A COMPANION TO
Poetic Genre
EDITED BY
ERIK MARTINY
WILEY-BLACKWELL
A Companion to Poetic Genre
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ERIK MARTINY

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Since this book is entirely given over to proclaiming the vigor of traditional genres in modern poetry, let us begin by considering the anti-formalist trend that still often interacts with the notion of genre, if only to reject it. A recent poem by the American poet Sapphire serves to illustrate this particular tendency. The text, entitled “Villanelle,” does initially take the late Renaissance genre into perfunctory consideration before it is dismissed:

At school the workshop focuses on villanelle & sestina—the light at the end for counting knowing, rhyming, European, white I’m interested in the black howl, light candles to invoke it.

(ll.1–5)

The speaker later asks:

Can a French form do anything for me? Can the light dying behind my eyes be recorded in rhymes schemes?

(ll.20–22)

Admittedly, the poem never dwells on the formula of the fixed form it evokes in the title and develops regardless of the ordered iteration of the villanelle. In the same collection of poems, “Sestina” proceeds along the same disdainful lines, using no more than the word “sestina” to head its entirely organic growth:

Last night after school I finally got around to looking at the formula for a sestina & thought of Crazy Horse dancing in the desert
& I asked, Is god gonna appear here?
I want god
a blue light so dark
it stains everything for centuries
radiative hallucinatory rood smelling
like urine & frankincense.

(ll. 1–9)

Poets like Sapphire are clearly far from considering non-organic forms as conducive
to intensity or personal expression and yet even the poems quoted above do betray a
certain residual interest in poetry’s ancient ancestry. Although Sapphire empties the
sestina and the villanelle of their formal characteristics, and ultimately sets them aside,
the titles chosen for her poems still nominally offer them as contemporary versions of
these ancient genres, betraying at least a modicum of interest in the mysteriousness
of archaic form. There is a certain ambivalence about the second poem’s discourse after
the word “sestina”: the vision of absolute freedom embodied by “Crazy Horse dancing
in the desert” can be interpreted as being entirely antithetical to the sestina, and yet
the fantasy is also triggered by the reading of the fixed form’s magic formula, the
sestina being a genre which did in fact leave its mark on poetry “for centuries” in a
“radiative” manner. The question which the speaker asks herself is perhaps not all that
ironic.

Other poems such as Peter Cooley’s “Aubade with Dachshund” indicate that even
for poets who reject ancient forms or their traditional motifs, there is a longing to
connect with notions of genre, no matter how gestural, facetious, or parodic this
engagement may be. Many neo-formalist poets are also interested in reconciling the
“black howl” with ancient form, making things old and new at the same time, techni-
cally demanding yet lyrical; formal and yet charged with emotion, hallucinatory
phantasmagoria, or comedy: Robert Creeley’s “Ballad of the Despairing Husband” is
another delightful case in point.

As the title chosen for this Companion suggests, genre is intended here in the broad
sense in which it is often spoken of today. Some might object that comic or satirical
poetry is closer to being a mode than a genre, serving primarily to inflect genres, yet
modes can also be considered in their own right as genres, especially when the main
purpose of a poem seems to be humorous or parodic. Likewise, some of the chapters
included here might seem to belong more properly under the rubric of themes: war
poetry, for instance, could be considered a theme, yet what are genres, in the end, but
themes or technical exercises which have recurred over time and accrued into a tradi-
tion with its intertextual links, its expectations, its stock characters, images, rhetorical
effects, formal trends, and deviations from those trends?

The reach of this Companion has been made as large as possible within the con-
straints of available space. It covers a wide range of cultural traditions from Britain,
Ireland, North America, Japan, the Arabic world, and the Caribbean, providing criti-
cal overviews of genres that are still in widespread current use today in English-
language poetry. While the focus of these essays is primarily contemporary, each chapter charts genres from their initial stages to their most recent renderings so that the reader can perceive in what ways genres from past centuries have evolved over time.

Some readers will perhaps bemoan the jettisoning of such genres as the virelai or the palinode for reasons of space: let me just say that it was hard to let them go, even though there was some comfort in dropping them overboard, knowing that they would not sink but float away to other hands. I thus send out an invitation to harbor them, if enough survivors can be found within the many seas of modern poetry; I wish to make the appeal to poets too for it is they who are the greater conservationists of ancient genres.

Although it is no longer referred to under that appellation, the palinode is arguably just as much alive as it was in times of yore, especially in our politically conscious, postmodernly self-surveying era: in Ancient Greece, the palinode was a poem which withdrew the claims, or redressed the balance, of a previous poem by the same writer. Since Stesichorus poetically retracted his attack on Helen for having caused the Trojan War, many poets have either rewritten their texts in subsequent reprints or addressed their previous poems with self-critical panache. A couple of fine examples spring to mind for those who might be interested in undertaking critical work on the contemporary palinode: Sharon Olds’s intratextual poem “The Window” (*The Unswept Room*) and Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s response to the reception history of his *Mother Poem* in his later *Ancestors* are well worth delving into.

The *Companion* has been divided into two parts, the first dealing with genres determined primarily by form; the second dealing with genres essentially defined by subject matter. It opens with considerations of ancient genres such as the elegy, the ode, and the ballad, and moves on to Medieval and Renaissance genres originally invented or codified by the Troubadours or poets who followed in their wake. It then approaches genres driven essentially by theme, with few or no formal parameters, also broaching recently emergent genres such as the calypso and found poetry.

A number of these genres were brought into existence possessing formal as well as thematic constraints, sometimes losing the structural element over time: the elegy, for instance, began essentially as a formal genre bound by the distich only to become a theme-based, occasional genre. Likewise, the alba is a genre that did initially have formal constraints such as the repetition of the word “alba” at the end of verses, a rhetorical dialogic structure, as well as stock characters including the pair of doomed lovers, the nightwatchman, and the jealous husband: these were generally lost over time as they blended with the more celebratory and less formally constrained aubade.

The metamorphic nature of most genres has caused some theorists to go so far as to claim that “genres have no essence: they have historically changing use values” (Frow 134). This is a seductive view of genre, even if it is tempting to protest that genres such as the sonnet will always retain its fourteen-line mold, even if its initial amatory theme is only occasionally drawn on today: the valiant, steadfast, inviolate sonnet has resisted attempts to stretch its steel in Meredithian style or trim its edges...
into curtal brevity. Before Meredith, there were attempts by Coleridge, Thomas Dermody, Charlotte Smith, and others to write extended sonnets during the almost compulsive nineteenth-century era of “sonnetizing”; even Byron, who vowed never to write another sonnet, claiming that it was “the most puling, petrifying, stupidly platonic” of compositions, could not resist its pull in his subsequent work (Duff 16).

The sonnet has resisted periodic overuse, hybridizing fusion, omission of its rhyme, tampering with its pentameter, typographical reshuffling of its outline on the page. No matter how far contemporary experimentation with the sonnet goes, we never seem to lose sight of its initial formulation. It is tempting to see the sonnet as giving birth to mutating offspring but remaining indestructible in its original form. It is as resistant as those small reptiles that survived cataclysmic conditions when the largest saurians did not.

And yet, permanent mutation or even extinction remains a possibility. One might ask: whence the partimen, the plazer and the pastorela? It is, however, ultimately a mistake to conclude that some genres are defunct and gone forever. Poets can at any time resurrect them in their original form, a modernized version, or in a deeply intrageneric or intertextual manner: even extinct volcanoes are really only very dormant.

Genres nowadays have not so much modified, or evolved from, their original formulations; modern poems exist together in varying degrees of generic concentration, ranging from strict adherence, to transgression, to parody, to token nominal gesturing in the title, to texts written in complete rejection or disregard for form.

Begun in 2009, the anniversary year of both Darwin and his groundbreaking theories, this volume of essays could be discussed in semi facetious biomorphic terms: the word “evolution” has often been used to describe how genres develop. Indeed there is a striking resemblance between the prescriptive, normative approach of Neoclassical theorists and artificial selection; natural selection being closer to what happens in contemporary practice. It is hard to imagine sexual selection operating between genres, even if one tries to picture the villanelle leaping backward and forward flashing its colors like a bird of paradise trying to attract the sestina’s attention, and yet similar things do happen in the metagenre poems of Billy Collins: his “Plight of the Troubadour” or “American Sonnet,” not to mention his comically generic hoax poem “Paradelle for Susan,” are poems which the reader interested in genre studies would do well to consider. The fact that Collins’s tongue-in-cheek creation of the “paradelle” fooled so many critics into believing it was an ancient genre goes to show how relevant and necessary this volume is.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING


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