

use of virtuoso naming and enumerating, of virtuoso free-rhyming, of hyperbolic or understated imagery, of metaphysical imagery, and of compression. <sup>1</sup> In her *Negro Digest* essay, "Black Poetry—Where It's At," Carolyn Rodgers adds to the list the use of "signifying" (hyperbolic insult, often describing one's adversary's Mama), of "shouting" (verbal harangue) and of "du-wah dirtybop bebop" (which defies explanation).<sup>2</sup> The spoken virtuosity of many Black poets is one way they call up audience response: It's difficult for a Black audience to hear a signifying competition or a talented showerer lay down his rap without adding, "Sock it to 'em," "Right on," or simply, "Amen!"

While many critics argue the existence of one or several Black themes, a most appropriate and encompassing understanding of theme recognizes the sense of mission shared by Black poets. Dismissing the idea that poetry does nothing, many Black poets have persistently believed that poems are tools of power. A sense of cultural responsibility prompts them to affirm the place of poetry in the struggle against social injustice. This is not to say that there is a party line of Black poetry; rather, this poetry insists that it will be heard or read by individuals who are a part of a real, larger social and political community. Whether they address Black or white audiences, Black poets, as Amiri Baraka points out, "can't go anywhere without an awareness of the hurt / the white man has put on the people. Any people."<sup>3</sup> Taking the side of the people, Black poetry offers them a description of life's possibilities. Even when it addresses political problems, social injustice, or personal pain, its tonal character tends to be enlivening. It draws inspiration from the survival of Black people in a hostile world and from the survival of their faith in a dream.

1991

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## ALICE FULTON

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(B. 1952)

Alice Fulton was born and raised in Troy, New York. She earned her B.A. in creative writing in 1978 from New York Empire State College and her M.F.A. in 1982 from Cornell University, where she studied with A. R. Ammons. In the late 1970s she worked briefly for an advertising firm in New York City, and in 1980 she married Hank De Leo, a painter. In 1983 she began teaching at the University of Michigan. After *Dance Script with Electric Ballerina* (1983), her first book, she published four more poetry collections—*Palladium* (1986), *Powers of Congress* (1990), *Sensual Math* (1995), and *Felt* (2001)—and a book of essays, *Feeling as a Foreign Language: The Good Strangeness of Poetry* (1999). Among her many awards, she has received a prestigious MacArthur Foundation grant.

In her drive to freshen poetic diction, avoid cliché and sentimentality, and create "skewed domains" in her poetry, Fulton has distinguished herself as one of the most original American poets writing today. She has succeeded in challenging not only assumptions about gender roles, but also the assumptions underlying current modes of poetry such as the autobiographical, first person lyric or the experimental "Language Poem." Rather than follow any prescriptive method for writing, she mixes her techniques, so that poems of hers that appear to be autobiographical are often concerned with how the mind comes to terms with experience through language, and poems that call attention to her linguistic virtuosity through puns and sudden shifts of diction are never abstract products of the mind, but invest themselves in feeling and celebrate the quirky details that she observes in the world around her.

Although many of the poems from *Dance Script with Electric Ballerina* refer to details of her Catholic girlhood, she has voiced skepticism about autobiographical poetry, pointing out that such poems are constructs whose pose of sincerity readers rarely question. Her later books have tended more and more toward emphasizing texture and variety of language and poses that call attention to themselves as poses—dramatic monologue, poems in which several voices arise and often contradict one another, and active enjambments that make words do double duty as different parts of speech.

1. Stephen Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References* (New York: Wm. Morrow & Co., 1973).
2. Carolyn Rodgers, "The New Black Poetry: Where It's At," *Negro Digest*, Vol. XVII, (1969), pp. 7-16.
3. Amiri Baraka, "Jitterbugs," *The Selected Poetry of Amiri Baraka / LeRoi Jones* (New York: Wm. Morrow & Co., 1979), p. 93.

In particular, she often refuses to gender her speakers, forcing her readers to reconsider their assumptions about what constitutes male or female identity. Like the Language Poets, Fulton is interested in linguistic play and artifice, and also in critical theory and philosophy, although the theories most evident in her poetry and essays are those of science and mathematics. Like her teacher, A. R. Ammons, she often develops analogies drawn from these fields to explain her poetics. Fulton has criticized the narrow emotional range of contemporary poetry: "Poems of 'desire' or loss are the safest, least vulnerable poems imaginable these days. It is far riskier, more vulnerable, to allow contrarian feelings: humiliation, vulgarity, perversity, humor, et cetera—than to express loss." Whether in her poetry or her essays, Fulton's contrarian stances have tried to occupy the "inbetween" spaces. Her work defies categories and continually averts predictable solutions, so that, in accordance with the title of her essay collection, she achieves the "good strangeness" that she seeks.



## OF FORMAL, FREE, AND FRACTAL VERSE: SINGING THE BODY ECLECTIC

For the past three years, there's been a critical outburst against the "formlessness" of much contemporary poetry. This critical bias defines and defends a narrow notion of form, based largely on a poem's use of regular meter. J. V. Cunningham defined form more generously as "that which remains the same when everything else is changed. . . . The form of the simple declarative sentence in English is the same in each of its realizations." Hence, by changing the content of any free verse poem while retaining (for example) its irregular meter and stanzaic length, one can show its form. And if a poem's particular, irregular shape were used again and again, his form eventually might be given a name, such as "sonnet."

It seems to me that good free and formal verse have a lot in common. In fact, I'd venture to say that both are successful in proportion to their approximation of one another. Often, a metered poem contains several lines so irregular we might as well call them free. The poems of Donne, Blake, Dickinson, and Hopkins are frequently polyrhythmic, and substitutions of one metrical foot for another are common in both classical and romance verse forms. We know that perfectly regular rhythm is a sure sedative to the ear. It follows that the variations rather than the regularities of metered verse give the work of its great practitioners a signature harm. On the other hand, vers libre frequently contains an underlying beat that comes close to regular measure. Richard D. Cureton, writing on the prosody of free verse, observes: "If we are interested in the rhythmic structure of a poetic text, the appropriate question is not *Is this text rhythmic?* but *At what level and to what degree is this text rhythmic?*"

Regular meter is pleasing because we can readily anticipate the rhythm of the lines to come. The pleasure lies in having our expectations fulfilled. Irregular

meter, on the other hand, pleases because it delivers something unforeseen, though, in retrospect, well-prepared for. Free verse is most compelling when most rhythmic: the poet must shape the irregular rhythms of language to underscore, contradict, or in some way reinforce the poem's content. Occasional lapses into regular meter frame the more jagged lines and help the reader appreciate their unpredictable music. For example, when a long iambic line is followed by a spondee or two, the rhythms are thrown into high relief. It's a little like placing a swatch of red next to a swatch of green: when juxtaposed these complements increase each other's vibrancy.

Prosody provides a comprehensive means of discussing traditional metered verse. But free verse is seldom subjected to any such systematic analysis in our literary magazines. There is, however, an insightful and growing body of literature by scholars of prosody, linguistics, and musicology on the rhythms of free verse. I think of Stephen Cushman's new book *Williams and the Meaning of Measure* (which in advancing our understanding of Williams' prosody advances our understanding of free verse); Charles O. Hartman's *Free Verse, An Essay on Prosody*; Cooper and Meyer's work on musical rhythm; linguist Ray Jackendoff's model of hierarchical structure in language as applied to music; David Stein and David Gil's linguistic insights concerning prosodic structures; phonologist Elizabeth Selkirk's study of the relationship between sound and structure; Donald Westling's syntactic theory of enjambment, which he calls "grammetric scissoring"; and Richard D. Cureton's analysis of the "myths and muddles" of traditional scansion. However, to judge from their opinions, many of the critics, essayists, and poets holding forth in our literary journals are unaware of such studies and, consequently, of any of the newer theories of prosody. As reviewers, they are content to describe the content of the poems and praise the poet's skillful use of blank verse. If the poet does not write in blank verse or in any of the more obvious metrical forms, the poems simply are not scanned. It's as if the reader, upon scanning two lines and finding dissimilar rhythms, gives up the search and regards the poem as a formless mass of words. I'd argue, however, that all poems have shape—whether it's pleasing or perceptible to the reader is something else. It's time that we, as poets, readers, and critics, begin to discern and analyze the subtle, governing structures of free verse and to talk more about its operative tropes.

Rather than placing the emphasis upon the formal devices of regular rhythm and meter, why not consider the whole panoply of design and pattern? As J. V. Cunningham noted, "A poem is a convergence of forms. It is the coincidence of forms that locks in the poem." Prosody is too specific an instrument to describe all the pattern-making possibilities of verse. To devote our analytical energy and aesthetic passion solely to metrical form is to deny the existence (and importance) of the myriad structural options available. At the very least, responsible formal analysis must define the details it chooses to disregard.

What are some of the formal schemes awaiting our investigation? As a beginning, we might look at the smaller linguistic units that influence or enlarge a text, such as allusions, puns, apostrophe, and pronouns with their function of insinuating gender. Or we could dissect the poem's larger governing organization: its rhetorical questions, conceits, virtuosic listings, registers of diction, and lineations. Cushman effectively argues that Williams wrote a prosody of enjambment, a counterpointing of visual line and syntactic unit. We might analyze the poem's enjambment within a syntactic-grammatical context or consider its use of resistant or

resolved line-breaks. As Cureton notes, enjambments alone can dramatize the “curve of emotion” in the text, from relaxation to tension to resolution. It’s also important to consider the poem’s visual form on the page, which changes the way we hear words. Is the use of white space mimetic, abstract, or temporal; do such effects serve to emphasize or to defamiliarize the line? We also should be attentive to the poem’s use of reiterative devices such as epianalepsis (ending a sentence with its own opening words—*Leaves of Grass* has many examples), refrain, chorus, or repetend (a repetition that occurs irregularly or partially, as in Delmore Schwartz’s poem “Do the Others Speak of Me, Mockingly, Maliciously”). And, as Jonathan Holden has pointed out, we can regard many contemporary poems as analogues that borrow their form from letters, horoscopes, television listings, fugues, etc. The deep logic of a poem may be based upon such concepts as the microcosm moving toward macrocosm; the linkage of opposites (oxymoron); stasis; dynamism; and equilibrium. Because English, unlike the Romance languages, does not contain a multitude of rhymes, we need to appreciate and make use of aural difference rather than similitude. French and Spanish poetry can afford to value endings, which contribute so much to the irregular texture and attendant richness of our language. With this in mind, we might consider the orchestration of verse through echo (assonance, consonance, irregular rhyme, front rhyme, half-rhyme, accords, and so on). It’s also interesting to analyze the operative rhetorical strategies, such as parallelism (a passing over with brief mention in order to emphasize the suggestiveness of what was omitted) and parataxis (placing words or phrases next to one another without coordinating connections). In rhythm, we could turn our attention to the use of accentual or syllabic verse, to irregular meter that enforces content (i.e., the tension of strong-stress rhythms or the relaxation of pyrrhic, anapaic lines). If we wish to be more ambitious, Cureton’s theory of hierarchical scansion provides a formal mechanism for representing comparable rhythmic shapes at different linguistic levels. (The major levels are narrative, syntactic, and phonological.) We also could consider the formal devices of asyndeton (omission of conjunctions, common in the work of Ammons or Swenson, for example) and its opposite, polysyndeton (repetition of conjunctions).

The last two devices, though opposite in principle, both have the effect of making the content more vivacious and emphatic. In fact, I hope that discussion of form will lead to considerations of content. Without this obligation, formalism becomes a comfortable means of avoiding responsibility for what is being said. It’s safer to speak of metrical finesse or blunders than to appraise the subjects poets choose. In too many reviews, I find lengthy *descriptions* of content, which do little more than paraphrase. Descriptive criticism is fine as a place to begin, but few critics go on to question why particular subjects continue to be chosen (while other topics suffer poetic banishment). Brave criticism might ask what is this subject’s value to me, as reader? And, what world views, values, or secular mythologies are implicit in the poet’s stance? Surely we must consider the cultural assumptions questioned or supported by the text, as well as the style in which these concerns are voiced.

Quantum physics teaches us that the act of measuring changes what is being measured. It follows that the act of measuring language (by putting it into regular meter) must change what is being said. Part of the resistance toward metered verse is coupled with a belief that passion or sincerity evaporates when the poet takes to

counting stresses and feet. I’d contend that the content of metered poems can, at times, take on a greater urgency by means of a regular rhythm. The exigencies of form foster such careful choices that each word can become a palimpsest of implication. In fact, I value the qualities of rhythm and multidimensional language in all poetry, whether the meter is regular or not. If it is true (and I’m not sure it is) that the poetry of social commitment is often written in irregular meters, perhaps this is because the poets write from a tradition other than that of English prosody. We should respect the richness of such cultural contexts. It is ethnocentric to regard traditional English prosody as the one sure means of writing poetry. Such a stance also fails to consider the changes our language underwent in becoming American.

Several critics have lamented the repose of free verse into stylistic planeness. Mary Kinzie has even coined a new literary term, “the rhapsodic fallacy,” which speaks to the problem. Kinzie’s position is too complex to summarize here, but the rhapsodic fallacy describes, in part, the equation of a prosaic style with authenticity of engagement. The observation is an important one. Have we forgotten that the plain-style represents a conscious aesthetic choice, rather than a simple outpouring of pure feeling? The word “style” itself points to language as a selective construct. As such, flat style poetry is no more “sincere” or “engaged” than are the constructs of metered verse. And when the majority of poets choose to write in a given style, one suspects it is becoming a convention, as well as an artificial device. (However, free verse is not to be equated with plain style or any other calcified aesthetic. If it were, there would be nothing free about it.) Perhaps readers are bored by the plethora of poems in simple language; perhaps they feel manipulated by the poet’s guileless pose. As solution to the monotony of flat style poetry, Mary Kinzie calls for a return to “those forms associated with the eighteenth century: formal satire, familiar epistle, georgic, pastoral.” Lamenting the blurring of high and low styles into “the low lyrical shrub” that is contemporary poetry, she would have poets write in clearly delineated genres. This stance supposes that by segregating high style from low and by restricting subject one may write “heart-piercing” poetry, to borrow Kinzie’s adjective. But hearts are subjective entities, steadfast only in their refusal to be reliably pierced by aesthetic programs—that’s the great thing about them! They remain willful little blobs, despite our best efforts at persuasion.

Robert Hillier’s *In Pursuit of Poetry* classifies the language of verse into two styles: “the rhetorical, heightened and dignified, and the conversational, informal and familiar. . . . Each has its dangers as well as its virtues, the first may become bombastic, the second prosaic.” I don’t agree that the language of verse falls neatly into binary registers of diction. If so, where would Chaucer or Shakespeare land in the aesthetic shakedown, combining as they do, the dignified with the familiar, the high with the low? To my mind, great work is large enough to include a multiplicity of styles, tones, and subjects. However, our attention for the moment is on the two styles Hillier describes, rather than the wide diversity of work he excludes. I think his description of the dangers common to high and low style holds true. Poets are just as likely to write rhapsodic epics that ring false as they are to write fallacious, plain-style lyrics. If Mary Kinzie’s programme should catch on, we’d undoubtedly see vast numbers of insufferable “genre” poems, written to fit the bill. Isn’t this what happened in the eighteenth century?

Perhaps the impulse for simplicity began as a corrective when the formal post-World War II poem was felt to have degenerated (through imitation and

overuse) into a polished veneer of language. The veneer might have been gold plate or marble, but everyone suddenly felt a yen for solid oak—or formica. And since the early 1960s the majority of poets have forsaken the primrose path for the plain one, which now begins, in its turn, to feel like an aesthetic shortcut.

In the largest terms, the search for a style is a search for a language that does justice to our knowledge of how the world works. According to one ordering of the canon, poetry has consistently reflected the world views of its age. Thus, in the Middle Ages, when everyone believed the world was created and run by a divine being, and earthquakes were viewed as a result of God's intervention (rather than of shifting plates), poetry mirrored the religious hierarchy. Dante's conception of the world as a series of spheres—the enormous heavens, the crystalline planets, the earth's elements, and the seven circles of hell—gave everyone a proper place, from king to serf. Newtonian physics replaced the hierarchical model with a physics of ordinary matter ruled by mathematical laws. And the literary climate of the early eighteenth century mirrored the harmony of a universe seen as a great, logical clock. The lawful and orderly cosmos was taken for proof of God's presence and goodness. Christian Wolff evolved the first system of German Rationalism from aspects of Newton's *Principia*. And the idea of Nature as order (prominent in *Principia*) also influenced such representative eighteenth-century literature as Pope's "Essay on Man." Later in the century, the rise of democracy, which posits an equality between parts of the social machinery, found expression in an enthusiasm for the simpler modes of folk poetry. And by the early nineteenth century, Wordsworth's "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" argued for the democratic readmission of "rustic" speech and subjects into English poetry.

Just as Newton shattered the medieval hierarchical conception of the world, modern physics has smashed Newton's mechanistic clockwork. Modernism may indeed have been a true reflection of Einstein's physics. He, after all, never accepted quantum theory and held to the old-fashioned hope that a realistic vision of the world could be congruent with the quantum facts. In his autobiography he states, "I still believe in the possibility of a model of reality—that is, of a theory which represents things themselves and not merely the probability of their occurrence." If we substitute "ideas" for "probability," we have a restatement of Williams' famous "No ideas but in things."

However, Niels Bohr's claims that there is no deep reality represents the prevailing view of contemporary quantum physics. Bohr insisted "There is no quantum world. There is only an abstract quantum description." Physicist N. David Mermin summed up Bohr's antirealist position by stating, "We now know that the moon is demonstrably not there when nobody looks." Perhaps popular literature and culture have made people aware of this and other quantum theories, such as the view that reality consists of a steadily increasing number of parallel universes; that consciousness creates reality; or that the world is twofold, consisting of potentials and actualities. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, which forbids accurate knowledge of a quantum particle's position and momentum, is certainly well known. A truly engaged and contemporary poetry must reflect this knowledge. As a body of literature it might synthesize such disparate theories into a comprehensive metaphor for the way the world appears to us today. Or it may be that synthesis and unity are fundamentally premodern concepts. In this case, a fragmentary, diffuse literature is the perfect expression of our world knowledge. In a sense, our search for a language mirrors science's search for a quantum reality. As Nobel

laureate Richard Feynman remarked, "I think it is safe to say no one understands quantum mechanics. Do not keep saying to yourself, if you can possibly avoid it, 'but how can it be like that?' Nobody knows how it can be like that." This reluctance to attempt meaning is clearly reflected in postmodernist literature and deconstructionism, where "meaning" is no longer the issue.

Perhaps it shouldn't surprise us, then, that the term *free verse* has lost its meaning and become a convenient catch-all whereby any piece of writing with wide margins may be defended as poetry. Pound's advice was to "compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome." He didn't say poetry should have no music at all. And founding mother Amy Lowell preferred the term "cadenced verse" to vers libre, noting that "to depart satisfactorily from a rhythm it is first necessary to have it." Frost, of course, thought that writing free verse was like playing tennis without a net. But surely the Net-Nabbing Freeform Tennis Club would waste no time in inventing another restriction. They might move the game indoors, use the walls as obstacles, and call their new sport "raquetball." In the same way, when free verse absconded with the net, it created other means of limitation. The best poets of free verse work long and hard to structure their poems. But as readers and critics, we have been slow in finding ways to discern and discuss the orders of their irregular form. But form *is* regularity, you might protest. If so, how much regularity constitutes pattern and structure?

Perfect Euclidean forms occur rarely in nature. Instead we find a dynamic world made up of quantities constantly changing in time, a wealth of fluctuations—such as variations in sunspots and the wobbling of the earth's axis. In 1977, the mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot observed that "twenty-five or thirty years ago, science looked at things that were regular and smooth." In contrast, he became intrigued by what are called chaotic phenomena: the occurrence of earthquakes; the way our neurons fire when we search our memories; patterns of vegetation in a swamp; price jumps in the stock market; turbulence in the weather; the distribution of galaxies; and the flooding of the Nile. Mandelbrot saw similarities in shapes so strange that fin de siècle mathematicians termed them "pathological" and "monsters." These earlier scientists never supposed that such "monstrous" shapes bore any relation to reality. Mandelbrot, on the contrary, believed they described nature much better than ideal forms. He found that certain chaotic structures (including the preceding list) contained a deep logic or pattern. In 1975, he coined the word *fractals* (from the Latin *fractus*, meaning "broken or fragmented") to describe such configurations. (Pound's injunction to "break the pentameter" is nicely implicit in the term.)

To put it simply, each part of a fractal form replicates the form of the entire structure. Increasing detail is revealed with increasing magnification, and each smaller part looks like the entire structure, turned around or tilted a bit. This isn't true of the classical Euclidean forms of lines, planes, and spheres. For example, when a segment of a circle is subjected to increasing magnification it looks increasingly like a straight line rather than a series of circles. But a fractal form has a substructure (we might say a subtext) that goes on indefinitely, without reposing into ordinary curves. The bark patterns on oak, mud cracks in a dry riverbed, a broccoli spear—these are examples of fractal forms: irregular structures containing just enough regularity so that they can be described. Such forms are, at least to my perception, quite pleasing. Like free verse, they zig and zag, spurt and dawdle, while retaining an infinite complexity of detail. (In contrast, formal verse travels

at a regular pace and is less dynamic, less potentially volatile.) The fascination of these intricate forms ("the fascination of what's difficult," you might say) indicates that we don't need an obvious or regular pattern to satisfy our aesthetic or psychological needs. Nonobjective art, which often reflects the fractal patterns of nature, makes the same point. In fact, asymmetrical or turbulent composition may be the essence of twentieth-century aesthetics.

There are two kinds of fractals: geometric and random. The geometric type repeats an identical pattern at various scales. As a corollary, imagine a poem structured on the concept of the oxymoron. The linkage of opposites on the smallest scale might appear in antonymic word usage, on a larger scale in one stanza's ability to oppose or reverse the form and content of another, and at the grandest scale in the poem's overall form becoming a paradoxical or self-reflexive contradiction of content. Thus far, the poem could be a sonnet or an ode. After all, ordered forms about chaos were rather popular in the eighteenth century. But let's suppose that the poem's rhythm is also oxymoronic: that a smooth, regular line is purposefully followed by a rambunctious or jagged utterance. If repeated throughout, this juxtaposition would constitute the poem's metrical form. Random fractals, to consider another possibility, introduce some elements of chance. In the composition of poetry, this could be as simple a factor as opening a book at random and using the metrical pattern happened upon as a contributing factor in your verse.

In his essay "How Long Is the Coast of Britain?" Mandelbrot showed that a coastline, being infinitely long with all of its microscopic points and inlets, is best treated as a random fractal rather than as an approximation of a straight line. While complication is characteristic of coastlines, there is also a great degree of order in their structures, which are self-similar. A self-similar mechanism is, formally speaking, a kind of cascade, with each stage creating details smaller than those of the preceding stages. As Mandelbrot writes, "Each self-similar fractal has a very specific kind of unsmoothness, which makes it more complicated than anything in Euclid." Fractal form, then, is composed of constant digressions and interruptions in rhythm.

Scientists are just beginning to uncover all the events, things, and processes that can be described through fractals. Clouds follow fractal patterns. (Incidentally, you'll notice that the previous sentence is composed of three trochaic feet, with one extra stressed syllable at the beginning. How regular! And irregular.) Since fractals can be illustrated by means of computer graphics, it's possible to see the basic fractal properties in all their intricacy and beauty.

Mandelbrot's discoveries could change the way we look at the world and, by extension, the way we look at poetry. Certainly the discovery of order within the turbulent forms of nature should encourage us to search for patterns within the turbulent forms of art. Fractal form may allow a more precise measure of those poetic shapes that aren't governed by the strategies of prosody. Though it's been around for over one hundred years (if one counts Whitman), in regard to free verse we're a little like primitive people who've never seen a two-dimensional image and can't, at first, ascertain that the shapes in photographs from faces or bodies. We must develop our ability to recognize subtle, hidden, and original patterns as the time-honored (and more obvious) metrical orders of prosody. And we might pay more attention to the irregularities of traditional formal verse, the freedoms and deviations within a context of similitude and correctness. (After all, deviance can't exist without an orderly context from which to differ.)

Since "free verse" has become a misnomer, perhaps we could use the irregular yet beautifully structured forms of nature as analogue and call the poetry of irregular form *fractal verse*. Its aesthetic might derive from the structural limitations of self-similar fractal form. I offer the following as a tentative exploration of fractal precepts: any line when examined closely (or magnified) will reveal itself to be as richly detailed as was the larger poem from which it was taken; the poem will contain an infinite regression of details, a nesting of pattern within pattern (an endless imbedding of the shape into itself, recalling Tennyson's idea of the inner infinity); digression, interruption, fragmentation, and lack of continuity will be regarded as formal functions rather than lapses into formlessness; all directions of motion and rhythm will be equally probable (isotropy); the past positions of motion, or the preceding metrical pattern, will not necessarily affect the poem's future evolution (independence).

Poems are linguistic models of the world's working. Now our knowledge of form includes the new concept of manageable chaos, along with the ancient categories of order and chaos. If order is represented by the simple Euclidean shapes of nature and by metered verse, chaos might be analogous to failed free verse and gibberish. (It's somehow reassuring that chaos is still with us, evident in natural forms that show no underlying pattern.) And manageable chaos or fractal form might find its corollary in fractal poetry. One thing seems certain: our verse should be free to sing the wildly harmonious structures that surround and delight us, the body eclectic, where geography ends and pebbles begin.

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## CHRISTIAN WIMAN

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(B. 1966)

Born in Abilene, Texas, Christian Wiman was raised in the small oil town of Snyder, and the imagery of Wiman's poetry reflects the flat, dry landscape of his native region. He attended Washington and Lee University in Virginia where he became an All-American tennis player who helped win for his school the national championship. Graduating in 1988, Wiman spent the next seven years traveling while mastering the craft of writing. He taught English at the Prague School of Economics in the Czech Republic and worked as a translator in Mexico City. In 1992 he won a Wallace Stegner Fellowship to Stanford where in 1996 he became the Jones Lecturer in Poetry. He also lived in England and Guatemala. In 1998 his first book, *The Long Home*, won the Nicholas Roerich Prize in poetry. He has taught at Lynchburg College in Virginia and is currently on the faculty at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois.

Wiman is one of the most eloquent and authoritative poetry critics of his generation. His essays and reviews have appeared in *Poetry*, *Sewanee Review*, and the *Hudson Review*. He has also reviewed widely for newspapers, especially the *Dallas Morning News* and *Austin American-Statesman*. The experience of poetry, he has written, "is to be given an image of life that you have lost or long dreamed of, to hear as sound something of the farthest sorrows that you are, and to know in that moment that what you've been given is not enough."

Wiman's criticism is learned without ever seeming academic. Tough-minded and skeptical, he ponders his topics by framing them carefully in larger issues. Not a proponent of any critical school, Wiman nonetheless seems instinctively drawn to biographical and historical perspectives in his writing. His essay, "A Piece of Prose," which appeared in *Poetry* in 1999, examines the various reasons that contemporary poets have turned to critical prose as a medium for self-expression.