

the one that appears in Notebooks 1, 23, 31, and 37 – are not examined to determine their ordering, nor, in this case, connected by cross-references: unfortunate omissions for readers who wish to take advantage of this rare opportunity to examine Frost's poetic composition.

The contents of these notebooks have the power to fuel Frost scholarship for decades – there is no doubting that – but we need to make sure we have them correct. Those familiar with Frost's originals will be dismayed by this edition's poor execution. More disheartening is the prospect that those who pick up this book out of a love of Frost's poetry and who take the jacket and publicity details on trust may never think of questioning its contents. Let the reader carefully consider 'what to make of a diminished thing'.

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## OPEN QUESTIONS

*Questions of Possibility: Contemporary Poetry and Poetic Form.*  
By DAVID CAPLAN. Oxford University Press, 2005; \$24.95.

One way of describing the form of a poem is to refer to it as 'open' or 'closed', but all poetry, whether free or formal verse, partakes of some combination of enclosure and release as soon as the reader comes to the first line break. T. S. Eliot makes the definitive point: 'Verse, whatever else it may or may not be, is itself a system of *punctuation*; the usual marks of punctuation themselves are differently employed' (*TLS*, 27 September 1928).

For Emily Dickinson, whose stone valves and closed carriages often widen the circumference of empty space (or the space of emptiness) at the heart of her verse, a poem is an open trap set to snare us unawares, even as it keeps us on guard, while we venture on our readerly way down the narrow path of its deceptively catchy rhythms:

The most obliging Trap  
 Its tendency to snap  
 Cannot resist –

The tendency to snap under pressure is not uncommon, but the lines of a poem must configure a way to coil and recoil on themselves in an engaging manner as they move down the page, enacting a motion that is both an entrapment and a springing free. (Dickinson adds a third possibility, in this case the horror of suspension: after the couplet clamp of the rhyme, and the trochaic inversion's metrical propulsion, the dash dangles – with its foot caught in the trap.) This kind of 'serpentine' movement of the lines has been beautifully expressed by Coleridge:

The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, or by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution; but by the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself. Like the motion of a serpent . . . at every step he pauses and half recedes, and from the retrogressive movement collects the force which again propels him forward. (*Biographia Literaria*, chapter 14)

The title of David Caplan's excellent book is especially appropriate, suggesting as it does the shifting registers of Caplan's mind, his taut flexibility before the paradoxical but not unyielding rigours of poetic form: the way that poems open us to fresh possibilities of perception even as they question those perceptions by sharpening our sense of limit. Poems that take hold, as Caplan compellingly shows, are always an opening and shutting case. But never a done deal.

Though Caplan clearly prefers poetry written in, or based upon, traditional forms (his book is concerned with five types in particular: sestina, sonnet, heroic couplet, ballad, and English versions of the ghazal), he carefully maps out what he calls 'the prosody wars' between advocates of free verse and those of formal verse, experimental and traditional poetry, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers and new formalists, and

so forth. (He also provides plenty of detailed notes on related topics such as the influence of creative writing programmes on contemporary American poetry.) Despite the strong passions that Caplan feels are continuing to fuel the debate, to my mind this argument sounds a bit forced, and certainly less urgent today than when Pound and Williams tried to break the pentameter's steely grip (and recast the verse line by adding their own irons to the fire). That the stakes may be different in recent times is shown by the work of three of the writers Caplan studies in depth – Bishop, Gunn, and Walcott – poets who have mastered both free and formal techniques and have used them as the necessity of the poem dictates, rather than as a conscious attempt to steer American poetry in a new direction.

Caplan's discussion of the heroic couplet I found particularly moving. After a brief synopsis of the usual arguments against writing contemporary poetry in rhyming couplets (they are a symbol of colonial repression, the rhymes offend a modern ear, etc.) and the usual arguments *for* writing in couplets (a verse form can stand in contradiction to a society's values, popular music is filled with striking examples of rhyming couplets, etc.), Caplan gets down to business with a close reading of lines from a poem by Thom Gunn. 'Lament' depicts a friend dying of AIDS, and Caplan offers a poignant analysis of the following couplet:

The small but clustering duties of the sick,  
Irritant as the cough's dry rhetoric.

To describe a full-blown AIDS patient's painful, sometimes violent, hacking fits as 'dry rhetoric' is to offer a trope of startling understatement. However, this rhyme and the sentiment it expresses are wholly appropriate; following the patient's example, the poet offers the rhetorical equivalent of his friend's stoicism: an elegantly, almost austere unadorned meter . . .

Caplan's use of 'almost' nicely follows Gunn's example of 'following the patient's example', though the rhyme and the

sentiment expressed may be 'wholly appropriate' for reasons less understated than he implies. But first Gunn's wonderful use of 'clustering' is worth remarking on: the way the daily tasks of the sick multiply like the swarming germs of the disease itself, and then so quickly morph into the thick phlegm in the cough of the patient with full-blown AIDS. There's nothing phlegmatic or 'austere' about the chafing irritation that's felt in our tightening throats as we read Gunn's line. 'Irritant' is harshly grating both to the ear and to the conscience, and implies how difficult it is to be in the same room as the patient, listening to his painful cough without, I suspect, feelings of vexed impatience, if not disgust. If poetry begins with a lump in the throat, the truthfulness of Gunn's poem, like the suffering he is witnessing, confronts us with a scouring irritant that's hard to swallow. Caplan's 'almost austere' suggests a stoicism that is deeply inflamed. To the sick, anything more would trigger another fit of dry rhetoric.

In Caplan's superb analysis of the sestina, Anthony Hecht's 'The Book of Yolek' produces a very different catch in the throat, though it leaves the mouth feeling just as dry. Here the sestina's constricting form can't breathe free, haunted as it is by the presence of a child with 'bad lungs,' a 5-year-old boy who was taken from the 'Home / For Jewish children' and marched off to a concentration camp. (As Caplan points out, Hecht witnessed the horrors of the camps at first hand when his infantry troop took part in the capture of Flossenburg.) Here's the second stanza:

You remember, peacefully, an earlier day  
In childhood, remember a quite specific meal:  
A corn roast and bonfire in summer camp.  
That summer you got lost on a Nature walk;  
More than you dared admit, you thought of home;  
No one else knows where the mind wanders to.

And here's the fourth stanza:

We're approaching August again. It will drive home  
The regulation torments of that camp

Yolek was sent to, his small, unfinished meal,  
 The electric fences, the numeral tattoo,  
 The quite extraordinary heat of the day  
 They were forced to take that terrible walk.

If the endwords start innocently enough, like smoke from a barbecue at summer camp, repetition carries a whiff of Buchenwald's fumes.

The leisurely walk turns into . . . a forced march to a horrific death, and the bucolic summer camp changes into a Nazi death camp . . . The pressure that the sestina form exerts on the reader and the poet echoes the speaker's helplessness. The repetitions are 'involuntary': just as the speaker can control neither the past nor Yolek's ghostly interruptions of his life, the speaker must follow the endwords' prescribed pattern.

To describe the creepy way the returning endwords, like foot-falls, turn menacing, Caplan turns to Freud's theory of the uncanny as 'involuntary repetition': repeated occurrences of something usually taken for granted (here, meals and walks) that, by ominous associations, instil the overwhelming sensation of being trapped by a sinister fate. (Though it is not unusual nowadays for sestinas to use rhymes in lieu of repeating the endwords, Hecht takes this liberty to tighten the poem's terse net of impending doom: hence 'to' '1942' 'tattoo'. The reference to 1942 occurs in a line from the third stanza: 'The fifth of August, 1942'.)

Perhaps no less sinister than the psychological implications of repetition is the movement of the lines themselves, weaving together the endwords as they enact the feeling of being caught, by chance, in an inextricable pattern. While Yolek is to 'Shamble between armed guards to his long home' the level cadence and steady pentameter blend the speaker's meandering childhood hike in the woods with the inexorable patter of Yolek being led to slaughter, just as 'shambles' conveys an ambling ungainly gait as well as the gore of atrocity (the noun form of 'shambles' is a term for slaughterhouse). As the returning

endwords of the sestina affirm a form that itself turns back to Petrarch and Dante, Caplan reminds us that the barbarism Hecht addresses occurred on European ground that gave birth to classical rationalism. Hecht's awareness of the historical context of these ironies, though, is more gut-wrenchingly personal, and his response more deeply rending than simply turning this turning form back on itself:

Wherever you are, Yolek will be there, too.  
His unuttered name will interrupt your meal.

For Hecht, what's at stake can cut, like a knife, both ways – as it does in the caesura that comes before 'will', and is wedged between 'unuttered' and 'interrupt', 'his ... name' and 'your meal'. This poet's scruples are felt in the pit of the stomach:

Prepare to receive him in your home some day.  
Though they killed him in the camp they sent him to,  
He will walk in as you're sitting down to a meal.

Even those who belong to different poetic camps may sit down to the same meal when the subject strikes close to home. In Caplan's discussion of contemporary ballads, he uses Charles Bernstein's 'Rivulets of the Dead Jew' to show how this exceptionally resourceful poet uses 'doggerel' technique to summon up reservoirs of feeling that may lie too deep for tears. The first and last stanzas are as follows:

Fill my plate with *boudin noir*  
*Boudin noir, boudin noir*  
Fill my plate with a hi-heh-ho  
& rumble I will go

I've got a date with a  
Bumble bee, bumble bee  
I've got a date with a  
wee bonnie wee  
& a-hurting we will go.

Caplan's delightful reading of Bernstein's recasting of the ballad form relishes the poet's brio: 'In a conventional "Last Goodbye" ballad, the condemned man achieves the grandeur of a doomed outlaw: an unrepentant sinner or tragic figure whose moral conversion comes too late. "Rivulets of the Dead Jew" presents this villain as the comedian Mel Brooks might play him, mawkish mock-heroic, and looking forward to a good meal.'

In his discussion of the first stanza, Caplan notes that *boudin noir* is not the type of food one would expect the 'dead Jew' to find palatable, but the next course Bernstein serves up is nothing more than a delicious sound, 'a hi-heh-ho', as if, for now, a simple melody were sustenance enough to satisfy the poet's craving for song. By the second line it's clear that the jaunty measure is steeped in the rhythms of Mary's Lamb. (So too the allusion to the Paschal Lamb may be steeped in references to the blood smeared on the lintels in Exodus, given the word 'go' at the end of these stanzas.) Caplan's register lifts when he notes that nursery rhymes are the source of the poem's nourishing powers:

death remains the greatest mystery because, by definition, the living cannot know it. The poem's verse form, though, evokes the familial and social relations that 'dead Jew' once knew, the scenes where parents sang nursery rhymes to their children. The speaker 'lusts' for the afterlife, his 'date,' but the poem's form recalls the life and the loved ones he left behind.

As a L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet, Bernstein favours what he terms 'the concrete particulars of sound and form over and against the dematerializing idea of voice or purity of expression'. Following Caplan's beautiful observation, I'm led to believe the 'we' in that 'wee bonnie wee' has never been weaned from the bright particulars of its familial context, or its love of Mother Goose. Around that piercing sound, with its extra *e* for shrillness, for a moment the busy hum of a family sitting down to a meal materialises. Like a bee siphoning honey, Bernstein's phrase (as Caplan notes) draws on a line from the English and

Scottish folk ballad tradition: 'And a-hunting we will go'. And then the bee applies its stinger: 'And a-hurting we will go'.

I found Caplan's chapter 'The Ghazal in America' deeply engaging but not entirely convincing. In an example cited from Adrienne Rich, the poet uses the arduously complex Persian and Arabic form of the ghazal, with its strict sequence of rhyming couplets (each of which is meant to be read as a detachable and self-sufficient expression), in order to depict what she calls 'writing in an age of political and cultural break-up'. Rich has explained that she was drawn to the ghazal's form because its structure 'allowed for a highly associative field of images' she found well suited to express the 'fragmentation' of the Sixties. Her ghazal alluding to the civil rights movement begins:

LeRoi! Eldridge! Listen to us, we are ghosts  
condemned to haunt the cities where you want to be at  
home.

The white children turn black on the negative.  
The summer clouds blacken inside the camera-skull.

Every mistake that can be made, we are prepared to make;  
anything less would fall short of the reality we're dreaming.

Caplan points out that 'Rich wants the verse form to record the very pressures that assault her. Jumping between threatening images, the ghazal's fragmentary argumentative structure evokes the age's skittish anxieties'. The problem is that Rich's skittish leaps across the stanza breaks are too complacent. What falls short is the feeling of being suspended by the rope-bridge of the paired lines – lines that should be linked through the tension exerted on them by sustaining the precisely placed and intricately woven multiple rhymes the ghazal form requires (or some verse equivalent of this effect). Rich's jagged couplets do stand on their own in a bracing way, but they stand without conveying the sense of being braced against a fall; they stand as they move down the page, rather than across the precarious expanse of a strict form's steep demands.

Because Rich alters the form to suit the occasion, rather than allowing the older structure to absorb the frisson of the modern dilemma and redistribute its stresses in a truly radical and surprising fusion, one can only wonder at the sparks of connection that might have flown had this marriage of counter-culture American poet and traditional Eastern form ever really occurred.

At the heart of this chapter Caplan quotes Agha Shaid Ali's criticism of American ignorance of the ghazal tradition as 'an insult to a very significant element of my culture'. Ali makes the point more convincingly in his ghazal dedicated to the Palestinian American writer Edward Said. Here is his lovely rendering of the opening and closing couplets:

In Jerusalem a dead phone's dialed by exiles.  
You learn your strange fate: you were exiled by exiles.

Will you, Beloved Stranger, ever witness Shahid –  
two destinies at last reconciled by exiles.

After providing a helpful gloss on the next to last line (Shahid means 'The Beloved' in Persian, 'witness' in Arabic), Caplan remains open to questions of possibility raised by the closing couplet of this resistant form:

The final couplet . . . can be read as a cry of anguish, a lamentation over the seemingly endless nature of exile . . . In another sense, the final couplet presents an idealized model for reconciliation. With its knotty grammar and syntax, the final lines suggest that to witness is to reconcile . . . through their mutually sustaining acts of witness, Said, a Palestinian-American, and Ali, an exile from New Delhi and Kashmir, provide an alternative model to the violence that ravages their homelands.

That the final couplet acts as a kind of double door (framed by double rhymes), whose emotional force hinges on the possibility of reading it in two ways, is right for a poem based on the condition of mutual exile. Doors slammed in one face open to another's shared feelings of exclusion. But when the knotty

grammar and syntax go against the grain of natural speech patterns the couplet becomes another door into the dark. In some of Ali's verses the pressure to sustain the traditional ghazal form appears to have warped their English meaning tight shut:

Tell me who's tonight the Physician of Sick Pearls?  
Only you as you sit, Desert Child, by exiles.

However strangely a phrase like 'Physician of Sick Pearls' may flicker with suggestion, it has the opaque pallor of a missed opportunity, the full impact of its transport lost in translation.

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