

## A Few Considerations on “Closed Form” in Contemporary Italian Poetry

The two sonnets that follow this essay are, respectively, the “postilla” (“postscript”) to the sequence “ipersonetto” (“hypersonnet”) by Andrea Zanzotto, included in the collection *Il Galateo in Bosco* (The Woodland book of manners, 1978), and the “sonetto metodologico” (Methodological sonnet) by Marcello Frixione, included in the 2001 collection *ologrammi* (Holograms). I submit that these poems represent significant chronological markers that one might use to define the literary phenomenon known in Italy as “the return to closed form.” While Zanzotto’s “ipersonetto” can be credited historiographically as the *terminus post quem*, since the return to using fixed schemes in Italy dates more or less to the end of the 70s, Frixione’s “sonetto” is, on the other hand, an arbitrary chronological signpost; since 2001, various Italian poets have continued to employ the fixed schemes of the lyric tradition. Out of the closed-form poems written in the past decade, however, Frixione’s sonnet is the one that most prominently presents reflexive and metatextual elements, to the extent that, like Zanzotto’s, it can be read as a poem about poetics.

Naturally, not all poets in Italy who write with fixed schemes do so with the same degree of awareness. Then again, writing in closed form tends to disperse itself into multiple streams: between a return to the sublime and a citational calculus, between an arcadian game and a metatextual reflection. In order to get an idea of the complexity and stratification of this phenomenon, keep in mind that diverse, influential poets such as Giovanni Raboni, Patrizia Valduga, and Edoardo Sanguineti have written in closed form, as well as younger writers of the avant-garde, such as Marco Berisso, Gabriele Frasca, Lorenzo Durante, Riccardo Held, and Giacomo Trinci, and even a mild adherent to tradition such as Roberto Piumini.

To frame the phenomenon in general terms, to summarize it, one needs to choose a playing field: here I will concern myself with just a sampling of the authors who (perhaps paradoxically harking

back to the greatness of the period of experimentation that marked Italian poetry in the 70s) employ fixed schemes first and foremost for the purpose of literary heuristics and then, in the broadly political sense of the term, opposition. This opposition occurs entirely within the domain of literary practice, perhaps following from the premise that every text is implicitly political: literature as resistance, then—to power, of course, but also to the power of language, to the language of power. Thus, with their claims for the autonomy of literary works, the new metricists have differentiated themselves wholly from the neo-avant-garde positions that preach the dissolution tout court of literature into politics.

A sestina by Frasca, a sonnet by Berisso, or a madrigal by Durante cannot be read as a mere restoration of meter. Starting with the “ipersonetto,” at least, any attentive poet who chooses to write using traditional meter does so, first and foremost, to make reference to the conventional nature of any and all literary choice, exhibiting the scheme either as a *contrainte* or as a surplus of signification. The adoption of closed form is, a priori, a dialectic between the artifice of form and the presumed authenticity of lived experience, between schematic artificiality and semantic content. Mannerism is connoted, then, as *labor intus*, as a dyke holding against the pathetic, enchanted flow of the world toward the ineffable, the way poetry was conceived by the Italian poets of the 70s and 80s, who had made an onanistic-orphic practice of free verse.

In Berisso’s poetry, for example, the reinvention of metrical forms, with its subtle philological variations, is a conceptual operation of the highest order, a veritable *inventio* that aims to allegorize its models, sometimes in arguably didactic ways, such as in the octaves of “Esortativi con dichiarazione acrostica” (Exhortatives with acrostic statement; in *Annali* [Annals; Oedipus, 2002]), wherein the flow of exhortations directed to the beloved is framed by the acrostic “TI AMO CON LA FORZA DELLA RIVOLUZIONE” (I love you with the force of the revolution). The poem’s final clause, the isolated verse of the octave (“Ma fine è solo in morte; non in riso” [but the end is only in death; not in laughter]) reveals, in a single moment, both the conventionality of the metrical scheme and of the content. In Berisso’s work, the metrical matrix strengthens semantic content, functioning on the level of signification: in this regard, the poem “Le dieci moralità”

(The ten moralities) is relevant inasmuch as we find within it political invectives in the shape of octave. The octave—which is, along with the *terzina*, the grand metrical form of the Italian narrative poetry tradition—acts as a sounding board in Berisso’s work, a bit like (if I may make the comparison) the forte pedal on the piano.

As the most important partisan of the sestet form in Italy, Gabriele Frasca seems to display a faith in the word akin to that of the humanists, though this faith has become a mannerist obsession that at its extremes borders on desperation. Metrical patterns function on two levels in Frasca’s work: as the crystallization in verse of experience (at all levels: everyday, political, amorous, but also sensorial) and as a screen, or frame, which controls linguistic flow. The latter is an almost metaphorical operation, one which concerns the level of enunciation and has one of its exemplary realizations in the series “fenomeni di fiera” (“carnival phenomena”; in *Rive* [Shores; Einaudi, 2001]), a Dantean gallery of *transtelegenici*, roadside spectacles immortalized in the varying sequence of hendecasyllabic verse lines as the “metrical cage,” and syllabotonic (or accentual-syllabic) pronunciation that removes them from the indistinct chatter of that other, more literal frame for speech, the television. Indeed, the idea of the metrical cage aptly characterizes Frasca’s entire corpus: a means of capturing and preserving language from manipulation by those in power. In Frasca’s work more than others, the dialectic between the element of experience and the *labor limae*—which is to say, between one’s own life and the material objectivity of form—is manifest; it appears emblematically in a text such as the following, taken again from the collection *Rive*:

throw a look around. what is it. the center.  
maybe of a target. with its swirling circles  
on and on the drain. in the excessive furrows  
of your brow. where I disembowel and enter.  
almost scarcely. from within I disinter.  
the lost which were naught but kernels.  
or you don’t know how long I searched on.  
uselessly. something nowhere near my center.  
no. we’re not there. I only asked for rest.  
I only said to wait up. but it’s not enough.

it was no use for anyone to bid me slumber.  
I was awake. and immersed amidst the tough  
stuck matter. that holds within my chest.  
as more crams in I halt what I unencumber

In this example, the Beckettian syntax functions in the way of a formulaic distantiating internal to the system of the sonnet.

As a general consideration, one may affirm that in so-called forward-thinking poetry, closed form assumes the character of an a priori citation, functioning then as a cubed text that inevitably triggers a second-level reading. Thus, the reader finds him- or herself presented with a reading in “falsetto.” The fixed scheme undoubtedly purveys a certain kind of order, imposing a process of synonymy structured in equivalent series. Yet this order is destabilized by poetic devices that impede automatization and destabilize the anaphoric process implicit in every instantiation of closed form—enjambment, prosaicism, rhymes between lexical couplets of opposing signs, and so on.

If, then, the fixed scheme is itself descriptive and introduces an additional element of identity, or recognizability, it does so by theme and topic (in the discourse of the *nouveau roman*) in just the same way that objects within those narratives did (objects like photographs, maps, geographical charts, etc.). These elements function within the chaos of narrative (and existence) as unattainable, ideal models of the world. Through this dialectic between description and recognizability, between the fixed scheme and its internal estrangement, closed form thus appears not so much as a prefabricated shell, but rather as a complex phenomenon of signification, one that is inseparable from the transmission of information that is reinforced by it, even as it gives itself over like the dead skin of tradition.

Closed form has a formulaic, histrionically ritualistic character, one referred to as *mandala* by Zanzotto, a magical circle that allows access, ironic though it may be, to the sublime (at least in Zanzotto’s own poetics). Naturally, the poetic exploration of a writer such as Frixione is of another kind, since there we find ourselves witnessing an obsessive demystification of the sublime and a sabotaging of the patrimony of tradition, in its obvious references to the seventeenth-century Baroque, filtered through the spoils of Pound reduced to his lowest terms, labyrinthine games, and optical tricks, all of which are

intended to depotentialize precisely those metaphorical allusions derived from the Baroque.

*wet cavalcanti*

from your eyes distal stimulus  
arrives through my lids to the photoreceptors  
where filtered the proximal datum  
strikes the visual cortex  
here with enough force it affirms  
that all other forms are shut outside  
then it moves on paths lined with sorrow  
to the right hemisphere then attacks the left

and takes its place by the force of love.

This poem—an octave with an added coda—is placed next to the “sonetto metodologico” in *ologrammi*, almost like a diptych. I would claim that the two texts openly declare Frixione’s poetics. Drawing directly here from the *stilnovisti* tradition, the poet employs a rigorous argumentative scheme in order to nullify the patrimony of its metaphor, since the metaphor is erased, or, rather, is disseminated in a series of synonyms that draw (far from incidentally) from the scientific lexicon. From this poetic operation arises a radical negation of mimesis, of object as sign, given that, at the level of the formal properties of the content, the *topoi*, the commonplaces of tradition, are either sabotaged or recodified. In the same way, the sonnet persists, through this pattern, as a structure that is both rational and combative, at least in the sense of self-allegory, as though it were a perfectly ordered language that refers to itself. In short, the text meticulously deploys a description for the sole purpose of nullifying it; the text develops itself as the periphrasis of an object, of a matrix that is rebutted or repressed, though capable of producing variations of itself, I would suggest, symptomatologically.

In Frixione’s poetry, more so than in that of his contemporaries, the fixed scheme functions like a readymade, a vestige, as it were, of the metaphors and of the clichés of high Italian lyric. The sonnet form might, at least, be used as a proven image, a wash-and-wear dinner jacket, if it were not the case that by cold continuance of rational,

syntactical junctures, Frixione, at the very moment in which he is drawing from poetic substantives belonging to the lyric tradition, cancels their polarization. By doing so, he generates both paradoxes and conceptual schemes, following a process of expansion or of iterative *amplificatio*, the outcome of which is, paradoxically, the cancellation of the referent. In the two texts I have furnished, traditional imagery, lowered into the scientific lexicon, functions as a hypogram of a new imagery self-consciously recodified: the poet is more interested and invested in demonstrating the truth of the linguistic structure than that of its referent. And so, the sonnet becomes a sign of itself.

In conclusion, I would argue that the new code of the closed form, along with the dismantling of traditional isotopies, functions like a critique of ideologies; or rather, a critique of the semantic categories that were codified and hypostatized within those isotopies. Their recodification, the recodification of the fixed schemes of tradition, represents first and foremost a critique of rhetoric as it has been socially codified, and hence also a critique of (and resistance to) the prevailing ideology of communication.

*Translated by Dylan J. Montanari*