thomas Austenfeld
Université de Fribourg
thomas.austenfeld@unifr.ch

