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# ECSTATIC OCCASIONS

65 LEADING CONTEMPORARY POETS  
SELECT AND COMMENT ON THEIR POEMS

# EXPEDIENT FORMS

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on Their Poems*



EDITED BY  
*David Lehman*

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# PREFACE



Trying to come up with a working definition of form is a little like trying to measure the circumference of a deity whose center, Pascal tells us, is everywhere. In both cases, one is tempted to look for safety in tautologies. "For when we ask, in our hopeless way, what is *form*, what is it that at all holds poems together, echo answers," Howard Nemerov has written. "It appears that poems are held together by people's opinions of what holds poems together." Nemerov would counsel us to "talk, if we talk at all, not about sonnets or villanelles and so forth, but about the working-out of whatever is in hand to be worked out." This makes eminent good sense, although—or because—it leaves us right back where we started.

At a time when traditional poetic structures propose themselves as options rather than exigencies, when the author of a sonnet sequence may cavalierly break the rules or invent new ones as he goes along; when it is a commonplace argument that poems fashion their own requirements for the poet to apprehend only after the fact, then the need for an enlightened practical criticism establishes itself with a vengeance. Wisdom dictates that the question of form be addressed with reference to specific texts. And, in the absence of all other authority, who better to talk about the formal dimensions of a poem than its author?

Out of such thoughts emerged this anthology of poems and commentary by the poets themselves: a forum on form that has itself become a form. Each contributor was asked to provide a poem accompanied by a statement on the decisions that went into its making. The results, in all their variety, follow. As the volume's editor, I sought to establish a compelling context rather than lay the framework for polemic and debate; I wanted merely to create an expedient occasion for various poets to ruminate variously about a common concern. Accordingly, in

my initial communication with the poets, I limited myself to raising, as possible points of departure, such questions as these about the poem at hand and its composition: What constraints, if any, did you impose upon yourself? Which formal choices preceded the act of writing, and which grew out of it? In the case of a traditional or exotic form, a given stanzaic pattern or metrical arrangement, what chiefly attracted you to it? To what extent did a principle of form, a technical stratagem, or a distinctive method of composition generate your momentum—and inspiration? I urged contributors to “feel free to construe ‘form’ broadly (as any strategy for organizing a poem) or in a narrow sense.” I also gave them license to disregard my queries if they seemed uncomfortably like leading questions. It just about went without saying that “the poem needn’t exemplify a specific verse form.”

I realized from the outset that the sum of the statements I received in reply might work as easily to muddy as to clarify our abstract and finally unsolvable quandary: “What is *form*, what is it that at all holds poems together?” The questions would, in any case, constitute a useful pretext or preamble. What poets, when pressed, have to say on a subject that seems at once so nebulous and yet so rife with customary associations would, it seemed to me, inevitably tell us a great deal about themselves, their assumptions, and their procedures. How, I wondered, would the poets elect to approach the subject? What form would their comments take? What tone? Mightn’t their statements prove revealing in ways that went beyond the writers’ spoken intentions?

Given so diverse a group of poets as that assembled here, it would be folly to look for anything resembling consensus. Yet some conclusions are inescapable. From the practicing poet’s point of view, form—as more than one contributor insists—is concomitant to composition. This opinion of the matter was stated definitively by Marianne Moore in her poem “The Past Is the Present.” “Ecstasy affords the occasion” for poetry, Moore wrote, “and expediency determines the form.” Form, in other words, proceeds not from theory but from the pressures of a specific occasion. Talking about their poems, most poets are empiricists, and it cannot surprise us to find one poet after another eschewing lofty pronouncements in favor of expedient explanations. That is certainly the case in this book.

In effect, the reader will have the chance to eavesdrop on poets talking shop, working out “whatever is in hand to be worked out,” freely or grudgingly giving themselves away. It adds an extra dimen-

sion to our understanding of the individual poets to find X and Y talking in a crisp, matter-of-fact way about the nuts and bolts of their verse-making technique, while A and B lean back and take a longer view, risking an occasional aphorism, gingerly invoking an influence or a precedent. It's significant, too, that one poet may choose to reconstruct the actual circumstances of her poem's composition (an idle meal at a Holiday Inn dining room) while another will dwell on the nature of his self-assigned task (to animate a photograph of an artists' bar in Milan). The outcome could be described as sixty-five ways of looking at a blackboard on which, after a suitable number of false starts and frequent erasures, a poem tentatively emerges. Nor is it an accident that the question of form should trigger off such a range of disclosures. Precisely because form is so elusive a concept, so multilayered a term, it seems perfectly emblematic of the poetic process itself: something that can be illustrated but never rigidly defined; something that can best be grasped with a chosen instance in mind.

A few words are perhaps in order on the methods of selection that this anthology reflects. No effort was made to be comprehensive. I followed no quota system, invoked no specific criterion other than the sense that the poets' work be of a quality and kind that would make it somehow exemplary in this context. Clearly, this was a judgment call. What it boils down to is instinct—and nerve. "You just go on your nerve," Frank O'Hara wrote. "If someone's chasing you down the street with a knife you just run, you don't turn around and shout, 'Give it up! I was a track star for Mineola Prep.'" The remark seems as apposite for the maker of anthologies as for the poet.

If, in perusing the list of contributors to this volume, you spot the omission of a favorite name, please don't assume that I necessarily snubbed him or her. On the college admissions theory that you accept more applicants than you have places for, I solicited material from many more poets than the sixty-five I hoped to end with. Even so, not everyone whose work I admired could be reached; and, of course, not everyone I asked chose to participate. Still, I can't help expressing my satisfaction with the finished product. The poems and statements, illuminating or usefully dissenting from one another, delight as they instruct. They argue well for the healthy state of contemporary poetry.

*David Lehman*

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# A. R. AMMONS



## *Inside Out*

**A**mong the many kinds of poetic form are those that realize themselves in stasis (achieved by motion) and those that identify their shape, their intelligibility through motion, as motion. Sonnets, villanelles are inventions like triangles (these may be discoveries) and their use is to cause "nature" to find its form only if it can do so in arbitrary human terms. There is the famous possibility that internal, organic form and imposed, external form may on splendid occasions complement each other as in a single necessity. But arbitrary forms please us even when they are interposed and impositional because they reassure us that we can repress nature, our own natures, and achieve sufficient expression with no more than a trifling threat, or we can take delight that we, mere human beings, have devised systems nature (or energy) is clearly, truly, abundantly released through. The danger is that arbitrary forms may be boringly clever compensations for a lack of native force, boxes to be filled with crushed material, boxes which may be taken to exhaust the unlimited existences inventive prosody can find to station the arbitrary in the work of art.

There are gestural and figural forms, too, internal assimilations that are narratives shaping transactions. I've chosen a short poem of mine to show how the figure of winding can suggest the manifold accuracy by which a brook or stream summarizes the meteorological action of whole terrains, so that wherever there are hills and valleys one can confidently look to find the winding of this dragon of assimilation.



## *Serpent Country*

Rolled off a side of mountains or  
hills, bottomed  
out in flatland but getting

away, winding,  
will be found a  
bright snake—brook, stream, or river, or,

in sparest gatherings,  
a wash of stones or a green  
streak of chaparral across sand.

The figures, though, in this poem are controlled by other progressions, and these progressions are the real form of the poem. In one motion, the figure enlarges from brook to stream to river, but then the figure disappears till the only "stream" in the landscape is a trace of green in the brush where an underground stream once briefly moved. The form of the poem is the motion from the indelible river to the nearly vanished green. It is a figure of disappearing. That is one kind of internal form. It allows to nature full presence and action, it excludes nothing a priori and imposes nothing. It discovers within. It uses human faculties to imagine means, analogies to simplify so much material, to derive from the broad sweep of action the accurate figure and the ineluctable, suitable form of motion.

# JOHN ASHBERY



## *Variation on a Noel*

*"when the snow lay round about,  
deep and crisp and even . . ."*

A year away from the pigpen, and look at him.  
A thirsty unit by an upending stream,  
Man doctors, God supplies the necessary medication  
If elixir were to be found in the world's dolor, where is none.

A thirsty unit by an upending stream,  
Ashamed of the moon, of everything that hides too little of her  
nakedness—

If elixir were to be found in the world's dolor, where is none,  
Our emancipation should be great and steady.

Ashamed of the moon, of everything that hides too little of her  
nakedness,

The twilight prayers begin to emerge on a country crossroads.  
Our emancipation should be great and steady  
As crossword puzzles done in this room, this after-effect.

The twilight prayers begin to emerge on a country crossroads  
Where no sea contends with the interest of the cherry trees.  
As crossword puzzles done in this room, this after-effect,  
I see the whole thing written down.

Where no sea contends with the interest of the cherry trees  
Everything but love was abolished. It stayed on, a stepchild.

I see the whole thing written down.

Business, a lack of drama. Whatever the partygoing public needs.

Everything but love was abolished. It stayed on, a stepchild.

The bent towers of the playroom advanced to something like  
openness,

Business, a lack of drama. Whatever the partygoing public needs

To be kind, and to forget, passing through the next doors.

The bent towers of the playroom advanced to something like  
openness.

But if you heard it, and if you didn't want it

To be kind, and to forget, passing through the next doors

(For we believe him not exiled from the skies) . . . ?

But if you heard it, and if you didn't want it,

Why do I call to you after all this time?

For we believe him not exiled from the skies.

Because I wish to give only what the specialist can give,

Why do I call to you after all this time?

Your own friends, running for mayor, behaving outlandishly

Because I wish to give only what the specialist can give,

Spend what they care to.

Your own friends, running for mayor, behaving outlandishly,

(And I have known him cheaply)

Spend what they care to,

A form of ignorance, you might say. Let's leave that though.

And I have known him cheaply.

Agree to remove all that concern, another exodus—

A form of ignorance, you might say. Let's leave that though.

The mere whiteness was a blessing, taking us far.

Agree to remove all that concern, another exodus.

A year away from the pigpen, and look at him.

The mere whiteness was a blessing, taking us far.

Man doctors, God supplies the necessary medication.



I first came across the word *pantoum* as the title of one of the movements of Ravel's "Trio," and then found the term in a manual of prosody. I wrote a poem called "Pantoum" in the early '50s; it is in my book *Some Trees*. "Variation on a Noel" is the only other time I have ever used the form. The poem was written in December of 1979. I was attracted to the form in both cases because of its stricture, even greater than in other hobbling forms such as the sestina or canzone. These restraints seem to have a paradoxically liberating effect, for me at least. The form has the additional advantage of providing you with twice as much poem for your effort, since every line has to be repeated twice.

# FRANK BIDART



## *Thinking Through Form*

I am still a boy lying on his bed in a dark room every afternoon after school.

I am listening to radio-dramas one after the other, for hours, before dinner. Then after dinner—until my mother and grandmother try to force me to go to sleep. They don't understand why after school I insist on listening to "my programs" on the radio instead of staying outside and playing with my friends.

Later—Olivier's "To be or not to be." Garland's *A Star Is Born*. The ironic, massive outraged fury of Brando's "Friends, Romans, countrymen" on the soundtrack of MGM's *Julius Caesar*. Much later—arias sung by Maria Callas. The *shape* of these songs, soliloquies, arias heard thousands of times when I was discovering what I loved.

Toscanini's Beethoven Ninth. Kazan's *East of Eden*—read about for months, and at last seen, again and again.

How thin the actual poems I've written are next to the intensities, the symphonic panoramas of ecstasy and conflict and denouement in the works of art that as a boy I imagined someday I would make!

Soliloquies. Arias. Father-son dramatic *agon*. Symphonies—whatever we crave to experience over and over as we discover what art can be. *Love buries these ghost-forms within us*. Forms are the language of desire before desire has found its object.

\*

"Form": I feel my brain always slightly short-circuits in front of this word. Like "freedom" or "Romanticism," it is full of contradictions, necessary, and trails behind it a long, bloody history of passionately held

opportunities for mutual contempt and condescension. Is there some way to think about "form" in which we can escape habitual assumptions, predilections, the hell of "opinions"? Perhaps all we can do is ask the use or practice our ideas are meant to serve—and the conceptions they contradict, or try to enlarge. What poets say never satisfies theorists. Most present-day theory seems to most poets a remote, rival universe.

The idea about form that has been most compelling and useful to me as a poet—the idea that, when I discovered it in graduate school, seemed to describe something like what I already had experienced—is Coleridge's notion of "organic form." It finally rests, I think, on a poetics of embodiment. The crucial texts are his lectures on Shakespeare and wonderful essay "On Poesy or Art."

\*

For Coleridge, the artist "imitates," but must not "copy" the subject of the work of art. "The artist must imitate that which is within the thing, that which is active through form and figure. . . ." If Shakespeare had imitated merely the external "form or figure" of his characters, he would have produced dead copies, figures in a wax museum. The Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, doesn't talk the way real nurses (or any human being) talked: "We know that no Nurse talked exactly in that way, tho' particular sentences might be to that purpose."

In the true work of art, "that which is *within* the thing" *takes on form* (just as "that which is active" in it took on form in the living world, in "nature")—and by a kind of self-manifesting, shows itself to us: "Each thing that lives has its moment of self-exposition, and so has each period of each thing, if we remove the disturbing forces of accident. To do this is the business of ideal art. . . ."

Such "self-exposition"—the *thing that lives* embodying its being by finding its shape in a work of art—is "organic form." Coleridge opposes it to "mechanical regularity," form that is imposed from without, pre-determined:

The form is mechanic when on any given material we impress a pre-determined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material, as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened. The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes as it devel-



ops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. Such is the life, such the form.

By attacking "pre-determined form" Coleridge is *not* attacking traditional forms like meter or formal stanzaic patterns. (He can't imagine poetry without meter, arguing that "all nations have felt" that "the invention of metre and measured sounds" is "the vehicle and involucrum of poetry.") His point is that *only by the appropriate form* can the subject of the poem reveal itself—the poem's formal means must embody the form *that is already there*, the innate structure at least implicit in "the properties of the material." The difference between the work of art and "nature" must never be obscured:

If there be likeness to nature without any check of difference, the result is disgusting. . . . Why are such simulations of nature, as waxwork figures of men and women, so disagreeable? . . . You set out with a supposed reality and are disappointed and disgusted with the deception, whilst in respect to a work of genuine imitation, you begin with an acknowledged total difference, and then every touch of nature gives you the pleasure of an approximation to truth.

But to have "*genuine* imitation" (the phrase catches that reconciliation of the seemingly irreconcilable Coleridge so often insists is necessary—and possible), the source or ground of form must always be beyond form: "The idea which puts the form together cannot itself be the form."

When form *proceeds* from subject, "developing itself from within," what speaks, what the work "witnesses" is the at-last-manifested *thing that lives* itself. The subject "witnesses itself," as if without the intervention of the author: "Remember that there is a difference between form as proceeding, and shape as superinduced,—the latter is either the death or the imprisonment of the thing,—the former is its self-witnessing and self-effected sphere of agency."

Coleridge's language often implies that self-witnessing "organic form" has an inner life of its own, independent of the will of the artist: "it shapes as it develops itself from within. . . ." Similarly, the work of art has its own laws, the organic laws of a living body: