

A Formal Feeling Comes

Poems in Form by Contemporary Women



Edited by Annie Finch

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INTRODUCTION

"After great pain, a formal feeling comes—"

—Emily Dickinson

A Formal Feeling Comes: Poems in Form by Contemporary Women reflects a surprising development in contemporary women's poetry in the United States: a widespread turn—or return—to "formal" poetics. Readers who have been following the discussion of the "New Formalism" over the last decade may not expect to find such a diversity of writers and themes in a book of formal poems; the poems collected here contradict the popular assumption that formal poetics correspond to reactionary politics and elitist aesthetics. This does not mean, however, that literary and cultural politics have not affected women's use of poetic form. For serious twentieth-century women poets, traditional poetic form is a troubled legacy. The lineage of women poets in English is largely a formal one, but since the Modernist period, many have had reason to be ambivalent about form.

Women poets found themselves in a double bind during the reign of Modernism, in spite of the fact that their predecessors—from Lydia Sigourney to Louise Imogen Guiney—had developed a popular mode of female poetry during the course of the nineteenth century. While a line of male poetic experimenters including Smart, Blake, Whitman and Hopkins inspired the modernist revolution for male poets, women's poetry had long tended to favor accessibility and community-building over radical innovation. Even Dickinson's innovative poems remain within traditional formal limits much more than those of, for example, her contemporary Whitman.

As one critic characterizes the female poet's predicament, "a modern woman poet could not be a woman poet without reaching for a tradition that would violate the unconventionality of modernism and seem politically regressive."¹ In the early twentieth century, the price of participation in the new movement was the repression or abandonment of the women's poetic tradition.

"Of sugar and spice and everything nice,/That is what bad poetry is made of," quipped William Carlos Williams in ironically perfect rhyme. Like other key modernist writers, Williams linked the major line of women's poetry with traditional verse form and with inferior writing. Ezra Pound is unlikely to have been thinking of formal verse when he declared, "poetry speaks phallic direction," and James Joyce meant to praise the metrically revolutionary *The Waste Land* when he observed that it "ends [the] idea of poetry for ladies." Elsewhere Pound remarked that he wanted "to write 'poetry' that a grown man could read without groans of ennui, or without having to have it cooed in his ear by a flapper."² Female modernists distanced themselves from the mode of more traditional women poets. Privately, H.D. is reported to have "considered herself and [Marianne] Moore far superior to other women poets such as Elinor Wylie, Edna St. Vincent Millay, or Sara Teasdale."³

Teasdale, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Millay, Wylie, Louise Bogan and others carried on the mainstream tradition nonetheless, continuing to write in traditional forms even after the modernist revolt. Although by mid-century almost all of the women poets of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had fallen out of print—and most certainly out of fashion—the legacy would

continue, haltingly and often in secret. While Sylvia Plath was determined not to "write simple lyrics like Millay," Anne Sexton and Tillie Olsen guiltily confessed to each other their private love for the work of Millay and Teasdale.⁴

The poets in this anthology are reclaiming a formal inheritance more openly than women have done in many decades, and their work demonstrates that the long tradition of women's formal poetry is evolving once again. When I began to collect the poems for this anthology, I had no idea of the variety and extent of formalism among women poets. These poems have been gathered from all over the poetic map. With the exception of Marilyn Hacker, whose direct influence can be seen in the work of a number of the poets included here, there has been no particular central model for a return to conspicuously formal poetry. Far from being a poetic movement in the usual senses, the kind of "New Formalism" represented in this book has had an almost unconscious, grass-roots development.

Since one of the aims of this collection is to emphasize the continuity of women's formal poetry, I have included several important early poems by contributors whose careers are long-established. In almost all of these cases, a more recent poem is published as well. I regret that some writers could not be included for various reasons.

Defining "formal" poetry broadly as poetry that foregrounds the artificial and rhetorical nature of poetic language by means of conspicuously repeated patterns, I have chosen a continuum of formal poems, from regular rhyme and meter through accentual verse through nonmetrical rhyming poems to repetitive chants. Each of

the poems included here involves conspicuous repetition, of vowels and consonants (rhyme), rhythmic patterns (meter), phrases (refrain or anaphora) or larger poetic patterns (stanza form). Many of the poems also engage the traditions that have developed around these root-techniques in English-language poetry.

A reader not familiar with the techniques of prosody will benefit by reading this book in conjunction with a handbook of versification such as Miller Williams' *Patterns of Poetry*, Babette Deutsch's *Poetry Handbook*, or Lewis Turco's *Book of Forms*. *A Formal Feeling Comes* includes examples of the most important prosodic forms in English—iambic and triple meters in a variety of line lengths, both rhymed and unrhymed; various quatrain rhyme patterns including the Italian (abba) and English (abab); other stanza patterns such as the hymn stanza, terza rima, rhyme royal, and sapphic stanza; and forms such as the villanelle, sestina, ballade, Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet, crown of sonnets, blues, chant, haiku, and pantoum. I have also included several poems in original or "nonce" forms ranging from pun-poems to oral literature-based chants.⁵ Appendix A describes the technique of each poem, and Appendix B groups poems according to form.

To obtain a sense of the range of contemporary women's approaches to form, readers will want to compare the various versions of a form such as, for example, the sonnet. Most women poets have shied away from the sonnet for decades, perhaps sensing that, as Rachel Blau Du Plessis puts it, "The sonnet is a genre already historically filled with voiceless, beautiful female figures in object position"—Millay and Barrett Browning notwithstanding.⁶ Many of the poets here use the sonnet form as they have inherited it, sometimes with ironic

subject matter, while others change its form: some poets keep rhyme without meter, and others use subtle or rearranged rhyme schemes that are easier to miss in their "sonnets."⁷

The contributors' statements on poetics, all but two (those by Sarton and Van Duyn) written especially for this book, provide clues about the reasons for these different approaches and the appeal of form for various poets. A number of contributors, sensitive to the gender implications of form, write in historically powerful poetic forms in order to transform them and claim some of their strength. Rita Dove, for example, describes her chosen form (the sonnet) as "stultifying," but hears voices in it that are "sing[ing] in their chains." Others, like Molly Peacock, find themselves freed, imaginatively or emotionally, by the aesthetic constraints of form which make feelings "safe to explore." Some relish the intellectual challenge of a rhyme scheme, while others describe the physical pleasure they experience among the rhythms of a metrical line and, like Carolyn Kizer, associate the beat of meter with the rhythms of the body. The passion for form unites these many and diverse poets. As Marilyn Hacker writes, "When I see a young (or not-so-young) writer counting syllables on her fingers, or marking stresses for a poem she's writing, or one she's reading, I'm pretty sure we'll have something in common, whatever our other differences may be."

As this book shows, women are taking on the risks of form in new ways. At their best, these poets combine the intellectual strength, emotional freedom, and self-knowledge women have gained during the twentieth century with the poetic discipline and technique that have long been the female poet's province. These

poems point the way to a true linking of the strengths of the old with the strengths of the new: not a nostalgic return to the old forms but an unprecedented relationship with their infinite challenges.

NOTES

1. Suzanne Clark, "The Unwarranted Discourse: Sentimental Community, Modernist Women, and the Case of Millay," *Genre* 20: 2 (1987): 145.
2. Quoted in David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1976) 298. The quotes from Joyce and Williams, and Pound's quote on phallic direction, are collected in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century, Vol. 1: The War of the Words* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1987) 155-56.
3. Barbara Guest, *Herself Defined: The Poet H.D. and Her World* (London: Collins, 1985) 133.
4. Plath is quoted in Gilbert and Gubar 204. The Sexton anecdote is in Diane Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991) 196.
5. I also urge those interested in chant forms to read the title poems from Joy Harjo's *She Had Some Horses* (Thunder's Mouth Press) and Pat Parker's *Movement in Black* (Eighth Mountain Press).
6. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "Thinking About Annie Finch, On Female Power and the Sonnet," (*How)ever* VI: 3 (Summer 1991) 16.
7. The focus of this book does not include the work of several contemporary women poets who are using the sonnet as the basis for even more experimental work, engaging with the idea of the form more than with its technical aspects. Readers interested in pursuing this phenomenon should investigate in particular Bernadette Mayer's *Sonnets* (Tender Buttons) and Irene Klepfisz's "Work Sonnets with Notes and a Monologue About a Dialogue" from *A Few Words in the Mother Tongue* (Eighth Mountain Press).

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