

THE *SRPR* REVIEW ESSAY:
RAISING THE NET

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The Reality Street Book of Sonnets
Jeff Hilson, editor
Reality Street Editions, 2008
360 pages; paperback, £15.00

Iteration Nets
Karla Kelsey
Ahsakta Press, 2010
120 pages; paperback, \$17.50

Nick Demske
Nick Demske
Fence Books, 2010
88 pages; paperback, \$16.95

Severance Songs: Poems
Joshua Corey
Tupelo Press, 2011
84 pages; paperback, \$16.95

In "On Sonnet Thought," poet-critic Christina Pugh defines sonnet thought as "the sonnet's necessarily economical formal harnessing of expansive, complex (or hypotactic) syntax-as-thought, thus incorporating a capacious amount of often recursive mileage, contrast, and change within the small poetic space of fourteen lines."¹ Sonnet thought, Pugh makes clear, is different from sonnet form: "I discovered that 'sonnet thought,' or sonnet energy, may be separated

1. Christina Pugh, "On Sonnet Thought," *Literary Imagination* 12.3 (Nov 2010): 356-64. 356.

from the metrical norms and rhyme schemes that have constituted the traditional sonnet in its various formal mantles.... It is the manner of thinking that the sonnet form has enabled or inaugurated, even if the more tactile scaffolding of that form has fallen away."² In fact, the point of "On Sonnet Thought" is "to show how sonnet energy, or combustion, may be harnessed from the traditional formal sonnet and reignited through the modality of economical free verse that utilizes certain aspects of sonnet manner."³

Key to differentiating sonnet thought from sonnet form is the *volta*, the sonnet's turn, the major shift in the sonnet's rhetorical and/or dramatic trajectory. Inquiring into "the nature of the sometimes-elusive *volta* within the sonnet form in general," Pugh states:

What is the precise degree or cant of the turn, and how does it reconfigure the sonnet's microscopic unfolding? Whether it occurs before the closing couplet in the Shakespearean sonnet, before the sestet in the Petrarchan scheme, or elsewhere in a sonnet, the *volta's* often breath-takingly indefinable pivot remains a vital component of the governing structure. The *volta* even thrives on its own variousness. As Paul Fussell shows, in sonnets by Santayana, Keats, and Wordsworth, the *volta* is characterized, respectively, as 'a logical action' [answering a question posed by the octave]; 'a moment of sheer metaphoric power'; and, more indexically, 'something like a literal turn of the body or the head.' This capacity for rhetorical shape shifting—perhaps its only indissoluble 'property'—makes the *volta* a metonym for the surprising elasticity of sonnet form over the centuries.⁴

Though key to sonnet thought, the "sometimes-elusive" *volta* is often treated as secondary (if addressed at all) in discussions of the sonnet, a view that many poets have sought to remedy almost since the sonnet's inception. Written over 700 years ago, Dante's *La Vita Nuova*—his collection of shorter poems, many of which are sonnets, accompanied by a prose commentary—might be considered one of the earliest discussions of sonnet thought. For Dante, an awareness of the parts, the divisions, of a poem, each of which is marked by a turn, is important to understanding the meaning of a poem. At the conclusion of his analysis of his canzone "Ladies who know by insight what

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 360-1.

love is..." Dante states, "Certainly to uncover still more meaning in this *canzone* it would be necessary to divide it more minutely; but if anyone has not the wit to understand it with the help of the divisions already made he had best leave it alone."⁵ In her introduction to her translation of *La Vita Nuova*, Barbara Reynolds suggests that Dante is instructing readers who are preoccupied with the features of poetic form how to read his poems more accurately: "What is interesting is that [Dante] evidently thinks it necessary to make clear to fellow-poets and instructed readers where the counter-divisions occur. Perhaps he considered that preoccupation with the *form* of poetry or with its embellishments was tending to obscure lucidity of thought."⁶ According to Reynolds, Dante wants his reader to notice "the articulation of the thought-content, for this is by no means always identical with the structural [i.e., formal] articulation..."⁷

Today, the situation of the volta is a strange one, mixed. Some critics and commentators clearly recognize the significance of the volta. In her introduction to *The Penguin Book of the Sonnet*, Phillis Levin writes, "We could say that for the sonnet, the *volta* is the seat of its soul."⁸ The volta is so important because, according to Levin, "[T]he reader's experience of this turn (like a key change) reconfigures the experiences of all the lines that both precede and follow it."⁹ And in her introductory essay to *The Making of a Sonnet*, "Discovering the Sonnet," Eavan Boland states that the sonnet's "engine of proposition and rebuttal has allowed the sonnet over centuries, in the hands of very different poets, to replicate over and over again the magic of inner argument."¹⁰ Additionally, Boland and co-editor Edward Hirsch restate, and even emphasize, the significance of the turn in

5. Dante, *La Vita Nuova*, trans. Barbara Reynolds (New York: Penguin, 1969), 58-9.

6. Reynolds, Barbara, "Introduction," in *Dante*, 11-25. p. 18.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Phillis Levin, "Introduction," *The Penguin Book of the Sonnet: 500 Years of a Classic Tradition in English*, ed. Phillis Levin (New York: Penguin, 2001), xxxvii-lxxiv. p. xxxix.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Eavan Boland, "Discovering the Sonnet," in *The Making of a Sonnet: A Norton Anthology*, eds. Edward Hirsch and Eavan Boland (New York: Norton, 2008), pp. 43-48. pp. 46-7.

the introduction to a section of their anthology called “The Sonnet Goes to Different Lengths” wherein sonnets of lengths other than the standard fourteen lines are featured. When explaining how the poems in this section are in fact are sonnets, the editors turn to the turn; the final paragraph of the section’s introduction states: “The truth is that there have always been meaningful variations on the fourteen-line standard. Almost every one of these poems defines itself as a sonnet. It relates an experience, develops a thought, makes a case, an argument. It takes a turn.”¹¹

Phillis Levin states that “[t]he *volta*, the sonnet’s turn, promotes innovative approaches because whatever has occurred thus far, a poet is compelled, by inhabiting the form, to make a sudden leap at a particular point, to move into another part of the terrain.”¹² Additionally, Levin rightly claims that when “[r]eading sonnets, one constantly confronts the infinite variety of moves a poet can make to negotiate a ‘turn.’”¹³ However, in contrast to the excitement *voltas* demand and deliver, discussions of the kinds of turns sonnets take tend to be limited to the argumentative type—the turn from problem to solution, from question to answer, from proposition to rebuttal. Pugh’s passing reference to Fussell’s three different kinds of turns constitutes one of the few recent efforts to reveal the variety of turns that sonnets take. Though the *volta* is said to be significant, such recognition has yet to produce an in-depth conversation about the varieties of turns, or what makes a turn great.

Consequently, the turn is too often ignored in discussions of the sonnet. For example, while in her essay, “On the Elasticity of the Sonnet and the Usefulness of Collective Experimentation,” Laynie Browne (the author of a book of experimental sonnets called *Daily Sonnets*) offers twenty-nine “sonnet experiments” for students to try, not one of them involves the *volta*. Or consider David Orr’s discussion of the sonnet form in his recent book, *Beautiful & Pointless: A Guide to Modern Poetry*, which takes place in a chapter called, simply, “Form.” Orr contends that while the use of form is believed by many to involve

11. *The Making of a Sonnet: A Norton Anthology*, ed. Edward Hirsch and Eavan Boland (New York: Norton, 2008). p. 297.

12. Levin, p. xxxix.

13. *Ibid.*

strict adherence to clear rules, form is in fact a rather “blurry” business.¹⁴ Using the terminology of linguist Nigel Fabb, Orr accounts for the sonnet as a “resemblance form,” which means that “the sonnet can’t be described in terms of linguistic rules; instead, it exists only as the result of a series of inferences we make about a given piece of writing.”¹⁵ Orr’s account of the sonnet, is, however, problematic, in that by completely removing the volta from what makes a sonnet a sonnet, it is descriptively inaccurate. And this inaccuracy, while perhaps excusable (the sonnet’s volta is not a purely formal part of a sonnet) leads to other infelicities, or at least difficulties. Of these, the most pressing with regard to my purposes in this review, is that Orr’s delineation of the sonnet as (merely) form does not allow one to say anything significant about a particular sonnet. At the end of his chapter on form, Orr glances at a poem from Karen Volkman’s *Nomina*, a collection of sonnets, and states, “Without bothering too much over whether this is ‘modern’ or ‘experimental’ or ‘radical’ or ‘proper’ or whatever, it’s worth asking: Is this interesting? Is it a sonnet? It’s both, I would say—and that is enough.”¹⁶

But I don’t think this *is* enough; “interesting” does not begin to describe what I feel about the great sonnets I’ve read, those that leave me awed and amazed, speechless and breathless, that have made me laugh out loud and have deepened my understanding. In what follows, I consider four recent collections of sonnets and evaluate them according to their skillful deployment of sonnet thought. I look especially for sonnets with stunning turns that both seem to fit the poem and yet take it in new and unexpected directions; turns that give the sonnet’s language consequence. In doing so, I revise Robert Frost’s idea that writing free verse is like “playing tennis with the net down.” Writing formal sonnets, it turns out, is not too difficult; it’s the writing of sonnets without great turns that’s akin to a netless game. In contrast, crafting sonnets with an eye toward their turns as well as a critical approach that can account for them not only raises the net but also raises the bar on what we expect from sonnets.

14. David Orr, *Beautiful & Pointless: A Guide to Modern Poetry* (New York: Harper, 2011), 69.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 96.