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the fact of a poet's inclusion in the study always means that Spiegelman considers that this poet rewards scrutiny, never that he feels obligated to shoehorn the poet into some critical tradition or identity-politics fiefdom. The lucky poets on whom Spiegelman turns his gaze this time around have in common (in addition to their reticence, complexity, and attention to the look of the world) precisely their individuality: all are idiosyncratic. The critic's aim isn't necessarily to make us love them; he enables us to see what they are up to, a process that may well include admitting what some readers have found to be flaws. Note all the negatives in Spiegelman's assessment of the work of Charles Wright, a poet he admires greatly:

In Charles Wright's work we find something peculiar if not unique in contemporary poetry: the use of landscape as a virtual replacement for sexuality. For all his sensuousness, he is not an erotic poet. His work is essentially neither allegorical nor symbolic, nor is it merely reportorial and empirical. It is a poetry of longing, but this longing is not directed at erotic fulfillment, social or familial coherence, or ecological sanity. (83)

More negatives pop up when Spiegelman considers the poetry of Jorie Graham: "The experience of the event is more important than its accurate description. And not only does she refuse to describe but she also, characteristically, refuses to moralize or to mourn. Seldom has the experience of the natural world resulted in so little human emotion" (177).

Perhaps Wallace Stevens, luminously discussed in Spiegelman's opening chapter, can help us out here: by acknowledging the nothing that is not there, this accomplished and urbane critic enables us to appreciate the rich but elusive nothing itself. *How Poets See the World* yields fresh insights on every page, touching upon the history of taste, or the sources of styles. As a guide to the work of poets whose difficulty Spiegelman never glosses over, it is indispensable.

### Note

1. *Anthony Hecht in Conversation with Philip Hoy* (London and Chester Springs, PA: Between the Lines, 1999), 82–83.

**Questions of Possibility: Contemporary Poetry and Poetic Form. David Caplan. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. Pp. viii + 165. \$35.00 (cloth).**

**Reviewed by Willard Spiegelman, Southern Methodist University, Dallas**

The wars among rival poetic factions in the U.S. raged more fiercely a decade ago than they do now, but David Caplan's judicious, sensible, and perceptive study of poetic form is as welcome and important today as it might have been during the so-called culture wars. In this maiden speech, a revision of the author's doctoral dissertation, Caplan takes on the problems of tradition and inherited forms, and the ways in which a quite various selection of contemporary poets have handled their inheritance. Between a wise introduction that sets the terms and categories of his argument, and an equally wise conclusion ("Prosody After the Poetry Wars"), Caplan sets himself the task of examining the contemporary scene with specific reference to four traditional poetic forms: the sestina, the ghazal (a recent import to the States although long established in Islamic culture), the sonnet, and the ballad, as well as the heroic couplet (this last not so much a form as a *style* for other forms).

The sanity of Caplan's argument and analyses is bolstered by the surprising catholicity of his taste. Rather than allying himself with the so-called "new formalists," a self-appointed band

**598** of semi-reactionaries who have felt for several decades that only a return to metrical verse will signal a return to poetic essence, he picks as his main subjects for review the work of people often quite unlike one another.

The first chapter (“The Age of the Sestina”) has the usual suspects: Elizabeth Bishop, Anthony Hecht, Rita Dove, and Donald Justice—a fairly conventional choice of sestina-writers. Then the surprises begin. “The Ghazal in America” focuses on Adrienne Rich, Jim Harrison, Agha Shahid Ali—the late Indian-Kashmiri-American poet who popularized the form during the past decade—and several younger poets whom Ali included in his 2000 anthology of the ghazal (*Ravishing DisUnities*): John Haag, Heather McHugh, Daniel Hall, and Carole Stone. The chapter on the sonnet wonderfully treats the experiments in this once-dismissed form by gay poets (Marilyn Hacker, Henri Cole, and Rafael Campo), and thereby proves that a conventional poetics, at the hand of a gay poet, can become a radical or transformative act. In discussing the couplet (“Why Not the Heroic Couplet?” indeed!), Caplan skirts the predictable James Merrill, focusing instead on Thom Gunn, Derek Walcott, and Derek Mahon, none of whom (interestingly and importantly) is a native American. Looking at the ballad, Caplan includes the traditional Dana Gioia, and X. J. Kennedy, a man always associated as a father figure to the new formalists, but he also considers Rosemary Waldrop and the African-Americans Dudley Randall and Marilyn Nelson, as well as the left-leaning Charles Bernstein who has always eschewed aesthetic and political conservatism as being somehow equivalent. Caplan’s summary of Bernstein’s own “Rivulets of the Dead Jew” epitomizes his broadmindedness: “When Bernstein uses metrical verse forms familiar to the English literary history, he generally parodies them. His most interesting poems, though, draw an oddly moving resonance from the forms they mock” (120). Imitation, in other words, is indeed a form of flattery.

This book succeeds on both the local and the more general level. It is a sign of Caplan’s sanity and literary acumen that he can be both lucid and provocative at once. The book has a persuasive rhythm to it—ebbing and flowing between historical and theoretical speculation on one hand, and astute close readings on the other. The author begins by re-examining, and persuasively refuting, the various claims put forth over the past fifty years (and going back still further to Williams and Pound) that try to equate poetic formalism with political repression or social irrelevancy. He says that “our current understanding of poetic forms, especially contemporary metrical verse remains inadequate” (9–10), and, although he doesn’t quote it, he would agree with Wallace Stevens’s famous pronouncement that “all poetry is experimental,” not merely that which looks new or simply weird, or which comes with fancy theoretical, programmatic justifications and manifestos. Instead, Caplan argues that poetic forms do not maintain stable values but that “their aesthetic uses accommodate new imperatives and contexts” (11). His sensitive readings of Bishop’s “Depression poem,” the marvelous sestina “A Miracle for Breakfast,” as well as his handling of gay love poems and queer theory, attest to his political acumen and his poetic sensibility. That Claude McKay’s famous First World War sonnet “If we must die” maintained its potency for more than fifty years after its composition attests to its author’s political forcefulness. Archaism of form and contemporary historical relevance may as easily become partners as arch-rivals. And Anthony Hecht’s use of the sestina to confront the horrors of the Holocaust (“The Book of Yolek”) reminds us that “the rich complexity of actuality” (32) exists both historically and aesthetically.

With regard to the sudden appearance on our scene of the ghazal—in 1968, one year before the death of the Urdu master Mirza Ghalib, and at the hands of Adrienne Rich—Caplan doesn’t stress as much as he might two significant facts. The first is that although American poets tended to reject conventional metrical form, they were able to welcome the ghazal because, not in spite, of the fact that it had foreign associations. And the second is that Rich’s own experiments with the ghazal, however moving the poems that resulted, play fast and loose with the very strictness of the form, thereby undoing its difficulty and conventionality. He is correct, however, when he says that Rich’s experiment in the form “elides the significant differences that separate the

two poets and recasts Ghalib as a rather ethereal ‘presence’ in Rich’s mind” (46). The late Agha Shaid Ali, who wrote perfect ghazals, did, however, take issue with Rich’s appropriation of the form, a kind of “cultural possession” (55) that Caplan acknowledges.

With the heroic couplet, the historical and political ramifications (indeed, the whole political stake in a stylistic choice) become more pointed. Caplan quotes from distinguished American poets (and poet-critics) who seem to believe that the couplet per se bespeaks a commitment to a world order of balance, and therefore oppression. As cultural historians like Roy Porter have cogently shown, the myth of a Georgian “world-view,” all sweetness and light, rationality and balance, is, in fact, just that, and therefore the supposedly new and horrifying tumultuousness of the twentieth century justifies our own poets’ seemingly inappropriate choice of archaic couplets. There is no logical or inevitable connection between poetic form and political content, as Swift (above all) certainly knew.

In his sane conclusion, Caplan states that “we need a critical vocabulary that clarifies the era’s most interesting poetry, instead of ignoring it. I propose we discuss ‘contemporaries’ who ‘share the language,’ not partisans who wage ‘wars’” (128). As Keats said a long time ago, it is easier to say what poetry should be than to write it, and David Caplan has returned us to the evidence that is most relevant: the poems themselves.

***Uncertain Poetries: Selected Essays on Poets, Poetry and Poetics.* Michael Heller. Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2005. Pp. xvi + 247. \$21.95 (paper).**

**Reviewed by Romana Huk, University of Notre Dame**

In “Doubt,” the prose-poetic section of her recent book, *Gone* (2003), Fanny Howe, the leading avant-garde Christian poet, writes:

When all the structures granted by common agreement fall away and that “reliable chain of cause and effect” that Hannah Arendt talks about—breaks—then a person’s inner logic also collapses. She moves and sees at the same time, which is terrifying.

Yet strangely it is in this moment that doubt shows itself to be the physical double to belief; it is … the invisible engine behind every step taken. Doubt is what allows a single gesture to have a heart. (25)

One of the most striking hermeneutic reversals of the last century—made suddenly apparent in our new one—was in the trade of mystifying forms of either knowing or unknowing for doubt, belief’s “physical double,” as a tool in both religious and poetic thought. Michael Heller’s *Uncertain Poetries*—a selection from twenty-five years’ worth of essay-writing—elegantly pursues this reversal alongside its relation to what, in his own Jewish-American reading and writing concerns, is *dispersal*: the diasporic yet adhesive, “midrashic” unfolding of textual interpretation and revisionary composition over temporal and linguistic, as well as geographic, distances.

In this book, which Heller (better known as a very fine poet) tells us we should regard as “an intellectual biography,” such reversals and dispersals eventually fold over one another in remarkable and moving ways. That’s a pun, in part, because these essays do actually *enact* the uneasiness which Heller suggests is required in post-“structural” or post-“logical” writings, be they theology or poetry. Such uneasiness arises from a vertiginous location in *both* affirmation and doubt, from a perspective that looks *both* backwards into tradition and forwards from it, casting itself into perpetual *hegira* or wanderings, continual “move[ment] out from under the father’s name” and from its “idea of fixity” in acts of *renaming* that provisionally suture the text of exile to the world as met (172). Whereas Howe’s movement out of certainty involves “loss of