

Handbook of Poetic Forms

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Jessica Bundschuh and Irmtraud Huber

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Thomas Austenfeld

32 Reading the Sestina

Abstract: Anglophone sestinas appeared in small numbers in the Renaissance, then disappeared until the late Victorian Age, and eventually burst on the scene after Ezra Pound published “Sestina: Altaforte” (1909). Over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a number of poets wrote notable sestinas, and a spate of comic sestinas erupted in the past 30 years. With its emphasis on the complex, prescribed variations of its line endings over the course of seven stanzas, the sestina eschews rhyme, but favors rumination. This chapter investigates the structure and potentialities of the sestina in English, Pound’s poetic theories and his imitators, and selected examples of the contemporary sestina from Anthony Hecht via Florence Cassen Mayers to Honorée Fanonne Jeffers.

Key Terms: *teleuton*, line, troubadour, *retrogradatio cruciata*, envoi

1 A Prison for the Mind?

When Ron Padgett edited *The Teachers and Writers Handbook of Poetic Form* in 1987, he recruited poet Anne Waldman to explain the rudimentary structure of the sestina. Waldman and her peers describe the form invitingly, intending to motivate high school students to try their hand at it.¹ Waldman concludes with this optimistic injunction: “It’s interesting how almost any six words, used in a sestina, will tend to generate a scene or little story” (Padgett 1987, 185).

Other practitioners beg to differ. In a brief and masterful “Afterword” to the anthology *Obsession: Sestinas in the Twenty-First Century*, the eminent scholar of formal poetry, Lewis Turco, observes that Anglophone poets mostly struggle with the fact that “the repeated end-words can be obtrusive” (Whitlow 2014, 243). A straightforward definition of the sestina can be found in Edward Hirsch, “Sestina,” *A Poet’s Glossary*.

Since sestinas are not required to rhyme in any conventional sense of the term, the hinges that quite literally articulate the poem, the end-words, must either be underemphasized through enjambment or grammatical substitutions or they must be comically overemphasized. While the past few decades have witnessed an unprecedented proliferation of sestinas, many have been outright comical or even derivative, often composed in deliberate allusion to Ezra Pound’s “Sestina: Altaforte” (1909), the

¹ The full book is reproduced at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED304701.pdf>. I invite readers to follow the instructions and write their own sestina.

poem that re-introduced the form to Modernism. Of relevance here are two major anthologies of sestinas: *Obsession: Sestinas in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Carolyn Bears Whitlow and Marilyn Krysl (2014), and *The Incredible Sestina Anthology*, ed. Daniel Nester (2013). From 2003 to 2006, the online journal *McSweeney's Internet Tendency* published hundreds of sestinas. For one of the fullest critical assessments of the proliferation of sestinas in the early part of the twenty-first century, see Stephanie Burt (2007). For a comparatively and linguistically inflected approach to the form, see Thomas Austenfeld (2023).

At the same time, the sestina has been the vehicle for deeply probing meditations, such as Anthony Hecht's "The Book of Yolek" (1990). It is thus tempting to describe the sestina initially *ex negativo*: it does not require rhyme; it does not have the snappy conclusive character of the couplet; its structure of strict equality among 36 of its 39 lines does not favor the intricate argumentative possibilities of the sonnet (✓23 Sonnet); and it is next to impossible to memorize. Add the fact that, as Turco observes about twenty-first-century sestinas, "the editors and I are bemused by the fact that writers of many of the sestinas seem to have either no regard or no ear for meter" (Whitlow 2014, 243), and the aesthetic appeal of the sestina seems limited indeed. What is left?

Actually, quite a bit. The sestina enables the poet and the reader to do a few things and to think in ways that no other form quite manages to achieve. Its obsessive character is perfectly suited to the neurotic mindset of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Its paucity of variations directs one's thinking into patterns that reveal rich contrasts and interconnections. In this, the sestina functions much like a polyphonic chorus or a Baroque fugue that privileges none of its many voices, but gives each one the space to develop fully while, almost incidentally, weaving all of them into the greater whole of the work.

Critic and poet Anthony Hecht, one of the sestina's most accomplished practitioners, offered the sobering assessment, "[t]he resources of the sestina seem astonishingly circumscribed" (Hecht 2019, 77). The statement serves as a transition between Hecht's analysis of Sir Philip Sidney's "Yee Gote-heard Gods," a rare double sestina, and his subsequent reading of Elizabeth Bishop's stunning "A Miracle for Breakfast." Hecht's chapter "Sidney and the Sestina" in *Melodies Unheard* (the essay was originally published in 2002) is at once an outstanding example of critical analysis within two very different settings – the English Renaissance and the mid-twentieth century – and a guide to any reader of Hecht's own sestinas, best-known among them "Sestina d'inverno" and the previously mentioned "The Book of Yolek." "Circumscribed" is not the same as "limited"; it rather suggests extreme strictness of rules and conscious self-limitation, somewhat akin to, but in fact stricter than, the "prison, unto which we doom / Ourselves" that is not in fact a prison, as Wordsworth says about the sonnet (Levin 2001, 89). The strictness of the sestina's rules, like the sonnet's, may well be its outstanding attribute. As a result, putting a genuine narrative into its 39 lines is the

poet's greatest challenge, since the recursive patterns of terminal words generally push against a forward movement. These words prevent the poet from finding alternate terms to describe what she's doing; hence, the poet is forced instead to re-interpret or re-purpose the words themselves. The sestina is often a kind of prison for the mind that can't seem to get past the permutations of six words, unless the seventh and final stanza, the *envoi*, really manages to function as the send-off that its name implies and thus propels the obsessive mind outward into the world again. As a result, the sestina, to adapt a famous adage by Robert Frost from 1939, is not necessarily "a stay against confusion" as much as it is a place where the mind may stay for a while as it sorts out its confusion (Frost 1995, 777).

Even inveterate lovers of poetry rarely manage to learn a sestina by heart. The subject material for such a poem needs to withstand, or work in unison with, and finally somehow rise above, the iron-clad rules of the sestina. Since the end-words are predetermined in their order, they exert their force backwards, as it were, on the line. Few sestinas sound completely organic; many have instances in which the line's end-word looks like necessity instead of deliberate choice. Elizabeth Bishop's "Sestina" (1956) may be one of the form's few examples that seems to have not a single contrived line, but flows organically from beginning to end. Many Anglophone poets, including the great American formalists Edwin Arlington Robinson and Robert Frost, never wrote sestinas (see Turco, in Whitlow 2014, 242). In view of these assembled obstacles, the proliferation of sestinas in the twenty-first century – more on that below – seems to have been made possible by giving a decidedly unserious, comical turn to the subject matter and in particular by loosening the meter and thus freeing the line to assume any length that suits the occasion (see Turco, in Whitlow 2014, 243). The line, then, is at issue (♫6 Line).

The Anglophone poetic tradition has excelled in producing intelligent and varied rhymes at its line endings (♫8 Rhyme) and has also featured remarkable inventiveness in anaphora. *Beowulf* and other accentual verse, as well as Walt Whitman's catalogues, are outstanding examples of both the functionality and the pleasure of alliteration in the history of Anglophone poetry. Line endings without rhyme, by contrast, have been favored by poets who find rhyme unheroic and, therefore, habitually use enjambment (see Milton's prefatory note, "The Verse," to his *Paradise Lost*; ♫11 Blank Verse), or by those who employ the line ending as a poem's central structural device (♫16 Free Verse). John Milton is justly famous for, among other things, the energetic enjambment that animates his poetry, so that his line endings hurl or tumble the reader into the subsequent line where the syntax is already ahead of itself in search of a stopping-point in the far distance. But the line endings of the sestina have no parallel or analogue in Anglophone poetry. The daunting formal requirements of the sestina all but forbid a headlong Miltonic rush. The prescribed order of alternating terminal words in the sestina, the strictest of its many rules, can make it difficult to break out of the constant little end-stops and to interrupt the reader's self-conscious backward look ("now how

exactly did this poet use the terminal words here in comparison to the preceding stanza?") and to progress with a story, an argument, or just any event unfolding over the course of time. Once more Anthony Hecht: "The repeated words, inexorable in their order, *seem* designed to convey a state of obsession, and of gloomy obsession especially" (Hecht 2019, 66; emphasis added).

Yet in both of Hecht's pronouncements quoted above, the operative verb is "seems" or "seem," instead of "is" or "are." Despite their strict rules, or perhaps enlivened by them, sestinas are process poems. Their "procedure" is, in fact, their built-in engine, which provides the energy that advances the form. The six terminal words (I'll use the word *teleuton* henceforth) are like six players in a board game. Their changing positions will help tell the story that the poem needs to tell. After the teleutons have gone through their proscribed alternations, their final positioning on the board is already determined: they will show up again in the three-line *envoi*, two to a line, now matched horizontally, in addition to their earlier vertical variance. Such strict formal rules encourage rumination, in both the mental and the bovine senses of that word, further retarding the poet's mind and the reader's eye as the form puts the brakes on rapidity. Moreover, the required alternation of the teleutons imposes a pattern of equality among the thoughts that are "assigned" to each teleuton. Each teleuton in turn will assume "first position" at the end of the first line of one of the stanzas and will enjoy this privilege only once. What is true of the teleutons is also true of the lines: the poem's form militates against privileging one thought among others or offering an argumentative development in a straight line. The seventh, concluding stanza, with the requirement to mention two of the six teleutons in each of its three lines, forces a certain intensification of thought and imagery, but the mere propinquity of the teleutons in those three concluding lines does not necessarily result in an argument either.

With its required *retrogradatio cruciata*, that is, the interlocking system of backward-looking teleutons in strictly ordered sequence, the sestina relies on its reader looking *back* repeatedly. Backward looking is a necessary feature of conventional phonic rhyme, too, of course (the satisfaction of rhyme depends on remembering what came before), but its design in rhyme is to satisfy (or to creatively thwart) the expectant ear (>8 Rhyme). Conventional end rhyme based on phonic equivalency, either through assonance or consonance, is unknown in the sestina. In its place, the sestina employs what one might call a rhyming of concepts – i.e., of the privileged teleutons – across stanza breaks. The internal "rhyming" brought about by the recursive *retrogradatio* is really a rhyming of ideas. A word rhymes with itself, so to speak, when it appears in the following stanza (in one of the six possible positions), recalling its earlier use in a preceding stanza. Because of the requirement that each stanza, starting with the second, re-use the closing word of the preceding stanza's last line, each teleuton in turn is, only once in the poem, brought into proximity with itself, with just a stanza break intervening. This simultaneous proximity-distance situation exemplifies the un-

easy equivalence that the teleutons have with each other. Formally tightly bound, even braided, they sit uneasily and yet evocatively near each other in conceptual terms.

Pattern requirements notwithstanding, the sequence of thoughts in a sestina is theoretically open to rearrangement, hence the difficulty of learning one by heart. Rumination is by definition unsystematic. If all thoughts and propositions are theoretically equal, the sestina may serve primarily as an instrument of carefully probing reflection, rather than as the vessel of a clear-eyed polemic. In this way, it aids introspection instead of acting as a tool of advocacy. It is a puzzle to be worked out on the page, rather than a full-throated proclamation. One other possibility remains: a sestina can tell a story across the sequence of its stanza, but such an effort, too, requires the poet to employ the same teleutons while advancing the plot.

2 Ezra Pound's "Sestina: Altaforte" and the Comic Tradition

The most successful sestinas just barely stay within the rules and stretch them at every opportunity. Ezra Pound's "Sestina: Altaforte" (1909) is in many aspects a counter-argument to some of my earlier claims: almost alone among the major examples of the form in English, Pound's poem is polemical, proclamatory, and impetuous in its tone and demeanor. The "story" it tells is the monologue of a vain and bored warlord. It is a historical set-piece, almost an antiquarian object created by Pound to evoke a time long past. Pound could not have foreseen "Altaforte's" echoes across the twentieth-century's landscape of sestinas, but the performative nature of his poem gave license to future sestineers who could establish pedigree by alluding to Pound. "Altaforte" then marks the beginning of the sestina's full re-entry into the Anglophone poetic universe. Except for a few notable examples from the pens of Algernon Charles Swinburne, Edmund Gosse, and Rudyard Kipling that initiated the recovery of the form, the sestina had been virtually absent from the English canon since the times of Sir Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser.

In 1909, as part of his project to make poetry modern, Ezra Pound resuscitated the sestina in his effort to illustrate the origin of lyric poetry in the Troubadour tradition. His essayistic work, and his most famous sestina, "Altaforte," explored and used a Troubadour setting, and with it Pound lit a fuse at the start of the twentieth century. Here is an apparent historical paradox: just as modern poetry successively abandoned the strictures of form and meter and focused more fully on the individual line, on linguistic experimentation and, later, on the "deep image," the rule-bound sestina muscled its way back into the poetic arsenal. The sestina's appearance in different historical periods points to its strengths and limitations. Its origins are in the Trouba-

dour court where, as Pound would have it, it sits “between literature and music” (Pound 1968a, 116), a fact that favors rather than inhibits its musical qualities. Pound styles “Altaforte” as a performance and therewith makes positive use of the form’s repetitive nature, repetition generally being more acceptable and perceived as more pleasurable in songs than in spoken poems (✓4 Performance). Pound exploits this musicality to its fullest.

“Altaforte’s” martial theme set off a kind of slow burn that glimmered through the following decades and turned into a sestina conflagration by the late twentieth century that has lasted up to the present moment. Pound’s sestina still provides the starting-point for contemporary poets. Here, following some elaborate “stage directions,” is Pound’s opening stanza with the teleutons that will generate the rest of the poem:

Damn it all! All this our South stinks peace.
 You whoreson dog, Papiols, come! Let’s to music!
 I have no life save when the swords clash.
 But ah! When I see the standards gold, vair, purple, opposing
 And the broad fields beneath them turn crimson,
 Then howl I my heart nigh mad with rejoicing. (Pound 1909, 14)²

In the composition of “Altaforte,” Pound’s craft favored Medievalism over contemporaneity and earthy accentual verse over metrical elegance. He takes troubadour subject matter, channels *Beowulf*’s accentual meter while disregarding metrical regularity or syllable count, and apparently eschews social or political relevance. But even while “Altaforte” is in some measure imitative, a vehicle for Pound to show off his erudition, its learned air and form of address clearly attracted the coterie of Modernists who possessed the highly specialized education and training to appreciate the effort and the result. Although it is a call to battle, Pound’s sestina is argumentatively turned inward: spoken in the voice of Bertrand de Born, it is pronounced by a character who entered literary history as a “sower of discord” in Dante’s *Inferno*, Canto XXVIII, where he is shown swinging his own severed head by the hair, like a lantern.

Pound specifically located the spirit of poetry – not just of the sestina – in its mystical numerology, which allowed him to demonstrate the exemplary nature of the sestina in poetic history:

Poetry is a sort of inspired mathematics, which gives us equations, not for abstract figures, triangles, spheres, and the like, but equations for human emotions. (Pound 1968b, 14)

2 Listening to the recording of Pound’s 1939 fiery reading of this poem, in which he accompanies himself on a kettledrum, is an unforgettable experience: https://www.openculture.com/2012/10/ezra_pounds_fiery_1939_reading_of_his_early_poem_isestina_altafortei.html

In “The Phantom Dawn,” the opening essay to his collection *The Spirit of Romance* (1910), Pound contextualizes this mystical statement in his lengthy appreciation of Arnaut Daniel, the troubadour credited with having invented the sestina. As Pound seeks to locate the *fons et origo* of European poetry in the Troubadour tradition, he relies on an anthropology firmly grounded in the late Middle Ages and on a craft combining skill and proper training. Somehow, “inspiration” and “mathematics” combine to produce a rudimentary psychology, or at least a way to express “human emotions.” Pound highlights that Dante singled out Arnaut for praise by calling him “miglior fabbro” in line 117 of Canto 26 of the *Purgatorio*. Thus, using “mathematics” and “emotions” as the book-ends for “poetry,” Pound marries two concepts metaphorically to undergird his claim to poetic knowledge. Pound’s mathematical metaphor obviously does not refer to the modern use of mathematics in engineering but evokes instead the place of algebra and geometry in the ancient system of the seven liberal arts, where each art, including music, opens a pathway to understanding the coherence of orderly spheres in which human beings live. Dante and his Provençal precursors, of course, lived and wrote in this kind of world, and Dante’s reliance on numerology in his *magnum opus* is as evident in his meter and stanza as in his portrayal of the celestial spheres. In writing, the poet produces a lesser image of the creation built by the greater craftsman, God himself.

“Fabbro” foregrounds the skill and craft necessary to good poetry, prior even to poetic inspiration. Today we would probably call this skill the use of form. The term “fabbro” would soon become a signpost in Anglophone poetry when T. S. Eliot dedicated *The Waste Land* in 1922 to Ezra Pound with words borrowed from Dante, acknowledging Pound’s substantial editorial help and calling him, in turn, “il miglior fabbro” (Eliot 1971, dedication). This gesture turns Eliot into a latter-day Dante: the simultaneous evocation of modesty and arrogance in this *captatio benevolentiae* is typical of Eliot’s defining paradoxes (for Eliot’s many paradoxes, see Howarth [2012], especially the subsection “The Paradoxes of Self and World,” 57–62). By 1922, the sestina, or at least its history as suggested by Pound, appeared to hover in the wings of American Modernism: it would not take long for it to move onstage.

The specific branch of American poetry that has embraced the sestina form in the past 100 years, and especially in the past 30 years, thus cannot be neatly traced back to the two traditions generally considered normative in American literary history, the Whitmanian tradition of bardic prophecy and the Dickinsonian tradition of reflective interiority. And yet, Ezra Pound and Elizabeth Bishop may stand exemplarily for these two traditions in the twentieth century: Pound famously made a poetic “Pact” (1913) with Whitman and would continue to write *Cantos* that adopt the bardic voice and ethos. And Bishop integrated the sestina form into the remainder of her exquisitely intricate, ruminating, self-exploratory corpus of poetry (see Donaldson 2001). The sestina has now been claimed by practitioners on both sides of the divide, as American poets have discovered in it a tool for intense introspection *and* for raucous

wit, and both practices have required them to play fast and loose with the “rules” for crafting a sestina.

“Altaforte” has generated its own tradition, so to speak, and that tradition veers clearly towards the comical. Given that “Altaforte” is itself partly derivative, purporting to be an adaptation of an original Troubadour lyric, this is impressive. Drew Gardner, in “Sestina AltaVista” (published after 2000) uses the exact same teleutons as Pound, changing only “opposing” to “poser” as if to reveal the one-upmanship of rivaling poets as “poseurs”:

Damn it all the cute future nurses are missing our march for peace!
It's not that I'm not a fan of prog rock – it's that I'm not a fan of awful music.
Cat videos may expel their thoughts on the afterlife while listening to The Clash,
But Standard & Poor's just laminated your stamp script to a poser.
I hate it when people use the race card to get tickets to King Crimson.
I drive along the BQE, blasting the A/C and rejoicing. (Nester 2013, loc 1961)

Several unconnected “plots” are initiated here, only some of which will be tentatively developed as the poem careens through its stanzas. With few exceptions, Gardner uses end-stopped lines adding observations sequentially, but randomly. That kind of line-writing is very much in the Poundian tradition: “Pound’s free verse line is almost always ended-stopped [sic], reinforcing moments of syntactical rest and emphasizing syntactical variation within the line” (Longenbach 2004, 138). In Gardner’s poem, the stanzas do not advance obvious internal arguments, but arrange koan-like insights such as “There’s no sound like the sound of your child singing to a poser” (stanza 6) in accordance with the teleutons’ respective placements.

Similarly indebted to Pound is Kent Johnson’s 2005 “Sestina: Avantforte,” which uses as its teleutons the names of six poets of the so-called New York School of Poetry: John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, Frank O’Hara, James Schuyler, Barbara Guest, and Joseph Ceravolo (Nester 2013, loc 2766). This sestina tells a story of the six poets involved in some kind of caper about a presumably fictitious translation project. Their full names, first and last, are interspersed whenever Johnson feels that he needs to end a “line” – some of his lines having grown, in the storytelling, into paragraphs of as many as forty words. Such loose observance of the rules – Johnson himself calls the poem “insouciant” and “madcap” (Nester 2013, loc. 2820) – makes the demanding shape of the sestina disappear under the elaborate joke. The “Avantgarde” evoked in the “Avantforte” of the title bears little resemblance to Pound’s imaginary troubadours.

Probably the most ingenious inheritor of Pound in this regard is Alfred Corn who, in his “Pound-Eliot Sestina,” composes a genuine, if tongue-in-cheek, homage to his Modernist forebears. Corn writes iambic pentameter almost to perfection in this sestina, creating an affecting mock seriousness. Corn styles the “argument” of his sestina as a debate with Pound and Eliot over the validity of form, assuring them that “free verse is here to stay” (Nester 2013, loc. 1543). Along the way, he throws some shade, as

we might say casually, on Dana Gioia and Marilyn Hacker, both of whom have at times written exquisitely neo-formalist poetry, including sestinas. Corn wittily alternates the teleuton “Altaforte” as “forte,” “for T,” or “forty.” His poem also features the terminal word “sestina” rendered in one instance as follows:

Secondhand emotion, says Tina
Turner, is boring. (Nester 2013, loc. 1543)

In other words, Corn, almost like a latter-day Polonius, expends both “matter” and “art” copiously on this hilarious text. As a serious scholar of prosody himself, Corn adds in a commentary to this poem,

I thought a sestina about the sestina might be fun and plunged headlong into the assignment. I think the ever-so-slightly absurd requirements (at least in a contemporary context) of this particular verse format lend themselves to comic treatment, including over-the-top features like homophonic puns, slang, and intentional overstatement. (Nester 2013, loc 1482)

Corn’s take on the poem can stand representatively for the work of many recent sestineers in demonstrating the skill of the *fabbro*.

3 Serious Sestinas

At the same time, the sestina’s nearly liturgical strictness of performance allows it to provide a space for serious intellectual interiority. As a poetic form prominent in Romance languages, and in particular in the troubadours’ *langue d’oc*, the sestina was originally committed to the characteristic hendecasyllabic lines that dominate poetic meter in these languages. In the face of these multiple challenges, Sir Philip Sidney upped the ante, as it were, and wrote a *double* sestina fashioned as a competitive dialogue about song, love, pain, and country pleasures among two shepherds, “Yee Goteheard Gods” or, in modernized spelling, “Ye goatherd gods.” Sidney’s shepherds are caught in a conventional, but nonetheless affecting love triangle. All of a sudden, their “gloomy obsession” (Hecht 2019, 66) has turned into competition. Sidney’s double sestina makes hay of its pastoral topos and the attendant opportunities: with six conventional teleutons (mountains, valleys, forests, music, morning, evening), the poet composes not just six but twelve (!) stanzas shaped as a dialogue of lovelorn shepherds, followed by an *envoi* of three concluding lines as prescribed. Moreover, Sidney skillfully employs the English pentameter in lieu of any hexameter models he may have had available for inspection and imitation. Producing twice the required length while continuing with the identical teleutons is a kind of poetic boast, and by significantly using a meter suited to the English language, i.e., pentameter, Sidney makes the sestina sound English.

A number of twentieth and twenty-first-century poets have employed the sestina for serious purposes. Anthony Hecht, already evoked earlier, as a young soldier in 1945 found himself confronting a situation that could only be dealt with in rumination: as Jonathan Post describes beautifully, in the first chapter of his book on Hecht, *A Thickness of Particulars*, Hecht participated in the liberation of the Flossenbürg concentration camp where he experienced – or at least learned about – the scenario that would lead him in 1981 to compose his sestina “The Book of Yolek” (Post 2015, 4). Post even quotes the respected critic William Logan as remarking, about the material treated in “The Book of Yolek,” “it is the most terrifying sestina I know” (Post 2015, 8). Jonathan Post’s chapter should be read in full to appreciate the historical context of the episode and the traumatic impact that Hecht and his fellow soldiers experienced.

“The Book of Yolek,” though just 39 lines long, tells the story of a five-year-old boy whose life ended in a concentration camp to which he had been marched after having been taken away from his midday meal. Yolek’s life was so short that its entire “book” fits into one poem. The poet, traumatized by this knowledge, will re-encounter Yolek, as it were, at every outdoor meal, every picnic, every nature walk: “His unuttered name will interrupt your meal” (2011, l. 36). Unuttered, yes, but not absent. As Post remarks, Yolek’s “name keeps reappearing as an anagram in each stanza, made out of the final letters of the terminal words (y, o, l, e, k) but without ever quite spelling out his name in the manner of an acrostic” (2011, l. 13). Hecht has not just used the teleutons, but even the terminal letters of five of the six words to inscribe the human tragedy into his poem. It seems to me that an event of such unfathomable evil as the Holocaust can, possibly, only be approached – though never explained – in a form such as the sestina, which gives room to inexpressible mystery.

Poet-scholar Marilyn Krysl emphasizes the quality of the sestina as rite or ritual, given that it originates in an age of faith. She argues that the sestina is particularly effective in challenging our perception of time. Rather than focusing on the sameness of the teleutons, Krysl argues that the ever-new juxtapositions of the teleutons in the successive stanzas will create “a peculiarly intoxicating tension” (2011, l. 8). “Six times,” Krysl says, “we’re brought from profane time into cyclic time, and for that duration we may experience intimations of immortality” (2011, l. 12). In her essentially mystical reading of the form, Krysl encourages contemporary readers to remain open to the sestina’s incantatory powers, which may work on our subconscious, even if we fail to be aware of it. Hecht’s “The Book of Yolek” is a far cry from any Wordsworthian “intimations,” but it is an outstanding example of such depth and changes in temporal perception as Krysl describes: the Holocaust experience will never assume a “normal” place in the speaker’s history.

James Merrill’s “Tomorrows” (2001), with its teleutons from “one” to “six,” laying bare its exoskeleton like Notre Dame de Paris, has already been invoked by Alex Alonso (✓26 Strict French Forms). What is entirely humorous in Merrill is – in a slightly different manner – rendered darkly pathetic in Florence Cassen Mayers’s “All-American Sestina” (1996). Inverting Merrill’s method by pulling the numeral

words/teleutons to the *front* of the line, while using popular idioms with each one, allows Mayers to foreground the banality of American experience and still arrange its set pieces artfully:

One nation, indivisible
 two-car garage
 three strikes you're out
 four-minute mile
 five-cent cigar
 six-string guitar (Mayers qtd. in Whitlow 2014, 32)

Mayers's scrupulous adherence to all the rules of *retrogradatio cruciata* in the stanzas that follow makes the nondescriptness of American clichés stand out in stark relief. The sestina form appears to lay a mantle of complexity over the deliberately banal and completely interchangeable American experiences here described. Yet by the time we reach the fourth stanza, signs of trouble ahead can no longer be ignored:

five-course meal
 three sheets to the wind
 two bits
 six-shooter
 one-armed bandit
 four-poster (Mayers qtd. in Whitlow 2014, 32)

The poem's *envoi* deflates pretentiousness into bleakness in a matter of three lines, signaling the end of the anonymous protagonist whose life has been measured by the poet, not in coffee-spoons, but in numbers from one to six:

two thumbs up, five-karat diamond
 Fourth of July, three-piece suit
 six feet under, one-horse town. (Mayers qtd. in Whitlow 2014, 32)

The all-American denizen of this nation who meets his demise as the poem ends likely does not himself appreciate the artful arrangement of his clichéd life: only the reader who understands the sestina form can wryly smile at so much art lavished on so little substance. Or should a more benevolent reading apply? Does Mayers suggest that even the most pedestrian life deserves to be artistically enhanced, at least for the benefit of the observer, if not for the main character of the poem? Whichever approach one chooses, the poem's persona remains in ignorance, but the writer and the reader share a knowing wink. No rumination has taken place, but the paradoxical relation of dignified form and risible content emerges visibly on the page.

Turning finally to another aspect of the American experience, I want to suggest the sestina's productive power in the hands of a versatile and highly accomplished African American poet and novelist. The opening stanza of Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's

“Cotton Field Sestina” (2004) describes a slow coming-to-consciousness of its young female protagonist:

The bolls by the side of the road –
 at first this picture of startling cream lies
 to the senses – maybe snow? – but the blues
 rises up, the heat rises up, the sweat – so much water
 down my neck. At last I see the dusty
 flecks are cotton, what I should know in my gut. (Jeffers 2004, 39)

Jeffers turns the form’s prescribed features into a haunting journey of self-recognition for the poem’s protagonist. The teleutons tell the story of her life, and they have a specific quality. The speaker, a Black girl in the South turning into a woman, is singing the *blues* of traveling on a *road* to Georgia, fighting *dust* and looking for *water*. While road, dust, and water are familiar concepts of everyday life in a rural world – although the water here can alternate as sweat or as “truth’s water” – “blues” evokes the larger, total world of this speaker’s existence: life is endured because it is articulated through the plaintive song of the blues. It is, however, the final two teleutons that whip the poem into a metaphysical realm: *lies* and *gut*: “lies” is used in one of its verbal senses only twice (“lying / like a frog-fed snake in the dust” and “what lies in Georgia dust”), but four times in its homonymic sense of not telling the truth. “Gut,” finally, is the innermost human organ, the one that knows without cognition, the one that registers hunger, and the one that communicates the depth of this gut-wrenching poem about finding home. The “gut / string” is also the material for the guitar or mandolin on which the blues can be plucked. The musical references here reinforce the reader’s sense that the meter, though not perfectly regular, is tightly controlled, totally dissimilar to the looser practice of the humorous sestineers discussed above.

The seemingly endless journey along roads that are identically dusty and waterless, leading along cotton fields that are deceptively white, is evoked with the help of the sestina’s obsessively repetitive structure. The first five stanzas, then, sound the small variations on the theme of an endless journey undertaken in response to the vague call, “come back home, girl” that begins the third stanza. And then, in stanza six, the speaker suddenly seems to have grown up, as she assumes agency and articulates conditions that will make this return possible:

My mother, my Mama, she calls me a liar,
 she denies me her waters,
 turns me out of her sweet gut
 if I don’t shake loose my fist of grave dust,
 if I don’t stop writing down my blues,
 if I don’t trot behind her on her smooth road. (Jeffers 2004, 39)

Here, anaphora is joined with preordained teleutons in the second half of the stanza. Three if-clauses, like the eternal three wishes in a fairy-tale, state the conditions of this speaker's self-liberation: three strong verbs with harsh consonants – shake, stop, trot – signal a new start in the speaker's consciousness. The anticipated family reunion will only be a lie and a denial and a rejection ("turns me out"), unless the speaker can turn her present deathlike condition ("grave dust") into living, get out of the obsessive repetitiveness of the blues, and take her own road instead of following her mother's path. The three lines have the *look* of an *envoi* in that their grammatical shape and rhetorical thrust differ from all the other lines. Technically, of course, they are not the *envoi*: when it arrives, the speaker's subject position has changed once more.

When the call "come back home, girl," again italicized as before, is sounded for the second time, at the start of the *envoi*, the tone of the entire poem has changed. The permutations of the thoughts that were suggested and directed by the permutations of the teleutons have given place to the hard-won recognition of hard truths that belie the conventional sentimentality of the return home. But they are now articulated in a clear-eyed manner; the speaker recognizes the uncompromising truths about her existence:

Come back home, girl to what lies in Georgia dust:
no love in truth's water, no birdsong blues,
no home in my gut – cotton by the roadside. (Jeffers 2004, 39)

Jeffers's choice of the sestina form is singularly suited to the process of suffering, introspection, recognition, and decision that her protagonist undergoes on her journey. These emotions and movements of thought remain the bedrock ingredients of the sestina.

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