The Word Sonnet: A Distillation

A Conversation between Author Seymour Mayne and Editor and Translator María Laura Spoturno

María Laura Spoturno: You are regarded as one of the leading figures in word sonnets. What led you to the word sonnet? How would you define this poetic form? [1]

Seymour Mayne: I first heard of this sub-genre from my friend, Tony Rudolf, the editor of the Menard Press in the U.K. In the late 1990s the Press promoted the word sonnet in a literary contest judged by the Irish writer Augustus Young, who did much to spread word of its practice by his support of the form and the example of his own writings.

The word sonnet is a relatively new variation of the traditional form. In essence, it is a fourteen-line poem with one word set for each line. Concise and usually visual in effect, this "miniature" version can contain one or more sentences, as the articulation requires.

MLS: Why is it so persistent a sub-genre in your work? What about other poetic forms?

SM: Ever since I began following that inner voice of poetic utterance I have leaned towards concise and resonant forms that pack a wallop of suggestion and feeling into their lines. When I began to publish my earliest work in the late 1950s and then 1960s, we were only a few decades on from Imagism, the movement that helped set off the various waves of experimentation in twentieth-century English-language poetry. However, the Imagists tended to shape static pictures that resembled photographs. Vorticism came along shortly afterwards but the stasis of Imagist practice still held sway.

What short form offered a transformative imagistic option? The haiku became more prevalent after World War II though some of the Imagists had already been influenced by Japanese poetics. The American occupation of Japan after the war helped open Japanese cultural expression to English-language writers.

While the tenets of Imagism and other short forms like the haiku inform my style, there is an older influence that also plays onto my practice: Pirkei Avot, or Sayings of the Fathers, a Talmudic tractate of maxims, proverbs, and images, each not only startling in its figurative expression but also instructive in the ways of everyday concerns and ethical conduct. As such, these word sonnets imply more resonant and deeper themes, and also serve as verbal snapshots of the seasonal Canadian environment.

To put it another way, when I became aware of the innovative word sonnet in the late 1990s, I found it immediately an appealing if not addictive form for the kind of short poem I had strived to write over the years—for now there was the discipline of fourteen-line sonnets with just one word per line, which could condense an experience while also finding shape with mini-rhythms and sound features that enhanced the apparent

[1] This conversation is based on some of the questions that appeared in Spanish in Mayne (2018).

subject.

Aside from the regular Italian or English sonnet, no other form has so entranced my writing. And soon I became a committed proponent of the form and chief tribune on behalf of Augustus Young's penchant for the slender sub-genre.

As for other more "regular" forms, I have not abandoned them. The collection *Ricochet: Word Sonnets* was followed the next year by *September Rain*, a gathering of poems that offered a diversity of practice. My new collection, *Perfume*, is almost evenly divided between a variety of tried and tested forms—and new word sonnets.

Each poem is a unique creation whose sound and shape are not determined in advance. It's always a surprise when a new work suddenly appears in a new form with no prior warning.

MLS: Why are your word sonnets generally set into sequences? In your opinion, is this a restriction of the form?

SM: Many of the word sonnets were composed in writing pulses so they were naturally linked by association and common themes. In fact, the sequences enhance each word sonnet as they find their place in an unfolding cycle in which words and images amplify each other, ricochet off each other, and resonate sound-wise and visually. Some word sonnets stand out all on their own, but the sequences draw in the reader for a more multi-faceted encounter.

I have also engaged in word sonnet exchanges, one of which, *A Dream of Birds*, co-authored with B. Glen Rotchin, was published in 2007. Similar word sonnet collaborations with other poets are in the editing pipeline and may appear in print or online in the not-too-distant future.

MLS: The reception of poetry is never a simple matter. What has the reception of word sonnets been like in Canada and elsewhere?

SM: The word sonnet over the past two decades owes much to Augustus Young, the Irish author who introduced them into public awareness in the late 1990s. It took time for the form to take root, so to speak, but by 2003 I had encouraged enough poets to explore the form and it was quickly taken up and subsequently the Ottawa (Canada) area practitioners had their best new work included in the online anthology *Foreplay*, which Christal Steck and I edited in 2004.

The first reviews of my collection *Ricochet: Word Sonnets* were on the whole quite generous and receptive in Canada and the U.S. The novelty of this mini-form and its playful character must have appealed to reviewers and others in a time when poetic speech seemed to overflow with prolixity and protracted self-reflexiveness.

MLS: Your poetry has been translated into many languages. Is there a language or culture that has proven to be particularly receptive of your work? Is it hard to find a publisher interested in this minimalist form of poetry?

SM: Not so, in fact. *Ricochet* was first published in English in 2004 in Canada and then my translators did not face any hurdles when Spanish, French, Romanian, Hebrew, and

Russian editions were published in these respective languages. There is an openness and curiosity for the sub-genre in a time when exactness of speech and care with language are more necessary than ever. *Wind and Wood*, for example, began its transmigration into Spanish under your direction, Laura, with the participation of your eager students. In fact, the translation of my word sonnets began first in 2005 at your National University of La Plata and has continued uninterrupted since then and has caught on in various other literary centres, most likely inspired by the work you have done in rendering my writing into Spanish, offering the example of possibility and completion to translators in other cultures. The fascination with the form has not abated. Italian, Mandarin, and Turkish renditions are now being prepared by translators in addition to the versions that have been published to date.

MLS: Being the child of an immigrant family, you grew up in multilingual Montreal. How has this unique life experience influenced your writing?

SM: I grew up in the heart of the immigrant neighbourhoods of Montreal, so I heard different languages from birth, so to speak. In my own community, it was natural for my grandparents and parents to speak to each other in Yiddish and to add phrases and passages in such East European languages as Polish and Russian. So early on I was used to translating while engaged in everyday conversations. In elementary school we read four languages including biblical Hebrew, and then in high school we added Latin which gave us a better understanding of the French we spoke and also heard in the francophone neighbourhood adjacent to our immigrant quarter.

From an early age I read poetry in a number of languages, not just Canadian English. And when I got to the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, where I pursued graduate studies, I found a university library that offered books in a variety of languages, including in translation. This was in the 1960s, the onset of the great era of translation that flourished in the U.S. and the U.K. while in Canada we finally began to render English and French literary works into the other official language.

My readings were quite eclectic and wide. No doubt all that I read found a way to graft itself onto my writing. But I would have to name hundreds of authors to locate all the writers whose excellent works must have had some influence on the words I chose, the forms they took, the sounds and rhythms that gave them their cadence and music. No doubt there are multiple idiomatic networks subsumed in the language of my word sonnets.

MLS: Over the years, you have collaborated with many of your translators. Tell us about your experience working with your translators. Has it been productive?

SM: Translators are partners, almost like spouses. They enter your words, your deepest feelings, and then they attempt to render all these moods and insights into words that echo and parallel the diction of the original works they are engaged in rendering into their own language. If a writer can work with his or her translator, engage in a dialogue about what he or she may have intended with their works, an intimate creative relationship builds up and often a close affinity if not deep friendship is initiated. We join with others in matrimonial partnership; as writers we connect with others and are bound

by the words we create, which are recreated in turn in translation.

MLS: As a poetry translator, one often wonders about the creative process. How do you write a word sonnet? Could you take us through the stages of the creative process?

SM: How do I write the sonnets? Sometimes, first, by writing the words down in a rush of inspiration, using a pen and inscribing the words into a small, lined notebook that I carry around with me—I have had it in my shirt pocket for years. A new notebook, of course, every year or so.

Then the word sonnets that seem most realized in rhythm, speech, and turn of phrase get transposed to my digital files for fine-tuning and vintage cultivation in my current manuscript. The poems need to "age" in the manuscript as in a wine cellar in a maturing oaken cask.

MLS: The prize-winning collection *In Your Words: Translations from the Yiddish and the Hebrew* (2017) shows your skilful and experienced hand as a poetry translator. How does the economy of poetry translation resemble/differ from the process of writing your own poetry? How do you craft your poetic voice in translation? What are the principles you follow when translating poetry?

SM: Translation was not a school subject or a professional discipline. It grew out of the reality of living in a multi-lingual immigrant community in Montreal and the bilingual milieu of my native city. To translate was like breathing; essential to social living. As for rendering the poems of other writers, these were taken up over the years as labours of love. There had to be a spark to set off the work of translation but once begun it was like the act of revision. Here was a text from another language and soon it took shape in my own first literary language. Always held before me was the ideal to ensure the translation had the same inevitability and naturalness of expression as an original poem. From time to time the original and my version wrestled silently but earnestly with each other before a truce was agreed to; and sometimes the lines leapt into English as if conceived in that language, without any headlocks necessary.

When I focus on a translation, I keep in mind as faithfully as possible the stylistic and poetic idioms of the original from within the contexts of its language and literary tradition. No easy feat, but the challenge is like learning a new turn of the tango. Perfection offers the rewards and pleasures of practice and performance. Always when translating I give full freedom of passage to instinctual response and the surprise of serendipity. But when writing my own poems, I listen to the voice that utters the words, lines, and stanzas. I take down the dictation but don't have to "research" from where the voice is speaking.

MLS: Throughout your writing life, you have combined your labour as a poet with prolific work as an editor of poetry. While this has certainly exposed English-speaking readers to fresh poetic voices and dialogues, it has also contributed to shape your ethos as a poet and writer. How do these different facets of your literary career interact? In a similar vein, how does the writing of short fiction and memoirs add to your literary identity?

SM: Why have I edited so many texts? In essence, this vocation arises from my participation in the anglophone circle of writers at McGill University in Montreal in the early 1960s. It was the first association of writers I joined, and the commitment to community was instilled in me by the example of a number of older literary figures who were key founders of contemporary magazines and literary presses. In later years, the anthologies I prepared participated, as it were, in the ferment of the 1980s and 1990s as many Canadian authors were preoccupied with establishing a Canadian canon so we could set aside the colonial trammels of a literature dominated by British and then American models. Let's say it was both a literary and political commitment. Canadian writing did not enjoy the blessings of having a publishers' nucleus of editors who supported and guided writers and poets in their art and craft. So the writers had to do the job themselves…and still continue to edit and shape books more often than not gratis.

As for short fiction, it is the sibling of the poem. Many of my stories are suffused with humour and uncannily introduce characters who without self-conscious plans seem to be preoccupied with preserving objects and features of their lives that embed their cultural identity. In many ways, the stories complement swathes of poems written over the past decades, offering plots and characters that gently show up absurdity and obsessions in our lives and relationships. Memoirs are the next challenge. In a few articles and essays I have tried to highlight or commemorate friends and associates whose writing life or books deserve ongoing attention. Some have passed away, but I still count them in my circle of friendship. No doubt there is a streak of loss that courses through memories and recollections.

Poetry seems a natural form of expression when emotion, feelings, and reflection come together in a moment of intensity and insight. When young, we are not so self-conscious, letting the words well up into speech without the interference of correction and seemly decorum. Eventually, with much reading and years of experience we are keen to shape the words with music and meaning. Prose is more leisurely, though it also has its organic cadences and perceptions.

The word sonnet is like a neat, nifty shot of single malt whisky, the "water of life," which is the best distillation to partake of when savouring a sequence or collection of these wee poems.

MLS: Your latest collection, *Perfume: Poems and Word Sonnets*, however, offers a more diverse canvas as it revisits poetic forms other than the word sonnet. What can you tell us about this fine collection?

SM: This last book is a harvesting of work from the past decade or more. Included are "regular" poems along with a new sequence of word sonnets, the sub-genre which continues to beguile my writing. In essence, the collection arches back over nearly sixty years since my first collection of short poems appeared in Montreal. There is a commitment to craft, both in the use of language, the notation of the lines, and the poetics of organic free verse. The poems in *Perfume* are distillations, concise, rhythmic works that try to avoid the selfie-garrulousness that is still the present fashion encouraged by the gatekeepers in Canadian writing. And let's not leave out the humour

and wit in the poems, the salt and pepper that I trust will provide taste and pleasure to readers who value vintage verse.

A Distillation of Poetry in Translation

I.[2]

Wind and Wood	**Viento y madera**	**Vent et bois**	**Vento e madeira**
Frivolous,	Frívolos,	Frivolement,	Frívolos,
we	pasamos	on	passamos
pass	las	passe	as
the	horas,	le	horas,
hours,	golpetea	temps,	os
ears	el	tympans	ouvidos
gently	oído	feutrés	batidos
tapped	un	du	delicadamente
by	delicado	xylophone	por
xylophone	xilófono	de	xilofone
of	de	vent	de
wind	viento	et	vento
and	y	de	e
wood.	madera.	bois.	madeira.

Tongue	**Lengua**	**Langue**	**Língua**
Rain	La	La	Chuva
is	lluvia	pluie	é
the	es	est	a
tongue	lengua	langue	língua
of	de	de	da
resurrection,	resurrección,	résurrection,	ressurreição,
its	cuyos	ses	miríade
myriad	infinitos	mille	de
accents	acentos	accents	sotaques
rousing	animan	charment	animando
roots,	raíces,	racines,	raízes,
bulbs	bulbos	bulbes	bulbos
and	y	et	e
seeds.	semillas.	semences.	sementes.

[2] Translations into Argentinean Spanish, Canadian French and Brazilian Portuguese first appeared in Mayne, *Wind and Wood*.

Day	**Día**	**Jour**	**Dia**
Blessed	Bendita	Combien	Abençoada
is	la	bénie	a
the	luz	est	luz
light	que	la	que
that	regresa	lumière	retorna,
returns	renovando	qui	renovando
renewing	el	fait	o
the	día	renaître	dia
day	diferente	chaque	diferente
different	de	jour	de
from	todos	sous	todos
all	los	un	os
other	demás	jour	outros
days.	días.	nouveau.	dias.

Winds	**Vientos**	**Vents**	**Ventos**
God's	Vocecitas	Petites	Pequenas
little	de	voix	vozes
voices.	Dios.	de	de
Sleep.	Duerman.	Dieu.	Deus.
Eternity	La	Dormez.	Durmam.
can	eternidad	L'éternité	A
wait.	esperará.	attendra.	eternidade
Its	Impaciente	Si	esperará.
impatience	es	impatiente	Sua
with	con	devant	impaciência
the	la	la	com
myriad	miríada	myriade	miríades
of	de	des	de
winds.	vientos.	vents.	ventos.

II.
Italian, Turkish, Russian voices

Wind and Wood	**Vento e legna**[3]	**Rüzgâr ve Ağaçlar**[4]	**ВЕТЕР И ДЕРЕВЬЯ**[5]
Frivolous, we pass the hours, ears gently tapped by xylophone of wind and wood.	Frivoli, passiamo le ore, l'udito sbattuto delicatamente per un xilofono di vento e legna.	Keyfekeder, geçiyor saatler peş peşe, usulca okşuyor kulaklarımızı rüzgâr ve ağaçlar bir ksilofon misali.	Мы проводим беззаботно час за часом, в ушах постукивает мягко ксилофон ветра и деревьев.
Tongue	**Lingua**	**Dil**	**ЯЗЫК**
Rain is the tongue of resurrection, its myriad accents rousing roots, bulbs and seeds.	La pioggia è la lingua di resurrezione, infiniti accenti animano radici, bulbi e semi.	Yağmur dirilişin dilidir, içinde sakladığı binlerce ağız uyandırır her daim kökleri, soğanları ve tohumları.	Дождь – это язык возрождения, мириады его штрихов с ударением пробудят корневища, луковицы, клубни, семена.

[3] Translations into Italian by Argentinean-Italian Visual Arts teacher and poet Mariana Perata.
[4] Translations into Turkish by Mert Moralı and supervised by Prof. Şehnaz Tahir Gürçağlar (MA Program in Translation, Boğaziçi University).
[5] Translations into Russian first published in Mayne, *Cusp*.

Day	**Giorno**	**Gün**	**ДЕНЬ**
Blessed	Benedetta	Her	Благословен
is	la	gün	будь
the	luce	geri	свет,
light	che	dönen	что
that	ritorna	ışığa	возвращается,
returns	rinnovando	şükürler	старательно
renewing	la	olsun,	раскрашивая
the	giornata	bugünü	день,
day	differente	diğer	расцвечивая
different	di	tüm	каждый
from	tutte	günlerden	по-иному,
all	le	ayırıp	как
other	altre	tazeleyen	никакой
days.	giornate.	ışığa.	другой.

Winds	**Venti**	**Rüzgârlar**	**ВЕТРА**
God’s	Voccete	Tanrının	Спокойный
little	di	kısık	шёпот
voices.	Dio.	sesleri.	голосов
Sleep.	Dormite.	Uyuyun.	Создателя.
Eternity	L’eternità	Elbet	Спи.
can	aspetterà	bekler	Вечность
wait.	Lei	sizi	может
Its	è	ebediyet.	подождать.
impatience	impaziente	Sabırsız	Её
with	con	ve	Нетерпеливост
the	la	yüklü,	ь
myriad	miriade	esip	с
of	di	savrulan	мириадами
winds.	venti.	rüzgârlarla.	несдержанных
			ветров.

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