



Axon: Creative Explorations, Vol 11, No 1, July 2021

EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF THE SESTINA FOR CREATING WONDER AND CONNECTEDNESS TO NATURE

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Processes and practices that stimulate and evoke experiences of wonder and awe may be essential to helping humanity establish a closer and more sustainable relationship to nature and self. How can poetry evoke wonder by re-engaging with classical imaginative forms? In this article I will approach this problem by elucidating the background to a sestina I have written, in which I speculate about the similarities of the repetitions of the six end words and the hexagonal form of snowflakes, as the poem traces the growth and trajectory of a falling snowflake, positing a specular relation between sestina and snow crystal. The poem aims to stimulate a double sense of wonder: the meeting of the invariant and the manifold, the organic and the crafted, cosmos and psyche. The article discusses Renaissance and modern explorations of the potential of the sestina form, and the phenomenology of awe and wonder in relation to ecological awareness.

Keywords: awe; wonder; sestina; poetic form; correspondences; connectedness to nature; ecological awareness

Introduction

‘Led solely by a desire to see the remarkable height of the place,’ Petrarch in April 1336 famously ventured to the top of Mont Ventoux in southern France. This event would later come to be regarded as representing the symbolic advent of the Renaissance. After an arduous ascent, the Italian poet was overwhelmed by the glorious sweep of creation below; the splendour of snowcapped mountains, rivers and valleys extending to the sea in the distance and the wide expanse of skies in every direction filled him with awe. And then a remarkable coincidence took place — Petrarch happened to open his copy of Augustine’s *Confessions*. Turning at random to book X, 8, his eyes fastened upon these words: ‘And men go abroad to admire the heights of mountains, the mighty billows of the sea, the broad tide of rivers, the compass of the ocean, and the circuits of the stars, and pass themselves by...’. James Hillman recounts:

Petrarch was stunned at the coincidence between Augustine’s words and the time and place they were read. His emotion both announced the revelation of his personal vocation and

heralded the new attitude of the Renaissance... Petrarch draws this crucial conclusion from the event: “Nothing is admirable but the soul” (*nihil praeter animum esse mirabile*). (1997: 196-197)

Petrarch could not believe that this transformative experience was a mere accident, knowing that Augustine had experienced a similar spiritual conversion after randomly opening a book. Discussing the various interpretations made by historians and scholars of Petrarch’s revelation, Richard Tarnas, in his in-depth exploration of the Renaissance worldview and its significance for us today, proposes the following understanding of its encompassing significance:

it is this newly articulate complexity and conflict of values, motivations and experiences to which Petrarch gives voice in his account that we must see as central — spiritual and moral, literary and humanistic, naturalist and perspectival, aesthetic and romantic, scholarly and classist. The event was a great *complexio oppositorum*, a complex interplay and synthesis of opposites: at once reflective and questing, looking both to the past and to the future, both outward and inward, both ascending and descending. It is precisely this divergent multiplicity of values, this tension of many conflicting impulses, by which Petrarch heralds the new sensibility of the Renaissance. (2007: 497)

Thus, we have an instance where the wonders of nature and the personal spiritual significance of beautiful words mutually reinforce each other to create a sublime experience, an epiphany of what may be regarded as a complex interplay of cosmos and psyche. As such, there is no either or between admiring the wonders of nature and contemplating the spiritual; rather, they seem to correspond to each other. One of the poetic forms that Petrarch used to elaborate his vision was the sestina. Through Dante, who developed further the form inherited from medieval provencal poetry, Petrarch found the form to contain rich metaphysical and metaphoric meaning.^[1] The sestina becomes a structure for holding opposites in tension, a *complexio oppositorum*, thus creating a specular form between natural phenomena and metaphysical truths.

In this article I argue that poetry can strengthen ecological awareness by means of creating wonder and awe, and that the sestina can be a fruitful form for doing so. I will first discuss the relationship between ‘connectedness to nature’ and feelings of awe and wonder. I will then look at how Renaissance poets explored the metaphysical depths of the poetic forms such as the sestina. It evolved into a structure for meditating on the relationship between change and permanence, the material and the spiritual. I go against postmodern understandings of the form as ‘arbitrary’ by arguing that it has evolved organically and contains a rich potential for creating engagement both with natural phenomena and spiritual experiences. Hence, I speculate on the potential of the sestina to create correspondences between poetic form and natural objects, specifically between the ‘sacred geometry’ (the Pythagorean idea that numbers and geometric shapes have spiritual qualities) contained in the sixfold structure of the sestina, and the hexagonal shape of snow crystals. Arguing that this correspondence may lead to a virtuous cycle of bilateral reflection, a *speculum*, where increased wonder regarding natural phenomena may feed back into increased admiration for poetry, I propose that the organicity of the sestina is conducive to augmenting ecological awareness through the affective experiences of wonder and awe.

Ecological awareness and connectedness to nature

‘People hate the didactic in art. They don’t want to be given information,’ says the poet Mona Arshi (2021: n.p.), who has made a career transition from human rights work and awareness-raising. ‘And poems go straight to the heart. Environmental poems are really interesting ways of making people think and feel, and you are aroused by feeling. It’s not the same as my human rights work, but I do think that poems are doing something important. They are a vehicle for the truth telling.’ How can poetry be a vehicle for truth telling about the environment?

In *Being Ecological*, influential contemporary philosopher Timothy Morton (2018) acknowledges the importance of finding ways of increasing ecological awareness, given that we face an impending ecological catastrophe. However, he criticises the conventional guilt-inducing fact-lumping ‘information dump,’ stressing that we need to find ways of overcoming carelessness and irresponsibility that steer between denial and guilt: ‘At present, the ways in which we talk to ourselves about ecology are stuck in horror mode: disgust, shame, guilt’ (60). Morton advocates an approach he calls Dark Ecology, based on acknowledging the strangeness of our situation: getting experiential, by finding new ways of thinking about interconnectedness that build on scientific knowledge as well as aesthetic modes of experiencing. He suggests: ‘maybe this feeling of disgust will diminish if we become used to our immersion in the biosphere’ (77). How can this happen? Although he doesn’t say this explicitly, I interpret this to entail an affective shift where negative feelings of guilt, fear and disgust must be balanced by positive feelings of wonder and awe. Moreover, finding new ways of thinking about nature and aesthetics may also mean a return to uncover the hidden meanings of older thought-forms. Thus, poetry may combine scientific experiences and aesthetic thought-forms to create increased awareness of ecological interconnectedness by exploring and stimulating feelings of wonder and awe. In the following section I will first discuss the importance of poetry in relation to ecological awareness, before moving on to discuss the complex phenomena of awe and wonder.

Many environmental psychologists assert that a person’s relationship with nature is a key antecedent of ecological values, beliefs and actions. Therefore, finding ways of increasing connectedness to nature is crucial. In a very interesting study, Yang et al have tested the effects of awe on ecological behaviours. They found that the relationship was mediated by connectedness to nature. They conclude that their findings ‘indicate that awe helps broaden the self-concept by including nature and increase connectedness to nature, which in turn lead to ecological behaviour’ (2018: 1).

Connectedness to Nature is a construct that has been operationalised in order to ‘measure individuals’ experiential sense of oneness with the natural world.’ (Mayer et al 2004: 504). Mayer et al conducted five studies that ‘provide strong evidence that the Connectedness to Nature Scale (CNS) is a reliable and valid scale’ and that there is a ‘moderately strong positive relationship between the CNS and eco-friendly actions, meaning that while this relationship may not hold for everyone, it does hold for most people and in a robust manner’ (512). If it holds for most people, then what personality factors contribute? Lee et al have found that Connectedness to Nature (identification with non-human entities) and Connectedness to Humanity (humans outside of in-group) are correlated, and that they are related to two specific personality factors: openness to experience and honesty/humility. They

posit that 'the tendencies to feel connected to humanity and to the natural world have a common psychological basis in being characterised by a lack of sharp boundaries between oneself and (the other)' (2015: 1-11).

Ballew and Omoto wished to establish experimentally a mechanism that could account for how contact with nature, rather than exposure to a built environment, elevates positive emotions. They found that 'absorption emerged as a significant mediator of nature's impact on positive emotions' and their results 'indicate that nature fosters awe and other positive emotions when people feel captivated and engrossed in their surroundings' (2018: 36-45). Other studies seek to define and operationalise the positive emotions resulting from such absorption when exposed to the wilderness. Bethelmy and Corraliza have developed a definition of transcendent sublime emotion consisting of two conceptual components: awe and inspiring energy. 'Awe was defined by feelings of fear, threat, vulnerability, fragility and respect for nature, which is perceived as vast, powerful and mysterious. Inspiring energy was defined by feelings of vitality, joy, energy, freedom and harmony with the universe' (2019: 1-12).

These studies indicate that a sense of connectedness promotes ecologically minded actions, and that feelings of awe and wonder may increase the sense of connectedness. Furthermore, such feelings of awe and wonder result from people being captivated and engrossed by their natural surroundings. Thus, we have the following chain of mechanisms: awe and wonder leads to a sense of connectedness which in turn strengthens propensity for pro-ecological behaviour. This leads me to the following speculative question: may being absorbed by poetry that reflects natural experience also precipitate this chain? Let us first look more closely into the aesthetic categories of awe and wonder.

Awe and wonder

The two meanings of 'wonder' (to ponder and to marvel) seem to hover between two feelings: that of awe and that of curiosity. We wonder why something is, and we admire its qualities. In an interesting study on the neurophenomenology of awe and wonder, Gallagher et al attempt to specify the differences between awe and wonder. They define awe as 'a direct and initial experience or feeling when faced with something amazing, incomprehensible, or sublime'; and wonder as 'a reflective experience motivated when one is unable to put things into a familiar conceptual framework — leading to open questions rather than conclusions' (2015: 22). Hence they propose that awe motivates wonder, and wonder has the potential to change one's perspective on life.

According to Keltner and Haidt (2006), there has been very little scientific research on the positive feeling of awe. In their review they found that awe nearly always was related to fear and submission in an encounter with something that is larger than the self. Keltner and Haidt conclude that the emotion of awe has two major appraisals; it occurs as the result of *vastness* and *accommodation*. The person will perceive something that is 'vast', i.e. either big or powerful; and the vast cannot be assimilated into the existing mental framework, but must be accommodated, in the Piagetian sense. In contrast to cognitive processes of assimilation, where new experiences are incorporated into already established mental structures, accommodation is characterised by a need to expand

awareness by forming new mental schemas.

Something enormous can't be processed, and when people are stumped, stopped in their cognitive tracks while in the presence of something vast, they feel small, powerless, passive and receptive. They often (but not always) feel fear, admiration, elevation or a sense of beauty as well. By stopping people and making them receptive, awe creates an opening for change, and this is why awe plays a role in most stories of religious conversion. (203)

Awe makes us open for change. Keltner and Haidt distinguish between the emotions of admiration and elevation on the one hand, and awe on the other. This is because the experience of the former only necessitates accommodation. In the case of admiration and elevation there is no vast entity or force, but rather great skill or moral greatness. Elevation depends on a successful accommodation. Shiota, Keltner and Mossman have found empirical support for this theory. They discovered that awe leads to 'a sense of smallness of the self and the presence of something greater than the self ... increasing one's sense of self as part of a greater whole — a self-concept that de-emphasises the individual self' (2007: 960).

In a brilliant study of the aesthetics of awe and wonder, Philip Fisher (1998) argues against the famous Keatsian notion that scientific endeavour 'unweaves the rainbow' and takes away its wondrousness. Rather, he says, science has 'consistently dispelled the extraordinary only to produce, in the very act of explanation, newer forms of wonder and newer experiences of wonder within those very things that were now explained. The inventions on the way to the explanation of the rainbow were themselves a catalogue of wonders' (89). He says that experiences of wonder and the sublime both happen when we find ourselves struck by effects within nature that are not common or everyday. Yet the two are different, he argues: 'the sublime could be called an "aestheticization of fear" and has been a privileged category in aesthetics, whereas wonder, "the most neglected of primary aesthetic experiences within modernity," involves "the aestheticization of delight" (2). Moreover, the aesthetics of wonder has to do with a combination of sensation and thought, between poetry and science. Thus, the use of science and technology may dispel fear and still augment wonder. Fisher defines wonder thus: 'a sudden experience of an extraordinary object that produces delight', following Descartes' definition of wonder as the primary of all the passions. But Descartes also adds: 'Wonder is a sudden surprise of the soul that brings it about that the soul goes on to consider with attention the objects that seem rare and extraordinary to it' (in Fisher 1998: 55). In introducing the verb 'seems', he opens up for the insignificant or ordinary. In wonder it is *as if* the object is extraordinary. It shines forth in the light of common day.

In his treatment *Of the Affects*, Spinoza (1996) [1677] contrasts *wonder* and *disdain*. He attributes the general cause of disdain to this: 'because we see that someone wonders at something', or 'something appears at first glance like things we admire, love', we are determined to wonder at the same thing. However, if 'from the thing's presence' or from 'considering it more accurately', we are forced to deny that it can be the cause of wonder, 'then the mind remains determined by the thing's presence to think more of the things which are not in the object than of those which are' (97). In other words, we can only see what is missing. Therefore, whereas wonder is imagination of a thing which touches us deeply in its newness, 'disdain is an imagination of a thing which touches the mind so

little' (105).

From this we may gather that wonder comes from seeing something new or extraordinary. But perhaps wonder is rather the feeling of seeing something *as if* for the first time: we become aware of our own previous disdain at the very moment the freshness of the object breaks through, and we wonder at our own wondering. We experience a sudden about-turn, an *enantiodromia*, in which disdain is transformed into wonder. But wonder may not always be a positive experience. Commenting on a theory of wonder by the philosopher Malecki, Urszula Lisowska remarks on the ambivalence of wonder: 'far from inspiring respect for a wonderful being's living dignity, wonder can lead to its objectification for the sake of pleasurable admiration' (2020: 61).

Daniel Stern, in his research in developmental psychology on affect attunement, says that the affect that emerges in the course of joyous play between mother and infant may not be divided and collocated in one or the other (1985: 132). Rather, it springs up from the 'in-between', or from the encompassing process in which the two are immersed, giving rise to what Stern terms 'vitality affects' or 'vitality contours'. These shared states are experienced through interbodily affection (2010). We gather that contemplation is not introspection, but rather a form of 'trans-spection': by looking through the other's eyes, resting in the presence of the other, may we read our own soul. The soul is not 'in there', but 'between' us. This is an echo of Hillman's theory of the soul in relation to the Renaissance worldview. Fuchs et al, in their discussion of intercorporeality, maintain that in other cultures there is less of a tendency to regard affective experiences as intra-psychic, 'but rather as bodily, expressive, interpersonal, or even atmospheric processes' (2014: 1). Their term *interaffectivity* covers processes in which there is a resonance between two entities that enriches them both.

The metaphysics of the Sestina form and its contemplative potential

In his article 'Sestina! Or the Fate of the Idea of Form', Stephen Burt (2007) notes the curious revived interest in the sestina in the modern period, while the use of rhyme and metre has declined. Why do poets simultaneously find value in its craft? Burt proposes that postmodern poets 'use sestinas to lament their diminished or foreclosed hopes for their art' (218-247). In other words, their sestinas are marked by ironic distance and ambivalence. Lacking a definite programme or higher vision for the existential importance of poetry, poets such as John Ashbery employ the sestina as a form of play: 'When these ethical, spiritual, political, and historical ambitions fall away, what is left is entertainment and craft or, to put it another way, technique and fun' (221). Therefore, Burt argues, 'The sestina is a favored form now as it has not been since the 1950s ... because it allows poets to emphasize technique and to disavow at once tradition, organicism, and social or spiritual efficacy' (221). Moreover, Burt contends, the sestina form is artificial and based on arbitrary constraints: 'This sense of artificiality, even arbitrary constraint, has fueled the sestina's appeal and suited it to describe poets' sense that their art as a whole corresponds to nothing much' (222). Let it be noted here that in the intervening years, new programmes and important social roles for poetry have developed. One of these is the use of poetry to promote ecological awareness. What I wish to contest in the following, is the notion of the sestina form being an 'arbitrary' construct. Instead, it may be understood as organic and highly conducive to the contemplation of natural wonders.

I follow James Cummins in speculating that we may have 'lost the meaning of the number mysticism that the medieval mind associated with the sestina' (1997: 31). Marilyn Krysl (2004) says further that Arnaut, credited with inventing the sestina, would have been familiar with Pythagorean number theory, and 'known that the number six represented the highest state of union attainable in the profane world. Six, the lowest multiple of three and two, appears in geometry as the double triangle, (which) corresponded to the middle sephiroth of the Kabbalah tree, the sephiroth which joins heaven and earth to its male and female left and right' (9). Six represented the 'perfect marriage' of polar opposites in earthly life and temporal time. According to Marianne Shapiro, six was considered the numerical equivalent of perfect harmony wherein one might hear the music of the spheres (1980: 13).

The sestina foregrounds this sacred number. Formally, the sestina is made up of six stanzas of six lines each and a three-line envoi or tornada. There is no rhyme within the stanza, but the same six end-words, *teleutons*, are repeated throughout in an order determined by their order in the first stanza. The first line of each succeeding stanza ends with the last rhyme word of the preceding stanza, and reorders the rest on a principle known in medieval rhetoric as *retrogradatio cruciata*, a backwards crossing movement: the order of the teleutons of stanza I, 123456, are reordered as 615243 in stanza II, 364125 in III, 532614 in IV, 451362 in V, and 246531 in VI. A seventh stanza would thus recommence the circle. The envoi again reorders the teleutons according to various principles of reversal and crossing.

Margaret Spanos (1978), in a central article about the dynamics of the structure of the sestina, argues against the perceived artificiality and pretentiousness of the form, pointing to the prestige it enjoyed during the Renaissance. Rather than a trivial exercise in technical virtuosity, the sestina may be regarded as a symbolic form 'whose particular aesthetic effects emerge from a coherent poetic vision' (545). These effects arise from a fundamental tension within the structure itself. Investigating the origins of the sestina she finds that:

the source of this tension lies in the fusion of two principles of rhyming which had long existed separately in Provençal popular poetry. F.J.A. Davidson identifies these principles with rhyme schemes: the *rimas dissolutas* which find their correspondences between rather than within the stanzas, and the tendency to reverse rhyme order of which the simplest example is *abba*. He sees the origin of the *rimas dissolutas* in the *canço redonda*, a song accompanying a circle dance, which contained an indeterminate number of stanzas, with the last rhyme of each repeated as the first rhyme of the following, and the last rhyme of the last stanza corresponding to the first rhyme of the first stanza. The introduction of the reverse rhyme order into this form began in another popular form, the *canço redonda encadenada*, in which the rhymes are repeated in inverse order creating a pattern of alternating identically rhymed stanzas. (547)

In Spanos' view this means that 'the two thrusts of the sestina's structure can be seen to co-operate in achieving the total unity of the poem on an intellectual plane, but on the perceptual plane — that of the experience of the poem — they appear antithetical to each other' (549). This tension is only resolved in the envoi, leading to a release of the built-up tension that the reader has experienced.

Spanos places the sestina in 'the tradition of emblematic poetry which communicates its meaning to

the intuition by embodying it rather than to reason by stating it' (548). I concur with this, but Spanos then goes on to argue that this type of stanza makes up a square form. Therefore, she says, the sestina partakes of the ancient philosophical problem of the squaring of the circle, and what Arnaut did was to superimpose the square form upon a circular form:

The formal tension between the dynamics of the circular connective logic of the sestina and the labyrinthine logic of the squared form dictating the interlacing rhyme pattern, when raised to a higher degree of abstraction, inevitably suggests the tension associated with squaring the circle. The traditional symbolic import of squaring the circle involves the union of the cosmic symbols of heaven (circle) and earth (square) in a true coincidence of opposites: a synthesis in a higher sphere of reality. If the union implied in the envoi of Arnaut's sestina is read as the spiritual union of divine love (a reading congenial to Dante and his contemporaries), then what has been achieved by the resolution in the envoi of the tensions woven through the body of the sestina may be expressed more exactly as a synthesis of the opposition between the world of spirit and the world of matter. (551)

But what about Petrarch, how does he appropriate the potentials inherent in the form? He takes up Dante's emphasis on the obsessive quality of unresolved tensions, but does not share the sense of the presence of the miraculous principle which is the essence of Dante's sestina. 'Each of his sestinas is an exploration of the processes of change, an attempt to discover even in the heart of instability some viable principle of release from change' (554). His use of end-words is not only taken from objects in nature, but is related to time. 'The tensions of the sestina form thus offer Petrarch an emblem of the tensions of the imperfect union of the earthly and the celestial rather than of the miraculous synthesis of the circle squared' (555). Thus, we may say that the medieval heritage in the metaphysics of form consists of one mathematical problem, squaring the circle, and one platonic problem: the mystical union with the beloved. However, during the renaissance this evolves to encompass a different metaphysics: the sacred geometry of the number 6 and the hexagram, and the ability to see correspondances between nature and the self. In my view, rather than a squaring of the circle, the sestina may be regarded as a spiralling of the hexagon.

The form grew forth organically from a circle dance and from patterns of repetition in song. Still, it may be upheld that the number of end-words and repetitions, six, is arbitrary. That it could be five or seven. However, we may speculate that the number 6 was integral to this circle dance from its inception. It is as if the number 6 invites an image that corresponds to it. For the metaphoric meaning inherent in the sestina to be realised, the form should be reflected in the content, and the dynamics should correspond to an image of a natural form that allows the logico-mathematical and the sensory experience to correspond with each other. I wish to present my own sestina that looks to address this correspondence.

Sestina, snow, correspondes

I have always been intrigued by Baudelaire's famous poem 'Correspondences'. It intimates that we, as humans, tend to forget that we are a part of nature. We often lose ourselves in the physical world

and neglect the spiritual one. By not paying attention to our souls we lose our connection to nature. Baudelaire argues that if we try to understand nature, we will also understand ourselves. The poem reflects on the correspondence between our souls and the divine forces and describes this experience as something cathartic.

Snow is beautiful both in the vastness of the number of the falling flakes, and in the minute details of each crystal's structure. As such, it combines two different aspects of awe. My sestina is created from two discoveries: firstly, the wondrous discovery of the correspondence between the structure of the sestina and the snowflake; secondly, being moved to wonder by Ono's event-score poem 'Snow Piece'.^[2] To watch snow fall can be a wonderful experience. And to study the snow crystal under the lens of a microscope can add another dimension to the experience. Hence I wanted to combine these two disparate forms and poetics. I was intrigued by the experience of a poem that is seemingly exhortatory, telling us what/how to think, paradoxically being so invitational and creating an opening onto wonder and stillness. Moreover, anyone writing a sestina will have to adhere to a set of constraints or instructions. In an attempt to combine the algorithmic and the imaginative, I transposed the poem and the discovery of correspondences into an event score for a sestina:

Think of a poetic form that reflects the shape of the snow crystal. Think of the sestina's properties. Choose six central words — snow, you, time, think, person, fall — from Snow Piece: Use these as end words in your sestina's six stanzas to create a pattern of lexical repetition. Find a personal way to reveal the six-fold form into which they both fall, the crystallized sestina and the sestina-like crystals of snow:

Think time you person fall snow
 Snow think fall time person you
 You snow person think time fall
 Fall you time snow think person
 Person fall thinking you snow time
 Time person snow fall you think

Then create the envoi:

Fall time
 Person you
 Snow think

Call it Snowy Sestina, or Sestina in snow.

This sestina event score was then transformed into the following sestina:

Snowy Sestina, or Sestina in snow

When the snow crystal is born and grows it first makes you think of the way a flower unfolds, and then of the beauty of numbers. Time's essence seems to be enveloped in each number. Reflecting on this you begin to wonder: surely I cannot be the only person to have noticed that the shape into which the snowflake falls corresponds to the form of the sestina? Just think of how the snow

crystal is shaped: Like the honeycomb of a beehive, a flake of snow is hexagonal. They both partake of the number six. Now think of the pattern of the sestina, and the way its stanzas fall into six sestets. Here too, repetitive lattices of six convey time as the point of intersection of permanence and flux. Personally, I find this correspondence intriguing. What about you?

Think that snowflakes are falling. As they land on your coat quietly, you wonder about the forming, and formations, of these flakes of snow. And just as all human beings are equal, yet every person is different, so each crystal is a unique variant too. You think about how the crystals may be shaped in and by time, and how they evolve on their earthbound journey as they fall.

Think that a snowflake grows and tumbles and falls through the clouds and air. Before it finally lands on your sleeve, the shape of the snowflake has shifted with time. Temperature and humidity around it affect how the snow crystal grows, as more vapour condenses and freezes onto it. Think that the six corners of the hexagon grow faster than the sides. Personify

these as limbs that, as they reach out and grow, person-like, sprout farther into the humid air. They float and fall and form side-branches that become six-armed. Think of these as flower-shaped. The final form that reaches you depends on the exact path the flake took, as each dab of snow follows a different path through clouds and time.

In 135 BCE, the Chinese writer Han Ying spent much time thinking of why the flowers of snow are six-pointed. His personal view was that unlike plants, which are often five-pointed, the snow flower is rooted in the sky, and grows downwards as it falls. And we too, perhaps, have heavenly roots, but our paths diverge as you and I fall, through clouds of unknowing, into the snow-covered world of thoughts.

The flake is shaped, as it falls, by formations of clouds and time. Each crystal is like a honeycomb, a flower and a person. The sestina lets you see, fleetingly, a gleam of the eternal in its slow-thawing snow thoughts.[3]

Conclusion

The central premise of this article is based on findings in environmental psychology that indicate the role of awe and wonder in strengthening connectedness to nature. But awe not only encompass encounters with the vast: the tiny, the fleeting and the remote may also induce awe when assisted by technology and scientific perspectives. And wonder is not just produced by encounters with the new and extraordinary, but may be found on the far side of ordinariness. Looking into the history of the sestina, it becomes apparent that its form organically grew forth to reflect central metaphysical concerns of the Renaissance which may be termed a *complexio oppositorum*: how do the material and the spiritual correspond to each other? As such, it seems to invoke an image or natural phenomenon that reflects its spiralling hexagram dynamic. Thus, the most apposite image is that of the snowflake. On the one hand, its wondrous nature is twofold: part of a multitude and revelatory of beautiful structures when studied up close; on the other, every crystal has a hexagonal form and yet is unique. I hope and speculate that connectedness to nature may be induced by poetry, and that connectedness to nature may in turn strengthen appreciation for poetry, in a virtuous circle.

[1] In his article about Petrarch's use of the double sestina, Kristján Hanneson argues that the sestina form creates a complex interplay of significations that take the meaning of the poem beyond the poet's paralyzing sorrow following Laura's death. See: Kristján Hanneson (2020): 'Making sense of form: The Semantic Implications of Structure in Petrarch's Double Sestina' in: *MLN (Italian Issue)*, 135 (1), January, 34-54, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mln.2020.0014>

[2] Yoko Ono: 'Snow Piece', in *Grapefruit: A Book of Instructions and Drawings*:

Think that snow is falling.
 Think that snow is falling everywhere
 all the time.
 When you talk with a person, think
 that snow is falling between you and
 on the person.
 Stop conversing when you think the
 person is covered by snow.

[3] I have translated the poem from the original Norwegian version. The poem will appear in my forthcoming volume to be published in January 2022 by Samlaget, Oslo, Norway.

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URL: <https://www.axonjournal.com.au/issue-111/exploring-potential-sestina-creating-wonder-and-connectedness-nature>

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Published by
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research
University of Canberra
Canberra, Australia
ISSN: 1838-8973

