



Echoes and Mirrors (Innovation in Conversation: Part III)

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One of the joys of teaching, and of writing for the *Kenyon Review* blog, is the two-way street of ideas and information these forums afford. While I *hope* I'm educating in the classroom, and at times introducing new poems, poets, or perspectives to readers here at *KR*, I *know* how much I gain when students, colleagues, and readers respond (so very kindly) in kind. Since I've been writing and thinking about lineage and influence so much these days, I thought I'd share some favorite revelations and reminders that have come my way in response to recent posts, leading me down new paths and further illuminating the ones I was already following.

In writing about [Terrance Hayes's anagram poems and Golden Shovel form](#), I briefly considered links with the general history of end-rhyme, the cento, erasure (in this case, a kind of "reverse erasure"), the acrostic (in this case, a kind of "reverse acrostic"), and Oulipo-by-way-of-Harryette-Mullen. In my discussions of the [anagram rhyme](#) and "[stutter rhyme](#)" of Randall Mann and Richie Hofmann, in which a rhyming couplet pairs a "regular" first line with a radically shorter (usually monometer) concluding line, I briefly considered potential precedents, touching on James Merrill and J. D. McClatchy in the case of the anagram, and the Classical epode and Kay Ryan's sense of "recombinant" rhyme in the case of stutter rhyme.

In terms of stutter rhyme, I was delighted when Brian Brodeur reminded me of Fred Chappell's "[Narcissus and Echo](#)," published in *Shenandoah*, in which each line ends with an italicized "echo" of the preceding syllable(s), revealing words within words. It begins:

Shall the water not remember Ember

my hand's slow gesture, tracing above of

its mirror my half-imaginary airy

portrait? My only belonging longing . . .

While Chappell occasionally takes liberties with the form (as when "I live apart" is echoed not by "part," but by "heart"), the form feels, for the most part, inseparable from the content. Chappell's form works on another level, here, as well, as it weds the stutter rhyme with the reverse-acrostic (or "telestich"), as the "echoed" words write their own poem-within-a-poem down the right-hand margin:

Ember of airy longing, ache of unbeing. Is your heart not stone? Hour, light: fare well.

While the "surprise" of these two line-end structures gives a freshness to the ancient myth of Echo and Narcissus, both forms at play here are actually ancient as well. "Acrostic" is from the Greek *akron* ("end," "highest," "topmost") and *stikhos* ("row," "line of verse"), and alphabetic acrostics notably appear in the Hebrew Bible (particularly in Psalms). In "Near Eastern Material in Hellenistic and Roman Literature," published in the *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, M. L. West writes:

It is a remarkable fact that both the Greeks and the Romans learned from the orient in the Hellenistic period the very sophisticated device of the acrostic, and three specific types of acrostic in particular: the sentence acrostic, the signature or name acrostic, and the alphabetic acrostic. (There are five Babylonian acrostics, and a number of examples in the Old Testament.)

Note that these acrostics from the Babylonian syllabary would have been syllabic, not alphabetic, but the truly ancient origins of these text-shaping-texts have been established. They endure not just as the perennial elementary school construction paper name acrostic in which every Bobby has the chance to be "Brave" in his own handwriting, but in the "serious play" of poets like Evie Shockley and Camille T. Dungy. As an example, Dungy's "Prayer for P—", after C. P. Cavafy in *Smith Blue* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2011), begins:

I.

*The door even,
her apartment door,
even her door*

*suffered cruelly. Was it not
enough no one knocked
all that time? Even her lover . . .*

Note “The sea” spelling itself down the left-hand margin. The poem continues, its acrostic spelling out a translated version of Cavafy’s “Prayer” letter-by-letter:

The sea took the sailor into its depths . . .

Of this poem’s origins, [Dungy has said](#):

I am regularly reading and writing and doing exercises that are my version of running scales if I were a musician. They are incredibly boring and tedious and unsuccessful frequently. I had for quite sometime been working on making acrostic poems from existing poems. I had been playing with that, it was just an idea that had struck me and I thought that it would be an interesting way to write a poem. It was significantly harder than I thought it would be and most of them were failures. All of them were failures with the exception of this one. What happened was when the woman at the center of the poem died, I was angry and I was sad . . . I wanted, I needed some way to address all those emotional responses, and I had been practicing acrostics. I was reading one day and I came across the Cavafy poem, “Prayer.” It was so beautiful and so perfect. I neutralized the pronouns in the Alike Barnstone translation, and then I had my poem on which to frame for the acrostic . . . I was forced into this incredibly strict form, which was holding all of that unwieldy emotion . . . I have this high intensity emotion and a highly focused form in which to pour it into . . . My hand got forced by the form that I had selected and it allowed me into what would have otherwise been an unwieldy emotional draft.

I love Dungy’s final phrasing on the subject: “it allowed me into.” Here, the acrostic becomes a kind of door that hinges open into the possibilities of the new lines, the new poem. It also frames the acrostic (and poetic form or constraint in general) as a kind of “Open Sesame,” the recurring folklore motif of the “magic formula” that “opens the mountain.” The acrostic also serves as homage (to Cavafy) in “Prayer for P–,” as the telestich does to Gwendolyn Brooks in Terrance Hayes’s Golden Shovel form (of which Dungy has written her [own version](#)); this acrostic-as-homage is also operative in Jeff Hardin’s “watermark” poems, of which he reminded me after reading the first part of my “Innovation in Conversation” post. He calls his form ‘watermark’ for the way in which he “engages with mostly five-word phrases from literature,” arranged “down the left-hand margin, sort of like a whispered prayer behind the poem.” Of their origins, he says, “When I started these poems, I just liked the idea of my own thoughts realigning themselves through the framework of these important phrases that make up my inner life.” In his poem “[Having Weighed the Only Words I Hold](#),” Hardin’s “watermark” comes from Emily Dickinson, as do Rebecca Hazelton’s acrostics in [Fair Copy](#) (Ohio State University Press, 2012), though hers, in poems like “[\[At last, to be identified!\]](#)” proceed letter-by-letter, not word-by-word as Hardin’s do.

In response to Hardin’s watermark poems, Rickey Laurentiis pointed to similar engagement in his *Boy with Thorn*, and in Eduardo C. Corral’s *Slow Lightning*, linking his thinking about this formal idea to conversation with Carl Phillips, in which Phillips “described it as a kind of call-and-response, engaging in that black (musical) tradition.”

Chappell’s particular “echo verse” in “Narcissus and Echo,” a kind of call-and-response, has a long history as well. In H. B. Wheatley’s 1862 *Of Anagrams* (the title of which I can’t resist citing in full: *Of anagrams : a monograph treating of their history from the earliest ages to the present time, with an introduction, containing numerous specimens of macaronic poetry, punning mottoes, rhopalic, shaped, equivocal, Lyon, and echo verses, alliteration, acrostics, lipograms, chronograms, logograms, palindromes, bouts rimés*), he writes, “Before entering upon the History of Anagrams, it may not be uninteresting to give a brief notice of those other ‘Literary Follies’ (as they are aptly styled by Disraeli) which bear some affinity to them,” one of which is the “echo verse.” After detailing some versions of Echo’s mythology, Wheatley recalls Shakespeare’s “periphrastic description of [Echo], as ‘the babbling gossip of the air’” in *Twelfth Night*, and notes that “Echo verses are a very ingenious adaptation of this fable.” He gives a Latin example (*Foemina dira viri est terribilis—lis*), and an example from George Herbert (“Heaven,” from *The Church*), in which the phonemes reiterated by Echo are transformed into revelatory knowledge. It begins:

Oh who will show me those delights on high?

Echo:

I.

Thou echo, thou art mortal, all men know.

Echo:

No.

(Herbert, in *The Temple*, also has a poem that hinges on the anagram: the transposition of “Mary” to “Army.”) Jonathan Swift’s “A Gentle Echo on Woman” is another famous example of echo verse; W. B. Yeats’s “The Man and the Echo,” while not strictly an “echo verse” poem, plays darkly on the theme of man seeking answers from echoes, and searching for answers in general. Knowing that the poem was written in 1938, when Yeats died on January 28, 1939 makes the echoed “last words” all the more painful. This poem appeared with “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” and “Politics” in the January 1939 issue of *The Atlantic*, of which Jennie Rothenberg Gritz writes in “[The Deathbed Confessions of William Butler Yeats](#)”:

[T]here was no gentle beauty in the three poems by Yeats that appeared in The Atlantic in January 1939, the month the poet died. All of them are brutal pieces of deathbed reckoning. In “Man and the Echo,” the poet stands in front of a blank cliff face, racked by guilt over his role in the 1916 Easter Rising:

*I lie awake night after night
And never get the answers right.
Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot . . .
And all seems evil until I
Sleepless would lay down and die.*

ECHO

Lie down and die.

In each of these poems, the echo acts as call-and-response, and as a kind of imperfect phonic reflection, a funhouse mirror of meta re-vision that serves, at times, to console in its partiality, and serves, at other times, to trouble. The workings of reckoning made visible in a skewed “reflection” yoke the auditory echo and the visual mirror, returning us to Hofmann’s “Mirror.” After I wrote about Hofmann’s “Mirror,” Jennifer Clarvoe got in touch with a string of formal connections, connecting Hofmann’s “Mirror” to James Merrill’s “[Mirror](#),” not just in content, but formally, as Merrill’s uses what Clarvoe calls “a tricky-to-imitate pattern of rhyming penultimate syllables with ultimate.” A persona poem in the voice of the mirror itself, it begins:

*I grow old under an intensity
Of questioning looks. Nonsense,
I try to say, I cannot teach you children
How to live.—If not you, who will?
Cries one of them aloud, grasping my gilded
Frame till the world sways. If not you, who will?*

Clarvoe notes that Merrill employs this formal scheme in “The Octopus” as well, a poem with couplets of alternating long-and-short lines that shares a rhythmic connection with the stutter rhyme of Mann and Hofmann. It also rhythmically connects with the alternating trimeter and dimeter of the Classical epode, and the alternating hexameter and pentameter of the Classical elegiac couplet. Merrill’s “Mirror” clearly connects form and content, and “The Octopus” speaks to form, formal “surface,” and poetic constraint as well, if more obliquely, beginning:

*There are many monsters that a glassen surface
Restrains. And none more sinister
Than vision asleep in the eye’s tight translucence.
Rarely it seeks now to unloose . . .*

Clarvoe sees Merrill’s penultimate rhyming pattern as under the influence of Auden, a lineage confirmed by Merrill himself in a [Paris Review interview](#) with J. D. McClatchy. When McClatchy asks, “What have you sought to learn from other poets, and how in general have you adapted their example to your practice?” Merrill begins:

Oh, I suppose I’ve learned things about writing, technical things, from each of them. Auden’s penultimate rhyming, Elizabeth’s way of contradicting something she’s just said, Stevens’s odd glamorizing of philosophical terms.

Clarvoe relates these effects of Auden (and Merrill) to those of Marianne Moore, whose “rhymes, both end and internal, evolve towards unsteady,” and then connects Moore with Kay Ryan, whose “recombinant” rhyme I have noted here. Clarvoe also points to George Herbert, whose anagram I mentioned earlier, in the context of rhyme and varying line lengths:

George Herbert (also an influence for Merrill) uses a variety of rhyming patterns that catch the hearer up in alternating longer and short rhymes . . . Herbert offers a good reminder of a much greater variety of stanza forms than 21st c. writers are used to considering—and the great pleasure of uneven line lengths. Somehow, over the long haul of the 20th c. busy breaking the pentameter, some writers came more or less to equate rhyming forms with rhyming-equal-line-length forms—mostly pentameter, but also ballads, or Keats’s great odes. (You could say that the “invisible inaudible abacus” of syllabics became one important counter-current to pentameter—Moore, Thomas, Gunn, and others, along with all the little haiku wavelets lapping in—without noticing that these forms often recuperated rhyme by deflecting/inflecting it across unequal, and often shorter lines.) You could say that Mann and Hoffman “out” this kind of rhyming by bringing it to the end of the line . . .

Clarvoe then turns toward another tradition: “Perhaps this use of couplets, specifically, to match and unmatch owes something to the rise of the playful and in-your-face repetitions of the ghazal in the last 20 years?” Clarvoe’s own second book, *Counter-Amores* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), “responds to (among other things) Ovid’s couplets.” The (unrhyming) couplets of Ovid’s *Amores* have what she calls the “slightly-pulled-out-from-under punchline effect of the shorter line . . . As Ovid himself says in ‘Amores 1,’ he’d devised a longer measure to write about war, when Cupid stole a foot away and made him write about love. Classic banana peel effect. From major to minor . . .” In Clarvoe’s “Counter-Amores III.5: A Dream”:

*I wish there were a white cow, and a crow,
some beast that I don’t know—*

*I wish there were a black bull, and a dove,
a lion starved for love*

*haunch-deep in the waters of the stream
without a name, the stream*

*aswim with symbols, flowing allegory,
I wish there were a story . . .*

Here, the tetrameter echoes pentameter—and Ovid’s elegiac couplets. The lines seem to long for some true “sign,” of a more ancient kind. *Counter-Amores* begins with a quote from Robert Frost’s “The Most of It”:

*Some morning from the boulder-broken beach
He would cry out on life, that what it wants
Is not its own love back in copy speech,
But counter-love, original response.*

Note that this is a poem explicitly “about” the echo. Though Clarvoe’s epigraph begins five lines in, Frost’s begins:

*He thought he kept the universe alone
For all the voice in answer he could wake
Was but the mocking echo of his own
From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake.*

There is as little consolation in Frost’s poem as there is in Yeats’s “Man and the Echo.” This is a poem that engages with but refuses “meaning” in echoes and signs, an apt entrance into Clarvoe’s book, which searches for, and questions, connection (with the writers of the past, with the world of the present). In the book’s first section, “Reflecting Pool,” the poem “After the Equinox” asks “Can you hear a thirst reply / from the opposite hill?” while the poem “*Mi Ritrovaì*” ends “Here, in the middle of this mirror trove.” While the other “Counter-Amores” poems in her collection take forms other than the echoed elegiac couplet quoted above, the whole collection echoes and mirrors in its own way.

Merrill’s mirror makes echo as well, ending:

*. . . Since then, as if a fish
Had broken the perfect silver of my reflectiveness,*

*I have lapses. I suspect
Looks from behind, where nothing is, cool gazes
Through the blind flaws of my mind. As days,
As decades lengthen, this vision
Spreads and blackens. I do not know whose it is,
But I think it watches for my last silver
To blister, flake, float leaf by life, each milling-
Downward dumb conceit, to a standstill
From which not even you strike any brilliant
Chord in me, and to a faceless will,
Echo of mine, I am amenable.*

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