



# Innovation in Conversation: Part I

DORA MALECH  
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In thinking about formal innovation in the poetry of Terrance Hayes in my [last post](#), it struck me that, paradoxically, innovation loves company. As a reader, when I encounter formal “newness,” my mind reaches to seek forebears or compatriots, not to negate the new, but to enable it to enter into conversation. And as a writer, a “new” move in one’s own work is so often reached through the example or “permission” of the literary moves of another. My appreciation of Hayes’s innovations (his Golden Shovel form; his title-into-line-end anagrams) is only enhanced as I look forward to [The Golden Shovel Anthology](#)’s exploration of the full range possibilities Hayes’s form has opened up, and as I look back to a poet like Harryette Mullen, whose ideas and sensibilities seem to have reached Hayes at a fruitful juncture in his writing life.

Depending on one’s methodology, searching for innovation in conversation and conversation in innovation may raise immediate questions of actual, factual causality. As a student of history (and interpersonal relations, a.k.a. gossip), one wants to know the actual human influences involved. Did X actually read Y’s work? And when? As a student of poetry, these questions of causality and influence most certainly do matter. But reaching a dead-end in literal causality and influence actually opens up a whole other set of interesting questions – if X *didn’t* read Y’s work before reaching a similar innovation, what was the urgency or relevance of the move that both would arrive at it independently?

I am *very* hesitant to speak of poetry in evolutionary terms, even figuratively (the idea of “strong” poems devouring “weak” poems seems like a wrong-headed and actually pernicious way of figuring the literary landscape), but in this specific case, the concept of “convergent evolution,” in which creatures of different lineages develop analogous structures independently of one another—think of wings and flight developing across species, structural innovation converging in form and function—is such a tempting figure. Perhaps we can borrow the “convergent” and skip the “evolution”; while aesthetic decisions need not be at the expense of other aesthetic decisions, it is still exciting to me to think of multiple poets arriving at “flight” alone at their various desks, as it is exciting to learn which poet inspired another to “fly.”

Take, for example, the parallel form of Randall Mann’s [“Straight Razor”](#) and Richie Hofmann’s [“Mirror.”](#) If anyone knows whether this form has an actual name, let me know; for now, I’ll call it “stutter” rhyme—rhyming couplets in which a longer first line is followed immediately by the quick, single-stress rhyme of a much shorter second line. “Straight Razor” begins”:

*He slid the stiff blade up to my ear:  
Oh, fear,*

*this should have been thirst, a cheapening act.  
But I lacked,*

*as usual, the crucial disbelief . . .*

“Mirror” begins:

*You’d expect a certain view from such a mirror –  
clearer  
than one which hangs in the entry and decays.  
I gaze  
past my reflection toward other things . . .*

The first poem appeared in *Poetry* in April 2010 and then became the title poem of [Straight Razor](#) (Persea, 2013), Mann’s third book of poetry. The second poem appeared in *The New Criterion* in January 2013 and was later included in Hofmann’s debut collection [Second Empire](#) (Alice James, 2015). While the “subjects” of the two poems are different (one exploring an erotic encounter, the other meditating on memory), they are linked not only by the “constraint” of the form itself but by the seeming *necessity* of the form as an enacted exploration of the poems’ themes of expectation

and subversion (or deflation) of that expectation. Both take an initial assumption or premise (of the speaker's "buy in" to the danger of the erotic game; of the clear vision presented by a mirror) and push against that expectation. This pushing against expectation manifests itself structurally as well as thematically, as one expects a comparable length in a rhyming couplet, and here must instead (un)settle on a new expectation.

As these are two (gloriously) living and working poets, I plan to fulfill my interpersonal curiosity and responsibility to history by asking Mann and Hofmann about their influences. Was Hofmann inspired by Mann? Were both influenced by a forebear's poem that I don't have readily in mind? Or did both of these talented formal practitioners arrive independently at an innovation that speaks directly to expectation and subversion, to desire and constraint? But that is, hopefully, a conversation for another post.

In thinking about connections between the two poets, one notes a shared investment in traditional and innovative prosody throughout their bodies of work. One also notes, in both, the exploration of love, desire, and the making of individual queer identity. (Of *Second Empire*, Peter LaBerge [posits](#) that the book "functions as a deeply personal glimpse into the immediate and long-term effects of the tension Hofmann experienced growing up as a queer man in Western society: tension between security and connection, beauty and fragility, tradition and identity." In an [interview](#) with Peter Kline for *32 Poems*, Mann describes *Straight Razor* as taking "a turn toward memory, a mythologized childhood, and the perils of queer adolescence.")

But what of *this* "stutter rhyme" couplet? Does it have precedents? Perhaps one could call it an extreme contemporary version of the Classical "epode," a form characterized by couplets in which a line of iambic trimeter is followed by a line of iambic dimeter? (But no—the lines of the epode wouldn't have rhymed, and the contrast between Mann and Hofmann's line lengths is much greater, and less strictly metrical, in the case of Mann's first lines.) When I read these two poems aloud, without seeing their regular visual form on the page, I think of Kay Ryan's description of what she calls "recombinant rhyme"; in [an interview](#) with *The Paris Review*, she says of her sense of recombinant rhyme:

*When I started writing nobody rhymed—it was in utter disrepute. Yet rhyme was a siren to me. I had this condition of things rhyming in my mind without my permission. Still I couldn't take end-rhyme seriously, which meant I had to find other ways—I stashed my rhymes at the wrong ends of lines and in the middles—the front of one word would rhyme with the back of another one, or one word might be identical to three words.*

She gives her poem "[Turtle](#)" as an example of this individual sense of internal rhyme (and I would add her "[A Certain Kind of Eden](#)," "[Blandeur](#)," and "[Album](#)" as favorite examples, myself), then concludes:

*What's recombinant rhyme? It's like how they add a snip of the jellyfish's glow-in-the-dark gene to bunnies and make them glow green; by snipping up pieces of sound and redistributing them throughout a poem I found I could get the poem to go a little bit luminescent.*

Interestingly, however, when asked if she writes "in form," she says, "Never. I don't have any gift for it," implicitly distinguishing between her looser sound play (which I would certainly call a "formal" capacity!) and "fixed" or "received" form"; I wonder how she herself would categorize the highly innovative forms found in the work of poets like Mann and Hofmann.

Though there might not be a direct lineage or influence of Kay Ryan on Mann or Hofmann (or at least not one that I have found), one might consider all three as engaged in the "queering" of "traditional" form, as Rickey Laurentiis posits in his description of [Queering Form with Rickey Laurentiis](#), a course offered last year through Poets House in New York:

*Since at least the mid-1990s, "queer" has emerged as a socio-political and theoretical framework set in opposition to the normative, "stable" or strictly binary. In 2016, then, what might it mean to write a poetics queerly, to insist upon a queer reading of a text or, indeed, to queer a form?*

Laurentiis asked participants to "arrive not so much ready to toss what perceptions, conventions or ideas they have of the poem/poetic form out of their thinking, as much as be prepared to turn those perceptions, conventions and ideas on their heads, in-side out, out-of-sorts, to pervert them into some productive 'new' space." Here, again, the opportunity to innovate with company.

To return once more to the couplet, if not the particular couplet of Mann and Hofmann, Laurentiis spoke of his own poem "[Mood Indigo](#)" to [PANK](#) in 2010, responding to the question "What is the significance or effect you wanted to achieve of the couplet structure in 'Mood Indigo'?" with the following:

*Anxiety, sex, tension, coupledness . . . The couplet-stanza has always represented for me a kind of friction, a pull-and-tug between each of its two lines that are—first separately and then, hopefully, together—campaigning for attention, for resonance. In a poem where I attempt to deconstruct what it means to be in love and in danger at once—whether that's to be queer in these United States; whether that's to be simply alive, trapped even, in a flooding house—the couplet form came, therefore, naturally. Moreover, "Mood Indigo" is a poem obsessed with ideas of*

*absoluteness, of binaries between “this” or “that.” The couplet, in this way, mimics this exchange.*

As per *Merriam-Webster*, one might take “exchange” here, again, as “talking or a talk between two or more people.” Synonyms include: converse, dialogue, discourse, discussion, conversation.

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