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Sounding Ends and Endings: Non-Closure in Modern and Contemporary Poetry

Federico Italiano

In this article, I will examine the ends of lyric poetry in the teleological sense (*il* fine) by investigating the end (*la* fine) of certain poems—the textual endings and instances of closure (or lack thereof), i.e., the final strophe, the final verse. After discussing Agamben's enjambment-oriented theory regarding the end of the poem, I will analyze some exemplary instances of non-closure in modern and contemporary (mostly Italian) poetry. Drawing on Timothy Bahti's work on the ends of the lyric.[1] I will examine a particular form of non-closure, namely, endings of poems that, by means of self-reflexivity, repetition, and chiastic structures, re-direct the text and its reader back towards its beginning, toward a new reading.

Poetic (Non)Closure: From Herrnstein Smith to Timothy Bahti

The discussion about the ends of poetry is as old as literary theory itself, beginning with Aristotle's famous statement that it is poetry's goal to give pleasure. It is astonishing how recently, by comparison, the question of how poems actually end was first raised. If we leave normative texts on versification aside, we find the first attempt to grapple theoretically with this issue in a brief essay, "How Does a Poem Know When It Is Finished?," published by the late I. A. Richards in 1963.[2] In this groundbreaking text, Richards answers the question set out in the essay's title by stating that a poem "begins by creating a linguistic problem whose solution by language will be the attainment of its end" (168). In other words, he understands poems as linguist artefacts which seek their own explanation within themselves. From this almost scientific point of view, the end of the poem is thus the predetermined fulfillment of a biological process, comparable with the development of an embryo (164–65).

Five years after the publication of Richards's essay, and one year after the appearance of Frank Kermode's *Sense of an Ending*,[3] which sought to establish the centrality of stories of "the End" to fiction, in the *annus mirabilis* of protest, change, and revolution that saw capitals throughout the Western world reverberate with the youth's cry for a new beginning, Barbara Herrnstein Smith published *Poetic Closure* (1968).[4] This is a comprehensive monograph on the question of how poems end, combining the Anglo-American formalism that was still dominant in literary classrooms at the time with innovative analyses of structural aspects of poetry, phenomenological attentiveness, and reader-response-oriented perspectives. As Herrnstein Smith rightly claims, hers was the first study—"aside from a brief and somewhat whimsical essay by I. A. Richards" (vii)—to treat poetic closure as a subject in its own right. Of particular significance

[1] Timothy Bahti, *Ends of the Lyric: Direction and Consequence in Western Poetry* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).
[2] I. A. Richards, "How Does a Poem Know When It Is Finished?" in *Parts and Wholes*, ed. Daniel Lerner (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), 163–74.
[3] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
[4] Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

is her insistence on the subtle but crucial distinction between the end of a poem and poetic closure.

Although Kermode and Herrnstein Smith conceived of their studies independently of one another and without knowing in advance of each other's work, they do share certain premises. For Kermode, "there is […] a need in the moment of existence to belong, to be related to a beginning and to an end."[5] As he brilliantly puts it, "Men, like poets, rush 'into the middest,' *in medias res*, when they are born; they also die *in mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems. The End they imagine will reflect their irreducibly intermediary preoccupations. They fear it […] the End is a figure for their own deaths" (7). Kermode's study is rooted in our need to speak about the end, to write fictions of the end, in order to gain a sense of orientation in the face of the shapelessness, limitlessness, and incommensurability of eternity.

Herrnstein Smith, by contrast, sees the reader's need for closure as ingrained in the psychological urge for structure: "the occurrence of the terminal event is a confirmation of expectations that have been established by the structure of the sequence, and is usually distinctly gratifying."[6] Closure is thus a form of gratification, which comes at the end, but does not coincide neatly with that end. This applies to poetry too, as Herrnstein Smith explains in her definition of closure: "It is clear that a poem cannot continue indefinitely; at some point the state of expectation must be modified so that we are prepared not for continuation but for cessation. Closure, then, may be regarded as a modification of structure that make stasis, or the absence of further continuation, the most probable succeeding event. Closure allows the reader to be satisfied by the failure of continuation or, put another way, it creates in the reader the expectation of nothing" (33–34). In her reading, closure, conceived as a process, exceeds the mere factuality of the last verse, of the last graphic sign of the poem. It is a "modification" within the unfolding of the text, which makes stasis possible, facilitating a condition of stability, a cessation of movement. Closure is what makes the "absence of further continuation" the most plausible occurrence. Moreover, it produces in the reader a sense of finality, so that no further expectation arises. "Closure," she writes, "occurs when the concluding portion of a poem creates in the reader a sense of appropriate cessation," thus lending "ultimate unity and coherence" to the reader's "experience of the poem" (36). Closure, then, is neither a mere graphic fact, nor a semantic phenomenon, but the "complex product of both formal and thematic elements" (40).

In 1996, drawing on Herrnstein Smith through the lens of Paul de Man,[7] Timothy Bahti published another compelling study, *Ends of the Lyric*, that went beyond the concept of closure.[8] Herrnstein Smith had principally investigated poems characterized by accomplished forms of closure or "failures of closure." Bahti, by contrast, focuses on what he calls "nonclosure," that is, on the ways in which certain poems and their readings "both end and […] don't end, or at least don't end in any way this has conventionally been understood."[9] Following Paul de Man's tropological deconstruction, Bahti understands poetry as a self-reflexive textual praxis that orientates itself and the reader toward its understanding mostly by way of tropes, which operate as "signals" and "maps." He singles out one trope in particular, which he considers crucial to all lyric poetry from Shakespeare to Celan, namely, the chiasmus, which he defines as "the inversion

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[5] Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 4.

[6] Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure*, 2.

[7] In particular, Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) and "Tropes (Rilke)," in *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 20–56.

[8] See n. 1.

[9] Bahti, *End of the Lyric*, 9.

and crosswise arrangement of otherwise parallel pairs of verbal units" (12). In Bahti's account, it is the "structural, that is, tropological predominance of chiasmus in the lyric tradition" that allows lyric poems to "end with such stunning power and curious frequency in inverting their ends into non-ends, and their readings into rebeginnings or not yet readings" (13).

The Ending as Catastrophe: Agamben

Shortly before the publication of Bahti's monograph, on November 10, 1995, Giorgio Agamben gave a lecture, *La fine del poema*, focusing on the endings of poems at a colloquium at the University of Geneva honoring Roger Dragonetti.[10] Agamben began by briefly describing his subject matter as a "poetic institution [*istituto poetico*] that has until now remained unidentified."[11] As we have seen, this was not entirely true. One might still accept his claim to complete originality, though, if one takes into consideration that his approach differed radically from the perspectives that Richards and Herrnstein Smith had developed on poetic closure, sharing few points of contact with either British New Criticism or Anglo-American formalism. Agamben's approach was rooted in a continental, apocalyptic line of thinking that, leading through Heidegger and Adorno, ranged from Hegel to Blanchot, in which the reflection upon and re-writing of the ends of poetry (and of philosophy) has been an ongoing concern. For Agamben, then, this lecture formed an integral part of his struggle—initiated in his early book, *Stanze* (1977)[12]—to rethink and empower language by conjoining philosophy and philology. Viewed from this vantage point, Agamben and Bahti have more in common than may meet the eye—an aspect to which I will return later.

What certainly did make Agamben's lecture a new point of departure for a re-consideration of the ends of the poem in both senses of the word—*la fine* and *il fine*—was the eschatological understanding of poetic closures he developed in it. Drawing on Valéry's definition of poetry as a "hesitation prolongée entre le son et le sens" (prolonged hesitation between sound and sense),[13] Agamben argues that poetry exists "only in the tension and difference […] between the semiotic sphere and the semantic sphere."[14] Stressing the significance of the opposition between metrical and semantic segmentation, he identifies enjambment as "the sole criterion for distinguishing poetry from prose."[15] From this follows a first substantial implication: a verse becomes a verse

[10] First published as Giorgio Agamben, "La fine del poema," in *Categorie italiane. Studi di poetica e letteratura* (Venice: Marsilio, 1996), 113–119; repr., with an Afterword by Andrea Cortellessa (Bari: Laterza, 2010), 138–144. Agamben's *Categorie italiane* was translated into English and published with a more palatable title for English-speaking academia as *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

[11] Agamben, *Categorie italiane*, 138; *The End of the Poem*, 109. He reiterates this claim again two pages later: "vi sono ricerche sugli incipit della poesia (anche se, forse, non in misura sufficiente), ma indagini sulla sua fine mancano quasi del tutto" (*Categorie italiane*, 140).

[12] Giorgio Agamben, *Stanze. La parola e il fantasma nella cultura occidentale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1977).

[13] Paul Valéry, *Tel Quel II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 79, cited in Agamben, *Categorie italiane*, 138; *The End of the Poem*, 109. On Valéry's understanding of poetry as a combination of zones of meaning ("Bedeutungszonen") and sound effects ("Klangwirkungen"), see also Hugo Friedrich's 1956 classic study on modern poetry, *Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik. Von der Mitte des neunzehnten bis zur Mitte des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts* (repr. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1992), 184.

[14] Agamben, *Categorie italiane*, 138; *The End of the Poem*, 109.

[15] Ibid. Even when taking into account that Nicolò Tibino's fourteenth-century reference to the "schism between sound and sense" corroborates Agamben's claims about what defines poetry, this admittedly sounds overly simplistic. He makes his case in a more plausible and sophisticated manner in *The Idea of Prose*: "[W]e shall call poetry the discourse in which it is possible to set a metrical limit against a syntactic one (verse in which *enjambement* is not actually present is to be seen as verse with zero *enjambement*). Prose is the discourse in which this is

solely at its end. Appropriating the Latin term that indicates where the plow turns around at the end of the furrow, Agamben names this point *versura*. As he explains in *The Idea of Prose*, the *versura* "is an ambiguous gesture, that turns in two opposed directions at once: backwards (versus), and forwards (pro-versa)."[16] It is exactly in this ambiguous, backward-directed gesture, in this hesitation between meaning and sound that poetry happens.

The logical corollary to this first implication—and probably the most controversial consequence of Agamben's concept of poetry—is that the last verse of a poem, strictly speaking, no longer qualifies as poetry. If poetry is defined only by enjambment, by the structural hesitation it produces, the final verse of a poem cannot be poetry.

> The *disarray* [*dissesto*] of the last verse *indicates the structural, non-incidental* relevance to the economy of the poem of the event I have called "the end of the poem." As if the poem, as a formal structure, could and would not end, as if the possibility of the end were radically taken away from it, since the end would imply a poetic impossibility: the exact coincidence of sound and sense. At the point in which sound is about to be ruined in the abyss of sense, the poem looks for shelter in suspending its own end in a declaration, so to speak, of the state of poetic emergency.[17]

In an erudite meandering from Arnaut Daniel to Baudelaire via Dante, Agamben describes the disarray produced by the final verse as an "emergency," or "catastrophe," "a veritable crisis of the poem, a genuine *crise de vers* in which the poem's very identity is at stake" (*The End of the Poem*, 113).

Towards the end of his lecture, Agamben cites a hitherto-overlooked passage on the end of the poem from Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*, which, he argues, points to a possible retrieval of the endings of poems, or at least certain kinds of endings, for the purposes of poetry: "Pulcherrime tamen se habent ultimorum carminum desinentiae, si cum rithmo in silentium cad[a]nt."[18] He translates this as, "Bellissime sono le terminazioni degli ultimi versi, se cadono, con le rime, nel silenzio" ["Most beautiful are the endings of the last verses, if they fall, rhymed, into silence"].[19] Drawing on this observation, Agamben maintains that the final verse of a poem might be considered poetry if it sinks into silence with its rhyme-fellow. This, he suggests, happens in an exemplary manner in the *tornata* of Dante's canzone "Così nel mio parlar voglio esser aspro,"[20] where "the verse at the end of the poem, which was now to be irreparably ruined in sense, linked itself closely to its rhyme-fellow and, laced in this way, chose to *sink with it into silence*."[21] The first verse in the *tornata*, "Canzon, vattene dritto a quella donna," he explains, ends with an unrelated rhyme, "donna," followed by two couplets adhering to the *baciata* rhyme scheme. It is the un-relatedness of "donna"—"the word that names the supreme poetic intention"—that maintains the tension between sound and sense, Agamben argues. The poem

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impossible […] Enjambment reveals a mismatch, a disconnection between the metrical and syntactic elements, between sounding rhythm and meaning, such that (contrary to the received opinion that sees in poetry the locus of an accomplished and perfect fit between sound and meaning) poetry lives, instead, only in their inner disagreement." Giorgio Agamben, *The Idea of Prose*, trans. Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 39–40.

[16] Agamben, *The Idea of Prose*, 41.

[17] Agamben, *The End of the Poem*, 113 (translation slightly amended – in italics); *Categorie italiane*, 142.

[18] *De vulgari eloquentia* 2.13.7–8, cited in Agamben, *Categorie italiane*, 142; *The End of the Poem*, 113.

[19] Agamben, *Categorie italiane*, 142; my translation.

[20] Dante Alighieri, *Rime* 46 (CIII), v. 1.

[21] Agamben, *The End of the Poem*, 115 (translation amended – in italics); Agamben, *Categorie italiane*, 143.

"thus reveals the goal of its proud strategy: to let language finally communicate itself, without remaining unsaid in what is said" (115; 144).

Agamben's eschatological understanding of the final verse as essentially alien to poetry is plausible, logical, and philosophically intriguing. His attempt to salvage the final verse by taking recourse to Dante's *auctoritas* is, however, problematic. On the one hand, it apparently applies only to final verses, which are ingrained in a rhyme scheme. On the other hand, he denies the poetic status of any semantically open, non-recapitulative poem ending—like that of Baudelaire's *Le Cygne*, which he quotes as an example of "the often cheap and even abject quality" that results from the aforementioned "veritable crisis of the poem […] in which the poem's very identity is at stake" (113; 142). Were we to take this literally, we would arrive at the paradoxical conclusion that virtually all "modern works of poetics and meter," having failed to take into consideration this crisis, end with final lines that, Agamben would insist, actually trespass into prose (112; 141).

It seems to me that at this juncture, Agamben has not sufficiently thought through the full implications of his stance. I can see no objective reason why the opposition between sound and sense he considers a prerequisite for the poetic status of final verses should work only within rhyme schemes. Sound and rhythm are not the preserve of rhymes—one need think only of the English institution of blank verse or the German tradition of the so-called *freie Rhythmen* used to great effect by poets such as Goethe and Klopstock. In fact, it is arguably more difficult for rhymed poems to maintain the poetic tension through to the last word, since the rhyme scheme tends naturally to smooth over the semantic segmentation by satisfying a formal expectation.

Agamben's preferred ending, which saves the poetic status of the final verse by not suppressing the tension between sound and sense, differs fundamentally from Herrnstein Smith's definition of accomplished poetic closure. For her, as we saw, closure takes the form of a structural modification, which allows form and content to cohere completely and thus creates a sense of finality and stability. In short: she thinks poems should end in precisely the way Agamben insists they should *not*. For him, Herrnstein Smith's concept of the perfect ending reflects the kind that trespasses into prose.[22] Like Bahti, Agamben is much more interested in poetic "nonclosure," in ends that are in fact non-ends.

In the following section, I will discuss some exemplary contemporary poems, sounding their endings (*la* fine), their final verses, in the hope that this will help us understand what they can tell us about the ends of poetry in the grammatically masculine sense (*il* fine). While I do not assume that non-closure is *the* cipher of contemporary lyric poetry, I do think that preserving the tension between sound and sense in the final verse may be considered a key strategy common to contemporary poets representing a variety of predilections and tendencies.

Non-Closure in Contemporary Lyric Poetry

There are countless ways to end a poem, and the more poems are written, the more modalities and strategies for poetic endings will doubtless be developed. However, there is one type of ending that is common to lyric poetry from its Provençal dawn to its most actual realizations, from Arnaut Daniel to the poetry of Antonella Anedda. The editors of this special issue have highlighted it by proposing as its motto T. S. Eliot's famous first line from "East Coker" (the second part of *Four Quartets*, 1940): "In the beginning is my end."[23] In conjunction with the poem's final verse, "In my end is my beginning," it forms a perfect chiasmus. This is, then, a

[22] Agamben does not use the Italian equivalent of closure, *chiusura* (except when referring to "chiusura metrica").
[23] T. S. Eliot, "East Coker," in *Collected Poems 1902–62* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), 196–204.

kind of ending that, by means of circular, spiral, or specular textual disposition, connects the final verse to the first.[24]

The inscription of the end in the beginning is a famously formal, structural feature of the sestina, a poetic form based on six stanzas of six verses followed by a *tornada* of three verses. Initially developed by Arnaut Daniel and perfected by Dante, it has evolved into one of the most daunting and respected poetic forms of the Western tradition—as well as, to some extent, the ultimate arena for mannerist compulsions. Most striking about the sestina is its teleological directionality. Having read the first stanza, the reader already knows the words with which the poem will end. The sestina encompasses six rhyme-words, which recur in each of its six stanzas in an alternating order that follows the so-called *retrogradatio cruciata* rhyme scheme. It is concluded by an envoi, a *tornada*, in which all six rhyme-words are presented again in yet another order. In the majority of cases, from Arnaut Daniel's foundational "Lo ferm voler qu'el cor m'intra"[25] to Ezra Pound's "Sestina: Altaforte"[26] to the Golden Age of the American Sestina, eminently embodied by Elizabeth Bishop,[27] to Franco Fortini's "Sestina a Firenze,"[28] the first rhyme-word coincides with the last rhyme-word.[29] In his commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans, Agamben argued that the sestina was the most radical embodiment of the poetic eschatology created by the fact that the poem "from the very start, strains towards its end."[30] He interpreted the complex mechanism constructed around "the announcement and retrieval" of rhyme-words as a "soteriological device" that "transforms chronological time into messianic time" (82). One need not subscribe to this messianic reading of prosodic compulsion toward the end, though, to acknowledge that the sestina engages its own ending from the very beginning.

The two great sestinas of twentieth-century Italian poetry, "Recitativo di Palinuro" by Giuseppe Ungaretti (1947–50)[31] and "Sestina a Firenze" by Franco Fortini (1948–57), are cases in point. Despite drawing on different aspects of the tradition—Ungaretti remained in Petrarch's camp while Fortini was more strongly influenced by Dante—both took recourse to this form in order to speak of the end. Ungaretti's sestina was conceived as part of a long, ultimately unfinished poem, *La terra promessa*, dedicated to the season of decline, to an "autunno inoltrato, dal quale si distacchi per sempre l'ultimo segno di giovinezza, di giovinezza terrena, l'ultimo appetito carnale."[32]

Per l'uragano all'apice di furia
Vicino non intesi farsi il sonno;
Olio fu dilagante a smanie d'onde,

[24] With respect to the circular movement ("Kreisbewegung") that connects the final verse to the first, see Jan Wagner's essay, "Ein Knauf als Tür: wie Gedichte beginnen und wie sie enden," in *Der verschlossene Raum* (Munich: Hanser Berlin, 2017), 240–43.
[25] Arnaut Daniel, *Sirventese e canzoni*, trans. by Fernando Bandini, ed. Giosuè Lachin (Torino: Einaudi, 2000), 77–79.
[26] Ezra Pound, *Personae: The Shorter Poems*. A revised edition prepared by Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz (New York: New Directions. 1990), 26–28.
[27] See Edward Brunner, *Cold War Poetry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).
[28] Franco Fortini, *Tutte le poesie*, ed. Luca Lenzini (Milan: Mondadori, 2014), 122–23.
[29] It would be well worth examining the relationship between the brief return of the sestina in post-war Italy, notably in the form of Fortini's and Ungaretti's contributions, on the one hand, and the success and popularity of the sestina among Anglo-American poets when the Cold War was at its height, on the other.
[30] Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 79.
[31] Giuseppe Ungaretti, *La Terra Promessa. Frammenti*, ed. Leone Piccioni (Milan: Mondadori, 1950), 40–41.
[32] Giuseppe Ungaretti, "Note," in *Vita d'un uomo. Tutte le poesie*, ed. Leone Piccioni (Milan: Mondadori, 1970), 546.

Aperto campo a libertà di pace,
Di effusione infinita il finto emblema
Dalla nuca prostrandomi mortale.

Avversità del corpo ebbi mortale
Ai sogni sceso dell'incerta furia
Che annebbiava sprofondi nel suo emblema
Ed, astuta amnesia, afono sonno,
Da echi remoti inviperiva pace
Solo accordando a sfinitezze onde.

Non posero a risposta tregua le onde,
Non mai accanite a gara più mortale,
Quanto credendo pausa ai sensi, pace;
Raddrizzandosi a danno l'altra furia,
Non seppi più chi, l'uragano o il sonno,
Mi logorava a suo deserto emblema.

D'àugure sciolse l'occhio allora emblema
Dando fuoco di me a sideree onde;
Fu, per arti virginee, angelo in sonno;
Di scienza accrebbe l'ansietà mortale;
Fu, al bacio, in cuore ancora tarlo in furia.
Senza più dubbi caddi né più pace.

Tale per sempre mi fuggì la pace;
Per strenua fedeltà decaddi a emblema
Di disperanza e, preda d'ogni furia,
Riscosso via via a insulti freddi d'onde,
Ingigantivo d'impeto mortale,
Più folle d'esse, folle sfida al sonno.

Erto più su più mi legava il sonno,
Dietro allo scafo a pezzi della pace
Struggeva gli occhi crudeltà mortale;
Piloto vinto d'un disperso emblema,
Vanità per riaverlo emulai d'onde;
Ma nelle vene già impietriva furia

Crescente d'ultimo e più arcano sonno,
E più su d'onde e emblema della pace
Così divenni furia non mortale.[33]

The poem centers on Aeneas's helmsman, Palinurus, who was flung into the sea at night when Somnus, the God of Sleep, disguised as Phorbas, drugged him—and who was, on

[33] Ungaretti, *La Terra Promessa*, 40–41.

Ungaretti's reading, subsequently transformed into the "ironic immortality of a stone."[34] Introduced by a strong enjambment following the last verse of the last six-line stanza ("furia | Crescente"), the *tornada* not only employs all six rhyme-words, as the form dictates, but also brings the poem's narrative to a dramatic close.

Prima facie, this closure seems so perfect and absolute that Agamben might well question the poetic status of the last verse. Crucially, however, the final iteration of the term "mortale" is in fact semantically inverted through its negation. Its meaning here is thus opposite of the meaning it had in all the previous instances, creating a fissure in the formal rigidity of the repetition. The earlier "mortale" here becomes "non-mortale" in the ironic sense of immortal stone. In this way, the poem's conclusion fractures the expected closure, allowing it to live as a sort of *mise en abyme*, sustained by its specular openness.

More recently, the sestina has experienced a discreet revival thanks in large part to a group of metrical *virtuosi* including Patrizia Valduga, Gabriele Frasca, Marcello Frixione, Lorenzo Durante, and Alessandro Fo.[35] Gabriele Frasca's sestina with the programmatic title "Dissestina" (1997)[36] is a particularly good example of the implementation of this form within the context of the so-called "ritorno alle forme" ["return to forms"],[37] which profoundly shaped Italian poetry in the 1980s and 1990s.

In "Dissestina," Frasca reinvents the sestina, expanding the regulative scheme of the *retrogradatio cruciata* from the end-word to the entire verse, achieving a paradoxical and parodic effect of rhyme-verses. The stanzas do not present alternating end-words but alternating verses that almost miraculously preserve, though not without syntactic and semantic fractures, a consistent lyric discourse, which roughly says: Do not despise the fragments, the splinters of your existence, since there is nothing beyond them, and the only thing you can do is try to put them together.

non le parole canto ma quei pezzi
nel disarticolarsi delle cose
con il lavoro ottuso degli attrezzi
per dirti fermo in poche strette pose
fra i cocci in cui frantumi e che disprezzi
mentre trascorri strade scivolose

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non le parole canto ma quei pezzi
fra i cocci in cui frantumi e che disprezzi
nel disarticolarsi delle cose
per dirti fermo in poche strette pose
con il lavoro ottuso degli attrezzi

[34] "La sesta sestina e la terzina di chiusa narrano disperatamente il trasformarsi di Palinuro nell'immortalità ironica d'un sasso. Come nel mio vecchio inno 'La Pietà', la chiusa ci indica un sasso, a indicare la vanità di tutto, sforzi, allettamenti: di tutto che dipenda dalla misera terrena vicenda storica dell'uomo" (Ungaretti, "Note," 566–67).
[35] See Carlo Pulsoni, "La sestina nel Novecento italiano," in *E vós, tágides minhas: miscellanea in onore di Luciana Stegagno Picchio*, ed. Maria José de Lancastre, Silvano Peloso, and Ugo Serani (Viareggio: Baroni, 1999), 541–49.
[36] Gabriele Frasca, "Dissestina," in *Prime. Poesie scelte 1977–2007* (Rome: Luca Sossella Editore, 2007), 135–36.
[37] See the fourth section, "Ritorno alle forme," in the commented anthology *Parola plurale. Sessantaquattro poeti italiani tra due secoli*, ed. G. Alfano et al (Rome: Luca Sossella Editore, 2005), 295ff.

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nel disarticolarsi delle cose

nel disarticolarsi delle cose
per dirti fermo in poche strette pose
mentre trascorri strade scivolose
fra i cocci in cui frantumi e che disprezzi
con il lavoro ottuso degli attrezzi
non le parole canto ma quei pezzi

perché se in pezzi vivono le cose
solo agli attrezzi devono le pose
che tu disprezzi come scivolose[38]

Staging fragments and splinters as objects worthy of the poet's attention, the text begins an obsessive, serial rumination on existential fragmentation, superimposed on traditional lyric themes such as love, nature, places, the poet's self, etc., normally introduced by the performative "I sing."[39] But this is just one dimension of the text. We are in fact dealing with a case of bait and switch, as it were, since the fragments, the splinters sung of by the poem, are the verses themselves, the rhyme-verses. The form chases the sense, shapes it on a syntagmatic level, creating a path, a road-map that leads it and the reader towards the teleological key of the *tornada*. There, the spell of the *retrogradatio* is broken into a three-line phrase comprising the actual rhyme-words, as a traditional sestina would require. On the one hand, the closure created by the envoi is highlighted by what Herrnstein Smith would describe as its return to the formal norm after the previous deviation. Indeed, the rhymes at the middle and ends of the verses demonstrate the poem's zealous longing for its own end. On the other hand, the final word,

[38] Frasca, "Dissestina," 135–36.
[39] On lyric address see Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 186–243.

“scivolose” [“slippery”], reopens everything, creating imbalance and disarray on the semantic plane. What at first seems, if we follow Agamben, to trespass into prose, actually disrupts the closure and maintains the tension between sound and sense.

The sestina is not the only poetic form that structurally anticipates its ending already at the outset. Three other forms particularly stand out in this context. First, there is the rondeau (rondel, *rondò*), whose structural circularity is indicated by its name. Second, the villanelle, which normally brings together the first and third lines of the first three-lined stanza in its closing quatrain. It is still a very popular form in English-speaking poetry. Finally, there is the pantoum, a form developed in Malaysia in the fifteenth century and “imported” to Europe by Victor Hugo and Théophile Gautier.[40] Here the first verse and the final line of the poem are usually identical. For all of these forms, there are plenty of contemporary examples, some of which—like Heaney’s sestina “Two Lorries,” Oskar Pastorius’s pantoums, Sinéad Morrissey’s villanelle “Genetics” and Jan Wagner’s rondeau “Maulbeeren”—have already made their way into the standard repertoire and representative anthologies.[41] What unites all of these structurally anticipated endings is the use of prosodic repetition, *ritornelli*, and refrains as spatializing devices that construct circles, spirals, and mirrors. As Deleuze and Guattari argue in *A Thousand Plateaus*,

> The role of the refrain has often been emphasized: it is territorial, a territorial assemblage. Bird songs: the bird sings to mark its territory. The Greek modes and Hindu rhythms are themselves territorial, provincial, regional. The refrain may assume other functions, amorous, professional or social, liturgical or cosmic: it always carries earth with it;
>
> […] Territorialization is an act of rhythm that has become expressive, or of milieu components that have become qualitative. The marking of a territory is dimensional, but it is not a meter, it is a rhythm.
>
> […] The refrain is rhythm and melody that have been territorialized because they have become expressive—and have become expressive because they are territorializing.[42]

In this sense, refrains and prosodic repetition territorialize the texts, they organize its spatial dimension. To some extent, they work within the text as signals, as topological markers that indicate paths, forms, and directions. While the sestina resembles a spiral construction or a conical object, the villanelle and the rondeau draw circles, often designing conical assemblages or, more rarely, specular figures. The latter is the case in what is probably the most condensed version of a rondeau in modern poetry, George Trakl’s “Rondel”:

> Verflossen ist das Gold der Tage,

---

[40] This poetic form owes its impact on twentieth-century poetry not least to John Ashbery and Oskar Pastior. Based on the repetition of verses, it vaguely resembles the aforementioned experimental appropriation of the sestina by Frasca. However, the pantoum consists of four lines of eight to twelve syllables that are cross-rhymed, and the second and fourth lines of each stanza become the first and third lines of the successive stanza.

[41] Seamus Heaney, “Two Lorries,” in *The Spirit Level* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997), 17; Oskar Pastior, *Villanella und Pantum. Gedichte* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2000); Sinéad Morrissey, “Genetics,” in *The State of the Prisons* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2005), 13; Jan Wagner, “Maulbeeren,” in *Regentonnenvariationen* (Munich: Hanser Berlin, 2014), 35.

[42] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 312–17.

Des Abends braun und blaue Farben:
Des Hirten sanfte Flöten starben
Des Abends blau und braune Farben
Verflossen ist das Gold der Tage.[43]

Vanished is the gold of the days,
And the evening's brown and blue:
Dead is the shepherd's gentle flute
And the evening's brown and blue
Vanished is the gold of the days.

In this rondeau, the principle of chiastic inclusion is embodied perfectly, designing an X within a circle, rotating on the central, unrepeated verse: A: gold of the days; B: evening's brown; X: shepherd's gentle flute; B: evening's brown; A: gold of the days. The poem does not really end—it begins all over again, turning ceaselessly like the circle of life.

So far I have discussed only modern and contemporary instances of non-closure in poems that—euphorically or dysphorically—reinterpreted traditional forms. Yet rhymed poems with regular verse meters only represent one part of recent poetic output, though they play an admittedly greater role in today's Anglophone and Eastern European poetry than in France, Spain, and Italy. As I have already pointed out, sound and rhythm are by no means the preserve of rhymes and meters. Free verse, prose poems, and even concrete poems have plenty of strategies at their disposal to create, perform, and shape rhythms and sound tonalities, from phonetic patterning to syntactic parallelism. In particular, repetition, in all its numerous renderings on both the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic axes, from alliteration and anaphora to refrains, create rhythms, sound tonalities, and melodic textures. The poem "Paisaje con tumbas y un perro asirio," written in the early twentieth century by the Spanish modernist poet Federico Garcia Lorca, is a case in point.[44] It is part of *Poeta in Nueva York*, a series of poems written in 1929/30 and published posthumously in 1940. It is a paradigmatic example of free verse. Its circularity is shaped by a strong anaphoric structure and, in particular, by a refrain that opens and closes the poem and thus inscribes its ending in its beginning:

Amigo,
levántate para que oigas aullar
al perro asirio.
Las tres ninfas del cáncer han estado bailando,
hijo mío.
Trajeron unas montañas de lacre rojo
y unas sábanas duras donde estaba el cáncer dormido.
El caballo tenía un ojo en el cuello
y la luna estaba en un cielo tan frío
que tuvo que desgarrarse su monte de Venus
y ahogar en sangre y ceniza los cementerios antiguos.

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[43] Georg Trakl, *Dichtungen und Briefe. Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Walther Killy and Hans Szklenar, 2 vols (Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1969), 1:59.
[44] Federico García Lorca, *Poet in New York: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Pablo Medina and Mark Statman (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 108–09.

Amigo,
despierta, que los montes todavía no respiran
y las hierbas de mí corazón están en otro sitio.
No importa que estés lleno de agua de mar.
Yo amé mucho tiempo a un niño
que tenía una plumilla en la lengua
y vivimos cien años dentro de un cuchillo.
Despierta. Calla. Escucha. Incorpórate un poco.
El aullido
es una larga lengua morada que deja
hormigas de espanto y licor de lirios.
Ya vienen hacia la roca. ¡No alargues tus raíces!
Se acerca. Gime. No solloces en sueños, amigo.

¡Amigo!
Levántate para que oigas aullar
al perro asirio.

Friend,
get up so you can hear
the Assyrian dog howl.
The three nymphs of cancer have been dancing,
my son.
They brought mountains of red sealing wax
and hard sheets where cancer slept.
The horse had an eye on his neck
and the moon was in a sky so cold
she had to tear apart her Venus mound
and drown the ancient cemeteries in blood and ash.

Friend,
wake up, for the mountains still don't breathe
and the grasses of my heart are in another place.
It doesn't matter you are full of seawater.
For a long time I loved a boy
who had a feather on his tongue
and we lived a hundred years inside a knife.
Wake up. Be quiet. Listen. Sit up a little.
The howl
is a long purple tongue that leaves
ants of dread and liquor of lilies.
It's coming to the rock.
Don't stretch your roots!
It's coming. It moans.
Don't cry in your dreams, friend.

Friend!
Get up so you can hear

the Assyrian dog howl.[45]

Bahti, as we saw, assumes that modern poetry is characterized to a considerable degree by circular, structural self-reflexivity. A crucial aspect of this self-reflexivity is the directionality inscribed in the poem that leads it and its readers to the end of the text, while bringing both the text and the reader back to the first verse, thus pointing to a new beginning. Commenting on canonical texts from Shakespeare to Celan, Bahti draws on Paul de Man's reading of Rilke to argue compellingly that the self-reflexivity of modern lyric poetry is paradigmatically based on chiastic structures.[46] The term chiasmus is the Latinized version of the Greek noun χίασμα, which means "crossing," "cross-over," or simply "shaped like an X." The Greek term is derived from χιάζω, "mark with the letter X," i.e., the letter chi of the Greek alphabet. As a rhetorical figure, it enacts an inversion that resembles the shape of an X. A typical chiastic ABBA structure looks as follows:

A B
x
B A

For Heinrich Lausberg, chiasmus is primarily a semantic figure that consists in the cross-positioning ("Überkreuzstellung") of corresponding components in corresponding groups and is thus a means of expressing antithesis.[47] Above all, the chiasmus is a reflective device, a means of mirroring. In poetry, one can find chiastic structures at multiple levels, from the classic chiastic figure of speech within a single verse to overarching chiastic structures that organize entire poems—as in the aforementioned "East Coker" by T. S. Eliot—and even lyrical sequences. The chiastic self-reflexivity of poetry leads to endings that do not create closure and produces non-endings akin to textual post-apocalypses in miniature, since the non-ending re-directs the poem and its reader towards a new beginning, which is also a new reading.

This chiastic structure features prominently in modern and contemporary Italian poetry. Cutting across generations and literary lineages from Edoardo Sanguineti to Laura Pugno,[48] it has played a profound role in the works of many poets. The following two poems offer paradigmatic examples of the role of the chiasmus in contemporary Italian poetry. I begin with Fabio Pusterla's "Le parentesi," the first poem in his first book, *Concessione all'inverno* (1985).[49] Characterized by an overarching chiastic structure, it is also included, again as the opening poem, in his selected poems, *Le terre emerse* (2009):[50]

L'erosione
cancellerà le Alpi, prima scavando valli,
poi ripidi burroni, vuoti insanabili

[45] The Spanish original and the English translation are both from Lorca, *Poet in New York*, 108–09.
[46] Bahti, *End of the Lyric*, 12.
[47] See Heinrich Lausberg, *Elemente der literarischen Rhetorik: Eine Einführung für Studierende der klassischen, romanischen, englischen und deutschen Philologie* (1963; repr., Munich: Max Hueber Verlag, 1984), 127–30.
[48] Sanguineti frequently and overtly plays with chiasmi and chiastic structures. A wonderful example is the sequence, "L'ultima passeggiata. Omaggio a Pascoli," in *Il gatto lupesco. Poesie 1982–2001* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2002), 69–77. Laura Pugno's most recent poetry, by contrast, deploys chiastic structures as secret reading maps that suggest a path through the intricacies of her allusions and semantic fractures. See, in particular, Laura Pugno, *Bianco* (Rome: Nottetempo, 2016), in which almost every poem harbors a chiasmus or quasi-chiasmus.
[49] Fabio Pusterla, "Le parentesi," in *Concessione all'inverno: poesie, 1976–1984* (Bellinzona: Casagrande, 1985), 15.
[50] Fabio Pusterla, "Le parentesi," in *Le terre emerse. Poesie scelte 1985–2008* (Turin: Einaudi, 2009), 5.

che preludono al crollo. Lo scricchiolio
sarà il segnale di fuga: questo il verdetto.
Rimarranno le pozze, i montaruzzi casuali,
le pause di riposo, i sassi rotolanti,
le caverne e le piane paludose.
Nel mondo Nuovo rimarranno, cadute
principali e alberi sintattici, sperse
certezze e affermazioni,
le parentesi, gli incisi e le interiezioni:
le palafitte del domani.

In terms of its meaning, the poem can be divided into four groups, interlaced within a cross-shaped chiastic structure: A: L'erosione […]; B: Rimarranno […]; B: […] rimarranno […]; A: le palafitte del domani. By reading the last verse as part of this chiasmus, one notices something that too linear and unidirectional a reading of the poem might easily overlook, namely, the tight relationship between the first phrase of the text, "L'erosione" ["the erosion"] and the final clause, "le palafitte del domani" ["tomorrow's stilt houses"]. The poem closes a circle, from the geological erosion of the beginning to the grammatical and symbolic "rest" represented by the "palafitte" at the end.[51] It also contraposes an entropic model of dissipation to a negentropic model of creation. Wooden structures built on stilts and fixed to the beds of rivers, lakes, or swamps, stilt houses were a common feature in the post-glacial, prehistoric Alpine region between Switzerland and Northern Italy. They offer a fascinating example of adaption to the environment, since they facilitate life, duration, and stability on the surface of supremely unstable matter: water—and they do so because of their elasticity and pliancy. They reverse entropy by constructing order out of a precarious situation.[52] Now, if we consider the central part of the poem (the BB structure of the chiasmus), we see that it works as a parenthetical element and retrieves the title. There is, however, no logical passage from the geological remnant left by the process of erosion to the linguistic residuals of the new world of the "palafitte." Rather, a specular, self-reflexive relation on the syntagmatic level allows for the construction of a metaphor on the paradigmatic level. The chiastic structure of the poem thus suggests that the reader ought to understand the end, "le palafitte del domani," as an inversion of the beginning—and this image, in turn, as a metaphor that describes the ends (*il* fine) of poetry, its negentropic ability to create something out of devastation.

I turn now to the second paradigmatic example of circular self-reflexivity based on chiasmus. It is Antonella Anedda's "Se ho scritto è per pensiero," from her collection *Notti di pace occidentale* (1999):

Se ho scritto è per pensiero
perché ero in pensiero per la vita
per gli esseri felici
stretti nell'ombra della sera
per la sera che di colpo crollava sulle nuche.
Scrivevo per la pietà del buio
per ogni creatura che indietreggia

[51] On this topic, see Sabrina Stroppa, "'Ciò che resta'. Commento a 'Le parentesi' di Fabio Pusterla (da *Concessione all'inverno*)," *Per leggere. I generi della lettura* 26 (2014): 121–139, 128.
[52] Understood as a negentropic construction, stilt houses are themselves a sort of architectural chiasmus.

con la schiena premuta a una ringhiera
per l'attesa marina—senza grido—infinita.

Scrivi, dico a me stessa
e scrivo io per avanzare più sola nell'enigma
perché gli occhi mi allarmano
e mio è il silenzio dei passi, mia la luce deserta
—da brughiera—
sulla terra del viale.

Scrivi perché nulla è difeso e la parola *bosco*
trema più fragile del bosco, senza rami né uccelli
perché solo il coraggio può scavare
in alto la pazienza
fino a togliere peso
al peso nero del prato.[53]

The poem comprises three strophes with no regular meter or rhyme scheme (although some rhyming does occur). As it progresses, it develops a kind of *ars poetica* structured by the anaphoric repetition of the verb *scrivere* [writing], which is refracted through different conjugations and performative nuances. Both the second strophe and the closing stanza are introduced by and depend on the imperative "Scrivi" [write!], followed by two groups of causal clauses. The last six lines of the poem are organized into three successive and intermingled chiasmi:

[…] nulla è difeso   la parola bosco
x
più fragile del bosco   senza rami né uccelli

[…] solo il coraggio   può scavare
x
in alto   la pazienza

[in alto]   a togliere peso
x
al peso nero   del prato.

The anaphoric use of "Scrivi," which introduced the series of chiasmi, unmistakably echoes a famous ending in Fortini's "Traducendo Brecht," a poem also shaped by chiasmus: "Nulla è sicuro, ma scrivi."[54]

The first part of Anedda's final strophe not only pays homage to the revered master, it also seems to indicate that forms are ineluctably connected with an ethical posture. This connection is

[53] Antonella Anedda, "Se ho scritto è per pensiero," in *Notti di pace occidentale* (Rome: Donzelli, 1999), 31.
[54] In Fortini, *Tutte le poesie*, 238. In fact, through its enjambment with the preceding line, the final line constructs a perfect chiastic inversion: "[…] La poesia / non muta nulla. Nulla è sicuro, ma scrivi."

corroborated by the central chiasmus of the strophe, which reveals another, crucial poetic allegiance, evoking Paul Celan's recurrent inversion of above and below, of earth and sky.[55] In a sense, the first two chiasmi reiterate Anedda's poetics in terms of lineage, poetic influences, and shared values. They have a sort of recapitulative function. Yet with the final and best hidden chiasmus, the poem veers into unknown territory, creating a formidable image that inverts the topology of the text: the digging for patience overhead turns into the easing of a burden, alleviating the somber heft of the meadow, the darkness that has reached the ground. This final chiasmus leads the poem—and its reader—back to the first strophe, to the *passato prossimo* [present perfect] of the first verse, "Se ho scritto." In a sense, Anedda's poem deals with an aftermath—it is post-apocalyptic rather than apocalyptic. The way in which dusk descends at a stroke on one's shoulders (lines 4 and 5) no longer refers merely to the imminent nocturnal darkness; it now represents a menacing state of emergency already present in the first strophe. Moreover, and more importantly, the end of the poem sheds new light on another chiasmus that we might have overlooked when reading the poem merely in terms of its beginning:

Se ho scritto		è per pensiero
	x	
perché ero in pensiero		per la vita

In this inverted parallelism, writing is interlaced with life, while thinking ("pensiero") is linked to worrying, to the idiomatic Italian phrase, "essere in pensiero," which usually denotes simply that one is worried about something or somebody. Here, however, juxtaposed to "pensiero," it highlights its literal meaning, i.e., the idea of being deep in thought about something or someone. Poetry, we might now say, emerges from the tension of this chiasmus as an urgent concern that takes on form in the interstices between "pensiero" and "essere in pensiero." The complex, obscure, haunting relationship between writing and life expressed by the first two strophes is captured within a semantic vortex in the last strophe and is condensed into a teleological idea of poetry: the purpose (*il* fine) of poetry is to respond to an emergency, a state of alarm. And as the circular self-reflexivity of the poem suggests, oscillating between the final and the first verse, poetry responds to this emergency by keeping the balance between thought, on the one hand, and being deep in thought, on the other, between prowess and resilience, between worrying about something meaningful and reducing the burden of meaning.

[55] In particular, it echoes a verse from Celan's most famous poem, the elegy "Todesfuge": "wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften" ["we dig a grave in the sky"] (Paul Celan, "Todesfuge," in *Gesammelte Werke in sieben Bänden. Gedichte I*, ed. Beda Allemann and Stefan Reichert [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000], 41–42).