



The End of the Line: Terrance Hayes and Formal Innovation

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If asked whose formal innovations have most influenced a current generation of younger poets, the first name out of my mouth would be Terrance Hayes. His “Golden Shovel” form is a kind of reverse-acrostic variation; rather than arranging letters at the beginnings of lines to spell a word or phrase down the left-hand margin, as in a traditional acrostic, his form places whole words at the *ends* of lines, where they trace out a pre-existing poem. The name of the form itself comes from Hayes’s poem “[The Golden Shovel](#)” in his collection *Lighthouse*, published in 2010. The poem signals its origins by following the title with “*after Gwendolyn Brooks*”; the title is already an allusion to Brooks’s most famous poem, “[We Real Cool](#),” from her 1960 book *The Bean Eaters*, which begins with a kind of stage direction following *its* title:

*THE POOL PLAYERS.
SEVEN AT THE GOLDEN SHOVEL.*

Hayes’s poem is written in two sections, “I. 1981” and “II. 1991.” 1981 begins:

*When I am so small Da’s sock covers my arm, we
cruise at twilight until we find the place the real*

*men lean, bloodshot and translucent with cool.
His smile is a gold-plated incantation as we*

*drift by women on bar stools, with nothing left
in them but approachlessness. This is a school*

*I do not know yet. But the cue sticks mean we
are rubbed by light, smooth as wood, the lurk*

of smoke thinned to song. We won’t be out late.

While one could already draw connections between Brooks’s poem and Hayes’s poem through the setting itself, a closer look at the end-words reveals the form. In this heavily enjambed, syntactically “spoken” (in other words, language that doesn’t feel forced into form) poem, we find: *we real cool we left school we lurk late*, the beginning words of Brooks’s own poem:

*We real cool. We
Left school. We*

Lurk late . . .

In “I. 1991,” the form pushes the reader further, its shorter lines breaking words into pieces, a fractured sensibility:

*Into the tented city we go, we-
akened by the fire’s ethereal*

*afterglow. Born lost and cool-
er than heartache. What we*

know is what we know. The left

hand severed and school-

ed . . .

It is as if the lines in Hayes's poem are now trying to tighten back into Brooks's original. Here, the poem itself feels "severed and schooled" by the life depicted therein. The formal innovation would be striking enough, but the poem transcends its play through its conversation with Brooks's original text, its world-making, its emotion and imagery and lyricism, and even its *additional* formal moves, like the internal rhyme of "cool / stools" or "go / afterglow" weaving through the end-rhymes and repetitions, distributing pressure throughout the lines.

In Lighthead, Hayes uses this "Golden Shovel" form in his poem "Last Train to Africa" as well, with Elizabeth Alexander's "Ladders" haunting the ends of Hayes's lines.

Those who follow in Hayes's formal footsteps with Golden Shovel poems sometimes use end words from a single line instead of an entire poem; there is room for variation within invention. While one could write a Golden Shovel poem using any poet's work as a source text, many writers continue to link the form with the poems of Brooks herself; *The Golden Shovel Anthology: New Poems Honoring Gwendolyn Brooks*, forthcoming from University of Arkansas Press in early 2017, includes work that "celebrates the life of poet and civil rights icon Gwendolyn Brooks through a dynamic new poetic form, the Golden Shovel, created by National Book Award-winner Terrance Hayes."

While this attention to the Golden Shovel form is well-deserved, this form is not the only one of Hayes's innovations that merits attention. I am particularly interested in what one might call his "end-rhyme anagrams," another variation on the tradition of the phonic echo (rhyme or repetition) linking and organizing lines and stanzas into poetry. Here, instead of rhyme, which brings repetition (with variation) through sound, we have repetition with variation through *letters*. These poems take the poem's title and "remix" selections of those letters to make new words, as in the poem "nuclear," from which we discover the end words "uncle, rule, learn, clue, clear, clan, lace, ulcer, race, caul, clean." Out of a game from the puzzle section of the newspaper comes poetry. In conversation with Shara McCallum, Hayes says that he "began wanting to capture something other than personal experiences. The series of anagram poems [in *Hip Logic*] were attempts to capture a particular slanted, intuitive knowledge/logic."

Of course, innovation builds on what has come before. Both of the aforementioned innovations have roots in a history of end-rhyme; one could also link the Golden Shovel to the cento, or even think of it as a kind of reverse-erasure. And I'm particularly interested in thinking of Hayes's anagrams in the context of Oulipo as seen through the lens of Harryette Mullen (a topic I discussed in my previous blog post).

In Harryette Mullen's "Theme for the Oulipians," she writes:

I can't be sure of the exact genesis of the anagram poems that Terrance Hayes has written, but I believe they might be a result of his participation in a workshop I taught in three consecutive years, from 1999 to 2001, for Cave Canem, an organization of African American poets organized by Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady. Among other things, we discussed the Oulipian interest in the persistence of the ludic principle in literature, as well as their systematic investigation and documentation of games, procedures, and devices including acrostics, lipograms, and anagrams. Our discussion also included African American poets whose work includes similar playful devices, poets such as Russell Atkins, Julia Fields, and Julie Patton. One example I used was Bob Kaufman's poem 'Oregon,' which riffs on words – Negro and green – that are near anagrams of the word Oregon. I suggested that instead of using rhyme, a poem could be held together with anagrams. The traditional use of end rhyme is to draw attention to significant words in a poem. Anagrams could be a subtle and intriguing way of emphasizing significant words without making them visibly and audibly prominent as end rhymes.

*Perhaps that discussion has something to do with the anagram poems in Terrance Hayes's book *Hip Logic*, published in 2002.*

Perhaps. And—I hope so. I can think of Terrance Hayes poems that are direct or indirect homages or references to Gwendolyn Brooks, Elizabeth Alexander, Wanda Coleman, Audre Lorde, and Lucille Clifton. I love placing Harryette Mullen in that matrilineal poetic ancestry, a lineage reinforced in Hayes's 2006 collection *Wind in a Box*, which includes "Harryette Mullen Lecture on the American Dream," a prose poem that – though not anagrammatic – is reminiscent of Mullen's own dense, fierce word play.

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