

# CALLIOPE MUSIC: NOTES ON THE *SESTINA*

By James Cummins

The *sestina*, as the comedian might put it, don't get no respect. Or perhaps a paraphrase of Frank O' Hara's comment on opera is more to the point: the *sestina* is obvious as an ear. The *sestina* is ungainly somehow, to our sight as well as to our obvious ears. Bad poems importune, but any *sestina* seems to ask for too much: it's too tricked out, either over- or under-dressed, Baby Huey lumbering up, giggling too loudly, or suddenly too earnest. Our comment about the *sestina* often has an edgy quality to it, too, as if the speaker not only is impatient to move on to more serious things, but also understands something important, even essential, about the form that the reader doesn't quite get; usually, the speaker doesn't feel required to put this knowledge into words. I wonder if maybe the *sestina* isn't secretly an embarrassment to formalists; it seems to mock their endeavor by its obviousness and lack of subtlety.

It intrigues me that of all the received forms that get talked about in our journals, only the *sestina* never gets anything interesting said about it. Or rarely. Often it's used as a whipping post to flay writers somehow less advanced than the writer making the comments. In a recent issue of Poetry Pilot, the Academy of American Poets' newsletter, Marilyn Hacker made some dismissive comments about those who write "unmetrical" *sestinas*. In the current issue of Black Warrior Review, Richard Wilbur made a number of comments about formal issues, including a few about the *sestina*. Again, though Wilbur's remarks were more substantive, he used the *sestina* to target bad writers--the phrase "creative writing" reared its ugly head--and showed little sympathy for and much condescension to the form. Here is an excerpt:

One thing that some people don't understand at present is that each form has a sort of implicit logic. I wouldn't dream of sitting down to "write a sonnet." Disgusting idea that someone should sit down with a determination to write in some form or other before he conceives of what the

hell he's going to say. It's what you're going to say that tells you what formal means might further the utterance. ...

It's one of the horrors of creative writing in America that people who have never written anything in form are often asked to write **sestinas**. They are often indulged in writing non-metrical **sestinas**, which is about as bad as you can get. But to sit down with the dire intent to write a **sestina** seems to me the worst thing you can do unless there is something happening in your imagination that necessitated the form. And I do think, having thought about it a little, that there are some subjects that are suitable to the **sestina**--suitable to the taking of six key words and emphasizing them seven times each; I guess that's what happens. If you're writing out of obsession, I think the **sestina** might very well serve you very well. An inability to stay away from certain words and situations and [the need to] emphasize those things could be expressed by the **sestina**. The sort of experience which you just can't believe could be described very well in a **sestina**, you could say it first in one stanza and then say I knew, really, it happened that way and then go through the reshuffled key words once again. Alas, not all **sestinas** have that kind of logic.

Or, one might say, Thank goodness. Now the rest of the interview from which this quote is taken contains some insights; however, it seems to me that in this passage Wilbur patronizes the **sestina**. This attitude has its roots in unspoken assumptions about received forms, I think, and helps account for the edginess of his remarks. Besides the desire for permanence--which is itself, of course, another way of stating the fear of impermanence--formalists want sport, play, not unlike Hemingway's ideas on the subject: an abstract field with clearly-delineated rules, wherein the cleanly-played game, the artifice, stands clear of the messiness of life, and comments on it. Corollary to this is the idea of the received form, brought to perfection by masters of an earlier time--Petrarch, Dante, Shakespeare--against whom one can be measured, with whom one can take one's place. One can master a form and, fetishized with our need to transcend ourselves, it can grant permanence.

Enter the **sestina**. Better yet, an unmetrical **sestina**. A formalist conceives of the **sestina** as a lyric, and hears the sound of it become distorted, go awry, if the basic metrical pattern, usually iambic pentameter, is tampered with--much like an air-raid siren blaring, going away, coming back in ellipses of sound that are uncomfortable to the ear. The metrical pattern is what holds the awkward, elliptical sound of the **sestina** together, in this view--counterpoints it, smoothes it, gives it the polish and sheen of a lyric. Destroy the metrical pattern, and you've got a wounded, bleating animal on your hands--a large wounded, bleating animal. Add to this a lack of development--change-- in the end words, and you're listening to a large, wounded, bleating animal that's brain-dead. Few sounds are so nightmarish to an ear sensitive to poems.

But paradoxically that awful sound is a key to the power of the **sestina**: it can make that sound. Most poems can't, because they're too busy being what we want them to be: good. They're like children: they court us, want our approval, want to be like us. The sound of a bad **sestina** might be the sound of life leaving the beast, but at least it's life. Nature is cruel, after all. Maybe a hundred **sestinas** must die, so that one may live. In any case, the **sestina** is not a lyric form, though it has lyric aspects. It is a meditative, narrative, dramatic form, and we need to adjust

our ears to hear it today.

I've tried to imagine what a **sestina** sounded like eight or nine hundred years ago. With its High Middle Ages love of display, the lines looping out into the night, concerned only with what they would find, not in reinforcing preconceptions of rhyme; with its self-regard, the way it rhymes itself, as it repeats and develops itself; with its circularity, its connecting back to itself, and its way of thus presenting itself freed, self-referential: the numinous quality of such an adventure should not be slighted. If you consider some of the types of poems in the air preceding and during the time of the **sestina**, you see not only aspects of the form we've come to designate **sestina** (connection of each stanza with the foregoing one by repetition; rhymes of first stanza repeated in inverse order in the next, etc.), but also a sense of exploration, a sense of becoming on the part of the form. If you think of the first poems that used repetition in the way we can recognize as a primitive version of the **sestina** (indefinite number of stanzas, the last rhyme of each used in the first line of the next; the last rhyme of all corresponding to the first rhyme of the poem; etc.), you see the sense of circularity and completion--of Eliade's sacred and profane time--that resonated in the medieval mind, and resonates still. Basic to the **sestina** form are issues of time, the voyage out, the return, change, repetition-as- development, self-reference, self-consciousness. Evidently, these early poems were accompanied by a dance. How many poems, how many dances, how many years go by in the pleasure of this ritual, this developing form, as gradually (or maybe not so gradually) innovations are made toward what we think of as ours: the "final" fixed form of the **sestina**?

This sense of the continuum of form is often what is lacking when formalists speak so dogmatically about form. They want certain rules and regulations to apply. They want to be right. I've discovered in my life that at the exact, precise moment I feel myself to be 100 percent right about something, I'm invariably wrong. Always, when I focus on the one thing, I fail to see the many, the flux; I haven't allowed for the fact that, as has been noted, you can't step into the same river twice. The moment in which I am right must always be the moment in which I was right--whatever being right means, or meant--because by the time it gets to consciousness the moment has passed, and I no longer fit the requirements of the new moment. The poem, formal or free verse, is like that: it is the moment in which I was right, and also, by my definition, the moment in which I am wrong. It's why, I think, when we look at this ungainly form, the **sestina**, we often fail to see the possibilities: we are looking at the goofy, harshly delineated inhabitant of this moment, not the mysterious voyager passing through our consciousness, whose form is not completely available to us. We want the **sestina** to be a certain thing, and we are disappointed when it eludes us.

The sonnet doesn't elude us; the sonnet reflects us, or at least reflects what we want to see about us. We can be brilliant in the sonnet, and the sonnet reflects our brilliance. Our argument can be allied with our verbal accomplishment; we can be unanswerable. We can have the last word. To return to the children again, sonnets are like our perfect children, or brilliant pets (perfect children are brilliant pets, after all): they not only do what they're told, they do it in league with us. We ask one thing of every sonnet: uphold our idea of ourselves.

The **sestina** reflects us, too, much more accurately than we think. That's why we don't like it.

Walker Percy has a trope in which he wonders why, after a lifetime of looking into mirrors, we are so surprised at our reflection in a clothier's three-way mirror. That perspective on us can't be us--can it? We walk out of a clothing store perplexed and shaken, our idea about ourselves a little more complicated than we'd imagined. What we need to recognize, I think, is that the **sestina** is a form that humiliates you as a writer--a form that mocks you, mocks itself, is rueful, meditative, self-dramatizing--in short, is not in league with you.

The formal principle of a **sestina** has nothing to do with metrics; it has everything to do with whether you can get said what you thought you wanted to say, as you find out what it is you can say. Wilbur calls it "disgusting" to sit down with a determination to write in a form before you know what you want to say. But he goes on in the next sentence to add that finding out what you want to say will tell you what formal means might help order your words. Which comes first, the chicken or the egg? The subtext here is a commonplace about organic form--expression finds its own form-- transposed to formalist arguments, thus bridging a gap (or preempting one) in a politically correct fashion. What it doesn't do is account for the moment when a given form rears its not-ugly but shaping head. Let's see: someone sits down with an unclear idea of what to say; therefore, a sonnet is out. A lightbulb goes on, and the ideas come; therefore, a sonnet is possibly the answer to the question of appropriate vessel. This is all so--so rational. The phrase "what formal means might further the utterance" buys into that false idea of "mastery," condescends to the very idea of form that formalists formally espouse, yet secretly avoid: you engage form, you don't choose it. It isn't an arrow in your quiver; it's an arrow in you, and it quivers; it's a kind of love.

A **sestina** that flies into me is Elizabeth Bishop's poem, beautifully titled, lest we forget, "**Sestina**." To savor this poem stanza by stanza is to appreciate how a **sestina** can mean; and also to see, I think, a modern version of how stanzas "mirror" each other in the **sestina**, something the medievals were obsessed with. This "mirroring" is essential to the progression of a **sestina**; and in this case, one way of seeing it work is to look closely at the teleutons, especially "tears." First, the poem:

#### *SESTINA*

September rain falls on the house.  
In the failing light, the old grandmother  
sits in the kitchen with the child  
beside the Little Marvel Stove,  
reading the jokes from the almanac,  
laughing and talking to hide her tears.

She thinks that her equinoctial tears  
and the rain that beats on the roof of the house  
were both foretold by the almanac,  
but only known to a grandmother.  
The iron kettle sings on the stove.  
She cuts some bread and says to the child,

It's time for tea now; but the child  
is watching the teakettle's small hard tears  
dance like mad on the hot black stove,  
the way the rain must dance on the house.  
Tidying up, the old grandmother  
hangs up the clever almanac

on its string. Birdlike, the almanac  
hovers half open above the child,  
hovers above the old grandmother  
and her teacup full of dark brown tears. She  
shivers and says she thinks the house  
feels chilly, and puts more wood in the stove.

It was to be, says the Marvel Stove.  
I know what I know, says the almanac.  
With crayons the child draws a rigid house  
and a winding pathway. Then the child  
puts in a man with buttons like tears  
and shows it proudly to the grandmother.

But secretly, while the grandmother  
busies herself about the stove,  
the little moons fall down like tears  
from between the pages of the almanac  
into the flower bed the child  
has carefully placed in the front of the house.

Time to plant tears, says the almanac.  
The grandmother sings to the marvellous stove  
and the child draws another inscrutable house.

The poem combines narrative, iconic, and meditative elements to present a static, yet highly charged scene that moves slowly past us with all the power and pathos of aching lived life; and then is gone, unredeemed save by puny Art. The first stanza sets the scene: we are approaching the autumnal equinox ("September rain"), time of rhythms more powerful than the personal, and more noticed in a northern clime; the light is failing; and the grandmother is old. The mother--the daughter, after all--is gone; the grandmother--the mother, after all--hides her tears from the child. Her tears are natural, normal, and are for both, or for all three, and must be hidden to spare the child.

But those tears are a complex liquid. The heart and brain go on after tragedy-- they obsess, as Richard Wilbur would attest--and the grandmother has had to find reason in her grief. But for human reason to try to put a design on God's ways is to invite rigidity--or, ironically, madness--and the grandmother's claim to esoteric knowledge is based not only on a connection to the earth and its seasons, but to a holy book, as well--the farmer's "Bible," the almanac. Such desperation--such will--is not enough; her action of offering the bread, and her directive that

seeks to dictate time, are thus ineffective.

We tend to think of "time" in a **sestina** as "subject matter," but it goes beyond that; "time" is a structural component of the form. The sonnet holds the moment captive; any lyric, no matter how long its actual duration, asks that we suspend time for the moment of its cry. Of all the shorter forms, the **sestina** most self-consciously calls attention to its existence-in-time, as it makes its journey through its mirrored landscape. In Bishop's poem, the grandmother tries to control time by identifying herself with nature, and by reading the "signs" of a holy book. But nature has been distorted here--one generation has been removed from the picture and fundamentalist typology cannot address the other, parallel "time" in the poem: the child's time. The child doesn't accept the "iron" kettle's contents--by extension, the brown tears of tea--but rather sees its "small hard tears" that have escaped--from the frying pan to fire, as it were--and are dancing, as she is, "like mad" with pain. She stares at them in a trance of psychological trauma, lesion, but also with some redemptive sense of the earth's power: she connects them to the dance of the rain on the roof. Here, the grandmother is "old" again, unsure of her explanations; and the almanac is "clever," a code word in such a household for the Devil's work.

In stanza four, the almanac is sinister, feral, "half open," not the solace the grandmother wanted from her book, but the source of deeper, truer knowledge that both threatens and comforts the child. From the child's perspective--and particularly for her adult self who serves as narrator of the poem--it is vitally important--ultimately, to her salvation--that the almanac know what it knows.

Its knowledge is vaster than the typology the grandmother wishes to read there; and though the absence of the mother has left the child without a translator of this knowledge, the voices that begin to speak in stanza five, with their hard truths, must be heard. There has been a breach in the line of generation, through which painful truths surge; these truths turn the child, forever, into an artist. And though there is no mother to mitigate the flow and charge of these voices, there is no recourse to hearing them: not to listen would be to die.

The house the child produces in her art is "rigid," and she projects her fear and sadness into the "buttons like tears"; but the pride with which she shows her work to her grandmother signals the beginning of psychological integration, and a turning for home on the part of the **sestina** itself. Now we begin the return trip to the place we will know for the first time. The sixth stanza is magic: the nocturnal and diurnal processes come back into sync, as the almanac rains down its little moons like tears into the child's art. The last two lines of the envoy are an image of the parallel universes the grandmother and the child inhabit, with no mother to mediate between them; but the tears that have been planted do more than give hope. We have, after all, been reading one of their issue.

To understand finally those tears--and teleutons generally--we have to look at a certain process at work in **sestinas**. It is a commonplace to say that we've lost the meaning of the number mysticism that the medieval mind associated with the **sestina**. The significance of the number 6 as a weak number, or of 7 as a number of mystical wholeness; of the sequence "615243"; or

of the fact that each stanza is composed of three couplets, each of whose sum equals 7--these are not uninteresting facts to us, but they are shut off from us unless we can somehow feel their meaning in the poem. I don't claim to have rediscovered any of those old feelings, but if we remember that a seventh stanza, were we to go that far, would return us to the originating sequence of teleutons, abcdef, not the exact copy of the first stanza, but a mirror image--and also that, at seven, we would have closed the circle perfectly--maybe we begin to get on the trail.

I have a feeling that the stanzas and teleutons of a **sestina** "mirror" themselves in a particular way, and to particular purpose; and that they do this primarily through the oddity of "rhyming themselves." Further, I think that this process is linked to the idea that "time" is a structural component of the form. It's a very strange thing, to rhyme a word with itself, and almost a taboo in ordinary rhyme. In a **sestina**, each teleuton mirrors itself in the previous stanza, thereby showing in itself gradation, change, progression. The mirror image "rhymes" itself, but is not "itself." The teleutons are signposts--each time you come around them you are made aware (one of their very important functions is to make you aware) of the passage of time: this word is the "same," but only in the sense a human being is the same at different ages. Time is the medium through which the teleutons pass, not only in the sense of passage, but also in the sense of duration of consciousness. Even self-consciousness.

To borrow from Heraclitus again, you can't step into the same stanza twice. Or as Pound might put it, the teleutons of the fifth stanza are not the teleutons of the first, though they hang in the same way over the bridge-rail. This mirroring fascinated the medieval poets; I think they saw the **sestina** as a strange landscape of mirrors that refracted time and love with much more complexity than, say, the sonnet. In his poem "West-Running Brook," Frost speaks of "that white wave [that] runs counter to itself" to describe a process of throwing back against oneself to progress--a process of "some strange resistance in itself" that pits the self against the self in order to grow.

The key here is progression, change. Each teleuton must change, grow, contain more or other than its previous incarnation, while it contains its own echo, another fascinating aspect of rhyming itself. Think what happens when a teleuton goes dead, doesn't progress: a **sestina** can stand--maybe--this happening once. But we hear the sound. Two teleutons die, and the air goes out of the ball; the game is over. In a larger sense, the stanzas work the same way; they progress and develop by commenting on what has gone before--on their previous formulation, as it were--then offering the new. Isn't this what's wrong with the many bad **sestinas** we've all read? The third or fourth stanza fails to deliver the new to us, or, like a sequence of too-similar adjectives, the "new" it offers hasn't changed, hasn't grown, enough.

So I chose to write in the **sestina** form; that was the first humiliation. There would be others to follow. Maybe that's why this old idea of "mastery" makes me laugh, makes me imagine myself holding a snowball while a high silk hat glides along the top of a fence. The **sestina** resists your "choosing" it as the "appropriate" vehicle for your "material"; it laughs at the whole process that compartmentalizes composition in this way. Because the **sestina** doesn't fit these ideas, people who need the notion of "mastery" find the **sestina** odd and confusing. I've mentioned

Richard Wilbur's notion that "obsession" has to drive a **sestina**. Paul Fussell has commented on the "dubious structural expressiveness in English" of the **sestina**, and Karl Shapiro also has decided **sestinas** reflect "obsessive vision." Whence this obsession about "obsession"? The **sestina** is an anomaly when seen from the perspective of "mastery" : it won't play along. And thus it can't be seen for what it is, but only for what it isn't.

The **sestina** is a relic from an age of faith, and the meditative voice is never single. It's always dual because it posits God. It posits itself and a Listener; and the idea of someone listening to you--let alone someone omniscient--makes for a whole dynamic, more than an utterance. Much contemporary poetry has lost this sense of the dual (duet, duel?)--of the listening part of the mind that grows impatient with the earnestness of I went, I saw, I thought. (Not too unlike, after all, I came, I saw, I conquered.) A powerful intellect can seduce itself into believing that what it thinks is the final say; and by final say, I don't mean that it precludes what others might say later (in fact, it welcomes response, gaining legitimacy from it, tradition, and one's place in it, being the ultimate legitimacy), but only that, for the purposes of the poem, the poet is in control of all aspects of the material. This is vanity, anxiety. I said the **sestina** was an expression of an age of faith. I could add that it's a specific faith--it's Roman Catholic. The **sestina** has adornments, fetishes; it peddles influence and indulgences. It has about it the fat smacking sound of the bishop's lips as he sets down his jewel-encrusted wine goblet and picks up a leg of mutton. This is disconcerting to the powerful Puritan intellect of our literature. The Puritan God doesn't find anything funny. No wonder he thinks the **sestina** can't express much. But with the duality of the meditative voice, the Listener can laugh at you--can find you absurd, ridiculous, give some measure to your outrageous earnestness, the comical seriousness with which you take yourself. When the meditative voice loses touch with the Other, the Listener, the "God" in whose presence and with whose assistance poems are made, the result is not cry, but statement. And statement, we know, partakes of the wrong kind of power. Bank statement. Bottom-line power.

The **sestina** is a vehicle for journeying, and as such its rhythms often lend themselves to decidedly unmetrical strategies. While it partakes of a version of rhyme by rhyming itself, it's open to all different sorts of "languages," since its overall desire is to deepen through repetition and change. As I conceive it, the **sestina** does not simply fire neural transmitters that come round in a regular way, but rather defeats your expectations of these very firings: it makes you miss your step, land slightly off; it truncates that seventh stanza. Purity--perfection--in this realm would be blasphemy. Several voices, different approaches to an issue, lyric riffs within stanzaic constraints; these extend and deepen the reach of the poem. I think a major strength of the contemporary **sestina** is its ability to assimilate prose rhythms.

Writing about Proust's masterpiece in *Aspects of the Novel*, E. M. Forster says: "the book is chaotic, ill constructed, it has and will have no external shape; and yet it hangs together because it is stitched internally, because it contains rhythms." He adds that he doubts the quality of rhythm in the novel "can be achieved by the writers who plan their books beforehand, it has to depend on a local impulse when the right interval is reached." Writing on Forster writing on Proust, Frank Baldanza--who is writing on Huckleberry Finn--says:

We ought to have a clearer idea of what Forster means by rhythm in the French novel. He selects as his example the "little phrase" from the sonata by Vinteuil, later incorporated into a sextet: Proust employs this musical phrase, which recurs innumerable times in the course of his narrative, in such a manner, says Forster, that in itself it has a "musical" function in the novel. ... [W]e can see that Forster has a clear definition of what he means by a "musical" function. The use of "repetition plus variation" is the key to this kind of rhythm. Simple repetition of a theme, such as Forster finds in [George] Meredith, is dead patterning; but repetition with variation and development, and especially with varying degrees of emphasis, is rhythm.

He goes on to quote Forster:

. . . the little phrase has a life of its own, unconnected with the lives of its auditors, as with the life of the man who composed it. It is almost an actor, but not quite, and that "not quite" means that its power has gone towards stitching Proust's book together from the inside, and towards the establishment of beauty and the ravishing of the reader's memory. There are times when the little phrase--from its gloomy inception, through the sonata into the sextet-- means everything to the reader. There are times when it means nothing and is forgotten, and this seems to me the function of rhythm in fiction; not to be there all the time like a pattern, but by its lovely waxing and waning to fill us with surprise and freshness and hope.

Repetition, change, development--this is how the **sestina** goes out on its journey, and how it returns in a way different from any other form. The **sestina** seems to me to embody a very real mode of existing: conversation. In a conversation a concept or theme is introduced, then repeated several times throughout the course of the conversation--perhaps extend the concept of "conversation" to "evening"--a dinner party, perhaps, drinks before, coffee afterward. Each time this concept or theme comes up during the course of the evening, it's with a variation, a nuance, that deepens and extends the layering of the discourse. Then--often, not always--a ingly funny, and smart, even wise. We use this thematic agent as a means for "discovering" the "form" of the evening--organic form, of course, as the evening takes the shape it naturally takes, but with this thematic agent interacting with that natural form. The two interpenetrate, weave together the finished product: the night, but the night resounding with the human--with art, with human agency. For me, this gentle, sometimes fierce, recognition of the ellipses that take us nearer to and farther from each other is what the **sestina** not only symbolizes, but embodies.

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