

[What Was and Is: Formal Poetry and Free Verse,](#)
[Theresa Werba](#)

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Review By Andrew Benson Brown

In *What Was and Is: Formal Poetry and Free Verse*, a magnum opus decades in the making, Theresa Werba reveals how the calling of poetry is infused into the very being of the writer. Werba is no mere scribbler of verse. In her list poem, "Poetess," she catalogues the panoply of emotions that go into her vocation, beginning with:

*Thinking, feeling, surging, trying,
Contemplating, dreaming, dying,
Resurrecting and creating,
Finding, telling, speculating...*

Theresa is considered one of the living masters of the sonnet (a fact which another reviewer has pointed out). I would point out, in addition, that she joins the likes of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Edna St. Vincent Millay as one of a handful of women in history to have become expert in this form. She does not confine herself to the sonnet, however. This collection is full of wondrous variety of forms, including some high quality free verse.

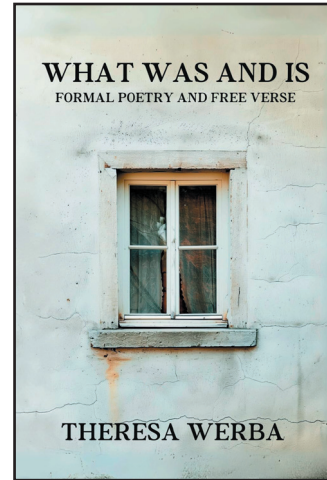
Poems are organized thematically: creativity, love, the mind (about dealing mental illness), poems about people (some historical), her 'other' vocation as a professional singer, biographical poems, aging, and (in a fitting finale) her spiritual life.

Sometimes a poem is included in one section that might well be in another. One might think the sonnet "For John of the Cross" would go in the section "Pantheon" with other historical figures, or perhaps in "Ever Towards Uncertainty," the section of spiritual poems. But no. Werba slots it into the section "My Mental World is Overloaded," devoted to her experiences with neurodivergence. It begins:

*It was five years of darkness. I was dead
But barely breathing, living hardly; lain
About the marble slab. It was my bed
Where I would live, if life were sleep.
Heart slain Of all feeling — empty, absent, gone —
Was beating only, but no heart therein.*

We realize, of course, that this poem is as much about the poetess as the author of "The Dark Night of the Soul."

In the ballad, "A Formalist Poet's Lament," Werba captures her approach to writing verse:



Wilderness House Literary Review 19/3

*It saddens and perplexes me,
The things I hear of late,
Of how to create poetry,
And how to make it "great":
I've heard it's not emotional,
It's nothing how you "feel;"
But it's entirely rational,
Not heartfelt in appeal.*

"For nature poems are fine and good," she says a few lines down, "But what about the soul?" The soul is, indeed, what separates the true poet from the poetaster or AI program.

It also might be said to be the theme of every poem here, whether hidden or overt—both in the general sense of 'soulfulness,' and also (we find later) in a more conventionally religious sense as well.

Werba pulls out all the literary devices, often employing these in a mimetic way that reflects her theme and subject matter. In 'Sonnet of the Hardened Heart,' for example, parenthetical descriptions are enshelled within the details of her thoughts on erecting barriers of emotional protection:

*Care less, I warn myself; bother no more
With inner crevices: prying the shell
Like scabs (rough, oozing, sore), which crust, but tell
Of tumults against the psychic seabed floor;
It is in vain. Swollen and hard around
The meat (like newborn skin, or the vaginal flower)....*

Werba belongs to that limited class of creatives who are adept in more than one field: in this case, music. Poetry and music have long had a deep connection, and her dual skills interpenetrate here. This section appropriately contains several actual songs, complete with instructions for performance. In "The Classical Singer's Drink Offering," we are invited to experience secondhand the ecstasy of music, which approximates both a sense of drunkenness and (as in the biblical passage from Numbers 28:7 that the title references) of spiritual inspiration. The closing stanza reads:

*But after the heaves and pants, the shimmer, the ring,
The chill-bumps in the hairshafts, when my blood
Has leapt and circled corpuscular gamuts, filling
My mask with heat and sound, a kind of thud
Percusses my environs. I turn around
As if to see Him watching.
Oh, to face
Not loving half so much my very sound,
As Him for whom this pouring out took place.
In "Venus and Adonis," a long poem of over 100 lines, Werba demonstrates a
capacity for extraordinary sensuality:
I see her standing there.
Ringlets of curls cascading down
Soft shoulders*

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/3

*Onto the copious breasts of pearl and alabaster.
The curls unfurl longer and longer,
Shining and reflecting like circle rings
The sun which hits them.
She walks, tall. Her feet bare and white,
Painted with lilies and grass.
The mountains in front of her
Are billows of soft escape,
And how I wish I could
Bury myself in them,
Taste and touch them,
Suckle them and know them,
Honor them and find them
Again and again.*

The uninhibited quality of passion that fits well with the spontaneity and irregularity of free verse, and I must confess that of all the varieties of this form, I enjoy the topic of love most. I shared this poem with a lady friend of mine, and she LOVED it. “So beautiful and raw,” was her impression.

Werba’s ability in the spheres of both formal and free verse is reminiscent of some of the early modernists like Eliot, Stevens, and Cummings, who moved to free verse styles after acquiring a deep familiarity with formal verse, allowing them to develop a unique voice and subtle structures. While Werba does not engage in the radical grammatical experiments of a Cummings, her skills also reflected in several nonce poems—verses written in no named, congealed form, skirting the boundary between the formal and spontaneous.

In the final section, we encounter a series of poems engaged in deep spiritual reflection. One of the most impressive in the collection is “The Supreme-Breasted One (El Shaddai).” A poem of praise as well as philosophical and personal reflection, it has an irregular structure, with stanzas of varying line length and number, as well as an irregular rhyme scheme:

*The woman in my Father’s face
The ruach of my soul
Male images have hid the shad,
The breast, that El Shaddai has had
To comfort those, who wounded, have
Quite never been made whole.
Born anew? Yes; a birth it is—
But only from the pronoun “His”?
When earthly form so plainly shows
That woman is in what seed grows
And germinates, and procreates?
And she, whom Comfort has made flesh
To show His less, nay, more than “manliness”:
That He is really also “She”—
A femininity in Trinity?*

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/3

After five more stanzas, Werba, having assimilated an expertise for different forms, ends the poem with a couplet:

*Now delivered, life from Life is come:
O feed me, fill me, Supreme-Breasted One.*

As a master of the sonnet form, Werba is particularly adept at ending her poems with a powerful two-line punch like this. Its unexpected appearance as the closing to an ode makes it all the more effective.

The poems discussed and excerpted here are only a slice of the rainbow this collection contains. It is well-organized (and elegantly formatted): beginning with personal reflections on creativity and eros, we move through history, life, and finally come full circle into the realm of the spirit—all while never ceasing to be personal. In terms of both diversity and depth, Werba is both a poet for our time, and for all time.

Theresa Werba the author of eight books, four in poetry, including the newly-released *What Was and Is: Formal Poetry and Free Verse* (Bardsinger Books, 2024). Her work has appeared in such journals as *The Scarlet Leaf Review*, *The Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Spindrift*, *Mezzo Cammin*, *The Wombwell Rainbow*, *Fevers of the Mind*, *The Art of Autism*, *Serotonin*, *The Road Not Taken*, and the *Society of Classical Poets Journal*. Her work ranges from forms such as the ode and sonnet to free verse, with topics ranging from neurodivergence, love, loss, aging, to faith and disillusionment and more. She also has written on autism, adoption and abuse/domestic violence. Find Theresa Werba at www.bardsinger.com and on social media @thesonetqueen.

Andrew Benson Brown is a poet and journalist living in Kansas City. He is the author of *Legends of Liberty*, a mock-historical poetic epic. He is a member of the Society of Classical Poets, where he regularly contributes poetry, essays, and reviews. His work has been published in a number of journals. He is also an arts columnist for the *Epoch Times* and a history writer for *American Essence* magazine.