I’m sitting at my desk—actually a rather worse for wear pine table—facing the window in my study / bedroom in the rue de Turenne in the third arrondissement. There’s a book review I’ve got to finish by Saturday for Poetry London which I’ve put momentarily aside, but the three books in question are stacked on the table along with a notebook, four earth-mail letters to be answered, an ash tray (mea culpa) and a dozen pages of translations in first or second draft, of a Moroccan Muslim poet and a Jewish poet born in Poland, both of whom write in French. The geraniums in the window box made it through the July heat wave, which seems now like ancient history. It’s cool and slightly overcast this afternoon: although the Assumption holiday is not yet past, it feels as if autumn is almost here. Sometimes that means an imminent departure, but not this year, so the thought brings anticipation of friends returning from holidays and the appearance of two French journals I’ve had a hand in editing rather than any anguish. A Bach flute concerto almost but not quite covers the chuffing of the No. 96 bus as it stops across the street, in front of the café on the corner. At least until I go out to get the evening paper—Le Monde hits the newsstands around four—I can pretend there’s less disaster in the world than I know there is (I spent an hour this morning signing and forwarding petitions: a cease-fire in Lebanon; five weeks ago it was peace in Gaza, which has still not come about).

Last night, over dinner in the corner bistro with the Lebanese writer Etel Adnan, who lives across the river, and her friend and publisher Simone Fattal, we traded anecdotes about our mutual friend June Jordan, the American poet who died before her time in California in 2002, whose political poems of the 1980s would be all too relevant today. This afternoon, over
lunch in another café with the French poet Claire Malroux, we discussed how best to translate the late-sixteenth-century English songs which accompany Dowland’s music, a commission for Deutsch Grammophon. Much of life takes place in those semi-public spaces, cafés, restaurants, parks, where, we say to each other, “on va travailler.” I often take my own notebook, a book I’m reading (as well as more mundane things like thesis chapters and term papers) in mid-morning to the Sancerre, a café on a busy neighborhood shopping street, but still across the way from a square with vegetation so lush it could be qualified as “wooded,” and stay there for the two hours “rental” my espresso has brought me. The waitress usually brings it, with a glass of water, without being asked. Often the combination of being “in public” yet alone, with the tacit agreement of café patrons not to disturb each other, to talk in a low voice, is as conducive to words on paper as is actual solitude. And the attractive nuisance of the computer is absent. (Much of the poem “A Sunday after Easter” was written in the café it describes.)

For twenty years I have lived for part, sometimes most of the year, at the same address in Paris, and returning here feels like returning home. Felt like that almost from the start, which is why I knew I wanted to take the offered lease on the studio apartment of a friend who was moving—and took the first mortgage of my life to buy the studio when the lease was up. Now the studio is a duplex with a spiral staircase, still less than 700 square feet of space. But it’s a space that feels like a small house in the midst of a city, in a modest (not to say run-down) building that was likely run-down twenty years after it was built in sixteen-ninety-something, whose winding stairway has been hollowed by centuries of feet. Four windows on the street, with window boxes, and the only view an aperçu of the sets of windows in the building across the street (for Paris, it’s a wide street) and the roof, and the sky, changeable, companionable. Always the sky. Last night at midnight, back from walking my friends to the métro, a low full moon sinking below storm-heavy steel wool. Now, pale sunlight behind a diffuse haze of cloud. And it’s time to buy the newspaper and consider the world.
What’s American about American Form
Phillis Wheatley and the Rest of Us

It is, to me, an obvious remark that all poems are “formal”: the writer’s decision to arrange a piece of writing on a page with line and stanza breaks which do not correspond to the page’s margins creates an implicit and fertile tension, a counterpoint, between the rhythm and pacing of the poem’s syntactic structure and that of the visual (and aural, metric) structure created by the poem’s typographic setting—a tension which seizes the eye, but can also be heard, often enough, when the poem is read out loud. A line in a poem which ends with the verb “lies,” with the following line beginning, say, “beneath the surface,” cannot avoid suggesting both meanings of that verb. Alternatively, a poem with a strong accentual meter (whether or not it is one to be found in manuals of prosody) can be “heard” as a poem even if it is printed out as prose, and the interplay between meter and syntax will be perceptible, as W. E. B. DuBois and Hayden Carruth have both proved to readers.

But that’s one take on what is “poetry” about “form,” or what is “poetry” tout court, not what’s “American.” American poets writing in English, whether they be from the United States or Canada, stand at an intersection of many formal traditions, including the indigenous poetries of Native Americans, the call-and-response forms enslaved Africans brought with them to this continent, which they married to English ballad and hymn forms to create both spirituals and the blues, the continual proximity of Latin American poetry, and, of course, the variegated English language prosodic tradition and its antitheses which came to this
continent with the English settlers. That tradition did not remain purely “English” or British for long, as is witnessed by the career of Phillis Wheatley, the brilliant child from Senegal who was writing verse in forms she learned from reading Pope and Gray six years after she was taken from a slave ship in Boston in the early eighteenth century, not speaking a word of English, her age—six or seven—determined by the fact that she was losing her milk teeth. The significance of Wheatley’s adoption of English meter can bear much discussion—but so can the fact that the rhythms of Milton’s verse and prose informed the cadences of African American religious rhetoric through the early decades of this century, and can be heard echoing in pulpits today. One thing Wheatley’s brief and tragic career signally exemplifies is that few American poets stand in the same relationship to the prosodic and other traditions of English verse as even the most politically or artistically radical British writers. All Americans who are not Native Americans / First Nations people are immigrants, or the granddaughters or great-great-grandsons of immigrants, likely to have ancestors who, like Phillis Wheatley or Olaudah Equiano, if under less duress, adopted English out of necessity. Many American poets grew up with the echoes and cadences of another language as background to their English. Just as, at least in New York, the quintessential American foods are pizza and the bagel, and the quintessential American music is jazz, the quintessential American locution is *ein bissel Yiddish y un poco Latino*, and sounds a bit ebonic on the phone. The sonnet on the base of the Statue of Liberty was written by a young Jew of Portuguese descent, Emma Lazarus. It’s not surprising that John Berryman had a blackface double, Mr. Bones, in his “Dream Songs,” that Elizabeth Bishop wrote a suite of “Songs for a Colored Singer” in honor of Billie Holiday; nor that Gwendolyn Brooks adopted the persona of the white Mississippi housewife whose complaint led to the murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till—and gave her the same destructive romantic illusions as the black teenage protagonist of her domestic World War II mock-epic, “The Anniad.” As Toni Morrison has pointed out, the constant presence of a racialized Other, sometimes a racial alter ego, is deep-rooted in American writing. But it is, I think, rooted in the American language as well. Along with the metrical/syntactical tension which
characterizes any poetry, American poetry is distinguished by another tension, between the *mestizo* American language and the written poetic traditions it inherited more from the English than from any of its other tributaries.

But—and this is an instant “but”—almost every verse form associated with English prosody comes from somewhere else—the sonnet from Italy, the sestina from the *lingua d’oc*, the villanelle from France—even blank verse was introduced in the sixteenth century by Wyatt and Surrey, from an Italian hendecasyllabic model. I’m not sure if any form other than Anglo-Saxon accentual verse is truly indigenous. And this is only congruent with the cheerfully mongrel nature of the English language even preceding its American expatriation, including, as it does, words of Anglo-Saxon, Latin, French, Spanish, Arabic, Greek, German origin, seeming surprisingly ready to integrate, if not embrace, neologisms. We do not have an Académie anglaise, still less an Académie américaine, to vote on the acceptance of “knish” or “dreadlocks” or “megabyte” into the dictionary. And that is one thing, in a personal parenthesis, which makes the writing of metered and rhymed poetry in English such a pleasure—the juxtaposition of those Latinate, Anglo-Saxon, and other-flavored words, “chickenshit” and “hematocrit,” “morose” and “Mykonos,” “contextual” and “transsexual,” “marathon” and “maricón,” “dental floss” and “meshugass.” That kind of juxtaposition is perhaps most flamboyant when it involves rhyme, but it is also characteristic of American poetry in unrhymed forms and freedoms. Perhaps the American romance with technology, only too briefly chilled by the enormities of Hiroshima and Auschwitz, has made American poets open to acquiring yet another vocabulary, another set of forms: I think of May Swenson’s “shaped” poem describing the physics of wave motion, which also describes, without a word extraneous to the stated subject, sexual excitation and release; of physician-poet Rafael Campo’s sequence, “Ten Patients And Another,” stretched on the grid of two fixed forms: the sonnet, and the patient history every medical student learns painstakingly to take.

American poets seem to have a propensity to invent forms; and our very characteristic contentiousness on the subject, going back to Whitman and Dickinson, is also the sign of an
extreme attention. Dickinson’s secular transformation of hymn-
mal measures was as deliberate a gesture of prosodic innovation
as Whitman’s rolling cadences—especially when we remember
that Dickinson had Barrett Browning’s feminist blank verse epic
_Aurora Leigh_ virtually by heart. Her decision to avoid the pen-
tameter and privilege a “popular” measure may not have been a
consciously defiant one, but was nonetheless momentous for
the history of American prosody, and perhaps not unrelated to
the subversive appropriation of Gospel cadences by enslaved
Africans. While literary modernism in the English language
novel has British and Irish sources—Joyce, Woolf, Lawrence,
Dorothy Richardson—modernism in poetry had largely Ameri-
can parentage. (Though upon at least one of the frequent
occasions when Ezra Pound campaigned for “breaking the back
of the iambic pentameter,” his next counsel was to “write Sap-
phics until they come out of your ears”—that is, to learn to hear
a metrical music unfamiliar to Americans, or indeed almost any
Anglophones.) Marianne Moore, that quintessential modernist,
hardly ever wrote a poem which was not “formal”—but the
forms were always of her own invention, elaborate fixed syllabic
stanzas whose metrically irregular lines were visually marked by
placement on the page, and often aurally marked by rhymes,
with the rhetorical superstructure of the fable. On the subject of
modernism, it is important to remember, in a cautionary way,
that one of its projects, less laudable in my eyes than “making it
new,” was to separate poetry from a populist or popular audi-
cence, those “women’s clubs” Pound scorned, but also factory
workers of both sexes, businessmen, farmers, bookkeepers, high
school students and their teachers. It’s arguable that the lack of
critical consideration received by the work of Edna St. Vincent
Millay, a decline in “reputation” which began well before her
death in 1950, has as much to do with a devaluation of the work
of any poet who appealed to a popular audience as with her
feminism or use of received forms. In this respect, the work and
the aesthetic goals of African American poets from the Harlem
Renaissance through the present provide a welcome corrective:
their concern seems to have been to bring a linguistically and
politically complex poetry to as wide an audience as possible,
both within and beyond the black community. _The Crisis_ and
_Op-
portunity, where so many of the Harlem Renaissance poets first published, were the journals of the NAACP and the Urban League respectively, and explicitly served a readership broader than a purely “literary” one. Decades later, this poetic “reach” would continue in the work of writers associated with the Civil Rights movement, the Black Arts movement, the anti-war movement, the women’s liberation movement.

The American poets of the generation preceding my own who continue to mark my own work were—and are—innovators more interested in how formal transformations illuminate and forefront previously unexamined or marginalized aspects of life and language than in either preserving or revising poetic form for its own sake: I think of Muriel Rukeyser’s incorporation of the legal testimony of strip-miners with silicosis, or of the syntax of a refugee child learning English, into poetry, of Hayden Carruth’s demotic Vermont and upstate New York dramatic monologues, his Horatian syllabic meditations drawn on the unforgiving northeastern landscape, of Gwendolyn Brooks’s Jacobean syntax limning the portrait of an African American community—the south side of Chicago in the aftermath of World War II—with respect, verbal and sensory virtuosity, and ludic irony.

Americans have an indefatigable appetite for self-definition. This is a nation with a contradictory past, a past with very different resonances for its different citizens—the mixed-race African American great-great-grandson of a slave and a man who owned slaves, the Boston Irish bus-driver’s daughter applying to Harvard, the Polish Jew whose parents were the sole survivors of their shtetl, the Vermont hardscrabble farmer losing the battle against agribusiness and rural gentrification. It is a culture still engaged in inventing itself, so it is no surprise that such invention should also be a tool, if not the central project, of its poetry.