



## Innovation in Conversation: Part II

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In my [last post](#), I segued from thinking about Terrance Hayes's formal innovation to thinking about other poets' formal innovations (and the possible conversations or influences therein), spending time with Randall Mann's "[Straight Razor](#)" and Richie Hofmann's "[Mirror](#)," two poems connected by their use of a striking couplet form—a couplet in which one longer line is rhymed by a single-stress, markedly shorter line. But a search for Mann and Hofmann in conversation with each other in person or on the page leads me not to "Mirror" and "Straight Razor," the poems in question, but to "[Illustration from Parsifal](#)" and "[The Heron](#)," two *other* poems by these two poets, linked by a version of one of the *same* formal innovations with which I began in thinking not about Mann or Hoffman, but about *Terrance Hayes*: the line-end anagram "rhyme."

Unlike Hayes's title-into-line-end anagrams, both Mann and Hofmann's formal innovation in *these* poems eschews the connection with the title in favor of independent couplets (as in "Straight Razor" and "Mirror"), though unlike the traditionally rhymed (if unconventionally structured) couplets of "Straight Razor" and "Mirror," the "rhymes" of "The Heron" and "Illustration from *Parsifal*" consist of anagrammatic recombinations, in which the letters of the final word of the couplet's first line are rearranged into the second line's end word. On Lewis Turco's blog, in a 2011 entry titled "[A New Kind of Chime: Anagram Rhyme](#)," he posts the result of his own investigation into this form's origins, after his first encounter with Hofmann's poem, which was brought to his attention in the May 2011 issue of *The New Criterion* by Robert Mezey. Hofmann's "[Illustration from Parsifal](#)" (included in his debut collection [Second Empire](#)) begins:

*While resting in the dim-lit inner study,  
I pulled a book down from the shelf—a dusty*

*old retelling of the opera, its once scarlet  
cover crumbled now, faded to a claret's*

*brittle blood-purple. With care, I spread  
a page, as one draws back the drapes,*

*not wanting to be seen . . .*

And here are lines from Mann's "[The Heron](#)," from his *Kenyon Review* Prize in Poetry Series collection [Complaint in the Garden](#) (Zoo Press, 2004):

*Mangroves flecked with a fire,  
deep-set birches rife*

*with the wait for night. In stone,  
the heron stares: the stoic tones*

*of the sky a storied procession of palms . . .*

So, are *these* poems in conversation? Are *they* in conversation with Hayes? Perhaps not biographically, it seems. In response to Turco's query about the form's origins, Hofmann writes:

*I chose to write the poem in anagrams in honor of James Merrill, whose book collection is referenced in the poem. I was very fortunate to catalog JM's personal library in Stonington last summer.*

*The only examples I know of the anagram rhyme scheme are "The Landing" by J. D. McClatchy (*The Rest of the Way*) and "Heron" from*

Randall Mann's *Complaint in the Garden*, which the author alerted me to after he saw the poem in TNC.

Turco has now included "anagram rhyme" in his revised and expanded edition of *The Book of Forms: A Handbook of Poetics, Including Odd and Invented Forms*, and tried his own hand at the form, including a "terza-anagram-rima sonnet" featured in the aforementioned post. Did McClatchy's "The Landing" influence Mann as well? Turco and Hofmann didn't say, but in corresponding with Mann after my last post, he confirmed that he was, indeed, formally inspired by McClatchy's 1990 "The Landing," which begins:

*Through the blinds, it must have been the searchlight I saw  
That silvered the woodwork. Step by step, its shadow was*

*Measuring out tonight. The climb itself has become a cloud  
That thickens with the effort. I'd look up if I could.*

One assumes that Merrill, McClatchy's mentor, influenced these anagrams, but though Merrill's own "[combinatorial texts](#)" appear in his notebooks, Jason Stumpf notes, "For all his flirtation with combinatorial practice, it only appears explicitly in a few places in Merrill's body of work," remaining, rather, as "a raw exploration of language." Of Merrill's anagrams, Stumpf concludes:

*Their challenge is infectious, as one wonders what other permutations are possible, or what ideas the text will yield. If nothing else, these texts show another side of a poet devoted to the mystical and formal aspects of poetry as he takes guiding conceits to extremes. They provide examples of the connection between many aspects of Merrill's writing life: his letters, formalism, interaction with culture, and a belief fundamental to poetry, that the manipulation of language gives rise to meaning.*

An infectious challenge, indeed. (Here, I think again of [Unica Zürn](#) and the "old dangerous fever of the anagrams.")

So while I can't find a direct lineage of influence or conversation between the anagrams of Terrance Hayes and the anagrams of Randall Mann and Richie Hofmann, I can at least scratch the itch a bit by tracing the "flirtation" with the anagram from Merrill to McClatchy (as I traced not a specific form but a recombinant sensibility from the [Oulipo writers](#) to Harryette Mullen to [Terrance Hayes](#)), and I can then trace the consummated couplets of anagram rhyme from McClatchy to Mann and Hofmann, and then to Turco. And then?

We arrive at a poem (a favorite of mine) by Phillip B. Williams—the taut intensity of "[A Spray of Feathers, Black](#)." Here, again: anagram rhyme. The poem begins:

*Angels know me by scent alone. Precise  
is their reaping my confessions. I am stained.  
God is stainless. A crescent moon pierces*

*the night. Stars: wounds grouped and sainted  
as constellations. I counted my blows, dared  
the bruises to implode like dying suns. Instead,*

*they hid behind skin to mask their dread . . .*

The poem is fourteen lines. After four interlocking ABA BCB tercets, a final couplet:

*Look how a lilt of dust is build to serve,  
sits on the lips like a song with no verse.*

Yes, this is anagrammatic terza rima . . . and a sonnet—or a "terza-anagram-rima sonnet," to quote Turco. When asked about this poem in [an interview](#) with *Tupelo Quarterly*, Williams said:

*That speaker is torn up and obsessed with controlling the situation by demanding a higher power to save him. The problem is that he suffers from being able to suffer; from not being "God." That his affliction is his own humanity was a shock to me, but it makes sense with the form. The poem . . . is a sonnet but this one takes the form of an anagrammatic terza rima. It goes back to having control; he can't seem to get what he wants to say perfect, so he finds all the ways a word can be changed in order to find the right combination, the right set. But nothing satisfies. So he takes words and changes them up again, borrowing from what came before, manipulating until something fits, forcing things to fit that simply won't do. He is dissatisfied and his imperfect body—the "lilt of dust"—is translated into this poem that "sits on the lips like a song with no*

verse.” *His own body and fallibility then become the source of his faith but he cannot get it right because he wants a certain type of control disguised as giving himself over.*

I wanted to quote Williams’s thoughts on the poem in nearly their entirety, as it is rare for a poet’s comments on their own poem to move me, at times, as an actual poem might. Perhaps I am personally moved because I see something of my own patterns in this restless, recombinant instinct.

Did Williams pick this form up from Turco? Anagrams aside, the terza rima sonnet is centuries-old; we could more surely place this one in a lineage with Shelley’s “[Ode to the West Wind](#)” than we could assume the connection with Turco, Hofmann, McClatchy, Merrill (Mann? Hayes? Mullen? Oulipo?). We find a partial biographical answer to Williams’s own formal origins in last year’s [Rumpus Poetry Book Club Chat](#), which leads us not to Turco, but to Carl Phillips, when Williams says of the sonnet, terza rima, and anagram form, “I did it to show Carl Phillips, one of my MFA professors, that I paid attention in class.” In the humor of this answer, a tantalizing aperture; who were Phillips’s examples of each of these forms? I’m especially curious about the anagrams in that regard, hoping to loop the conversation back to Hayes, maybe. (As a potentially relevant aside, I mentioned Rickey Laurentiis’s thoughts on “queering form” in my previous post; Laurentiis, another former MFA student of Phillips’s at Washington University in St. Louis, cites Phillips on the reading list for his “[Queering Form](#)” course offered last year at Poets House.)

Whether there are *linear* lineages among the aforementioned poets, there’s certainly a conversation to be had in and around form that includes all of these authors—and others. Perhaps grasping for linearity is exactly what these anagrammatical forms, and poets, ask us *not* to do. Perhaps I should return to what Robert Frost once wrote about reading poetry in an essay called “The Prerequisites”:

*A poem is best read in the light of all the other poems ever written . . . Progress is not the aim, but circulation. The thing is to get among the poems where they hold each other apart in their places as the stars do.*

(And now, through Frost, I find I’m circulating back to Williams: “Stars: wounds grouped and sainted / as constellations.”)

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