

writing poetry:

a practical guide

Writing

Poetry

by colin john holcombe

ocaso press 2021



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# PREFACE

The present volume is the re-titled edition of my earlier *Writing Verse: a Practical Guide*, with a few improvements. 'Verse' has now a rather old-fashioned connotation, and most of today's poetry is in fact written in prose. That prose has to be ordered into lines, however, and requires a good deal of skill to work successfully as a poem. The term 'verse' in this new issue therefore still refers to practicalities, the mechanics of writing rather than the inspiration, and the new edition still aims to bridge the gap between elementary manuals on poetry and the writing of work that merits detailed literary criticism.

A few sections have been slightly rewritten and references added, especially in the more recent sections devoted to:

Cadence and white space patterning, the *New Formalism*, the contemporary verse play, translation, and the longer verse line, plus sections on the influence of critical theory and reviews.

Rhyme, writing approaches, Modernist and Postmodernist styles.

Like everything else in the arts, writing poetry is a skill acquired by practice, but also requires an understanding of what poems attempt to achieve, and how they do so. Hence the theory woven into the text, which goes well beyond the usual manuals of prosody, useful though they are. Modernist, Postmodernist and current poetry styles are covered in some detail, and the translation section provides a brief look at verse in other languages: French, German, Italian, Persian, Chinese, Latin and Sanskrit.

Most sections end with references and suggestions for further reading, but more material can be found on the [ocasopress.com](http://ocasopress.com) site, and, more particularly, on the [textetc.com](http://textetc.com) site, from which much of the book is quarried. It may also help to repeat the introductory words on the site.

The tone will seem sharper and more categorical than the situation warrants. My background is technical research in commerce and industry, where matters have to be simplified for a lay audience, and specific recommendations made. The nuanced literary essay will not serve for that world, and what I am writing here is also more in the nature of notes, with the Internet user in mind. With clarity comes the danger of misrepresentation, but I have tried for a balanced view, adding references to indicate where fuller arguments can be found. On all these matters there are qualifications, lurking complexities, and downright disagreement. In literary preferences we are very much individuals, and I apologize in advance for questioning what many poets and critics not only hold passionately, but have made into articles of faith. In general, rather than take sides, I have tried to explore the territories surrounding the current battles to see if better perspectives can be gained by seeing poetry over many centuries of its development.

Verse unattributed is mine. Hyperlinks were working when the new text was written. Broken links have been removed but not updated, as renewal is an unending task. Google searches will generally find something equivalent. Links earlier employed as references for the text, but not now available are shown as NNA. **Q** indicates a Questia listing. The book has been reformatted to facilitate reading on 7" tablets.

I should be grateful for any corrections or suggestions on improvement.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. WHY WRITE VERSE?

Verse is a means to an end, a step towards what may, with the right gifts and effort, become poetry. It enables a piece of writing to be effective, moving and beautiful. Though much of today's free verse is technically prose, it is still an ordered prose, and is referred to as verse in this book.

Verse gives structure to lines, and so liberates words from their everyday uses and connotations. And words for poets have special meanings, appropriate uses, associations, connotations, etymologies, histories of use and misuse. They conjure up images, feelings, shadowy depths and glinting surfaces. Their properties are marvellous, endless, not to be guessed at from casual inspection. And each property — meaning, association, weight, colour, duration, shape, texture, etc. — changes as words are combined in phrases, rhythms, lines, stanzas and completed poems. Out of these properties the poetry is built, even if the end cannot be entirely foreseen but grows out of the very process of deployment, that continual, two-way dialogue between writer and poem.

An analogy may help. We are born into language, using its words and ready-made phrases to get through our busy lives. From those words and sometimes complete phrases we make poetry — a poetry that is therefore ever latent in language. What verse does is to select, organize and shape that language, just as the radio set picks up and converts into sound what we otherwise cannot hear. Far from constraining language, therefore, verse gives it greater possibilities, significance and responsibilities. Verse is an enabling mechanism, but through traditions and expectations that are always evolving.

So this book, which is aimed at those who care for verse in its larger dimensions, or wish to do so, that select minority appreciating how its complex harmonies and silences on the page can be more effective and memorable than the 'kindling of poetry from the living voice': a worthy aim but in practice difficult and limiting. Verse is not wholly idiomatic, therefore, but takes certain licences with language in exchange for greater effects. Certainly it becomes strained and artificial if it departs too much from a common currency, but that is not an argument for making today's free verse so flat-footed and unexciting. {1-2}

Perhaps insulated by a belief in the superior properties of free verse, the great majority of would-be poets making up literary circles and workshops — articulate, well-read and perceptive students — generally have only the most rudimentary ear for traditional styles. And if that's an extraordinary situation, it is one repeated in many of the experimental arts where the critical theory is abstruse and taxing but often produces something prosaic in the extreme. The craft aspect is entirely overlooked, though it must be self evident that trying

to write poetry without developing an ear for verse is akin to writing an opera while remaining ignorant of music. Opera lovers can dispense with the technicalities and trust their simple passions, but composers and critics have to study everything possible, from music theory to the efforts of past composers, generally adding proficiency in some musical instrument to their skills.

But why so many examples of styles no longer used by serious poets? Why learn to write rhyming couplets, for example, when few now can even read them with an appreciative ear? Because:

1. The old styles are still needed for translation from formal poems in other languages. Free verse forms aren't generally successful.
2. Being the more demanding, the old styles train the ear more thoroughly, just as contemporary dancers generally learn the basics of their art through ballet. Not only train the ear, moreover, but help give the poet a wide dexterity in handling words, all the more needed in contemporary styles that largely dispense with poetic devices. Some of the most pleasing free verse was written by the early Modernists, of course, who enjoyed the best of both worlds.

The emphasis of this book is on the practical, a belief that poets will learn more of the strengths and weaknesses of all styles by actually writing them than by reading bookshelves of literary criticism or theory.

The approach that may seem unconventional today, but was once accepted without question. Until the nineteenth century, practically all European poets learned from the classics, translating from the Greek or Latin to a modern equivalent, and then translating back to see how closely they could achieve the admired model. The best poets were frequently those who studied the classics most assiduously, and though they didn't generally succeed in surpassing their models, their work did benefit remarkably. {1} Painters also copied masterpieces, not only because photography was unavailable, but because the exercise taught them just why each element had been handled in that particular manner. Change the colour purity of a sleeve by a fraction, move the grapes in the still life by a couple of centimetres, and something was clearly wrong. The exercise developed a painterly sensibility, and built up a handbook of practical skill.

Those who'd dismiss this approach as pastiche, plagiarism, or playing with outmoded concepts should consider Auguste Rodin. No one will call the godfather of modern sculpture a pasticheur, but until the age of thirty-six, when he produced *The Age of Bronze*, and to some extent throughout his life, Rodin studied, copied and cast in many styles: Classicist, Rococo, Mannerist, Realistic. He was constantly experimenting, but also studying the past masters. And it was through such study that he came to realize that the Academy virtues were not wrong, but incomplete, bound by fashion and shallow dogma. {3}

The arts continually return to earlier hopes, and these were spelled out long ago by Ben Jonson: 'The third requisition in our poet, or maker [after natural

wit and exercise] is imitation, to be able to convert the substance, or riches of another poet, to his own use. . . I know nothing that can conduce more to letters, than to examine the writings of the ancients, and not to rest in their sole authority, or take all upon trust from them. . . It is true they opened the gates, and made their way, that went before us; but as guides, not commanders.' {4}

But why the emphasis here on metre, rhythm and phrasing, as though these were the only things that mattered? They are not, of course, most certainly, but they are the foundations on which everything else is built. Imagery, content and emotion are all deployed through language, and the language of poetry is verse, verse of *some* sort. That statement may dumbfound an increasing number of students, teachers, critics and poets who will be incredulous to learn that by making free verse the only serious contender today they have largely lost the ear for the phrasal and rhythmic nature of poetry, though still imagining that they are reading poems properly. In traditional work they are not. Great poets were masters of verse, and indeed had to be to write as they wished. Verse is a vital help in the writing and the enjoyment of poetry, and if we cannot hear the piece as its author intended then we are little better than the woman in Perrault's story:

'An admirer of the classics. . . was praising Pindar with enormous enthusiasm, and reciting the first few lines of the first Olympian ode, with great feeling, in Greek. His wife asked him what it was all about. He said it would lose all its nobility in translation, but she pressed him. So he translated:

*"Water is indeed very good, and gold which shines like blazing fire in the night is far better than all the riches which make men proud. But, my spirit, if you desire to sing of contests, do not look for any star brighter than the sun during the day in the empty heavens, nor let us sing any contest more illustrious than Olympia."*

She listened to this and said, "You are making fun of me. You have made up all this nonsense for a joke; but you can't fool me so easily." And although her husband kept trying to explain that he was giving a plain literal translation, she insisted that the ancients were not so stupid as to write stuff like that.' {5}

What Pindar wrote only 'works' in and with the language he employs, and it is futile to expect quasi-prose styles to serve. Formal verse can do things that prose cannot, and it does them with power and economy immediately apparent to the verse writer. The best analogies are not with the reductive approaches of radical theory, but with the simple experience of learning a foreign tongue. We need to think and speak in the language concerned, in the phrases that native speakers actually use. Those phrases contain the sense, just as they do in physics, where problems practically insoluble in one mathematical formulation are speedily resolved in another. Physicists do not formulate a problem and then search for ways of representing it mathematically, but formulate and understand the problem within a particular branch of mathe-

matics, when the situation discloses itself and is solved in those terms. Poetry also discloses a world according to its formulation, and the older forms, though hard for beginners to master, create a world larger and more varied than can be encompassed in prose.

If a poem to be translated is in formal verse, then its translation takes the poet into the workshop of that language, giving him an insight into how and why the original was so constructed. In converting to another language, the best method is often that of repeated correction, a zigzag path between fuller meaning and pleasing verse expression, the aim being the fusion of the two where shaping is a part of meaning. By echoing the actual process of poetry writing, the translation reads better, and the verse is enriched with specific words whose properties have been assayed through their deployment.

Certainly there are dangers. If poetry is what gets lost in translation, as Robert Frost once quipped, then the translator may indeed add a poetry that is not in the original, namely his own. But all poetry is translation of a sort — into the reader's outlook, literary experience and skill in reading verse — and to write with no ear at all for the rhythms of English, as so many translators do today under the banner of free verse, is to write something that negates what their author was probably trying to convey.

The trouble, in a nutshell, is that unrefined language we commonly use, that 'routine and short-hand of experience set down in prose, thinned out in the mainly inert figures of daily speech'. (7) For making sense of our contemporary world in terms of the everyday minutiae of existence, the discontinuous prose style of contemporary poetry serves admirably, but poets have generally had grander longings. They have wanted to impart an imperishable beauty to what is fleeting in our chaotic and problematic lives. They have wanted to explore matters that had no existence outside their intricately-constructed expression. And they have wanted to say things that no sane person would probably ever conceive of saying — creating an essential, full and vital representation of the world where other representations are abstract and abbreviated.

Poetry writing is difficult and time-consuming. It requires discipline, practice and a keen ear. A trained ear, moreover, which generally entails a deep love of poetry, plus long years spent studying the critical books and articles that are now to be found, if at all, in library basements and second-hand booksellers. The very qualities that made for excellence in literature, which gave poems their appeal and celebrity down the ages, are now becoming a forgotten art — a loss not only to the general reading public, which cares less and less for contemporary poetry, but to poets themselves, who must use everyday language for purposes it was not designed to serve.

In general:

1. Dedication to poetry is a vow of poverty. Scant reward comes in money or reputation. As in other arts, a more decent living is to be found on the periphery — in teaching, commentating on and/or performing poetry.
2. Poetry is a calling, not a career.
3. Despite exhortation, hype and extensive funding, poetry is no longer the queen of the arts. It has minority status — worthy, but not courted by publishers or the media.
4. The rewards of poetry are those of a skilled craftsman in a difficult medium, one that gives great opportunities, and enormous pleasure when the work succeeds.
5. Poetry is still the workshop of language, and things can be explored in poetry that escape prose. Indeed, for all the current difficulties, poetry is still among the most innovative, exciting and significant of today's writing. To contribute here is to join a select community, and enter into a kinship with the serious writers of the past.

The sensible poet will want to know what to aim for, which movement or group to join.

The broadest grouping is into professionals and amateurs, but even professional poets disagree as to what is or should be good poetry, and make strenuous efforts to belong to the right movement. You can only appreciate such coterie politics by jumping into the swim of events — writing, editing, reviewing — but you will need eventually to declare for one or other of the current types of poetry, and modify your output accordingly. Your pattern of acceptances will be a guide, but also helpful will be extensive reading, particularly the critical work of the 'enemy camp'.

## Professionals

Many dream of the time when they can really get down to writing, without the need to put food on the table and create a name for themselves in their day-to-day jobs and local community. Why not become a professional, a career poet, turning out collections regularly from prestigious presses, and taking a recognized part in conferences, courses and workshops?

Some hundreds of poets do just that, becoming writers in residence at universities, or accredited workshop conveners at writing colleges or community centres. Poetry was, is, and always will be an essential part of their lives, whatever the cost, however financially or socially unrewarding. They spend their last penny on poetry collections, and can remember precisely when they encountered an author later important to them.

Note the unquenchable interest, contacts and background. Professional poets make careers for themselves in one or more of the following ways:



1. Take a Master of Fine Arts degree, and become a writer in residence etc. at some recognized university or college of further education.
2. Follow a university English course by a Ph.D., but spend much of their time writing and associating with poets, promoting their work and being promoted in turn.
3. Become officers of poetry institutions, again hobnobbing with poets and becoming part of the publicity machine.
4. Teach in an English faculty, many of which run a magazine publishing certain types of poetry and their important names.
5. Work in a publishing house, particularly those few that bring out poetry collections or literary novels.
6. Join the poetry performing circuit, building up a loyal public and issuing collections of popular numbers.

There are many advantages. Students make a receptive audience. Publishing is easier. Status comes as it does in any other academic discipline, through the significance of published work, by maintaining accepted standards, and by staking out and defending an appropriate plot of academic turf. Equally apparent are the dangers. The work-load is heavy, and writing time tends to be pushed into weekends and summer holidays. Political correctness is essential, and many styles and themes are taboo. Collections have to be published at regular intervals, regardless of quality, simply to prove credentials. Literary activities tend increasingly to substitute for the real thing, which is writing. *Everything* is easier than writing poetry, or poetry that's any good, and perhaps only the most uncompromising (and sometimes difficult) characters survive the temptations.

## Amateurs

But perhaps you're not a career poet at all, but an amateur in the best sense of the word, who has produced a substantial body of work. How do you get your precious lifeblood published?

1. You've earned the money to self publish at no cost spared. You find a reputable publisher, talk to local bookstores and place your work on Amazon Books.
2. You don't have the money needed to 'publish and be damned'. Your options:
  1. Join a local poetry group and publish in their occasional anthology.
  2. Submit to the many ezines springing up on the Internet, and disappearing as fast again.
  3. Submit to one of the long-established small poetry or literary magazines.

4. Self-publish an anthology of your work: traditional or print-on-demand.
5. Run your own magazine or literary website.

## References

1. See the survey of literary magazines on <http://www.textetc.com/blog>) and *The Undiscovered Country* by William Logan, Columbia University Press, 2005.
2. To judge from David Lehman's *The Oxford Book of American Poetry*, OUP, 2006, and Jennifer Ashton's *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry Since 1945*. CUP, 2013.
3. Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature*. OUP, 1949.
4. Albert E. Elsen's *Rodin*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1963 pp.13-19.
5. Ben Jonson, Discoveries II, 166-71, 3056-65, 160-3. Cited by Isabel Rivers' *Classical and Christian Ideas in English Renaissance Poetry: A Students' Guide*. George Allen & Unwin, 1979; Routledge, 2002.
6. Highet 1949, 271-2.
7. *Poem into Poem: World Poetry in Modern Verse Translation*. Edited by George Steiner. Penguin Books, 1970. Introduction, p. 25.

## A Few Books

### Self Expression

1. *The Art and Craft of Poetry* by Michael J. Bugeja. 1994. Writer's Digest Books. Cincinnati, Ohio. 339 pp. Emphasizes the personal and authentic. How to generate ideas for poems. Simple introductions to voice, line, stanza, meter and rhyme. Many contemporary examples.
2. *The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises from Poets who Teach*. Edited by Robin Behn and Chase Twichell. 1992. Harper Perennial. New York. 299 pp. Some 90 odd exercises covering: getting started, image and metaphor, structuring, rhythm, crafting, etc.
3. *Writing Personal Poetry: Creating Poems from your Life Experiences* by Sheila Bender. Writers Digest Books. 1999. Good in parts.

### Poetry as Art

1. *How to Write Poetry* by Nancy Bogan. 1998. Macmillan. New York. 150 pp. Sensible introduction to the elements of traditional poetry in strict and free verse form. Includes detailed analysis of classic poems and a list of small magazines receptive to new work.
2. *In the Palm of your Hand: The Poet's Portable Workshop* by Steve Kowit. 1995. Tilbury Houses, Publishers. Maine. 274 pp. Another good introduc-

tion, treating matters a little more fully. Useful sections on publishing your poems, workshops, and resources available to serious poets.

3. *Creating Poetry* by John Drury. 1991. Writer's Digest Books. Cincinnati, Ohio. 211 pp. Excellent, non-nonsense guide to all aspects. American orientated, but has no axe to grind. Twelve chapters cover preparation, language, metaphors, sound, movement, shaping, pattern, voice, sources of inspiration, influences of other arts, etc. Often wryly amusing.
4. *Writing Poems* by Robert Wallace and Michelle Boisseau. 1996. Little, Brown and Company. Boston. 410 pp. A popular schoolbook, packed with examples. Instruction is by appreciation of poetry in a wide variety of styles and genres.
5. *Please, Lord, Make Me a Famous Poet or at Least Less Fat* by Dean Blehert. Words and Pictures East Coast. 1999. Light-hearted but thorough.
6. *The Poetry Handbook: A Guide to Reading Poetry for Pleasure and Practical Criticism* by John Lennard. O.U.P. 1996. Does exactly what it says in the title.
7. *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms* by Mark Stroud and Eavan Boland. W. W. Norton & Co. 2000. Examples from contemporary poets and old favourites.
8. *Reading Poetry: An Introduction* by Tom Furniss and Michael Bath. Pearson Education Ltd. 1996. Practical and sensible.
9. *Poetic Designs: An Introduction to Meters, Verse Forms, and Figures of Speech* by Stephen Adams. Broadview Press, 1997. Google Books.

## **Literary Criticism**

1. *An Introduction to Poetry* by X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia. 1998. Longman. New York. 650 pp. Classic school text, packed with past to present-day examples, plus much useful advice.
2. *A History of Modern Poetry* by David Perkins. 2 vols: *From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode*, and *Modernism and After*. 1987. Harvard University Press. c 700 pp. each. A deft interweaving of biography, critical appraisal and cultural setting. Solid and generous: covers the major US and British poets of the period.
3. *Eight Contemporary Poets* by Calvin Bedient. 1974. In-depth appraisal of eight British poets of the 1950-70 period.
4. *An Introduction to 50 Modern British Poets* by Michael Schmidt. 1979. Fifty sharply-written essays.

## **Literary Theory**

1. *Poetry in English: An Introduction* by Charles Barber. 1993. Macmillan. London. 220 pp. Generally sound, explaining what other introductions take for granted. Covers poetry of Eliot to Hughes adequately, but not Structuralism, stylistics and later schools of criticism.
2. *Poetry Today: A Critical Guide to British Poetry 1960-1984* by Anthony Thwaite. 1996. Addison-Wesley. 196 pp. Short but intelligent survey.
3. *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism: Dialogue and Estrangement* by Ian Gregson. 1997. Macmillan. London. 269 pp. Illustrates the conflict between mainstream and Modernist poetry outside the Establishment. Mostly British contemporary poets.
4. *English Poetry Since 1940* by Neil Corcoran. 1993. Longmans. 308 pp. Covers some fifty-odd British poets from Eliot to contemporary performers from a somewhat narrow, post-modern, Leftish stance. More themes and theories than illustration. Very useful bibliographies and potted biographies.

### **Poetry Anthologies**

1. *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Verse* edited by John Heath-Stubbs and David Wright. 1975. Faber and Faber. 347 pp. Broad survey, with many favourites.
2. *New Poets of England and America* by Donald Hall, Robert Pack and Louis Simpson. 1957. New American Library. 351 pp. Introduced contemporary poetry to the postwar generation.
3. *British Poetry Since 1945* by Edward Lucie-Smith. 1985. Penguin Books. 432 pp. A catholic and generous selection, with helpful notes.
4. *Up Late: American Poetry Since 1970* edited by Andrei Codrescu. 1990. Four Walls Eight Windows. 623 pp. More experimental American poetry.
5. *New American Poets of the '90s* edited by Jack Myers and Roger Weingarten. 2001. Godine. Mainstream American poetry. Being republished.
6. *Postmodern American Poetry* edited by Paul Hoover. 1994. Experimental contemporary American poetry.
7. *Strong Measures: Contemporary American Poetry in Traditional Forms* by Philip Dacey and David Jauss. 1986. Harper and Row. 750 pp. Some 150 contemporary poems in traditional forms.
8. *Aloud: Voice from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe* edited by Miguel Algarin. 1994. Dial. 514 pp. Poetry written for performance.

## 1.2. POETRY: A THEORETICAL DEFENCE

Any decent poetry book will make the points above. A more detailed and theoretical defence of poetry in an age of science and consumerism would proceed more as follows

### 1.2.1. A Superior Truth

Poetry is a way of telling the truth, a way often superior to others. How so?

One argument goes back to Aristotle, to his famous distinction between history and poetry. History reports what happened, and is therefore subject to all the constraints and imperfections of actual life. No general is a full embodiment of courage in battle, steadfastness in adversity, far-sightedness in decision-making, etc. But poetry uses words in their larger potential, and creates representations that are more complete and meaningful than nature can give us in the raw.

A second argument borrows the approach of the Postmodernists, who claim that we experience the world with and through language. The claim is greatly overblown, since we all have experiences not readily conveyed in words — riding a bike, listening to music, etc. — and meaning is not finally anchored in mere words but in bodily physiology and social usage. But language undoubtedly does colour our perceptions and modify responses, which politicians and the media understand very well. Words are not therefore neutral entities, but have intentions, associations, and histories of usage, which in poetry are given their truer natures by employing the traditional resources of language. Rhythm, segregation into lines, metaphor etc. are not ornament, something added and inessential, but a means to a more exact commentary and expressive power. In this sense, the ordinary language of commerce and the professions, as that of everyday speech, is a stunted, stripped down and abbreviated shadow of what poetry should achieve.

Furthermore, there is no 'standard language', but only a wide spectrum of usage from which we select for the purpose in hand. Even everyday speech is not a natural benchmark since each of us — as every playwright knows — uses speech slightly differently: according to our personality, the occasion, our social standing, whom we're addressing, what we want to express or get done. Our words may be apt or off the point, but they are not more natural for being used loosely or 'instinctively'. We admire the speaker who achieves exactly what is needed in a certain situation, and that exactness, but more honest, more personal, more considered, is what we look for in poetry. Poetry has more time at its disposal, and much greater resources of language, and its appropriateness is indeed governed by what the classical and renaissance worlds knew as rhetoric.

The point needs emphasizing. Unbeknown to most poets, British and American philosophy has attempted to find a language that should be logically transpar-

ent and free of ambiguity. That language should express the truth when all paraphrase is stripped away. It should state irreducible facts that are independent of their expression. The search has lasted the better part of a century, and has comprehensively failed. It cannot be done. What has emerged, with a greater understanding of such enterprises generally, is the extent to which philosophic enquiry itself is governed by rules, standard expressions and agreed procedures. In this regard, philosophy seems close to poetry, though its creations are very different. Both aim at truth, but a truth based on different perceptions.

So arise some important consequences for poetry writing. Poetry is not exempt from the requirements of the other literary arts. It is not mere fancy, but an attempt to tell the truth in a fuller and more authentic manner. We still want that truth to be new-fashioned and not simply imported from other experiences or situations — one argument against cliché — but we do not judge that truth by originality. We need the new fashioning to be appropriate, illuminating, to sharpen rather than distort perception and understanding. We judge a particular phrase or line in the context of the poem as a whole, and the poem itself against the poet's larger work and outlook. To say of a novel, 'I didn't find the setting too convincing', is to make a damaging criticism. Poetry needs also to be underwritten by experience.

### 1.2.2. Poetry Reconciles Us to the World

However different we may be from other members of the animal kingdom in constructing our own world through thought, insight and artistic creation, human beings also need coherence and consistency in their surroundings. In this broader sense, the history of western art is a search for purpose in an increasingly strange and hostile universe. Since the demise of medieval theology, and the fragmentation of knowledge, the great intellectual traditions of the west have attempted to find some bedrock of belief, something that is fundamental and cannot be questioned further. The attempt seems to have failed. Whatever else the past century has learned, one thing has become clear: the world is stranger and more various than anything our intellectual equipment can encompass.

So has grown the great influence of the arts in western societies. The arts are not reductive, but seek pattern, order and consistency in the very midst of variety. Poetry may not change the world — much though Marxists insist that it should — but it can enable us to see life whole, with clarity and understanding. The great theatre of the world is written in verse, and its poetry reconciles us to the manifest absurdities, injustices and cruelties of our natures. In art we put aside the struggle for individual pre-eminence, said Schopenhauer, and learn to see life as it is directly given to us through timeless ideas.

### 1.2.3. Demanding and Satisfying

For much of its history, poetry has been the product of a highly educated, leisured class. Reams of competent but somewhat pedestrian verse were scribbled by eighteenth-century parsons, and the more popular poets were issued in reprint after reprint for the Victorian middle classes. But the widespread osmosis of poetry into English cultural life may start in mass education at the turn of the last century, and the subsequent need for standards and syllabuses. Today, poetry is again a minority interest, and one where craft is greatly subordinate to stylistic movements and political allegiances. Neither by the public at large, nor the practitioners themselves, can poetry still be called 'the queen of the arts'.

Many post-war developments have contributed to this fall from grace. Knowledge has become more specialized, and very abstruse theories have been devised to keep favoured styles of poetry within the ambit of academic study. Divergent styles have become anti-intellectual or even infantile. The sixties stress on personal expression is still working its way through society, and this iconoclasm naturally distrusts tradition and long-practised skills. Radical criticism has irrupted into literary criticism, and insists that literature be judged on the non-literary criteria of continental philosophy, psychoanalysis and ideology.

But poetry has always possessed the deeper roots and the larger promise. Prose is a comparatively late development in literature, and the masterworks of the past were predominantly in verse. Remove the poetry of the Greek playwrights, of Lucretius, Ovid and Virgil, the work of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Racine, Milton and Hugo, and the western literary heritage dwindles to a thin shadow of its former glory. Poets and poetry were prized in the Chinese world, fought over by the early Arabs, sought by lavish patronage in the hedonistic courts of the Timurid and Indian rulers. Poetry enters into the fabric of a people, and to be able to quote Ferdowsi or Hafez in Iran, even today, is the mark of an educated man.

As we grow older we read less, and that less tends to be poetry. With age comes knowledge of life, and a certain impatience with irrelevancies and self-importance. And writers too, though they may mellow into a larger humanity, tend also to be pithier and more to the point. Poetry is the most concentrated of all literary expression, and, if an obvious example were needed, we find the prosier plays of Shakespeare's middle period give way to the terse, eloquent poetry of *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest*.

If writers and readers often return to poetry when they have a wider experience of life, there is also the deep and abiding joy that poetry, and often poetry alone, can bring. To a trained ear — and an extended training is needed — there is nothing to match verse that lifts so readily into saying what is exact, evocative and moving. Prose by comparison seems a muddled and lumpy medium, where there is little to separate the good from the merely competent.

Poetry displays its bloodline immediately, and if it is more difficult to write, its successes are infinitely more worth having.

#### 1.2.4. Versatile and Wide-Ranging

Poetry is the most versatile and wide-ranging of literary forms: things can be said in poetry that cannot be said in prose.

Is this true? To many readers, poetry seems as out of date and constricting as an eighteenth-century stomacher, an artificial language that hardly exists outside school essays and unvisited library shelves. And if extraordinary things can be said in poetry, its most experienced practitioners will often despair of completing something of even modest competence.

But ease and prolixity have nothing to do with excellence. Poetry is a compact medium, needing great concentration to read, and even more to write. It is overwhelmingly a high art form, and so demands an excellent education, acute sensitivity, broad experience of life, and decided literary gifts. Facility only comes with practice, and the best way to appreciate poetry is to keep reading and rereading it, critiques and guides at the ready. Certainly it is hard work, but so are many things in life. Dancers must practice daily, and often start with the most demanding and unforgiving of training provided by ballet. Painters begin their apprenticeship with drawing — economy of statement, precise articulation of hand and eye, visual awareness all being developed in a medium where the essentials cannot be overlooked or fudged.

Granted that its conventions and devices may be necessary, what is the evidence that poetry can meet all demands? Would it be appropriate for a catalogue of horrors in a Nazi concentration camp? Would it serve for a difficult letter to our bank manager? Yes it would, provided by poetry is meant language at its most authentic, effective and resonant. All speech and writing is governed by conventions, so that a frank, courteous and well-thought-out letter in the usual form might well extend the overdraft. And even if we felt that a business letter could not be poetry of a sort, albeit of a very modest sort, and something a novelist would not spend time in getting right, we could at least accept that from poetry the descent can only be to prose. As for the concentration camp, its events are such that a plain rendering of the facts would suffice. Only the facts would not be 'speaking for themselves', but inevitably have been selected and ordered so as to serve the purpose of the report. Again a poetry of a sort, an astringent, sombre poetry requiring fine judgement and sensitivity not to turn horror into Grand Guignol.

Consider then what poets have achieved. Despite all the advantages enjoyed by contemporary plays and films — the technology, the 'real-life' dramas, modern idiom in speech and attitudes — Shakespeare is still the most performed of dramatists, giving us a gallery of recognizable characters that no one has rivalled. Dante provides us with a sharp-etched picture of thirteenth-century Italian politics. Byron manages to work in slang and details of a water



pump into Don Juan, and Ezra Pound incorporates views on capitalist economics in the Cantos. Philip Larkin paints the domestic nihilism of the contemporary welfare state, and Ted Hughes's animals are exactly observed. The list can be infinitely extended.

But what do we say on the Modernist and Postmodernist movements that claim an abrupt break with the past? With the Modernist's love of experimentation, anti-realism, individualism and intellectualism came a great narrowing of aims and accomplishments. Poetry was not writing at its highest pitch, but something constructed altogether differently. Poems were free-standing creations of their authors, and they had no independent truths or emotions to impart. Their excellence lay in the subtlety, not to say complexity, with which meanings disclosed themselves to literary analysis. Modernist poetry was a highbrow art, drawing more on esoteric shadings and the inner lives of poets than the joys and sorrows of the workaday world. With Postmodernism these trends were accentuated. Writers became the self-appointed spiritual guardians of language, championing its creative and arbitrary nature over its more prosaic powers to represent, analyse and discover. Postmodernist poems do not represent anything but themselves. They are collages of words whose meaning lies only in their specific arrangement on the page.

These efforts are certainly to be taken seriously. A good deal of current scholarship, funding and publishing centres on these creations, and no one wishes to overlook the best achievements of the last fifty years. Yet Postmodernist poems are often thin and unsatisfying. They require buttressing by abstruse theory, which is itself supported by a contemporary scholasticism, a turning away from science and a wilful misreading of linguistics, psychology and continental philosophy. It can still be argued that such poetry says things that prose cannot, but such things have no wider reference. They do not help us to see the world with greater vividness, clarity and understanding, and perhaps for this reason have not won the heart of the general reading public.

But there's poetry and poetry. Much of what's published today is probably best called journalism, a recycling of themes in an unexceptional style. Occasionally the writing lifts into the striking and memorable, and we praise as poetry what was once within the scope of the average novelist or essay writer. Poetry *can* say more than prose, and perhaps *should* say more, but may be lacking at present the necessary courage, independence of thought and informed reading.

### 1.2.5. A Special Mode of Knowledge

Poetry achieves a special mode of knowledge — an essential, full and vital representation of the world where other representations are somewhat abstract and abbreviated.

Here we enter very contentious territory. Past writers have occasionally claimed as much — Aristotle, Shakespeare and Shelley for example — but

contemporary aesthetics is almost wholly opposed to such a view. The earlier arguments are numerous and compelling, however, and come from several disciplines.

1. Language is built of metaphors that, though largely dead, still guide our responses and understanding. This is easily demonstrated. In the first sentence all these started as metaphors: *language, built, metaphors, largely, dead, still, guide, responses and understanding* — as a glance at an etymological dictionary will show. Moreover, change 'largely' to 'generally' and the meaning shifts. *Large* comes from *largus*, the Latin for copious, whereas *generally* derives from *genus*, the Latin for birth or stock. Not a great shift in meaning, but one a conscientious writer would be aware of. Rephrase the sentence altogether — 'language is at base metaphorical, and that base unconsciously affects our behaviour' — and the rephrasing opens up new vistas of use and association. Metaphor is a mapping from source (familiar and everyday) to target domains (abstract, conceptual or internal), and this process cannot be evaded, however grey and bureaucratic the language employed.

For everyday purposes that metaphoric nature is minimized or overlooked. The law uses a circumlocutory Latinised language. The various sciences each have their preferred sets of imagery, but usually employ a mechanical language with commonplace verbs linking heavy noun clusters. Commerce prefers a commonplace style with quaint vestiges of social address — '*I should be obliged if you would...*' And so on. Whatever philosophy may wish, there seems no core meaning that is independent of its expression.

The ancient world never supposed there was. Close argumentation suited the philosopher in his private study, while a heightened, richer language was needed for public speaking. But the second was not inferior to the first, quite the contrary, as the orator had to demonstrate the larger humanity a classical education imparted. Poetry — and poetry in the Roman world was written for the speaking voice — was naturally allied to oratory, but it was not diminished by appealing to all sectors of the audience. In short, persuasion was the essence of speech and writing, not irrefutable evidence or truth.

Modern metaphor theories support this view, and link it to brain functioning. Metaphors reflect schemas, which are constructions of reality using the assimilation and sensorimotor processes to anticipate actions in the world. Schemas are plural, interconnecting in our minds to represent how we perceive, act, respond and consider. Far from being mere matters of style, metaphors organise our experience, creating realities that guide our futures and reinforce interpretations. Truth is therefore truth relative to some understanding, and that understanding is plural, involving categories which emerge from our interaction with experience. Poetry, which uses language with an acute awareness of its metaphoric content, is at once the most vital and authentic of utterances, conveying a knowledge that is not generalized.

2. Hermeneutics began as the interpretation of ancient documents — i.e. making a consistent picture when the words themselves drew their meaning from

the document as a whole, which the words had yet to spell out — but has moved on to literature in general. Inevitably we live on our historical inheritance, a dialogue between the old traditions and our present needs. There is no way of assessing that inheritance except by trial and error, by living out its precepts and their possible reshapings. Literature not only bears the self-image and moral dimensions of the society that produced it, but the products of the resistance exerted by the individual circumstances of creation to wider social presuppositions. We cannot filter out these presuppositions without replacing them by own alternatives, which later readers will also come to see as prejudices, part of the sedimented ideology that makes up our utterances. All we can do is allow the two sets of presuppositions to confront each other, and grow into the larger opportunities of their fused horizons.

Poetry above all is sensitive to the past usage of words and their latent properties, and it is therefore poetry that speaks the fullest truth. The gaps, inconsistencies, corruptions and prejudices of language are not something we can ultimately escape from, and the smooth grey language of business or government is not so much a papering over as a repression of what is most vital and individual to us. Truthful language has to link both writer and reader, to be continually self-verifying if not self-evident, and to extend through the changing circumstances of a man's life, validating itself through being re-experienced.

3. Poetry is banned from many areas of public life. Its truths, its wider social reflections and moral dimensions are precisely what is not wanted for government, advertising and commercial use. Academia also prefers a thinner and more neutral language, where arguments can be closely reasoned and rest finally on 'evidence that speaks for itself'. But what is this neutral language? The heroic attempts to find a logically transparent language have failed, and a language reduced to 'essentials' seems more an impoverished language than one of greater exactness. The discipline of extended and rigorous argument — i.e. philosophy — has recourse to symbolic logic, but that logic is not without its problems. Everyday statements have first to be converted to that symbolic expression, and that involves procedures that are reductive, open to question and ultimately sanctioned by the practices of the philosophic community. Once in symbolic form, logic is immeasurably more powerful, but there are many logics, and sometimes inconsistencies within each logic. And the great philosophical questions — the proof of existence, the nature of truth, the analyses of meaning — have not been solved or clarified: in most cases the questions remain more perplexing than ever.

### 1.2.6 Insight into All Forms of Writing

Poetry provides a deep insight into all forms of writing, which ripens eventually into an informed love of literature.

This rests not on argument but the experience of most readers. Certainly there are rare souls who find the coarse medium of prose unsatisfying or

downright repellent, just as there are many prose readers who find poetry too demanding or insubstantial. But the great majority of seasoned readers relish both, and realize that prose at its best rises to the condition of poetry, and is enjoyable to the extent that poetry is enjoyed.

Must a love of poetry inevitably develop into a greater love of literature in all its forms? Not necessarily. Much of the literature winning rave reviews is ephemeral, and an apprenticeship in poetry may make it even less appealing. But experienced readers understand the commercial pressures behind publishing, read the reviews cautiously, and make their own selections. The argument remains. Life is short, and there is every reason to insist on the best in the hours stolen from other activities.

### 1.2.7. General Apprenticeship

Poetry is only one form of literature, and many good poets have handled the other forms indifferently. Indeed, the gift of poetry seems rather special, almost 'an illness of the ear'. Nonetheless, poetry often forms part of introductory courses in creative writing, and for this reason: poetry displays its excellences deep in the grain of language. Prose is written in phrases, often somewhat ready-made phrases, but poetry is individual crafted in words or syllables. Everything counts — content, story, genre, diction, imagery, metaphor, syntax, rhythm — and nothing shows this interdependence so well to the beginner as writing poetry. Later courses develop a writer's particular bent, and will specialize in the skills — journalism, short-story writing, articles — that the trainee will need to make a career in a competitive and not overly rewarded profession. But poetry provides a concentrated introduction to the interrelated complexities of writing, and is recognized as such. There can be few journalists who haven't announced at dinner parties that they will someday give up their second-rate scribbling and concentrate on what they know they have inside. No one believes them, but the recognition is there.

### 1.2.8. Convenience

Firstly, there are the time scales. A poem or an article can be written in hours, a play in weeks and a novel in months. All generally take longer, often very much longer, but poetry seems easiest to the hobbyist or amateur writer.

Then the publishing side. Whatever the standard, the style or content of a poem, it is usually possible to find a publisher of sorts. But with this proviso. Most mainstream publishers will not handle poetry: they cater for the mass market and poetry cannot be sold in bulk. The dozen or so leading publishers who do have poetry lists are wary of publishing unknowns: contacts are needed and a good track record in the top literary journals. Unfortunately, it is difficult to get into the better literary journals, and practically impossible — editors' protestations to the contrary — to get into the top ones until well known.

For most poets, that leaves the less prestigious literary journals, the small presses, and the commercial publications that have the odd corner for a poem. Also self-publishing, by individuals or writing circles, which is much resorted to, increasingly on the Internet.

### 1.2.9. Sheer Pleasure

Most people write for pleasure. They have always enjoyed poetry, and now have the time — through retirement, unemployment or the children leaving home — to try their own hand at this absorbing genre. Poetry writing is indeed one of the fast-growing areas of the retirement industry. Practitioners number tens of thousands, and innumerable small presses scattered throughout the English-speaking world exist to publish their work.

Nonetheless, poetry is not easy. The medium is a compact one, needing great concentration to read, and even more to write. First attempts are not apt to be good. Nevertheless, even the most pedestrian effort occasionally lifts into the vivid and memorable, and kindles a response in its reader, which is reward enough.

Poets please themselves. There is nothing to stop good writers producing work that they like reading. Or what they consider worth reading. No doubt there's something perverse about the seclusion needed to perfect what will interest very few people, but all good writers put themselves through this purgatory. And the reasons are not merely psychological, but the satisfaction that the writing supplies. Without talent, nothing of importance can be achieved. But without increasing absorption, fascination and sheer pleasure in literary craftsmanship, that talent will never see the light of day. Native ability and hard work are essential to poetry, and pleasure is the stimulus to both.

## 1.3. WHAT IS POETRY?

Poetry definitions are difficult, as is aesthetics generally. What is distinctive and important tends to evade the qualified language in which we attempt to cover all considerations. Perhaps we could say that poetry was a responsible attempt to understand the world in human terms through literary composition.

The terms beg many questions, of course, but poetry today is commonly an amalgam of three distinct viewpoints. Traditionalists argue that a poem is an expression of a vision that is rendered in a form intelligible and pleasurable to others and so likely to arouse kindred emotions. For Modernists, a poem is an autonomous object that may or may not represent the real world but is created in language made distinctive by its complex web of references. Postmodernists look on poems as collages of current idioms that are intriguing but self-contained — they employ, challenge and/or mock preconceptions, but refer to nothing beyond themselves.

## Discussion

What distinguishes poetry from other compositions? Nothing, says a vociferous body of opinion: they are all texts, to be understood by the same techniques as a philosophic treatise or tabloid newspaper. But that makes sense only to readers of advanced magazines, for poetry does indeed seem different. Even if we accept that poetry can be verse or prose — verse simply having a strong metrical element — poetry is surely distinguished by moving us deeply. In fact, for all but Postmodernists, it is an art form, and must therefore do what all art does — represent something of the world, express or evoke emotion, please us by its form, and stand on its own as something autonomous and self-defining.

No doubt more could be said, but the starting poet may be feeling impatient. Theorists, like clever lawyers, can prove anything, and it is all too easy for an atrocious piece of writing to be defended by irrefutable standards. Are there not more practical ways of assessing poetry?

One point worth making is that aesthetics, together with theories of poetics and literary criticism, does not operate in a vacuum, but within a community of shared approaches and understandings. Typically, they are academia-based, and so written for fellow academics and their captive students. Their insights are important, indeed indispensable, for countering the half-truths that float around the poetry world, and for insisting that poetry maintain some depth and substance, but the young poet may wish initially to sidestep these abstruse matters and join another community, that of poetry itself. Poetry also has its beliefs and patterns of excellence. Its insights have to be acquired by participation: by writing and having that writing evaluated by fellow poets, by being able to appreciate a wide range of work, and by acquiring the crafts of literary composition.

None of that is easily accomplished, given the pressures of everyday life. Nor is there wide agreement on what sort of apprenticeship should be served. Schools of poetry are often hostile to, if not contemptuous of, other movements, and what is prized in one may be anathema to another. The beginning poet should read widely, join many groups, take any criticism seriously, but perhaps remember these points:

1. Poetry may well be the art of the unsayable. A good poem lies somewhere beyond mere words: it is the intangible, an exultation in things vaguely apprehended, something which emerges out of its own form, and which cannot exist without that form. Any poem that can be completely understood or paraphrased is not a poem, therefore, but simply versified or emotive prose (though none the worse for that).
2. Poems are an act of discovery, and require immense effort — to write and to be understood. The argument against popular amateur poetry is not that it uses out-of-date forms (there is no authority here, and art is always a mixture of elements coming in and going out of fashion) but that popular poetry

finds its conceptions too readily. Contrary to contemporary dogma, poetry doesn't have to be challenging, but it does have to explore the nature and geography of the human condition.

3. A poem is something unique to its author, but is also created in the common currency of its period: style, preoccupations, shared beliefs. You may therefore grow out of the habit of writing Elizabethan sonnets, if indeed you ever write them, not by colleagues telling you that the style is passé but by understanding the limits of that Elizabethan world. You will probably write yourself through many enthusiasms and styles. And because your experience of the world will be shaped by your literary efforts, your conceptions of poetry will change as you develop a voice commensurate with your vision.

4. Poems are not created by recipe, or by pouring content into a currently acceptable mould. Shape and content interact, in the final product and throughout the creation process, so that the poems will be continually asking what you are writing and why. The answers you give yourself will be illustrating your conceptions of poetry. Once again, those conceptions will develop, eventually to include experiences more viscerally part of you, since poems are not a painless juggling with words.

5. Many poets have theorized on the nature of their craft. Their aphorisms are very quotable, and often provide entry into new realms of thought, but they should be used with caution. Artists are notoriously partisan, and rarely paint the whole picture. To understand their pronouncements, you need first to love their work, be steeped in its vision, and then to measure their pronouncements against the larger conception of art that other work provides.

## 1.4. WHY VERSE?

Verse is a good deal more than lines that rhyme. First there is rhythm, an inescapable element of poetry. Cultural conventions and literary history select their varying requirements from the individual features of a language, but rhythm also arises naturally from the simple exercise of breathing and the desire for shape and regularity in human affairs.

Metre is a systematic regularity in rhythm. In western literature there are two great metrical systems the quantitative (introduced by the Greeks) and the accentual (which appears in Latin of the third century AD), but metre of some sort is found in all poetry, east and west. {2}

Metrical skill comes from practice rather than any slavish following of rules, and rules indeed vary with the literary tradition and what poets are attempting to achieve. The ear is not the only judge. Swinburne and Chesterton appeal to the auditory imagination, but look bombastic on the page. The late blank verse of Shakespeare needs a trained actor to bring out its rough-hewn splen-

dour, and the rhythmic subtleties of Geoffrey Hill are apt to vanish on public performance.

New metres are rarely created, but much more common is the importation and adaptation of metre from a foreign language, which is a good reason for reading beyond translations. Conventional English verse is usually (and confusedly) described in a terminology deriving from classical prosody: as iambic, trochaic, dactylic and anapaestic. On an elementary level it may be better to consider metre under two headings: whether the syllables or the stresses are being counted, and whether these counts are fixed or variable. Accentual verse has fixed counts of stress but variable syllables. Syllabic verse has fixed counts of syllables regardless of stresses. Accentual-syllabic is conventional metre with both stress and syllables fixed. Free verse has no restrictions on either. How readers recognize and respond to metre is unclear, but any particular metre seems to be a norm, a pattern intuited behind permissible examples. The examples are often irregular, and indeed the common iambic pentameter seems only to be exact in some 25% of cases overall. {3}

Accentual verse is found in popular verse, ballads, nursery rhymes, songs and doggerel. Syllabic verse as exemplified by the French alexandrine is very different from English blank verse, and twentieth century attempts to write a pure syllabic verse in English have not caught on. Accentual-syllabic was developed by Chaucer from Italian models, and became the staple for English poetry from Elizabethan times till comparatively recently. Contemporary forms of verse originated in France around the middle of the nineteenth century, were championed (briefly) by the founders of Modernism, and have ramified into styles largely indistinguishable from prose.

Traditional verse is overshadowed by the achievements of the past. Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope and Wordsworth set standards difficult to emulate, and poets are nowadays hardly encouraged to try. Many of the better magazines, where the fledgling poet must start his or her publishing career, will not take traditional poetry, and those with more generous requirements may still lack readers or editors capable of telling the good from the merely facile. Nonetheless, strict verse enjoys periodic revivals, and has been a feature of several twentieth century schools: the Georgians, Neo-Romantics, the Movement poets and the New Formalists.

Free verse is a very confused field, not properly understood or linguistically mapped. {4} Its adoption may be more about pamphleteering and cultural aspects than poetic ends. Some of the speech rhythms claimed as 'superior to metre' are not rhythms at all but an enviable dexterity in idiomatic expression. Some are loose assemblages of rhythmic expression to no constant base, and some an endearing tribute to their author's performance skills.

Why use the device? Because metre creates and organises content, giving emphasis to words or elements that would otherwise escape attention: the tighter the metre, the more expressive can be small departures from the norm. Metre gives dignity and memorability, conveying tempo, mood, the



subtle shifts in evidence, passion and persuasion beyond what is possible in prose. In the hands of a great master like Shakespeare, metre provides grace, energy, elevation, expressiveness and a convincing approximation to everyday speech.

But metre is not diametrically opposed to free verse. Many contemporary poets write both, or served an apprenticeship in strict forms before creating something closer to their needs. Nonetheless, in the absence of this ability to highlight and compound meaning, free verse is often driven to expand in other directions. It prizes a convincing exactness of idiomatic expression, the line seeming exactly right in the circumstances: appropriate, authentic and sincere. It operates closely with syntax. It adopts a challenging layout on the page where line and syntax are rearranged to evade or exploit the usual expectations.

## Metre in Practice

Poems need some supporting structure, and that in turn requires a decision: should you go for free verse or tackle the more demanding traditional forms?

Traditional metre and stanza shaping confer certain advantages, and certain disadvantages. They:

1. Please the reader by their display of skill, their variety within order, their continuity with the admired literature of the past.
2. Help the actual writing of the poem, either by invoking words from the unconscious, or by pushing the poem in new directions to escape the limitations of the form.
3. Provide a sense of completeness impossible in free verse. The author knows when the last word clicks into place.
4. Enforce dignity, emotional power and density of meaning.
5. Are more memorable.

The difficulties are equally apparent. Strict forms are:

1. Taxing to write, requiring inordinate amounts of time, plus literary skills not given to everyone.
2. Much more likely to go wrong and expose the blundering incompetence of their author.
3. Inappropriate to the throwaway nature of much of contemporary life.
4. More difficult to place in the small presses.

Firstly, if, as we have said, poets write more by ear than rules, what's to be gained by formal study? Four answers:

1. Rules govern many art forms music, painting, choreography, etc. and are seen as aids to creation once they are so thoroughly ingested as to be second nature. Indeed, without some rules, art fails to be art and becomes instead a perplexity to everyone, not least its practitioners.
2. Poetry is now fragmented into diverse schools, each claiming indisputable truth. As rhythmic expressions are often made into shibboleths, the sensible writer will want an understanding of the issues, so as to choose between the rival claims.
3. Study sharpens the ear, and will locate examples useful to the practising poet.

Rhythm in poetry can be treated in many different ways. In fact, there exist no fewer than sixteen different theories. Most are in use by literary criticism (though not on this book, which adopts the simplest of notations), and each theory adds depth and significance to the others.

## 1.5. TYPES OF POETRY

What exactly is poetry? Dictionaries generally offer something like: the expression or embodiment of beautiful or elevated thought, imagination or feeling in language adapted to stir the imagination and the emotions.

But if this expresses the expectations of the man in the street, it doesn't describe the aims of most poets working today, nor take us far in appreciating the variety of past work.

### 1.5.1. Traditional Poetry

Traditionalists generally believe that poems give enduring and universal life to what was merely transitory and particular. Through them, the poet expresses his vision, real or imaginative, and he does so in forms that are intelligible and pleasurable to others, and likely to arouse emotions akin to his own. Poetry is language organised for aesthetic purposes. Whatever else it does, poetry must bear witness, must fulfil the cry: 'let not my heart forget what mine eyes have seen.' A poem is distinguished by the feeling that dictates it and that which it communicates, by the economy and resonance of its language, and by the imaginative power that integrates, intensifies and enhances experience. Poems bear some relationship to real life but are equally autonomous and independent entities that contain within themselves the reason why they are so and not otherwise. Unlike discourse, which proceeds by logical steps, poetry is intuited whole as a presentiment of thought and/or feeling. Workaday prose is an abbreviation of reality: poetry is its intensification. Poems have a transcendental quality: there is a sudden transformation through which words assume a particular importance. Like a bar of music, or a small element in a holographic image, a phrase in a poem has the power to immediately call up whole

ranges of possibilities and expectations. Art is a way of knowing, and is valuable in proportion to the justice with which it evaluates that knowledge. Poetry is an embodiment of human values, not a kind of syntax. True symbolism in poetry allows the particular to represent the more general, not as a dream or shadow, but as the momentary, living revelation of the inscrutable.

The poet's task is to resurrect the outer, transient and perishable world within himself, to transform it into something much more real. He must recognize pattern wherever he sees it, and build his perceptions into poetic form that has the coherence and urgency to persuade us of its truth: the intellectual has to be fused with the sensuous meaning. All poets borrow, but where good poets improve on their borrowing, the bad debase. The greatness of the poet is measurable by the real significance of the resemblances on which he builds, the depth of the roots in the constitution, if not of the physical world, then of the moral and emotional nature of man.

Poetry can be verse or prose. Verse has a strong metrical element. An inner music is the soul of poetry. Poetry withers and dries out when it leaves music, or at least some imagined music, too far behind. The diction of poetry is a fiction, neither that of the speaker nor the audience. Without its contrivance poetry is still possible, but is immensely poorer. Subtly the vocabulary of poetry changes with the period, but words too familiar or too remote defeat the purpose of the poet. {1}

## Traditional Aesthetics

Can these widely different views be bridged? Definitions are tricky matters, especially in art, but could we not analyse successful works of art and identify their common features? So attempts aesthetics, {2} which recognizes the following:

### Representation

What is the first task of art? To represent. Words certainly do not stand in simple one to one relationships with objects, and there's no doubt that codes, complex social transactions, and understandings between speakers play a part in the process. But if literature of all types — written, spoken, colloquial, formal — reconstitutes the world according to its own rules, those rules are also constrained by our sense perceptions and social needs.

### Emotional Expression

We also expect art to move us. Whether that emotion is what the artist originally felt, or what he subsequently induces in us through the artwork, is a debated point. But make us feel something a poem must, and we cannot begin an appraisal until we have that first response.

## Autonomy

Beauty is a term unfashionable today, and troublesome to the contemporary philosopher, but there remains organisation — internal consistency, coherence, a selection and shaping of elements that seems to make art an autonomous and self-enclosing entity. Is that aesthetic separation required? Post-modernists say not, but most commentators have thought art was something different from life, and that a host of qualities — harmony in variety, detachment, balance, luminous wholeness, organic coherence, interacting inevitability, etc. — allowed art to provide something different from our everyday experience.

## Social Purpose

But art is not entirely consolation or private pleasure. Artworks are social objects. We wouldn't fund the arts, or honour artists, unless they served some further end. Marxists believe that art should not only represent the economic facts of life, but also improve them. And even conservatives would accept that poems give us some understanding of the world, can make us more tolerant and perceptive, shake us out of stock responses, perhaps even give our lives some overall purpose and significance. {4}

## Traditional Poetry Today

Traditionalists see themselves in a difficult position. Criticism, which was useful to them in opening doors to new approaches and poets, has been taken over by literary theory, which espouses different objectives. The *New Formalism*, which shares their interest in craft, tends to march poems up and down in strict iambic beat, or to suppose that prosaic thought expressed as verse automatically becomes poetry. Many of the prestigious small presses will not take traditional work, or show by the pieces they do publish that they have no ear or soul for poetry. On the other side lie the vast plains of amateurism, well-intentioned efforts on the whole, giving the odd success, but with talent spread so thin that poetry itself is given a bad name.

Writers may be competitive creatures, but the traditionalists do not generally have a quarrel with later schools, whose manifestos they find interesting if not wholly convincing. They can see why Modernists believe that poems should not represent, but be. That they are structures of meaning with those meanings conveyed only through language. That once created, poems have an existence independent of the author's intentions, of the historical context or any social purpose. That poems are in some sense fictions and not representations of reality, though they may give significance, value and order to our perceptions. That they have the ability to hold something in the mind with uncommon sensitivity, with uncommon exactness, and to hold it there by attention to the language in which they're formulated. Yes, and that language catalyses, interpenetrates and modifies what is said. Perhaps even that a new reality is created, often by metaphors, which have an outward-ringing quality. Poetry does not simply illustrate a concept, but give it a new life and larger dimensions. A

man is a poet if the difficulties of his craft provide him with inspiration, and not a poet if these difficulties deprive him of opportunities. {3} Yes, to all these they have no objection.

Of Postmodernism in its various manifestations — minimalism, conceptualism, performance art, improvised happenings — they are more wary. Perhaps Postmodernist poems do negate themselves by appearing to strive for autonomy but then dislocating that autonomy by shifting genre boundaries, fragmentation and montage. Perhaps language is ultimately ambiguous, when poetry is a special locus of unreality, poems accepting and exploiting that ambiguity, and to that extent becoming the most authentic of literary creations. Perhaps content is created by language, and meaning is simply the play of forms. Texts cannot know themselves, and it is the reader who has the final say on interpretation, no interpretation being final or better than another. More important than any outward organic unity is the dissonance, complexity, athwartness, estrangements and lacunae that specialized reading will discern in a poem. {4} All very interesting, traditionalists feel. But then they look at Postmodernist collections that receive rave reviews and see mere novelty, pieces that are clever but ultimately trivial and disheartening, what they might produce themselves if they forgot what poetry is or was.

## Looking Ahead

Though literature of the last century turned away from the findings of pure and social science — if not from life altogether — research in many areas of pure and applied science is beginning to place traditional poetry in context, to show the basic rightness of its intuitions. Study of complex systems suggests, for example, that art is important for the patterning it creates from chaos — i.e. it is not the order nor the chaos per se that are important, but the growth of one from the other. Poems therefore have to be fought for: they are continually asserting themselves against the obscure, the incoherent, the dark forces of our instinctive natures. The greatest poems do not necessarily derive from the most obviously felt emotions, but are made from deep strands of intellectual and emotional instability in society and individual character.

Then we have the expanding field of metaphor research, whose findings echo the sustained search for foundations in the other great areas of human endeavour: mathematics, linguistics, philosophy and science. Man is a complex creature, and his truest experiences are not to be wholly encompassed by rational systems. As the classical world accepted, man's nature is also instinctive and physiological. Traditional poetry operates through language used in its widest remit, and that language, having been fashioned by trial and error over millennia, must inevitably hold man's truest needs and longings.

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### 1.5.2. Modernism: Overview

Modernism is where we are now, broadly speaking, if we include Postmodernism and experimental poetry. Modernist poetry is the poetry written in schools and poetry workshops, published by innumerable small presses, and reviewed by serious newspapers and literary journals — a highbrow, coterie poetry that isn't popular and doesn't profess to be. To its devotees, Modernist styles are the only way of dealing with contemporary matters, and they do not see them as a specialized development of traditional poetry, small elements being pushed in unusual directions, and sometimes extended beyond the limits of ready comprehension.

The key elements of Modernist poems are experimentation, anti-realism, individualism and a stress on the cerebral rather than emotive aspects. Previous writing was thought to be stereotyped, requiring ceaseless experimentation and rejection of old forms. Poetry should represent itself, or the writer's inner nature, rather than hold up a mirror to nature. Indeed the poet's vision was all-important, however much it cut him off from society or the scientific concerns of the day. Poets belonged to an aristocracy of the avant-garde, and cool observation, detachment and avoidance of simple formulations were essential.

Poststructuralist theories came in many embodiments, but shared a preoccupation with language. Reality is not mediated by what we read or write, but is entirely constituted by those actions. We don't therefore look at the world *through* a poem, and ask whether the representation is true or adequate or appropriate, but focus *on* the devices and strategies within the text itself. Modernist theory urged us to overlook the irrelevancies of author's intention, historical conventions and social context to assess the aesthetic unity of the poem. Poststructuralist criticism discounts any such unity, and urges us to accept a looser view of art, one that accords more with everyday realities and shows how language suppresses alternative views, particularly those of the socially or politically disadvantaged.

Experimental poetry pushes the process further, taking its inspiration from advertising, and deploying words as graphic elements.

Modernism has no precise boundaries. At its strictest, in Anglo-American literature, the period runs from 1890 to 1920 and includes Joyce, Pound, Eliot and Wyndham Lewis among many others. {1} But few of its writers shared common aims, and the term was applied retrospectively. {2} Very largely, the themes of Modernism begin well back in the nineteenth century, and many do not reach full expression until the latter half of the twentieth century, so that Modernism is better regarded as part of a broad plexus of concerns which are variably represented in a hundred and twenty years of European writing. {3}

Modernism is a useful term because writing in the period, especially that venerated by academia and by literary critics, is intellectually challenging, which makes it suitable for undergraduate study. {4} Many serious writers come from university, moreover, and set sail by Modernism's charts, so that the assumptions need to be understood to appreciate contemporary work of any type. {5} And quite different from these is the growing suspicion that contemporary writing has lost its way, which suggests that we may see where alternatives lie if we understand Modernism better. {6}

### Features of Modernism

To varying extents, writing of the Modernist period exhibits these features:

#### 1. experimentation

- belief that previous writing was stereotyped and inadequate
- ceaseless technical innovation, sometimes for its own sake
- originality: deviation from the norm, or from usual reader expectations
- ruthless rejection of the past, even iconoclasm

#### 2. anti-realism

- sacralization of art, which must represent itself, not something beyond
- preference for allusion (often private) rather than description
- world seen through the artist's inner feelings and mental states
- themes and vantage points chosen to question the conventional view
- use of myth and unconscious forces rather than motivations of conventional plot

### 3. individualism

- promotion of the artist's viewpoint, at the expense of the communal
- cultivation of an individual consciousness, which alone is the final arbiter
- estrangement from religion, nature, science, economy or social mechanisms
- maintenance of a wary intellectual independence
- artists and not society should judge the arts: extreme self-consciousness
- search for the primary image, devoid of comment: stream of consciousness
- exclusiveness, an aristocracy of the avant-garde

### 4. intellectualism

- writing more cerebral than emotional
- work is tentative, analytical and fragmentary, more posing questions than answering them
- cool observation: viewpoints and characters detached and depersonalised
- open-ended work, not finished, nor aiming at formal perfection
- involuted: the subject is often the act of writing itself and not the ostensible referent

#### 1.5.3. Postmodernist Poetry

Whereas Classicism, Realism and Romanticism all deal with the outside world, contemporary literature, by contrast, is commonly a retreat into the writer's consciousness — to make autonomous creations that incorporate diverse aspects of modern life (Modernism), or free-wheeling creations constructed of a language that largely points to itself (Postmodernism).



Postmodernism began in the sixties, when there developed on both sides of the Atlantic a feeling that poetry had become too ossified, backward-looking and restrained. {1} The old avant-garde had become respectable, replacing one orthodoxy by another. The poetry commended by the *New Criticism* — and indeed written by its teachers — was self-contained, coherent and paradoxical. Certainly it was clever, with striking imagery, symbolism and structural economy, but it was also far too predictable. Where were the technical innovations of the early Modernists? Where were the alternatives to capitalism and the modern state that feature in Pound's or Lawrence's thought? And if contrary movements existed, they seemed disorganised. The UK might have its neo-Romantics, and a reaction to them, and in Europe were Milosz, Kundera, Ponge and Herbert, but there was no common purpose in these figures, and no common philosophy to give them intellectual standing. Into this vacuum came radical theory, and the generally Left-leaning theories of literature.

## Features of Postmodernism

Most conspicuously in the visual arts, but shown to varying degrees in novels and poetry, Postmodernism has these four features: {2}

### 1. iconoclasm:

- decanonizes cultural standards, previous artworks and authorities
- denies authority to the author, discounting his intentions and his claim to act as spokesman for a period
- contradicts the expected, often deliberately alienating the reader
- subverts its sources by parody, irony and pastiche
- denounces ethnic, gender and cultural repression
- strips context, reducing content to an austere minimum
- broods on the human condition disclosed by radical literary theory

### 2. groundless:

- employs flat, media-like images that have no reference beyond themselves
- champions the primary, unmediated but not sensuous
- regards both art and life as fictions, sometimes mixing the two in magic realism or multiple endings
- argues that meaning is indeterminate, denying a final or preferred interpretation

### 3. formlessness:

- repudiates Modernism's preoccupation with harmony and organic form

- narrows the aesthetic distance, art being something to enter into or act out rather than simply admire
- fragments texts, turning them into collages or montages
- avoids the shaping power of metaphor and other literary tropes
- mixes genres with pastiche, travesty and cliché
- promotes the fluid and socially adaptable

#### 4. populism:

- employs material from a wide social spectrum
- eschews elitist, literary language
- avoids the serious and responsible, promoting the arbitrary and playful
- accepts media images as the most accessible contemporary reality, making these the building blocks of art

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## 1.6. AESTHETICS

Many artists feel uncomfortable with aesthetics, but since its terms feature so prominently in radical theory, and radical theory influences current assessments of poems and movements, it may help to know the fundamentals.

Aesthetics is the philosophy of art. Though not amenable to definition, art can be analysed under various headings — representation, coherent form, emotive expression and social purpose.

Aesthetics analyses and attempts to answer such questions as: What is art? How do we recognize it? How do we judge it? What purposes do artworks serve? {1}

Why should we want to ask such questions at all? Well, firstly there is intellectual curiosity. Other professions are clear about their aims, so why not art? And if, as we shall see, there are no definitive answers, nothing that does not beg further questions, we may nonetheless gain insights into an activity that is human but very perplexing. Moreover, there are practical considerations. Daily in magazines, performances and exhibitions the frontiers of art are being extended, and about some of these efforts hangs the suspicion of a leg-pull, empty pretension, fraud on a long-suffering public. {2} If we ask: Is this *really* art, very often we are met with the retort: prove otherwise. Art is as it is, and you are just too dumb, bourgeois or ill-educated to understand that. If we could somehow draw a line, a cordon sanitaire, around true artistic expression, we could ensure that the lion's share of art funding went to the better candidates — the sincere, the dedicated and the gifted who made a contribution to society. Surely real artists would not object, when the blind seem sometimes to be leading the blind?

Art is vastly oversupplied. Only the smallest percentage support themselves solely through their work, leaving the great majority to teach, review, or take menial part-time jobs. Such a situation would be monstrous in other professions. Lawyers, scientists, doctors, etc. have organised themselves into guilds with career structures, rates of pay, and a clear articulation of their public roles. Their communities share knowledge: the fruits of countless lifetimes of effort are tested, codified, and made ready for immediate application. Not for them to reinvent the wheel, or to venture forth without traditions, working practices and the helping hand of master to journeyman right to the base of the tree. Art may be marginalized in today's technological and consumerist society, but a clear notion of its objectives might help it back into the fold. {3}

## Definitions of Art

So, what is art? What (to adopt the philosopher's approach) are its necessary and sufficient conditions? Many have been proposed — countless, stretching back to ancient Greece — but one of the most complete is that of Tatarkiewicz. His six conditions are: beauty, form, representation, reproduction of reality, artistic expression and innovation. Unfortunately, it is difficult to pin these terms down sufficiently, to incorporate them into necessary and sufficient conditions — do they *all* have to be present? — and what about quality? Even in the most hackneyed piece of commercial art we shall find these conditions satisfied to *some* extent. How do we specify the *sufficient* extent? {4} By common agreement, a consensus of public taste?

Take a less time-bound view and consider art down the ages? Then we have problems of shifting boundaries and expectations. The Greeks did not distinguish between art and craft, but used the one word, *techné*, and judged achievement on goodness of use. In fact not until 1746 did Charles Batteux separate the fine arts from the mechanical arts, and only in the last hundred years has such stress been laid on originality and personal expression. Must we then abandon the search for definitions, and look closer at social agreements and expectations? That would be a defeat for rationality, philosophers might feel — it being their role to arrive at clear, abstract statements that are true regardless of place or speaker. But perhaps (as Strawson and others have remarked) art may be one of those fundamental categories that cannot be analysed further, cannot be broken into more basic terms. And there is always Wittgenstein's scepticism about definitions — that terms commonly have a plexus of overlapping applications, meaning lying in the ways words are used, and not in any fiat of God or philosophers.

## Aesthetic Qualities

Suppose, to take Wittgenstein's scepticism further, we dropped the search for definitions but looked to the characteristics of art, the effects and properties that were needed in large measure for something to establish itself as 'art'. What would they be? One would be beauty, surely — i.e. proportion, symmetry, order in variety that pleases. Beauty therefore comes down to feelings — not individual and transient feelings necessarily, but matters that ultimately cannot be rationalized? Yes, said David Hume and George Santayana. But then, said Wittgenstein, we should have to deny that aesthetic descriptions had any objectivity at all, which is surely untrue. We may not know whether to call some writing 'plodding' or simply 'slow-moving', but we don't call it energetic.

Very well, do we need to enquire further into beauty? Probably, since it is a term useful and universal. {5} But contemporary philosophers have great difficulties in analysing the term properly — i.e. into abstract, freestanding propositions that are eternally true. Art certainly speaks to us down the ages, and we should like to think it was through a common notion of beauty. But look at

examples. We revere the sculpture of fourth century Athens, but the Middle ages did not. We prefer those marbles in their current white purity whereas in fact the Greeks painted them as garishly as fairground models. We cannot, it appears, ignore the context of art, and indeed have to show *how* the context contributes. Clearly, beauty is not made to a recipe, and if individual artworks have beauty, they do not *exemplify* some abstract notion of it.

## Dangers of Aesthetics

Artists have therefore been chary of aesthetics, feeling that art is too various and protean to conform to rules. Theory should not lead practice, they feel, but follow at a respectful distance. Put the cart before the horse and theory will more restrict than inform or inspire. Moreover professionals — those who live by words, and correspondingly have to make words live for them — are unimpressed by the cumbersome and opaque style of academia. Any directive couched in such language seems very dubious. For surely literature is not made according to rules, but the rules are deduced from literature — rationalized from good works of art to understand better what they have in common. And if theorists (philosophers, sociologists, linguists, etc.) do not have a strongly developed aesthetic sense — which, alas, they often demonstrate — then their theories are simply beside the point.

But theory need not be that way. Rather than prescribe, it may clarify. No doubt, as Russell once wryly observed, philosophy starts by questioning what no one would seriously doubt, and ends in asserting what no one can believe, but creative literature is not without its own shortcomings. Much could be learnt by informed debate between the disciplines, and a willingness of parties to look through each other's spectacles. Obtuse and abstract as it may be, philosophy does push doggedly on, arriving at viewpoints that illuminate some aspects of art.

## Art as Representation

What is the first task of art? To represent. {6} Yes, there is abstract painting, and music represents nothing unless it be feelings in symbolic form, but literature has always possessed an element of mimesis, copying, representation. Attempts are periodically made to purge literature of this matter-of-fact, utilitarian end — Persian mysticism, haiku evocation, *poesie pure*, etc. — but representation always returns.

How is the representation achieved? No one supposes it is a simple matter, or that codes, complex social transactions, understandings between speakers, genre requirements etc. do not play a large if somewhat unfathomed part. Our understanding is always shaping our experiences, and there is no direct apprehension of chair, table, apple in the simple-minded way that the Logical Positivists sometimes asserted. Words likewise do not stand in one-to-one relationships to objects, but belong to a community of relationships — are part,

very often, of a dialogue that writing carries on with other writings. Even when we point and say 'that is a chair', a wealth of understandings underlies this simple action — most obviously in the grammar and behavioural expectations. The analytical schools have investigated truth and meaning to an extent unimaginable to the philosophically untutored. They have tried to remove the figurative, and to represent matters in propositional language that verges on logic. Very technical procedures have been adopted to sidestep paradoxes, and a universal grammar has been proposed to explain and to some extent replace the ad hoc manner in which language is made and used. Thousands of man-lives have gone into these attempts, which aim essentially to fashion an ordered, logically transparent language that will clarify and possibly resolve the questions philosophers feel impelled to ask.

Much has been learnt, and it would be uncharitable to call the enterprise a failure. Yet language has largely evaded capture in this way, and few philosophers now think the objectives are attainable. Even had the goals been gained, there would still have remained the task of mapping our figurative, everyday use of language onto this logically pure language. And of justifying the logic of that language, which is not the self-evident matter sometimes supposed. There are many forms of logic, each with its strengths and limitations, and even mathematics, that most intellectually secure of human creations, suffers from lacunae, areas of overlap and uncertainties. But that is not a cause for despair. Or for embracing the irrationalism of the Poststructuralists who assert that language is a closed system — an endless web of word — associations, each interpretation no more justified than the next. But it does remind us that language becomes available to us through the medium in which it is formulated. And that literature of all types — written, spoken, colloquial, formal — incorporates reality, but reconstitutes it according to its own rules.

## Art as Emotional Expression

Let's return to simpler matters. Art is emotionally alive. We are delighted, elated, filled with a bitter sweetness of sorrow, etc., rejecting as sterile anything that fails to move us. But are these the actual emotions that the artist has felt and sought to convey? It is difficult to know. Clearly we can't see into the minds of artists — not in the case of dead artists who have left no explanatory notes, and not generally in contemporary cases where artists find their feelings emerge in the making of the artwork. Then, secondly, we wouldn't measure the greatness of art by the intensity of emotion — unless we accept that a football match is a greater work of art than a Shakespeare play. And thirdly there is the inconvenient but well-known fact that artists work on 'happy' and 'sad' episodes simultaneously. They feel and shape the emotion generated by their work, but are not faithfully expressing some pre-existing emotion. {7}

Some theorists have in fact seen art more as an escape from feeling. Neurotic artists find their work therapeutic, and hope the disturbance and healing will



also work its power on the audience. And if Aristotle famously spoke of the catharsis of tragedy, did he mean arousing emotions or releasing them — i.e. do artists express their own emotions or evoke something appropriate from the audience? Most would say the latter since raw, truthful, sincere emotion is often very uncomfortable, as in the brute sex act or the TV appeal by distraught parents. Whatever the case, art is clearly a good deal more than emotional expression, and at least requires other features: full and sensitive representation, pleasing and appropriate form, significance and depth of content.

## Form and Beauty: The Autonomy of Art

And so we come to form. Beauty we have glanced at, but if we drop that term, so troublesome and unfashionable today, there remains organisation: internal consistency, coherence, a selection and shaping of elements to please us. And please us the art object must — genuinely, immediately, irrationally — by the very way it presents itself. How exactly? Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Croce, and dozens of contemporary philosophers have all made important contributions, but the variety of art makes generalization difficult, and explanations are naturally couched in the philosophic concerns of the time.

But something can be said. Art presents itself as an autonomous, self-enclosing entity. The stage, picture frame, etc. give an aesthetic distance, tell us that what is shown or enacted serves no practical end, and is not to be judged so. We are drawn in — engrossed, enraptured — but we are also free to step back and admire the crafting, to exercise our imagination, and to enjoy disinterestedly what can be more complete and vivid than real life. {8} Is this autonomy necessary? Until the present century most artists and commentators said yes. They believed that harmony in variety, detachment, balance, luminous wholeness, organic coherence, interacting inevitability and a host of other aspects were important, perhaps essential. Many contemporary artists do not. They seek to confront, engage in non-aesthetic ways with their public, to bring art out into the streets. Successfully, or so the trendier critics would persuade us, though the public remains sceptical. Modernism is taught in state schools, but Postmodernism has yet to win acceptance. {9}

## Art as a Purposive Activity

Art, says the tax-paying citizen, is surely not entertainment, or not wholly so. Artists aim at some altruistic and larger purpose, or we should not fete them in the media and in academic publications. We don't want to be preached at, but artists reflect their times, which means that their productions give us the opportunity to see our surroundings more clearly, comprehensively and affectionately. And not only to see, say Marxist and politically orientated commentators, but to change. Art has very real responsibilities, perhaps even to fight male chauvinism, ethnic prejudice, third-world exploitation, believe the politically correct. {10}

## Artist-Centred Philosophies

With the advent of psychology, and the means of examining the physiological processes of the human animal, one focus of attention has become the artist himself. Indeed, Benedetto Croce and R.G. Collingwood felt that the work of art was created in the artist's mind, the transposing of it to paper or music or canvas being subsidiary and unimportant. But the transposing is for most artists the very nature of their art, and few conceive their work completely and exactly beforehand. John Dewey stressed that knowledge was acquired through doing, and that the artist's intentions were both modified and inspired by the medium concerned. For Suzanne Langer the artist's feelings *emerged* with the forms of expression — which were not feelings expressed but ideas of feeling: part of a vast stock which the artist draws on, combines and modifies. Of course there is always something inexplicable, even magical, about good writing. It just came to me, says the writer: the words wrote themselves. That and the intertextuality of writing — that writing calls on and borrows from other pieces of writing, establishing itself within a community of understandings and conventions — led Roland Barthes to assert that the writer does not exist, that writing writes itself. Certainly writing is inextricably part of thinking, and we do not have something in our minds that we later clothe in words. But most writing needs shaping, reconsidering, rewriting, so that the author is not some passive, spiritualist medium. Moreover, though we judge the finished work, and not the writer's intentions (supposing we could ever know them exactly) it is common knowledge that writers often have a small stock of themes which they constantly extract and rework: themes which are present in their earliest efforts and which do indeed reflect or draw substance from their experiences. Biography, social history and psychology do tell us something about artistic creations. {11}

## Viewer-Centred Philosophies

Given that artists find themselves through their work, and do not know until afterwards what they had in mind, it may be wiser to look at art from the outside, from the viewer's perspective. We expect literature, for example, to hold something in the mind with particular sensitivity and exactness, and to hold it there by attention to the language in which it is formulated. Special criteria can apply. We feel terror and pity in the theatre, but are distanced, understanding that they call for no action on our part. We obey the requirements of genre and social expectations, making a speech on a public platform being very different from what we say casually to friends. We look for certain formal qualities in art — exactness, balance, vivid evocation, etc. — and expect these qualities to grow naturally from inside rather than be imposed from without. We realize that art produces a pleasure different from intellectual or sensuous one — unreflective enjoyment, but one also pregnant with important matters. Change one feature and we know instinctively that something is wrong. How? Perhaps as we instinctively detect a lapse in grammar, by referring to tacit rules or codes. Nelson Goodman argued that art was essentially a system of denotation,

a set of symbols, even a code that we unravel, the code arbitrary but made powerful by repeated practice. {12} Edwin Panofsky suggested that symbols could be studied on three levels — iconic (the dog resembles a dog), iconographic (the dog stands for loyalty) or iconological (the dog represents some metaphysical claim about the reality of the physical world). {13} Hence the importance of a wide understanding of the artist and his times. And why no appeals to good intentions, or to morally uplifting content, will reason us into liking something that does not really appeal.

## Art as Social Objects

But can we suppose that content doesn't matter? Not in the end. Art of the Third Reich and of communist Russia is often technically good, but we don't take it to our hearts. Marxist philosophers argue that art is the product of social conditions, and John Berger, for example, regarded oil paintings as commodities enshrining values a consumerist society. {14} Hermeneutists argue that the art produced by societies allows them to understand themselves — so that we have devastating judgements skulking in the wartime portraits of Hitler, and in scenes of a toiling but grateful Russian proletariat. They are untrue in a way obvious to everyone.

But if society ultimately makes the judgements, who in society decides which artistic expressions it will commission and support? Not everyone. Appreciation requires experience and training — in making quality judgements, and in deciding the criteria. Some criteria can be variable (subject matter), some are standard (music is not painting) and some are decided by the history of the art or genre in question (paintings are static and two-dimensional). But additionally there are questions of authority and status. Institutionalists like George Dickie say simply that an object becomes art when approved sections of society confer that status on it. {15} But that only shifts the question: how can we be sure such sections are not furthering their careers in the cosy world of money, media and hype? Ted Cohen could not really find such rituals of conferral, {16} and Richard Wollheim wanted the reasons for such conferral: what were they exactly? {17} Arthur Danto introduced the term 'artworld', but emphasized that successful candidates had to conform to current theories of art. Individual or arbitrary fiats were not persuasive. {18}

But are there not more important considerations? However portrayed in the popular press, artists lead hard lives, for the most part solitary, unrecognised and unrewarded. What drives them on? Vanity in part, and deep personal problems — plus, it may be, a wish to overcome feelings of inadequacy deriving from youth or the home background. But artists are not always more febrile or bohemian than others, or at least the evidence of them being so is open to question. {19} When asked, artists usually speak of some desire to make sense of themselves and their surroundings. They feel a little apart from life, and do not understand why the public can skim over the surface, never troubling itself with the deep questions that cause elation, anguish and won-

der. Literature, say writers, brings them experiences saturated with meaning, in which they perceive the fittingness of the world and their own place within it. The concepts of their own vision are inescapably theirs, and they can only hope these concepts are also important to the society from which they draw their support and inspiration.

## Conclusions

We have come a long way, but only scratched the surface of aesthetics. Large sections (the non-representational arts, the ontology of art objects, the history of aesthetics) have not received even a mention. But here are the starting points at least for further reading in the difficult but very rewarding original sources. Also the beginnings of answers to questions that surface continually in the writing and appraisal of poetry: What do poems attempt? Why don't the strongest feelings produce the best writing? Why is originality important, but not all-important? Why is poetry so marginalized in contemporary society, and what can be done to correct matters?

The answers will not be definitive. Philosophy does not finally settle anything, but can untangle the issues involved, suggest what has to be argued or given away if a certain position is held. Philosophical questions pass ultimately beyond rational argument (the finding of bad reasons for what we instinctively believe, one philosopher called his subject) into preferences, outlooks, and experiences. It would be surprising if they didn't. And more surprising if we could use one small part of our faculties to explain the rest, though that is very much what mathematics, science, logic and linguistic philosophy have attempted. But if reason has its dangers, the sleep of reason may be worse.

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6. Crispin Sartwell's *Representation* entry in Cooper 1995, Chapter 6 of Hanfling 1992, and Chapters 6 and 7 of Passmore 1991.
7. Chapter 5 of Hanfling 1992, and Malcolm Budd's *Emotion* entry in Cooper 1995.
8. Crispin Sartwell's *Realism* entry in Cooper 1995.

9. Ihab Hassan's *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture*. (1987).
10. Chapter 11 of Hanfling 1992.
11. Chapter 10 of George Watson's *The Literary Critics* (1986).
12. Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art* (1968).
13. Edwin Panofsky's *Iconology and iconography: An introduction to the study of Renaissance art* in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (1970). Also John Hyman's *Language and Pictorial Art* entry in Cooper 1995.
14. Passmore 1991, pp 24-25.
15. George Dickie's *Art and the Aesthetic* (1974)
16. Ted Cohen's *Aesthetic and Non-Aesthetic* (1973).
17. Richard Wollheim's *Art and its Objects* (1980).
18. A.C. Danto's *The Artworld* (1973). Also Chapter 1 of Hanfling 1992 for references 15-18.

## Internet Resources

1. *American Society of Aesthetics*. <http://www.aesthetics-online.org/>. Free samples of papers; otherwise \$70/year subscription, which includes back issues in electronic form. Excellent listing of aesthetics resources and web-sites.
2. *Aesthetic Interestedness and the Uncertainty Principle in Musical Meaning*. Richard Stains. 1998-2001.  
<http://www.richardstaines.org.uk/interestedness.htm>. Urges a multi-disciplinary approach, one that recognises psychological and sociological perspectives.
3. *Canadian Aesthetics Journal*. <http://www.uqtr.quebec.ca/AE> . Free online papers from Spring 1996.
4. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*.  
<http://www.journalofaestheticsandprotest.org/> . Online journal for the counter-culture in politics and aesthetics.
5. *Aesthetics and Visual Culture*.  
<http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu/~janzb/aesthetics/>. Emphasis on the visual arts, but providing a good listing of sites.
6. *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/> . Free online encyclopaedia, with good search facilities and detailed entries.
7. *Ethical Aspects of Aesthetics*.  
<http://www.infography.com/content/411158825462.html> . Select listing of books and sites.
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## 2. GENRE AND STYLE

If you're commissioned to write a piece for a popular golfing magazine, the editor will not expect the bland prose of 'corporation-speak', nor to have the piece interlarded with literary quotations. Similarly, a thriller written as a literary novel will probably not be published in either category. Readers, critics and publishing houses like to know what they are dealing with, and the greater literary skills lavished on the crime setting will not be appreciated — quite the opposite, as they will undermine the conventions of stock characters, plots and endings. Poetry lovers are equally creatures of habit, and their reading is through various conventions. An experimental poem will make no sense to devotees of the *New Formalism*, and avant-garde magazines will reject the rhyming poem as a pointless and inauthentic exercise.

Beginners are therefore advised to study the market before submitting: not simply skim through a few web pages but actually purchase the magazines concerned, studying them carefully. Professionals generally go one step further, and write with a certain magazine in mind. That may seem cynical, but the exercise of crafting to a particular style or format is a valuable one, enabling poets to see their work in contemporary context. For a similar reason, professionals also give up their limited time to workshops, not only to renew contacts, but to trim their work to catch the winds of fresh concerns and enthusiasms.

This section can only be the briefest introduction to what is an immense field, but readers may wish to consult the short list of introductory books below, and to follow the links to Internet sites for explanation and illustration.

### 2.1. GENRES

A broad classification is still useful.

#### :Epic

An epic poem is a long poem narrating the heroic exploits of an individual in a way central to the beliefs and culture of his or her society. Typical elements are fabulous adventures, superhuman deeds, polyphonic composition, majestic language and a craftsmanship deploying the full range of literary devices, from lyrical to dramatic. Nonetheless, the first epics — *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* — were created and transmitted orally, a tradition still seen in Serbian guslars and storytellers throughout Asia.

Epic poetry was counted among man's noblest creations. Gilgamesh, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Aeneid*, *Beowulf*, *Poema de mio Cid*, *La Chanson de Roland*, *Divine Comedy*, *Jerusalem Delivered*, *Orlando Furiosa*, *os*

*Lusiádas*, *Faerie Queen*, and *Paradise Lost* are still read with admiration and enthusiasm. Some long poems are better called mock heroic or satire — *The Rape of Lock*, *Don Juan*, — and others are magnificent failures: *Prelude*, *Hyperion*, *Idylls of the King*, Pound's *Cantos*. There is also the pastoral tradition, from Theocritus through *Virgil* to Milton and others, but the setting is an idealized landscape and the heroic element is missing.

With different objectives, epic poetry continues to be written by a few individuals, e.g. Ruth Mabanglo, and *Frederick Turner*. Some aspects also appear in proponents of expansive poetry and the long poem — broad perspectives, significant non-confessional content, strong narrative and dramatic elements. Readers may also like to see the various approaches to extended poems that feature in the work of *Walt Whitman*, *Nikos Kazantzakis*, St.-John Perse, William Carlos Williams, *Robert Pinsky*, *Ed Dorn*, *Amy Clampit*, *Adrienne Rich*, *James Merrill*, *Galway Kinnel*, *Judy Grahn*, *Derek Walcott* and *Sharon Doubiago*.

## :Dramatic

Until the *nineteenth century*, drama was commonly written in verse. Characters in the first Greek plays were gods, kings and heroes, from whom dignified expression was expected. Later playwrights also preferred verse because speech lifted so readily into a poetry by which the deeper realities of human nature could be explored. Indeed, whatever the period, given only intelligence and experience from actors and audience, verse often proved the better medium, providing a more sensitive portrayal of character, emotion and motivation than could be achieved in prose.

Much of *dramatic poetry* belongs to the literary canon. Verse is the medium of plays by Aeschylus, *Sophocles*, Euripides, *Aristophanes*, *Menander*, *Terence*, *Plautus*, *Seneca*, *Marlow*, Shakespeare, Lope de Vega, *Caldéron*, *Corneille*, *Racine*, *Molière*, Dryden, *Lessing*, *Goethe*, *Musset*, *Hugo*, *Dumas*, *Byron*, *Browning*, *Tennyson*, *Pushkin*, *Ibsen*, *Claudell*, *Yeats*, *Hauptman*, *Brecht*, *Eliot* —and many others, particularly in non-European languages. Equally wide-ranging are the verse forms: the *classical meters* of *Greek playwrights*, the iambic senarius or *trochaic septenarius* of *Latin playwrights*, Shakespearean *blank verse*, French alexandrine, Spanish redondilla and *sonnet*, *heroic couplets*, *Claudell's versicles*, and so forth, down to contemporary melanges of verse, free verse and rhythmic prose.

A remarkable number of 20th century writers in English have tried their hand at verse plays: James Elroy Fletcher, *Lascelles Abercrombie*, *Lawrence Binyon*, *John Drinkwater*, *John Masefield*, *T.S. Eliot*, Christopher Fry, *Anne Ridler*, Norman Nicholson, Arthur Miller, *Tennessee Williams*, E.E. Cummings, *Richard Eberhart*, *Archibald MacLeish*, Wallace Stevens, Albert Albee and William Carlos Williams. Only plays by *Eliot*, *MacLeish*, *Albee* and *Tennessee Williams* have enjoyed much of a commercial success, though verse has appeared in



many librettos and translations (Anne Ridler, Ronald Duncan and Richard Wilber being the best known).

## :Lyric

Lyrical poetry was originally **poetry composed to be sung**, and lyrical poetry still shows its ancestry by making the musical element part of the intrinsic content. Other forms of poetry — narrative and dramatic — may use musical elements for memorable and pleasing effects, but in lyrical poetry these elements are employed specifically to convey emotion and personal views. Little may be worth calling poetry if these elements are removed or attenuated — as too often happens in 'faithful' translations. Musical terminology has been applied to lyrical poetry, though without great success: poetry seems to have its own (complicated) rules.

The original conception of lyrical poetry is preserved in the lyrics for song, i.e. in what remains when the elements of music are stripped from popular or commercial music. Good poets in France wrote for the nightclub, but the appeal of their British or American counterparts is more in the music than the words. Very different were the songs of the Middle Ages, Renaissance, the Persian world and India. A singing element returned to Europe with the 19th and 20th century composers who set popular poetry to music — Schubert, Brahms, etc. — the musical elements making their own interpretation of the poem. In different ways, though with less sophistication, the writing of lyrics for song continues today in rap, cowboy poetry and poetry slams.

Long before Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*, lyrical poetry had developed into forms that were not intended to be sung: odes, satire, introspection, sensual longing, religious devotion. By the Renaissance, poets were composing works for publication, not individual recitation, and they had therefore to adapt the original themes, metres and imagery to a new medium of presentation. Results were marvellously varied. The 16-17th century lyrics of Shakespeare, Marvell and Milton, the Romantic lyrics of Keats, Shelley and Wordsworth, the Victorian classicism of Arnold and Tennyson, the Pre-Raphaelite melancholy of Rossetti and Dowson, the experimentation of Pound, Bishop, Robert Lowell and Wilbur — all pushed the medium in new directions and provide abundant study material.

## :Narrative

Narrative poetry was a precursor to the modern novel and many of the world's great (and still popular) stories are written in verse: *Iliad*, *Aeneid*, *Beowulf*, *Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Divine Comedy*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Fairie Queen*, *The Rape of Lock*, *Don Juan*, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Browning's *Dramatic Lyrics*, *Idylls of the King*, *Hiawatha* — to mention only



European examples. Narrative poetry presents a story or account of events, and must therefore encompass the novel's requirements.

Stories needn't be simple or linear. Half the pleasure comes from digressions, subplots, observations on life and a dozen other inconsequentialities. Narrative poems allow their author to speak with borrowed voice and viewpoint — useful for dealing with painful or novel experiences — but, more importantly, open up new **techniques** to the poet. **Plot**, dialogue, conflict, **page-turning suspense**, characterization, setting, local colour, **reader-grabbing openings** and so forth: these are not simply requirements but a way of vastly extending the territory and accomplishments of a poem.

The need to represent or bear witness enters into most **art**, but literary realism usually means a portrayal of life in all its immediately given ways, good and bad. Crabbe, **Kipling**, Frost, **Hardy** and **Larkin**, for example, wrote a down-to-earth poetry of sobriety rooted in actual perception, one that refused to sentimentalise, idealize or transfigure the everyday, and distrusted mythologizing, heightened emotions or rhetorical flourish.

Isn't story telling natural to humans? No, says the American **avant-garde**. **Narratives** impose a structure on events, and are therefore repressive. Poets like **Charles Bernstein**, **Jack Spicer**, and **Catherine French** therefore **replace** characterisation and narrative techniques by free association, mechanical or random selection devices, stress on **text only**, etc. Results are dada-like but often intriguing. Freedom is not the only aim, moreover: some avant-garde work simply tries to represent the **contemporary world** honestly, without borrowed trappings.

## 2.2. STYLES

### Classicism: Overview

Classicism is an aesthetic attitude deriving from the arts of ancient Greece and Rome, specifically an emphasis on simplicity, proportion, and restrained emotion. {1} {2} {3} {4}

Put very simply, Classicism, Realism and Romanticism all deal with the outside world, but Realism shows the world as it is, Romanticism as the heart tells us it should be, and Classicism as it would be in some ideal and public incarnation. Contemporary literature, by contrast, is commonly a retreat into the writer's consciousness — to make autonomous creations that incorporate diverse aspects of modern life (Modernism), or free-wheeling creations constructed of a language that largely points to itself (Postmodernism).

The terms are somewhat overlapping, and ill defined. Catullus, Lucretius and Horace were very different poets, for example, {5} {6} and some aspects of all forms can often be found in the more ambitious poems of the present time.

More particularly, Classicism is a term that has evolved over the centuries, often differently in different countries. The French call Classical their great literature of the seventeenth century, but German authors tend to call this Neoclassicism, i.e. constrained and derivative.

## Features

In varying degrees, Classic, Classical or Classicism is used to denote:

### 1. attitudes stemming from classical culture, particularly: {7}

simplicity: less is more if carefully chosen and crafted.

clarity: depth achieved through surface transparency.

perfection: achieved through extended, painstaking craftsmanship.

proportion: nothing to excess, aiming for beauty or pleasing aesthetic shape.

restraint: opposed to individuality of expression.

propriety: an elevated but not necessarily refined language that usually excludes the humdrum, misshapen and obscene.

### 2. forms and themes invented/developed by the classical world: {8}

genres: epic, comedy, tragedy, lyric.

conventions of these genres, e.g. Aristotle's three unities in drama.

mythology: Greek myths used throughout English literature (particularly by Modernism as an alternative to plot).

### 3. excellence

best of its kind: in language, depth of treatment and subtlety of theme.

exemplar for others: material to learn from.

standard to emulate, quarrel with or surpass.

### 4. traditional

respect for traditional forms and genres

building on achievements of celebrated authors.

pragmatic: based on experience rather than theory.

### 5. period designation

examples:

Greek writers

Alexandrian school

Roman late classical period

renaissance classicism

neoclassicism

### 6. taught in schools

academic tradition: understanding the rules before knowing how and when to break them.

an essential part of the nineteenth-century curriculum.

## Classical Attitudes

As depicted above, Classicism seems a rather dull affair, excluding the life-sustaining, colourful and original. In fact, life in the ancient world was far more precarious and violent than ours, and its language much less inhibited. Few commercial theatres will put on Aristophanes in a literal translation today, and swimming pools decorated with the pornographic images common in Roman bathhouses would be closed down.

Our concepts of epic, tragedy, drama, lyric, etc. date from antiquity, but they have only gradually taken their current form. Plato distinguished description (epic) from drama (enacted), though allowing for a mixed category. Aristotle also saw literature as a form of imitation, though he did not recognize the lyric as such. His writings are much less prescriptive than commonly supposed. It was the Alexandrians of the second century BC that undertook much of the classifying and grading of writers, but even then lyric meant poetry sung to the lyre rather than personal expression. In their enthusiasm for the ancient world, the Renaissance imposed more rigorous formulations, tending to replace what had been convenient labels with strict rules. Codification continued in French classical drama, which (wrongly) attributed 'unities of time, place and action' to Aristotle, and insisted on the most elevated language. Victor Hugo's plays were a sensible reaction, though they caused outrage at the time. Only in the nineteenth century did the lyric become poetry in its purest form, a view enshrined in Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*. {9}

## Excellence

Horace codified contemporary understandings in his *Ars poetica*, {10} stressing craftsmanship, urbanity and decorum, thereby creating the mindset with which antiquity was viewed later. Horace was the ultimate craftsman, but urbanity is not what one associates with Catullus, Juvenal or a host of Greek authors. Each age adapts to new demands, and writers in the classical tradition are as individual as those outside. Writers of consequence simply exploit a convention in ways that seemed relevant to their contemporaries, and that remain personal and authentic to them. Ultimately, it is not a question of rules or conventions, but of extending and making more pleasing and telling what seems normal at the time, which is a social matter.

## Standards

However academic or remote Classicism may seem in the contemporary art scene, it is the dominant aesthetic attitude of western culture (and even more so of Indian and Chinese cultures). Long centuries go past in which Classicism is lost or misunderstood, but the arts inexorably return to what human beings crave: significance, beauty and security, the return often being celebrated by

an outburst of creative energy. Predominantly, Classicism is the art of communities that live by accepted rules — rules that a long and often painful history has shown to be necessary. Classicism is not based on theory, therefore, but on experience: its rules generalize on past achievements. Tradition can be stifling, and artists worth the name usually innovate, test and break the rules. Nonetheless, when their work is successful, it is often by developing aspects of tradition that had been overlooked.

Classicism also underwrites popular culture. Bestsellers, soaps, Hollywood blockbusters all follow rules laid down two thousand years ago — which novel-writing software or a short course in script writing will demonstrate. Even 'slice of life' dramas are in fact carefully constructed: characters built up with motives and telling idiosyncrasies, suspense generated by time-honoured techniques, and the plot given some aesthetic shape.

## Representatives

All the great English poets show the influence of Classicism, but the following poems are often regarded as the more classical:

Ben Jonson's *An Elegy* {11}

Samuel Johnson's *The Vanity of Human Wishes* {12}

John Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* {13}

Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* {14}

Matthew Arnold's *The Scholar Gipsy* {15}

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## Romanticism

Romanticism is an aesthetic attitude born out of a late eighteenth century reaction to the Enlightenment, stressing powerful feelings, originality, the individual response and a return to nature. {1} {2} {3} {4}

To repeat a previous simplification: Classicism, Realism and Romanticism all deal with the outside world, but Realism shows the world as it is, Romanticism as the heart tells us it should be, and Classicism as it would be in some ideal incarnation.

## Features

Romanticism or the Romantic emphasizes: {5} {6}

1. emotion over reason

laws of physics are inadequate to comprehend the world

art is instinctive more than conceptual knowledge (Croce)

psychiatry (rather than experimental psychology)

quote:

'poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' (Wordsworth)

2. sensory experience before intellect

sensibility not a product of cultivation but expresses man's passionate nature

'truth is beauty' (Keats)

'show rather than tell' prescriptions of poetry courses

### 3. imagination as a the road to transcendental experience and spiritual truth

pantheism: reality is fundamentally one, and the Divine is present in all its manifestations

poet as voyante: Rimbaud, Rilke's *Elegies*

'poetry is the first and last of all knowledge' (Wordsworth)

'imagination is a shaping or modifying power' (Coleridge)

poets are 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world' (Shelley)

'life copies art' (Wilde)

### 4. the human personality, in all its inexplicable moods and depths

Gérard de Nerval

César Vallejo

### 5. genius, hero or exceptional figure

Goethe's *Faust*

Byronic hero: Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, Lermontov's *The Demon*

### 6. ethnic, folk and national cultures

culture is not rationally grounded but a product of feelings and traditions previously overlooked

states are natural growths with roots in the common nature of man: Marxism

poetry should draw on folk traditions: examples:

Burns's *Poems and Songs*

*Preface to Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads*

Francis Jammes' *Clara d'Ellébeuse*

Lorca's *Romancero gitano*

### 7. the occult, exotic, diseased or satanic

path to truth is through psychosis: depth psychology

examples:

Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*

Byron's *Manfred*

Baudelaire's *Fleur du Mal*

Yeats's *A Vision*

### 8. the remote in time and space

Latin pastoral tradition

medieval romances

Shakespeare's *Pericles* or *The Tempest*

medievalism in German and English 19th century poetry

Pound's Chinese and Latin 'translations'

## 9. work of a particular period

European Romanticism: 1780-1840

British Romantic Revival: 1930-50

Romanticism is an enormous subject, {7} and the above can only be the smallest of characteristics and trends.

### Romantic Attitudes

The early Romantics strove to understand the world through imagination, not reason, and they distrusted the world set out for them by Church and State. {8} To these hate figures in the later nineteenth century were added commerce and science, creating a split in outlook that pushed Romanticism into extreme positions — Symbolism, Surrealism, Dada, Modernism and Postmodernism. Some antagonism is a feature of most societies — Sufism versus Shar'ia in Islam, and Daoism versus Legalism in imperial China — but only western societies have created such elaborate and at times fantastic theories to protect the Romantic position.

Can the world be understood by imagination? Can poetry discover realms of significance beyond the conscious and rational? Some general points:

1. Romanticism has generally and needlessly resorted to theory, where Classicism has simply generalized from experience, saying when cleared of individual entanglements, these sorts of things work. Nonetheless, Romanticism created or strengthened much of what we take for granted — universal suffrage, individual rights, religious freedom — and its ideas are still feeding through contemporary literature. Romanticism can stand on its record, and equally generalise from successes.
2. Men do not live by bread alone, and poetry has little to fear from commerce or science. Economics is spectacularly unsuccessful in its predictions, and the newer theories of metaphor, hermeneutics, brain functioning and complexity bridge many of the chasms between the old worlds of art and the sciences.
3. Recent work in brain functioning and metaphor theory, plus older views in religion and depth psychology, suggest that consciousness and perception are indeed susceptible to cultural change. Matters can be overstated — the world's 4,000 languages are all inter-translatable, and no one believes that Hopi Indians have no concept of time — but poetry (and the arts in general) do create new entities, and these entities have existence outside the poem or artwork concerned, to an extent useful to society.
4. The besetting sin of the theory emanating from Romanticism has been reductionism, the attempts to extract a few simple laws in the manner of science, and explain the many and multiform in these terms. Art is not science, and the narrowing focus of the various post-Romantic movements — Symbolism (rarefied symbols), Imagism (visual), Futurism (anti-history) Surrealism

(irrational), Dada (anti-society) — created not strength but only thin and quickly changing fashions.

## Romantic Representatives

Poems belonging to the Romantic period include:

William Blake's *The Tyger* {9}

William Wordsworth's *Ode Intimations Of Immortality From Recollections Of Early Childhood* {10}

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* {11}

George Gordon, Lord Byron's *She walks in beauty, like the night* {12}

Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* {13}

John Keats's *Ode to Melancholy* {14}

Among the Victorians:

Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott* {15}

D.G. Rossetti's *Soul's Beauty* {16}

Ernest Dowson's *Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae* {17}

Twentieth-century poets:

W. B. Yeats's *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* {18}

Edna St. Vincent Millay's *What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why* {19}

Dylan Thomas's *Fern Hill* {20}

Edwin Muir's *The Horses* {21}

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## Realism

Realism is an aesthetic attitude stressing the truthful treatment of material, the normal and everyday, life as it truly is. {1-8}

### Features

In varying degrees, Realism or the realistic (and sometimes Naturalism) has these aims: {1} {5} {8}

1. faithfully represents life as it is:

aims for a pleasing and convincing structure of reality  
 presents a normal rather than intensified perceptions of reality  
 emphasizes accurate, even photographic detail  
 is objective: showing rather than telling  
 mutes or removes the author's commentary  
 reinforces the socially responsible view

2. rejects idealizing conventions and formulae:

apparently represents direct, unmediated experience  
 avoids artifice, the visionary and theatrical  
 returns to simpler, past conventions  
 employs images in preference to symbols  
 simplifies or reduces rhetorical devices  
 avoids epic themes, exercises in the pastoral tradition, etc.

3. takes subjects from contemporary life:

emphasizes the experienced commonplace  
 deals with social/political issues of the day  
 focuses on the regional or local scene

4. represents middle class attitudes:

focuses on character more than events or plot  
 avoids the sensational: plausible events  
 employs a natural, everyday diction  
 promotes morality without overt moralizing

5. refers to work of a particular period:

examples:

late Augustan poetry  
 socially committed poetry of the Auden generation  
 'kitchen sink' and contemporary styles  
 magic realism

## Realistic Attitudes

Though Realism would seem the easiest attitude to understand and maintain, it throws into relief many philosophical problems. How can words properly represent reality? {9} {10} Doesn't any representation, with its tacit codes and conventions, distort the true picture, perhaps replace it all together? {11}

Not entirely, is the answer. The philosophic journey is a long and tangled one, from Kant's demonstration that reality is fundamentally unknowable, through nineteenth-century attempts at the absolute, to today's fundamental divide between those who work at ad-hoc solutions (theories of meaning) and those who believe the unconscious (Lacan) or language wholly isolates us (Derrida). Poets are not philosophers, but the differing outlooks still divide poetry world into antagonistic and mutually uncomprehending movements. Amateur poetry generally follows a watered-down Romanticism. Poetry in mainstream publications adopts a Modernist approach. Postmodernist poetry plays with the 'insights' of Derrida and critical theory. And whereas popular and mainstream poetry usually has a large dash of realism, Postmodernist poetry typically does not — or, more exactly, its poetry does not lie in any accurate representation of the world.

Hence the incomprehension, if not downright hostility, with which many readers greet contemporary poetry. They are unimpressed by the clever games with language, and are bored by a haphazard portrayal of plain life. They expect some aspects of Classicism: sense, shaping, beauty. They expect Romanticism's sense of the unfathomable, one that will clear the wellsprings of their emotional lives.

And these expectations expose the shortcomings of Realism. As a corrective to poetry's tendency to inbreed and create its own conventions, Realism plays a vital part, widening its remit and making it more relevant to common readers. But the attitude alone cannot create poetry, since poetry is an art form governed by aesthetic requirements. Indeed, at least till recently, poetry with the more realistic subject matter has generally felt the need to balance that freedom by increased attention to form.

### Representatives

Realism is strongly marked in these poems (though not necessarily the writers):

- Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale* {12}
- William Shakespeare's *My Mistress's Eyes* {13}
- Jonathan Swift's *A Description of the Morning* {14}
- George Crabbe's *Peter Grimes* {15}
- Robert Browning's *Porphyria's Lover* {16}
- John Drinkwater's *The Carver in Stone* {17}
- Thomas Hardy's *Friends Beyond* {18}
- Rudyard Kipling's *Danny Deaver* {19}

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### 3. SENTENCE STRUCTURE

Poems fail as other forms of writing do, because they:

1. have nothing informative, entertaining or moving to say,
2. are not developed with the reader in mind,
3. have dull or faulty sentence structure, and/or
4. neglect what is expected of the genre.

#### 3.1. BASIC REQUIREMENTS

A publisher considering a MS wants to know three things: that the author has something important to say, that people want to hear about it, and that the writing is adequate to the task. Judging from submissions, it will surprise many poets to know that similar criteria apply to poetry. Yes, a poem may start with a vague tune in the head, and no doubt develops in some subterranean way of its own, but the final piece needs to be as tightly plotted as the best detective fiction. All must seem natural and inevitable. Level by level — content, argument, emotive expression, diction, imagery, rhythm — everything will hang together and be interrelated in one convincing whole.

How is that achieved? By the application of an immense amount of effort, flair and experience. There is no single method of composition. Spencer used the medieval world of allegory to suggest and shape. Shakespeare followed the rules of Renaissance rhetoric. Racine modelled his plays on the Greek classics. Yeats wrote prose drafts. Pound employed mimicry and textural collages. And so on. Every writer of stature develops his own method, which works for him and fulfils the cultural expectations of the time.

Time available and natural talent impose their own restrictions, but the composition process is often driven by the content, which is not so much chosen by the poet as drawn from his deepest nature. Certain themes provoke and obsess writers, so that from juvenilia to masterwork the author can be seen working and reworking a restricted range of material. Often these relate to personal incidents, perhaps buried deep in childhood, but not completely so, and not so as to explain why response has taken this particular form, or invoked any response at all.

How does this relate to the craft of writing? The one thing that all editors and publishers look for is individuality. They want something fresh, authentic and distinctive, which is nonetheless relevant, self-validating and convincing. Novelty by itself counts for nothing — the small presses are crowded with such stuff — but poems that build gradually into a landscape at once original and significant are greatly prized. The odd poem can always be created out of some lucky chance, but to produce good work consistently, that explores new

territories and presents them vividly, calls on rare personal qualities, honesty not the least of them. Matters well outside the usual ambit of literature have to be researched, and everything fused in a uniquely personal and all-embracing vision.

## Keeping the Reader In Mind

Contemporary poetry tries not to use existing language in new ways so much as to create a new language (or languages) altogether, dispensing with rhetoric in favour of:

- vivid images only tenuously connected with narrative or general argument of the poem
- collages of remembered thought or conversation
- ready-mades of life around, the more arbitrary the better
- themes continuously drawn from the process of writing: poem seen as process rather than object
- private/recondite symbols and allusions

Only partial success has met these efforts. The theory is at least dubious, and the work often fails in its primary objective, which is to communicate. Some ordering of material or rhetoric is inescapable, as in these examples. Equally important is word choice.

## 3.2. EXAMPLES

Great licence is given poetry, but effective sentences are still essential. Many patterns have been developed down the centuries: a simple listing: {1}

1. Two short sentences linked by a semicolon, actual or implied.

Prose example: *Verse is one thing; poetry is another.*

Verse illustration:

*Ash on an old man's sleeve*

*Is all the ash the burnt roses leave.*

*Dust in the air suspended*

*Marks the place where the story ended. {2}*

2. Repeated structure with the verb understood and therefore omitted.

Prose example: *Verse is one thing, poetry another.*

Verse illustration:

All day it has rained, and we on the edge of the moors

Have sprawled in our bell-tents, moody and dull as boors,

Groundsheets and blankets spread on the muddy ground  
 And from the first grey wakening we have found  
*No refuge from the skirmishing fine rain*  
*And the wind that made the canvas heave and flap.* {3}

3. Compound sentence(s) ending with explanatory statement:

Prose example: *The book he wrote, with its balanced arguments, its brief case histories and restrained phrasing, achieved more than had the political tracts over the previous century: it spoke the truth.*

Verse illustration:

Last night, ah, yesternight, betwixt her lips and mine  
 There fell thy shadow, Cynara! thy breath was shed  
 Upon my soul between the kisses and the wine;  
 And I was desolate and sick of an old passion,  
 Yea, I was desolate and bowed my head:  
*I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.* {4}

4. A series without a conjunction.

Prose example: *The poem he wrote on this occasion was his best: simple, heartfelt, unanswerable.*

Verse illustration:

It stuck in a barbed wire snare,  
 Ich, ich, ich, ich,  
 I could hardly speak.  
 I thought every German was you.  
 And the language obscene.

An engine, an engine  
 Chuffing me off like a Jew.  
 A Jew to *Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.* {5}

5. A series of clauses linked by *and* or by *or*:

Prose example: *He made the poem express his private thoughts, and to give voice to his inner doubts and quandaries, and to what he had not before found the courage to confront or understand or suppose were the confusions of so many of his own countrymen.*

Verse illustration:

*And* thinking of that fit of grief or rage  
 I look upon one child or t'other there  
*And* wonder if she stood so at that age —  
 For even daughters of the swan can share  
 Something of every paddler's heritage —  
*And* had that colour upon cheek or hair,  
*And* thereupon my heart is driven wild:  
 She stands before me as a living child. {6}

## 6. Balanced pairs.

Prose example: *The piece he wrote on this occasion was his best: researched and referenced, restrained and sincere, unswerving and unanswerable.*

Verse illustration: :

*And Pan by noon and Bacchus by night,  
Fleeter of foot than the fleet-foot kid,  
Follows with dancing and fills with delight  
The Mænad and the Bassarid;  
And soft as lips that laugh and hide  
The laughing leaves of the trees divide,  
And screen from seeing and leave in sight  
The god pursuing, the maiden hid.*

The ivy falls with the Bacchanal's hair  
Over her eyebrows hiding her eyes;  
The wild vine slipping down leaves bare  
Her bright breast shortening into sighs;  
The wild vine slips with the weight of its leaves,  
But the berried ivy catches and cleaves  
*To the limbs that glitter, the feet that scare  
The wolf that follows, the fawn that flies. {7}*

## 7. Introduction with appositives.

Prose example: *Barbed, audacious, truthful — the article struck home.*

Verse illustration:

*So smooth, so sweet, so silvery, is thy voice  
As, could they hear, the damned would make no noise,  
But listen to thee (walking in thy chamber)  
Melting melodious words to lutes of amber. {8}*

## 8. Apposites or modifiers *within* the sentence.

Prose example: *The poem he wrote on this occasion — sincere, audacious and unsparing — was his best.*

Verse illustration:

When in the chronicle of wasted time  
I see description of the fairest wights,  
And beauty making beautiful old rhyme,  
In praise of ladies dead and lovely knights,  
Then in the blazon of sweet beauty's best,  
*Of hand, of foot, of lip, of eye, of brow,*  
I see their antique pen would have expressed  
Even such a beauty as you master now.  
So all their praises are but prophecies  
Of this our time, all you prefiguring;  
And, for they looked but with divining eyes,



They had not skill enough your worth to sing:  
For we, which now behold these present days,  
Have eyes to wonder, but lack tongues to praise. {9}

9. Emphatic apposite at *sentence end*, usually after a colon:

Prose example: *Whatever the feints and countermovements of the previous years, the elaborate and illiberal measures against free speech and their immediate removal, the unions' actions now left no doubt of their intentions: total opposition.*

Verse illustration:

Should Beauty blunt on Fops her fatal Dart,  
Nor claim the triumph of a letter'd Heart;  
Should no Disease thy torpid Veins invade,  
Nor Melancholy's Phantoms haunt thy Shade;  
Yet hope not Life from Grief or Danger free,  
Nor think the Doom of Man revers'd for thee:  
Deign on the passing World to turn thine Eyes,  
And pause awhile from Learning to be wise;  
There mark what Ills the Scholar's Life assail,  
*Toil, Envy, Want, the Garret, and the Jail.* {10}

10. Using a single appositive or a pair.

Prose example: *The poem he wrote on this occasion — his last day of freedom — though seeming so ordinary — was his best.*

Verse illustration:

I knew a man who used to say,  
Not once but twenty times a day,  
That in the turmoil and the strife  
(*His very words*) of Public Life  
The thing of ultimate effect  
Was Character — not Intellect.  
He therefore was at strenuous pains  
To atrophy his puny brains  
And registered success in this  
Beyond the dreams of avarice,  
Till, when he had at last become  
Blind, paralytic, deaf and dumb,  
Insensible and cretinous,  
He was admitted ONE OF US. {11}

11. *Dependent clauses* in a pair or series.

Prose example: *If he had not chosen to record his own private doubts, and had only expressed what was being shouted in every house and tavern in the country, the outcome would have been very different.*

Verse illustration:

*Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs  
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,  
The night above the dingle starry,  
Time let me hail and climb  
Golden in the heydays of his eyes,  
And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns  
And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves  
Trail with daisies and barley  
Down the rivers of the windfall light. {12}*

12. Repetition of a key word or phrase.

Prose example: *The article he wrote on this occasion was inflammatory, and the inflammatory response the government made to its publication brought confrontation one step closer.*

Verse illustration:

*Calm* is the morn without a sound,  
*Calm* as to suit a calmer grief,  
And only thro' the faded leaf  
The chestnut pattering to the ground:

*Calm* and deep peace on this high wold,  
And on these dews that drench the furze,  
And all the silvery gossamers  
That twinkle into green and gold:

*Calm* and still light on yon great plain  
That sweeps with all its autumn bowers,  
And crowded farms and lessening towers,  
To mingle with the bounding main:

*Calm* and deep peace in this wide air,  
These leaves that redden to the fall;  
And in my heart, if *calm* at all,  
If any calm, a *calm* despair:

*Calm* on the seas, and silver sleep,  
And waves that sway themselves in rest,  
And dead *calm* in that noble breast  
Which heaves but with the heaving deep. {13}

13. Repetition of word in a parallel structure.

Prose example: *The article he wrote on this occasion — calculated in its timing, calculated in its laboured phrasing and honest perplexity, calculated in its very deployment of terms that the government had removed from the political agenda — had a success that even his own supporters could scarcely have hoped for.*

Verse illustration:

Too quick despairer, wherefore wilt thou go?  
*Soon* will the high Midsummer pomps come on,  
*Soon* will the musk carnations break and swell,  
*Soon* shall we have gold-dusted snapdragon,  
 Sweet-William with his homely cottage-smell,  
 And stocks in fragrant blow;  
 Roses that down the alleys shine afar,  
 And open, jasmine-muffled lattices,  
 And groups under the dreaming garden-trees,  
 And the full moon, and the white evening-star. {13}

14. Subject and verb separated by *comment* or *aside*:

Prose example: *So poetry, whatever the aim, has to be verse.*

Verse illustration:

Where the quiet-coloured end of evening smiles,  
     Miles and miles  
 On the solitary pastures where our sheep  
     Half-asleep  
 Tinkle homeward through the twilight, stray or stop  
     As they crop —  
 Was the site of a city great and gay,  
     (So they say)  
 Of our country's very capital, its prince  
     *Ages since*  
 held his court, in gathered councils, wielding far  
     Peace or war. {15}

15. A full sentence as an interrupting modifier:

Prose example: *So poetry — it cannot be repeated enough — has to be verse.*

Verse illustration:

The coast — *I think it was the coast that I*  
*Was just describing — Yes, it was the coast*  
 Lay at this period quiet as the sky,  
 The sands untumbled, the blue waves untost,  
 And all was stillness, save the sea-bird's cry,  
 And dolphin's leap, and little billow crost  
 By some low rock or shelve, that made it fret  
 Against the boundary it scarcely wet. {16}

16. Introductory or concluding participles:

Prose example: *Unswerving from the truth, ignoring his own supporters, he completed the reading.*

Verse illustration:

The seas are quiet, when the winds give o'er,  
 So calm are we, when passions are no more:

For then we know how vain it was to boast  
Of fleeting things, so certain to be lost.  
Clouds of affection from our younger eyes  
Conceal that emptiness, which age describes.

The soul's dark cottage, batter'd and decay'd,  
Lets in new light through chinks that time has made;  
Stronger by weakness, wiser men become  
As they draw near to their eternal home:  
*Leaving the old*, both worlds at once they view,  
That stand upon the threshold of the new. {17}

17. A *single modifier*, out of place for emphasis

Prose example: *Whatever he might have said to save the measure, poignantly, remained unuttered, and the opportunity did not return.*

Verse illustration:

Much have I travelled in the realms of gold,  
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;  
Round many western islands have I been  
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.  
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told  
That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne:  
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene  
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:  
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies  
When a new planet swims into his ken;  
Or like stout Cortez, when with eagle eyes  
He stared at the Pacific - and all his men  
Looked at each other with a wild surmise —  
*Silent*, upon a peak in Darien. {18}

18. Introduction *with prepositional* phrase:

Prose example: *In most of us, poetry is an intermittent and dormant faculty.*

Verse illustration:

*In* pious times, e're priestcraft did begin  
*Before* polygamy was made a sin;  
*When* man on many multiplied his kind,  
*Ere* one to one was cursedly confined;  
*When* nature prompted and no law denied  
Promiscuous use of concubine and bride;  
Then Israel's monarch after Heaven's own heart,  
His vigorous warmth did variously impart  
To wives and slaves; and, wide as his command,  
Scattered his Maker's image through the land. {19}

19. Inversion of the normal subject-verb order:

Prose example: *Humbug we necessarily hate in poetry.*

Verse illustration:

*Still falls the Rain —*

Dark as the world of man, black as our loss —

Blind as the nineteen hundred and forty nails

Upon the Cross.

*Still falls the Rain*

With a sound like the pulse of the heart that is changed to the hammer-beat

In the Potter's Field, and the sound of the impious feet

On the Tomb:

*Still falls the Rain*

In the Field of Blood where the small hopes breed and the human brain  
Nurtures its greed, that worm with the brow of Cain. {20}

20. *Complete inversion* of normal pattern:

Prose example: *Necessarily, humbug we hate in poetry, and also sentiment that is too simple to be genuine.*

Verse illustration:

*May I for my own self song's truth reckon,*

Journey's jargon, how I in harsh days

Hardship endured oft.

Bitter breast-cares have I abided,

Known on my keel many a care's hold,

And dire sea-surge, and there I oft spent

Narrow nightwatch nigh the ship's head

While she tossed close to cliffs. Coldly afflicted,

My feet were by frost benumbed. {21}

21. Paired constructions: *subject-verb*, so too *subject-verb*, etc.:

Prose example: *As three hard years of his life had gone into the writing of the poem, so would three hard years in fruitless efforts to have it published.*

Verse illustration:

Oh! if to dance all Night, and dress all Day,

Charm'd the Small-pox, or chas'd old Age away;

Who would not scorn what Huswife's Cares produce,

Or who would learn one earthly Thing of Use?

To patch, nay ogle, might become a Saint,

Nor could it sure be such a Sin to paint.

But since, alas! frail Beauty must decay,

Curl'd or uncurl'd, since Locks will turn to grey,

*Since paint'd, or not paint'd, all shall fade,  
And she who scorns a Man, must die a Maid; {22}*

23. A *this, not that* construction (or the reverse) used for contrast.

Prose example: *Poetry is a vocation, not a career.*

Verse illustration:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:  
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,  
Hath had elsewhere its setting,  
And cometh from afar:  
*Not in entire forgetfulness,  
And not in utter nakedness,  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God, who is our home:*  
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!  
Shades of the prison-house begin to close  
Upon the growing Boy,  
But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,  
He sees it in his joy;  
The Youth, who daily farther from the east  
Must travel, still is Nature's priest,  
And by the vision splendid  
Is on his way attended;  
At length the Man perceives it die away,  
And fade into the light of common day. {24}

24. Dependent clause (usually starting with *if*, *why*, *when*, etc.):

Prose example: *Because he so trawled the newspapers for material of current interest, and because he sent work to outlets of every political colour, not neglecting to call on editors and harangue journalists for long hours in bars afterwards, his became a name that even a trade magazine would not publish.*

Verse illustration:

*Whan* that Aprille with his shoures soote,  
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,  
And bathed every veyne in swich licóur  
Of which vertú engendred is the flour;  
*Whan* Zephirus eek with his swete breeth  
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth  
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne  
Hath in the Ram his halfe cours y-ronne,  
And smale foweles maken melodye,  
That slepen al the nyght with open ye,  
So priketh hem Natúre in hir corages,  
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,  
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,

To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;  
 And specially, from every shires ende  
 Of Engelond, to Caunterbury they wende,  
 The hooly blisful martir for to seke,  
 That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke. {25}

25. *Independent clauses* (i.e. no grammatical connection between clauses and sentence, the sentence being entirely modified).

Prose example: *He trawled the newspapers for material of current interest; he sent his work to every political magazine in the country; he called on editors and harangued journalists at his own expense in bars of their own choosing; he left nothing to chance and became unpublishable.*

Verse illustration:

*No; cast by Fortune on a frowning coast,  
 Which neither groves nor happy valleys boast;  
 Where other cares than those the Muse relates,  
 And other shepherds dwell with other mates;  
 By such examples taught, I paint the Cot,  
 As Truth will paint it, and as Bards will not: {26}*

26. Short *simple sentence* for relief or dramatic effect:

Prose example: *Despairing of the confusion, the discordant voices and abortive measures of the party, he sat down that night to write the manifesto that would open his long-delayed campaign for leadership. It failed.*

Verse illustration:

*O, my luve's like a red, red rose  
 That's newly sprung in June:  
 O, my luve's like the melodie  
 That's sweetly play'd in tune.*

*As fair art thou, my bonie lass  
 So deep in luve am I:  
 And I will luve thee still, my Dear,  
 Till a' the seas gang dry.*

*Till a' the seas gang dry, my Dear,  
 And the rocks melt wi' the sun!  
 O I will luve thee still, my Dear,  
 While the sands o' life shall run.*

*And fare thee weel, my only Luve,  
 And fare thee weel a while!  
 And I will come again, my Luve,  
 Tho' it were ten thousand mile. {27}*

27. Short *question* for dramatic effect:

Prose example: *Why did he write it?*

Verse illustration:

The time is not remote, when I  
 Must by the course of nature die;  
 When I foresee my special friends  
 Will try to find their private ends,  
 Though it is hardly understood  
 Which way my death can do them good;  
 Yet thus, methinks, I hear 'em speak:  
 'See, how the Dean begins to break:  
 Poor gentleman, he droops apace,  
 You plainly find it in his face;  
 That old vertigo in his head  
 Will never leave him, till he's dead.  
 Besides, his memory decays,  
 He recollects not what he says;  
 He cannot call his friends to mind,  
 Forgets the place where last he dined;  
 Plies you with stories o'er and o'er:  
 He told them fifty times before.  
*How does he fancy we can sit  
 To hear his out-of-fashioned wit?* {28}

## 28. Deliberate fragment(s)

Prose example: *The effect of his article, which is still debated, is perhaps not to be fully appreciated even now, unpredictable in its consequences, imponderable to those who study such things, vagrant and irrelevant to the parties concerned, brought about his downfall.*

Verse illustration:

They looking back, all th' Eastern side beheld  
 Of Paradise, so late thir happie seat,  
 Wav'd over by that flaming Brand, the Gate  
 With dreadful Faces throng'd and fierie Armes:  
 Som natural tears they drop'd, but wip'd them soon;  
 The World was all before them, *where to choose*  
*Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide:*  
 They hand in hand with wandring steps and slow,  
 Through Eden took thir solitarie way. {29}

Successful lines of course use several such patterns at the same time, and add variations to these basic patterns.

Equally important in shaping reader expectations are genres and stanza forms.

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## 4. RHETORIC

Rhetoric is a vital element in any successful speech or piece of writing, whether a passing remark or heart-stopping poetry. Far from remaining a leftover from a superseded classical education, rhetoric is an expanding field of study, with fascinating insights into many aspects of language.

### 4.1. RHETORIC IN THEORY

Rhetoric was formerly an indispensable aid to writing, and poets were among its most assiduous students. {1} Taxis, or the structure of argument, which shows how lines and phrases work on our affective understanding, usually had a simple shape. Attract attention by producing something of immediate personal interest. Develop an argument with a few more instances, but not too many, and keep them relevant. Lead to agreement with personal assurances, guarantees and claims on authority. Conclude by complimenting the audience on its humanity and common sense. Equally obvious and necessary was finding the appropriate words, tone and gestures: lexis.

Rhetoric organises language to evoke emotion, persuade by argument, or to distract. Of course the last, distraction or entertainment, can be very complicated, but even the direct emotional appeal is no simple matter. Unconstrained outpouring is not art. At the very least we want to know that the emotion is appropriate, and that our feelings are not being cynically played on. The wellsprings of individual emotions have to be tapped, and these, as any tabloid editor knows, are obvious. Love in all its forms, the pain of death and separation, the joy of friendship and in the good things of life, the pride of home, family, status and country, loyalty, courage in adversity, simple modesty, service and kindness — these and a dozen others make the world go round. How are the emotions tapped? Not by direct appeal. Not even by showing rather than telling. The reader is a fastidious creature and dislikes being buttonholed.

Rather than clothe a sentiment with illustration, or tag a moral onto a story, the emotion must arise out of the very portrayal of the scene. Poets may seem at a disadvantage, since the greater compass of time, scenes and characters do not require the playwright or novelist to immediately hit the target. But, in compensation, the poet is allowed greater resources of language, since nothing very much in the arts is a raw slice of life. Dialogue in plays and novels may seem natural, but is very far from a transcription of a live performance, which indeed a radio listener realizes immediately. Even in the most realistic novel the dialogue is contrived, and has to be: to move the plot along, display the speaker's character and motivations, keep the reader wanting more. And if dialogue doesn't appear contrived (which it certainly must

not) it is because dialogue very subtly uses the understandings and conventions lurking beneath the surface in all social interactions.

Such understandings and conventions constituted rhetoric, which could be an art form in its own right. A sophisticated audience saw through the devices but nonetheless applauded their cleverness. *The New Criticism*, which focused on the literary devices employed, was not a new phenomenon, therefore, any more than is Postmodernism, which denies a reality outside such devices. All is sophistry, a self-conscious form of amusement.

In entertainment the illustration (exemplum in rhetoric) can therefore become more important than the argument. The correlate is seen as vivid and engrossing in its own right, which enables the speaker or writer to smuggle in extraneous matter. Instead of the argument proceeding step by step, with each step illustrated, the illustrations introduce subsidiary themes, or distract from weaknesses in the central argument. Something similar happens in television adverts when we enjoy the visual display without believing or even remembering the message. Poetry employing this technique becomes very oblique, if not somewhat rambling, but can produce surprising effects.

## Importance of Rhetoric

A vast number of terms exist, and details with examples of their use can be found at several Internet sites. {2} Some devices will concern only Renaissance scholars, but many turn up surprisingly often in our everyday lives. Effective speech and writing is scarcely possible without them, which means that they may well enter into the very fabric of thought. We can't avoid them, only use them adroitly or clumsily. Contemporary poetry may distrust the oratorical, or any fine flourishes of language, but the resulting flatness of language has then to look for other effects — novel experiences, taboo subjects, outré expressions. Poets tend not to have good stories to tell, moreover, being unadventurous individuals, so that while we warm to authors who seem one of us, regular guys, we may tire in the end of their local reporting.

## Comparative Rhetoric

George Kennedy has reviewed rhetoric across time and cultures. {3} Rhetoric is a form of mental and emotional energy that appears when an individual encounters a situation that offers or denies personal advancement. Some awareness of this energy seems to remain in description of rhetoric — as 'physical thought' and vital force' in Chinese, as 'energeia' in Aristotle and 'vivacity' in eighteenth-century British rhetoricians. Rhetoric can even be recognized in animals, and its most basic use by humans may serve a similar need: to strive for advancement without recourse to physical violence.

Rhetoric seems inherently conservative, seeking to retain past values. Thus Atticism in the Roman Empire continued to be used long after it became incomprehensible to those without special training. Latin remained in formal use

in medieval Europe after vulgate languages replaced it in everyday use. And when Dante used a vulgate language for *The Divine Comedy* he felt impelled to create something that still had the formality of Latin.

Rhetoric of some sort is found in all cultures, but the disputatious nature of Greek democracy led to its greatest development, which was continued in Roman and Renaissance oratory. Only the west recognized the distinction between tropes, figures of speech and figures of thought. Classical poetry was written for the speaking voice, and Hermogenes's {4} instructions would have applied to literary work, law suits and speeches in the Roman senate. There were seven types of style — clarity, grandeur, beauty, rapidity, character, sincerity and force — and for each of these Hermogenes specified the appropriate choice of words, figures of speech, construction of sentences and rhythmic productions.

## Language as Narrative

How did language arise? To tell a story, or, more exactly, a parable. Mark Johnson has extended the notion of metaphor to parables: not a word standing for something else, but a whole story standing for a particular description of the world. Narrative imagining — parables, he calls them {5} — allow us to shape and organise experience. We project one story onto another, and humankind may well have developed language to facilitate this process.

The evidence for this intriguing notion? None comes from the origins of language, about which little is certain, {6} and even less from the origins of writing, which arose for accounting purposes. {7} Johnson's theory in fact draws on cognitive science, and advances in psychology, computer science, linguistics and neuroscience. {8}

Human beings use imaginative narratives: they construct stories, and project these stories to give meaning to new encounters. Out of the flux of experience, the human mind learns to distinguish events that can be organised in this way, and then to deploy and modify them. We climb a wall; project the effort into surmounting an intellectual obstacle; talk about long-term objectives. The trial and error process is not smooth, and there are social and cultural skills to be learned. Turner accepts the Poststructuralist view that meanings are not stable, fixed and bounded, but also believes there is no point in dwelling exclusively on the problems. Whatever theory asserts, we generally do make ourselves understood, fill in our tax returns, and go about our normal business. Moreover, contra Chomsky, the primary feature of human speech may not be grammar, which would have conferred little evolutionary advantage, but the propensity to find such patterns in sensory inputs, to make models in consciousness and to react appropriately.

Meanings in fact are made through a complex process of projection, binding, linking, blending and integration over mental spaces. Blending is particularly important in cartoons and parables, producing a mental space differing from

its constituents. Proust's description of the sound of the bell announcing Swann's arrival at Combray — 'two shy peals' — seems perfectly acceptable, though is clearly an amalgam of words employed in an unusual way. We adopt different points of view in reading fiction, and each of these views projects narrative imaginings developed in everyday experience. The literary mind is not peripheral to human activity, but our instinctive way of organising thought and experience.

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## 4.2. RHETORIC IN PRACTICE

Rhetoric was formerly an indispensable aid to writing poetry, and some of its approaches are still helpful. Taxis, or the structure of argument, shows how lines and phrases work on our affective understanding. Lexis or diction governs the emotive correlates, and so the appeals to the fundamental human condition. Detailed rhetorical analysis will show how each operates to achieve its ends.

## Introduction

Rhetoric is now neglected. Originally it meant the effective use of language, not only to sway the ignorant mob but also to persuade one's intellectual peers. And by governing such matters as laying out an argument, presenting the evidence, employing the appropriate syntax and diction, rhetoric was unavoidable — in law, politics, literature and everyday life. {1} But today rhetoric conjures up the specious promises of politicians, the showy ornament of discarded literary styles, and the empty pretences of admen and spin-doctors. Rhetoric even disallows thought, predetermining what our public ideologues must say. Perhaps for this reason contemporary poetry has become rather prosaic, even pedestrian, taking for granted that plainness bespeaks sincerity.

But it was not always so. {2} Even the prodigiously gifted Shakespeare, the most supremely original and creative of writers, in practice followed the rules of Renaissance rhetoric very closely, depending on it for his most striking effects. {3} His classical education was not wasted, any more than the stories he borrowed and adapted. Rhetoric is not extinct in popular literature. Anyone attending courses on article or feature writing will be taken through the standard devices, which themselves derive from rhetoric. The public expects articles to conform to certain specifications, and something departing too much from the usual is simply not read. Equally, there are conventions for the short story, for novels, and for poetry. Rhetoric has always entered into the very fabric of literature — not only to persuade, but to inform, move, entertain, distract and amuse.

The structure of *taxis* — the overall shape of a successful appeal to an audience — was usually simple. Equally obvious and necessary was finding the appropriate words, tone and gestures: *lexis*. This meant not only avoiding the pompous, the uncouth and insincere, but making some correlation to larger themes, to precisely the tabloid issues mentioned above. No link with the fundamental issues of human existence, and the appeal only ruffles the surface, as is the case with TV adverts, however well made.

Rhetoric still operates in Postmodernist poems. Here's an example, with a brief analysis.

## The Architects

But, as you'd expect, they are very  
impatient, the buildings, having much in them  
of the heavy surf of the North Sea, flurrying  
the grit, lifting the pebbles, flinging them  
with a hoarse roar against the aggregate

they are composed of — the cliffs higher of course,  
more burdensome, underwritten as  
it were with past days overcast



and glinting, obdurate, part of the  
silicate of tough lives, distant and intricate

as the papers shuffled by the bureaucrats  
settling with coffee in their concrete pallets,  
awaiting the post and the department meeting —  
except that they do not know it, at least do not  
seem to, being busy, generally.

So perhaps it is only on those spun out to nothing  
and airless afternoons, with tier upon tier  
of concrete like rib-bones arrayed above them,  
and they light-headed with the blue airiness  
spinning around, and muzzy, a neuralgia

calling at random like frail relations, a phone  
ringing at some office they can never get to,  
that they become attentive — the planners,  
the architects, the constructions themselves, and we  
living ourselves in these webs of buildings, which,

caulked like great whales about us, are always  
aware that some trick of the light or weather  
will dress them as friends, pleading and flailing —  
and fill us with placid but unbearable melodies  
as the lift drops us down smoothly through the plates of glass.

## Taxis: Structure of Argument

How is the taxis developed in the poem under consideration? The opening is striking: hyperbole. We should not at all expect buildings to be impatient, and cannot initially understand what is meant. Something to do with their constituents we realize in a line or two, but are then taken off on a roller coaster of associations. Is there an argument, and how would it appear if set out by the laws of classical rhetoric?

**exordium** (introduction: appeal to the audience)

They are very impatient, the buildings  
(please consider the buildings)

**narratio** (outline of case)

having much in them / of the heavy surf of the North Sea  
(they have the character of their constituents)

**confirmatio** (supporting examples, precedents, etc.)

the heavy surf of the North Sea, flurrying  
the grit, lifting the pebbles, flinging them

with a hoarse roar against the aggregate / they are composed of  
the cliffs higher of course,  
underwritten as / it were with past days  
distant and intricate / as the papers shuffled by the bureaucrats  
(silicate minerals have structures as complicated as bureaucracies)  
awaiting the post and the department meeting —  
(and extends into the lives of those who occupy the buildings)  
except that these do not know it, at least do not / seem to, being busy,  
generally.  
(though they don't know it . . . they cannot get to,  
(indeed consciously block it out)  
that they become attentive, or we do —  
(as we do)  
the planners . . . webs of buildings  
(even as architects, working with the properties of materials)  
which, / caulked . . . pleading and flailing —  
(though seeing our constructions as huge, friendly creatures that ask to be  
allowed to express themselves)  
and fill with placid but unbearable melodies  
(and ask so plaintively)  
as the lift drops us down smoothly through the plates of glass.  
(that we are won over and lost in their world.)

**refutatio** (anticipating objections)

the cliffs higher, of course,  
(which are not docile constituents entirely, already accumulating them-  
selves into cliffs)  
underwritten as it were  
(if you would extend your imaginations a little)  
they do not know it  
(I'm not saying it's conscious)  
at least do not seem to  
(agreed, we can't see into people's minds)  
So perhaps  
(I'm only suggesting it)  
the planners . . . webs of buildings,  
(we're all complicit in this)  
will dress them as friends  
(they only appear so)

**peroratio** (graceful withdrawal)

smoothly through the plates of glass.  
(now we leave the office and these claustrophobic feelings)

So what do we conclude? That there is an argument, which is logically laid out, but not very clear? Yes, but there is a more crucial point. To powerfully move an audience the speaker must bear in mind certain maxims:

1. Subject matter must be broadly empathetic.
2. Stance should be direct and uncomplicated.
3. Argument should be compulsively developed.
4. Emphasis should focus on one or two images or correlates.

## Rhetorical Types

Are these maxims obeyed here? Terminology is difficult, a forest of forbidding names, but as a simple introduction we group as follows: All aspects of rhetoric, everything that gives point and controlling shape to thoughts and observations, we call *figure*, subdividing figure into *scheme* where word order and syntax is involved, and *trope* for plays on the sense or meaning of words. Tropes we further subdivide into those that involve word meaning (e.g. metaphor), and those that more involve the sense of the passage (e.g. irony).

Amongst schemes — for the record, without illustration or explanation for the moment — are anaphora, epistrophe, anadiplosis, climax, symplecton, parison, isocolon, chiasmus, hendiadys, oxymoron, zeugma, epizeuxis, epanorthesis, epanalepsis, antanaclassis, polyptoton. Among the word meaning tropes are simile, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, paronomasia and personification. Among the passage tropes are irony, paradox, hyperbole, litotes, aporia, anacoenosis, comprobatio and epitropis. {4}

Taking the *schemes* in turn:

**anaphora** (first word or phrase repeated)

we do  
we talk about  
we living ourselves

**parison** (parallel constructions, often in twos or threes)

they are very impatient, the buildings, / having much in them of the North Sea  
flurrying the grit / lifting the pebbles / flinging them with a hoarse roar the cliffs higher, of course, / underwritten as it were with past days lightheaded, / with the blue airiness spinning around, / and muzzy, /  
a neuralgia calling at random like frail relations

**hendiadys** (two nouns or adjectives of similar or contingent meaning)

more burdensome / overcast obdurate / silicate of past lives spun out to nothing / and airless afternoons

**oxymoron** (juxtaposition of words with contrasted meanings)

underwritten.. by .. days overcast  
distant and intricate

concrete packed above them, and they lightheaded  
placid but unbearable

**epanorthesis** (recall of a word to suggest more appropriate expression)

calling at random... a phone they cannot get to  
the architects . . . ourselves in these webs of buildings

**antanaclasis** (repetition of a word in an altered sense)

caulked like great whales.. dress them

And now the *word-meaning tropes*:

### **simile**

concrete like rib-bones  
calling at random like frail relations  
caulked like great whales  
Will dress them as friends

### **metaphor**

they are very impatient, the buildings  
having much in them of the heavy surf of the North Sea  
the cliffs... more burdensome  
the cliffs... underwritten.. with past days  
days..glinting, obdurate  
days part of the silicate of tough lives  
a neuralgia calling at random  
webs of buildings.. are always aware  
buildings... dress them as friends, pleading and flailing

**synecdoche** (substitution of part for whole)

the concrete pallets  
plates of glass

### **personification**

buildings with the impatience of their constituents.  
days part of the silicate of tough lives

Finally, the *passage tropes*:

**hyperbole** (overstatement)

as you'd expect, they are impatient, the buildings  
underwritten as . . . the silicate of tough lives,

**aporia** (affectation of perplexity)

except that they do not know it, at least do not / seem to, being busy,  
generally. / So perhaps

## Discussion: Emotive Appeal

Armed with this skeleton of the poem, which is very different from the surface grouping as six stanzas of iambic pentameters, let us begin the diagnosis. It is the extensive use of parison — parallel constructions that pick up a word and extend its associations before drifting on — that seems responsible for the surreal, rather baffling effect. The images appear free-floating and arbitrary, just flat collages of widely disparate elements, and they are not well anchored, either to an underlying content or to each other. Exactly what does *flurrying the grit...* refer to: the North Sea or the buildings? And *more burdensome, underwritten...*? Do these describe the cliffs, the North Sea or the buildings? Similarly for other examples of parison: *days, lives, bureaucrats, afternoons, light-headedness, architects, webs, whales, plates of glass*. The other tropes only spread the confusion: there is as much oxymoron and aporia as hendiadys. It is very difficult to find a central meaning, and it may be that the rhetoric obscures any such meaning. Is this a fault?

By traditional rules it must appear so. Rhetoric organises language to evoke emotion, persuade by argument, or to distract. And often very subtly. Actors learn to display emotion, but they do so by wholly identifying with the character they're acting. They do not say to themselves, 'here comes my big weepy scene, and I must remember to screw up my face and stare tearfully into the camera'. They do these things instinctively because they have learnt by year after year of varied practice how to sink their identity into such a part. Emotion has become an integral part of acting, and is no longer a mask donned as required. Even TV presenters, con men and salesmen must believe in their script to be convincing. No doubt poets seem at a disadvantage, but their compensations are greater resources of language, used subtly, becoming an art that hides art. For the same reason, the diction of good contemporary poetry appears unpretentious, deft and inevitable, but this happy facility comes from a good deal of talent, a training of the ear and endless practice. Clearly the facility is not spontaneous or we'd find it more widely displayed, even in everyday speech.

The issue is one of conventions, what an audience will accept as convincing, and it is this matter that commonly lies behind the proselytising for naturalness in poetic language. Their practitioners are seeking to widen the acceptance of their own conventions, since it is through such new conventions that their work comes across.

Be that as it may, how does the poem fare? Does it tap the well pools of emotion, and obey the orator's maxims. Not at all. The subject matter is remote from everyday concerns. The stance is not direct. The argument floats vaguely on through associations, and employs far too many images. Is that the end of the matter: the poem fails by the standards of classical rhetoric, and can only be one of those intriguing but ultimately unsatisfying Postmodernist creations? Perhaps so, but there is still one aspect of rhetoric that may prove enlightening: rhetoric as distraction.

## Rhetoric as Entertainment and Distraction

Rhetoric was an art, and was often enjoyed as such: a sophisticated audience saw through the devices but nonetheless applauded the display of such skills. Nor was this an admission of defeat, even for poetry. The *New Criticism* focused on the literary devices employed. Postmodernism denies that anything exists beyond such devices, poetry being a self-conscious and superior form of entertainment.

Poetry employing this technique became very oblique, if not somewhat rambling, but produced surprising effects: Milton's extended similes that add grandeur to *Paradise Lost*, Byron's irrepressible digressions in *Don Juan*. If the images have no connection with the theme, then of course they are simply decoration (which a less austere age was quite happy to accept) but in this modest poem the images do add to the total effect. Indeed they are vital. Baldly stated, without these beguiling illustrations, the argument of the poem is very unconvincing, even preposterous. Show me! says the sceptical reader, and it is these images, coloured by moods and associations, that do duty for reason.

## Published Examples

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<http://www.towson.edu/~tinkler/reader/cicero.html> NNA. Excerpts from key texts.

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<http://bradley.bradley.edu/~ell/notelinks.html>. Excellent: notes and links to all aspects, from classical world to present.

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## 5. ORGANISATION

Poetry is built of lines, which in traditional verse are assembled into stanzas shaped by end-rhymes and/or line lengths. The last are commonly measured by the number of feet they contain, from the dimeter (2 feet) to the octameter (8 feet). {1-4} Both individual lines and their assembled stanzas contribute to the 'meaning' of a poem — what it says and how it does so — but not exclusively so. Pentameters, the most popular of lines in traditional English verse, in fact allow very different voices to be heard:

Shakespeare: Prosperity's the very bond of love

Dryden: Thou last great prophet of tautology

Jane Austen: The day commemorative of my birth

Robert Frost: Snow falling, and night falling fast, oh fast

Thom Gun: Resisting, by embracing, nothingness {5}

Much the same applies to of the tetrameter, though less so of the very long and very short lines, which do restrict what can be easily said, and are therefore less widely used.

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### 5.1. ORGANISATION BY LINE

Poems take many forms, particularly today, but here are some examples of the more common.

#### 5.1.1 DIMETERS

Ted Kooser's *Beer Bottle*



In the burned-  
out highway  
ditch the throw-

away beer  
bottle lands  
standing up {1}

N. Scott Momaday's *Comparatives*

Sunlit sea,  
the drift of fronds,  
and banners  
of bobbing boats—  
the seaside  
of any day— {2}

May Swenson's *Question*

Body my house  
my horse my hound  
what will I do  
when you are fallen {3}

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### 5.1.1. TRIMETERS

Trimeters are much commoner:

George Withers' *I Loved a Lass*:

I loved a lass, a fair one,  
As fair as e'er was seen;  
She was indeed a rare one,  
Another Sheba Queen:  
But, fool as then I was,  
I thought she loved me too:  
But now, alas! she's left me,  
Falero, lero, loo! {1}

Richard Corbet's *Farewell Rewards and Fairies*:

Farewell, rewards and fairies,  
Good housewives now may say,  
For now foul sluts in dairies

Do fare as well as they.  
 And though they sweep their hearths no less  
 Than maids were wont to do,  
 Yet who of late for cleanness  
 Finds sixpence in her shoe? {2}

Thomas Campion's *The Life of Man Upright*:

The man of life vpright,  
 Whose guiltlesse hart is free  
 From all dishonest deedes,  
 Or thought of vanitie, {3}

W.H. Auden's *As I Walked Out One Evening*:

As I walked out one evening,  
 Walking down Bristol Street,  
 The crowds upon the pavement  
 Were fields of harvest wheat. {4}

Walter de la Mare's *All That's Past*

Very old are the woods;  
 And the buds that break  
 Out of the briar's boughs,  
 When March winds wake,  
 So old with their beauty are --  
 Oh, no man knows  
 Through what wild centuries  
 Roves back the rose. {5}

Kingsley Amis's *New Approach Needed*

Should you revisit us,  
 Stay a little longer,  
 And get to know the place.  
 Experience hunger,  
 Madness, disease and war. {6}

Thomas Lux's *All the Slaves*

All the slaves within me  
 are tired or nearly dead.  
 They won't work for money,  
 not for a slice of bread. {7}

Frank O'Hara's *To the Poem*

Let us do something grand  
 just this once            Something

small and important and  
 unAmerican            Some fine thing

will resemble a human hand  
 and really be merely a thing {8}

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### 5.1.2. TETRAMETERS

Both the traditional tetrameter and pentameter are too widely used to need much illustration, but we should recognize the variety possible:

The Gawain Kight's *Pearl*

So round, so radiant in each array,  
 So small, so smooth her sides were,  
 Wheresoever I judged gems gay,  
 I set her singly above them all.  
 Alas! I lost her in a garden,  
 Through grass to ground she fell away.  
 Wounded by love, by love forsaken,  
 I mourn that pearl without a flaw {1}

Sir Walter Raleigh's *Her Reply (to Marlowe's Passionate Shepherd)*

If all the world and love were young,  
 And truth in every shepherd's tongue,  
 These pretty pleasures might me move  
 To live with thee and be thy Love. {2}

Ben Jonson's *Cynthia's Revels: Queen and huntress, chaste and fair:*

Queen and huntress, chaste and fair,  
 Now the sun is laid to sleep,  
 Seated in thy silver chair  
 State in wonted manner keep:  
     Hesperus entreats thy light,  
     Goddess excellently bright. {3}

William Shakespeare's *The Phoenix and the Turtle:*

Beauty, truth, and rarity,  
Grace in all simplicity,  
Here enclos'd in cinders lie. {4}

William Shakespeare's *O Mistress Mine*:

O Mistress mine where are you roaming?  
O stay and hear, your true love's coming,  
That can sing both high and low.  
Trip no further pretty sweetening.  
Journeys end in lovers' meeting,  
Every wise man's son doth know. {5}

William Blake's *The Tyger*

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright  
In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry? {6}

Algernon Charles Swinburne's *The Forsaken Garden*

In a coign of the cliff between lowland and highland,  
At the sea-down's edge between windward and lee,  
Walled round with rocks as an inland island,  
The ghost of a garden fronts the sea. {7}

Anne Sexton's *The Abortion*:

Just as the earth puckered its mouth,  
each bud puffing out from its knot,  
I changed my shoes, and then drove south.

Up past the Blue Mountains, where  
Pennsylvania humps on endlessly,  
wearing, like a crayoned cat, its green hair, {8}

Knute Skinner's *Imagine Grass*:

The planet that we plant upon  
rolls through its orbit of the sun,  
bending our grass upon the breeze.  
While far away the galaxies  
in a decelerating pace  
reach for the outer edge of space. {9}

David Baker's *Romanticism*:

It is to Emerson I have turned now,  
damp February, for he has written  
of the moral harmony of nature.  
The key to every man is his thought. {10}

Thomas Blackburn's *Hospital for Defectives*:

Lord of the Images, whose love  
 The eyelid and the rose  
 Takes for a metaphor, today,  
 Beneath the warder's blows,  
 The unleavened man did not cry out  
 Or turn his face away;  
 Through such men in a turnip field  
 What is it that you say? {11}

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### 5.1.3. PENTAMETERS

The pentameter is the most useful and flexible of lines.

John Donne's *Holy Sonnet*:

At the round earth's imagin'd corners, blow  
 Your trumpets, angels, and arise, arise  
 From death, you numberless infinities  
 Of souls, and to your scatter'd bodies go; {1}

Sir Philip Sidney's *With how sad steps*:

With how sad steps, O moon, thou climb'st the skies!  
 How silently, and with how wan a face!  
 What! may it be that even in heavenly place  
 That busy archer his sharp arrows tries? {2}

Thomas Gray's *Elegy*:

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,  
 And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,  
 Awaits alike the inevitable hour.  
 The paths of glory lead but to the grave. {3}

W.B. Yeats' *No Second Troy*:

Why should I blame her that she filled my days  
 With misery, or that she would of late  
 Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,  
 Or hurled the little streets upon the great,  
 Had they but courage equal to desire? {4}

Alun Lewis's *All Day it has Rained*:

All day it has rained, and we on the edge of the moors  
 Have sprawled in our bell-tents, moody and dull as boors,  
 Groundsheets and blankets spread on the muddy ground  
 And from the first grey wakening we have found {5}

Bruce Bennett's *The True Story of Snow White*:

Almost before the princess had grown cold  
 Upon the floor beside the bitten fruit  
 The Queen gave orders to her men to shoot  
 The dwarfs, and thereby clinched her iron hold  
 Upon the state. Her mirror learned to lie {6}

Theodore Roethke's *I Knew a Woman*:

I knew a woman, lovely in her bones,  
 When small birds sighed, she would sigh back at them;  
 Ah, when she moved, she moved more ways than one:  
 The shapes a bright container can contain!  
 Of her choice virtues only gods should speak,  
 Or English poets who grew up on Greek  
 (I'd have them sing in chorus, cheek to cheek). {7}

Amy Clampitt's *The Kingfisher*:

In a year the nightingales were said to be so loud  
 they drowned out slumber, and peafowl strolled screaming  
 beside the ruined nunnery, through the long evening  
 of a dazzled pub crawl, the halcyon color, portholed  
 by those eye-spots' stunning tapestry, unsettled  
 the pastoral nightfall with amazements opening. {8}

Donald Justice's *Women in Love*:

It always comes, and when it comes they know.  
To will it is enough to bring them there.  
The knack is this, to fasten and not let go. {9}

Peter Klappert's *Ellie Mae Leaves in a Hurry*:

There's some who say she put death up her dress  
and some who say they saw her pour it down.  
It's not the sort of thing you want to press {10}

John Logan's *Shore Scene*:

There were bees about. From the start I thought  
The day was apt to hurt. There is a high  
Hill of sand behind the sea and the kids  
Were dropping from the top of it like schools  
Of fish over falls, cracking skulls on skulls. {11}

Vassar Miller's *Without Ceremony*:

Except ourselves, we have no other prayer;  
Our needs are sores upon our nakedness.  
We do not have to name them; we are here.  
And You who can make eyes can see no less. {12}

Howard Nemerov's *Brainstorm*:

The house was shaken by a rising wind  
That rattled window and door. He sat alone  
In an upstairs room and heard these things: a blind  
Ran up with a bang, a door slammed, a groan  
Came from some hidden joist, and a leaky tap,  
At any silence of the wind, walked like  
A blind man through the house. Timber and sap {13}

Gjertrud Schnackenberg's *The Paperweight*:

The scene within the paperweight is calm,  
A small white house, a laughing man and wife,  
Deep snow. I turn it over in my palm  
And watch it snowing in another life, {14}

Louis Simpson's *To the Western World*:

A siren sang, and Europe turned away  
From the high castle and the shepherd's crook.  
Three caravels went sailing to Cathay  
On the strange ocean, and the captains shook  
Their banners out across the Mexique Bay. {15}

Pamela Stewart's *Punk Pantoum*:

Tonight I'll walk the razor along your throat  
 You'll wear blood jewels and last week's ochre bruise  
 There's a new song out just for you and me  
 There's sawdust on the floor, and one dismembered horse {16}

James Wright's *Saint Judas*:

When I went out to kill myself, I caught  
 A pack of hoodlums beating up a man.  
 Running to spare his suffering, I forgot  
 My name, my number, how my day began, {17}

Alex Comfort's *For Bayle: Letter to an American Visitor*

You've seen the ruins, heard the speeches, swallowed  
 The bombed out hospitals and cripples' schools-  
 You've heard (on records) how the workers hollowed  
 And read in poker work GIVE US THE TOOLS;  
 You know how, with the steadfastness of mules,  
 The Stern Determination of the People  
 Goes sailing through a paradise of fools  
 Like masons shinning up an endless steeple-  
 A climb concluding after many days  
 In a brass weathercock that points all ways {18}

John Wain's *A Song about Major Eatherly*:

Good news. It seems he loved them after all.  
 His orders were to fry their bones to ash.  
 He carried up the bomb and let it fall  
 And then his orders were to take the cash, {19}

Thom Gunn's *Autumn Chapter in a Novel*:

Through woods, Mme Une Telle, a trifle ill  
 With idleness, but no less beautiful,  
 Walks with the young tutor, round their feet  
 Mob syllables slurred to a fine complaint,  
 Which in their time held off the natural heat. {20}

Edward Lucie-Smith's *The Lesson*:

'Your father's gone,' my bald headmaster said.  
 His shiny dome and brown tobacco jar  
 Splintered at once in tears. It wasn't grief.  
 I cried for knowledge which was bitterer  
 Than any grief. For there and then I knew {21}

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#### 5.1.4. HEXAMETER

The hexameter is a form of surprising diversity, though rarely used in contemporary English verse.

##### **Imitating the Classical Hexameter**

Greek and Latin verse is quantitative where English verse is accentual-syllabic, and that vital difference prevents any English equivalent to the dactylic hexameter being written. {1} Some four hundred years of experimentation by gifted English poets — not to mention lifetimes of angry disputation {2} {3} — should prove it cannot be done. Some attempts.

William Morris: {4}

But Palinure with scarce-raised eyes e'en such an answer gave:  
'To gentle countenance of sea and quiet of the wave  
Deem'st thou me dull? Would'st have me throw in such a monster's truth?

And here the distinguished translator of a generation back: Patrick Dickinson: {5}

There are others assuredly I believe,  
Shall work in bronze more sensitively, moulding  
Breathing images, or carving from the marble  
More lifelike features: some shall plead more eloquently,  
Or gauging with instruments the sky's motion  
Forecast the rising of the constellations:

Though these are some of the best renderings, they clearly do not sound like their originals. The final spondee is missing, and the English only faintly echoes the original splendour.

##### **English Hexameters: Earlier Examples**

The picture changes with the English hexameters, defined simply as lines possessing six metrical feet. Byron patterns his stanzas with decreasing pauses to have the emotion swell out at the end:

I speak not, || I trace not, || I breathe not thy name, |||  
There is grief in the sound, ||| there is guilt in the fame: |||  
But the tear which now burns on my cheek may impart |||  
The deep thoughts that dwell | in that silence of heart. ||| {6}

Emily Brontë's *The Prisoner* is less varied: the lines are all 3:3, rather monotonously so:

He comes with Western winds, | with evening's wandering airs,||  
With that clear dusk of heaven | that brings the thickest stars:  
Winds take a pensive tone, | and stars a tender fire, ||  
And visions rise, and change, | that kill me with desire. {7}

In G.K. Chesterton's *The Secret People* the pauses are handled with more variety, but the lines are laboured and need more verse devices to hang together:

Smile at us, | pay us, | pass us; | but do not quite forget. ||  
 For we are the people of England, | that never have spoken yet. ||  
 There is many a fat farmer | that drinks less cheerfully, ||  
 There is many a free | French peasant | who is richer  
 and sadder than we. {8}

Quite different is Kipling's *Tommy* with its rumbustious rhythms and snatches of Cockney speech: deservedly popular at the time.

O it's Tommy this, | an' Tommy that, | an' 'Tommy, go away'; |  
 But it's 'Thank you, | Mister Atkins,' | when the band begins to play, |  
 The band begins to play, | my boys, | the band begins to play, |  
 O it's 'Thank you, | Mr. Atkins,' | when the band begins to play. || {9}

Robert Bridges' *The Testament of Beauty* was written in what he called 'loose alexandrines'. Note the delicacy of the phrasing and weighted assonance between the pauses:

Twas at that hour of beauty | when the setting sun |  
 squandereth his cloudy bed with rosy hues, | to flood  
 his lov'd works as in turn he biddeth them Good-night; ||  
 and all the towers | and temples | and mansions of men |  
 face him in bright farewell, | ere they creep from their pomp |  
 naked beneath the darkness; || {10}

The early Yeats piece compares less favourably: the long wavering lines need an Irish intonation to come across:

Although crowds gathered once if she but showed her face, ||  
 And even old men's eyes grew dim, | this hand alone, |  
 Like some last courtier at a gypsy camping-place |  
 Babbling of fallen majesty, || records what's gone || {11}

Finally worth noting is the occasional hexameter, rounding off the Spenserian stanza or making a third line in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century verse. Dryden:

But satire needs not those, and wit will shine  
 Through the harsh cadence of a rugged line  
 A noble error, and but seldom made,  
 When poets are by too much force betrayed.  
 Thy generous fruits, though gathered ere their prime,  
 Still showed a quickness; and maturing time  
 But mellows what we write to the dull sweets of rhyme. {12}

### English Hexameters: Contemporary Examples

Since I seem to be one of the few writing the regular longer line today, I hope readers will excuse examples so much drawn from my exercises. The hexameter can provide:

1. A rolling opulence if phrasal units are cadenced properly:

As for the unfathomable || there are the clouds only |  
that on some days |hung in indolent splendour || scattering  
refulgence and sadness on the hills beneath. ||| {13}

2. Dense end-stopped lines: tend to be static: often seeming 'hewn out':

Perpetual are the silences in these vast lands |  
of shimmering distances | that rise to mountain wall.||  
A snake unthreads itself to gold | across the sands, ||  
and the tessellated lizard is not heard at all. |||

3. A restrained grief achieved by a falling cadence and repetitive phrasing:  
{14}

Late for them here, | in these broad-leafed summer days, | to lie  
out in made-up ground. | With chained-in roses, | beds  
of laurel, | chaste walkways, | do they sleep now, | heads  
not pummelled by the tides — | those who went out, |who knew why?||

4. Reportage with a neutral, factual tone:

Diary entry: || Jan 8th. | 1917. ||  
Late arriving: | after four. || Prague when it  
appeared | took on the outlines of a winter city, |  
the squares and palaces closeted in snow. ||  
What surprised me was the silence, | complete in  
Karmelitska | as I walked to my apartment. || {15}

5. Description heavy with religious significance:

Along the nave | the hooded candles wink | and flare |  
as though their pinchbeck innocence | could light up faith. ||  
The small hypocrisies of Sunday dress or talk |  
enlarge to radiant mummeries of coloured glass. || {16}

6. Many of these will be too grandiloquent for today's poetry of the quotidian,  
but Jared Carter's hexameters in *Under the Snowball Bush* allow observations  
to be quietly built up, each word holding its place naturally and unobtrusively  
in lines that persuade by their attention to detail:

Look not under the lilacs, with their lavender blossoms, their white;  
that stand like thickets along both sides of the garden path,  
their canes so rich, so laden, you can hardly pass through.

No, nor below the spring house, where the late wisteria clings  
to the rocks in the limestone wall, where long clusters  
of blue flowers spill down and pool in the shadows;

No, nor within the shaggy tunnel of the spirea bordering the side yard,  
the spangled hedge that leans heavily now, that droops  
almost to the ground, to the scattering of violets there; [17]

Much more irregular is the hexameter of John Logan's *To a Young Poet  
Who Fled*:

So you said you'd go home to work on your father's farm.  
We've talked of how it is the poet alone can touch

with words, but I would touch you with my hand, my lost son,  
to say goodbye again. You left some work, and have gone. [18}

### English Hexameters: Internal Structures

But forms are not always what they seem.

This translation of the opening lines of Virgil's *Georgics* appear to be hexameters:

What makes the cornfield joyful, and beneath what star  
we turn the earth, Maecenas? How may vines be fastened  
to the elm? What husbandry will manage cattle,  
breed the ox? What knowledge have the thrifty bees?  
With such I start my song. And you, O radiant lights  
that lead the seasons in their fruitful dance, and you,  
both Liber and propitious Ceres, who have turned  
Chaonian acorn lands to thick-sown fields of wheat  
and mixed in drafts of Archeloüs new-made wine;  
and Fauns, you rustic deities who serve for local  
powers—so dance you Dryad girls and gods—your gifts  
I celebrate. {19}

But are in fact free verse lines of different lengths collected into formal hexameters. Each line has a rhythmic unity, iambic, but with wide differences in pace and phrasing:

What makes the cornfield joyful,  
and beneath what star we turn the earth,  
Maecēnās?  
How may vines be fastened to the elm?  
What husbandry to manage cattle,  
breed the ox?  
What knowledge have the thrifty bees?  
With such I start my song.  
And you,  
O radiant lights  
that lead the seasons in their fruitful dance,  
and you,  
both Līber and propitious Cerēs,  
who have turned Chāonian acorn lands to thick-sown fields of wheat  
and mixed in drafts of Archeloüs new-made wine;  
and Fauns,  
you rustic deities who serve for local powers  
—so dance you Dryad girls and gods—  
your gifts I celebrate.

This irregular hexameter: {20}

Whatever it was they'd sought for on those dream-encrusted  
shores faded on arrival. When put down  
they were as ciphers of themselves — still purposed on their plans,  
loud with their hopes singing, as with tribulations —  
but also distanced, shadowed as with journey, cast  
upon a landscape that was not ingrained by days  
that they could enter into. In rock or tree or river  
or in the trailing clouds they sensed primeval Eden:  
nugatory, other, not of their descent.

Has an internal dynamic, shifting back and forth to echo the immigrants  
trekking into the interior.

Whatever it was they'd sought for  
on those dream-encrusted shores  
faded on arrival.

When put down they were as ciphers of themselves —  
still purposed on their plans,  
loud with their hopes singing,  
as with tribulations —  
but also distanced,  
shadowed as with journey,  
cast upon a landscape that was not ingrained by days  
that they could enter into.

In rock or tree or river  
or in the trailing clouds  
they sensed primeval Eden:  
nugatory, other, not of their descent.

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#### 5.1.5. HEPTAMETERS

The heptameter, a line of 7 feet, is used rarely in English verse, and for good reason: it is an exceptionally difficult one to handle, threatening always to break into the 4-3 ballad stanza.

#### Earlier Examples

Nonetheless, the heptameter occurs in :

William Blake's *Prophet Books*:

His theme calls me in sleep night after night, & ev'ry morn  
 Awakes me at sun-rise, then I see the Saviour over me Spreading his  
 beams of love, & dictating the words of this mild song. Awake! awake O  
 sleeper of the land of shadows, wake! expand!  
 I am in you and you in me, mutual in love divine:  
 Fibres of love from man to man thro' Albion's pleasant land.  
 In all the dark Atlantic vale down from the hills of Surrey  
 10 A black water accumulates, return Albion! return! {1}

Wordsworth's *The Norman Boy*:

High on a broad unfertile tract of forest-skirted Down,  
 Nor kept by Nature for herself, nor made by man his own,  
 From home and company remote and every playful joy,  
 Served, tending a few sheep and goats, a ragged Norman Boy.{2}

Whittier's *Massachusetts to Virginia*:

The blast from Freedom's Northern hills, upon its southern way,  
 Bears greeting to Virginia from Massachusetts bay:  
 No work of haughty challenging, nor battle bugle's peal,  
 Nor stead tread of marching files, nor clang of horsemen's steel. {3}

Sir Walter Scott's *The Noble Maringer*:

O, will you hear a knightly tale of old Bohemian day,  
 It was the noble Moringer in wedlock bed he lay;  
 He halsed and kiss'd his dearest dame, that was as sweet as May,  
 And said, 'Now, lady of my heart, attend the words I say. {4}

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Cowper's Grave*:

It is a place where poets crowned may feel the heart's decaying;  
 It is a place where happy saints may weep amid their praying:  
 Yet let the grief and humbleness as low as silence languish:  
 Earth surely now may give her calm to whom she gave her anguish. {5}

Rudyard Kipling's *McAndrew's Hymn*:

Lord, Thou hast made this world below the shadow of a dream,  
 An', taught by time, I tak' it so — exceptin' always Steam.  
 From coupler-flange to spindle-guide I see Thy Hand, O God --  
 Predestination in the stride o' yon connectin'-rod.  
 John Calvin might ha' forged the same — enorrnous, certain, slow —  
 Ay, wrought it in the furnace-flame — my 'Institutio'. {6}

G.K. Chesterton's *The Rolling English Road*:

Before the Roman came to Rye or out to Severn strode,  
 The rolling English drunkard made the rolling English road.  
 A reeling road, a rolling road, that rambles round the shire,  
 And after him the parson ran, the sexton and the squire;  
 A merry road, a mazy road, and such as we did tread  
 The night we went to Birmingham by way of Beachy Head. {7}

Louis Macneice's *Bagpipe Music*:

It's no go the merrygoround, it's no go the rickshaw,  
 All we want is a limousine and a ticket for the peepshow.  
 Their knickers are made of crepe-de-chine, their shoes are made of  
 python,  
 Their halls are lined with tiger rugs and their walls with head of bison. {8}

Vernon Watkins' *The Foal*:

Darkness is not dark, nor sunlight the light of the sun  
 But a double journey of insistent silver hooves.  
 Light wakes in the foal's blind eyes as lightning illuminates corn  
 With a rustle of fine-eared grass, where a starling shivers. {9}

John Masefield's *Sea Fever*:

I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,  
 And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by;  
 And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,  
 And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking. {10}

James Elroy Flecker's *Oxford Canal*:

When you have wearied of the valiant spires of this County Town,  
 Of its wide white streets and glistening museums, and black monastic  
 walls,  
 Of its red motors and lumbering trains, and self-sufficient people,  
 I will take you walking with me to a place you have not seen — {11}

Gilbert Frankau's *Gun Teams*:



Their rugs are sodden, their heads are down, their tails are turned to the  
 storm;  
 (Would you know them, you that groomed them in the sleek fat days of  
 peace,  
 When the tiles rang to their pawings in the lighted stalls, and warm,  
 Now the foul clay cakes on breeching strap and clogs the  
 quick-release ?) {12 }

## Contemporary Examples

### 1. Translation of the Latin Hexameter:

The best known may be A.E. Stalling's translation *De Rerum Natura*, where the lines have a pleasing conversational looseness held in a tight aa, bb, etc. rhyme scheme.

And whatever interest fascinates us, whatever thing we make  
 Our business, what occupies the mind when we're awake  
 Whatever we're most focused on, it is that thing, it seems  
 That we are likeliest to meet with in our dreams:  
 Advocates keep arguing cases, and have claims to settle,  
 High commanders take the field and lead troops into battle,  
 {13}

### 2. Conversation

I think it may be clearing up, said Gavin, peering through  
 the high french-windows. Yes, there's definitely some blue.  
 Much too wet for walking, but there might be something on. {14}

### 3. Translation of Sanskrit, here using the natural 4:3 break in the lines.

Bhartrihari: Vairagya Shataka 50

Half the hundred years of man  
 is stillness of the night,  
 and half again but mewling and  
 the dotage of old age.  
 In the interval wait illness,  
 the death of friends, and fret,  
 and happiness a water bubble  
 that passes in a breath. {15}

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14. *Lowdnes in A Book of Places* by C.J. Holcombe Ocaso Press, 2008.

15. In *Diversions*, translated from the Sanskrit by C.J. Holcombe. Ocaso Press, 2008/15.

#### 5.1.6. OCTAMETERS

For the sake of completeness, we might also glance at the octameter, which tends to break into two tetrameters:

Tennyson's *Vastness*:

Many a hearth upon our dark globe sighs | after many a vanish'd face,  
Many a planet by many a sun | may roll with a dust of a vanish'd race.

Raving politics, never at rest—| as this poor earth's pale history runs,—  
What is it all but a trouble of ants | in the gleam of a million million  
of suns? {1}

Tennyson's *Locksley Hall*:

Comrades, leave me here a little, | while as yet 't is early morn: ||  
Leave me here, and when you want me, | sound upon the bugle-horn.

'T is the place, and all around it, | as of old, the curlews call, ||  
Dreary gleams about the moorland flying over Locksley Hall; {2}

The line might prove useful in the translation of long Sanskrit lines, but is a rather shambling line in the first example, and discontinuous in the second, even in the hands of a master poet like Tennyson. None of the other examples

is wholly successful, I'd have thought: they need more verse devices to give the lines some natural integrity.

George Meredith's *Phaethon*:

At the coming up of Phoebus | the all-luminous charioteer, |  
Double-visaged stand the mountains | in imperial multitudes, ||  
And with shadows | dappled men sing to him, | Hail, O Beneficent! ||  
For they shudder chill, | the earth-vales, | at his clouding, | shudder to  
black; {3}

May Wedderburn Cannan's *Rouen*:

Early morning over Rouen, | hopeful, | high, | courageous morning, ||  
And the laughter of adventure, | and the steepness of the stair, ||  
And the dawn across the river, | and the wind across the bridges, ||  
And the empty littered station, | and the tired people there. ||{4}

Auden:

'Smokeless chimneys, | damaged bridges, | rotting wharves | and  
choked canals, ||  
Tramlines buckled, | smashed trucks lying on their side | across  
the rails; ||  
Power-stations locked, | deserted, | since they drew the boiler fires; ||  
Pylons fallen or subsiding, | trailing dead high-tension wires—' {5}

Gavin Ewart's *Officer's Mess*:

It's going to be a thick night tonight | (and the night before was a thick  
one), ||  
I've just seen the Padre disappearing into 'The Cock' | for a quick one. ||  
I don't mind telling you this, | old boy, | we got the Major drinking— ||  
You probably know the amount of gin he's in the habit of sinking— || {6}

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<http://www.bartleby.com/246/396.html>
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<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/248526>
5. Section from poem by W.H. Auden quoted in *The Wasteland Era* by Randall Swingler. Poetry Magazines.  
<http://www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=26447>
6. *Officer's Mess* by Gavin Ewart. *Literature as History: Essays in Honour of Peter Widdowson* edited by Simon Barker and Jo Gill. A&C Black, 2011. Google Books.

### 5.1.7. MIXED

Poets commonly mix lines of different length to make attractive stanzas.

Ben Johnson's *Third Charm from Masque of Queens*:

The owl is abroad, the bat, and the toad,  
     And so is the cat-a-mountain,  
 The ant and the mole sit both in a hole,  
     And the frog peeps out o' the fountain;  
 The dogs they do bay, and the timbrels play,  
     The spindle is now a turning;  
 The moon it is red, and the stars are fled,  
     But all the sky is a-burning: {1}

John Donne's *Go catch a falling star*:

Go and catch a falling star,  
     Get with child a mandrake root,  
 Tell me where all past years are,  
     Or who cleft the devil's foot,  
 Teach me to hear mermaids singing,  
 Or to keep off envy's stinging,  
     And find  
     What wind  
 Serves to advance an honest mind. {2}

John Milton's *Lycidas*:

Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more  
 Ye myrtles brown, with ivy never sere,  
 I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude,  
 And with forc'd fingers rude  
 Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year. {3}

Alfred Tennyson's *Lady of Shalot*:

On either side the river lie  
 Long fields of barley and of rye,  
 That clothe the wold and meet the sky;  
 And thro' the field the road runs by  
     To many-tower'd Camelot; {4}

W.B. Yeats' *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*:

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,  
 And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:  
 Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee;  
 And live alone in the bee-loud glade. {5}

## References

1. *Third Charm from Masque of Queens* by Ben Jonson. Poets.org.  
<http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/third-charm-masque-queens>
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<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173383>

3. *Lycidas* by John Milton. Poetry Foundation.

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[http://www.englishverse.com/poems/the\\_lady\\_of\\_shalott](http://www.englishverse.com/poems/the_lady_of_shalott)

5. *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* by William Butler Yeats. Poets.org.

<http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/lake-isle-innisfree>

## 5.2. ORGANISATION BY STANZA

By similar trial and error, traditional poetry has built up a large assemblage of stanza forms, of which this is a small listing of the commonest: just name, poet and rhyme scheme. Consult the book references for formal requirements and varieties.

### :Rhymed Verse

- two-line stanzas

abab: heroic couplets: *The Rape of Lock* (Pope)

concluding couplet: *Midsummer Night's Dream* (Shakespeare)

- three-line stanzas

aab ccb: triplet: *Cape Cod* (Santayana)

aba bcb: terza rima: *Divine Comedy* (Dante)

- four-line stanzas

aaaa. *The Woodspurge* (Rossetti)

aaab: *Hohenlinden* (Campbell)

abbb: *Three Enemies* (Rossetti)

aabb: *The Rose* (Carew)

abab: *Ancient Mariner* (Coleridge)

abba: *In Memoriam* (Tennyson)

aaxa: *Omar Khayyam* (FitzGerald)

- five-line stanzas

aabba: limerick: *Oedipus*

- cinquain:

aabba: *Night Piece* (Herrick)

abaab: Daughter of Eve (Rossetti)

- six-line stanzas

aabccb: Mistress Mine (Shakespeare)

ababcc: Fear No More (Shakespeare)

xayaza: The Blessed Damozel (Rossetti)

abacbc: Last Night (Dowson)

- seven-line stanzas

ababbcc: rime royal: Troilus and Criseyde (Chaucer)

- eight-line stanzas

abababcc: ottava rima: **Don Juan** (Byron)

aBaAabAB: triolet: To a Fat Lady (Cornford)

ababcdcd: I Remember (Hood)

abcbabcb. Song to Celia (Jonson)

- nine-line stanzas

ababcdcd: The Fairie Queen (Spenser)

aaaabcccb: Lady of Shalott (Tennyson)

ababacddc: Intimations of Immortality (Wordsworth)

ababbcbcc: Eve of St. Agnes (Keats)

- ten-line stanzas

ababcdecde: Ode to a Nightingale (Keats)

abcbcadeed: Scholar Gipsy (Arnold)

abcbddceae: To Daffodils (Herrick)

- eleven-line stanza

ababcdecde: Ode to Autumn (Keats)

abbaccdeede: Ave Atque Vale (Swinburne)

aabbcddeec: Last Ride Together (Browning)

- twelve-line stanza

abacdefeghi: Cloud (Shelley)

- thirteen-line stanza

AbbaabABabbA : rondel: The Castle (Charles d'Orlean)

- fourteen-line stanza

abbaaccadefdef: Sonnet 19 (Rossetti)

abbaabbaedfedf: Sonnet 19 (Milton)

ababdcdefefgg: Sonnet 30 (Shakespeare)

- fifteen-line stanza

ab throughout: rondeau: **In Flander's Fields** (McCrea)

- eighteen-line stanza

abbaacddcceeffgg. Prothalamium (Spenser)

nineteen-line stanza

ab throughout: villanelle: **Do Not Go Gentle** (Thomas)

quatrains with repeated lines: pantoum: **Eunoch Cat** (Court)

3xababbcbC+bcbCballade: **Ballade of Fair Ladies** (Villon)

6x6 line stanza + envoi: sestina: **Sestina d'Inverno** (Hecht)

## :Unrhymed Verse

Many of the above forms can be written without rhyme (and often are to-day) but keep some echo or expectation of rhyme. Verse specifically unrhymed includes:

- unrhymed verse

**haiku**

tanka

- blank verse

Shakespeare: **Richard II**

Shakespeare: **Anthony and Cleopatra**

Shakespeare: **Tempest**

Milton: Paradise Lost I

Milton: Paradise Regained I

Wordsworth: Prelude I

Tennyson: Morte d'Arthur

## References and Resources

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<http://www.auburn.edu/~downejm/hyperepos.html> Excellent collection of sites focusing on epic poetry: theory and examples.
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<http://www.uni-koeln.de/%7Eame02/pppp.htm>. Not theory but an excellent brief listing of the elements of versification.
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[http://eir.library.utoronto.ca/rpo/display\\_rpo/poetterm.cfm](http://eir.library.utoronto.ca/rpo/display_rpo/poetterm.cfm) NNA. Quite extensive.
7. *Prosody Guide*. <http://www.trobar.org/prosody/>. Invaluable.

## Short List of Books

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2. *English Epic and Heroic Poetry*, Dixon, W.M. (1912)
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4. *The Classical Tradition*, Highet, G. (1948)
5. *Parnassus Revisited*, Yu, A.C. (1973)
6. *Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry*, Hatto, A.T. (1980)
7. *The American Epic*, McWilliams, J.P. (1989)
8. *The Idea of Epic*, Hainsworth, J.B. (1991)
9. *A History of English Prosody*, Saintsbury, G. (1906–10)
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12. *The Poets's Craft: A Course in the Critical Appreciation of Poetry*, Scott, A.F. (CUP., 1957)
13. *The Art and Craft of Poetry: An Introduction*, Zillman, L. J. (Macmillan, 1966)
14. *Chapters on English Metre*, Mayor, J.B. (1968)
15. *The Practice of Poetry*, Skelton, R. (Heinemann, 1971)
16. *Versification*, Wimsatt, W.K. (1972)
17. *Writing Poems*, Wallace, R. (Little, Brown and Co., 1987)
18. *The Making of a Poem: The Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*, Strand, M., and Boland, E. (W.W. Norton and Co., 2000)



19. *Versification: A Short Introduction*, McAuley, J. (1983)
20. *The New Book of Forms*, Turco, L. (1986)
21. *The Sounds of Poetry*, Pinsky, R. (1999)
22. *Rymes Reason*, Hollander, J. (1989).
23. *Rhythm and Meter*, Kiparsky, P. and Youmans, G. (1989)
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## 6. WORD CHOICE

Can poetry employ any sort of language? An odd question, but the workshop attendee will often find his diction called pretentious, genteel, cliché, etc. Are there overall principles to guide and justify word choice?

### 6.1. INTRODUCTION

We might look at past practices, since what worked then should still work now, but an overwhelming difficulty is that fashions change. The concrete, vivid and unpretentious is often preferred today, but the eighteenth century excluded such words, producing manuals to good taste — as indeed did the sixteenth, though with different rules. Movements often start as a reaction to styles that have become flabby or overblown, but manifestos are not always followed through. Wordsworth, for example, championed everyday speech in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, but wrote the poetry in an educated tongue.

No doubt we're concerned with current writing, but even less agreement prevails today on aspirations, styles or content. An innocuous word like *upon* will pass unnoticed by many editorial boards, but bring automatic rejection from others. Diction shows allegiances, and allegiances are what poetry editors and adjudicators are always concerned about. And beyond the infighting between poetry schools, there is the larger suspicion that many of our current literary celebrities are simply famous for being famous. We need the examples of the unassailably great, and they did not write in our manner.

But some larger observations are possible, and they come as much from critics and philosophers as practising poets. Etymology is important, since the Saxon, Norman or Latin root gives words their characters and dispositions. Too idiomatic an expression calls up the mundane, and is inappropriate in many instances. The poetic diction of the eighteenth century, though much derided today, was an attempt to remove contemporary and irrelevant associations of words and so release the full potential of their primary meanings. Greek classical verse contains hundreds of words, verbal forms and constructions that are not found in prose. {1} Homer's language is a mixture of dialects, and Dante wrote in a similarly eclectic vein.

Secondly, an abstract language is not necessarily a dead language. 'Our literacy programme will make Government more transparent, and bring opportunities to the many still disadvantaged in rural communities', says the political pamphlet. 'First remove screw-retaining devices E and G', says the workshop manual. Both are using language suited to their purposes, and conceptual and direct vocabularies are not easily interchanged, both standing on their intentions and their results. Distinctions between abstract and concrete tend to become hazy as etymologies are traced back, moreover. Abstractions may have their root in simple physical processes, but a wealth of rules and understandings underlies a phrase like 'Sky lowering over black rock' — not least the

grammar of its very expression, and the contexts unstated but not wholly removed.

## 6.2. WORDS IN CONTEXT

Lexicons are governed by social usage. The Elizabethans embroidered words with religious, courtly and pastoral associations, but these trappings were gradually dropped when the eighteenth century imposed a more correct and classical diction. The Romantics introduce a new inner world with *cold, pale, grey, home, child, morning, memory, ear, feel, hold, sleep, turn, weep*, etc. Later came *moon, stir, water, body, shadow, house*. The mid-nineteenth century popularised *dead, red, rain, stone*. Nineteen thirties poetry was packed with references to industrial buildings and political change.

Vocabularies not only reflect interests and fashions, but must be broadly understood in their contemporary setting. Pound's literary borrowings are very wide — from the ancient world, from classical Chinese, the Renaissance and early USA history — but for many readers the Cantos remain an unconvincing patchwork. William Carlos Williams stressed the sensory and the homely, but his shorter poems were often limited, verging on the banal. At the other end of the spectrum lies the poetry of Geoffrey Hill, where a Christian and guilt-saturated diction may be baffling to a readership lacking scholarship, or indeed the interest, in the western intellectual tradition.

Words do not possess wholly transparent meanings, and in the more affective poetry their latent associations, multiple meanings, textural suggestions and rhythmic power are naturally given freer rein. But the touchstone is always the audience, even the audience of one. *Words too familiar, or too remote, defeat the purpose of a poet*, said Samuel Johnson, and that observation remains true, as much for traditionalists writing inside a poetic tradition as for others trying to kindle poetry out of naked experience.

But is the audience the only concern? The *Medea* of Euripides in Diane Arnson Svarlien's translation {2} is clear, lively and intelligent, with an impressive set of stated aims: to be faithful to the diction, tone, connotation, context, echo, image, euphony and image, and to render dialogue, lyric and anapaest sections by different English measures. But the result of such laudable aims can often come down to everyday speech, i.e. a jumble of clichés. Here in lines 224-230:

My case is different. Unexpected trouble  
has crushed my soul. It's over now; I take  
no joy in life. My friends, I want to die.  
My husband, who was everything to me—  
how well I know it—is the worst of men.

Medea is a semi-divine princess, and it may be better to give her speech the majesty of such an elevated being: {3}

But, friends, remember that this severing blow  
has killed the happiness I used to know.  
So grieved my spirit, it would follow on  
to where my innocence in life has gone.  
However be my world, it's not as then:  
I know my husband as the worst of men.

In short, diction has to be appropriate, not only to the audience but the period and characters. The stanza immediately preceding Song 3 of Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* and its word-for-word translation is: {4}

vasante	vAsantI	kusuma	sukumArair	avayavair			
spring	delicate	flower-like	with_dainty	limbed			
bhramantIM	kAntAre	bahu	vihita	kRSNAnusaraNA	m		
wander	in_woodlands	in_many	make_happen	Krishna_following			
amandaM	kandarpa	jvara	janita	cintAkulatayA			
not_slowly	by_lovegod's	fever	caused	by_anguish			
valad	bAdhAM	rAdhAM	sarasam	idam	Uce	saha	carI
again	strongly	to_Radha	enraptured	this	said	girl	friend

Which can be rendered something along these lines:

So went Rādhā in her passion, flower-  
limbed, throughout that forest spring.  
Seeking Krishna's haunts she felt love's longing,  
which her friend discerned and said:

Suppose, in aiming to make this twelfth-century classic more accessible to a contemporary audience, we wrote:

Spring, and slim-limbed Rādhā got the hots for Krishna,  
and rattled through his forest haunts, her pants on fire.  
She seemed consumed, distraught about it, really awful.  
'But honey, just you go for it,' the girlfriend said.

But, however snazzy, the choice of language will still set the social milieu, and so the context in which we read the lines. Streetwise words are inadequate because they lack the connotations to encompass the Vishnu dimensions of the text. The many levels of meaning so vital to the *Gita Govinda* are also ruled out. 'Consumed', 'distraught' and 'awful' have everyday references that close off extended literary associations. Even in its late forms, Sanskrit poetry was very different from ours, using an elevated diction and impersonal style to create a palpable, emotion-laden atmosphere where the audience could realize again the cultural implications of their world.

## 6.3. POETIC DICTION

Words create mood and context, and for this purpose old-sounding, old-fashioned, or obsolete words have often been employed, even by the greatest of poets — Virgil, Ronsard, Spenser. Also by Pound and Eliot, for all their stress on the new. {5} Nonetheless, in its cultivation of an egalitarian, conversational style, contemporary poetry avoids what it terms a ‘poetic diction’ as something that harks back to earlier traditions, especially those of ‘fine writing’. But the utilitarian can be overdone. Prose is extraordinarily difficult to recast in forms that give the satisfaction of poetry, and the application of immense skill and experience may create things that are neither fish nor fowl. Consider, for example:

1. in a look until dropped like an egg on the floor  
let slop, crashed to slide and run, yolk yellow  
for the live, the dead who worked through me  
(*Wherever You Are, Be Somewhere Else*: Denise Riley)

2. Or is it the pentagram  
Hidden in a bed the conversation of bodies.  
(*The prose of walking back to China*: Christopher Middleton)

3. Still, as one of us said into his beard,  
‘Without your intellectual and spiritual  
Values, man, you are sunk.’ No one but squared  
The shoulders of his own unloveliness.  
(*Charles on Fire*: James Merrill).

Would these fit seamlessly into a conventional article or film script? Do they not, in their different ways, constitute a modern, if inverted poetic diction? And *unloveliness* in the last example seems even to offend the cardinal rule of word choice: consistency in intellectual and social registers.

### Hyperbaton or Inversion

Aristotle stipulated that there should be a mixture of ordinary and unfamiliar words in the language of poetry. Ordinary words made for clarity. Unfamiliar words (which included metaphors but not obscure technicalities) made the language shine, and avoided the appearance of meanness and the prosaic. {6} And of course language should be appropriate to context.

So arose the understanding that words were not good or bad in themselves, but only by virtue of their placing in a line. Languages like English allow considerable variety. Into *He said shortly that she was not to go.* the word *however* can be inserted correctly, if a little awkwardly, into all positions, giving not only rhythmic flexibility but nuances of meaning. But poets have generally wanted more. If the standard word order in English is subject, verb object, that order is not followed in these percentages of lines overall: Pope 32%, Mil-

ton 19%, Shelley 15%, Shakespeare and Tennyson 12%. Perhaps the commonest variation was hyperbaton, inversion of noun and adjective. {7} Milton could write:

I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude,  
And with forced fingers rude  
(*Lycidas*)

And Pope:

*What dire offence from amorous causes springs*  
(*The Rape of the Lock*)

Contemporary verse dislikes such inversions, but is not above pointing line endings in its own way — and perhaps less effectively, because line breaks are less apparent in spoken poetry:

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow...

(*The Red Wheelbarrow*: William Carlos Williams)

In short, the arrangement or juxtaposition of words creates its own poetic diction, and reflects society as much as anything else in the arts.

## Heteroglossia

Amateur poets, it is said, commonly write like their poetic grandfathers, a jibe that seems borne out by offerings at the more popular internet sites. But the truth behind F.L. Lucas's observation that while poetry can certainly be written without poetic diction, it is immeasurably the poorer for it {8} calls for some deeper understanding. Bakhtin argued that speech and writing came with the viewpoints and intentions of its authors preserved in the multi-layered nature of language. {9} And for poems to achieve autonomy and artistic unity, these polyglot social contexts (heteroglossia) had to be fused together, losing their worlds of reference.

Many Postmodernist works have rejected such autonomy, poems being often no more than a space in which intriguing notions are floated before the reader. Words with a long history of use in (i.e. in traditional) poetry need to be avoided, as they inevitably refer to a narrow canon of poetic excellence, and are heard with their accompanying rhetoric, metre, assonance, alliteration, metaphor, etc. And if one of art's functions was once to give order and significance to our lives, these ennobling views Postmodernism will flatly deny.

What is the purpose of its poetry, then? To amuse, to jolt us out of our sleepwalking state, to make us think beyond conventional categories? Again, possi-

bly so. But the obstacles are serious. Poetry is not particularly effective as a shock-treatment, not in comparison to the cinema, TV or even multimedia. Secondly, far from wrapping us in thoughtless somnolence, words and phrases interpenetrate life, and are kept up because they continue to serve some vital need. Linguistics and metaphor research both suggest that words are far from arbitrary signs, and the world's four thousand, often isolated, languages do not carve up nature so differently that translation is impossible. Metaphors are active in our understanding because they enable us to function in ways inherent in our natures. We know if something is the case, and even the terrors of Stalinist Russia could not turn lies into truth.

## Conclusions

Poets must understand the consequences of their diction, which go far beyond getting their work published. Diction shows allegiances, and each of these open up new areas of opportunity as they close down others. If poetry is to be largely 'a slice of life', then that poetry needs to defend itself against the stronger claims of films and novels. If poetry is to be something else, then that purpose needs to be thought through, which includes attention to diction.

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4. Holcombe, C.J. *Englishing the Gita Govinda*. Journal of Vaishnava Studies, Vol. 22, 1, 27-46, 2013.
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9. pp. 1-4 of David Lodge's *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (1990). and Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist's *Mikhail Bakhtin* (1984).

## Internet Resources

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[http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/virtualit/poetry/diction\\_def.html](http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/virtualit/poetry/diction_def.html). Definition, exercises and examples of its importance in two poems.
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## 6.4 Allusion

### Introduction

Poems commonly include words or phrases borrowed from the poetry of other authors, {1} but allusion means more than plagiarism or poetic diction, and something other than extended simile. Matters have become somewhat technical, and criticism today tends to distinguish 1. reinscription (amplifications of previous texts), 2. quotation (taking over the previous text in its entirety, including concept and texture), 3. echo (lacking conscious intention) and 4. intertextuality (involuntary incorporation of previous word usage and associations). {2}

A literary allusion is an explicit or implicit reference to another literary text that can be recognized and understood as such by competent readers. {3}

### Uses

Allusion is used to:

1. display literary knowledge or cleverness.
2. advertise membership of a poetic tradition or community.
3. add historical depth to a word or phrase.
4. suggest an association with literary excellence.
5. show topicality by reference to recent events.
6. sharpen contrasts, as in satire.
7. imply a generality of experience, often the human condition.

### Cultural Considerations

Allusion is the staple of many poetic traditions. Islamic poetry draws heavily on the Koran, as Jewish {4} and Christian {5} {6} poetry does on the Bible. Until the late nineteenth century, and even beyond, {7} English poetry also made much use of Classical allusion. {8} The Chinese indeed expect to find repeated allusion in poetry, and some of Du Fu's late poems, for example, have every word or phrase alluding to usage in the illustrious past. Japanese poetry even laid down rules governing its use. {9} Modernist poetry also employs its own brand of allusion, generally more personal and sometimes obscure. {10-11}

### Reinscription

Renaissance poets tended not merely to make reference to the classical past but to extend and modify classical allusions for their own purposes, commonly to assert nationhood or literary independence. Edmund Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar* accepted the pastoral mode of Theocritus with its autumnal mood, but added political denunciation. His *Faerie Queene* went further, converting the *poema cavalleresco* of Lodovico Ariosto and Torquato Tasso into an extended allegory constructed around Aristotle's twelve moral virtues. {12}

## Echo

Distinctions between allusion and echo tend to blur in practice, but Philip Larkin's *Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives* in his poem *Deceptions* would be an echo of George Herbert's *My thoughts are all a case of knives* in his poem *Affliction* because the reference seems to have been unconscious. Elizabeth Bishop, however, explicitly makes reference to Herbert in her poem *Wading at Wellfleet* by putting *all a case of knives* within quotation marks. {1}

## Classical Allusion: Pope

A famous example comes in line 176 of Alexander Pope's *Epistles to Several Persons: Epistle IV To Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington*:

Another age shall see the golden ear  
 Embrown the slope, and nod on the parterre,  
 Deep harvests bury all his pride has plann'd,  
 And laughing Ceres reassume the land. {13}

*And laughing Ceres* is not only beautiful but strikingly apt, referring to the earth goddess (Demeter) of wheat and grain, who spread knowledge of the agricultural arts. The ostentatious country house will be given over to the plough, and the land made productive again.

## Development: Pound's *Cantos* (1925-60)

Whatever their originating misconception, Pound took the high road of allusion in his *Cantos*. Allusions were initially simple quotes, which evoked the work from which they were taken, giving the *Cantos* a thickness and seriousness of meaning. But they could also be juxtaposed, which set up shocks and interrelations in the reader. By 1927, the approach had developed into what Pound called ideograms, where the component images interacted 'simultaneously to present a complex of meaning'. {14} Take, for example, lines 36-44 of Canto XXX:

Came Madam 'Yle  
 Clothed with the light of the altar  
 And with the price of the candles.  
 'Honour? Balls for yr honour!  
 Take two million and swallow it.'  
                     Is come Messire Alfonso  
 And is departed by boat for Ferrara  
 And has passed here without saying 'O'.

Pound is referring to the proxy marriage of Alfonso d'Este to Lucrezia Borgia (whom he calls Madame Hyle, the Greek word for matter), which reflects the sexual and monetary corruption of the Papacy under the Borgias. In larger context, this and surrounding stanzas illustrate Pound's belief that Baroque art had subverted the purity of the Italian primitives, and that the taste and vig-

our of families like the d'Este were preferable to the 'usury' of contemporary banking institutions. {15}

Pound's phrasing is like no other, with a mischievous parody of diplomatic language (is departed. . . ), pungent humour and the sly reference to the Borgias counting the cost of the wedding candles. A wide range of matters is brought into play, and it is difficult to see how the complex emotional timbre could be achieved in other ways.

: Historical and Topical Allusion

The enormous tragedy of the dream in the peasant's bent shoulders  
Manes! Manes was tanned and stuffed,  
Thus Ben and la Clara *a Milano*  
by the heels at Milano {16}

The lines conflate the Fascist claims to bring social justice to Italy with the deaths of both the founder of the Manichaen religion and of Benito Mussolini and his mistress in the closing stages of WWII. Pound wrote this opening section of the *Pisan Cantos* when the death of his hero was still fresh in his mind, and when he himself faced prosecution for treason. The three fragments bridge the centuries and seem the more powerful for being presented without comment.

: Literary Parodies

Oh to be in England now that Winston's out  
Now that there's room for doubt  
And the bank may be the nation's  
And the long years of patience  
And labour's vacillations  
May have let the bacon come home, {17}

The section starts with a parody of Browning's *Home Thoughts from Abroad*, {18} and moves into political comment on the Labour Government returned in elections after WWII. Pound is still identifying with the Axis powers.

: Good Guy Stereotypes

Pound's allusions can also descend to a sort of chinoiserie, a simplistic view of the orient and elsewhere. His good guys in Canto LV, for example, are not merely caricatures, but mishandle Chinese history.

Came OUEN-TSONG and kicked out 3000 fancies  
let loose the falcons  
yet he also was had by the eunuchs after 15 years reign  
OU-TSONG destroyed hochang pagodas,  
spent his time drillin' and huntin'  
Brass idols turned into ha'pence  
chased out the bonzes from temples  
46 thousand temples . . . {19}

These allude to 'true events' of course, as PhD theses and student's guides demonstrate, {20} {21} {22} {23} but only in the sense that events in *A Child's First Book of the Saints* are true, as simple pictures. Economic matters, and more so the structure of Chinese society, {24} {25} {26} are too complex (and fascinating) to be properly represented by such cut-out figures. The allusions baffle the common reader and exasperate the knowledgeable, so failing in their primary task, which is to illustrate, support and enlarge our understanding of Pound's stress on good governance.

: Private Allusions

so that leaving America I brought with me \$80  
 and England a letter of Thomas Hardy's  
 and Italy one eucalyptus pip  
 from the salita that goes up from Rapallo {27}

The allusions here are clear enough to anyone who knows Pound's life, but the memories, or rather what they meant to Pound, stay private.

: Pretension

If Basil sing of Shah Nameh, and wrote  
     {*Frdwsi* in Farsi}  
                                 Firdush' on his door  
 Thus saith Kabir: 'Politically' said Rabindranath  
     they are inactive. They think, but then there is  
 climate, they think but it is warm or there are flies  
 or some insects' {28}

Pound was inclined to air his knowledge by playing the 'village explainer'. Persian and Hindi themes seem hardly relevant in this example, and even *Firdush'* is misspelt, unless this is one of Pound's chummy improvisations. Kabir {29} is a very different writer from Ferdowsi, {30} and Rabindranath Tagore's {31} comment seems little more than name-dropping. The switch to economic theory in the succeeding line leaves the quotation disappearing into the air.

## Some Conclusions

Are such 'complexes of meaning' really meanings at all, therefore, and do they cohere into larger units? Pound didn't write a traditional epic, and while certain themes appear in the poem, there is no story line or central character to hold the composition together. Repetitions and references to earlier sections thicken the weave, but don't add clarity.

Of course we can say that life *is* discontinuous, and that the shifting focus of the *Cantos* foreshadow the mix of events we see nightly on the news-channels. In that regard, the *Cantos* have been an important influence on l=a=n=g=u=a=g=e poets and others. But art has always claimed to do more

than mirror experience: it has claimed to give continuity, intensity and significance to events. Pound gives us a world of marvellous breadth, great beauty and intriguing comparisons, but it is also a looking-glass world where Pound the street barker is always appearing.

Allusions add to the emotional and semantic texture of poetry, and provide a generality of appeal even when we don't fully understand them. Pound's allusions often succeed because they are extraordinary evocative, freshly struck, mimic a great range of voices, are rhythmically deft and have a broad dash of humour. Nonetheless, all that admitted, the overall and finally disappointing effect is looseness, the variousness of what can be read into them. A few lines are delightful, an individual canto somewhat dizzying, and the poem as a whole a disorientating experience that leaves us distanced from ourselves and intellectually light-headed. Even the well-anthologized and more personal *Pisan Cantos* — which many expert readers {32} find the most moving — can appear somewhat egotistical, with Pound seemingly indifferent to the consequences of his views.

I personally find Pound a gloriously entertaining writer, and many years' reading of the *Cantos* have not diminished my enjoyment. Possibly the shortcomings of the approach are more Pound's, who was inclined to pass off pretence and obscurity as deeper meaning. Nonetheless, Pound's ideas are not always too interesting, and that limits how seriously we can take him. Allusion is an important element of poetry, but when it usurps others it becomes yet another example of 'perpetual revolution' in twentieth-century poetry.

## Allusion by Awareness

Literary allusion is vast field of scholarship, even if focused on a single poet {33} or the similarities of allusion to heteroglossia. {34} Not strictly allusion, but still illuminating, is the way poets pick up ways of handling their material from near-contemporaries, {35} when their lines gain from keeping those other treatments in mind. Here are snippets of poems by writers who maintained a wary knowledge of each other's productions:

Philip Larkin's *Home is So Sad*: {36}

You can see how it was;  
Look at the pictures and the cutlery.  
The music in the piano stool. That vase.

And Seamus Heaney's *Old Pewter*:

of illiteracy under rafters:  
a dented hand-me-down old smoky plate  
full of blizzards, sullied and temperate

Both express the universal yearning for home, but the first poem undercuts the happy clichés with particular instances, the pathos being held back behind the downbeat tone. The second is a commemoration of the rural

community, the glimmering pewter perhaps being an emblem of the soul and its imperfections. {37} We have to say 'perhaps' because such a meaning can be read into the line, but is not compelled by it — i.e. the line is sufficient intriguing not to need the glosses of academia.

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## 7. SOUND IN POETRY

Sound-patterning is a feature of the great majority of poems, and only in the last few centuries have readers become accustomed to silently reading a printed text. Poems were previously written for performance, and only committed to print subsequently, if at all. Poetry also derived from oral traditions, most spectacularly in the case of Homer, but continuing today in many less literate societies.

### 7.1. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

We know, to begin with, that the brain is a complicated instrument which digests and acts on information by a variety of complex and inter-linked processes. At its simplest, the left hemisphere (in right-handed people) attends to the literal sense, while the right is more intuitive. Logic is a therefore left-brain activity, and music a right-brained one. The distinction should not be overdone: no human activity is limited to one hemisphere, and even the most elementary operations involve levels deeper than the cerebral cortex. But the common view that poetry is as more concerned with how than with what is said, does contain an element of truth. In ordinary listening we respond to the speaker's intention without attending overmuch to their shape and presentation. In poetry, however, with its double code, both sound and sense are important, and the two are processed on different and not necessarily parallel tracks. Psychoacoustics distinguishes a speech from a non-speech mode, and finds that not only is coding very complex in both modes but signals in one mode can cue the other.

And perhaps that explains differences between the music of instruments and of poetry. They are not the same. The poverty of language often obliges us to call a voice soft or harsh, and no doubt we fancy that the vowels produced deep in the back of the mouth correspond to the larger woodwind instruments. But such knowledge as we possess on such matters, which is still very sketchy, does not support these analogies. Nor have all poets been good musicians, or good musicians been poetry readers with a keen ear.

Do sounds possess intrinsic meanings? The Symbolists fondly imagined so, and the attachment of words to their signified can be reinforced or reawakened by onomatopoeia and kinaesthesia. But what attachments do individual words possess? Deconstructionists view language as a self-referencing code, in which words have no final attachments to the world outside. However overstated, the theory stresses an obvious point: words gain meanings by context. If sounds are to have inherent meanings, therefore, they will achieve those in the context of other sounds. Given that poems are not freestanding creations but express cultural and literary understandings, any intrinsic meanings of sound will also involve a larger matrix, from which they are not easily extracted.



Nonetheless, some research has been possible. Just as different languages use common features to carve up the world in generally similar ways (even though the languages are physically and historically isolated), so there appear certain parallels in the ways sound is employed in the very different literatures of the world. Even beyond poetry, sound evokes similar associations in widely different cultures, and to some extent necessarily, since human beings have common behaviours and vocal equipment.

Again, there are dangers of oversimplifying matters. Oriental languages are often tonal, and this makes for difficulties in translation, since oriental poetry extensively exploits a feature missing from English. Even within the European languages there are differences in the ways certain sounds will register. The Romance languages are generally fluid and employ open vowels, whereas the Germanic languages are markedly stressed, and make more use of consonant clusters. When, for example, Valéry writes *L'insecte net gratte la sécheresse* (line 68 of *Le Cimetière*), the dentals and sibilants used to convey the parched landscapes of the Mediterranean summer are much more evident to a French ear than they are to ours.

And that brings us to an essential point. It is not sound in any general sense which is important, but how sound is used in a particular poem. Contemporary poets generally shun any music of verse, even if that means producing work not markedly different from everyday speech. That is their prerogative, and the matter is not to be settled on abstract bases, but to what uses sound can be put, on their varied gains and losses.

Sound underlies those terms which schoolchildren were once tortured with — alliteration, assonance, euphony, rhyme, pararhyme, onomatopoeia, repetition and tone colour. Moreover, in England at least, sound makes oblique reference to class attitudes and aspects. The greatest poets — Homer, Virgil, Du Fu, Rumi, Shakespeare, Racine, etc., who are supreme by virtue of their humanity — were also masters of the intricate deployment of sound, and had to be: sound is part and parcel of a poem's content.

Arguments arise over three aspects. First we have to note that writers (and indeed readers) vary considerably over whether they predominantly verbalize or visualize. The two faculties are not entirely separate, but where Byron tends towards graphic images, Keats gains his effects by incantatory sound. Second is the question of how consciously or deliberately poets create their sound effects. Valéry could spend days seeking a word with the required vowels, consonants and number of syllables, but Shakespeare wrote much too rapidly for that valetudinarian care. Both are great writers, however, so that there is nothing gained by making rules from personal preferences. Third is the effect on the reader. Overuse of certain devices will create artificial work: alliteration in Lilly, Poe, and Swinburne. Nonetheless, it is not the device as such, but its use in too strident a way, or its use to the exclusion of other devices, which causes the problem that literary tact must correct.

We have also to acknowledge that sound is a pleasure, and something innate in human beings. We like to sing, and chants that approach song are moving and socially cohesive: the King James' Version and street demonstrations. Poetry is more readily put to music than prose, and even pop music employs poetic devices. Poetry may indeed slide into music, though the first makes more use of articulation and phonetic timbre and the second of pitch and duration. Repetition is instinctive, moreover: *dada* and *mama* gurgles the baby. Mnemonic devices are most effective when sound reinforces the sense.

Sound is used for various ends in poetry, and these are often grouped under structure and texture. To the first belong rhyme, metre, arrangement of internal pauses, all of which come in a multitude of patterns dictated by literary tradition and properties of the language itself. The texture of sound is subtler and more important, at least to modern ears. It goes well beyond any simple characterization by recurring consonants or vowels, or predominantly as liquid or harsh, bright or sombre. In fact, both structure and texture can be classified further under headings of formal structure, sense, scene, feelings and aesthetics.

## 7.2. RHYME

### 7.2.1. Introduction

Rhyme occurs throughout the world's literary languages, even occasionally in inflected languages like Greek, Latin and Sanskrit. Often the device was imported, into Sanskrit from Chinese verse, and into Persian from Arabic, for example, but rhyme also appears spontaneously, as it does in children. Worth distinguishing are: {1}

Alliteration:	bad boy
Assonance:	back rat
Consonance:	back neck
Reverse rhyme:	back bat
Pararhyme:	back buck
Strict rhyme:	back rack
Rich rhyme:	battery cattery

These line-end effects are sometimes combined. Assonance and rhyme in Milton's *On the Late Massacre in Piedmont*:

Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughter'd saints, whose bones  
 Lie scatter'd on the Alpine mountains cold,  
 Ev'n them who kept thy truth so pure of old,  
 When all our fathers worshipp'd stocks and stones;  
 Forget not: in thy book record their groans  
 Who were thy sheep and in their ancient fold

Slain by the bloody Piemontese that roll'd  
Mother with infant down the rocks. Their moans {2}

Consonance and rhyme in Yeat's *Among School Children*:

Both nuns and mothers worship images,  
But those the candles light are not as those  
That animate a mother's reveries,  
But keep a marble or a bronze repose.  
And yet they too break hearts—O Presences  
That passion, piety or affection knows,  
And that all heavenly glory symbolise—  
O self-born mockers of man's enterprise; {3}

Rhyme is not essential to verse, and much of the greatest literature in all languages has been written without it. Nonetheless, rhyme may help to: {7}

1. Point line endings where these are important (e.g. satire).
2. Bind the content by emphasizing the stanza shape.
3. Embellish and knit together the sound patterning.
4. Give memorability to the lines.
5. Give a line structure to verse.
6. Indicate scene ends in plays.

Rhymes are words of different meanings which end in the same sound. As much as possible in English, a language poor in rhyme sounds, they should:

1. Be pleasing in themselves, employing long and full-sounding vowels.
2. Link words not simply of different meanings but different parts of speech.
3. Alternate monosyllable and polysyllable words, i.e. not always employ short words.
4. Show some variety, the same rhymes not appearing too often.
5. Not appear contrived, unless a comic effect is intended.

### 7.2.2. Contemporary Use

Rhyme is rarely used in serious poetry today because it appears to:

1. Stamp 'inauthentic' on the product: it voids attempts to capture a living voice, something that could be conceivably be spoken by real people in real situations.
2. Sever words from their usual associations.
3. Create aesthetic distance, and commonly a heightened sense of feeling or beauty — neither wanted in today's poetry.

### 7.2.3. Advantages of Rhyme

In practice, however, verse is often immeasurably poorer for the absence of rhyme. If, for example, we rewrite a *Rape of the Lock* snippet by changing alternate rhyme words:

From this:

Sol thro' white curtains shot a tim'rous ray,  
 And op'd those eyes that must eclipse the day;  
 Now lap-dogs give themselves the rousing shake,  
 And sleepless lovers, just at twelve, awake:  
 Thrice rung the bell, the slipper knock'd the ground,  
 And the press'd watch return'd a silver sound.  
 Belinda still her downy pillow press'd,  
 Her guardian sylph prolong'd the balmy rest:  
 'Twas he had summon'd to her silent bed  
 The morning dream that hover'd o'er her head;  
 A youth more glitt'ring than a birthnight beau,  
 (That ev'n in slumber caus'd her cheek to glow)  
 Seem'd to her ear his winning lips to lay,  
 And thus in whispers said, or seem'd to say.  
 'Fairest of mortals, thou distinguish'd care  
 Of thousand bright inhabitants of air!  
 If e'er one vision touch'd thy infant thought,  
 Of all the nurse and all the priest have taught,  
 Of airy elves by moonlight shadows seen,  
 The silver token, and the circled green,  
 Or virgins visited by angel pow'rs,  
 With golden crowns and wreaths of heav'nly flow'rs,  
 Hear and believe! thy own importance know,  
 Nor bound thy narrow views to things below.  
 Some secret truths from learned pride conceal'd,  
 To maids alone and children are reveal'd:

To this:

Sol thro' white curtains sent his tim'rous light,  
 And op'd those eyes that must eclipse the day;  
 Now lapdogs give themselves the rousing stretch,  
 And sleepless lovers, just at twelve, awake:  
 Thrice rung the bell, the slipper knock'd the ground,  
 And the press'd watch return'd its silvered note.  
 Still on her downy pillow Belinda lay,  
 Her guardian sylph prolong'd the balmy rest:  
 'Twas he had summon'd to her silent thought  
 The morning dream that hover'd o'er her head;  
 A youth more glitt'ring than a birthnight beau,

(That ev'n in slumber fanned her cheek aflame)  
 Seem'd to her ear his winning words to pour,  
 And thus in whispers said, or seem'd to say.  
 'Fairest of mortals, thou distinguish'd hope  
 Of thousand bright inhabitants of air!  
 If e'er one vision touch'd thy infant care,  
 Of all the nurse and all the priest have taught,  
 Of airy elves by moonlight shadows seen,  
 The silver token, and the circled lawn,  
 Or virgins visited by angel pow'rs,  
 With wreathes of heav'nly flow'rs and golden crowns,  
 Hear and believe! thine own importance hold,  
 Nor bound thy narrow views to things below.  
 Some secret truths from learned pride withheld,  
 To maids alone and children are reveal'd:

The loss is obvious: the rewritten piece is another animal altogether. The complaint of the *New Formalists* against free verse is that, far from giving originality and naturalness, free verse drastically reduces the different modes of expression available in various metre and stanza forms.

#### 7.2.4. Rhyme in Translation

Much poetry in European languages was written with rhyme, and a proper translation requires that it be reproduced in some way.

Pierre Ronsard: *Quand vous serez bien vieille*

I will be long buried, a phantom without bones  
 Who by the sombre myrtle-trees will myself repose;  
 You will be by the hearth, a stooped old woman,  
 Regretting my love and your proud disdain.  
 Live, if you believe me, and wait not for tomorrow:  
 Pluck today the roses of life. {3}

Seems to me better put as:

But I in earth, a disembodied guest,  
 shall in the shade of myrtles have my rest,  
 while huddled up in hearth, a crone you'll stay  
 regretting love and those past vows you scorned.  
 Believe me, live. By afterwards be warned  
 to gather in life's roses of today. {4}

Charles Baudelaire: *Le Voyage*

To a child who is fond of maps and engravings  
 The universe is the size of his immense hunger.

Ah! how vast is the world in the light of a lamp!  
In memory's eyes how small the world is! {5}

The child enamoured of his maps and stamps  
has universe enough for appetite,  
but those vast lands beneath the blaze of lamps  
are stale and petty in remembered light. {4}

Rubén Darío: *Song of Autumn in Springtime*

Youth's a treasure that only the gods may keep,  
and how it flees from me, forever – now.  
I can't seem to cry, when I need to,  
and sometimes tears come when I don't want them to.

The stories of this heart are countless,  
can never be told – and  
she was a darling child,  
in this world of pain and woe. {6}

Youth, in splendour from on high,  
how soon you go, nor come anew.  
When I would cry, I do not cry. . .  
and at times I cry without wanting to. . .

Plural has been the celestial  
history of the heart beneath:  
sweet as a girl is in our bestial  
world of travail and of grief. {4}

Rilke: *Herbststag*

Oh Lord, it's time, it's time. It was a great summer.  
Lay your shadow now on the sundials,  
and on the open fields let the winds go! {7}

A lofty summer, Lord! It's time to lay  
your shadows on the sundials now, and let  
once more in meadowlands the winds hold sway. {4}

It will also help to dignify translations where the original does not employ rhyme, as in the classical languages:

Horace: *Odes I, 2*.

It's enough now, all this vicious snow and hail  
Father Jupiter has sent to earth, enough  
his striking sacred peaks with a smoldering hand  
to terrify the town

To terrify the people: what if the dismal age  
of Pyrrha should return, when she quailed at strange  
new signs, when Proteus drove his ocean herd  
to visit mountain tops,

And the race of fish clustered in the highest elms  
where doves used to build their nests in the dry old days,  
and deer swam, terrified, in floods ravaging  
over lost land? {8}

Horace's jewelled phrases are better echoed with something similarly intricate and artificial:

Such snow and hail has Jove hurled down  
upon our sacred hills, defied  
with his fierce hand, that this vast town  
lies terrified.

And people too, lest Pyrrha's time  
should come again with monstrous sights  
when Proteus had his sea herds climb  
the mountain heights.

Then fish were hoisted high in elms  
where naturally the pigeons roost,  
and on those swirling liquid realms  
were red deer loosed.{9}

Translation is not a competition, but there is an obligation to improve on predecessors in some way — by making the rendering more contemporary, insightful or better expressed. Where rhyme has played an important part in a previous rendering that rhyme should also appear in the later rendering. After Housman's translation of *Horace Odes IV, 7* brought the piece into English verse:

The snows are fled away, leaves on the shaws  
And grasses in the mead renew their birth,  
The river to the river-bed withdraws,  
And altered is the fashion of the earth.

The Nymphs and Graces three put off their fear  
And unapparelled in the woodland play.  
The swift hour and the brief prime of the year  
Say to the soul, Thou wast not born for aye. {10}

We need to write something similar:

The snows are fled away, the fields new grassed,  
and trees are filled with leaves' rebirth.

The streams, diminishing, flow quietly past,  
and in its turn so changes earth.

In blatant nakedness the Graces play,  
and with the Nymphs are chorusing,  
but think, as hour on hour draws down the day,  
in time there passes everything. {9}

Rhyming becomes second nature with practice, but it's always wise to check possibilities with a rhyming dictionary, either in book or electronic form. Slim volumes purchased at second-hand bookseller are often the best choice. American and British pronunciations can be quite different.

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## 7.3. SOUND PATTERNING

Deliberate use of sound is far from dead, even among poets who dislike academia and the tightly constructed poetry it advocates. Allen Ginsberg, Robert



Creely and Charles Wright {1}, to mention but three, aim at fluid, open forms that reflect the contemporary American scene. Yet if we look at their poetry, we find their most celebrated lines are successful to the extent they deploy the devices we have touched on.

*Passages: Oct 1* by Robert Duncan

The bird's leap upward to flight towards the heart

(Punctuation by repeated d, t and p sound; expressive mime of repeated to.)

*Wings Lifted over the Black Pit* by Allen Ginsberg

Smoke & Steam, broken glass & beer cans,  
Auto exhaust.

(Repeated s and t sounds used in an abstract pattern to symbolize the sense.)

*Southern Cross* by Charles Wright

Nightwind by now in the olive trees  
No sound but the wind from anything.

(Not only tone painting with nasal n and v, but the involved interconnections in the repeated in, nd, ee sounds, superb in the second line.)

## Detailed Examples

Sound in fact serves a wide variety of uses:

### **Emphasis: words or images**

For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy — cloth  
(2. W.B. Yeats. *Byzantium*.)

Master of beauty, craftsman of the snowflake,  
Inimitable contriver,  
(2. John Berryman. *Eleven Addresses to the Lord*.)

And the mussel pooled and the heron  
Priested shore  
(2. Dylan Thomas. *Poem in October*.)

## Indirect support of argument by related echoes

Is it a trick or a trysting place,  
     Is it a mirage or miracle,  
         (2. Philip Larkin. *XXVII*)

    Comes home dull with coal dust to deliberately  
     Grime the sink...  
 (3. Ted Hughes. *Her Husband*.)

    It was a flowering and a laying waste  
 — Man's skills found shining at the heart of woman,  
 His vengeance too, expediently unlaced.  
         (3. Carol Rumens. *The Freedom Won by War for Women*.)

## Counterpoising: opposes or distracts from verse structure

And iridescent creature  
     Batter against the brilliance, drop like a glove  
 To the hard floor, or the desk top.  
 (3. Richard Wilber. *The Writer*.)

The woman in the block of ivory soap  
 Has massive thighs that neigh,  
 Great breasts that blare and strong arms that trumpet.  
 (2. Marge Piercy. *The Woman in the Ordinary*.)

He took no suck when shook buds sing together  
 But he is come in cold as workhouse weather  
         (2. John Short. *Carol*.)

## Interconnection: sound, meaning and feeling.

The way the shy stars go stuttering on...  
     Slurs its soft wax, flatters.  
         (4. Carol Ann Duffy. *The Grammar of Light*.)

    Their distant husbands lean across mahogany  
     And delicately manipulate the market  
 (2. Elma Mitchell. *Thoughts after Ruskin*.)

And dearer, water, than ever your voice, as if  
 Glad — though goodness knows why — to run with the human race,  
         (2. W.H. Auden. *Streams*.)

### **Abstract patterning: emphasizing content**

Knowing not how shrewdly the rod  
     Would bite the back in the kingdom of the dead God.  
 (3. Howard Nemerov. *The Death of God*.)

Help us out in Vietnam  
     Batman  
 Help us drop that BatNapalm  
 (2. Adrian Henri. *BatPoem*.)

I am a young executive No cuffs than mine are cleaner.  
     (2. John Betjeman. *The Executive*.)

### **Onomatopoeia: representation by sound.**

I lay in an agony of imagination as the wind...  
 Snuffled through floorboards from the foundations.  
 (2. Peter Redgrove. *Old House*)

Grumbling on the stairs  
 Over an old grammar...  
 The somnambulist brook.  
 (3. Elizabeth Bishop. *A Summer's Dream*.)

I hear among the furze the murmur  
 Of innumerable wasps.  
 (3. Robert Conquest. *To be a Pilgrim*.)

### **Illustrative Mime: mouth movements evoke motion or shape**

The towelled head next, the huge bactrachian mouth:  
 (2. Charles Tomlinson. *Charlotte Corday*.)

I am Raftery, hesitant and confused among  
 (2. Derek Mahon. *I am Raftery*.)

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
 Come gargling from the froth — corrupted lungs.  
 (2. Wilfred Owen. *Dulce et Decorum Est*.)

### **Illustrative Painting: patterns correspond to non — acoustic elements.**

Whatever went wrong, that week, was more than weather:  
 (2. Amy Clampitt. *A Hairline Fracture*.)

I was born in Bristol, and it is possible  
To live harshly in that city.  
(3. C.H. Sisons. *Family Fortunes*.)

How loud and above what  
Furious spaces of fire do the distracting devils  
Orgy and hosanna,  
(2. Ted Hughes. *Thrushes*.)

### **Passionate Emphasis**

Forever aslant in their moment and the mind's eye.  
(3. Anthony Hecht. *The Cost*.)

Lamb of the shepherds, Child, how still you lie.  
(3. Robert Lowell. *The Holy Innocents*.)

Cousin, it's of you I always dream  
As I walk these dislocated lawns  
(2. Jane Cooper. *C. in a mental hospital*.)

### **Mood Evocation**

Sated upon the stillness of the bride.  
(3. Geoffrey Hill. *A Short History of British India*.)

Again deceived, I found  
Peace in the ceremonial love of wealth,  
(5. Wesley Trimpi. *Oedipus to the Oracle*.)

The gaiety of three winds is a game of green  
Shining, of gray-and-gold play in the holly-bush  
(5. W.S. Merwin. *White Goat, White Ram*.)

### **Expressive Mine: mouth movements evoke the emotion**

Lark drives invisible pitons in the air  
And hauls itself up the face of space.  
(3. Norman MacCaig. *Movements*.)

Some must employ the scythe  
Upon the grasses  
(5. Philip Larkin. *The Dedicated*.)

Oh leave his body broken on the rocks  
(5. William Bell. *On a Dying Boy*.)

## Expressive Painting

All year the flax-damn festered in the heart  
Of the townland;  
(3. Seamus Heaney. *Death of a Naturalist*.)

Now winter downs the dying of the year  
And night is all a settlement of snow  
(5. Richard Wilber. *Years-End*.)

And caught in the snare of the bleeding air  
The butcher bird sings, sings, sings.  
(5. Charles Causley. *Recruiting Drive*.)

## Ebullience

But she, exiled, expelled, ex-queen,  
Swishes among the men of science.  
(6. Fleur Adcock. *The Ex-Queen among the Astronomers*.)

It may be at midday, limousines in cities, the groaning  
Derrick and hissing hawser alive at dockyards,  
Liners crawling with heat-baked decks, their élite  
(6. Edwin Morgan. *Stanzas of the Jeopardy*.)

Shipwrecked, the sun sinks down harbours  
Of a sky, unloads its liquid cargoes  
Of marigolds,  
(6. Dannie Abse. *Epithalamion*.)

The heat-haze dances meadowsweet and may,  
Whole cliffs collapse,  
(6. Andrew Motion. *The Lines*.)

## Embellishment

Clouds are flowering  
Blue and mystical over the face of stars.  
(6. Sylvia Plath. *The Moon and the Yew Tree*.)

and a winter when every stick of timber —  
the yard's sodden, inedible driftwood, the fence-posts  
(6. Duncan Bush. *Pig Farmer*.)

Fish gnaw the Flushing capons, hauled from fleeced  
Lutheran Holland, for tomorrow's feast.  
(6. Tony Harrison. *The Nuptial Torches*.)

Bitten and burned into mirrors of thin gold,  
The weathercocks, blind from the weather,  
(6. Charles Tomlinson. *The Weathercocks*.)

## Incantation

Time passing, and the memories of love  
Coming back to me carissima, no more mockingly  
Than ever before; time passing, unslackening  
(6. Donald Davie. *Time Passing, Beloved*.)

The late, retarding and unsettled season  
Works in the air with a distracting aim,  
(6. Charles Gullens. *Autumn. An Ode*.)

Against the flare and descant of the gas  
I heard an old woman in a shop maintain  
(5. John Holloway. *Warning to a Ghost*.)

Mother, I went to China this morning.  
The trees were pagodas, the puddles were seas.  
Dragons were hiding behind the begonias.  
(5. Alastair Reed. *Who can Say*.)

## Some Suggestions

The list has been a long one, but is doubtless incomplete and somewhat arbitrary. What can we conclude? Perhaps the following:

1. Effects may not be consciously sought by the poet, or not initially, but they do help to explain the unexpected pleasure of the lines.
2. Once recognized, the effects can be developed, just as a composer develops a musical phrase by the laws of harmony.
3. Far more telling is their effect on the poem as a whole, the effect they create or fail to create.

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## 7.4. CADENCE

Cadence is a word used rather freely by poets and literary critics to indicate the rhymic flow of verse beyond that of mere metre. In music the term refers to a progression of chords moving to a harmonic close, point of rest, or sense of resolution. In phonetics the term refers to a fall in the pitch of the voice, as at the end of a sentence. {1} Both meanings tend to attach themselves to poetry, but the word is better used as the particular modulation of a succession of rhythmical sounds. {2}

Imprecise as it seems, and open to confusion, {3} cadence is an important element of all verse, free and formal. But whereas cadence in free verse approximates to 'natural speech rhythms' — what normal people in normal situations could conceivably speak {4} — cadence in formal verse has no such limitations.

### Metre and Cadence

Dactylic metre alone can indeed create a falling pitch, as in this translation of Verlaine's *Autumn Day* shows: {5}

Autumn Song

**In** con | **sol** a ble | **winds**  
 bring | **vi** ol ins,  
 and | **aut** umn's | **part**  
**is** mo | **not** on ous  
 and | **lang** uo rous,  
**pain** to the | **heart**.



But of course there's good deal more than simple dactylic metre here — some lines are trochaic, the end rhymes are all stressed, and some lines can read variously. As we'll note in the Browning below, the wholly dactylic line is rarely successful, probably because rhyme automatically stresses the last syllable in the line.

Nonetheless, cadence is not simply metre, as can be seen by comparing Thomas Hood's *Song of the Shirt* with Robert Browning's *The Lost Leader*. The first has the stronger falling pitch but fewer dactylic feet:

With | **fingers** | **weary** and | **worn**  
 With | **eyelids** | **heavy** and | **red**,  
 A | **woman** | **sat** in un|**womanly** rags,  
**Plying** her | **needle** and | **thread**—  
**Stitch!** | **stitch!** | **stitch!**  
 In | **poverty**, | **hunger**, and | **dirt**,  
 And | **still** with a | **voice** of | **dolorous pitch**  
 She | **sang** the | '**Song** of the | **Shirt.**' {6}

**Just** for a | **handful** of | **silver** he | **left** us,  
**Just** for a | **riband** to | **stick** in his | **coat**—  
**Found** the one | **gift** of which | **fortune** be | **reft** us,  
**Lost** all the | **others** she lets | **us** de|**vote**;  
**They**, with the | **gold** to give |, **doled** him out | **silver**,  
**So** much was | **theirs** who so | **little** al|**lowed**:  
**How** all our | **copper** had | **gone** for his | **service!** {7}

As is often the case with Browning, the content has to work against the metre, which is here rather flat-footed and contrived.

## Cadence and Phrasing

Equally important to cadence is the phrasing, the pauses of various lengths that give the lines their sad beauty in Ernest Dowson's *Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration*, for example:

**Calm**, || **sad**, || **secure**; ||| **behind** high **convent walls**, |||  
 These **watch** the **sacred lamp**, || these **watch** and **pray**: |||  
 And **it** is **one** with **them** | when **evening falls**, ||  
 And **one** with **them** || the **cold return** of **day**. {8}

Note the dropping cadence in lines 3 and the first half of 4, achieved with the simple iambic, and then the rising cadence of *the **cold return of day***, which is so bitterly undercut by *cold*. In his famous *Non Sum Qualis Eram Bonae Sub Regno Cynarae*, Dowson has improved on the Horace original (Odes IV, 1):

Intermissa, Venus, diu  
 rursus bella moues? Parce precor, precor.

Non sum qualis eram bonae  
sub regno Cinarae. Desine, dulcium  
mater saeua Cupidinum,

Where a straightforward rendering might be:

I beg and beg you, back again  
from battles interrupted, Venus, make  
me not of good Cinara's reign,  
but, savage mother of such loves, forsake . . {9}

How much richer is this:

Last night, ah, yesternight, betwixt her lips and mine  
There fell thy shadow, Cynara! thy breath was shed  
Upon my soul between the kisses and the wine;  
And I was desolate and sick of an old passion,  
Yea, I was desolate and bowed my head:  
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion. {8}

Dowson was a timid soul, but no one has written English lines of more desolating sorrow. A full analysis would take several pages, but note how the phrasing builds up a mounting expectation in the first line:

Last night, ||ah, yesternight, || betwixt her lips and mine ||

Then we have reality in dropping cadences:

There fell thy shadow, || Cynara! ||| thy breath was shed |  
Upon my soul between the kisses | and the wine; ||

The situation is noted and repeated:

And I was desolate || and sick | of an old passion, |||  
Yea, | I was desolate || and bowed my head: |||

And the stanza ends with rueful acceptance:

I have been faithful to thee, | Cynara! || in my fashion. |||

But of course it's also a highly literate emotion, which Eliot and Modernism were to sweep away with:

April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.  
Winter kept us warm, covering  
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding  
A little life with dried tubers.  
Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee {10}

Or perhaps not. Again we have the dropping cadence, but only in the last foot:

April is the cruellest month, | **breeding**  
 Lilacs out of the dead land, | **mixing**  
 Memory and desire, | **stirring**

Then two spondees

**Dull roots** with **spring rain**.

Again the dropping cadence:

Winter kept us warm, | **covering**  
 Earth in forgetful snow, | **feeding**

Followed by a loose hexameter:

**Sum** mer | sur **prised** us, || **co** ming | **over** the | Starn **berg** | er **see**

And so on. It's as calculated as the Dowson, though not as accomplished (i.e. Eliot's effect is easily achieved, but not Dowson's).

In short, verse is enormously complicated, and there may be several orders of metrical rhythm laid one over the other — the individual feet, the primary metre, the rhetoric, the stanza shaping — each interacting with the others and drawing their strength from how the words sound and what they mean. 'How the rhythms seem naturally to fall' might be one way of looking at cadence, and in the best lines this 'fall' assumes an inevitability: it could not be otherwise we feel. Consider the Edmund Blunden lines:

I have been young, and now am not too old,  
 And I have seen the righteous forsaken,  
 His health, his honour and his quality taken  
 This is not what we were formerly told. {11}

It's modelled on Psalm 37,25:

I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.

But given a deep irony by war. A very simple scansion might be:

I **have** | been **young**, | and **now** | am **not** | too **old**,  
 And **I** | have **seen** | the **right** | eous for **sa** | ken,  
 His **health**, | his **hon** | our **and** | his **qua** | li ty | **taken**  
**This** is | **not** what | **we** were | **form** er ly | **told**.

Here the falling cadence of *formerly* echoes *righteous for* and *quality*. But looking closer at line 4 we see how the rising indignation of *This is **not what we were***, with the heavy emphasis on those last four words, then falls away with **formerly told**. Or partly. The line in fact wavers between scansions, which is the reason for its effectiveness. Writing something with a clearer scansion produces a very tame line:

**It** is **some** thing **we** were **ne** ver **told**.

That very confusion in *not what we* underlines the sense: the scansion 'stumbles' just as we stumble to take in how the world has changed. Sense and sound come together: it has to be 'formerly', not 'truthfully', 'readily', or some other three-syllable word:

This is not what we were truthfully told.

## Inevitability

In Dryden's translation of the Aeneid (Book 6), where occur the well-known lines:

Obscure they went thro' dreary shades, that led  
 Along the waste dominions of the dead.  
 Thus wander travelers in woods by night,  
 By the moon's doubtful and malignant light,  
 When Jove in dusky clouds involves the skies,  
 And the faint crescent shoots by fits before their eyes. {12}

We can see how correct is:

By the moon's doubtful and malignant light,

By writing other possibilities:

By the doubtful moon and its malignant light,  
 By the moon's most hurtful and malignant light,  
 Beneath the moon's malignant, doubtful light,  
 Etc.

But only the version as written gives that measured threat, both swelling and contained, that leads on from the more metrically regular preceding line. It's a small flourish that Dryden allows himself in his powerfully masculine translation.

Note that we have extended the notion of cadence, from some natural *fall* of lines to their overall metrical nature and sonic properties. Cadence becomes verse craft pertaining to the rhythmic organisation of a line's sonic properties. Cadence may then be something quite other than 'falling lines': simple happiness

It was a lover and his lass,  
 With a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonino,  
 That o'er the green cornfield did pass,  
 In springtime, the only pretty ring time,  
 When birds do sing, hey ding a ding, ding;  
 Sweet lovers love the spring. {13}

Or regret:

Ca' the yowes to the knowes,  
 Ca' them where the heather grows  
 Ca' them where the burnie rows,  
 My bonnie Dearie. {14}

And so on. We can't imagine the lines being very different if the poem is to remain what it is. In this sense the cadence of lines is that music of verse, without which most of their charm, emotion and authority disappears. A poetry without verse of some sort is as silent as the libretto of an opera without its orchestral score.

Compare the exquisite 'rightness' of Richard Wilbur's *Year's End*:

Now winter downs the dying of the year,  
 And night is all a settlement of snow;  
 From the soft street the rooms of houses show  
 A gathered light, a shapen atmosphere,  
 Like frozen-over lakes whose ice is thin  
 And still allows some stirring down within {15}

With the following:

Vassar Miller's *Without Ceremony*

Except ourselves, we have no other prayer;  
 Our needs are sores upon our nakedness.  
 We do not have to name them; we are here.  
 And You who can make eyes can see no less. {16}

Joan LaBombard's *By the Beautiful Ohio*

Now at the dark's perpetual descent,  
 I remember the hoses, looped like snakes,  
 The arcs of silver spilled in little lakes,  
 All that rainbow bridge to summer, bent  
 Under the hanging stars. {17}

Ted Kooser's *Anniversary*

At dinner, in that careful rouge of light  
 of five or six martinis, you could pass  
 for Ginger Rogers; we could dance all night  
 on tiny tabetops as slick as glass  
 in flying, shiny shoes. {18}

Anthony Hecht's *Double Sonnet*

I recall everything, but more than all,  
 Words being nothing now, an ease that ever  
 Remembers her to my unfailing fever,

How she came forward to me, letting fall  
Lamplight upon her dress {19}

June Jordan's *Sunflower Sonnet Number One*

But if I tell you how my heart swings wide  
enough to motivate flirtations with the trees  
or how the happiness of passion freaks inside  
me, will you then believe the faithful, yearning freeze {20}

Donald Justice's *Women in Love*

It always comes, and when it comes they know.  
To will it is enough to bring them there.  
The knack is this, to fasten and not let go. {21}

That extra grace slowly vanishes, until we have J.V. Cunningham's *The Aged Lover Discourses in the Flat Style*: note the play of voice against the metre.

There are, perhaps, whom passion gives a grace,  
Who fuse and part as lovers on the stage;  
But that is not for me, not at my age,  
Nor with my bony shoulders and fat face. {22}

That flatness is deliberate, but probably not here, with Van K. Brock's *Lying on a Bridge*:

We saw anchored worlds in a shallow stream.  
The current tugged at clouds, the sun, our faces.  
And while we stared, as though into a dream, {23}

The 'music of verse' is a somewhat pejorative term today, suggesting artifice-laden musings that occupy an unreal parallel universe, outside the pressing concerns of our contemporary world, perhaps something that the 'Tennyson and water' simplicity of amateur poetry feels more comfortable with. But the founders of Modernism, still much quoted in critical articles and manifestos, saw things very differently. Baudelaire realized that music, which lacks an obvious meaning, or at least a semantic one, could move the heart more deeply than touching thoughts on contemporary issues. A better understanding of music could enable poets to develop the instrumental resources of language, and so explore unknown depths of the soul. He wrote, 'La poésie touche à la musique par une prosodie dont les racines plongent plus avant dans l'âme humaine que ne l'indique aucune théorie classique.' Mallarmé declared that his aim was to recover 'un art d'achever la transposition, au Livre, de la Symphonie'.

The Symbolists were not the first to make such a connection, of course. Dryden had called music 'inarticulate poesy' and even Shelley, in his nebulous way, had said 'Sounds as well as thoughts have relation between each other and towards that which they represent, and a perception of the order of their

relations has always been found connected with a perception of the order of the relations of thought.' The most gifted English poets of the late nineteenth century, struggling to escape lush Romanticism and the impersonal correctness of the Parnassian school, were drawn to Symbolism's view that poetry aspired to the condition of music, for all that hostile critics might counter with the sturdy commonsense of Pope:

In the bright Muse, though thousand charms conspire,  
Her voice is all these tuneful fools admire,  
Who haunts Parnassus but to please their ear,  
Not mend their minds; as some to Church repair,  
Not for the doctrine, but the music there.

But Pope himself was a master of immaculate verse music: there is more to his poetry than homilies neatly expressed.

Far more than is the case today, poets looked to music for what their art should be doing. 'But for opera I could never have written *Leaves of Grass*,' said Whitman, meaning not simply that his relish for Italian opera had developed and inspired his sensuous faculties but that the poem itself was operatic in structure. Tennyson, who was tone deaf and did not care much for music, imitated the rhythms of a contemporary polka in 'Come into the garden, Maud'. Indeed the Hawaiian rhythms of his *Kapiolani* went back to a visit made some twenty-five years earlier by Queen Emma and her entourage, who had called on the poet at Farringford to chant their Hawaiian songs, seated briony-wreathed on his drawing-room floor.

In his lecture of 1942 on the *The Music of Poetry*, T.S. Eliot observed that:

'The use of recurrent themes is as natural to poetry as to music. There are possibilities for verse which bear some analogy to the development of a theme by different groups of instruments; there are possibilities of transitions in a poem comparable to the different movements of a symphony or a quartet; there are possibilities of contrapuntal arrangement of subject matter.'

Eliot's critical writings often disclose concerns central to his own writing, and here he may be referring to the celebrated passage from *The Waste Land*, that collage of impressions, clashing social registers, slang and quotations that contemporary poets still find a useful technique:

O City city, I can sometimes hear  
Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,  
the pleasant whining of a mandoline  
And a clatter and a chatter from within  
Where fishmen lounge at noon: where the walls  
Of Magnus Martyr hold  
In explicable splendour of Ionian white and gold.

Individually, the lines are less than impressive: the heavy slab of prose in *Lower Thames Street*, the brazen *clatter and a chatter from within* that would

be difficult to follow in the same metre, the improbability of the *mandoline* (of all things) and *fishmen lounging at noon*. But then comes the subsuming last line, where the *inexplicable* is exactly right for reasons of sense — adding unreality of the scene and a nagging anxiety — and verbal music. {15}

There seems to be an aural symbolism lurking deep in the unconscious, and perhaps most evocative when experienced in the semi-hypnotic condition induced by verse, though the conscious mind still has to be satisfied. It's possible to analyze actual examples — though there are many difficulties (2-3)— and Ronald Carter and Walter Nash's simple introduction to styles in English in fact devotes several pages to the verse patterning exhibited by Browning's *Meeting by Night*, which readers will remember starts with:

The grey sea and the long black land;  
And the yellow half-moon large and low;  
And the startled little waves that leap  
In fiery ringlets from their sleep,  
As I gain the cove with pushing prow,  
And quench its speed i' the slushy sand.

Sprinkled through their introduction to and analysis of the piece are such comments as: (16)

'But sounds in verse — or the sounds implied by the verse text—have more than musical value. While they decorate the poem, they may also help to organize it, acting as more or less emphatic markers of the phrase, the line, the stanza. Rhyme, for example, offers something more than a pleasant variation of sonorous chimes; it is also a kind of acoustic punctuation, a designator of the boundaries and overlaps of verse form and grammatical form. Alliteration occurs quite commonly as a device which not only picks out the balancing halves of a line, or the matching lines of a distich, but also gives emphasis to the grammatical shape of clause and phrase.'

One role of verse is its ability to frame the poem, to signal that words are being used in a special and interdependent way. Poems are not slices of life, generally, but deeply pondered creations, and that removal from reality is signaled by the verse texture, rhyme and stanza shape— i.e. the music of verse.

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## 7.5. WHITE SPACE

Equally important is what is *not* heard, the 'white space' that typographers leave so that the text can 'breathe' and the page show a pleasing balance between text, illustration and empty space.

Because Geoffrey Hill can write things of formal beauty like:

The starched unbending candles stir  
As though a wind had caught their hair,  
As though the surging of a host  
Had charged the air of Pentacost. {1}

It is tempting to see his lines from *Funeral Music* in a similar fashion:

Pro **ces** | sion **als** | in **the** | e **xem** | pla ry **cave**, |  
Benediction of shadows. Pomfret. London.  
The voice fragrant with mannered humility,  
With an equable contempt for this world,  
'In honorem Trinitatis'. Crash. The head  
Struck down into a meaty conduit of blood. {2}

They become loose pentameters if we count all the syllables, and tetrameters if we count the syllables stressed.

Pro**cessionals** **in** the **exemplary** **cave**,  
Bene**diction** of **shadows**. **Pomfret**. **London**.  
The **voice** fragrant with **mannered** **humility**,

But that's to misread the lines. They have a formal neatness, certainly, but lean towards a free verse, where an underlying patterning gives unity to the lines but also allows many changes of emphasis and tempo. The meter does not regiment the words, therefore (nor, more fatally, their meanings), but allows words and phrases the autonomy needed to make their point. The lines vary considerably. Lines 1, 3, 4 and to some extent 6 are complete in themselves, though we hear long pauses after 'cave', 'shadows', 'Pomfret' and 'London', etc. The words have been fastidiously chosen for their exact meanings, with the usual overtones of guilt and recrimination, {2} but also employ a host of poetic devices, not least metaphor, assonance and alliteration. After the other-worldliness of the first four lines comes brute reality in 'Struck', 'meaty' and 'blood'. Geoffrey Hill wrote slowly in those days, and the silences in the lines were highly effective. Not so beautiful (nor so fastidious and ornate) but employing the same technique of words placed above an underlying metre (here very deeply buried, it's only barely sensed) are these lines from Mary Jo Bang's *An Autopsy of an Era*: {3}

That's how it was then, a knife  
 through cartilage, a body broken. Animal  
 and animal as mineral ash. A window smashed.  
 The collective howl as a general alarm  
 followed by quiet.

Boot-black night,  
 halogen hum.

Again the words are exactly placed: they seem 'right'. It is, of course, the usual style of verse today, and one that allows the poet to work in a good deal of miscellaneous and untuneful material. How much material before the free verse become prose? Until the words lack an exact placing, I would suggest, as they do in these lines from Juan Felipe Herrera's *Exiles*: {4}

They are in exile: a slow scream across a yellow bridge  
 the jaws stretched, widening, the eyes multiplied into blood  
 orbits, torn, whirling, spilling between two slopes; the sea, black,  
 swallowing all prayers, shadeless. Only tall faceless figures  
 of pain flutter across the bridge. They pace in charred suits,  
 the hands lift, point and ache and fly at sunset as cold dark  
 birds. They will hover over the dead ones: a family shattered  
 by military, buried by hunger, asleep now with the eyes burning  
 echoes calling *Joaquín, María, Andrea, Joaquín, Joaquín, Andrea*

The poem handles highly emotive subject matter, of course, which many will feel justifies the headlong rush of words, but those sensitive to the graces of verse will have to read such material with their critical faculties turned off — as fastidious readers do (though enjoyably) with pulp fiction.

Everything comes at a cost. No one supposes the Geoffrey Hill lines read as 'natural', everyday speech: the language is clearly unusual, self-conscious and highly fashioned, as it is in the fragment below. They scan regularly enough (with some inversions in the third line):

It **is** | the **liv** | ing **die** | in **Bud** | a **pest.** | The **dead** |  
 al **rea** | dy **are** | dis **mem** | bered, **in** | their gen | e **rat** | ions  
 they **peel** | from **off** | the **walls,** | in the | **streets whirl** | **leg** ions |  
**of** | the **dust** | whom **Cross** | and **Syn** | a **gogue** | have **hid.** {6}

But their phrasing is very different:

It is the living || die ||| in Budapest. || The dead  
 already are dismembered, ||| in their generations |  
 they peel from off the walls, | in the streets whirl: || legions  
 of the dust || whom Cross and Synagogue have hid.

Strictly speaking, that first line is an empty tautology (the dead being already dead) but the bracketing of 'die' with heavy pauses serves to focus on the poem's theme: it's a meditation on the dead.

White space can be used for decoration, to add variety and patterning to a line:

I knew a woman, lovely in her bones,  
When small birds sighed, she would sigh back at them;  
Ah, when she moved, she moved more ways than one:  
The shapes a bright container can contain!  
Of her choice virtues only gods should speak,  
Or English poets who grew up on Greek  
(I'd have them sing in chorus, cheek to cheek). {7}

It is also useful to create 'turning space' where lines may change their speed and direction, as in Judith Hemschemeyer's *I Remember the Room was Filled with Light*:

They were still young, younger than I am now.  
I remember the room was filled with light  
And moving air. I was watching him  
Pick brass slivers from his hands as he did each night  
After work. {8}

But white spaces can also indicate silences, indications of profound matters that can't be spelt out. Many of Berryman's Dream Songs have this nature. The disconnects with reality (and alternating showmanship, schizophrenia and psychoanalysis) are indicated by the fragmentary collage-like verse, where the poet ventures to the very edge of the abyss in his rage and grief. {9}

Inner Resources.' I conclude now I have no  
inner resources, because I am heavy bored.  
Peoples bore me,  
literature bores me, especially great literature,  
Henry bores me, with his plights & gripes  
as bad as achilles, {10}

But that silence may not be pathological, but simply the edge of what is sayable. As Eliot wrote:

Words, after speech, reach  
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern  
Can words or music reach  
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still  
moves perpetually in its silence.

But much white space is simply pauses for the sense, as in John Hollander's *Sonnets for Rosebush*:

Why drink, why touch you now? If it will be  
Gin from the beginning, ending there,  
For me, in the unblaming rain we see  
Outside your window, filling all the air? {11}

Thomas James's *Mummy of a Lady Named Jemutesonekh*

My body holds its shape. The genius is intact.  
Will I return to Thebes? In that lost country  
The eucalyptus trees have turned to stone.  
Once, branches nudged me, dropping swollen blossoms,  
And passionflowers lit my father's garden. {12}

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## 8. METAPHOR AND IMAGERY

Though often written off as decoration or illustration, imagery lies at the heart of a poem. Much of any language is built of dead metaphors, and metaphors in poetry are more sleeping than dead. To put the matter concisely: imagery is the content of thought where attention is directed to sensory qualities: mental images, figures of speech and embodiments of non-discursive truth.

Psychologists identify seven kinds of mental images — those of sight, sound, taste, smell, touch, bodily awareness and muscular tension. All are available to poets, and are used by poets, though rarely to the same extent. The key point is the *purposes* to which imagery is put. Metaphor, simile, allegory, personification, metonymy (attribute for whole) and synecdoche (part for whole) all involve imagery. Often the things compared are both images, but one of them may also be a feeling or concept. The effects achieved are very various, therefore, and the matter is further complicated by literary fashion and a poet's individual obsessions.

### 8.1. METAPHOR

Metaphor commonly means saying one thing while intending another, making implicit comparisons between things linked by a common feature, perhaps even violating semantic rules. {1} Scientists, logicians and lawyers prefer to stress the literal meaning of words, regarding metaphor as picturesque ornament.

But there is the obvious fact that language is built of dead metaphors. As a traditional critic put it: *'Every expression that we employ, apart from those that are connected with the most rudimentary objects and actions, is a metaphor, though the original meaning is dulled by constant use.* Consider the words of that very sentence: an 'expression' is something squeezed out; to 'employ' something is to wind it in (*implicare*); to 'connect' is to tie together (*conectere*); 'rudimentary' comes from the root to root or sprout; an 'object' is something thrown in the way; an 'action' something driven or conducted; 'original' means rising up like a spring or heavenly body; 'constant' is standing firm. 'Metaphor' itself is a metaphor, meaning the carrying across of a term or expression from its normal usage to another.' {2}

Metaphors are therefore active in understanding. We use metaphors to group areas of experience (*life is a journey*), to orientate ourselves (*my consciousness was raised*), to convey expression through the senses (*his eyes were glued to the screen*), to describe learning (*it had a germ of truth in it*), etc. Even ideas are commonly pictured as objects (*the idea had been around for a while*), as containers (*I didn't get anything out of that*) or as things to be transferred (*he got the idea across*). {3}

## Metaphors in Science

How does science and scientific prose deal with this most obvious of facts? By stratagem and evasion. The scientific style aims at clarity, objectivity and impersonality — attempting to persuade us that the reality depicted is independent of experimenter and reporting. The key evidence is that laid out in the scientific paper, which, though purporting to be a plain account of what was done and observed, is in fact {4} a carefully tailored document making a bid for personal recognition. The abstract allows the significance of the work to be modestly hinted at. The passive voice makes appear inevitable and impersonal what was often achieved only after great effort and skill by the experimenter. Stylistic devices like metaphor, irony, analogy and hyperbole that might call attention to the staged nature of the reporting are muted or banned. Where descriptive, the language employs figures drawn from physics: inert and mechanical. Sentence structure is simple, not to say barbaric: commonplace verbs linking heavy noun clusters. References pay homage to previous workers in the field, and imply familiarity with procedures and therefore professional competence.

## Linguistic Philosophy

Can metaphors be paraphrased in literal terms? Many philosophical schools supposed they could, particularly those of the Logical Positivist approach who stressed the rational, objective aspects of language. But influential papers by Max Black showed that readers come to metaphors armed with commonplace understandings of the word employed, understandings which enter into how we read the passage. In *When sorrows come, they come not in single spies, but in battalions* both *spies* and *battalions* have different connotations that interact and shape our understanding in ways that escape a literal paraphrase. {5}

Not everyone agrees. As would be expected from a theorist who needs a logically transparent language, John Davidson denies that metaphors have a meaning over and above their literal meaning. They may point to some resemblance between apparently dissimilar things, but they don't assert that resemblance and do not constitute meaning. {6}

## Lakoff and Johnson

Metaphors are much more powerful instruments in the eyes of Lakoff and Johnson. {7} Metaphors have entailments that organise our experience, uniquely express that experience, and create necessary realities. Lakoff and Johnson attacked the two commonly accepted theories of metaphor. The abstraction theory — that there exists one neutral and abstract concept that underlies both the literal and metaphoric use of word — failed on six counts. The abstraction doesn't apply throughout, in height, emotion, future, etc. We can say A is B, but the reverse, B is A, is not equivalent. The theory doesn't ac-

count for the structuring of different aspects of a concept, nor with the fact that when we say A is B, the B is always the more concrete and clearly defined. The systematic way in which metaphors apply is not explained, nor how metaphors are made to fit the occasion. Equally, on several counts, the homonymy theory — that the same word may be used for different concepts — also fails. In its strong form the theory cannot account for relationships in systems of metaphors, nor for extensions of such metaphors. In its weak form the theory doesn't account for categories of metaphor. In addition to the above-mentioned difficulty that B is always more concrete and clearly-defined than A, it is to be doubted that statements like 'I'm on a high' really involved similarities at all.

Previous theories derive, Lakoff and Johnson believe, from a naive realism that there is an objective world, independent of ourselves, to which words apply with fixed meanings. But the answer is not to swing to the opposite and embrace a wholly subjectivist view that the personal, interior world is the only reality. Metaphors, for Lakoff and Johnson, are primarily matters of thought and action, only derivatively of language. Metaphors are culturally-based, and define what those with certain assumptions and presuppositions find real. The 'isolated similarities' are indeed those created by metaphors, which simply create a partial understanding of one kind of experience in terms of another kind of experience. They are grounded in correlations within our experience.

## Evidence of Psychology

If metaphor permeates all discourse, it necessarily played a large part in the history of psychology, particularly in generating fruitful ideas. But metaphor does not simply express, it conditions thought. Psychologists at the turn of the century (and Freudians even today) tended to picture psychic energy as steam in a pressure-boiler. Mind is subsidiary, something brought to life by the energy of the instincts. {8} Deviant behaviour has also been seen as spirit-possession, a pathology, dementia, hallucination, inappropriate response, mental imbalance, spiritual and intrapersonal poverty — views which have not only coloured society's views of the 'afflicted' but also guided treatment. {9}

The process continues. Neurological discourse employs metaphors from telecommunications, computer science and control systems. Analysis of emotions revolves round metaphors of inner feelings, driving forces, animal instincts, etc. Motivation looks to metaphors of vigilance and defence. Perception oscillates between mirrors of reflection and moulders of experience. Social analysis uses the concepts of laboratory work, mechanical regulation, meaningful relationships and systems theory. What is the 'correct' view? There isn't one. Yet metaphor is not an empty play of words, or even free play of ideas. Metaphors need to be in harmony with the social and historical setting, with the beliefs and personal constructs of the society or micro-society of the time. {10}



## Sociology and Anthropology

Sociologist and anthropologists are much interested in metaphor — because of the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis, the supposedly primitive thinking of some tribes, and the clash of cultural contexts implicit in translation. Equally important is the light thrown by the study of native people on our own western cultures and unexamined assumptions. Sociologists remember what Vico said long ago: ‘man, not understanding, makes his world.’ Much of man's reasoning is vacuous, simply transferring meaning from intimate, domestic surroundings to the unknown. {11} In less picturesque terms, metaphor is a mapping from source (familiar, everyday) to target domain (abstract, conceptual, internal, etc.) But, contrary to Lakoff and Johnson's view that metaphor represents something fundamental to brain functioning, many sociologists regard the target domain as culturally determined. In describing their marriages, speakers choose models (target domains) that provide a helpful match (‘we made a good team, I'd be lost without her’). {12}

How do sentences in different languages have the same meaning? Rationalists assume that there is a universal base of shared semantic primitives (just as Chomsky's grammar once supposed there were syntactic universals) but fail to explain how this base came about. Empiricists argue for some body of shared experience that arises from contact with the real natural world, but can't explain why language takes the form it does. Linguists like Jakendorf suppose that language grows out of perceptual structures — meaning is part of the meaningfulness of experience — but then need to forge detailed links between the two. {13} Jardine believes that all objects are intentional objects — i.e. that our human senses and intelligence are conditional, and restrained by our biologic make-up. Words become components of experience. {14} Alverson {15} considers the preposition ‘over’ from Lakoff's perspective {16} and accepts that schemas are not reducible to propositions, are the core-meanings of words, enter into syntax, are ideal in origin and partly predictive, enter into networks with other schemas, and enter into metaphorical and conventional extensions. But they are not brain-based as such or primitive. Languages contain codings of universal schemas, but their partitioning into words varies with cultural context. Schemas remained as symbols for categories of sense as intention-and-significance-bestowing devices, not abstract configurations.

## Literary Use

For writers and critics, metaphor is simply a trope: a literary device deriving from the schools of classical rhetoric and intending to put an argument clearly and persuasively. Boundaries are not sharp, but devices are commonly grouped as schemes and tropes. Schemes, which include alliteration, chiasmus, etc., have more to do with expression. Tropes, which include metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche, are more powerful and deal with content. {17} Metonymy entails using a name to stand for the larger whole: ‘*Whitehall* in-

tended otherwise.’ where *Whitehall* stands for the British civil service. Metonymy does not open new paths like metaphor, but shortens distance to intuition of things already known. {18} Metaphor therefore involves a transfer of sense, and metonymy a transfer of reference. {19}

There are larger considerations. Kenneth Burke thought tropes were ready-made for rhetoricians because they describe the specific patterns of human behaviour that surface in art and social life. {20} Hayden White sketched a theory of history which bridged the claims of art and science by defining the deep structures of historical thought in terms of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. {21} For Jacques Derrida, the inevitable clash of metaphors in all writing shows only too well that language may subvert or exceed an author's intended meaning. Like Derrida, Paul de Man saw language as an endless chain of words, which cannot be closed off to a definitive meaning or reference. The literal and figurative meaning of a text is not easily separated, and the realities posited by language are largely those accepted by the dominant ideology as truthful representations of the world. {22}

## Rhetoric of Science

Alan Gross goes a good deal further than most literary critics in his *Rhetoric of Science*. {23} Truth in science, he argues, is a consensus of utterances rather than a fit with evidence. Whatever scientists may assert — and they very much resent any reduction of science to a form of persuasion — philosophers have long known that the claim of science to truth and objectivity rests on shaky foundations. Knowledge does not exist independently of conceptual schemes, or even perhaps of linguistic formulation. Indeed, has not the contemporary logician, W.V.O. Quine, shown that science is under-determined by experience: the edges may square with experience but the interior cannot be more than a coherence view of truth? Perhaps it comes down to practicalities. The sheer bulk of ‘scientific findings’, its dependence on certain procedures and assumptions, not to speak of vetting and reviewing procedures, all ensure that the reality which science portrays exists as statements which are now too costly to modify. Of course science ‘works’, but then so does mathematics, which has largely relinquished claims to logical foundations or transcendent truth. {24}

## Translation

What are Lakoff and Johnson saying but that there is no one central interpretation? Use different turns of speech — as we do naturally in our everyday lives — and the ‘meaning’ alters. Without thinking twice we translate from one mind-set to another. We have probably always done so. {25} Speech started as a primary function in oral societies. There was no ‘content’ behind the expressions. Hieroglyphics were not word pictures but mnemonic devices initially, becoming logograms in Egypt and Mesopotamia in the third millennium BC, and only later denoting a syllable sound. It was the North Semitic Byblos al-

phabet of BC 1400 that the ancient Greeks adapted, turning four of the consonants into vowels that allowed entire speech to be placed on the page, when the focus passed from words to invisible ideas.

What of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*? Parry and other scholars showed that Homer's productions were improvisations to music of a vast collection of stock phrases — a procedure still used by Serbian *Guslars* who can improvise tens of thousands of lines in this way. Plato preferred the new written procedures (castigating poets of the old oral tradition in *The Republic*) but also worried that the very process of writing and learning from texts imprisoned speculation in authoritative interpretations. Meditation was needed to bring the past into the presence, and this may also explain Plato's desire for eternal forms. Classical rhetoricians developed mnemonic devices but it was the north European scholastics who made memory a record of doings that could be examined under confession. In twelfth-thirteenth century Europe the validity of an oath (given word, symbolically the Word of God) is transferred to documents that have legal force.

Translation was not an issue in the classical world: the literate spoke several languages and could interpret (i.e. recast) from one to another. The Christian Church became monolingual to incorporate Greek and Hebrew into the culture of late Antiquity. Indeed, for long centuries, the vernacular spoken by all classes in Europe was a romance language pronounced differently in different places, none of the pronunciations being close to classical Latin. It was never written down, and only in ninth century Germany was an attempt made to create a 'German grammar'. Charlemagne accepted a uniform pronunciation of official Latin, but this was incomprehensible to his subjects and was therefore repealed. Depositions were taken from the vernacular and written in Latin, and Latin creeds were rendered and remembered in the vernacular. Elio Anonio de Nebrija attempted in 1492 to create a Spanish that was not spoken but served to record speech, his grammar and argument for a standardized *Castillano* being intended to curb the publication of literature inimical to the crown.

Until comparatively recently — continue Illich and Sanders {26} — there was no self as such, but only an 'I' that glowed into life as it recounted its adventures or told its autobiography. Chaucer claimed a fantastic memory to avoid the Church's injunction against invention, employing also a complex syntax so that listeners were compelled to imagine the page. The first novel to 'make up facts' was Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*, which undercut the dependence on written testimony to which the work alluded. The work was fiction dressed up as fact, just as Huckleberry Finn asks the reader to believe in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by an illiterate Tom. But his misspellings and incorrect expressions do all the same evoke the great openness and freedom of the meandering Mississippi River, which implies that we are imprisoned by our own mannered language. Coming to modern times, we note that Orwell's *Newspeak* served as a mechanical substitute for thought, and was therefore a

parody of the 'Basic English' promulgated in the thirties. And today of course we have the grey 'interpersonal communication' of politics and the media.

## Mixed and Extended Metaphors

Style guides often caution against mixing metaphors, particularly when both words are clichés. Results can be ludicrous ( 'when the Nazi jackboots sing their swan song'), {27} but Shakespeare in practice often rose above such constraints. The 'plates' in Cleopatra's speech is certainly incongruous (who keeps plates in their pockets?)

For his bounty,  
There was no winter in't; an autumn 'twas  
That grew the more by reaping: his delights  
Were dolphin-like; they show'd his back above  
The element they lived in: in his livery  
Walk'd crowns and crownets; realms and islands were  
As plates dropp'd from his pocket. {28}

But our playwright earned his keep with:

The crown o' the earth doth melt. My lord!  
O, wither'd is the garland of the war,  
The soldier's pole is fall'n: young boys and girls  
Are level now with men; the odds is gone,  
And there is nothing left remarkable  
Beneath the visiting moon. {29}

One metaphor fuses into another as Antony dies in Cleopatra's arms. The 'crown' emphasizes the regal theme, extending over the whole earth. War can have no triumphs with Antony's death, however, and the soldier's pole is at once spear, the children's maypole and the turning axis the world. The 'odds' here means the exceptional, and that 'visiting' is evocative of lunar splendour and finality: the heavenly bodies move on their own purposes whatever men may do.

Such extended effects were probably created by Shakespeare's fevered imagination when pressed by the usual production deadlines. Milton is very different in this complex chain of images: measured, slow-moving and deliberate. (*Paradise Lost*, One, 286-313):

He scarce had ceased when the superior Fiend  
Was moving toward the shore; his ponderous shield,  
Ethereal temper, massy, large, and round,  
Behind him cast. The broad circumference  
Hung on his shoulders like the moon, whose orb  
Through optic glass the Tuscan artist views  
At evening, from the top of Fesolè,  
Or in Valdarno, to descry new lands,

Rivers, or mountains, in her spotty globe.  
 His spear—to equal which the tallest pine  
 Hewn on Norwegian hills, to be the mast  
 Of some great Ammiral, were but a wand—  
 He walked with, to support uneasy steps  
 Over the burning marle, not like those steps  
 On Heaven's azure; and the torrid clime  
 Smote on him sore besides, vaulted with fire.  
 Nathless he so endured, till on the beach  
 Of that inflamèd sea he stood, and called  
 His legions—Angel Forms, who lay entranced  
 Thick as autumnal leaves that strow the brooks  
 In Vallombrosa, where the Etrurian shades  
 High over-arched imbower; or scattered sedge  
 Afloat, when with fierce winds Orion armed  
 Hath vexed the Red-Sea coast, whose waves o'erthrew  
 Busiris and his Memphian chivalry,  
 While with perfidious hatred they pursued  
 The sojourners of Goshen, who beheld  
 From the safe shore their floating carcasses  
 And broken chariot-wheels. So thick bestrown,  
 Abject and lost, lay these, covering the flood,  
 Under amazement of their hideous change. {30}

Magnificent, but not suited to the theatre.

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## 8.2 IMAGERY

Imagery is the content of thought where attention is directed to sensory qualities — i.e. mental images, figures of speech and embodiments of non-discursive truth. Given that language is so largely constructed of dead metaphors, some residue of original use remains behind even the most commonplace words. Yet readers very much differ in their ability to visualize such metaphors, and not all metaphors are primarily visual. How do poets bring such qualities to life? And how far should they go, since many of Shake-

spere's lines become ludicrous if their mixed metaphors are realized too completely?

A first point to make is that both the use and concept of imagery in poetry has followed shifting cultural outlooks. The medieval view of art was rooted in morality, and its descriptions of the world never forgot that the things depicted served God's purpose: the smallest thing reached into a larger world beyond. Renaissance writers studied the classical authors more widely and employed figures — rhetorical figures, including simile, allegory and metaphor — whose purpose was to clarify, enforce and decorate a pre-existing meaning. Imagery was often elaborate, but not generally constitutive of meaning. The growth of a homogeneous reading public in the 18th century, with more settled opinions, brought a polite and plain diction into general use. Images became mental representations of sensory experience, a storehouse of devices by which the original scenes of nature, society, commerce, etc. could be recreated. With Romantic transcendentalism, when the world reappeared as the garment of God, and the abstract and general resided in the concrete and particular, poetry came to embody the sacred, and images to be symbols of an indwelling (though not necessarily Christian) deity. In Modernism and Postmodernism, the interest has focused on the images themselves, which are an inescapable part of language, and therefore of a poet's meaning.

These are very broad generalities. There are traces of Medieval allegory in most Renaissance writers. Shakespeare's later works may belong to the hermetic tradition. The best eighteenth century writers do not simply open the props cupboard but employ conventional imagery to construct a penetrating commentary on life. Byron may be a Romantic poet but he is not a spiritualist like Blake. And so on. By the eclectic late twentieth century, matters had become complicated indeed.

Imagery in poetry can be very various. Psychologists identify seven kinds of mental images — those of sight, sound, taste, smell, touch, bodily awareness and muscular tension. All are available to poets, and all are used by poets, though not to the same extent. Browning uses tactile imagery while Shelley's imagery emphasizes movement, for instance. Nor is imagery per se important — its extent or type — but the purposes it serves. Metaphor, simile, allegory, personification, metonymy (attribute for all) and synecdoche (part for whole) each compare one thing with another, but involve the two in different ways. Often the things compared are both images, though one may also be a feeling or concept. The effect differs, therefore, and word choice is further dictated by literary fashion and a poet's obsessions. Donne's metaphysical images show a startling reach from subject to analogue, but such conceits were prized at the time, and Donne was a tortured and exceptionally learned writer. Literary works can indeed be attributed to authors in disputed cases by computer analysis (cluster analysis) of imagery, and occasionally something made of the poet's state of mind. Imagery can be used to externalise thought, to create mood and atmosphere, and to give continuity by recurring leitmotifs. Light and dark are prevalent in *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, and the aimlessness



of modern life evoked by fragmented images in *The Waste Land*. In longer poems, moreover, the recurring imagery need not simply reappear but can operate in contrast with other images to develop plot or increase the dramatic effect.

Writers tend to make certain words or images typically their own — especially if hard won — so that individual poems become inseparably part of the larger corpus by which they are recognized and understood. Since authors also share something of their contemporary's concerns, those concerns and attendant images will illustrate and shape their own writing. And such concerns are important. Overworked editors of poetry magazines discern immediately from the attendant imagery whether a poem submitted will enhance the brand image of the publication, and pass the poem on or out. More important than images personally meaningful are the symbols, sexual images and myths that express the deepest natures of a community. In short, imagery is powerful, but needs careful handling.

## Imagery in Poetry Today

Here we look at imagery in action, drawing examples from contemporary British poetry.

1. Carole Ann Duffy's *Adultery* evokes the radiance and guilt of an illicit affair. Stanza 2/3 is conventional enough with its portrayal of increased desire and vulnerability:

Now

you are naked under your clothes all day,

But then comes the withering:

Slim with deceit.

Why is this so effective? Perhaps it is the several levels of meaning: a. The speaker, now a desirable woman again, imagines the figure she possessed before her marriage became so humdrum. b. Just as the relationship is based on deceit, so is the image the speaker holds of herself. She is not slim, and the body, vibrant beneath the clothes, is flagrantly other than it appears. c. *Slim* applies to the affair — being only for sex, the relationship lacks the acceptance and fullness of a proper liaison. d. *With deceit* hints at the social cost of the deception, that the subterfuge demeans her, and reduces the sexual enjoyment. e. *Slim* suggests concentration, that the sexual organs are ravenous, focused on their own appetites. f. The phrase — with its overtones of trim, brief, concealment, seat, etc. — creates a visual embodiment of the pudenda. After the sexual largess of *naked under your clothes all day* the verse tapers down into a neat, wry impression of what is only flimsily hidden from view. In short, a compressed imagery, which releases its meaning slowly.

2. Sebastian Barry's poem *Fanny Hawke Goes to the Mainland Forever* is set against the religious divides in Ireland. Fanny, a Quaker and on her way to marry a Catholic lithographer in Cork City, is betraying not only her faith, but the sexual restraints of Protestantism. She passes:

on the lightly  
Grassed dunes, something tart in the air  
While she walked, banging her skirts.

Even in this short excerpt, the sexual punning — *fanny, tart, banging* — shouts the overpowering pull of sex. Perhaps the method is overdone, but throughout the poem an overt Freudian imagery — *hindview, brush, shoving, bushes, rustle, smooth, come, smells, strewn, lightly grassed, bosom, seabox* — seems to flaunt itself at the young woman and push her enterprise into the future. The poem ends by looking ahead to the sadly conventional occupations of her children. A Pilgrim's Progress or commentary on the ephemeral nature of sexual desire? Perhaps both. The relentless imagery creates a thicket of hopes and temptations for the young woman.

2. Michael Hulse's *The Country of Pain and Redemption* ends with:

He learns to say yes, say yes, and goes  
home to a lighted house, a dazzle of  
horror, security, darkness and love.

What could be more complete? But this is not the usual reaction to an accepted proposal of marriage. The young man is dying, the victim of a car crash or terrorist bomb. The proposal is being made to him by his lover, who is cradling his head and extracting some keepsake from these wrecked hopes. The *lighted house* is heaven or hell or the end of things. Note how wonderfully apt is *dazzle* — the sharpness of the image, its purely sensory nature, the bewilderment of things dark and light. The extended image gathers force as the poem comes strikingly to an end.

3. Frank Kuppner's *A Bad Day for the Sung Dynasty* depicts a scholar selecting the Sung Dynasty literature that should be saved for posterity. Stolidly he ponders the old text in front of him:

Delight something buttocks pliant something;  
Sunburst something buttocks something balcony;

It is an onerous responsibility, but the old man is tormented by thoughts of the serving girl. Into his lapses of concentration (the continual *something* in the poem) erupt images of her obvious charms. In the end he succumbs, and the great glories of the Sung Dynasty are briefly forgotten. The poem is not simply a piece of fun, but wryly underlines the frail nature of our pretensions and responsibilities.

4. *Crinkle, near Birr* is a dangerous poem. Paul Durcan starts with

Daddy and I were lovers,

and ends with

I lay on my back in the waters of his silence,  
The silence of a diffident, chivalrous bridegroom,  
And he carried me in his two hands home to bed.

Is this incest, the boy's thoughts only, or a comment on the sexual nature of father-son bonding? There are hints of all three, but the poem is more an extended metaphor of boyhood love, which does not shy away from taboo aspects. An uncomfortable poem, but one with lines of shining accomplishment — *we spawned our own selves in our hotel bedroom ... the quality of his silence when he was happy* — again achieved by the compelling imagery. No one supposes these views are edifying, or adequate to the full experience of sex or love. The poems are only partial successes on other grounds, moreover. But these examples of imagery in poetry are a powerful means to thinking, and allows literature to explore what pulp fiction serves up as stock responses.

All these poems can be found in *The New Poetry*, edited by Michael Hulse, David Kennedy and David Morley: 1993 Bloodaxe Books.

## 9. METRE AND RHYTHM

Metre is a systematic regularity in rhythm. It creates and organises content, giving emphasis to words or elements that would otherwise escape attention: the tighter the metre, the more expressive can be small departures from the norm. Metre gives dignity and memorability, conveys tempo, mood, the subtle shifts in evidence, passion and persuasion beyond what is possible in prose. In the hands of a great master like Shakespeare, metre provides grace, energy, elevation, expressiveness and a convincing approximation to everyday speech.

Conventional English verse is usually (and confusedly) described in a terminology deriving from classical prosody — i.e. as iambic, trochaic, dactylic and anapaestic. For contemporary practice it may be better to consider metre under two headings: whether the syllables or the stresses are being counted, and whether these counts are fixed or variable.

Accentual verse has fixed counts of stress but variable syllables. Syllabic verse has fixed counts of syllables regardless of stresses. Accentual-syllabic is conventional metre, with both stress and syllables (more or less) fixed. Free verse has no restrictions on either.

Accentual verse is found in popular verse, ballads, nursery rhymes, songs and doggerel. Syllabic verse as exemplified by the French alexandrine. It is very different from blank verse, and attempts to write a pure syllabic verse in English have not caught on. Accentual-syllabic was developed by Chaucer from Italian models, and became the staple for English poetry from Elizabethan times till comparatively recently.

### 9.1. FREE OR TRADITIONAL VERSE?

Poems need some supporting structure, and that in turn requires a decision: should you go for free verse or tackle the more demanding traditional forms?

Free verse originated in France around the middle of the nineteenth century, was championed (briefly) by the founders of Modernism, and has ramified into various forms, some of them indistinguishable from prose.

Traditional verse is overshadowed by the achievements of the past. Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope and Wordsworth set standards difficult to emulate, and poets are nowadays hardly encouraged to try. Many of the better magazines — where the fledgling poet must start his publishing career — will not take traditional poetry, and those with more generous standards may still lack readers or editors capable of telling the good from the merely facile. Nonetheless, strict verse enjoys periodic revivals, and has been a feature of several twentieth century schools: the Georgians, Neo-Romantics, the Movement poets and the *New Formalists*.

Free verse is a very confused field, not properly understood or linguistically mapped. Adoption may be more about pamphleteering and cultural allegiances than poetic ends. Some of the speech rhythms claimed as 'superior to metre' are not rhythms at all but an enviable dexterity in idiomatic expression.

Metre is not diametrically opposed to free verse. Many contemporary poets write both, or served an apprenticeship in strict forms before creating something closer to their needs. Nonetheless, in the absence of this ability to highlight and compound meaning, free verse is often driven to expand in other directions. It prizes a convincing exactness of idiomatic expression — the line seems exactly right in the circumstances: appropriate, authentic and sincere. It operates closely with syntax. It adopts a challenging layout on the page where line and syntax are rearranged to evade or exploit the usual expectations.

## Suggestions

Experiment. Weigh up the pros and cons.

Traditional metre and stanza shaping confer certain advantages, and certain disadvantages. They:

1. Please the reader by their display of skill, their variety within order, their continuity with the admired literature of the past.
2. Help the actual writing of the poem, either by invoking words from the unconscious, or by pushing the poem into new areas to escape the limitations of the form.
3. Provide a sense of completeness impossible in free verse. The author knows when the last word clicks into place.
4. Enforce dignity, emotional power and density of meaning.
5. Are more memorable.

The difficulties are equally apparent. Strict forms are:

1. Taxing to write, requiring inordinate amounts of time, plus literary skills not given to everyone.
2. Much more likely to go wrong and expose the blundering incompetence of their author.
3. Inappropriate to the throwaway nature of much of contemporary life.
4. Difficult to place in the better literary magazines.

## 9.2. METRE: THE BASICS

European verse has five metrical systems, quantitative, syllabic, accentual, accentual-syllabic and free. While traditional English verse is predominantly accentual-syllabic, contemporary verse often adopts free forms. To understand the differences, we should look in some detail at all five types.

### 9.2.1. QUANTITATIVE VERSE

Verse in the classical languages is based on an intrinsic property of words, whether the syllables are pronounced as inherently 'long' or 'short'. The Latin dactylic hexameter runs:

— ◡ ◡ — ◡ ◡ — ◡ ◡ — ◡ ◡ — ◡ ◡ — ◡ ◡

where long syllables are shown as —, the short syllables are shown as ◡.

To this were added various rules. Two short syllables in the first part of the line could fuse into one long:

— x — x — x — x — ◡ ◡ — ◡ ◡

where x can be one long syllable or two short.

The final two short syllables counted as long, but were able to fall on what would be counted a short syllable in everyday speech:

— x — x — x — x — ◡ ◡ — f

where f is the final syllable

Finally, there was the caesura, a break between words, which cut across the feet to make the two units more immediately comprehensible. It was not pronounced as strongly as is the caesura in French verse, and tended to be placed after the first long syllable of the third foot, though the position could be varied a little: {1}

— x — x — || x — x — ◡ ◡ — f

So the opening of Virgil's Aeneid: {2}

— ◡ ◡ — ◡ ◡ — || — — — — ◡ ◡ — —

arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris

Hexameters generally ended with a disyllable or trisyllable. Monosyllables sounded uncouth, and polysyllables seemed weak or gabbled.

The intrinsic nature of the vowels in words, whether long or short, had to be learned, or consulted in a dictionary. {3} showing this feature: it was not indicated by the spelling. Additionally, the rules in reading Latin verse were: {1}

Vowels intrinsically long remain long.

Diphthongs are long.

A vowel followed by another vowel and not forming a diphthong was generally short (provided the word was not a Greek borrowing).

A short vowel ending a word or followed by single consonant (includes qu, ch, ph and th, but not x) stayed short.

A short vowel followed by two or more consonants in same word (or single x) became long.

A short vowel followed by final single consonant in the word, and by another consonant starting the word following, became long.

Explosive consonants (cpt, gbd) or f were counted as belonging to the next syllable when followed by r or l. This could make the preceding vowel short, or (at the poet's wish) leave the vowel long but have the accent shift to the following syllable.

English Latinists ( it should be added) tended also to hear an accent or ictus, which does not necessarily fall on long vowels. The rules were:

Two-syllable words are accented on the first syllable.

Three-syllable words are accented on the penultimate syllable if long, and the one proceeding if the penultimate is short.

Multisyllable words are accented on the penultimate syllable if long, and the one proceeding if the penultimate is short.

Expressive reading, or even silent reading, would slightly modify these rules.

In general, when a word ended with a vowel, and was immediately followed by a word starting with a vowel, the first vowel was not sounded: elision. In practice, especially where elision would prevent the sense being grasped immediately, a trace of the first vowel remained, just as we sound a vestigial d in 'windmill'.

The final m of a word was hardly pronounced, and elided altogether when the immediately following word started with a vowel. Also lost was the immediately preceding letter.

When a word ending in a vowel or m was immediately followed by es or est it was the e in es or est that disappeared: aphaeresis.

There were also certain places where elision and the caesura were not permitted by the author in question, but the practice seems to have been a personal preference only.

Properly quantitative verse cannot be written in English, {4-6} but duration is the approach of the temporal prosodists described below. In a ghostly fash-

ion, quantitative effects also play their part in metrical variation. J.A. Symonds' comment:

'The secret of complex and melodious blank verse lies in preserving the balance and proportion of syllables, while varying their accent and their relative weight and volume, so that each line in a period shall carry its proper burden of sound, but the burden shall be differently distributed in the successive verses. This is done by sometimes allowing two syllables to take the time of one, and sometimes extending one syllable to the length of two, by forcing the accentuation of prominent monosyllables and gliding over successive liquid sounds, by packing one line with emphatic words so as to retard its movement, by winging another with light and hurried polysyllables, and by so adapting words to sense, and sense to rhythm, that pauses, prolongations, and accelerations, absolutely necessary for the understanding of the matter, evoke a cadence of apparently unstudied melody. In this prosody the bars of the musical composer, where different values from the breve to the demi-semiquaver find their place, suggest perhaps a truer basis of measurement than the longs and shorts of classic quantity.' {7}

### 9.2.2. SYLLABIC VERSE

Syllabic verse is a poetic form with a fixed or constrained number of syllables to the line, in which stress or tone play little or no role. Syllabic verse is common in Italian, Spanish, French, and the Baltic and Slavic languages, but much less so in English, which is predominantly accentual or accentual-syllabic. {3} More features are generally needed to make an acceptable literary form, however. The line lengths are pre-defined, fixed by their number of syllables. The line is commonly divided into two parts (hemistich), each containing a set number of syllables. Hemistiches have to start with whole words, and their ends may be marked by a stressed syllable, sometimes preceded by an unstressed syllable to emphasize the ending.

English syllabic verse, the invention of twentieth-century poets, is much freer: the hemistich and end markings are not usually observed, and, as Brogan remarks: 'It is very doubtful that verse lines regulated by nothing more than identity of numbers of syllables would be perceived by auditors as verse . . . Further, absent the whole notion of meter as pattern, one may question whether syllabic verse is "metrical" at all.' {4} In English, the difficulty of perceiving even brief isosyllabic lines as rhythmically equivalent is aggravated by the inordinate power of stressed syllables.

That said, with an immense amount of fastidious craft and effort, syllabic verse can in fact be made beautiful if not very effective in English. Matters are quite different with that staple of French verse, the alexandrine, however, which is governed by strict rules. Somewhat simplified, these are: {13}



The alexandrine always consists of exactly twelve syllables. The only licence allowed the poet concerns the 'double vowels'. There are no diphthongs in French, and i/u/ü + vowel may be treated as two separate syllables (diaeresis) or as one by pronouncing the double vowel as y + vowel (synaeresis). Each vowel of the alexandrine is sounded. The neutral e is not sounded when occurring at the line end, but lengthens the preceding vowel/syllable. A similar rule applies to the third person plural present tense ending of *ent*. Lines ending in e or *ent* are termed feminine. Other lines are masculine. Though they may end with the same sound, feminine and masculine lines do not rhyme. A feminine line can only rhyme with another feminine line, and a masculine line rhyme with masculine one. French classical verse is written in alternating pairs of masculine and feminine lines. If an act in a play closes with a masculine line, the following act must open with a feminine line, and vice versa.

Hiatus is avoided in French, by running wherever possible the last consonant(s) of the preceding word or syllable into the vowel, by adding a letter (*a-t-il*), or by absorbing the neutral e before *aient*. The neutral e is not sounded in everyday speech (*cette semaine* is pronounced as *sèt smèn*) but *is* pronounced when occurring in the body of an alexandrine (*cette semaine* becomes *sè te se mèn*).

Unlike English, however, where words have an inherent stress pattern (**body**, emb**od**iment), French is a syllabic language where the stress falls on the last syllable of any meaningful group of words. In the alexandrine, this comes at the end of the line and usually, to a lesser extent, after the sixth syllable, which is marked by a caesura. The arrangement can be varied a little, and other patterns deployed, but in general the alexandrine is securely end-stopped, making it very different from English blank verse where enjambment or run-on is expected.

Rhyme is a match in sounds (phonemes) between words of different meaning, preferably different function as well (verb with noun, etc.) but has more complicated rules in French. We are happy with high/sky, etc., but the French dislike what they call *rime pauvre*. *Rime suffisante* requires two sounds or phonemes to match: vowel + consonant or consonant + vowel (*consonne d'appui*). *Rime riche* requires an additional phoneme match, generally consonant + vowel + consonant, but is sometimes taken to include assonance earlier in the line. And whereas the English detest *rime riche*, reserving it for comic effects, the French admire this extra correspondence. There are also a few licences applying, which derive from earlier changes in pronunciation. Under *rime normande*, the terminal *er* is allowed to rhyme with *é*. A final *s* or *t* can rhyme with a 'fossilised e'. And a few words can be spelt in odd ways: *pié* for *pied*, *remord* for *remords*, *croi* for *crois* and *encoue* for *encore*.

With these in mind, we can now look at the closing section of the queen's speech in Racine's *Phedre*, Act IV, Scene 6. Set out with a. the caesura shown as | b. the syllables grouping patterns (4 2, etc.), and c. feminine lines indented, this runs: {14}

Hé las ! du cri mea ffreux | dont la hon te me suit 2 4 | 4 2  
 Ja mais mon tri ste cœur | n'a re cuei lli le fruit. 2 4 | 4 2  
 Jus qu'a der nier sou pir, | de mal heurs pour sui vie, 3 3 | 3 3  
 Je rends dans les tour ment | su ne pé ni ble vie. 2 4 | 4 2

Which in my rendering becomes: {15}

Never the **once** | to **wh**at it **sought** for came |  
 This heart | but **sadness** only, | and to **sh**ame. ||  
 And **Ph**aedra in **si**ghs, | with which her **path** was **ri**fe |  
 In **ag**onies **gives** back | a **painful** **li**fe. ||

English syllabic verse is much quieter. Here is Tony Kline's translation of Horace Odes I, 5, where the syllable counts of lines are preserved but not their quantitative features: {15}

Quis multa gracilis te puer in rosa  
 perfusus liquidis urget odoribus  
 grato, Pyrrha, sub antro?  
 cui flauam religas comam,  
 simplex munditiis?

- - - u u - / - u u - u - // 12  
 - - - u u - / - u u - u - // 12  
 - - - u u - - // 7  
 - - - u u - u - /// 8

What slender boy, Pyrrha, drowned in liquid perfume,  
 urges you on, there, among showers of roses,  
 deep down in some pleasant cave?  
 For whom did you tie up your hair

Pleasing, but note that traditional verse gives a much stronger shaping:

What slim, rich-scented youth, on roses lain,  
 now courts you, Pyrrha, in the grotto's shade?  
 Why fasten each blonde skein  
 of hair into that modest braid? {16}

The point, I think, is that verse is read by customs specific to a particular language, which are not arbitrary but created by long trial and error, with occasional flashes of prosodic genius. Centuries of effort have failed to make classical verse grow on English soil, and syllabic verse is not really an acceptable alternative: in longer lines it's generally too prosaic, {10} flaccid and arbitrary. {11}

Nonetheless, syllabic verse is a choice of some modern poets, notably Marianne Moore:

Openly, yes,

With the naturalness  
Of the hippopotamus or the alligator  
When it climbs out on the bank to experience the

Sun, I do these  
Things which I do, which please  
No one but myself. Now I breathe and now I am sub-  
Merged; the blemishes stand up and shout when the object {17}

### 9.2.3. ACCENTUAL OR STRESS VERSE

Accent, beat, stress or ictus is the name given to a syllable that is automatically stressed in our vocalizing a word. It's an inherent property of the word, similar to the duration a long syllable possesses in a quantitative language. We say **strain**, **return**, **embody**, **particular**ly, etc. Ictus (Latin for 'strike') is probably the least unsatisfactory of these terms, though the word is often defined in terms of its alternatives. 'The ictus is the accent that falls on a stressed syllable in a scanned line of verse.' {18} Milton's Sonnet is a regular iambic (i.e. both ictus and syllable counts are fixed). The **number** of ictuses is shown in brackets, plus the pattern of intervening unstressed syllables:

When **I** | consid | er **how** | my **light** | is **spent** || (**5** 1 1 1 1 1)

The ictus is usually distinguished from the emphasis or accent the meaning can place on a word, which is not necessarily an inherent property of the word:

I'm *asking* you to go now

Or

I'm asking you to go *now*

In prose we could even say:

When I consider how *my* light is spent

In accentual or stress verse the number of ictuses is counted (i.e. fixed or regulated in some way), but not the intervening unstressed syllables. So Coleridge's Christabel: {19}

'Tis the **midd** | le of **night** | by the **cast** | le **clock**, ||(**4** 2 2 2 1)  
And the **owls** | have a **wak** | ened the | **crowing cock**; ||(**4** 2 2 2 1)  
Tu—**whit**! | Tu—**whoo**! | (**2** 1 1)  
And **hark**, | a **gain**! | the **crow** | ing **cock**, || (**4** 1 1 1 1)  
How **drow** | si ly it **crew**. ||(**2** 1 3)

Richard Wilbur's *Junk* is a modern example: {20}

An **axe angles**  
from my **neighbor's ashcan**; (**4** 1 0 1 2 1 1)

It is **hell's handiwork**,  
the **wood** not **hickory**, (**4 2 0 3 1 1**)

The **flow** of the **grain**  
not **faithfully followed**. (**4 1 2 1 2 1**)

The **shivered shaft**  
**rises** from a **shellheap** (**4 1 1 0 3 1**)

Alun Lewis' *All Day it has Rained* has more of natural speech rhythms:

All **day** it has **rained**, and **we** on the **edge** of the **moors**  
Have **sprawled** in our **bell**-tents, **moody** and **dull** as boors,  
**Groundsheets** and **blankets spread** on the **muddy ground**  
And **from** the **first** grey **wakening we** have **found** {21}

The patterning is: (**5 1 2 1 2 2**) (**5 1 2 1 2 2**) (**5 0 2 1 2 1**) (**5 1 1 1 1 1**)

#### 9.2.4. ACCENTUAL-SYLLABIC

Both ictuses and syllables are fixed in accentual-syllabic verse, in which there are four basic metres, all unhappily given classical (i.e. quantitative) verse names: the iambic, the trochaic, the anapaestic and the dactylic. Examples:

##### Iambic

There **is** | a **lad** | y **sweet** | and **kind**,  
Was **ne** | ver **face** | so **pleased** | my **mind**;  
I **did** | but **see** | her **pas** | sing **by**,  
And **yet** | I **love** | her **till** | I **die**. {22}

##### Trochaic

**Fear** no | **more** the | **heat** o' the | **sun**,  
**Nor** the | **fur** i ous | **win** ter's | **rage** s;  
**Thou** thy | **world** ly | **task** hast | **done**,  
**Home** art | **gone**, and | **ta'en** thy | **wage** s:  
**Gold** en | **lads** and | **girls** all | **must**,  
As **chim** ney | **swee** pers, | **come** to | **dust**. {23}

##### Anapaestic

The Assyr| ian came **down** | like the **wolf** | on the **fold**, |  
And his **co** | horts were **glea** | ming in **purp** | le and **gold**; ||  
And the **sheen** | of their **spears** | was like **stars** | on the **sea**, ||  
When the **blue** | wave rolls **night** | ly on **deep** | Ga li **lee** || {24}

##### Dactylic

**Half** a league, | **half** a league, ||  
**Half** a league | **on** ward, ||

**All** in the | **vall** ey of | **Death** ||  
**Rode** the six | **hund** red. || {25}

Milton kept strict time, but most poets have preferred some variety. Note how effective is the extra syllable in Shakespear's 'furious'.

#### 9.2.5. FREE VERSE

British free verse was very tame prior to the twentieth century, and prosody guides would feature examples like Arnold's *The Forsaken Mermaid*: (rhymed lines with four, three and two stresses, rhythm a little more varied than shown below):

**Come**, dear **children**, **let** us **away**;  
**Down** and **away** **below**!  
**Now** my **brothers** **call** from the **bay**,  
**Now** the **great** winds **shoreward** **blow**,  
**Now** the **salt** tides **seaward** **flow**;  
**Now** the **wild** white **horses** **play**,  
**Champ** and **chafe** and **toss** in the **spray**.  
**Children** **dear**, **let** us **away**!  
This **way**, this **way**! {26}

Or Southey's *Thalaba* (unrhymed lines — he called them hexametres — of 3, 4, and 5 stresses, generally iambic but a little irregular)

So **from** the **inmost** **cavern**, **Thalaba**  
**Retrod** the **windings** **of** the **rock**.  
Still **on** the **ground** the **giant** **limbs**  
Of **Zohak** **were** **outstretched**;  
The **spell** of **sleep** had **ceas'd**,  
And his **broad** **eyes** were **glaring** **on** the **youth**  
Yet **rais'd** he **not** his **arm** to **bar** the **way**,  
**Fearful** to **rouse** the **snakes**  
Now **lingering** **o'er** their **meal** {27}

All that changed with Walt Whitman onwards. His *Reconcillation* had long and rhythmically irregular lines:

When **lilacs** **last** in the **dooryard** **bloom'd**,  
And the **great** star **early** **droop'd** in the **western** **sky** in the **night**,  
I **mourn'd**, and **yet** shall **mourn** with **ever-returning** **spring**.

**Ever-returning** **spring**, **trinity** **sure** to **me** you **bring**,  
**Lilac** **blooming** **perennial** and **drooping** **star** in the **west**,  
And **thought** of **him** I **love**. {28}

Ezra Pound's work in free verse was a volume in itself. *The Seafarer* with its strong alliteration and crowded rhythms:

May **I** for my own **self** song's **truth reckon**,  
**Journey's jargon**, how **I** in **harsh** days  
**Hardship endured oft**.

Bitter breast-cares have I abided,  
 Known on my keel many a care's hold,  
 And dire sea-surge, and there I oft spent  
 Narrow nightwatch nigh the ship's head  
 While she tossed close to cliffs. {29}

Composition by the line: the subtle, changing rhythms of *The Return*:

See, they return; ah, see the tentative  
 Movements, and the slow feet,  
 The trouble in the pace and the uncertain  
 Wavering! {30}

The mischievous but often beautiful *Homage to Sextus Propertius*.

Shades of Callimachus, Coan ghosts of Philetas  
 It is in your grove I would walk,  
 I who come first from the clear font  
 Bringing the Grecian orgies into Italy,  
 and the dance into Italy.  
 Who hath taught you so subtle a measure,  
 in what hall have you heard it;  
 What foot beat out your time-bar,  
 what water has mellowed your whistles ? {31}

The *Cantos*, later formidably difficult, but still showing an exact ear for phrasing and ictus placement:

And Kung gave his daughter to Kong-Tchang  
 Although Kong-Tchang was in prison.  
 And he gave his niece to Nan-Young  
 although Nan-Young was out of office.  
 And Kung said 'Wan ruled with moderation,  
 'In his day the State was well kept,  
 'And even I can remember  
 'A day when the historians left blanks in their writings,  
 'I mean, for things they didn't know, {32}

That skill is gradually overtaken by other concerns as American poetry became more contemporary, unaffected and idiomatic. Kenneth Rexroth's still clear if irregular metre:

Strong ankled, sun burned, almost naked,  
 The daughters of California

Educate reluctant humanists;  
Drive into their skulls with tennis balls  
The unhappy realization  
That nature is still stronger than man. {33}

Elizabeth Bishop's quiet patterning, with the thought end-stopped in graceful patterning:

There are too many waterfalls here; the crowded streams  
hurry too rapidly down to the sea,  
and the pressure of so many clouds on the mountaintops  
makes them spill over the sides in soft slow-motion,  
turning to waterfalls under our very eyes. {34}

James Tate's *Inspiration* is prose, though an amusing one where the lines are self contained by the cadences of everyday speech:

The two men sat roasting in their blue suits  
on the edge of a mustard field.  
Lucien Cardin, a local painter,  
had suggested a portrait. {35}

Brian Pattern's *Ode to Celestial Music* is again strictly prose but the diction is clearly not of everyday usage:

It's not celestial music it's the girl in the bathroom singing.  
You can tell. Although it's winter  
the trees outside her window have grown leaves,  
all manner of flowers push up through the floorboards.  
I think – 'what a filthy trick that is to play on me,'  
I snip them with my scissors shouting  
'*I only want bona fide celestial music!*' {36}

Finally, everyday concerns and the critical theory implicit in the poem became the deciding factors as serious poetry retreated into academia. {37-39} Work was often experimental, moreover, making use of previous techniques as sparingly as possible: here parallelism:

We come into the world and there it is.  
We come into the world without and we breathe it in.  
We come into the world.  
We come into the world and we too begin to move between the  
brown and the blue and the green of it. {40}

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### 9.3. RHYTHMIC ANALYSIS: PROSODY

Poets and critics like to know how poems secure their effects, and that functioning once included prosody, the study of metre. With the adoption of the prose variety of free verse as the medium of serious poetry today, much of that interest has waned — unfortunately in the case of verse translation, and probably for poetry in general, given that the world's most celebrated pieces have survived not through the clever things that scholars have found to say about them, but by their expression of our profoundest yearnings in precisely memorable ways.

But a larger reason for the current neglect of prosody is the unyielding difficulty of saying something new and helpful about the metrical nature of poetry. Scholars often disagree on scansion of individual lines, sometimes fiercely, making prosody a contentious subject. Worse still, studies based on mechani-

cal, musical, organic and linguistic analogies have shown how little is really understood.{1} Nonetheless, as defined as some pattern of phonological stress, pitch and/or length, rhythm is an inescapable element of poetry. Cultural conventions and literary history select their varying requirements from the individual features of a language, but rhythm also arises naturally from the simple exercise of breathing and the desire for shape and regularity in human affairs.

In western literature there are two great metrical systems: the quantitative (introduced by the Greeks) and the accentual (which appears in Latin of the third century AD), but metre of some sort is found in all poetry, east and west. {2} But why? What can metre do for poetry?

It induces a semi-hypnotic state in which we become receptive to words in their larger dimensions and usages. Poetry is not written in our normal waking state, but at a more creative level — often in a sort of suspended but receptive trance. That hard-to-describe (and to create) condition went by the name 'inspiration', and it's also the condition by which poetry has to be read, with some faculties switched off and others more acutely turned on.

Metrical skill comes from practice rather than any slavish following of rules, and rules indeed vary with the literary tradition and what poets are attempting to achieve. The ear is not the only judge. Swinburne and Chesterton appeal to the auditory imagination, but look bombastic on the page. The late blank verse of Shakespeare needs a trained actor to bring out its rough-hewn splendour, and the rhythmic subtleties of Geoffrey Hill are apt to vanish on public performance.

New metres are rarely created, but much more common is the importation and adaptation of metre from a foreign language, which is a good reason for reading beyond translations. How readers recognize and respond to metre is unclear, but any particular metre seems to be a norm, a pattern intuited behind permissible examples. The examples are often irregular, and indeed the common iambic pentameter seems only to be exact in some 25% of cases overall. {3}

## Theory: Introduction

Firstly, if, as we have said, poets write more by ear than rules, what's to be gained by formal study? Four answers:

1. Rules govern many art forms in music, painting, choreography, etc. and are seen as aids to creation once they are so thoroughly ingested as to be second nature. Indeed, without some rules, art fails to be art and becomes instead a perplexity to everyone, not least its practitioners.
2. Poetry is now fragmented into diverse schools, each claiming indisputable truth. As rhythmic expressions are often made into shibboleths, the sensible

writer will want an understanding of the issues, so as to choose between the rival claims.

3. Study sharpens the ear, and will locate examples useful to the practising poet.

Rhythm in poetry can be treated in many different ways. In fact, there exist no fewer than sixteen different theories. Most are in use by literary criticism (though not by this book, incidentally, where only a simplified foot substitution appears), and each theory adds depth and significance to the others.

## Foot Substitution

We start with the most popular theory, that of the foot substitution prosodists. {5} The approach derives from classical scansion, and divides the line into feet. Each foot contains one dominant stress and a number of unstressed syllables. The metres are:

Iambic: rising duple: The cú | r | few tó | lls | the kné | ll | of pá | rt | ing dá | y.

Dactylic: falling duple: Sú | m mer | ís | les of | É | den | lý | ing | ín | dark | púr | ple | sphé | res of | sé | a

Anapaestic: rising triple: *The Ass* | *ý* | *rian came* | *dó*wn | *like a* | *wó*lf | *on the* | *fó*ld

Dactylic: falling triple: *Tó*uch | *her* | *not* | *scó*rn | *full* | *y*

Verse is rarely completely regular, but if we a. add the pyrrhic (two unstressed syllables) and the spondee (two stressed syllables), and b. allow individual feet to be replaced (most commonly the iambic by a trochaic foot) then most verse can be scanned succinctly. The classification includes type of line (dimeter with two feet, trimeter with three feet, tetrameter with four feet, pentameter with five feet, hexameter with six feet and heptameter with seven feet), and groupings by stanzas of various types.

How real is this periodic stress? It is something instinctively felt on practice, but can be broken into amplitude (i.e. volume), duration and pitch in that decreasing order of importance. Laboratory study on adults and children (and indeed unborn children) has substantiated the reality of the sensation, and some schools of linguistics recognize stress as a feature in everyday speech. In that sense, stress pattern is a reality of the English language, and not something imposed by outmoded literary conventions. If its intricate employment in verse is culturally determined, then so of course is language.

The foot substitution system has many advantages. It is: 1. Widespread in earlier literary criticism, and still very popular. 2. Simple to learn and apply. 3. Sufficiently flexible to cover everything from advertising jingles to Shakespearean blank verse.

Unfortunately, the system also has serious limitations: 1. The classification is artificial, the terminology and to some extent the practice being taken from the wholly different system of classical verse. 2. The classification does not distinguish degrees of stress. 3. Prosodists vary (sometimes very markedly) in their interpretations, and there seems no way of deciding between claims. 4. The system is somewhat rough and ready, and so not over-helpful to the poet. Only the trained ear will distinguish between a good and the merely correct line of verse, and that training exceeds what is needed to apply the system. 5. The system does not properly capture the experience of reading verse. 6. The system enforces correctness at a very elementary level, but metre is not integrated into an overall and illuminating view of a poem's structure.

Temporal Prosodists

The traditional rival to foot substitution has been temporal prosody. Under this approach, which derives from classical verse, the lines are divided into measures like a musical score. {6} Each measure contains a major beat plus one or more subordinate beats. The beats are not marked by pitch or loudness but by the time taken to sound them. Some are long (major) and some are short (subordinate), but in total the beats make up measures of approximately equal duration. One measure may consist of one major beat lasting six intervals of time, for example, and another consist of three equal but subordinate beats, each lasting two intervals of time. Milton's famous opening to *Paradise Lost* could be scanned thus: 2|42|222|312|222|42

2    4            2    2    2            2    3    1    2            2    2            2            4            2

Of   man's   fir   st   dis   o   be   di   ence   -   and   the   fruit   -

Many refinements are possible. Some prosodies, as in the example above, allow for pauses. Some would insist that the bar-lines fall always before the major beat. Many have indeed employed a musical notation.

One attraction of temporal prosody is its application to prose rhythm. Verse in this view is not something divorced from natural speech, but merely speech made more regular and pleasing. The same measures can be applied to both, and there thus exists a gradual progression from strict forms, through free verse and emotive prose into everyday, spasmodic conversation.

Yet the temporalist approach is not without its problems. Most telling is the complete lack of evidence that such measures actually exist. Decades of testing in speech laboratories have failed to substantiate the notion. Whether in everyday speech, narrative prose or verse, human beings do not linger over syllables in such a way that measures of equal duration can be recognized, or not unless the lines are chanted, when all rhythmic subtlety is lost. Verse seems not to be a heightening of natural speech tendencies, but speech cultivated for a particu-

lar end. 'What does not ripen with cultivation?' said Quintilian (c. 90 AD), and 'that which is most natural is that which nature permits to be done to the greatest perfection.' Verse allows the formal powers of language to release, inflect and modulate meaning, and so needs extensive training to write, to speak and to appreciate.

## Phrasalists

Phrasalists are not concerned with metre, but with rhythmic phrases, these phrases forming spatial patterns that give verse its aesthetic appeal. {7} Lines are scanned for combinations of phrasal shapes repetitions, variations, inversions, etc. and the attraction of a poem ascribed to its figured harmonies of thought.

Some phrasalists ignore metre, or deny it exists at all, particularly in modern free verse, but the majority ascribe the effectiveness of verse to an interplay between phrase and metre. Phrasal prosody may be directed to individual lines, stanzas, or to the poem as a whole. A few prosodists even extend the concept from units of sound to implied meaning, when their analysis encroaches on what has traditionally been considered rhetoric. Some of Whitman's verse, for example, can be analysed on four phrasal levels. Stresses combine into pause groups. Pause groups combine into lines. Lines combine into verse paragraphs. These three levels interact to form a fourth level, which is our experience of reading a poem as a whole.

Milton composed by verse paragraphs. The end of *Paradise Lost*, with its regular alternation of 2 and 3 beat phrases, is subdued and dignified, the beat strict as always with Milton: inversions but no extra syllables. The sequence in this passage is 3 || 2 || 3 || 2 | 2 | 3 || 2 || 3 || 2 | 3 :

Som natural tears they drop'd, || but wip'd them soon; ||  
The World was all before them, || where to choose  
Thir place of rest, | and Providence thir guide: ||  
They hand in hand || with wandring steps and slow, ||  
Through Eden took| thir solitarie way.

The drawbacks with the phrasalist approach? Most obvious are those common to all such studies: knowing *what* is not knowing *how*. Findings cannot be applied as recipes, only as guides to self-cultivation. We also find ourselves recognizing the effectiveness of phrasal structures without entirely knowing why they are effective. Most of the phrasalist approaches until recently have indeed been limited, but the approach does form a basis for the sophisticated theory of rhythmic phrasing developed by David Curton (see below).

## Prose Rhythms

Affective and ornate prose has its own rhythms. {8} What can we learn from their classification?

The most ambitious study was George Saintsbury's *A History of English Prose Rhythms* (1912), which extended the approach of foot substitution to prose paragraphs. Containing up to five syllables, these prose feet were longer than verse feet, however, and required a complex terminology: 22 types in all. The classification did not catch on, but Saintsbury was able to draw some lessons from the ordered variety. Juxtaposed feet were never of the same shape, but followed one or more of these patterns: grades moved from short to long and long to short; variations modified a common shape; shapes themselves reflected the content rising for inspiration, for example, and falling for paragraph endings. Always there was opposition between verse feet (recurring feet with some variation) and prose feet (varied feet with some recurrence.)

Thomas Browne's (1605 - 82) celebrated passage in *Urn Burial* was analysed thus:

**Now** since these **dead** bones | have **already** | **outlasted** | the **living** ones | of Meth**uselah**,| and in a **yard** | under **ground**,| and **thin** | **walls** | of **clay**,| **out-worn** | **all** the **strong** | and **specious** | **buildings** | **above** it;| and **quietly** | **rested** | under the **drums** | and **tramlings** | of **three** | **conquests**;| what **Prince** | can **promise** | **such** | **diurnity** | unto his **reliques**,| or **might not** | **gladly** | **say**,

The classification could be taken further. Croll (1919), {9} for example, proposed a system of ascending units. The lowest unit was a *colon*, a passage typically averaging some ten syllables that could be enunciated in one breath. The next unit was a *commata*, a melodic and rhythmic passage not necessarily contained by sense and syntax. Then came *phrases*, which were often two-fold: a first phrase consisting of an appeal with modifying relative clause, and a second phrase of imperative clause or clauses. The highest unit was the *period*, defined as perfect in itself and easily comprehended by the understanding. Often these *periods* coincided with sentences, but they could include more than one sentence. This, from *the English Book of Common Prayer*, has two *phrases* and one *period*:

Almighty and everlasting God who dost govern all things in heaven and earth;  
mercifully hear the supplications of thy people, and grant us peace all the days of our life.

Prose analysts were also interested in the *cursus*, a rhythmical formula that ended the *commata* or *cola* in liturgical writing. The *cursus* began with a strong accent, continued through a long span of unstressed syllables to a subordinate accent, and then tailed away in (optional) unstressed syllables. There was a recognized terminology for the various types: The *planus* had no subordinate accent and ended in one unstressed syllable: *help and defend us*. The

*tardus* ended with two unstressed syllables: *governed and sanctified*. The *velox* had a subordinate accent: *punished for our offences*.

Another form of periodicity studied by prosodists was the overall shape of sentences. *Periodic* sentences place adverbial elaboration before the main clause. *Loose* sentences place them after. *Balanced* sentences have initial and final elaborations in equal proportions. *Suspended* or *mid-branching* sentences have elaboration between the mandatory elements of the main clause. The matter is complex, and the classifications even more so.

How does this affect poets? The exact terminology may not matter, but poetry of a high order was obtained by careful elaboration of such phrasing, and might be so again. The elaboration is inappropriate for demotic speech, as for writing of any naturalness or spontaneity, but fine prose shows that free verse is not bound to simple speech rhythms. French poets in particular have created marvels in the twentieth century with such devices, though the prose poem is admittedly easier in loose hexameters than irregular blank verse.

Mais ce soir de grande age et de grande patience, dans. . . (St. John Perse)

More can be done. Forster divided the rhythmic shape of an extended piece of prose into two categories. Easy rhythms were analogous to a musical motif. An event, action or scene recurred frequently, and each recurrence gained from previous incarnations, so that the prose was provided with a clear internal structure. Barthes formalized this in semic, symbolic and referential codes. Difficult rhythms are more analogous to the deep structural organisation of a musical composition: they can be sensed but not tapped or spelt out. Most good prose belongs to the second category, of course: heterogeneous, unwieldy but somehow pleasing, which Barthes labelled as proaeretic and hermeneutic. {10}

The advantages of such study? It gets us reading good prose, developing an ear for rhythmic subtleties and structural organisation that are needed for the longer poem. We appreciate the poet's art better, understanding what Shakespeare did to Sir Thomas North's prose to arrive at *The barge she sat in like a burnished throne...*

But the difficulties are again legion. Saintsbury's terminology is daunting, and based on a never-substantiated temporal prosody. Scholars disagree on interpretation, very markedly, and even Saintsbury, in his usual disarming way, could not decide whether the *Urn Burial* piece quoted starts with a heavily weighted docmaic or four monosyllabic feet.

## Free Verse

Free verse is the form most widely used in contemporary poetry, but is anything but new. Many of its features can be found in ancient Sumerian, Akkadian, Egyptian, Sanskrit and Hebrew literature. As a loosening of traditional

metre, the form reappears in 17<sup>th</sup> century French poetry, and again in 19<sup>th</sup> century poetry throughout the European languages.

Pinning down the form has caused endless problems. {11} Free verse has been defined as unmetered, metered but unscannable, non-conventionally metered, partially or loosely metered, complexly metrical verse, and so on. Perhaps all that the many studies have demonstrated is how readily the various forms of free verse evade any simple notation. Foot substitution in particular needs some metric norm to return to, but a norm is what free verse avoids. The lack of normative organisation may indeed be the one defining characteristic of this complex and somewhat perplexing form.

Regardless of the facts, modern free verse sees itself as innovative, making a important break with the past. Two traditions run through American and British poetry. The first originates in Walt Whitman and comes down through Allen Ginsberg and Robert Bly. This is a personal style tending to use asymmetric and often long lines, parallelism, repetition of words and phrases, stresses in unexpected places and mixtures of idiom. The second is more tightly written, with lineation coinciding with grammatical units (D.H. Lawrence, Wallace Stevens and Carl Sandburg) or not so coinciding (William Carlos Williams, Carl Sandburg and Robert Creeley).

Freedom applies not only to freedom from traditional metre, but freedom to use visual and sound effects for surprise, thickening of meaning, symmetry, repetition, or simply for pleasure. Lines can be shortened for speed, or segmented into clots of words or syllables to slow down the reading or comprehension. Continuously long lines are more the preserve of Whitman (with David Jones, Robinson Jeffers and A.R. Ammons) but alternating long and short have been popular for long poems (Pound, Dorn, Reznikoff and others). Similarly the line breaks: some writers break their lines in unusual and sometimes arbitrary places (Williams), while others run them on (Lawrence).

Equally varied has been the arrangement of the poem on the page. Eleanor Berry {12} in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, for example, distinguishes some twelve ways in which such visual layouts may support the irony, openness, dissonance, anticlimax, tension, surprise, fragmentation, ambiguity and self-reference of modern poetry.

Those emphasizing the poem's autonomy or unity may:

1. Give prominence to the sound or structure in the text.
2. Indicate the juxtaposition of ideas or images.
3. Signal shifts in tone, meaning or perspective.
4. Frame a word or phrase.
5. Emphasize (foreground) the text as an aesthetic object.
6. Provide an abstract shape of energy.

The textural and disintegrative may:



1. Signal a reference to poetic tradition.
2. Allude to genres of printed texts.
3. Sustain interest through textural differences.
4. Create counterpoint between structures occupying the same words.
5. Heighten awareness of the reading process.
6. Defamiliarise certain areas or aspects of the text.

Behind these devices generally lies a belief that poetry should be a representation of lived experience. The poetry tries to replicate the perceptual, cognitive, emotional or imaginative processes which gave rise to the poem, and to do so in a manner that seems natural and everyday. Living and writing are matters not to be confused or fused completely, of course, but free verse at least tries to overcome the nineteenth century dichotomy between art and life.

## Slavic Theorists

It is Russian and Polish theorists, the Slavic School, who have created the largest body of metrical analysis in the twentieth century. {13} A few are well known in the west — Jacobson, Wellek, Tarjinskaya — but the work of others lies buried in foreign journals, where even here it was fortunate to survive the Stalinist purges. From the sixties onwards, however, Slavic approaches have been applied to English verse, initially with considerable success. The approach is characterized by being a) minutely attentive to the texts, b) thorough and wide-ranging, c) supportive of theoretical considerations that were later transported to the west: semiotics and structuralism d) based on linguistics and e) aimed at normative analysis: i.e. not the preferred reading of a particular line but the quantitative generalizations that could be made about all verse of a similar type.

Such studies do not make for easy reading, and their technicalities will not help the poet struggling with a particular line, since correct lines are not necessarily good lines. But some objectivity and clarity does emerge. We don't have to lay down rules in absence of the facts: we can analyse large bodies of poetry and see what actually happens. Tarjinskaya in 1976 {14}, for example, analysed the non-dramatic iambic pentameters of 30 major poets, from Chaucer to Swinburne. The finding was that 1. ictic (rhythmical or metrical) stress features in 75 - 87% of cases, that 2. non-ictic stress occurs three times more frequently in the first position of a line than elsewhere, 3. non-ictic stress declines progressively across a line, 4. ictic non-stress occurs most commonly with monosyllables and 5. lines having more than one non-ictic stress caused by polysyllables are generally avoided. Not compelling reading, and not a revelation, but a prophylactic against any rigid imposition of rules in the *New Formalist* fashion. Verse types do indeed fall into normative patterns, but the patterns are derived from the analyses, not the other way round.

In their analyses, the Slavic metrists divided lines horizontally and vertically. In addition to rhythmical stress, for example, there is the part played by meaning, intonation, sound orchestration, syntax and visual form. These as-

pects are depicted vertically above the line, as secondary rhythmic features that are nonetheless important. Across the lines appear the sorts of findings noted by Tarjinskaya above. They give a horizontal shaping, so that a line of verse is not seen as an unvarying pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables.

Additionally, there is a hierarchical grouping, generally represented by syllable, word, phrase member, phrase and sentence (also called utterance or totality). The higher levels of syntax are also brought into the picture, so that these analyses merge with the structuralism of Levi-Strauss. How are analyses decided upon in the first place? They may be quantitative and objective, but someone has to decide on what is relevant and worth measuring, as indeed happens in all the sciences. So enters the speculative part, the theories that the evidence must support or refute. The Slavic metrists were often audacious theorists, and none more so than Ramon Jakobson. {15} In his famous definition of poetry (1960), the poetic function of language projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination.

The idea is this. The order of words in a sentence is governed by syntax. In *The dark night closed around them* the syntax is quite straightforward: adjective subject noun, verb, adverb and object pronoun. We can replace the noun by another noun, an equivalent part of speech: *The dark animal closed around them*. Ditto for any other part of speech, or all of them together: *The overpowering smell seeped into him*. These replacements are in a vertical sense, along the axis of equivalence. Replacements in the horizontal sense are much more difficult. We can't write *Around the night dark closed them*, for instance, because words in this horizontal direction have to combine in certain ways. But we can in literary language carry out some replacements: *Around them, the night was close and dark. The close night darkened around them*. And so on: it is very typical of poetry, and imaginative literature generally.

Characteristics are one thing, but to make a definition of poetry in this way was preposterous. Poetry is an art, and art is governed by a good deal more than linguistics. There is no clear demarcation between literal and imaginative language, moreover, and the most compelling poems can include apparent statements of fact: witness *The Divine Comedy* and thousands more. A case can indeed be made for all language being metaphoric at base, so poetry and non-poetry cannot be distinguished on such a basis anyway. Jakobson's notion gained an undeserved currency in the sixties because it coincided with the vistas offered by Structuralism, and the hope that artistic creation could be placed on a scientific footing.

Jakobson did in fact elaborate the notion and provide detailed examples, but the moral should be clear. Poetry is the most subtle use of words, and the lumping together of reductionism destroys precisely what is worth distinguishing. To the extent that linguistics is a science, and science deals with propositions that must be falsifiable, linguistics does not provide a royal road to certainty in metrical analysis. The work of the Slavic metrists has been invaluable

in clearing out dogma, however, and their stress on normative analysis is well worth remembering.

## Intonationalists

Verse rhythm is not wholly to be represented by simple stressed and unstressed syllables. In their seminal work of 1951, Trager and Smith {16} distinguished four levels in three elements: stress, pitch and juncture. Stress or loudness was denoted as primary, secondary, tertiary or weak. Pitch (as in music, technically the frequency of vibration of a column of air) was denoted as very high, high, mid or low. Juncture was denoted as open, sustained, rising or falling. All four levels of stress were needed to say *elevator-operator*, for example, and we indicate a question by raising the pitch at the end of a sentence. (*I'm late.* versus *I'm late?*). Open juncture allows us to distinguish *nitrate* from *night rate*. And so on. Other workers developed similar systems, using them to argue that 1. variation within regularity so characteristic of verse is elegantly captured by such systems, 2. verse rhythm is more easily seen as an alternation of stress levels, and 3. the approach can be adapted to a normative approach: rhythm is best studied by statistical analysis of what seems acceptable to practiced readers.

Such systems can be extended vertically, moreover. Elizabeth Hewitt (1965) {17} recognized what she termed metrical foot, measure, lower cadence and upper cadence in the poetry of T.S. Eliot, an analysis only possible with pitch and juncture as elements in the grouping. The pronunciation of American English is very different from that of British English, and has brought differences in approach. Americans tend to move from segment through phrase to meaning, where British intonationalists are top down, moving from overall meaning to phrase and segment. Important to the British are tone units, which divide a text into informational segments. Each tone unit includes a prominent pitch movement (tonic syllable) that coincides with the information focus. Preceding the tonic syllable is information recoverable from context, and following is a short post-tonic element. Features making the pitch movement are tones that 1. rise, 2 fall, 3. remain level, 4. fall then rise and 5. rise then fall. British linguists also divide the tone unit into rhythmic feet, comparable to prosodic feet, where the stresses can be implied rather than sounded. Where does this lead?

British prosodists have used the tone unit and the melodic contour as alternatives to simple verse measures. Most poetic lines, it is claimed, end with a tonic syllable and a tone unit boundary. Unconsciously, readers expect lines to be intonationally delimited, unified and paralleled, and these are more practicable than standard rules of versification. More particularly, this approach finds patterns inherent in the many types of free verse that break the rules but are nonetheless pleasing. William Carlos Williams' 'chopped-up prose' is often abrupt and jagged, for example, but has passages of stateliness when these deeper patterns are followed.

The approaches are technical and somewhat narrow, but Kenneth Pike (1959, 1982), {18} on the American side, extended intonation into a larger study of rhythmic organisation. Hierarchically, there are three 'standpoints': particles, field and wave. Any particle can have a nucleus, plus optional margins, and these margins can have a variety of roles: setting, denouement, action, etc. Each particle belongs to a class of waves in a vertical relationship with super-ordinate and subordinate waves. These waves in turn are associated with meaning and a field of structural and functional expectancies.

## Poetic Closure

Less study has been given to movement among sentences, i.e. across the text as a whole. One exception is Barbara Herranstein Smith's (1968) {19} work on poetic closure. Poems please us because they arouse our appetites and expectations, continually defer and evade those appetites and expectations, and then finally close when the structure is coherent, complete and stable. Smith believed that such processes give us psychological or even physiological gratification, and are of two types: formal and thematic.

Formal structures arise from the physical nature of words, and include such things as rhyme, alliteration, metre and stanza shaping. Thematic structures arise from the symbolic nature of language, and include syntax, genres, sense imagery and rhetorical figures. Formal and thematic structures interact to effect closure. Formal patterning depends on repetition, and can always be extended, at least until we feel an overwhelming need for change. These terminations are not random, moreover, but emphasize a thematic revelation at the close, antithesis, puns, hyperbole, aphoristic brevity and parallels often being employed for this purpose.

Thematic structures at their most basic are unordered and expandable, and can only be closed by adding some 'paratactic listing'. These may be a paraphrase of the opening line, a reference to natural stopping places in human experience (death, sleep, heave, etc.) or some element of narrative or dramatic ordering. Poetry uses these novelistic devices, but theme dominates plot: the poem usually comments rather than simply presents or portrays. Smith in fact recognized several types of thematic structure, which she termed paractic, temporal, sequential and associative/dialectical. The last are interior monologues, the wavering of minds on trains of thought that may not reach closure.

## Generative Metrists

The success of Chomsky's generative grammar approach encouraged metrists to establish a similar system for well-formed verse. Comprehensive rules would specify what was acceptable and what was not acceptable as verse.

Various systems were proposed. Hall and Keyser (1972) {20} demonstrated, for example, that iambic pentameters were specified by a set of *correspond-*

*ence rules* operating on a metrical pattern of (W)SWSWSWS (X)(X) where ( ) indicates an optional element and X can only be occupied by an unstressed syllable. The correspondence rules are:

1. S, W or X corresponds to a single syllable or a sounded sequence of no more than two syllables.

2. Fully stressed syllables occur in all S and only in S positions, or

Fully stressed syllables occur only in S positions but not in all S positions, or

Stress maxima occur in S positions only, but not in all S positions. (A stress maximum is a fully stressed syllable occurring between two unstressed syllables in the same syntactic constituent.)

Where does that take us? Well, firstly, the rules are specified. Then the rules can establish a norm and a hierarchy of departures from the norm. Thirdly, they emphasize the importance of word boundaries since monosyllabic words have metrical freedom whereas polysyllabic words usually have their lexical break in a strong position.

And so on: this early work has been much built on and modified. Kiparsky (1975) {21} developed a concept of phonological words to examine metrical breaks that appear on syntactical and phonological grounds. (Phonological has lexical stress on a major category word plus syntactically associated unstressed syllables, a concept deriving from the work of Chomsky and Halle in 1968. {22} ) It is well known, for example, that poets tend to place stressed syllables in weakly stressed positions only after strong breaks, and Dillon (1977) {23} suggested a sevenfold hierarchy of such phrasal breaks.

The drawbacks? The first is the difficulty with all generative grammars, that well-formed examples are not objectively derived. Second, the rules are not over useful to practitioners. Like native speakers, poets construct their verses intuitively, not by following rules or blueprints. And finally, it must be admitted that disputes have frequently arisen among generative metrists themselves, and that even their science has not escaped radical transformations and schisms.

## Reuven Tsur's Work

Reuven Tsur's {24} cognitive poetics tries to fit the generative metrists approach into the larger framework of brain functioning. Literature has aesthetic effects when normal cognitive processing is interrupted or delayed. Something complex and irregular is therefore scanned for similarity, regularity and balance, and recoded into the simple, economical patterns the brain requires. Conversely, however, input which already has these properties (has what gestalt psychologists call *strong shapes*) is not immediately accepted. Indeed, these strong shapes stand out from the overall complexity of other inputs, and

so (in the larger framework) constitute irregular or *weak shapes*. From this interaction between strong and weak arises the aesthetic phenomenon.

Some broad distinctions can be made. Convergent or conclusive styles are marked by clear-cut shapes, both in contents and structure. Divergent or suspensive styles have weak shapes: blurred, atmospheric and emotive. Into one or other of these styles can be placed most of English poetry, with very different consequences for rhythm. Misplaced stresses are not tolerated in iambic pentameters with convergent styles, for example, but can be acceptable in divergent styles provided they affect only certain positions. 7. The brain, Tsur argues, integrates inputs into groupings on various levels based on word boundaries, syntactical breaks and pauses (caesurae). Some groupings are more common than others, and influence a good deal more than rhythm.

## Derek Attridge

Attridge {25} has united rhythmic experience with well-formedness and universals. The focus is on what the trained reader senses, and to this end Attridge identifies an *underlying rhythm* consisting of a small number of abstract patterns. Such patterns are given particularity by the verse traditions in question, and can be related to the language of the text by *realization rules*. The underlying rhythm is a perceived temporal pattern reinforced by repetition and periodicity. (The pulses of energy that make the rhythm itself are difficult to analyse further, but seem to have both cognitive and muscular components.) Strong pulses (beats) and weaker pulses (off-beats) set up patterns of expectation, which are heightened by deviations from regularity. Beats can be sensed but unrealised, as in Donne's

For I am every dead thing

Where the offbeat between *dead* and *thing* is not realized, but adds very powerfully to the metrical tension.

Art requires shapes or groupings. In English verse the most popular groupings are four- and five-beat lines. Four-beat lines are the most natural and popular, imparting a song-like quality. Five-beat lines are the more various, allowing the greater range of effects and are generally employed by serious poetry. Besides the underlying rhythm, however, experienced readers also recognize *metrical patterns* that particularize certain genres. These metrical patterns go well beyond rhythm, and include the shaping of lines, stanzas and the interplay of rhythm with content and syntax.

The theory uses a simple notation, is readily grasped, and overcomes the knotty problem of distinguishing between rising (iambic) and falling (trochaic) movement. Individual lines can be perplexing, as a good line of verse commonly has both rising and falling sections. Attridge's theory regards the distinction as unimportant, the key features lying elsewhere.

The problems? Attridge's realization rules are complicated enough (two-base rules, deviation rules, sets of conditions) but gloss over the finer points of verse structure. Syllables are either stressed or unstressed. Abnormally stressed syllables are called rhetorical stress, and phonetic elision is also oversimplified. Many theorists are also unhappy with the extensive use of unrealised beats, as this opens the door to regarding trimeter verse as tetrameter verse with a stress unsounded, etc.

## Metrical Phonologists

Why do we say *The word is misspelt*, but *a misspelt word*? What rules make us shift the stress? One approach to understanding is to construct a metrical grid. The grid is hierarchical and includes progressively larger elements upwards: syllable, word, phrase, sentence. At each level we recognize weak and strong elements (syllable level **mis** **spelt**: word level the **word** is **misspelt**). Then we can find the rules or constraints that apply to each level of the grid. It may be, for example, that an alternation of weak and strong at one level needs to be matched by a similar alternation at a higher level.

Such was the approach of Liberman (1975), {26} and has been very influential, many workers refining and adding to the original notion. Hayes (1984) {27} added three rules to that of simple alternation. One was that four syllables should occur between stresses at some highly salient level in the grid. A second required symmetrical division at a level below that of the highly salient level. The third required a strict polarization of stresses at the highest level. Hayes also identified five layers: word, clitic group, phonological phrase, intonational phrase and utterance.

How are these rules derived? Essentially by observation and induction, the scientific approach of trial and error. But they have some linguistic basis i.e. form part of a larger set of linguistic rules and aren't therefore purely arbitrary. Often the linguistic basis is that of generative grammar. Kiparsky (1977) {28} for instance claimed that iambic pentameters had a structure like this:

Level 5: strong

Level 4: weak strong

Level 3: weak strong

Level 2: weak strong strong weak

Level 1: weak strong weak strong weak strong weak strong weak strong.

Constraints on metrical styles could then be derived by comparing well-formed verse instances with untrammelled possibilities. Hayes himself generalized a wide set of rules that governed the interaction of phrase with metre. Bounding rules governed stress peaks within a line. Right-edge rules forbade stress clusters at the end of phrases to appear in weak positions. Left-edge rules countermanded right-edge rules and allowed clusters of stresses at the beginning of phrases.

The importance? Much of this work confirmed the theories of the Slavic metrists that the beginnings of phrases are metrically lax and the ends of phrases are metrically strict. But they did so with greater precision, laying down rules for well-formed verse.

## David Gil

David Gil and co-workers at Tel Aviv University {29} underline an important aspect of the generative grammar approach, that of choosing examples of well formedness. We should not restrict ourselves to art forms, to the work of distinguished poets, they argue, but consider mankind's general competence at verse, what they call non-canonical verse. That competence, moreover, should extend from the smallest units of rhythm to texts as a whole, including nonlinguistic matters. Like Liberman, Gill and his co-workers employ a metrical grid, with constituents at each level composed of one strong unit and one or more weak units. These constituents are given the traditional labels of iambic (I), trochaic (T), anapaestic (A), or dactylic (D). Looking at the vertical organisation of the grid, the central level is the line, labelled 0. The four levels below extend to the 'sub-position' or 1/16 of the line. The four levels above extend to the 'bi-super-stanza' or 16 lines. Individual constituents (I, T, A or D) are identified by superscripts for level and position within that level.

By analysing a good deal of material in this way, a number of unexpected features arise. Non-canonical verse operates as a continuous series of layers, with rules or constraints that control what can appear on adjacent lines. Depending on the verse type or genre, patterns appear in the syllables that can take strong or weak stresses, and there is also a patterning in the vertical sense. Most important of all, this patterning appears in the genres of other languages, and is a feature of broader linguistic units. Principles like 'small precedes large' and 'focus falls at the end of the unit' are well known in the phonological, intonational and narrative organisation of language, but also apply to metre. Anyone who disputes the importance of metre, and most particularly its objective existence, has solid linguistic evidence to contend with.

## Grammetrics

As should be apparent from these short notes (and would be overwhelmingly so on reference to textbooks or research papers) the linguistic analysis of rhythm has become a very technical subject, divorced not only from the writing of poetry but the study of literature as a whole. Donald Wesling's {30} contention is that we need to look at the larger purposes of language, and be content with approximate answers to important questions. Linguistic prosodists have elaborated brilliant theories, but only related sign to sign, not sign to signifier: they have failed to ask what the signs mean. Literary critics have equally avoided reality by making a fetish of metrical regularity, recasting poetry in simplistic models that do not explain why poetry was ever written in the first place. For poetics to be useful today, we need to accept that con-



temporary writers are attempting to do away with stable forms, to dissolve genre and technique back into ordinary language. All aspects of a poem are now indexes of personality, a correlation between work and universe that Wesling calls 'voice'.

What does that amount to? We need to examine how voice is realized:

1. In the reader's experience of the poem.
2. In the language of the text.
3. In the relation between the two.

Wesling has a Modernist conception for the first. Poetry defamiliarises, de-facilitates and retards our normal expectations in language, and does so because aesthetic and cognitive aspects interpenetrate.

He bases much of these contentions on the theoretical work of Jan Meijer (1973) {31}, who recognized specific aesthetic and cognitive structures. The first create relations of equivalence and work towards self-perpetuation. The second create unequal relations of dependence and work towards closure. From the mutual interference of the two structures arises the artistic tension and the poet's individual voice.

And the language of the text? Wesling proposes a grid marking the intersections of syntax and a poem's structure. One axis of the grid has morpheme, word, phrase, clause, sentence and group of sentences. The other has syllable, foot, part-line, line, stanza and whole poem. The size of a circle drawn at each intersection can show its importance: an approach Wesling calls grammetrics.

How is that importance assessed? For an answer to question 3 above, Wesling uses the work of the Czech theorist Jiri Levy, who pointed to morphological analogies between prosodic forms and semantic effects. The linear flow in poetry, for example, follows three formative principles: continuity-discontinuity, equivalence-hierarchy and regularity-irregularity. Each plays its part in the formal aspects of poetry (pauses, intonation, rhyme, repetition and rhythm) but also impacts on the semantics. Each intersection can be used to form hypotheses about higher level interpretation (tone of voice, point of view) so that stylistic concepts can be loaded with semantic possibilities.

## Henri Meschonnic

Henri Meschonnic {32} also takes a broad, not to say speculative, view of rhythm. His *Critique du Rythme* (1982) encompasses language, society and the individual, and in much of its considerable bulk Meschonnic attempts to show how narrow, vague and wrong-headed are conventional views. Rhythm is not binary, periodic or repetitive, but pervades all discourse. Rhythm is not valued for its mnemonic properties, but remembered because it is valuable. Rhythm is not decoration but a constituent of meaning. The essence of rhythm is form, not movement, as an examination of its etymology demonstrates.

What is Meschonnic's definition of rhythm? He doesn't really say, except to claim that rhythm is the most archaic part of language and human subjectivity, all those aspects of discourse that do not include signification. Rhythm is fragmentary and diverse, moreover, making definitions impracticable and unneeded.

Examples? Meschonnic postulates three sorts of rhythm: linguistic rhythms, rhetorical rhythms and poetic rhythms. Unfortunately, his *Critique* elaborates only the first, which does seem to involve just those matters that escape rigorous linguistic description. Here belong paralinguistic gesture, visual form, sound orchestration, metaphor, ambiguity, choriambic patterns and a host of others. Meschonnic's normalization of this category is standard but very elementary, its purpose being largely to demonstrate the inadequacy of traditional scansion.

## Richard Cureton

*Rhythmic Phrasing in English Verse*, Richard Cureton's important book of 1992 {33}, brought together contemporary thought on verse rhythms, but did so in extensive and carefully thought out schemes. The inspiration was Jackendoff and Lerdahl's (1983) treatment of rhythm in western tonal music, which recognized three distinct but interacting components: a cyclic beating (metre), peaks of structural salience (grouping) and arrival at expected goals (prolongation). Musical theorists had argued that what we call rhythm is the human ability to combine complex and diverse inputs into relatively simple patterns, and Cureton was equally determined not to oversimplify matters. Metre certainly existed, and consisted of duple or triple patterns. Grouping extracted more irregular shapes from structures inherent in the medium, and ordered these shapes in a hierarchical fashion over all levels. Prolongation was the reader's expectation of where the text was headed, and was therefore more general and subjective. Metre, grouping and prolongation were a feature of rhythm, but all three were not required for rhythm to exist.

An illustration may help. Cureton uses an extensive bracketing and tree notation, but here is a flavour of the metrical system, rather freely transposed, the bold type indicating a beat. The text is from William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*:

Metre:

Level 5    Without **out** invention nothing is well spaced  
 Level 4    Without **out** invention **nothing** is well spaced  
 Level 3    Without **out** invention **nothing** is well **spaced**  
 Level 2    Without **out** invention **nothing is** well **spaced**  
 Level 1    Without invention nothing is well spaced

Grouping:

Level 10 Without invention nothing is well spaced  
 Level 4    Without invention | nothing is well spaced

Level 3    Without invention |    nothing |    is well spaced  
 Word      Without invention nothing is well spaced  
 Syllable   With out in ven tion no thing is well spaced

Readers will have to consult Cureton's book for a proper treatment. His scheme is relatively compact and simple, but daunting to those unfamiliar with linguistic notation. Moreover, by giving emphasis to grouping, Cureton's 1992 book rather neglected prolongation and metre, though work in progress (*A Temporal Theory of Poetic Rhythm* {34}) apparently corrects the imbalance. Language, literary convention and historical content are also to be brought into the new system, which is indeed the full set of metrical preference rules detailing how prosody and versification affect our metrical reading of a text. A fourth rhythmic component is also added (theme), and Cureton attempts wider correlations with cultural history, neurobiology, ethics and so forth.

## Conclusions

Are we home? Probably not. Cureton's may be the most convincing and comprehensive treatment we have of rhythm in English verse, but it is worth dwelling on the assumptions and limitations.

1. Does a grouping of vertically arranged layers of progressively larger units really exist? Do the layers relate to realities of consciousness or brain processing, or are they only the artefacts of a convenient notation? Chomsky's grammar is vexed by the same questions, and they are not empty sophistry. Chomsky and Cureton have rather a computer-processing view of the brain, which is certainly open to question.
2. Is Cureton's scheme able to distinguish the good line of verse from the merely correct? No. It is not intended to. The scheme simply aims to establish the rules to comprehensively distinguish between what is acceptable and what is not acceptable as verse. Who then makes the correct reading in the first place, which Cureton objectifies in comprehensive rules? Who indeed? Academia is not noted for consensus.
3. Does metre apply to the same phenomenon in different cultures? Is the Chinese experience of metre in their verse (which is very strong) actually the same as ours? We can't be sure, and experts disagree.

What attitude should we adopt to this brief survey of a very technical and disputatious field? Some patience and honest doubt. Rhythm is not an easy matter, and we should treat with as much caution the proselytising of the free-verse movement as we do the simplistic rules of the *New Formalists*. More important than correctness is excellence, and that is only appreciated through a deep love and knowledge of poetry. Perhaps, to be reactionary, we could adopt what poetry lovers of earlier generations recommended: recitation, the speaking of verse as an art form. That art has now made an encouraging return in the many recordings now available on CDs or over the Internet.

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# 10. SONNETS

The sonnet is a 14 line iambic pentameter form rhymed abab cdcd efef gg (Shakespearean) or abba acca defdef (Petrarchian). More importantly, sonnets express the themes of their time, and the personality of their authors: those by William Shakespeare, John Milton, William Wordsworth, D.G. Rossetti, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Annie Finch and countless others are all distinctive. {1}

## 10.1. ANALYSING

### Shakespeare

One of the most admired of Shakespeare's sonnets {2} is number 166:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
 Admit impediment. Love is not love  
 Which alters when it alteration finds,  
 Or bends with the remover to remove.  
 O no, it is an ever fixed mark  
 That looks on tempests and is never shaken:  
 It is the star to every wand'ring bark,  
 Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.  
 Time's not love's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
 Within his bending sickle's compass come.  
 Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
 But bears it out ev'n to the edge of doom.  
 If this be error and upon me proved,  
 I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

The subject is constancy, and the argument is laid out in the usual way of Renaissance rhetoric: **exordium**, **confirmatio**, **peroratio**,

Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
 Admit impediment. Love is not love  
 Which alters when it alteration finds,  
 Or bends with the remover to remove.  
 O no, it is an ever fixed mark  
 That looks on tempests and is never shaken:  
 It is the star to every wand'ring bark,  
 Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.  
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 But bears it out ev'n to the edge of doom.  
 If this be error and upon me proved,  
 I never writ, nor no man ever loved.



The rhetorical schemes are also fairly obvious: **anaphora**, **parison**,

Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
 Admit impediment. **Love is not love**  
 Which **alters when it alteration finds**,  
 Or **bends with the remover to remove**.  
 O no, **it is an ever fixed mark**  
 That looks on tempests and is never shaken:  
**It is the star** to every wand'ring bark,  
 Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.  
**Time's not love's fool**, though rosy lips and cheeks  
 Within his bending sickle's compass come.  
**Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks**,  
 But bears it out ev'n to the edge of doom.  
 If this be error and upon me proved,  
 I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

Plus **antanaclasis** (1) and (2)

Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
 Admit impediment. Love is not love  
 Which alters when it alteration finds,  
 Or bends with the remover to remove.  
 O no, it is **an ever fixed mark**  
**That looks on** tempests and is never shaken:  
 It is **the star** to every wand'ring bark,  
 Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.  
 Time's not love's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
 Within his **bending sickle's compass come**.  
 Love alters not **with his brief hours and weeks**,  
 But bears it out ev'n to the edge of doom.  
 If this be error and upon me proved,  
 I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

And **metaphor**, hyperbole

Let me not to the **marriage** of true minds  
 Admit impediment. Love is not love  
 Which alters when it alteration finds,  
 Or bends with the remover to remove.  
 O no, it is **an ever fixed mark**  
 That looks on tempests and is never shaken:  
 It is **the star to every wand'ring bark**,  
 Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.  
 Time's not love's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
 Within his **bending sickle's compass** come.  
 Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
 But bears it out ev'n to the **edge** of doom.

If this be error and upon me proved,  
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

Rhetoric was designed to work upon our effective understanding, and is here simply doing its job, which includes structuring the poem.

## Illustration Continued: Elements of Ideation

But we are looking for something else: we want to see how individual, non-representational elements operate at a deeper level in the poem.

Let's consider what readers generally find so remarkable in this piece by developing some of the suggestions provided by Stephen Booth's commentary. {2}

The poem makes moving assertions on the nature of love that escape refutation or limitation by:

1. Identifying with matters that cannot be denied:

*star . . . Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken*

*I never writ, nor no man ever loved.*

*though rosy lips and cheeks Within (time's) sickle's compass come.*

2. Adopting theological language.

The psalm-like *Let me not. . .* with its echo of the marriage service, also repeated in *impediment*.

The reminder of the burial service with *his brief hours and weeks*,  
*But bears it out ev'n to the edge of doom.*

3. Extended use of negatives. Since love is **not** what is listed, it can be anything that is left unstated.

Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediment. Love is **not love**  
**Which** alters when it alteration finds,  
**Or** bends with the remover to remove.  
O no, it is an ever fixed mark  
That looks on tempests and is **never** shaken:  
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,  
Whose worth's **unknown**, although his height be taken.  
Time's **not** love's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
Within his bending sickle's compass come.  
Love alters **not** with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out ev'n to the edge of doom.  
If this be error and upon me proved,  
I **never** writ, nor **no man** ever loved.

4. Conflating the action of looking and being looked at:

That **looks** on tempests and is never shaken:  
 It is the **star** to every wand'ring bark,  
 Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.

5. Using **sweeping and energetic** images of action that a) have unspecified contexts:

**Let me not** to the marriage of true minds  
 Admit impediment. **Love is not love**  
**Which alters** when it alteration finds,  
 Or **bends** with the remover to remove.  
**O no, it is an ever fixed mark**  
 That looks on tempests and is never shaken:  
**It is the star** to every wand'ring bark,  
 Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.  
**Time's not love's fool**, though rosy lips and cheeks  
 Within his bending sickle's compass come.  
**Love alters not** with his brief hours and weeks,  
 But **bears it out ev'n to the edge of doom**.  
 If this be error and upon me proved,  
**I never writ, nor no man ever loved**.

And b) are supported by a text energized by **long vowels** (or vowels emphasized by **stress**) surrounded by **harder consonants** (to adopt a simple terminology: {2}):

Let me **not** to the **marriage** of **true** **minds**  
 Admit **impediment**. **Love** is not **love**  
 Which **alters** when it **alteration** **finds**,  
 Or **bends** with the remover **to** remove.  
**O no**, it is an **ever** fixed **mark**  
 That **looks** on tempests and is never **shaken**:  
 It is the **star** to every wand'ring **bark**,  
 Whose **worth's** **unknown**, **although** his **height** be **taken**.  
**Time's** not **love's** **fool**, though **rosy** **lips** and **cheeks**  
 Within his **bending** **sickle's** **compass** **come**.  
 Love **alters** not with his **brief** hours and **weeks**,  
 But **bears** it out **ev'n** to the **edge** of **doom**.  
 If this **be** error and **upon** me **proved**,  
 I never **writ**, nor **no** man **ever** **loved**.

Many more strategies occur in this celebrated piece, and will be apparent to every close reader. But note that we're not suggesting that specific sounds reinforce the meaning (though they may on occasion) but that they form elements of composition independent of the meaning. Look, for example at the repetition of **m** and **n**, that cluster so thickly in the opening sentence and con-

tinue throughout the poem. However created — probably unconsciously by Shakespeare — their effect is to bind the poem together:

Let **me** not to the **marriage** of true **minds**  
 Ad**mit** **impediment**. Love is **not** love  
 Which alters when **n** it alteration **n** finds,  
 Or **bends** with the **rem**over to **re**move.  
 O **no**, it is an ever fixed **mark**  
 That looks on tem**pests** and is **never** shaken:  
 It is the star to every wand'ring bark,  
 Whose worth's **unknow**n, although his height be taken.  
 Time's **not** love's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
 Within his bend**ing** sickle's **comp**ass **come**.  
 Love alters **not** with his brief hours and weeks,  
 But bears it out ev'**n** to the edge of doom**.**  
 If this be error and upon **me** proved,  
 I **never** writ, **nor** no **man** ever loved.

## 2. Dante Gabriel Rossetti

D.G. Rossetti generally {2} {3} used the Petrarchian form, though he often varied the defdef rhyme scheme of the final sextet, as in this example, which runs deffed. {4}

### Soul's Beauty

Under the arch of Life, where love and death,  
 Terror and mystery, guard her shrine, I saw  
 Beauty enthroned; and though her gaze struck awe,  
 I drew it in as simply as my breath.  
 Hers are the eyes which, over and beneath,  
 The sky and sea bend on thee,— which can draw,  
 By sea or sky or woman, to one law,  
 The allotted bondman of her palm and wreath.  
 This is that Lady Beauty, in whose praise  
 Thy voice and hand shake still,— long known to thee  
 By flying hair and fluttering hem,— the beat  
 Following her daily of thy heart and feet,  
 How passionately and irretrievably,  
 In what fond flight, how many ways and days!

Life, love, death, terror, mystery, beauty . . . Rossetti was never afraid to use the great commonplaces of poetry, but he does so here by saying something unusual in English poetry: the awe that beauty brings to someone of his perceptive but unstable temperament. Rossetti was a deeply sensual artist {6} and there is a lingering over the words which the rhythms emphasize.

We look first at the rhythmic phrasing, marking a pause by | and a long pause by || — relatively speaking: there can be some debate over placings, and the

pauses won't have the same duration in different lines. The numbers refer to metrical beats between the pauses:

1. Under the arch of Life || where love and death | 3 2
2. Terror and mystery | guard her shrine | I saw 2 2 1
3. Beauty | enthroned || and though her gaze struck awe | 1 1 3
4. I drew it in as simply as my breath. || 5
5. Hers are the eyes | which over and beneath | 2 3
6. The sky and sea | bend on thee, || — which can draw 2 2 1
7. By sea | or sky | or woman| to one law | 1 1 1 2
8. The allotted bondman of her palm and wreath. || 5
9. This is that Lady Beauty | in whose praise | 3 2
10. Thy voice and hand shake still, || — long known to thee 3 2
11. By flying hair and fluttering hem, | — the beat | 4 1
12. Following her daily | of thy heart and feet || 2 3
13. How passionately | and irretrievably | 2 3
14. In what fond flight | how many ways | and days | 2 2 1

### 3. Our Version

Now, with this sort of patterning in our heads, we write our own piece, on a similar theme, and with the same rapt attention:

1. I saw her flaunted | as in Eve's undress || 2 3
2. From when | in rising| she puts up her hair || 1 1 3
3. And was enamoured | of the nimbused air | 2 3
4. That with her odour had an | otherness || 3 2
5. And so | from others | in this strange | distress | 1 1 2 1
6. I grew | in canvasses | Bellini painted | 1 2 2
7. To find | both soul and body | were acquainted || 1 2 2
8. That all was simple| a mere naturalness || 2 3
9. Beyond her | through the startled | day's embrace | 1 2 2
10. In ache of dancehalls | ever younger years | 2 3
11. I forced from bodies | their most fervent | sighs || 2 2 1
12. But to all she said | I am a little space | 2 3
13. A sense of falling and diminishing | after tears | 3 2
14. Far as the starlight | out of quiet eyes || 2 3

Now, as far as metrical correctness goes, ours is more a sonnet than is Rossetti's: quietly moving under a predominantly iambic beat. In Rossetti's, lines 1 to 3 and possibly 9 start with a stress that pushes the movement on. Lines 4 and 8 break that movement but it picks up again in the sextet, becoming so impetuous in lines 11 to 13 that a double rhyme (*ways* and *days*) is needed to slow the rhythm and bring the piece to satisfactory conclusion. Indeed, Ros-

setti loses control in lines 6 and 7, with a crash of gears at *thee || which*. Have we outdone the master?

Let's look at what the poem is saying, the phrasing by content. I show by italics where Rossetti pushes the sense on, not allowing a pause for thought, even at violence to the metre:

1. Under the arch of Life, *where* love and death,
2. Terror and mystery guard her shrine | I *saw*
3. Beauty enthroned || *and* though her gaze struck awe
4. I drew it in as simply *as* my breath. ||
5. *Hers* are the eyes *which* over and beneath
6. The sky and sea *bend on thee* | — *which* can draw
7. By sea or sky or woman to *one law*
8. The allotted bondman of her palm and wreath. ||
9. This is that Lady Beauty || *in* whose praise
10. Thy voice and hand shake still, — *long* known to thee
11. By flying hair and fluttering hem, — *the beat*
12. Following her daily of thy heart and feet ||
13. *How* passionately and irretrievably |
14. *In what* fond flight | *how* many ways and days ||

So the impetuosity of the verse, with sense units continually shortening as the poem speeds up. Also possibly why Rossetti has placed *I drew it in as simply as my breath* at line 4 rather than using it to round off the octet. This type of very simple line, without ornament or heavy rhetoric, Rossetti learnt from his translations of Dante and his contemporaries:

To the dim light and large circle of shade  
I have clomb, *and to the whitening of the hills*,  
(Of the Lady Pietra degli Scrovigni: Cino da Pistoia) {6}

and:

And by the scent, in truth, the plant I found,  
And *rested in its shadow a great while*.  
(Of a Lady's Love for him: Ubaldo di Marco) {6}

Line 8 is a standard iambic, but it is not negligible: open vowels, assonance in b and p, the m's in *bondman* and *palm*:

The allotted **b**ond**m**an **o**f her **p**al**m** and wreath

Try rewriting, and the aptness of the original becomes apparent:

The allotted serving man of palm and wreath.

That is the bondman of her palm and wreath.

## Reworking Our Draft

We should now see that what we have written is correct, but something taking fewer risks than Rossetti's piece, which is imperfect but comes from deeper levels, being thereby the more moving. Poetry is something produced *through* language, and that something has to be sincerely held — contra deconstruction and some *New Formalist* work. It may be true that "Whatever autobiographical elements may be found in Rossetti's poetry, the love he described is never simply the love of Gabriel Rossetti for Lizzie Siddal, or for Fanny Cornforth, or for Jane Morris; rather it is, like the love Shelley described, a love for an ideal of perfection." {7} And also that the "complex, often convoluted, imagery of Rossetti's later work, such as the later sonnets in *The House of Life*, appear to attempt to create a poetry out of the richness of language rather than out of the way that such language describes any objective reality." {8} But the matter is not that simple. All writing uses language and its conventions, but poets of any distinction use certain parts of both for more individual purposes. A diary entry refers to real people and real events, but it does so with conventions that do not generally make for poetry. And just as a painter does not produce a photographic record but uses elements of the visual in a more abstract and constructive manner, so the poet manipulates the conventions that govern words to say something that has existence only within those conventions. Modernism, to be more contemporary and individual, threw out many of those conventions, but the result was often a Pyrrhic victory, with poetry that was fresher but not so moving or memorable.

To repeat, a successful poem has to believe in what it is saying, and make others so believe, at least for the period of its construction and reading. Any sonnet we write in the manner of Rossetti's, unless a simple pastiche, will therefore be how we ourselves respond to the theme of *Soul's Beauty*, employing comparable but not identical devices. With a much quieter ending than Rossetti's, and a simpler construction, I would probably correct the draft along these lines: {9}

### The Painter

To sense her all day long in Eve's undress  
 From when in rising she puts up her hair:  
 To be enamoured of the nimbused air  
 That had her odour and her otherness,

I took from others in this strange distress  
 Among the canvasses Bellini painted  
 A soul and body that was new acquainted  
 Where all was simple, a mere naturalness.

When past her, through the startled day's embrace,  
 In thirst for innocent and withheld years,  
 I forced from bodies their most fervent sighs.

To which she said, 'I am a little space,  
A sense of falling and diminishing in tears,  
Far as the starlight, out of quiet eyes.'

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<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dgr/image1.html>.
9. Since correcting the draft I have discovered a similar last line in a Dante translation by George Santayana: 'But beauty and the starlight of her eyes.' *Three Poems* in Mark Van Doren (Ed.), *An Anthology of World Poetry* (Albert and Charles Boni, 1928), 587. Many prose stylists were also good verse writers — Thoreau, Bunin, Fromentin, etc.

## 10.2. CONTEMPORARY EXAMPLES

Sonnets are not difficult to write, and poets traditionally dashed one off before breakfast every morning just to limber up. But correctness has little value in the arts, and good sonnets — exactly phrased and deeply moving — need more than three adequate quatrains and rhyming couplet. The verse has to hold together, and those textural devices also allow the form to be pushed in new directions.

I'll not lay out the steps of writing the following pieces, but simply draw attention to the textural devices and the needs they serve:



## The Jubilee

It rained the day that we commemorate  
Somewhat unwillingly this wet June day.  
Cold for the young queen then; her ride in state  
Diademed a darkened Europe. 'We pray

For peace among our peoples. . . as we have sinned  
Against our neighbour . . . ' Such pieties were tossed  
Into the dark grey sky above, and that keen wind  
Makes us contemporary to a world whose cost

Was not for us to sense. It's hard for us  
Who interceded things thought for the best,  
Co-operated, were not covetous,  
To altogether feel we have progressed.

We push the kiddie to the launderette;  
Watch rain fill up the wobbles in the wet.

A fairly dense but quiet use of sound patterning, with **internal** rhyme and a caesura marking the change in rhythm after *unwillingly*:

It **rained** the **day** that **we** commemor**ate**  
Somew**hat** un**willingly** | this **wet** June **day**.

Sound repetition can be **far-spaced**, or **close**, depending on the work it has to do (in British, not American pronunciation):

were to**ssed**

Into the dark grey sky above, and that **k**een wind  
Made us **con**temp**o**rary to a world whose **co**st

**W**as **no**t for **us** to **sen**se. It's hard for **us**  
Who interceded **th**ings **thou**ght **fo**r the best,  
**C**ooperated, were not **co**vetous,

And so on. Many more will be obvious, but not so much as here:

## On a Photograph by Sarah Moon

The girl, clothing by a casement window, holds  
It. Click. The lens collects the light that bathes  
Her limbs so splendidly in blazing golds.  
Who knows what blemishes the sunlight swathes

In bars of brightness or of shade? Who cares?  
We see too little, there's no privacy,  
Are matters agent with the contract squares.  
For us the camera's clouding alchemy

Transmutes to generic a jaded view  
Of breasts and bodies and dark hair. And yet  
How artfully beguiling is this ingénue,  
How beautiful in truth. Curious, isn't it, that

More than a girl's fastidiousness in make-  
Up is the magic of this colour plate?

Why should we want to write anything so bombastic? Two reasons:

1. To vary the pace. The short fragments of the opening lines broaden into the long rhythms of:

For us the camera's clouding alchemy

Transmutes to generic a jaded view  
Of breasts and bodies and dark hair. And yet  
How artfully beguiling is this ingénue,  
How beautiful in truth.

and conclude in the hurried:

Curious, isn't it, that

More than a girl's fastidiousness in make-  
Up is the magic of this colour plate?

2. The dense sound patterning of, and centrally placed caesurae:

**M**ore than a girl's | fastidi**ousness** in **m**ake-  
Up is the **m**agic | of thi**s** colour plate?

sounds highly artificial, as indeed is the carefully controlled eroticism of Sarah Moon's work.

## Dartmoor

Sonnets are formal pieces, perhaps too formal for today's society. What can we do to make them sound more contemporary, closer to the reigning orthodoxy of free verse? One approach is to clip the syllables:

### Dartmoor

Talk, turn up the radio as you pass  
Uplands of heathery, half-stifled screams.  
Sun blushes into the wayside grass;  
Pebbles flit quietly in the headlong streams.

In none of them, mysteries — not in traces  
Of sheep's wool on wire, in rabbit's bones.

Not even in winds, though their eddies turn faces  
Inward at encampments and in standing stones.

The heather roots thickly. The rivulet fills  
Eventually the pools now as black as jet.  
Spattering the blue a hawk swoops and spills.  
Incessantly, the birdsongs chip at granite.

Shadows of clouds graze the far hills whence  
Comes a patterning of white, pure white on the silence.

In strict iambic, the opening lines would run:

Now **listen to** the **radio as** you **pass**  
The **uplands of** **heathery**, half-**stifled screams**.  
The **sun** is **blushing in** the **wayside grass**;  
And **quietly pebbles flit** in **headlong streams**.

Correct, but intolerably boring. The menace disappears, and we could achieve none of the necessary phrasing in such flat-footed lines. None of this:

1. Opening spondees:

**Tá**lk, **tù**rn **ú**p the **rá**dio **ás** you **pá**ss

**Sún** **blú**shes **í**ntò the **wá**y-side **grá**ss;

2. Trochaic inversion:

**Sp**attering the **blue** | a **hawk swoops** and **spills**.

**In**ward at en**camp**ments **and** in **stand**ing **stones**.

3. A varying or wavering stress pattern:

**Sh**adows of **clouds** | **graze** the **far** hills | **whence**  
**Comes** a **patter**ning of **white** | pure **white** | on the **silence**.

4. Sound patterning:

Uplands of hea**th**ery, half-**f**-stif**l**ed screams.  
**S**un bl**u**shes into the wayside **gr**ass;

**In**ward **a**t **e**nc**a**mp**m**en**t**s **a**nd **i**n **s**t**a**nd**i**ng **s**ton**e**s.

The hea**th**er **r**oots **th**ickly. The **r**ivulet **f**ills

5. Parallelism:

**In none of them**, mysteries — not in traces  
Of sheep's wool on wire, in rabbit's bones.  
**Not even in winds**, though their eddies turn faces

6. Masculine/feminine rhyme:

Shadows of clouds graze the far hills **whence**  
Comes a patterning of white, pure white on the **silence**.

And a second approach is to use pararhyme rather than strict rhyme. The syllables can again be clipped, but the sense is more conveyed by images:

## Warwick Castle

Heavy the smell of river, the prevailing seasons  
Of drift and of rottenness, a running on.  
Weaker than sun through a stilled translucence  
Of water, the Renaissance here was thinly-borne.

Opening from their calyxes the swans preen  
Improbably on the water and dissolve.  
The gunmetal colours are flurried, levelled; soon  
There is nothing but stillness where moorhens delve.

All this was Offa's, Warwick's, the middle kingdom:  
Land of fat willows, slow streams, unaccountable crops.  
Dowager, the river gathers its itinerants in,  
No archers but clouds on the embattled steps.

A dream, just a dream, with no more semblance  
To Italy than willows on the water's blaze.

The sonnet form has almost disappeared: the lines end in a faint echo of rhyme, and the phrasing runs against the stanza pattern.

Heavy the smell of river | the prevailing seasons a  
Of drift and of rottenness | a running on. || b  
Weaker than sun through the stilled translucence a  
Of water | the Renaissance here was thinly-born. b

Opening from their calyxes the swans preen c  
Improbably on the water and dissolve. | d  
The gunmetal colours are flurried | levelled | soon c  
There is nothing but stillness | where moorhens delve. || d

All this was Offa's | Warwick's | the middle kingdom: | e  
Land of fat willows | slow streams | unaccountable crops. || f  
Dowager | the river gathers its itinerants in | e  
No archers but clouds on the embattled steps. || f

A dream | just a dream | with no more semblance g  
To Italy than willows on the water's blaze. || g

# 11. THE LYRIC

As the name suggests, lyrics have a 'singing' quality about the verse, with the vowels open and melodious and the rhymes turning the pieces neatly about their themes.

## 11.1. CHARACTERISTICS

First some examples:

Thomas Carew

Ask me no more where Jove bestows,  
When June is past, the fading rose ;  
For in your beauty's orient deep  
These flowers, as in their causes, sleep.

Ask me no more whither do stray  
The golden atoms of the day ;  
For in pure love heaven did prepare  
Those powders to enrich your hair. {1}

William Collins

How sleep the brave, who sink to rest,  
By all their country's wishes blest!  
When Spring, with dewy fingers cold,  
Returns to deck their hallow'd mould,  
She there shall dress a sweeter sod  
Than Fancy's feet have ever trod.  
By fairy hands their knell is rung,  
There Honour comes, a pilgrim gray,  
To bless the turf that wraps their clay;  
And Freedom shall awhile repair,  
To dwell, a weeping hermit, there. {2}

Robbie Burns

Ye banks and braes o' bonny Doon,  
How can ye bloom sae fresh and fair?  
How can ye chant, ye little birds,  
And I sae weary fu' o' care!  
Thou'll break my heart, thou warbling bird,  
That wantons thro' the flowering thorn!

Thou minds me o' departed joys,  
Departed never to return. {3}.

George Gordon Noel, Lord Byron

So, we'll go no more a roving  
So late into the night,  
though the heart be still as loving,  
And the moon be still as bright.

For the sword outwears its sheath,  
And the soul wears out the breast,  
And the heart must pause to breathe  
And love itself have rest.

Though the night was made for loving,  
And the day returns too soon,  
Yet we'll go no more a-roving  
By the light of the moon. {4}

Ralph Hodgson

Time, you old gipsy man,  
Will you not stay,  
Put up your caravan  
Just for one day?

All things I'll give you  
Will you be my guest,  
Bells for your jennet  
Of silver the best,

Goldsmiths shall beat you  
A great golden ring,  
Peacocks shall bow to you,

Little boys sing.  
Oh, and sweet girls will  
Festoon you with may,  
Time, you old gipsy,  
Why hasten away? {5}

## 11.2. ANALYSING THE MODERN LYRIC

Though the lyric is traditionally a singing 'piece', and strongly personal, it takes very different forms in modern poetry, where a prose sense is an essential part of its shaping. Philip Larkin, an important member of 'The Movement'

group, {6} interpolated prose reading and metrical pointing to make poetry out of wry scraps of contemporary life.

## Philip Larkin: Money

*Money* is not among his best work, but does lead us into Larkin's art. First and last stanzas of the poem: {7}

Quarterly, is it, money reproaches me:  
'Why do you let me lie here wastefully?  
I am all you never had of goods and sex.  
You could get them still by writing a few cheques.'

I listen to money singing. It's like looking down  
From long French windows at a provincial town,  
The slums, the canal, the churches ornate and mad  
In the evening sun. It is intensely sad.

We have to admit the obvious: the earlier stanzas are doggerel. The aabb rhyme scheme is not a helpful one for quatrains, but handles easily enough. Larkin's lumpiness is easily removed:

Quarterly, the money looks at me.  
'Why do you let me lie here wastefully?  
I'm all you never had of goods or sex  
Why don't you get them? Write some cheques.'

That's what they do, the others, using theirs.  
I mean they certainly don't leave it stashed upstairs:  
The cottage in the country, second wife:  
Yes, money has a lot to do with life.

In fact it's not difficult to enquire  
How the poor old codgers will retire  
To settle in stages to the 'Plan D' grave:  
Straggle of mourners, the last, brisk shave.

Money is sometimes like our looking down  
From long French windows on some provincial town,  
On slums, canal, the churches, ornate and mad:  
Sun bright at evening, but immensely sad.

But for the better? Compare the two renderings:

I listen to money singing. It's like looking down  
From long French windows at a provincial town,  
The slums, the canal, the churches ornate and mad  
In the evening sun. It is intensely sad.

Money I think is sometimes like looking down  
From long French windows on a provincial town,

The slums, the canal, the churches, ornate and mad:  
Bright sun in the evening, but immensely sad.

The *I listen* and *It is* of Larkin's poke through the metre, and bring us up short. Ours is smoother, but it's missed something.

Larkin used a hybrid style between verse and prose, sometimes putting commonplace thoughts in commonplace language, and then slipping into an iambic verse for more serious reflections. Here are the first and last stanzas of one of his best-known poems: {8}

From *Church Going*

Once I am sure there's nothing going on  
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.  
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,  
And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut  
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff  
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;  
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,  
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off  
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence.

A serious house on serious earth it is,  
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,  
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.  
And that much never can be obsolete,  
Since someone will forever be surprising  
A hunger in himself to be more serious,  
And gravitating with it to this ground,  
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,  
If only that so many dead lie round.

From *Church Going* by Philip Larkin. The opening lines can be read:

Once **I** am **sure** | there's **nothing going on**  
I **step inside** || **letting** the **door** thud **shut**.

But the stresses are not clearly marked, the speech rhythms imposing something more like:

**Once** I am **sure** there's **nothing going on**  
I **step inside** | **letting** the **door thud shut**.

Making its very ordinariness seem sincerity:

Once I am sure there's nothing going on, I step inside, letting the door thud shut.

Another church: matting, seats, and stone and little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut for Sunday, brownish now. Some brass and stuff up at the holy



end; the small neat organ; and a tense, musty, unignorable silence,  
brewed God knows how long.

Hatless, I take off my cycle-clips in awkward reverence.

Ordinary prose, or almost so, since *awkward reverence* is preparing us for the third stanza, which starts:

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,  
And always end much at a loss like this,

And by the final stanza the language is much more elevated — *blent, robed in destinies, hunger in himself, gravitating. . . ground, . wise in, dead lie round* — and the assiduous student of rhetoric could identify: {9}

Parenthesis: he once heard

Parallelism: In whose *blent* air all our compulsions *meet*

Anaphora : A *serious* house on *serious* earth

Anadiplosis: to be more *serious*

Procatalepsis: Are recognized

Litotes: proper to grow wise in

Metabasis: And that much never can be obsolete

Amplification: Since someone will forever . .

Metanoia: If only that so many dead lie round

Metaphor: *robed* as *destinies*.

Personification: A *hunger* in himself to be more serious

Hyperbaton: earth it is

Pleonasm: gravitating with it to this ground

Alliteration: And *gravitating* with it to this *ground*

Parataxis: If only that so many dead lie round.

Climax: If only that so many dead lie round

From an everyday beginning — though with some rhetoric {10} — the poem moves to studied exactness, the more striking because of the 'artless' flatlands from which it rises. Only they're not artless, but a conscious strategy.

The concluding stanza of the first poem mentions money singing, adds some bald observations, and ends with *It is intensely sad*. Nothing has really prepared us for *I listen to money singing*: it hasn't in the speaker's life, and doesn't in the decaying landscape around, unless heartlessly so on the lack of investment. Where *Church Going* rose to the memorable, this poem bites the matter off with *It is intensely sad*, which echoes the singing, and relates back to a repressed life. A climax in reverse, deepened by the banality of the language and metrical expression.

### 11.3. WRITING THE MODERN LYRIC

So, if we want to write like Larkin — and Larkinland is heavily protected — we should remember that, as Christopher Ricks notes, {11} Larkin was adept at producing lines that could be read variously. In this last section of *An Arundel Tomb* {12}

Time has transfigures them into  
Untruth. The stone fidelity  
They hardly meant has come to be  
Their final blazon, and to prove  
Our almost-instinct almost true:  
What will survive of us is love.

we can make a Classical interpretation by stressing *survive* as *What will **sur-vive** of us is love*, or Romantic as *What will survive of **us** is love*. Both the general and the personal operate throughout the poem, and are fused in this last ambivalence, the couple on the tomb speaking in a way that is still relevant. So:

You are smiling. Or you will be soon.  
The clock goes forward; the longed-for boon  
Of life, which is love, shows a daytime face  
Waiting for something in the amount space.

Which you will jot down later, still better off  
Despite clothes in the shower, nighttime cough.  
First it's abstinence, then demands gets worse,  
Miss November changing to a stockinged nurse.

Still, whatever you may think of sex,  
Payback will arrive, in he who checks  
She's taking her medicine, is not gardening mad,  
With an ambulance laid on if things look bad

From an existence which, as everyone says,  
Is served to the full in unstinting 'yes',  
Except, coddled or caring, you may not know  
Which one had the other poor sod in tow.

We have used some of Larkin's techniques in our rendering. The submerged explosion of ambivalence in *had the other poor sod in tow*. The self-deprecating *he who checks*. The puns: *changing into*, *laid on*. The rueful humour: *Miss November*. The colloquial *Or you will be soon* that passes by degree into the serious: *Except, coddled or caring*. It is still a world of small hopes, deceptions and perplexities, but without Larkin's glum tone.

And also too glib, the verse not engaging with the content. We need a bolshier voice, more 'ordinariness' at the beginning, and an injection of that 'tenderly nursed sense of defeat'. {13}

Special. The ordinary sex-bitch won't do.  
 You have to like her. She must like you.  
 And when you get it wrong you pay. A big drop,  
 Like falling off a high building: you never stop.

So you weigh it up: that mutt from Staines,  
 With her comical singing, farts, varicose veins,  
 Floods in the bathroom, great piles of shoes,  
 And being together, always, the two by twos.

And know in the end it's not love or sex  
 But the hope of it, the undrawn cheques  
 On the blonde who smiled that time at hockey,  
 An endlessly remembered day spent lucky.

Enough for a lifetime of keeping mum, or face  
 What is always differing or another place —  
 Which you don't get used to, though kept in tow  
 Are lives still perfectly failing, for all you know.

For what it's worth, I would think the second is the better poem, though still not close to Larkin. Writing with another's techniques will not reproduce the original if we use them according to our own outlook and personality, but that itself may be an answer to charges of plagiarism.

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## 12. HEROIC VERSE AND RHYMING COUPLETS

Rhyming couplets have been used since Chaucer's time, but in its 200 year reign — twice that of Modernism — the heroic couplet added extra features: {1} {2} {3}

### 12.1. CHARACTERISTICS

Rhyming couplets often have these features:

1. Sentence structure conforming to the metrical pattern, giving an air of neat finality.

Here hills and vales, the woodland and the plain,  
Here earth and water, seem to strive again;  
Not Chaos like together crush'd and bruis'd,  
But as the world, harmoniously confus'd: {4}

2. Lines individually balanced, usually with a pronounced caesura.

Made drunk with honour | and debauched with praise. {5}

3. An epigrammatic neatness.

True wit is nature to advantage dressed —  
What oft is thought but ne'er so well expressed! {6}

4. End-stopping of lines, enjambment unimportant or absent.

New sorrow rises as the day returns,  
A sister sickens, or a daughter mourns.  
Now kindred merit fills the sable bier,  
Now lacerated friendship claims a tear.  
Year chases year, decay pursues decay,  
Still drops some joy from withering life away; {7}

5. Important words stressed at the line ends.

Lo! thy dread Empire, Chaos! is restor'd;  
Light dies before thy uncreating word:  
Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall;  
And Universal Darkness buries All. {8}

6. Polysyllabic words, often latinized and abstract, making for brevity.

Ill fares the land, to hast'ning ills a prey,  
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay: {9}

To achieve point and interest, its better writers continually:

7. Varied the pace with foot substitution, cadence and sound patterning.

Shut, shut the door, good John! fatigu'd, I said:  
Tie up the knocker, say I'm sick, I'm dead.  
The Dog-star rages! nay 'tis past a doubt,  
All Bedlam, or Parnassus, is let out:  
Fire in each eye, and papers in each hand,  
They rave, recite, and madden round the land; {10}

8. Employed triplets in place of couplets at strategic points.

How could she say what pleasures were around?  
But she was certain many might be found.'  
'Would she some seaport, Weymouth, Scarborough, grace?' -  
'He knew she hated every watering-place.'  
'The town?' - 'What! now 'twas empty, joyless, dull?'  
'In winter?' - 'No; she liked it worse when full.'  
She talk'd of building - 'Would she plan a room?' -  
'No! she could live, as he desired, in gloom.'  
'Call then our friends and neighbours.' - 'He might call,  
And they might come and fill his ugly hall;  
A noisy vulgar set, he knew she scorn'd them all.' {11}

9. Grouped the couplets into larger units.

A man so various that he seemed to be  
Not one but all mankind's epitome.  
Stiff in opinions, always in the wrong;  
Was everything in starts and nothing long:  
But, in the course of one revolving moon,  
Was chemist, statesman, fiddler and buffoon. {5}

10. Employed parentheses within the couplet itself.

Man is a puppet, and this world a show;  
Their old dull follies, old dull fools pursue,  
And vice in nothing, but in mode, is new;  
He ---- a lord (now fair befall that pride,  
He lived a villain, but a lord he died) {12}

11. Varied the placing of the caesura.

Business or vain amusement, | care or mirth,  
Divide the frail | inhabitants of earth.  
Is duty a mere sport, | or an employ?  
Life an entrusted talent, | or a toy?  
Is there, | as reason, conscience, scripture, say,  
Cause to provide | for a great future day,  
When, | earth's assigned duration at an end,  
Men shall be summon'd | and the dead attend? {13}

12. Made lines with only three or four effective stresses by letting the ictus fall on unimportant words.

The **trumpet** — **will** it **sound**? the **curtain rise**? (5)  
 And **show** th'**august** **tribunal** of the **skies**, (4)  
 When **no** pre**varication** **shall avail**, (4)  
 Where **eloquence** and **artifice** shall **fail**, (3)  
 The **pride** of **arrogant** **distinctions** **fall**, (4)  
 And **conscience** and our **conduct** **judge** us **all**? (4) {13}

13. Surprised with unexpected words or word order.

Shimei,— whose youth did early promise bring  
 Of zeal to God, and hatred to his king,—  
 Did wisely from expensive sins refrain,  
 And never broke the Sabbath but for gain: {5}

William Cooper was wrong when he said these skills:

Made poetry a mere mechanic art  
 And ev'ry warbler has his tune by heart. {14}

In fact they made a compact, content-rich verse capable of taking a high polish without losing the personal touch, sometimes able to 'snatch a grace beyond the reach of art'. {15}

## 12.2. WORKING WITH COUPLETS

Among William Cowper's descriptions of scenery is this piece of blank verse: quiet, meditative, acutely perceived: {16}

From *A Winter Walk at Noon*

No noise is here, or none that hinders thought:  
 The redbreast warbles still, but is content  
 With slender notes and more than half suppressed.  
 Pleased with his solitude, and flitting light  
 From spray to spray, where'er he rests he shakes  
 From many a twig the pendant drops of ice,  
 That tinkle in the withered leaves below.  
 Stillness, accompanied with sounds so soft,  
 Charms more than silence. Meditation here  
 May think down hours to moments. Here the heart  
 May give an useful lesson to the head,  
 And learning wiser grow without his books. {16}

Clearly different is Alexander Pope's *Rape of the Lock*: witty, minutely polished and glittering with the rhetorician's art:

From *The Rape of the Lock*

Sol thro' white curtains shot a tim'rous ray,  
 And op'd those eyes that must eclipse the day;  
 Now lap-dogs give themselves the rousing shake,  
 And sleepless lovers, just at twelve, awake:  
 Thrice rung the bell, the slipper knock'd the ground,  
 And the press'd watch return'd a silver sound.  
 Belinda still her downy pillow press'd,  
 Her guardian sylph prolong'd the balmy rest:  
 'Twas he had summon'd to her silent bed  
 The morning dream that hover'd o'er her head;  
 A youth more glitt'ring than a birthnight beau,  
 (That ev'n in slumber caus'd her cheek to glow)  
 Seem'd to her ear his winning lips to lay,  
 And thus in whispers said, or seem'd to say.  
 'Fairest of mortals, thou distinguish'd care  
 Of thousand bright inhabitants of air!  
 If e'er one vision touch'd thy infant thought,  
 Of all the nurse and all the priest have taught,  
 Of airy elves by moonlight shadows seen,  
 The silver token, and the circled green,  
 Or virgins visited by angel pow'rs,  
 With golden crowns and wreaths of heav'nly flow'rs,  
 Hear and believe! thy own importance know,  
 Nor bound thy narrow views to things below.  
 Some secret truths from learned pride conceal'd,  
 To maids alone and children are reveal'd: {17}

Suppose we rewrite the Cowper passage in the style of Pope, which will:

1. Help us appreciate the merits of both.
2. Show why the heroic couplet was gradually dropped by Romantic poets.
3. Teach techniques still useful in contemporary verse.

### First Rendering

As the skills displayed by either passage would take many pages to describe, let's plunge straight into the rewriting, pausing later to analyse results. The first rewriting is for the rhymes, the aa bb cc of heroic verse. We do that quickly, aiming for a minimum of change:

No noise is here, or none that hinders thought.  
 The redbreast warbles still but holds a court  
 In slender notes and more than half suppressed:  
 Pleased with his solitude, he flits to rest  
 Lightly from spray to spray: the shakes entice



Down from twigs the pendant drops of ice,  
 To tinkle in the withered leaves below.  
 Stillness accompanied by sounds so low  
 Charms more than silence. Meditation's part  
 Is hours thought down to moments. Here the heart  
 May give a useful lesson to the head  
 And learning be the wiser left unread.

No: content is hardly improved with *holds a court, entice, so low, Meditation's part*. The original was better observed and expressed. More rearrangement is needed:

What noise is here but inwardly has lent  
 Notes to the redbreast warbling, still content  
 With slender pipings more than half suppressed.  
 Pleased with his solitude, he flits to rest  
 Lightly from spray to spray and at each stop  
 Shakes down from twigs each icy pendant drop  
 To tinkle in the withered leaves below.  
 Silence, accompanied with sounds, must go  
 From softness into stillness. Meditation here  
 May think down hours to moments, and endear  
 All that the heart has learnt from reason's looks,  
 And reading grow the wiser less its books.

When we escape some of the previous nonsense, but at a cost. Compare.

Shakes **down** from **twigs** each icy **pendant drop**

With:

From **ma**n a **twig** the **pendant drops of ice**,

The first is heavy, with its alliteration in *d*, and the compressed phrase *icy pendant drop*. The second skips along with its light assonance in **o** and **e**, the **i** of twig completed with **i** of ice, and the unattractive *twig* suppressed by being preceded by two unstressed syllables.

And there is a much higher price in terms of what Pope would have accepted. First the *enjambment*, the flow of sense from one line to the next:

What noise is here but inwardly has lent  
 Its notes to the redbreast warbling, | still content  
 With slender pipings more than half suppressed. ||  
 Pleased with his solitude, | he flits to rest ||  
 Lightly from spray to spray | and at each stop  
 Shakes down from twigs each icy pendant drop |  
 To tinkle in the withered leaves below. ||  
 Silence, | accompanied with sounds, | must go

From softness into stillness. || Meditation here  
 May think down hours to moments, | and endear  
 All that the heart has learnt from reason's looks, |  
 And reading grow the wiser less its books. ||

Very few of the lines have an end-stopped finality. Still less is the caesura placed as Pope would have wished (line ends give the number of syllables before the caesura):

1. What noise is here | but inwardly has lent 4
2. Its notes to the redbreast warbling | still content 8
3. With slender pipings | more than half suppressed. 5
4. Pleased with his solitude | he flits to rest 6
5. Lightly from spray to spray | and at each stop 6
6. Shakes down from twigs | each icy pendant drop 4
7. To tinkle in | the withered leaves below. 4
8. Silence | accompanied with sounds must go 2
9. From softness into stillness | Meditation here 6
10. May think down hours to moments | and endear 7
11. All that the heart has learnt | from reason's looks, 6
12. And reading grow the wiser | less its books. 6

Pope's preferences have reason. To take the phrasing of the first few lines of our *Rape of the Lock* snippet:

1. Sol thro' white curtains | shot a tim'rous ray, 5
2. And op'd those eyes | that must eclipse the day; 4
3. Now lapdogs give themselves | the rousing shake, 6
4. And sleepless lovers | just at twelve, awake: 5
5. Thrice rung the bell | the slipper knock'd the ground, 4
6. And the press'd watch | return'd a silver sound. 4

We note not only how medial is the caesura, but that it divides the line into units where additional effects are possible. In all these lines there is a parallelism, plus:

1. sly humour with *tim'rous* (not to wake Belinda)
2. homage of exaggeration
3. contrast of *lapdogs* with *rousing*
4. more sly humour with *sleepless* and *twelve*
5. imperiousness of *Thrice rung the bell* mocked with *slipper*
6. tinkling intimacy of *press'd* followed by *silver sound*.

Note also how lines 3 and 4 are grouped (lovers are also kept animals), as are lines 5 and 6 (a comment on 'upstairs and downstairs' life). This is Pope in his early mastery, affectionately commenting on society's foibles.

These effects are more limited in our rendering, occurring only in lines 1, 3, 6, 11 and 12, where we have left ourselves segments of a decent size. Cowper

by contrast — who also wrote excellent heroic couplets — doesn't make this mistake, even in his blank verse:

1. No noise is here | or none that hinders thought: 4
2. The redbreast warbles still | but is content 6
3. With slender notes | and more than half suppressed. 4
4. Pleased with his solitude | and flitting light 7
5. From spray to spray | where'er he rests he shakes 4
6. From many a twig | the pendant drops of ice, 6
7. That tinkle in | the withered leaves below. 4
8. Stillness | accompanied with sounds so soft, 2
9. Charms more than silence | Meditation here 5
10. May think down hours to moments | Here the heart 7
11. May give an useful lesson | to the head, 7
12. And learning wiser grow | without his books. 5

His caesura placings (as generally in his heroic couplets) have a wider range than Pope's, but still allow some additional effects in all lines except 7. Pope's verse improves even further once the sylphs appear, as should be clear on reading further in our snippet, but it's now time to try again.

## Second Rendering

We want more work done by the individual segments: parallelism or antithesis. So:

1. No noise is here | but what the sense has lent 4
2. To winter's solitude | and deep content. 6
3. The warbling redbreast | seems now overdressed 5
4. But in his flight | from pendant spray to rest, 4
5. Makes each alighting | but a sift of snow, 4
6. With icicles to tinkle | on the ground below 6
7. Thin-matted now in leaves. | Each flurry here 6
8. Extracts from stillness | what the straining ear 5
9. Can hardly reach in thought. | The hours that pass 6
10. Compressed to moments | in the frosted glass 4
11. Of season's fashion | are fair nature's art 5
12. To teach a humbling lesson | to the heart. 7

The concluding couplet is neat, but *overdressed* and nature personified as a fashionable creature? And note how weak is *Thin-matted now in leaves*: it's not the matting that Cowper is concerned with, but the quietness that allows us to hear the icicles falling on the matted leaves. We have also lost the effective *Meditation here / May think down hours to moments*.

If we now look at an early piece of Pope's, *Windsor Forest* {18} we see, first, how much stricter is the verse: heavily end-stopped, no sentences ending mid-line:

Thou too, great father | of the British floods!  
 With joyful pride | survey'st our lofty woods;  
 Where tow'ring oaks | their spreading honours rear,  
 And future navies | on thy shores appear.  
 Not Neptune's self | from all his streams receives  
 A wealthier tribute, | than to thine he gives.  
 No seas so rich, | so gay no banks appear,  
 No lake so gentle, | and no spring so clear.  
 Not fabled Po | more swells the poet's lays,  
 While thro' the skies | his shining current strays,  
 Than thine, which visits | Windsor's fam'd abodes,  
 To grace the mansion | of our earthly Gods:  
 Nor all his stars | a brighter lustre show,  
 Than the fair nymphs | that grace thy side below:  
 Here Jove himself, | subdu'd by beauty still,  
 Might change Olympus | for a nobler hill.

And, second, that he is not interested in nature per se, but in what nature can teach us by example or analogy. *Windsor Forest* is the prop on which to hang various flattering comparisons of Britain with a classical world that was real to his contemporaries. Rich seas, clear springs, gentle lakes — the epithets were rather conventional, though the reference was wide, and meaning could be compressed into lines of epigrammatic clarity.

### Third Rendering

So, moving the caesura to a more central position, and playing off the segments more, we get something a little closer to Pope — though still without that glittering polish:

1. No noise is here | but what the sense has lent    4
2. To winter's solitude | and deep content.    6
3. The redbreast's warbles here | are half suppressed    6
4. That in his flight | from pendant rest to rest,    4
5. Turns each alighting | to a sift of snow    5
6. With icicles tinkling | on dead leaves below.    6
7. The sounds once gathered | into softness here    5
8. Charm more than silence, | and the listening ear    5
9. Slow meditating | through the hours that pass    5
10. Shrinks all to moments | and the reading glass    5
11. Extracts from stillness | what is nature's art    5
12. To take a humbling lesson | to the heart.    7

## 12.3. SHIFT TO ROMANTICISM

*Windsor Forest* is a little grandiose for our taste, and was certainly not the means to explore what interested the Romantics, who did not wish to be pre-

cise, deal in public verities, or debate on the political circuit. Their solutions were to:

1. Remove rhyme altogether and write blank verse.

2. Reduce the importance of rhyme by:

making the lines more run-on

I wander thro' each charter'd street,  
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,  
And mark in every face I meet  
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,  
In every Infants cry of fear,  
In every voice, in every ban,  
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear. {19}

mixing masculine and feminine rhymes

Young companies nimbly began dancing  
To the swift treble pipe, and humming string.  
Aye, those fair living forms swam heavenly  
To tunes forgotten — out of memory: {20}

making it a decorative feature, a pleasing echo only

A ship is floating in the harbour now,  
A wind is hovering o'er the mountain's brow;  
There is a path on the sea's azure floor,  
No keel has ever plough'd that path before;  
The halcyons brood around the foamless isles;  
The treacherous Ocean has forsworn its wiles; {21}

'Loose versification and Cockney rhymes' were what contemporaries called these early attempts.

3. Shade the meaning of words by employing unusual epithets, nouns and then whole clauses that drew on increasingly vague, personal and private reference: a strategy that led from Romanticism to Symbolism and finally to Modernism and Postmodernism.

Allusion was also a strategy of Pope's in drawing on the verse of Dryden and Milton, {22} but Augustan verse is public verse, and the reference was clearer.

## 12.4. MODERN EXAMPLES

No one is today writing heroic couplets in the manner of Pope or Dryden, except in affectionate pastiche, as in this example by A.D. Hope:

From *Dunciad Minor*

First of the few for whom the Muse finds space,  
 See Wilson Knight advance and take his place.  
 A Double Boiler fixed on fiery wheels,  
 Hisses hysteric or ecstatic squeals;  
 He takes a play, The Tempest, from his poke,  
 Kisses the boards and drops it in the smoke.  
 The smoke redoubles and the cauldron roars;  
 At length he turns a cock and out there pours  
 The play - Ah, no! it cannot be the play  
 To myth and symbolism boiled away;  
 Where the plot, the actors and the stage? {23}

But certain aspects continue in twentieth-century poetry. Donald Davie, an admirer of Augustan verse, could achieve an easy delivery with end-stopped lines by varying the pace and enjambment:

From *Remembering the 'Thirties*

Hearing one saga, we enact the next.  
 We please our elders when we sit enthralled;  
 But then they're puzzled; and at last they're vexed  
 To have their youth so avidly recalled.

It dawns upon the veterans after all  
 That what for them were agonies, for us  
 Are high-brow thrillers, though historical;  
 And all their feats quite strictly fabulous. {24}

In general, the devices employed by the heroic couplet are still the staple of verse writing. Philip Larkin is one of the Moderns, but note the noun and *epithet* in this snippet from *An Arundel Tomb*: {25}

From *An Arundel Tomb*

Side by side, their faces blurred,  
 The earl and countess lie in stone,  
 Their *proper* habits *vaguely* shown  
 As *jointed* armour, *stiffened* pleat,  
 And that faint hint of the absurd -  
 The little dogs under their feet.

Such plainness of the pre-baroque  
 Hardly involves the eye, until

It meets his left-hand gauntlet, still  
 Clasped empty in the other; and  
 One sees, with a sharp tender shock,  
 His hand withdrawn, holding her hand.

From *An Arundel Tomb* by Philip Larkin.

The device is very simple here, and not continued — the metre then changing to *And that **faint hint of the absurd*** and then to the prose rhythm of *The **little dogs under their feet*** — but effective in its way: rewriting makes the lines poorer:

Side by side, their faces blurred,  
 The earl and countess lie in stone,  
 Their *stiffened* habits *vaguely* shown  
 As *jointed* armour, *proper* pleat,

## 12.5. RHYMED 'BLANK VERSE'

Blank verse is not simply unrhymed pentameters: an important ingredient is the verse structure, the way the sense is carried from line to line. Those lines can be rhymed without the enjambment being lost. Here is Richard Wilbur's translation of the opening lines of Racine's *Phèdre*: Hippolytus is speaking: {27}

No, dear Theramenes, I've too long delayed  
 In pleasant Troezebe; my decision's made.  
 I'm off; in my anxiety, I commence  
 To tax myself with shameful indolence.  
 My father has been gone six months or more,  
 And yet I do not know what distant shore  
 Now hides him, or what trials he now may bear.

The French is:

Le dessein en est pris, je pars, cher Théràmène,  
 Et quitte le séjour de l'aimable Trézène.  
 Dans le doute mortel où je suis agité,  
 Je commence à rougir de mon oisiveté.  
 Depuis plus de six mois éloigné de mon père,  
 J'ignore le destin d'une tête si chère ;  
 J'ignore jusqu'aux lieux qui le peuvent cacher.

Which can be rendered with more ease and force by letting the meaning overflow the line ends, though these be still marked by rhyme:

I leave, Theramenes: my course is set.  
 No more in pleasant Troezen will I let  
 myself be agitated by unease.  
 I start to blush at idleness that sees

my father's six month's leaving us has led  
to unknown destinies for that dear head  
in places distances still serve to hide. {26}

As written today, rhymed couplets can be very far from the measured politeness of Augustan verse. These lines, a translation from Racine's *Phèdre* (Act IV Scene 6, 1284-94) are mostly end-stopped, but build up to a overwhelming climax as the ruined queen realizes her approaching end.

For what, my father, do these horrors yearn  
that now I see you drop that fearful urn?  
What further punishments can you devise  
than butchery by which your bloodline dies?  
Forgive me that I let a god in wild  
1290. reprisal sow her fury through the child.  
Never the once to what it sought for came  
this heart, but sadness only, and to shame.  
Phaedra in sighs, with which her path was rife,  
in agonies gives back a painful life. {26}

Here is the phrasing:

For what, | my father, | do these horrors yearn 113  
that now I see you drop that fearful urn? | 5  
What further punishments | can you devise 32  
than butchery | by which your bloodline dies? 23  
Forgive me that I let a god in wild | 5 enjambed  
1290. reprisal | sow her fury through the child. 14  
Never the once | to what it sought for | came 221 enjambed  
this heart, | but sadness only, | and to shame. 122  
Phaedra in sighs, | with which her path was rife, 23  
in agonies | gives back | a painful life. 212

Note also how line 1291 is largely regular in metre, but stretched out, inverted in its word order and ending with a lifting cadence

**Ne** ver | the **once** | to **what** | it **sought** | for **came** 221

is followed by the enjambed and falling

this **heart**, | but **sad** |ness **on** | ly, **and** | to **shame**. 122

to express the queen's devastating disappointment with life. Racine varies his lines with remarkable subtlety within the strict alexandrine, and similar devices are available to the English rhymed couplet. The lines draw their grandeur by being free of natural speech rhythms and diction.



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## 13. OTHER FORMS

Poems take many forms, particularly today, but here are some analyses of the more common.

### 13.1. ODE

We analyse a formal, eighteenth century poem to see what poetry always needs to do: build lines into an effective whole.

#### The Bard

Nothing could be more dead than the ode today, surely, with its elevated tone and conspicuous artifice:

##### The Bard

'Cold is Cadwallo's tongue,  
 That hush'd the stormy main;  
 Brave Urien sleeps upon his craggy bed:  
 Mountains, ye mourn in vain  
 Modred, whose magic song  
 Made huge Plinlimmon bow his cloud-topp'd head.  
 On dreary Arvon's shore they lie,  
 Smear'd with gore, and ghastly pale:  
 Far, far aloof th' affrighted ravens sail;  
 The famish'd eagle screams, and passes by.  
 Dear lost companions of my tuneful art,  
 Dear, as the light that visits these sad eyes,  
 Dear, as the ruddy drops that warm my heart,  
 Ye died amidst your dying country's cries--  
 No more I weep. They do not sleep.  
 On yonder cliffs, a grisly band,  
 I see them sit, they linger yet,  
 Avengers of their native land:  
 With me in dreadful harmony they join,  
 And weave with bloody hands the tissue of thy line:— {1}

But if we put aside prejudices to this style of poetry today, and just listen to the lines, we find them surprisingly good. The phrasing and imagery is conventional, but the sense is conveyed with admirable clarity. The ictus can fall irregularly but stresses the important words:

'**Cold** is Cad**wallo's tongue**,  
 That **hush'd** the **stormy main**;

The alliteration is not decorative, but again emphasizes what is important:

**Brave** Urien sleeps upon his craggy **bed**  
 Made **huge** Plinlimmon bow his cloud-topp'd **head**.

Even the *ms* here underline what we can accept: that the mountains look mournful, and that Modred had magic powers. This is not a personal narrative, but a retelling of a popular story (which Dr. Johnson thought unfit for such poetry {2}).

**M**ountains, ye **m**ourn in vain  
**M**odred, whose **m**agic song

Thomas Gray (1716-1771) {3} was an extraordinarily learned man, and the intelligence continues into the interweaving of rhyme scheme and stress pattern:

1. 'Cold is Cadwallo's tongue, a 3
2. That hush'd the stormy main; b 3
3. Brave Urien sleeps upon his craggy bed: c 5
4. Mountains, ye mourn in vain b 3
5. Modred, whose magic song a 3
6. Made huge Plinlimmon bow his cloud-topp'd head. c 5
7. On dreary Arvon's shore they lie, d 4
8. Smear'd with gore, and ghastly pale: e 4
9. Far, far aloof th' affrighted ravens sail; e 5
10. The famish'd eagle screams, and passes by. d 5
11. Dear lost companions of my tuneful art, g 5
12. Dear, as the light that visits these sad eyes, h 5
13. Dear, as the ruddy drops that warm my heart, g 5
14. Ye died amidst your dying country's cries — h 5
15. No more I weep. They do not sleep. ii 4
16. On yonder cliffs, a grisly band, j 4
17. I see them sit, they linger yet, kk 4
18. Avengers of their native land: j 4
19. With me in dreadful harmony they join, l 5
20. And weave with bloody hands the tissue of thy line: — l 5

Summarizing:

Setting the scene: 6 lines rhymed a b c b a c

Lament for fallen dead: 4 lines rhymed d e e d

Companionship with the dead: 4 lines rhymed g h g h

Manly resolution: 6 lines rhymed i j k j l l: i and k are rhymed internally.

*Dear* is repeated twice ( anaphora {4}) to mark the shift in tone.

Clearly a very organised piece of writing, the lines end-stopped in accordance with Augustan verse, rather grand and lacking emotional shading. We can see why the Romantics wanted to write differently, but does the poem work to-day? Probably, provided we regard poetry as an art, and not a spontaneous outpouring of feeling.

But perhaps the best answer is to see what can be done with this approach. Our poem should be a piece of public declamation, no doubt unfashionable to-day, but using some of the Romantic inheritance: enjambment, more contemporary imagery.

## The Great Dinosaurs

My friend: this is the land of bank-clerks, mostly.  
The pugnacious, the dutiful, the brave?

The rank

Upon rank

Ride on plate or in cenotaph. They

Airily to earth graves have gone

Who fought at Plassy or Verdun.

We, in our own lines, orderly and grey,

Take as stipends what they gave,

We, who follow quietly, laid as closely

In our cemeteries the same. My friend,  
this is the land of consort, not content-  
ment, here, where

Small lives flare

Vainglorious and seeded as summer's end

In parks, allotments, or knots

Of thistles in council plots —

Which clouds envelop, and the hills blend

In rain-smudged contours that are not consent -

Not here, not now, in England, where empires end

In injured mummery, Malacca pride

Of old gentlemen swashbuckling and spruce

In their pedigree

Waistcoat and tweed

Of social engagements on rainbowed hills

Dotted around Esher, Godalming, Chorley.

Gone, all of them, just as surely

As the lichen extends and its fibre fills

The eyes of the angel that without excuse

Shelters the fallen on some far hillside.

Ridiculous those bugles or the broken harp

To those with money or learning how.

In suburbs nearby

The great names lie

Locked into streetnames, and the sagging gate

Leads to the mansions that all too long

Reigned at ball and evensong.

Outside, not silent, the mammals wait

The mass-starts of history that new times allow,  
Their teeth and manners cut very sharp.

## Concluding Remarks

The piece probably goes further than even the *New Formalists* (see below) would advocate, but the exercise may illustrate a useful approach to structure. Pound's *Cantos* are built around their author's views, organised by musical phrase and thick tissue of allusion. The Black Mountain poets argued for open forms, but in practice rewrote their jottings. Philip Larkin used a free verse not far from prose for opening stretches, but then tightened the phrasing into an iambic dense with rhetorical devices. And so on. Gray's work is fastidiously correct, rather cold and formal for our taste, but that complex interweaving of rhyme and lines of unequal length can produce pointedly individual poems.

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## 13.2. PASTORAL ELEGY

Though strictly a fictionalised imitation of rural life, the term 'pastoral' is often used to describe the town dweller's depiction of the countryside. The pastoral elegy adds the note of lament, and its great practitioners include Virgil, Petrarch, Spenser, Milton, Goethe, Shelley and Arnold. {1}

The form is still very much alive, {2} though contemporary examples are much less formal than the piece we analyse here.

### Thomas Arnold: Thyrsis

*Thyrsis* was written by Matthew Arnold {3} in memory of his friend, Arthur Hugh Clough, and is famous for the poignant hedonism of passages describing the English summer:

## Thyrsis

It irk'd him to be here, he could not rest.  
 He loved each simple joy the country yields,  
 He loved his mates; but yet he could not keep,  
 For that a shadow lour'd on the fields,  
 Here with the shepherds and the silly sheep.  
 Some life of men unblest  
 He knew, which made him droop, and fill'd his head.  
 He went; his piping took a troubled sound  
 Of storms that rage outside our happy ground;  
 He could not wait their passing, he is dead.

So, some tempestuous morn in early June,  
 When the year's primal burst of bloom is o'er,  
 Before the roses and the longest day—  
 When garden-walks and all the grassy floor  
 With blossoms red and white of fallen May  
 And chestnut-flowers are strewn—  
 So have I heard the cuckoo's parting cry,  
 From the wet field, through the vext garden-trees,  
 Come with the volleying rain and tossing breeze:  
 The bloom is gone, and with the bloom go I!

Too quick despairer, wherefore wilt thou go?  
 Soon will the high Midsummer pomps come on,  
 Soon will the musk carnations break and swell,  
 Soon shall we have gold-dusted snapdragon,  
 Sweet-William with his homely cottage-smell,  
 And stocks in fragrant blow;  
 Roses that down the alleys shine afar,  
 And open, jasmine-muffled lattices,  
 And groups under the dreaming garden-trees,  
 And the full moon, and the white evening-star. {4}

The larger issues are Arnold's loss of poetic impulse, {5} and what George Landow calls the Pisgah sight: Arnold cannot reach the goals he and Clough idealized in *The Scholar Gypsy*, and catches only a brief glimpse of their elm tree as the sun sets. {6} The sensory richness of the world, and its imaginative recreation in art, are the only compensations life affords, and it's to understand this poignancy of description serving as thought that we now analyse these sections.

Unlike Gray's ode, the form ( end-stopped lines rhymed a b c b c a d e e d ) does not preclude a deeply moving and personal note. Arnold drives on the sense with dependent clauses, piling description on description:

**So**, some tempestuous morn in early June,  
**When** the year's primal burst of bloom is o'er,

**Before** the roses and the longest day—  
**When** garden-walks and **all** the grassy floor  
**With** blossoms red and white of fallen May  
 And chestnut-flowers are strewn—  
**So** have I heard the cuckoo's parting cry,  
**From** the wet field, **through** the vext garden-trees,

And then brings the reader up short with desolating brevity of the spectacle:

**Come** with the volleying rain and **tossing** breeze:  
 The bloom is **gone**, and with the bloom **go** I!

With this comes some parallelism: anaphora: {7}

**Soon** will the high Midsummer pomps come on,  
**Soon** will the musk carnations break and swell,  
**Soon** shall we have gold-dusted snapdragon,

and chiasmus:

The bloom is gone, and with the bloom go I!

The structure is not markedly rhetorical, however, or less obviously so than Tennyson's *Tithonus* (see below), but the key words are carefully placed, first to create impetuous despair:

So, some **tempestuous** morn in early June,  
 When the year's **primal** burst of bloom is o'er,  
 Before the roses and the **longest** day—  
 When garden-walks and **all** the grassy floor  
 With blossoms red and white of **fallen** May  
 And chestnut-flowers are **strewn**—  
 So have I heard the cuckoo's **parting** cry,  
 From the wet field, through the **vext** garden-trees,  
 Come with the **volleying** rain and **tossing** breeze:  
 The bloom is **gone**, and with the bloom go I!

And then to reign that back into the idealized, fragrant and familiar:

**Too quick** despairer, wherefore wilt thou go?  
**Soon** will the high Midsummer **pomps** come on,  
 Soon will the **musk** carnations break and **swell**,  
 Soon shall we have **gold-dusted** snapdragon,  
**Sweet**-William with his **homely** cottage-smell,  
 And stocks in **fragrant** blow;  
 Roses that down the **alleys** shine afar,  
 And open, **jasmine-muffled** lattices,  
 And groups under the **dreaming** garden-trees,  
 And the **full** moon, and the **white** evening-star.



Arnold is not usually seen as a Romantic, but these lines have the sensuous beauty of Keats, without his sometimes cloying sweetness. {8} Their secret is the phrasing: where Keats will write:

### The Day Is Gone, And All Its Sweets Are Gone

The day is gone, and all its sweets are gone!  
 Sweet voice, sweet lips, soft hand, and softer breast,  
 Warm breath, light whisper, tender semitone,  
 Bright eyes, accomplished shape, and lang'rous waist!  
 Faded the flower and all its budded charms,  
 Faded the sight of beauty from my eyes,  
 Faded the shape of beauty from my arms,  
 Faded the voice, warmth, whiteness, paradise—  
 Vanished unseasonably at shut of eve,  
 When the dusk holiday—or holinight  
 Of fragrant-curtained love begins to weave  
 The woof of darkness thick, for hid delight;  
 But, as I've read love's missal through today,  
 He'll let me sleep, seeing I fast and pray. {9}

With a very regular metre half lost in the heavy consonants:

Of **fra** | grant-**cur** | tained **love** | be **gins** | to **weave**  
 The **woof** | of **dark** | ness **thick** | for **hid** | de **light**;

Arnold's lines are much less regular: we probably read some as tetrameters:

1. So, some | tem **pest** | u ous **morn** | in **ear** | ly **June**,
2. When the | **year's pri** | mal **burst** | of **bloom** | is **o'er**,
3. Be **fore** | the **ro** | ses and | the **long** | est **day**
4. When **gar** | den-**walks** | and all | the **gra** | ssy **floor**
5. With blo | ssoms red | and white | of fa | llen May
6. And **chest** | nut-**flow** | ers are **strewn**
7. So have | I **heard** | the **cuck** | oo's **par** | ting **cry**,
8. From the | **wet field** | through the **vext gar** | den-**trees**,
9. **Come** with | the **vo** | lley ing **rain** | and **to** | ssing **breeze**:
10. The **bloom** | is **gone** | and with | the **bloom** | go **I**

and, most importantly, with a the metre verging on the anapaestic / dactylic. Pope and the Augustans placed the ictus on unimportant words to create variety in stresses per line, but Arnold used the device for a headlong impetuosity:

From the **wet field** | through the **vext garden-trees** |  
**Come** with the **volleying rain** | and **tossing breeze** ||  
 The **bloom** is **gone** | and with the **bloom** go **I** ||

All good verse is extraordinarily complicated, and poets create rhythms more from matters half sensed than through theoretical templates, but the reversal

in metre should be apparent from lines annotated as 6 and 7 above, the slowing in line 8 and the continuation of the original metre, subdued, in lines 9 and 10.

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## 13.3. LIGHT VERSE

Light verse comes in many forms, including:

### 1. Society Verse

Often described as light, graceful and entertaining poetry that appeals to polite society, 'society verse' can also make pointed comments, sometimes with deadly effect:

Some men never look at you,  
Some men fawn and flatter,  
Some men break your heart in two,  
And that cleans up the matter. {1}

I am his Highness' dog at Kew;  
Pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you? {2}

### 2. Humorous Verse

Humorous verse is often boisterous fun:

The airline's fare seemed more than fair,  
but I am not impressed,  
for while my flight travelled east,  
they sent my luggage west! {3}

We're truly in awe  
of Fernando the Fearless  
who needed no net  
for the flying trapeze.

Alas, what a shame  
it's surprisingly difficult  
catching a bar  
in the midst of a sneeze. {4}

but can carry darker undertones:

At Christmas little children sing and merry bells jingle,  
The cold winter air makes our hands and face tingle  
And happy families go to church and cheerily they mingle  
And the whole business is unbearably dreadful if you're single. {5}

### 3. Nonsense Verse

Humorous or whimsical verse features absurd characters and actions, often containing evocative but meaningless nonce words.

The elephant is a bonnie bird.  
It flits from bough to bough.  
It makes its nest in a rhubarb tree  
And whistles like a cow. {6}

Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.

Beware the Jabberwock, my son!  
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!  
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun  
The frumious Bandersnatch! {7}

### 4. Limerick

The Limerick's definition is more serious than it should be: a kind of humorous verse of five lines, in which the first, second, and fifth lines rhyme with each other, and the third and fourth lines, which are shorter, form a rhymed couplet.

There was an Old Man of Nantucket  
 Who kept all his cash in a bucket.  
 His daughter, called Nan,  
 Ran away with a man,  
 And as for the bucket, Nantucket. {8}

There once was a young lady named bright  
 Whose speed was much faster than light  
 She set out one day  
 In a relative way  
 And returned on the previous night. {8}

A pirate, history relates  
 Was scuffling with some of his mates  
 When he slipped on a cutlass  
 Which rendered him nutless  
 And practically useless on dates {9}

## 5. Exotic Forms

Light verse generally requires a sound metrical touch, and verse where the form exceeds the content is often termed 'light' — the French ballade, rondel, villanelle and triolet, but also the pantoum and possibly the haiku.

I took her dainty eyes, as well  
 As silken tendrils of her hair:  
 And so I made a Villanelle!

I took her voice, a silver bell,  
 As clear as song, as soft as prayer;  
 I took her dainty eyes as well. {10}

The red blossom bends  
 and drips its dew to the ground.  
 Like a tear it falls {11}

## 6. Serious Poetry

The form can also be used seriously, as did Sylvia Plath in *Lady Lazarus* {12} where the seeming nonchalance sharpens the theme.

Ash, ash—  
 You poke and stir.  
 Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—

A cake of soap,  
 A wedding ring,  
 A gold filling.

Herr God. Herr Lucifer  
 Beware  
 Beware.  
 Out of the ash  
 I rise with my red hair  
 And I eat men like air

## A Letter of Advice

When he died, suddenly, at the age of thirty-nine, Winthrop Mackworth Praed stood on the verge of a brilliant parliamentary career.

### A Letter of Advice

You tell me you're promised a lover,  
 My own Araminta, next week;  
 Why cannot my fancy discover  
 The hue of his coat, and his cheek?  
 Alas! if he look like another,  
 A vicar, a banker, a beau,  
 Be deaf to your father and mother,  
 My own Araminta, say 'No!'

Miss Lane, at her Temple of Fashion,  
 Taught us both how to sing and to speak,  
 And we loved one another with passion,  
 Before we had been there a week:  
 You gave me a ring for a token;  
 I wear it wherever I go;  
 I gave you a chain, - it is broken?  
 My own Araminta, say 'No!'

O think of our favourite cottage,  
 And think of our dear Lalla Rookh!  
 How we shared with the milkmaids their pottage,  
 And drank of the stream from the brook;  
 How fondly our loving lips faltered,  
 'What further can grandeur bestow?'  
 My heart is the same; - is yours altered?  
 My own Araminta, say 'No!'

Remember the thrilling romances  
 We read on the bank in the glen;  
 Remember the suitors our fancies  
 Would picture for both of us then;  
 They wore the red cross on their shoulder,  
 They had vanquished and pardoned their foe -  
 Sweet friend, are you wiser or colder?  
 My own Araminta, say 'No!' {13}

The charm and polish of the verse should be obvious, but we might notice:

1. The metrical skill:

Alas! if he look like another, (a oo u)

A vicar, a banker, a beau, (i a o)

And **drank** of the **stream** from the **brook**; (a ee u)

2. The smiling good humour of so many touches:

You tell me you're promised a lover,  
My own Araminta, *next week*;

*Miss Lane*, at her *Temple* of Fashion,

3. The sheer brio of the anapaestic lines:

Remember the thrilling romances  
We read on the bank in the glen;

4. The speaking voice, its coyness in:

You tell me you're promised a lover,

followed by petulance in:

Why cannot my fancy discover

and mock despair in:

Alas! if he look like another,

5. The telling details, creating believable characters:

O think of our favourite cottage,  
And think of our dear Lalla Rookh!  
How we shared with the milkmaids their pottage,  
And drank of the stream from the brook;

How is my High-Stepping Filly?

Wit, metrical skill {14} and a distinctive voice on the page are what count in society verse. Rather than laboriously work the steps involved, I will try to show how the following does not measure up.

*How Is My High Stepping Filly* was written many years ago in imitation of Praed, and seems to rattle along quite happily:

And how is my high-stepping filly?  
How is my first love and late?  
Still flagrantly showy and silly  
But wild and unfeigned at the gate?

For, silly, I could have been bolder,  
 And wild, then why not with me?  
 For I, who am old, am older,  
 So you, though you do not agree.

To think you were firebrand and bandit,  
 Our chief in each changing craze,  
 And tomboy in times now disbanded,  
 Companion of uncountable days.  
 Was anything haltered or hidden,  
 Or anything left to repent?  
 But your future came forward unbidden,  
 From girlhood to woman you went.

Old friends were phantoms, forgotten,  
 Aloft in another domain  
 You flounced in a frock of white cotton  
 And were queen of the city and plain.  
 Men came and went with their hot-rod  
 Jalopies, and even a yacht  
 You laughed, and thought them an odd lot:  
 Oh did you, my shy demigod?

What good if at school I was clever  
 When you gamboled and beckoned me on?  
 What solace in summery weather  
 In phoning to find you had gone?  
 But now I have come to my mid-life  
 And must earn with flat effort my wage  
 In forests of tropical midnight,  
 And deserts that do not know age,

I smile and look back to that brief time  
 When later we met and made up:  
 Amazing that absence at each time  
 Of each other had charged the cup.  
 So long was the draught that we drank then  
 And sweet the residue stays.  
 I reach with both hands to thank them  
 Who gave us such pasture to graze.

Yes, my mind goes back, and I'm merry  
 To think of the characters now:  
 From Moira a nun down in Kerry  
 To Pru, of all people, a frau.  
 I don't know where all have their holdout  
 But Dot's in the social whirl,

Our Meg filled some centre-page fold-out  
And Tup got engaged to an earl.

Well, well, I may mumble and wonder,  
Fate turn the wheel round one more time,  
If we, who were close, fell asunder  
Back closer would come if we climbed?  
But I doubt it, and know not to tether.  
Go further and kiss and curvet:  
Whatever impends is forever,  
And that which is past I forget.

The verse is fluent, and carries its pathos lightly, the metre adjusting in tempo to the content.

But is it true? Did these people exist, and did the writer have to earn with *flat effort his wage* *In forests of tropical midnight / And deserts that do not know age*? To some extent, certainly. That was how I used to feel on brief visits to London from exploration work in various desert and rain-forest countries, though I have changed some of the names.

And the place to *Kerry*, clearly to rhyme with *merry*. When, looking at the alliteration:

Yes, **my** mind goes back, and I'm **merry**  
To think of the **ch**aracters **n**ow:  
**F**rom **M**oira a **n**un down in **K**erry  
To **P**ru, of all **p**eople, a **f**rau.

we begin to wonder if it's not a little over-neat. The suspicion grows that the story is filling out the form, and we notice two other matters: voice and character. We can picture the young women from their voices in:

You tell me you're promised a lover,  
My own Araminta, next week;  
Why cannot my fancy discover  
The hue of his coat, and his cheek?

And their childhood memories:

Remember the suitors our fancies  
Would picture for both of us then;  
They wore the red cross on their shoulder,  
They had vanquished and pardoned their foe -  
Sweet friend, are you wiser or colder?  
My own Araminta, say 'No!'

But do we see either in *How Is My High Stepping Filly?*

The language in the first adopts a certain tone or social register, something real that Praed affectionately mimics, but what about this?



Was anything *halted* or hidden,  
Or anything left to repent?  
But your future came forward *unbidden*,  
From girlhood to woman you went.

And this?

Men came and went with their *hotrod*  
Jalopies, and even a yacht

Yes, they pick up the filly theme, but no Englishman will take them as natural speech. English society is class-conscious, and anyone who would write society verse has to develop an ear for its forms of address and word usage.

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## 14. BLANK VERSE

Blank verse — unrhymed pentameters — is the staple of much narrative and dramatic poetry in English. It's easy to write correctly, but phenomenally difficult to write well because of the many verse skills needed to keep it effective, varied and musical. Some examples:

### 14.1. MARLOWE

If all the pens that ever poets held  
 Had fed the feelings of their masters' thoughts  
 And every sweetness that inspired their hearts,  
 Their minds and muses on admired themes;  
 If all the heavenly quintessence they still  
 From their immortal flowers of poesy,  
 Wherein as in a mirror we perceive  
 The highest reaches of a human wit —  
 If these had made one poem's period  
 And all combined in beauty's worthiness,  
 Yet should there hover in their restless heads  
 One thought, one grace, one wonder at the least,  
 Which into words no virtue can digest. {1}

Early blank verse by Marlowe, which has a swelling impetus overflowing the lines but still presents a simple argument:

**If** all the pens that ever poets held  
           had fed the feelings of their masters' thoughts ||

**And** every sweetness that inspired their hearts,  
           their minds and muses on admired themes; ||

**If** all the heavenly quintessence they still  
           from their immortal flowers of poesy, |  
           wherein as in a mirror we perceive  
           the highest reaches of a human wit — ||

**If** these had made one poem's period |  
           and all combined in beauty's worthiness,

**yet** should there hover in their restless heads  
           one thought, one grace, one wonder at the least,  
           which into words no virtue can digest.

## 14.2. SHAKESPEARE

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,  
 As I foretold you, were all spirits and  
 Are melted into air, into thin air:  
 And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
 The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
 The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
 Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve  
 And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
 Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
 As dreams are made on, and our little life  
 Is rounded with a sleep.

From *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare {2}

Shakespeare's valedictory piece in the person of Prospero. Its structure is clear if we set it out like contemporary free verse:

Our revels now are ended.

These our actors, (as I foretold you,) were all spirits and are melted into  
 air,  
 into thin air:

and,

like the baseless fabric of this vision, (the cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous  
 palaces, the solemn temples, the great globe itself —  
 yea, all which it inherit)

shall dissolve

and, (like this insubstantial pageant faded),

leave not a rack behind.

We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life

is rounded with a sleep.

Shakespeare's skill (like Milton's, but with a more natural word order) lay in welding these elements into an imaginative whole. Many lines are end stopped, but the argument carries the listener on. Note also how quietly the piece starts. The central sections swells to magnificence, and with that radiance left hanging in the air like a half-remembered dream, the piece is folded away into a universal truth.

### 14.3. MILTON

So spake th' Omnipotent, and with his words  
All seem'd well pleas'd, all seem'd, but were not all.

That day, as other solem dayes, they spent  
In song and dance about the sacred Hill,  
Mystical dance, which yonder starrie Spheare  
Of Planets and of fixt in all her Wheelles  
Resembles nearest, mazes intricate,  
Eccentric, intervolv'd, yet regular  
Then most, when most irregular they seem:  
And in thir motions harmonie Divine  
So smooths her charming tones, that Gods own ear  
Listens delighted. Eevning approach'd

(For we have also our Eevning and our Morn,  
We ours for change delectable, not need)

Forthwith from dance to sweet repast they turn  
Desirous, all in Circles as they stood,  
Tables are set, and on a sudden pil'd  
With Angels Food, and rubied Nectar flows:  
In Pearl, in Diamond, and massie Gold,  
Fruit of delicious Vines, the growth of Heav'n.  
They eat, they drink, and with refection sweet  
Are fill'd, before th' all bounteous King, who showrd  
With copious hand, rejoycing in thir joy. {3}

These 'slow planetary wheelings' (as De Quincey called them) belong to Milton alone, and there are also his common inversions from normal word order: *mazes intricate*, / *Eccentric, intervolv'd*, *change delectable*, etc. But note how musical is the line:

*In song and dance about the sacred Hill,*

and simple:

*Eevning approach'd*

which is then developed into a double aside:

*(For we have also our Eevning and our Morn,  
We ours for change delectable, not need)*

Milton could develop a multitude of thoughts, qualifications, illustrations and descriptions without losing the overall rhythmic structure. The pauses are varied, but the movement is solemn, with many lines end stopped. Much more varied is the vowel music, which is so subtly set off with consonants as to seem unsought for.

Forthwith from dance to sweet repast they turn |  
 Desirous, | all in Circles as they stood, ||  
 Tables are set, | and on a sudden pil'd  
 With Angels Food, || and rubied Nectar flows:  
 In Pearl, | in Diamond, and massie Gold, ||  
 Fruit of delicious Vines, | the growth of Heav'n. ||  
 They eat, | they drink, | and with refection sweet  
 Are fill'd, | before th' all bounteous King, | who showrd  
 With copious hand, | rejoycing in thir joy. ||

## 14.4. TENNYSON

Blank verse is usually described as unrhymed iambic pentameters with frequent enjambment. An adaptable form, it can convey anything from elevated thought to everyday speech, and was once universally employed for drama and epic. Indeed, so easy is blank verse to write that it needs constraints, challenges and melodic invention if it is not to become slipshod and boring.

First consider this piece, the opening and closing sections of Tennyson's *Morte d'Arthur*:

So all day long the noise of battle roll'd  
 Among the mountains by the winter sea;  
 Until King Arthur's table, man by man,  
 Had fallen in Lyonesse about their Lord,  
 King Arthur: then, because his wound was deep,  
 The bold Sir Bedivere uplifted him,  
 Sir Bedivere, the last of all his knights,  
 And bore him to a chapel nigh the field,  
 A broken chancel with a broken cross,  
 That stood on a dark strait of barren land.  
 On one side lay the ocean, and on one  
 Lay a great water, and the moon was full.

So said he, and the barge with oar and sail  
 Moved from the brink, like some full-breasted swan  
 That, fluting a wild carol ere her death,  
 Ruffles her pure cold plume, and takes the flood  
 With swarthy webs. Long stood Sir Bedivere  
 Revolving many memories, till the hull  
 Look'd one black dot against the verge of dawn,  
 And on the mere the wailing died away. {4}

Enjambment — the running-on or overflowing of sense and rhythm of one line into the next — is clear enough: *So all day long the noise of battle roll'd among the mountains by the winter sea*; etc. But so too is a 'blocking out' by pauses:

So all day long | the noise of battle roll'd |  
 Among the mountains | by the winter sea ||  
 Until King Arthur's table | man by man |  
 Had fallen in Lyonesse | about their Lord ||

The cadences create these effects, so strongly marked that we are surprised to find no rhymes, so satisfyingly do the lines end. But there's also the melody of the long vowels, which overflow the metre:

So **all day long** | the **noise** of **battle roll'd**

The subtle alliteration:

So all day **long** the **noise** of battle **roll'd**  
**A**mong the **m**ountains by the winter **sea**;  
 Until King Arthur's table, **man** by **man**,  
 Had **fall**en in **L**yonesse about their **L**ord,

And the pacing: the slow movement of the first four lines, a pause coming after *then* in line five to take breath, the quickening in the singly-moulded line six, and then a varied pacing helped by the repetition of *Sir Bedivere* to the full flood of:

On one side lay the ocean, and on one  
 Lay a great water, and the moon was full.

Which is echoed, distantly, with the d's largely replacing the more liquid l's in the final:

Look'd one black dot against the verge of dawn,  
 And on the mere the wailing died away.

A great more could be said about this celebrated piece, but it should be clear that blank verse is not an escape from rhyme, but a replacement of rhyme by equally powerful and carefully-woven devices.

## Tithonus

Technically, Tithonus is also blank verse, but with more singly-moulded lines. Here are the opening and concluding sections of its 76 lines:

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,  
 The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,  
 Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,  
 And after many a summer dies the swan.  
 Me only cruel immortality  
 Consumes; I wither slowly in thine arms,  
 Here at the quiet limit of the world,  
 A white-hair'd shadow roaming like a dream

The ever-silent spaces of the East,  
Far-folded mists, and gleaming halls of morn.

Yet hold me not for ever in thine East;  
How can my nature longer mix with thine?  
Coldly thy rosy shadows bathe me, cold  
Are all thy lights, and cold my wrinkled feet  
Upon thy glimmering thresholds, when the steam  
Floats up from those dim fields about the homes  
Of happy men that have the power to die,  
And grassy barrows of the happier dead.  
Release me, and restore me to the ground;  
Thou seest all things, thou wilt see my grave:  
Thou wilt renew thy beauty morn by morn;  
I earth in earth forget these empty courts,  
And thee returning on thy silver wheels. {5}

No rhymes, not even pararhyme, but something between assonance and pararhyme at times. And much repetition:

Of **happy** men that have the power to **die**,  
And **grassy** barrows of the **happier** dead.  
**R**elease me, and **r**estore me to the **g**round;  
Thou **seest** all things, thou **wilt see** my **g**rave:  
Thou **wilt** renew thy beauty **morn** by **morn**;  
I **earth** in **earth** forget these empty **courts**,

And a good deal else in what was probably written in response to sister Emily's grief at her fiancé's death, the Hallam to whom Tennyson was also greatly attached. Tennyson continued to write accomplished blank verse for his *Idylls of the King*, {6} but the expressive power was not recaptured.

## 14.5. AUDEN

The following is not blank verse, but alternating hexameters and quatrains, a tour de force by W.H. Auden. The opening lines:

In Praise of Limestone

If it form the one landscape that we, the inconstant ones,  
Are consistently homesick for, this is chiefly  
Because it dissolves in water. Mark these rounded slopes  
With their surface fragrance of thyme and, beneath,  
A secret system of caves and conduits: hear the springs  
That spurt out everywhere with a chuckle,  
Each filling a private pool for its fish. {7}



David Perkins calls the piece dull, {8} which is perhaps to say that Auden is not riding his thirties hobbyhorses, or speaking from personal tragedy. The problem is perhaps the conversational ease: entertaining, bubbling along as ideas come to mind, but with thoughts that do not resonate across the poem. The elegiac expectations ushered in with *The woods decay, the woods decay and fall*, are realized in the setting, but how or why are we homesick in *If it form the one landscape that we, the inconstant ones / Are consistently homesick for*? Auden's piece is thoroughly modern in its diction and cadence — a great accomplishment — but perhaps more is needed for so long a piece, for all the agile phrasing, with the ball kept spinning in the air:

If it **f**orm the one land**s**c**a**p**e** that we | the in**c**onstant ones |  
 Are **c**onsistently homes**s**ick for || this is *chief***f**ly  
 Because it di**s**solves in water || **M**ark these rounded **s**lopes |  
 With their **s**ur**f**ace **f**ragrance of **t**hyme | and | beneath |  
 A **s**ecret **s**ystem of **c**aves and **c**onduits || **h**ear the springs  
 That spurt out everywhere with a chuckle |  
*Each* **f**illing a private pool for its **f**ish. ||

Note also how the **verbs** and the ee sounds push the sense along, and the assonance in **s**, **c** and **f/th**. These are not decoration, but auditory sinews of the poem, giving it continuity, brio and consistency.

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## 14.6 Cookham

Can we write something that employs the melodic invention of Tennyson and agile phrasing of Auden in a hexameter form?

Here are the lines that came to me when I visited Cookham, the Thameside village where Stanley Spencer lived and painted: {6}

As for the otherworldly, there are the clouds that hang  
Muscular but sadly on the scenes beneath. Here  
Stanley Spencer, painter and iconoclast painted  
The solemn glory of his God.

Not good lines, but pregnant with opportunities. Spencer's life was unhappy, largely through his own stupidity: preoccupation with the nude, rejection of his dealer's advice, infatuation with a local woman that broke his marriage and left him practically homeless. What a poem might explore, I thought, were the clouds soaring over a prosperous English landscape and the hard life of a painter who drew his inspiration from its splendours. Blank verse would have been the natural choice, but I rather liked the opening hexameter, and was wary of the dangers of writing in so easy a form. So came a rereading of Auden, and an echo of Tennyson in this first rewriting, which opens out the sense more:

As for the otherworldly, there are the clouds only  
That on some days hang in a corpulent splendour, casting  
Opalescence and sadness on the hills beneath.

Stanley Spencer, painter and iconoclast,  
Traced each day with solemn brush the glory  
Of his God. He painted in large canvases

Which we correct, and then sketch out possibilities for other sections:

As for the otherworldly, there are the clouds only  
That on some days hang in a radiant splendour, casting  
An apocryphal sadness on the hills beneath.

Stanley Spencer, painter and iconoclast,  
Traced each day with eye and brush the solemn the glory  
Of his God. He painted in vast canvases  
How the Thames gave up its treasures, rolled its children

It was a vision, mild as the weather, as if composed  
Of half forgetfulness the public loved. Commissions  
Followed

Painting became his life, and he obsessive: abroad  
A celebrity, at home a bespectacled recluse.

Far distant from the village, his house, his now memorial,  
And unconcerned by his passing, the huge clouds rise.

From which, with a little more description, the complete poem followed.

## Cookham

As for the unfathomable, there are the clouds only  
That on some days hang in indolent splendour, scattering  
Refulgence and sadness on the hills beneath.

For here and everywhere is England: ordered, rollered  
Into farms and parklands, shelving to the Thames  
Which, upstream silver-dimpling into water meadows  
Or threading into inlets, here on the village settles  
An air of foreign occupation. It lines up boatyards  
And small bridges, reflects the waterside hotels;  
For visitors it shimmers, backdrops picnic lawns,  
Jostles the odd pleasure craft, plunges, legend-pooled,  
To runs of tench and perch.

All this is thematic,  
And was. Stanley Spencer, painter and iconoclast,  
Traced each day with eye and brush the solemn glory  
Of his God. He painted in vast canvases  
The Thames rolled back, from its cramping gravels the dead  
Awakened, tumbled out in dawn-pale multitudes  
Of children, postmen, vicar, schoolmistresses, the baker. . .

The vision, roundly drawn, composed as of the weather  
With its mildness and forgetfulness, the public  
Accepted in large commission. More followed. He married,  
Was successful. Working on altar pieces, however,  
He pierced the body to its ribald cloak of flesh;  
Painted his own in every jubilant particular,  
Then a friend's. All still, he saw, the progeny of God.  
The public disagreed, bought nothing. By turns  
He lost his wife, his friend, the cottage and commissions.  
He painted on. Became obsessive: abroad a celebrity,  
At home a bespectacled recluse. Eventually God left him.  
In the iron-stained gravels one stripped December day  
They buried him, a pauper with a civic pension.

Years pass. At the request of visitors the council  
Open a museum, which vies now with the Sunday funfair.  
And over the village, and far from his demise —  
Unruffled and unconcerned by it the huge clouds rise.

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# 15. NARRATIVE VERSE

Whatever the verse form adopted, the story-telling aspects come first, i.e. the verse has to adapt to the needs of character, plot and mood development. Before the eighteenth century, much narrative was in verse form, but the novel is generally written in prose today, and now has techniques that verse can't easily match. Fiction readers look for emotion primarily, of course, and want a world more real, engrossing and significant than the one they live in — created: evoked, conjured up, built by sustained craft and inspiration into something they can happily inhabit and return to for subsequent rereading.

## 15.1. BASIC PRINCIPLES

Nineteenth-century fiction moved slowly. Whole pages were devoted to setting the scene, and to carefully describing the characters as one by one they stepped on to the stage. Except perhaps in literary novels, or the superior historical romance, no one has such patience today. Films are the preferred model, and by looking carefully at what appears every night on your TV screen you'll begin to understand how it's done. Many start at some exciting point in the story. A spectacular bank heist. A drugs swap in a seedy nightclub. The schoolchild reluctantly going up the stairs to her stepfather's flat. The body being weighted and dropped into the canal. The farewell party at the corporate headquarters. . . All are telling the viewer something that needs to be known: the genre, the period, the setting, the preferred audience. Equally, all are creating expectations that will be developed and realized as the story unfolds. There are standard openings taught in writing schools, and a host of books on the subject, but the easiest and most enjoyable way of starting your piece is often to imagine it filmed. In this way you can sketch in quickly what the opening scene must depict, and avoid that dreaded stumbling block: the opening sentence.

Narrative poems take a long time to read. If you're in a hurry to find opening sentences then you may do worse than consult short stories, which are more to the point, and where every word must count. We know immediately what to expect with: *The revolver felt heavy, but the trigger was well oiled. . . Whatever else could be said of him, Hubert Dreaver was a responsible man. . . When I think of Aunt Jayne's house, across the foothills of memory, and go up the unpainted steps. . . Bernstein was my best friend. . . Open Day is not a favourite on any Head Teacher's calendar, and . .*

### Plot or Character-Driven?

Should your narrative be plot-driven, or operate through the motivations of its characters? Your piece will end up being both, of course, with a plot to keep readers turning the pages, and the characters that are believable. More than believable: your poem must have characters your readers identify with, share

their excitement and hopes, feel their goals are worthy, and that failure is too awful to think about. You'll need to intermesh plot and character so completely that one automatically conjures up the other.

Here lies the failure of many literary works. Brilliantly written, but falling over on the first test: sympathetic characters. If we don't care about the suspicions of the neurotic invalid on the ground floor of the decaying tenement, or believe the return of the missing Modigliani will be a triumph at the local art gallery, or a thousand and one such contrivances, then the piece fails. On the world stage, none of these things matters, but they must to the characters, and we must be drawn into their lives sufficiently that they matter to us.

To classify pieces as essentially plot- or character-driven is also to overlook their larger dimensions. Novels, for example, have explored issues of conscience (Dostoevsky), social reform (Dickens), class barriers (Austen) and racial issues (Baldwin). Novels have explored the human heart in love (Turgenev) consumed by ambition (Balzac) by jealousy (Proust) or by class interest (Lampedusa). Some novels have no real plot (Bunin) and some have no real characters (Kafka). Many carry the innermost hopes and feelings of their creators, which is why authors are advised to write the kind of novels they enjoy reading. Intellectual slumming is quickly detected, and literary novels cannot be created with the crude (though effective) devices of the successful thriller.

## Point of View

Point of view is the character whose eyes are observing what is happening. Partly this is convention (what readers expect) and partly commonsense (you can't portray what your point of view can't observe). You have a choice of first, second or third person, and the pros and cons of each are easily grasped:

### Third Person Narrative

Narrative in the third person is told as though someone were recounting it, facing an audience. In the twentieth century, this point of view is often limited to what one person could theoretically see, though that view may include outward aspects of personality the characters are not aware of. In previous centuries, the 'third person omniscient' perspective was more popular, and here the storyteller held all the cards, including what the characters thought, felt or planned to do. An intermediate point of view is the 'third person objective', which allows the writer to present all the characters, wherever they may be, but not to know their inner thoughts: the 'fly on the wall' approach. Other variations are possible: readers may be given access to the inner motivations of some characters but not to others, leaving those unknown quantities as intriguing or threatening aspects of the landscape.

The third person narrative is the most flexible, but generally places some distance between reader and character. Even if inner motivations are given read-

ers, it is difficult to identify fully with a long cast of characters, however engagingly drawn.

## Second Person Narrative

The second person, where the reader is addressed as 'you' throughout, is difficult to manage, though experimental fiction sometimes takes the reader by the hand, like a Virgil guiding Dante through a strange and forbidding world. The present tense is more often used, and that separation between reader and narrator can operate as the tension in good dialogue.

## First Person Narrative

The first person point of view sacrifices omniscience for a greater intimacy with one character: the readers see the world through his or her eyes, feel as that person feels, and share his or her motivations and dreams. That character is commonly the protagonist, but may be a close friend or wise elder. The author speaks through the narrator, which brings intensity but also the danger of losing what the writing needs in plot, dialogue, balance and overall shape. Occasionally, the narrator may directly address the reader, but this breaks the tacit understanding, and gives a distance or unreality to events: it is rarely done in modern fiction. In autobiographical fiction, the narrator is clearly the author, and may or may not be reliable.

## Further Points

Controlling the point of view is essential for the intensity of a story, but the matter can be subtler than the above suggests. The third person is much used for action novels and commercial fiction, as the narrator can go anywhere, tightening the sub-plots, and adding to the suspense as characters come up against obstacles the reader is expecting. The difficulty is keeping the reader engaged with the characters, not as devices of plot but as breathing people whose aims readers sympathize with. What they experience, even simple observations, has to be real and important to them, and not third person observations from a neutral perspective.

It is possible to mix first-person points of view, but this is rarely successful within a scene, and even changes between chapters must have some point if readers are not to become confused. Naturally, since the narrator has clearly survived, the first person point of view is rarely used for thrillers, and there are also problems with the narrator's ego. If he comes over as too introspective he may seem weak, and so forfeit the reader's interest. If, on the other hand, he continually kicks his way through life, or presents his views too strongly, he may come over as a braggart, and be equally a turn off. It's usually better for readers to build their own sense of character from the varied response of others in the piece, having the narrator's self-perspective recast by what others say to or of him. More depth is created this way, though the narrator is not then entirely reliable.

## Dialogue

After plot, nothing gives writers so much trouble as dialogue. It never seems perfect, and editing—tightening, shaping, recasting—only creates more possibilities. Are there general principles, and when do you stop tinkering?

First: dialogue is part of your piece, an increasingly important part in mainstream work, but still only part. If the plot doesn't hold up, or the characters are unbelievable, then no dialogue brilliance will save the work. Listen to the scripts of good films: many are surprisingly flat and cliché-ridden, giving no hint of personality to their characters, but the stars breathe life into the hackneyed words. Or get an actor friend to read a page of your work, or anything else: you'll be surprised what a trained voice can do. Be a little wary, therefore, of the 'reading aloud test': that your dialogue isn't convincing may lie more with your acting skills than the dialogue as such. Nonetheless, a dialogue should serve one or more of the following. It:

- discloses the speaker's personality, background and motivations.
- carries the plot, often creating a climax and/or decisive twists in the story.
- heightens tension or conflict between the speakers.
- continually and subtly changes the relationship between the speakers.
- reminds the reader of what may have been forgotten.
- foreshadows events or personality aspects.
- establishes mood or tone.
- stimulates the reader's curiosity.
- breaks up long stretches of text.

Dialogue is not a transcript of actual speech, as you can tell by listening to the radio: you'll know within a few seconds whether it's a recording or a play. Dialogue is a carefully crafted and distilled version of actual speech, employing conventions that vary with genre and the author's intentions. In contrast, actual speech is more spasmodic and untidy: full of run-ons, repetitions and throwaway phrases (*actually, perhaps, right, like, I mean . .* most of which can be removed unless acting as speech markers).

Characters don't generally address one another with their names, even in group discussion, and you'll have to find other ways of indicating who is speaking. Commonly this is done with he said / I said speech tags, but a richer approach is through speech markers. Consider:

Vocabulary specific to the character: *I always think, I mean it's kinda gross, And Bob's your uncle again, and the like.*

Speech that's noticeably tight: *Sort it! Got that? Tuesday without fail. . .*



Speech that's unusually loose: *I wonder if I could ask you, Which means all things considered if you follow my thread of course that. . .*

Words specific to a profession: *Lesions to the right temporal lobe, interpersonal relationship skills.*

Sarcasm: *You can read, can't you? Running the company, are we now?*

Run-on sentences: *So there I was . . . and you'd have thought . . . but no, not for his highness . . . and that's always the way with these . . . isn't it? I mean . . .*

Grammar: *If I was you, Because he nice man, So me I think big.*

Omit words: *So I think myself, When I was boy.*

Indicate class or ethnicity: *May I know your name? Now my dear boy. Get lost.*

Characteristic throwaway phrases: *Look here old sport, Know what I mean? Like we're old friends, aren't we?*

Vocabulary inappropriate to the background or context: *I mean like albeit that you're a big-shot, Are you the perpetrator of this particular foul-up?*

Dialect (just the odd word): *Only a wee bairn, So I says to the old sugar and strife.*

None of this should be overdone, or make difficulties for the reader who generally reads by sight, not by enunciating each word of the page. Feelings drive fiction, and dialogue is no exception. Only use words that seem natural to character and situation, therefore, but cut even these when emotion goes off the boil.

## Credible Characters

Of course your piece needs credible characters, people more real than those you meet every day in the office or supermarket but still acting as anyone would in their situation. People who also represent characters your readers would like to be, so they can warm to and identify with them. You have these resources:

### 1. Descriptions

Characters used to be introduced with lengthy descriptions:

*Visitors to O'Connell's Ice-cream Parlor in the early summer of 1964 would have noticed the appearance, every morning at eleven, of an elegant young woman with tightly curled blonde hair and eyes so large, candid and blue that regulars would say, 'here comes summer on the prairies again.' She was dressed in . . . and the small waist was even more tightly pinched by . . . Everything was immaculate, even to the stockings, which were silk, as the better*

*class of customer was aware—and O’Connell’s did have the better class of customer in those days.*

And so on. Still useful for literary fiction, but something of a burden on the reader who has to remember these details. Who is noticing all this, and is it relevant? No doubt police officers and portrait artists do make mental notes of passing strangers, but most of us take in only what we need to get through our busy lives. You may do better to build your character slowly, giving your reader just what is necessary scene by scene to explain the narrative.

*She wasn’t pretty, but there was something about the manner, he thought: pleasing, a little girlish even, though she was in her thirties, he concluded, dismissing the thought. He brought out his cell-phone, and was making his third call of the morning, when he noticed she was looking at him again. Too old to be wearing that short dress, he said to himself, as though he had some claim on her life. . .*

Two last points: professional writers often keep a ‘casting book’, where they jot down descriptions of characters dreamt up or met in real life. Into this large book they dip when the need appears for a character in their work. Detailed descriptions are also restricting, and many excellent novelists keep them simple and vague for that reason.

## 2. Dialogue

Also revealing is what others say to and of the character you’re building. If they call him ‘spineless’ or ‘calculating’ or ‘a decent sort’ that those descriptions will be one aspect of his character. Those aspects may not be accurate—the characters are acting as unreliable narrators, or seeing matters too much through their own perspective—but character need not be presented all at once, but grow slowly in the reader’s consciousness as the plot evolves.

## 3. Reactions of other characters to them.

Nothing works in advertising like the personal recommendation from someone we trust, and the same technique is open to the fiction writer. It may be direct as in popular fiction:

Haines rubbed his chin. ‘Well, the only guy who’s going to measure up to that is Rayner. Ran him out of Peru and Mexico, and every other trouble spot. But he’s still there, and the CIA still use him, because he’s the only operative the guerrillas respect. . .’

Or more oblique, as in literary fiction:

Devlin was the malevolent figure I’d met on my first day at the plant, and still someone who got things done by sinking into the background, only re-emerging with an affable modesty when credits were handed out . . .

Verse adds an extra difficulty to dialogue, and even its most accomplished masters (Browning but not Chaucer) have long passages now tedious to read.

## Plot

We learn more (and believe more) from watching people in action than listening to what they tell us about themselves. The narrative is no different. Villains behave badly. Good guys do creditable things. If that good guy is also your viewpoint, you can enrich his character with thoughts, interior monologue and flashback. The reader knows the mainsprings of action, and what fears and difficulties had to be overcome. If the good guy is not the viewpoint, then other characters can comment on the action, tell each other how it contrasts with expectations, and so on.

Heroes make things happen, but they're not miracle workers. If yours rescues the woman from the frozen lake, make sure you've shown your reader that he's a skating ace, and fearless, well before that scene. Explanations inserted at the climax to a story look contrived, and are unforgivable when the word processor allows easy changes in the script. Likewise coincidences. The boy needs to meet his girl several times, and in ways that seem natural, before the romance blossoms. The reader has suspected their involvement, but delaying the moment gives you time to flesh out their characters more, and build suspense.

## Flashbacks

Flashbacks take your reader into a scene that happened before the present. Because that interrupts the narrative, and endangers the illusion of scenes passing before the reader's gaze, flashbacks need to be used carefully and sparingly. In general, a flashback should:

- add materially to the present scene: provide motivation, richness of character, and suspense.
- introduce an immediate scene and not off-stage narrative.
- move immediately from the present to the flashback.
- start with an arresting sentence.

A problem arises immediately with 'had'. Since most stories are written in the past tense, the logical tense for flashbacks would be the pluperfect. That destroys the continuity and immediacy of the scene, however, and it's better to quickly signal a flashback and then continue in the simple past tense. Instead of:

*I was always in trouble at school. Even on rare good days I had had the distinct impression the girls were laughing at me . . .*

Try:

*I was always in trouble at school. Even on good days I knew the girls were laughing at me . . .*

You can introduce a flashback with dialogue:

*'Truth is, Sue, I wasn't exactly a hotshot at school.'*

An understatement. *How many times was I standing in the corner . . . ?*

Or go direct into dialogue from a flashback.

*I was not good at school.*

*'Roberts you are the most singularly dull and obtuse boy in this class. Stand up. . .'*

To close a flashback you can simply leave a blank line and pick up the previous scene. Or you can refer to the flashback in some way:

*Then I moved to Baltimore, and everything changed.*

*I was still thinking of those humiliations when I saw Delmot's eyes come off my face.*

Flashbacks can create suspense:

*'Go on, little man.'*

*I thought of the doctor's advice.*

*'Put your fists up.'*

*Don't get into a scrap, or heated. Your heart won't take it.*

*'Thought you wouldn't. Try this for size', he said, giving me a sharp prod in the stomach. . .*

## Adjectives and Adverbs

Adjectives and adverbs are best used sparingly, and for these reasons:

1. They make your text seem insubstantial and overqualified:

*Wearily, her face wearing a sad look of puzzled dejection, she sat down and opened the folder.*

is probably better cut to:

*Puzzled, she sat down and opened the folder.*

2. Their power falls off with the number employed.

*With a sad gesture of tiredness, her uncombed hair flopping untidily over her face, she sat down to read the address book I gave her.*

will be more forceful as:

*With a practiced air of tiredness, she sat down to read the address book.*

3. They hold up the action. In place of:

*With a sad gesture of tiredness, her uncombed hair flopping untidily over her face, she sat down to read the address book I'd given her.*

consider:

*She glanced at the address book, and flipped it shut. 'I'd always be knowing Dave had others.'*

4. More time-wasting are qualifiers: *rather, very, perhaps, a bit, somewhat*. If there's uncertainty, then point your reader to that.

5. They draw unnecessary attention to the he/she of dialogue. The 'angrily' is not needed in:

*'That's enough from you,' she said angrily.*

but the 'softly' is saying something else here:

*'That's enough from you,' she said softly.*

If you're heroically doing without dialogue qualifiers altogether, then add an action:

*'That's enough from you,' she said, and put a soft arm round.*

Nonetheless, as point 2 suggests, adjectives can be used to set atmosphere and tone. There is a world of difference between these descriptions of the crooked lawyer warning off the hero:

*'I would not advise that,' he said indifferently.*

*'I would not advise that,' he said with a snap of menace in the voice.*

If the contrast is between the well-heeled world of crime, and the impoverished protagonist, then:

*'I would not advise that,' he said pleasantly, the smile showing expensively kept teeth.*

And all the rules can be broken if we know what we're about. Here for tone:

*'I would not advise that,' he said. The smile opened to show two faultlessly maintained rows of white teeth, gleaming as though flossed regularly between appointments. I wondered if I should change my dentist.*

Everything depends on the effect aimed for, which in turn supposes that we realize how the words will be read, i.e. we know the rules before we ignore them.

## 15.2. NARRATIVE VERSE FORMS

The ballad and blank verse are the most popular narrative forms and mark the ends of a sequence in which the stanza shape gradually yields to the demands of a believable voice. To achieve that naturalness requires great skill and various artifices, as even the novel's dialogue has to be carefully heightened to express the personality and motivation of the characters. In practice, some balance between the two, stanza shape and dialogue, needs to be struck, with the dialogue drawing some of its power from the verse structure. Some common stanza forms for narrative:

**Couplets:** easy to write, but tending to monotony unless the pace is varied as here:

Whilom, as olde stories tellen us,  
 Ther was a duc that highte Theseus;  
 Of Atthenes he was lord and governour,  
 And in his tyme swich a conquerour,  
 That gretter was ther noon under the sonne.  
 Ful many a riche contree hadde he wonne,  
 What with his wysdom and his chivalrie;  
 He conquered al the regne of Femenye,  
 That whilom was ycleped Scithia,  
 And weddede the queene Ypolita,  
 And broghte hir hoom with hym in his contree,  
 With muchel glorie and greet solempnytee,  
 And eek hir yonge suster Emelye.  
 And thus with victorie and with melodye  
 Lete I this noble duc to Atthenes ryde,  
 And al his hoost, in armes hym bisyde. {1}

**Ballad forms:** many, here in a traditional ballad

The king sits in Dumferling toune,  
 Drinking the blude-reid wine:  
 'O whar will I get guid sailor,  
 To sail this schip of mine?'

Up and spak an eldern knicht,  
 Sat at the kings richt kne:  
 'Sir Patrick Spence is the best sailor  
 That sails upon the se.'

The king has written a braid letter,  
 And signd it wi his hand,  
 And sent it to Sir Patrick Spence,  
 Was walking on the sand. {2}

And here in a modern, expanded form:

As I walked down by the river  
 Down by the frozen fen  
 I saw the grey cathedral  
 With the eyes of a child of ten.  
 O the railway arch is smoky  
 As the Flying Scot goes by  
 And but for the Education Act  
 Go Jumper Cross and I. {3}

**Don Juan stanza:** ideal for Byron's roistering style with its many asides and digressions

XI

Juan embark'd — the ship got under way,  
 The wind was fair, the water passing rough:  
 A devil of a sea rolls in that bay,  
 As I, who've cross'd it oft, know well enough;  
 And, standing upon deck, the dashing spray  
 Flies in one's face, and makes it weather-tough:  
 And there he stood to take, and take again,  
 His first — perhaps his last — farewell of Spain.

XII

I can't but say it is an awkward sight  
 To see one's native land receding through  
 The growing waters; it unmans one quite,  
 Especially when life is rather new:  
 I recollect Great Britain's coast looks white,  
 But almost every other country's blue,  
 When gazing on them, mystified by distance,  
 We enter on our nautical existence.

XIII

So Juan stood, bewilder'd on the deck:  
 The wind sung, cordage strain'd, and sailors swore,  
 And the ship creak'd, the town became a speck,  
 From which away so fair and fast they bore.  
 The best of remedies is a beef-steak  
 Against sea-sickness: try it, sir, before  
 You sneer, and I assure you this is true,  
 For I have found it answer — so may you. {4}

**Spenserian stanza:** harmonious but very slow moving

Such whenas *Archimago* them did view,  
 He weened well to worke some vncouth wile,  
 Eftsoones vntwisting his deceitfull clew,  
 He gan to weaue a web of wicked guile,  
 And with faire countenance and flattring stile,  
 To them approching, thus the knight bespake:  
 Faire sonne of *Mars*, that seeke with warlike spoile.  
 And great atchieu'ments great your selfe to make,  
 Vouchsafe to stay your steed for humble misers sake.

He stayd his steed for humble misers sake,  
 And bad tell on the tenor of his plaint;  
 Who feigning then in euery limbe to quake,  
 Through inward feare, and seeming pale and faint  
 With piteous mone his percing speach gan paint;  
 Deare Lady how shall I declare thy cace,  
 Whom late I left in langourous constraint?  
 Would God thy selfe now present were in place,  
 To tell this ruefull tale; thy sight could win thee grace. {5}

### **Ten-line stanzas**

Then you were grown; I let you on your own.  
 We will forget that August twenty-third,  
 When Mother motored with the maids to Stowe,  
 And the pale summer shades were drawn—so low  
 No one could see us; no, nor catch your hissing word,  
 As false as Cressid! Let our deaths alone:  
 The fingers on your sword-knot are alive,  
 And Hope, that fouls my brightness with its grace,  
 Will anchor in the narrows of your face.  
 My husband's Packard crunches up the drive. {6}

### **Blank Verse:** here at its grandest

A Dungeon horrible, on all sides round  
 As one great Furnace flam'd, yet from those flames  
 No light, but rather darkness visible  
 Serv'd onely to discover sights of woe,  
 Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace  
 And rest can never dwell, hope never comes  
 That comes to all; but torture without end  
 Still urges, and a fiery Deluge, fed  
 With ever-burning Sulphur unconsum'd:  
 Such place Eternal Justice had prepar'd  
 For those rebellious, here thir Prison ordain'd  
 In utter darkness, and thir portion set  
 As far remov'd from God and light of Heav'n



As from the Center thrice to th' utmost Pole.  
 O how unlike the place from whence they fell!  
 There the companions of his fall, o'rewhelm'd  
 With Floods and Whirlwinds of tempestuous fire,  
 He soon discerns, and weltring by his side  
 One next himself in power, and next in crime,  
 Long after known in *Palestine*, and nam'd  
*Beelzebub*. To whom th' Arch-Enemy,  
 And thence in Heav'n call'd Satan, with bold words  
 Breaking the horrid silence thus began. {7}

### 15.3. REWORKING THE FORM

All styles can be refurbished. Here is Charles Causely's in a faux-naïf (but effective) variation of the ballad:

I had a silver penny  
 And an apricot tree  
 And I said to the sailor  
 On the white quay

'Sailor O sailor  
 Will you bring me  
 If I give you my penny  
 And my apricot tree

A fez from Algeria  
 An Arab drum to beat  
 A little gilt sword  
 And a parakeet?' {8}

#### Ezra Pound's Cantos

Ezra Pound wove in allusion and several voices in a free-verse style in *The Cantos*. A section from *Canto VII*:

1. The old men's voices, beneath the columns of false marble,  
 The modish and darkish walls,  
 Discreeter gilding and the panelled wood  
 Suggested, for the leasehold is  
 5. Touched with an imprecision. . . about three squares;  
 The house too thick, the paintings  
 a shade too oiled.  
 And the great domed head, *con gli occhi onesti e tardi*  
 Moves before me, phantom with weighted motion,  
 10. *Grave incessu*, drinking the tone of things,  
 And the old voice lifts itself

weaving an endless sentence.

We also made ghostly visits, and the stair  
 That knew us, found us again on the turn of it,  
 15. Knocking at empty rooms, seeking for buried beauty;  
 But the sun-tanned, gracious and well-formed fingers  
 Lift no latch of bent bronze, no Empire handle  
 Twists for the knocker's fall; no voice to answer. {9}

## Content

Canto VII is one of the more difficult of the early Cantos, where Pound weaves in echoes of the classical and Renaissance world, contrasting in this section their forceful vigour with the *fin de siècle* languor, from which he took refuge in eclectic reading and (less happily) residence in Mussolini's Italy. Pound wanders round empty rooms thinking of Henry James, who acts as a Virgilian guide. We have a description of the man (great domed head, and quotations from Dante {10}) and a reference to his manner of talking — *weaving an endless sentence*, which Pound is also doing.

Many of James's characters were attracted to the sunlit vitality of Italy, and here Pound is noting how overdone is the decor of the world left behind, with its heavy panelling, dark oil paintings and false columns. The section has some excellent touches (*old men's voices, a shade too oiled, drinking the tone of things, found us again*), and some that are less so (*Touched with an imprecision, buried beauty*). Overall, a falling tone, with repetitions and a tired emptiness in surroundings and what lay beyond.

First note the **stress**/syllable counts for the line segments, and show the pauses simplistically as | (short) and || (longer):

1. The **old men's voices** | beneath the **columns** | of **false marble** || 3/5  
2/5 2/4
2. The **modish** and **darkish walls** | 3/7
3. Discreeter **gilding** | and the **panelled wood** 2/5 2/5
4. Suggested | for the **leasehold** is | 1/3 1/5
5. **Touched** with an **imprecision** || about **three squares** || 3/7 3/4
6. The **house** too **thick** | the **paintings** || 2/4 1/3
7. a **shade** too **oiled** || 2/4
8. And the **great domed head** | *con gli occhi onesti e tardi* 3/5 4/10
9. **Moves** before me | **phantom** with **weighted motion** | 2/4 3/6
10. **Grave incessu** | **drinking the tone** of **things** | 2/5 3/6
11. And the **old voice lifts** itself || 4/7
12.           **weaving an endless sentence** || 3/7
13. We **also made ghostly visits** || and the **stair** 4/8
14. That **knew** us | **found** us **again** | on the **turn** of **it** | 1/3 2/4 2/5
15. **Knocking at empty rooms** | **seeking for buried beauty** | 3/7 3/6
16. But the **suntanned, gracious** | and **well-formed fingers** | 3/6 3/5

17. **Lift** no **latch** of **bent bronze** | no **Empire handle** 4/6 2/4  
 18. **Twists** for the **knocker's fall** | no **voice** to **answer** 3/6 2/5

The rhythms are similar to those Pound developed for *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, though quieter and more fragmentary. As in that poem:

1. Beneath most lines is conventional metre, predominantly iambic in lines 4, 6, 7, 9, 13, 14, and 16, and trochaic in lines 2, 3, 10, 12, 15 and 18. Other lines are more mixed or indeterminate. If we attend to the underlying metre, then the structure approximates to: {3}

1. hexameter: molossus of **old men's voices**
2. tercet
3. pentameter
4. tetrameter
5. pentameter: molossus of **about three squares**
6. tercet
7. duplet
8. hexameter: molossus of **great domed head**
9. pentameter
10. pentameter
11. tercet: molossus of **old voice lifts**
12. tercet
13. pentameter
14. hexameter
15. hexameter
16. pentameter: molossus of **well-formed fingers**
17. pentameter
18. pentameter

And becomes even more regular by regarding lines 3 and 4 as a segmented pentameter, and lines 11 and 12 as a hexameter.

2. Many of the irregular lines are not irregular at all, but have their own patterns.

The **old** men's **voices** | **beneath** the **columns** | **of** false **marble** ||

And the **old** voice **lifts** **itself** || **weaving** an **endless** **sentence** ||

That **knew** us | **found** us **again** | on the **turn** of **it** |

**Knocking** at **empty** **rooms** | **seeking** for **buried** **beauty** |

### Imagist Techniques

The passage would benefit from extended rhythmic analysis, but of more interest here is the Imagist technique of having image serve as content.

We can distinguish four interwoven themes: a disembodied reference to **old men's voices**, which leads to **memories of Henry James**, **passages of description associated with old men's voices**, and a **description of Pound's visit**.

1. The old men's voices, beneath the columns of false marble,
2. The modish and darkish walls,
3. Discreeter gilding and the panelled wood
4. Suggested, for the leasehold is
5. Touched with an imprecision. . . about three squares;
6. The house too thick, the paintings
7. a shade too oiled.
8. And the great domed head, *con gli occhi onesti e tardi*
9. Moves before me, phantom with weighted motion,
10. *Grave incessu*, drinking the tone of things,
11. And the old voice lifts itself
12.               Weaving an endless sentence.

13. We also made ghostly visits, and the stair
14. That knew us, found us again on the turn of it,
15. Knocking at empty rooms, seeking for buried beauty;
16. But the suntanned, gracious and well-formed fingers
17. Lift no latch of bent bronze, no Empire handle
18. Twists for the knocker's fall; no voice to answer.

By combining these simple themes, Pound makes his reflections part of the larger fabric of American expatriate life. We are given old men's voices that drift from the heavy setting (France or England, possibly Flaubert's Paris), which reminds us/Pound of William James (who loved Italy, spending extended periods in Venice). Aspects of James give way to his/an old voice weaving an endless sentence. We/Pound have also made our ghostly visits to empty rooms, and these remind us of James and what he appreciated of Italy. Not a difficult set of associations, and successfully handled. In what sense is it Imagist?

Pound has the scene 'speak' by presenting specific images, and intensifying a sense of objective reality through the immediacy of those images. Rhythm is 'composed by the musical phrase rather than the metronome' — naturally so, as Pound wants those rhythms to be part of the characterization. Compare the quiet first section with the energy ushered in with *We also made ghostly visits*.

The technique is a novelist's, but the sequences marking the turn in and out of flashback have been removed, conflating past and present, and making historical personages a mouthpiece for Pound's views. The dangers are acute — unsupported opinion on one side, and obscurity on the other — but in this passage Pound is successful.

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## 15.4 WRITING THE NARRATIVE POEM

A narrative poem generally needs a plan. A short poem can grow out of the lines as they arrive, the words on paper suggesting new words and themes, but that approach becomes wasteful when hundreds of lines have to be created quickly. How are the two aspects to be balanced — the poetry of individual lines, and the overall shape, plot and characterization of a successful story? One way is develop the two together, though in interlinked phases. The poem below deals with a 'chancer': a womanizer who, after losing his family in a fire, is brought to accept a deeper side of himself and create a New Age movement.

### **Phase One: Scraps of Verse**

We dip into a book of quotations and mull over what appeals, closing the book to jot down lines as they come:

Who am I? You have heard me, not once but again  
And again calling a thousand times your name.

Yes, I am the falling  
throughout the summer rain:

First love or last love:  
always the same.

When I was young they dandled me  
Very much like you  
But at manhood then I shed my skin,  
Grew a pebble in the shoe.

The moon rose in the ascendant  
In a bright blaze at noon  
Now and wherever, in fey lands and fell  
Where the wind changes your name.

### **Phase Two: Stanza Form**

These scraps suggest the verse form: the ballad of 4a 3b 4c 3b. For example:

All my long life out as a rover,  
It was women, or it was worse,  
Only sometimes when the rain falls  
I hear the old man curse.

### **Phase Three: Check**

We rewrite more the scraps to see if they'll carry the content properly. They don't: the form is too restricting. We therefore extend the third line to five stresses — unusual but giving flexibility: it can be anything from an end-stopped pentameter to rhythmic prose:

Who am I? You have heard me, calling  
A thousand times your name.  
Throughout the falling of the summer rain:  
First love, last, the same.

Now I'm not making apologies,  
I'd sooner not tell lies.  
But Babs can talk as though she cares or not and  
They can't criticize.

### **Phase Four: Write Key Episodes**

We then rough out possible episodes in this new form, varying it to cover character, poignancy, pace, mood, etc.

But then they all know what I'm at.  
They probably swap notes,  
Where did the chancer take you, do this time?  
Usual misquotes.

Then Jason would take the swing with me  
Or ride the water chute,

Laughing I'd toss him into the air, his hair fluffed up,  
A golden parachute.

I have seen and do not discount them,  
My way is also fraught  
With obsessions and with evasions and always  
The settling afterthought

Ah, the new appointments, I said as  
The eyes shifted and looked tired:  
Well, you can rest assured, sir, that my salary. . .  
'Tranter, you are fired.'

Oh there are no factory hooters,  
Or drifts against the sky  
When Charlie and his van of Peerless Dreams  
Go toot and twinkling by.

### **Phase Five: Plot**

Next comes the plot, which grows out of conflicts in the character we have created: Charlie Tranter: feckless but intending better. Scenes:

Tranthers: their family history and character

Charlie Tranter: womanizer but marries Babs and has a kid

Fired from sales job for irregularities

Has fling with office colleague

Arrives home to find wife and child dead from fire

Sympathy: reinstated in sales job

Local press investigate: fired again

Funeral: gathering of the Tranter clan

Remorse and hard thoughts

Becomes traveller in women's underwear

More adventures, which begin to pall

Becomes more of a recluse: reads, has mystical experiences

Realizes that the shadow world of imagination is real

Imagines journey to eastern Europe with woman of his dreams

Founds a New Age movement

Successful, but embezzles contributions

Imprisoned, and now looking to convert a new congregation

### **Phase Six: Rough Draft**

Now we have to rough out the story: 250 stanzas. Mostly doggerel at this stage, as these:

And then an odd thing, I must tell you:  
Bought a book or two.  
Just action, spy books, cheap romances, anything  
In odd hours read them through.

And then more leisurely,  
I'd stop in lay-bys and what I'd thought  
Was all there - hopes, dreams, fantasies:  
Yes, that caught me short.

Timecheck: about 100 hours to this point.

### **Phase Seven: Polish Up and Add**

Next we polish up some specimen stanzas to check they're performing as intended. Some of the earlier playfulness has been lost, however, and we try adding snatches of nursery rhymes,

Ring-a-ring of poses  
The girl has lost her closes:  
I wish you, I wish you  
Would all pipe down.

rewriting where necessary in the a b c b pattern. Sexual innuendo and humour are the aim:

Where are you going, my pretty maid?  
Going to milking, unless, instead. . .  
That face is your fortune, my pretty one.  
Only my face? kind sir, she said.

Not successful: the additions don't work in properly. We therefore absorb the nursery rhymes into the standard stanza form, trying to make poetry by taking the opening line or two as suggestions only:

Remember Charlie's a-hunting gone  
To find another skin  
And all to wrap for one brief, raptured hour  
His little baby in.

### **Phase Seven: First Rewriting**

We start the rewriting, aiming for cockney humour, wry poetry, fun, sauciness. Bad bad lines or stanzas are left at this stage, as the idiocies, false



starts and bad taste may be useful later. Result is some 284 stanzas of so-so verse: not accomplished but material to work on:

So ever smiling, in I go:  
Right, morning, everyone!  
All brewster dandy, but I overdid  
The bantering, the fun.

A long, long silence followed. Please  
Take a chair, sit down.  
And even then I was laughing and chattering: Oh  
You great big lumbering clown!

Tranter, that's enough, now listen,  
The sergeant will explain.  
And it was odd, nothing at all I felt but  
Evacuating pain.

And also there was quietness, voices  
Hardly getting through,  
A hard force pressing me and the tears spurting and  
My hands trembling too.

Timecheck: another 50 hours to here.

### **Phase Eight: Second Rewriting**

Now we rework the lines, stanza by stanza, rejecting those which won't come good. Result is 250 stanzas:

All their long lives they were drifters,  
Feckless from the start.  
No rich man in the cherry stones: but choosing  
The rough trades and the mart.

Their world was a brimming oyster which  
They left in dawn-white heaps:  
Brides they messed in the fresh-dressed sheets that  
Others had for keeps.

Poised to be irregulars,  
Pressed and abruptly gone:  
Down highways where always were soft voices falling  
Through and over and on.

The dark trees spread in their eyelids,  
Evening wraps the skin  
And windows will light them from highways and byways,  
And warm smiles let them in.

This little Tranter went to Haymarket,  
 This one to the Scrubs,  
 And this one in laughter ran all the way home with his  
 Takings from the pubs.

Timecheck: another 200 hours to here.

### **Phase Nine: Polishing**

Stanzas are now polished and put away for weeks at a time, being reworked as they are seen afresh. First few stanzas:

All their long lives they were drifters,  
 Feckless from the start.  
 No rich man in the cherry stones: but choosing  
 The rough trades and the mart.

The world was their brimming oyster which  
 They left in emptied heaps,  
 And women they trashed in the dawn-white sheets must  
 Others have for keeps.

Poised to be irregulars,  
 Pressed and abruptly gone:  
 Down highways where always were soft voices falling  
 Convivially and on.

The dark trees spread in their eyelids,  
 Evening wraps the skin  
 And windows will light them from highways and byways,  
 And warm smiles let them in.

This little Tranter went to Haymarket,  
 This one to the Scrubs,  
 And this one in laughter ran all the way home with his  
 Takings from the pubs.

The final poem is published in free pdf form by [Ocaso Press](#).

# 16. DRAMATIC VERSE

Western theatre probably originated in Athens in the fifth century BC. Each of the three competing playwrights put on three tragedies and a satyr play. Tragedies consisted of two elements — choral song in lyrical measures and accompanied by music and dancing, and dramatic exchanges between two or three characters, who generally spoke in iambic trimeters. Both actors (who included the author in earlier productions) and chorus wore masks. Athenian tragedy gradually became less ritualistic, but still dealt with man's relationship to the gods, taking themes from mythology that were well known to the audience. A prologue was followed by a choral song; then came episodes of actor and chorus, followed by a standing chorus and the final scene.

## 16.1. BASIC PRINCIPLES

Poets writing for the stage have constantly modified their verse to accommodate the voice in all its moods and passions. Shakespeare took great licences with blank verse in his later plays {1}, and the dialogue in the lesser Restoration dramatists was so loosened as to be hardly verse at all. {2} In practice, some fusion between the two, stanza shape and dialogue, is needed, with the dialogue drawing some of its power from the verse structure (which is more than metre).

## 16.2. VERSE FORMS

English plays were usually written in blank verse, as is this the most flexible form closest to the natural speaking voice. Or can be, given sufficient skill. Free verse forms seem not to be so successful: they can mimic the speaking voice closely, and be beautiful, but the lines often lack power and significance. Here are six translations of the same short (12 line) section of Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*:

**Prose:** accurate and pleasing, but not very 'live':

Stranger, in this land of goodly steeds thou hast come to earth's fairest home, even to our white Colonus; where the nightingale, a constant guest, trills her clear note in the covert of green glades, dwelling amid the wine-dark ivy and the god's inviolate bowers, rich in berries and fruit, unvisited by sun, unvexed by wind of any storm; the reveller Dionysus ever walks the ground, companion of the nymphs that nursed him.

Sir Richard Jebb {3}

**Rhymed quatrains:** aiming for charm more than expressive power:

You come to Colonus, a land of peace,  
white haze and horses and of windless shade:  
in glades of wine-dark ivy, unafraid,  
the songs of nightingales can never cease.

Inviolable is the foliage: to this ground  
so rich with berries and with fruiting things,  
the nymphs of Dionysus come, with revellings  
to nurse their master with a haunting sound.

C.J. Holcombe {4}

**Rhymed quatrains:** verse dated (1913) but keeping to the strophe-antistrophe structure of the original:

Thou hast come to a steed-famed land for rest,  
O stranger worn with toil,  
To a land of all lands the goodliest  
Colonus' glistening soil.

'Tis the haunt of the clear-voiced nightingale,  
Who hid in her bower, among  
The wine-dark ivy that wreathes the vale,  
Trilleth her ceaseless song;

And she loves, where the clustering berries nod  
O'er a sunless, windless glade,  
The spot by no mortal footstep trod,

The pleasance kept for the Bacchic god,  
Where he holds each night his revels wild  
With the nymphs who fostered the lusty child.

F. Storr {5}

**Couplets:** superb verse but not a translation:

Come praise Colonus' horses, and come praise  
The wine-dark of the wood's intricacies,  
The nightingale that deafens daylight there,  
If daylight ever visit where,  
Unvisited by tempest or by sun,  
Immortal ladies tread the ground  
Dizzy with harmonious sound,  
Semele's lad a gay companion.

W.B. Yeats {6}

**Blank Verse:** flexible but close to prose:

Stranger: this is Colonus you've come to,  
a land famed for horses and for shining calm.  
No storms can hurt her nor the scorching sun  
for here are depths of forests, ripe with fruit,  
and glades with berries where the nightingale  
among the wine-dark ivy comes to sing.

Here the revelling Dionysus  
walks beneath the sacred boughs with nymphs.

C.J. Holcombe {4}

**Free verse:** attenuated but musical, conveying much of the original:

Stranger, here  
Is the land of the horse  
Earth's fairest home  
This silver hill Colonus

Here the nightingale  
Spills perennial sound  
Lucent through the undergreen.

Here the wine-deep ivies creep  
Through the God's untrodden bower  
Heavy with the laurel berry.

Here is a sunless quiet  
Riven by no storm.  
Here the coybantic foot  
Of Bacchus beats  
Tossing with the nyphs that nursed him

Paul Roche {7}

Restoration tragedy was generally written in heroic couplets, and with Dryden achieved a smooth economy of statement without rising to Shakespearean heights:

The noble *Arimant* usurp'd my name;  
Fought, and took from me, while he gave me, fame.  
To *Aureng-Zebe*, he made his Souldiers cry,  
And seeing not, where he heard danger nigh,  
Shot, like a Star, through the benighted Sky.  
A short, but mighty aid: at length he fell.  
My own adventures 'twere lost time to tell;  
Or how my Army, entring in the night,  
Surpris'd our Foes: the dark disorder'd fight:  
How my appearance, and my Father shown,

Made peace; and all the rightful Monarch own.  
I've summ'd it briefly, since it did relate  
Th'unwelcome safety of the man you hate.

From *Aurang-Zebe* by John Dryden {8}

Often the effect was more of charm:

What's all my glory, all my pomp? How poor  
Is fading greatness! or how vain is power!  
Where all the mighty conquests I have see?  
I, who o'er other nations have victorious been,  
Now cannot quell one little foe within. . .

From *Don Carlos* by Thomas Otway {9}

Quatrains were also used:

Why was I destined to be born above,  
By midwife Honour to the light conveyed  
Fame's darling, bright infant of high love,  
Crowned, and in Empire's golden cradle laid;  
Rocked by the hand of empresses, that yield  
Their sceptres formed to rattles for my hand,  
Born to the wealth of the green floating field,  
And the rich dust of all the yellow land?

From *Gloriana* by Nathaniel Lee {10}

Shakespeare could interlard rhyme with blank verse:

HOTSPUR: By heavens, methinks it were an easy leap,  
To pluck bright honor from the pale-fac'd moon,  
Or dive into the bottom of the deep,  
Where fathom-line could never touch the ground,  
And pluck up drowned honour by the locks;  
So he that doth redeem her thence might waer  
Without corrival all her dignities:  
But out upon this half-faced fellowship!

WORCESTER: He attends a world of figures here,  
But not the form of what he should attend.

From *Henry IV* (Part One, Act One, Scene 3) by William Shakespeare. {11}

Something similar is seen in T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, where the rhyme helps occasionally to shape the rather undistinguished verse:

Unbar the door!  
You think me reckless, desperate and mad.  
You argue by results, as this world does,

To settle if an act be good or bad.  
 You defer to the fact. For every life and every act  
 Consequence of good and evil can be shown.  
 And as in time results of many deeds are blended  
 So good and evil in the end become confounded.  
 It is not in time that my death shall be known;  
 It is out of time that my decision is taken  
 If you call that decision  
 To which my whole being gives entire consent. {12}

### 16.3. SHAKESPEARE'S DEVELOPMENT

Shakespeare learnt to vary his verse skilfully in his early poems, these being the chief departures from absolute regularity: {13}

- variation in location of midline phrasal break
- mild enjambment
- variation in stress patterns (replacement of iamb by trochaic, spondaic trochiac foot)

Gradually, however, as Shakespeare grew in confidence, he crafted lines for individual speeches, not to any set pattern but with these features:

- extra syllable at line start
- extra syllable in midline
- extra syllable at the line end (feminine ending)
- syllable omitted, usually unstressed but occasionally stressed
- line longer or shorter than the pentameter.
- split lines between parts.

Here are short excerpts from various stages in his dramatic verse writing.

*Two Gentlemen of Verona* (Act Two, Scene 3: Proteus speaking)

Say that upon the altar of her beauty  
 You sacrifice your tears, your sighs, your heart:  
 Write till your ink be dry, and with your tears  
 Moist it again, and frame some feeling line  
 That may discover such integrity:  
 For Orpheus' lute was strung with poets' sinews,  
 Whose golden touch could soften steel and stones,  
 Make tigers tame and huge leviathans  
 Forsake unsounded deeps to dance on sands.

After your dire-lamenting elegies,  
 Visit by night your lady's chamber-window  
 With some sweet concert; to their instruments  
 Tune a deploring dump: the night's dead silence  
 Will well become such sweet-complaining grievance.  
 This, or else nothing, will inherit her. {14}

*Richard the Second* (Act Two, Scene 4: Captain speaking)

'Tis thought the king is dead; we will not stay.  
 The bay trees in our country are all wither'd,  
 And meteors fright the fixed stars of heaven;  
 The pale-fac'd moon looks bloody on the earth  
 And lean-look'd prophets whisper fearful change;  
 Rich men look sad, and ruffians dance and leap,  
 The one in fear to lose what they enjoy,  
 The other to enjoy by rage and war.  
 These signs forerun the death or fall of kings.  
 Farewell: our countrymen are gone and fled,  
 As well assur'd Richard their king is dead. {15}

*Antony and Cleopatra* (Act Four, Scene 15: Cleopatra speaking)

The crown o' the earth doth melt. My lord!  
 O, wither'd is the garland of the war,  
 The soldier's pole is fall'n: young boys and girls  
 Are level now with men; the odds is gone,  
 And there is nothing left remarkable  
 Beneath the visiting moon. {16}

*The Winter's Tale* (Act Four, Scene 3: Perdita speaking)

Out alas:  
 You'd be so leane, that blasts of Ianuary  
 Would blow you through and through. Now (my fairst Friend,  
 I would I had some Flowres o'th Spring, that might  
 Become your time of day: and yours, and yours,  
 That weare vpon your Virgin-branches yet  
 Your Maiden-heads growing: O Proserpina,  
 For the Flowres now, that (frighted) thou let'st fall  
 From Dysses Waggon: Daffadils,  
 That come before the Swallow dares, and take  
 The windes of March with beauty: Violets (dim,  
 But sweeter then the lids of Iuno's eyes,  
 Or Cytherea's breath) pale Prime-roses,  
 That dye vnmarried, ere they can behold  
 Bright Phoebus in his strength (a Maladie  
 Most incident to Maids:) bold Oxlips, and  
 The Crowne Imperiall: Lillies of all kinds,



(The Flowre-de-Luce being one.) O, these I lacke,  
To make you Garlands of) and my sweet friend,  
To strew him o're, and ore {17}

We pass from the sturdy work of apprenticeship to the captain's speech in Richard the Second, which is so closely modelled on the sonnet, the lines end-stopped and arranged as one thought after another. In contrast, nothing seems so spontaneous as Cleopatra's speech at the death of Antony in the third example. The fourth example has that attenuated beauty of Shakespeare in his last plays, the lines ending with words as they fall: *Daffodils, dim, and,* etc.

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## 16.4 CONTEMPORARY VERSE PLAYS

The verse play is more alive than may be imagined. In the twentieth century James Elry Flecker, Gordon Bottomly, Lascelles Abercrombie, Lawrence Bin-yon, John Drinkwater, John Masefield, John Middleton Murray, William Archer, T. Sturge Moore, T.S. Eliot, Christopher Fry, Anne Ridler, Norman Nicholson, Ronald Duncan, Dylan Thomas and many others wrote verse plays for the English stage. In America that example was continued by Richard Eberhart, Archibald MacLeish, Wallace Stevens, e e cummings and William Carlos Wil-liams, though only MacLeish achieved a commercial success. Arthur Millar wrote his first draft of *The Crucible* in verse, and Tennessee Williams' *Purifica-tion* is in free verse form. Even Samuel Beckett's *Come and Go* and *Rockaby* break into formal verse on occasion. {1}

Many distinguished poets have translated plays, of course, from the classics and European languages, among them Robert Lowell, Tony Harrison, Ted Hughes, Robert David MacDonald, Adrian Mitchell and Richard Wilbur. {1}

Despite the public's declining appetite for poetry, the modern verse play is still far from dead. {2} Here are some snippets, ranging in style from the tradi-tional to a ludic postmodernism.

C.J. Holcombe: *Cleopatra* (Act Two, Scene 1)

DEMETRIUS: Men gaped at marvels, knowing that their gaze  
330. would not the like behold in later days,  
and saw their Antony, great Antony,  
the ruler of the eastern world, could be  
a struck-dumb schoolboy, watching, gauche and shy,  
the queen's magnificence pass slowly by.

DELLIUS: She anchored off, and with attendants came,  
each boat ablaze with bobbing gold and flame.

DEMETRIUS: A vast, thick odour fell on us and drew  
a deep compulsion, where each soul would sue  
for all its sweethearts lost long years ago —

340. when life ran naturally, and none need know  
 the daily harassment and injury  
 that keep us from the better selves we'd be.  
 All this the perfume in an instant brought,  
 and then the customs of another court:  
 one dark, demonic, and half wild to us.  
 At first restrained it seemed, and decorous,  
 each piping lost in cymbal-softened sound,  
 but then it deepened, sharpened: all around  
 we heard cacophonies as though from hell  
 350. their howling, snout-nosed gods bestrode the swell.  
 Then through it quietly came the flute and pause  
 where we could see the dip of jewelled oars  
 and hear the silver-twinkled movement cause  
 a stir, a murmur, then such wild applause,  
 as glittering beneath her cobra crown  
 and more revealed within her veiling gown,  
 the queen appeared and with a swarthy grace  
 showed great imperiousness in that strong face.  
 I do not know I ever saw such eyes  
 360. look quite so lambent, dark and otherwise.  
 It was as though beneath each gilded lid  
 as much was offered as was also hid.  
 Our Antony, now ruffled and confused,  
 produced his orders but was then refused. {3}

### Kenneth Koch: *Angelica: An Opera* (Act Two Scene 3)

EDOUARD Oh see where Hausman comes, see where he comes  
 To put these projects into execution!  
 See how he moves as to the sound of drums,  
 Intent on architectural revolution!  
 His light militia carry pick and hammer  
 To rob the city of its old, and give it a new glamor!  
 See where he comes, see where the Baron comes!  
 Oh he shall win Angelica back  
 For if she isn't blind  
 She'll like the breezy Paris he creates!  
 See where he comes with compass, cranes and weights! {4}

### Dennis Johnson: *Soul of a Whore* (Part One)

*HT's voice [sings]: Let the Midnight Special  
 Shine a light on you  
 pinpoint spot lights a sign, overhead left 'STORE SURPLUS'*

WOMAN [OS]: Guys, I need your papers of parole  
 And state ID to cash that check, OK?  
 MAN [OS]: Dump your whites up there on the second level.  
 The second level is where you dump your whites.  
 Use the changing room, sir, will you, please?  
 WOMAN [OS]: Your middle name is printed on that check,  
 Then go ahead and spell your whole name out.  
 Sign the *back* side: first name, middle name  
 If middle name is printed on the check,  
 And your last name; *and* I want your writ  
 Of discharge, *or* parole certificate  
*And* your official Texas state ID;  
 Or else your check will *not* be honoured here.  
*HT's voice [sings]: Let the Midnight Special*  
*Shine an ever lovin' light on you*  
*Lights up: Greyhound station in Huntsville, Texas. {5}*

## Joyelle McSweeney: *Dead Youth, or, The Leaks*

ST-EXUPÉRY: Let the interrogation proceed. Now, Muse, I don't want to have to take out my carburetor or my salad tongs. So answer my questions. Sing, muse.

MUSE: I won't.

ST-EXUPÉRY: Then prattle.

MUSE: The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream  
 YOUTH: the only emperor is the emperor de glace  
 MUSE: the only emperor is the one who stands naked  
 YOUTH: the only emperor is the emperor sans pants  
 MUSE: and communicates to youth, directly in his nakedness.  
 ASSANGE: O dream of a crystalline communication.  
 Flap flap to dirty ears. The pidgins of pigeons.  
 The germs they smuggle in their penates and pinions.  
 The germs they share for a puddle of crumb-ions.  
 Good pigeons, grey matter, rats with aspirations!  
 O rank mass, its rank communicants! Its holy communications!  
 YOUTH: We Catholics believe in transubstantiation.  
 Our uncanny valley runs on circuits of revulsion.  
 MUSE: How like a thing, how like a paragon  
 YOUTH: how like a think, how like an epicure  
 MUSE: how like a stink, how like a pedicure  
 YOUTH: how like bacteria that thrive in the footbath  
 MUSE: how like a strand of flesh-eating staph  
 YOUTH: how like the society ladies hobble on no feet  
 MUSE: until they realize Jimmy Choos fit better with no feet

YOUTH: how they then occupy the lotus position

MUSE: how like a bath salt

YOUTH: how like a bidet.

MUSE: What a piece of...work is man

YOUTH: *Le seul empereur est l'empereur de glace*

MUSE: *Caveat emptor*

YOUTH: *Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate.*

MUSE: Follow your leader. That's called dictée. {6}

Many others have written verse plays — Tim Griffin, Edwin Torres, Joel Brouwer, David Herson, Jez Butterworth, to mention but a few — but their work is not readily accessible on the Internet.

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## 17. MODERNIST STYLES

Modernist (and Postmodernist) verse is not a break with the past so much as a development — sometimes to extremes— of certain strands of Romanticism.

### 17.1. CHARACTERISTICS

#### The Shock of the New

One feature above all is striking in Modernism: experimentation, change for the sake of change, a need to be constantly at the cutting edge in technique and thought. {1} 'Make it new' said Pound. Perhaps this was understandable in a society itself changing rapidly. The First World War shattered many beliefs — in peaceful progress, international cooperation, the superiority of the European civilizations. It also outlawed a high-minded and heroic vocabulary: 'gallant, manly, vanquish, fate', etc. could afterwards only be used in an ironic or jocular way. {2} But more fundamental was the nineteenth century growth in city life, in industrial employment, in universal literacy, in the power of mass patronage and the vote. Science and society could evolve and innovate, so why not art?

Is incessant change to be welcomed, and should art reflect such change? Perhaps a stronger argument could be made for stability, some inner anchor of belief and shared assumptions as society moved beyond its familiar landmarks. Well known are the disorientating and debilitating effects of the stress involved, in animals and humans. {3} Man is above all a social animal, and it may be that the media hype and advertising of contemporary life is purposely shallow to fulfil that need for shared experience.

In its desire to retain intellectual ascendancy, art overlooked one crucial distinction. Science tests, improves and builds, but does not wantonly tear down. Extensive modification of established conceptions is difficult, and starting afresh in the manner of the modernist artist would be unthinkable. There is simply too much to know and master, and the scientific community insists on certain apprenticeships and procedures. Originality is not prized in the way commonly supposed.

And does art represent its time? Not in any simple way. Very different artworks may originate in the same society at the same time — those of Hals and Rembrandt, for example. Art history naturally wishes to draw everything into its study but neither the appearance of great artists nor the direction of artistic trends seems predictable, any more than history is, and for similar reasons. Everything depends on the starting assumptions: what counts as important, and how that is assessed. Much the same can be said of economic theory. {4} The necessary are not the sufficient causes: certain factors may need to be present but they are not themselves sufficient to effect change.

## The Always Unconventional

No less than other practices, art begets art, with sometimes only a nodding acquaintance with the larger world it purports to represent or serve. Much writing and painting from the early nineteenth-century days of Romanticism was frankly escapist, preferring the solitude of nature or the inner world of contemplation to the mundane business of socializing and earning a living. No doubt the shallow optimism, humbug and economic exploitation of the Industrial Revolution was very unattractive, but so then was rural poverty. Excepting the Georgians and some of the Auden generation, few poets of the last hundred years had first hand experience of the social issues of the day, and there are large areas of contemporary life even now that are not squarely treated: the world of work, public service, cultural differences, sexual experience. The literary models do not exist, and poets are not prepared to 'dig out the facts' — i.e. write something closer to journalism. {5}

## The Ever Individual

But the burning issues of the day pass and are soon forgotten. Art prides itself on its more fundamental qualities. If they did not have the time, training or intellectual powers to understand the contemporary world, artists would look for some shorter path to their subject matter. Hence the championing of the artist's viewpoint, on a vision unmediated by social understanding. Hence the appeal to (if not the understanding of) psychiatry, mythology and linguistics to assert that artistic creations do not *represent* reality but in some sense *embody* reality. Poems should not express anything but themselves. They should simply *be*. {6}

Many techniques were used to distance language from its common uses, and assert its primary, self-validating status. And since proficiency in science and business requires a long, practical training, literature also insisted on study courses: a good deal needs to be accepted before the student's eyes are opened to the excellences of contemporary writing. Maybe these are invisible to the general public, or even to rival sects, but that is not a drawback. Art is not for the profane majority, and its boundaries are carefully patrolled. Art may employ populist material or techniques, but it cannot be populist itself. Art is outspokenly useless.

All this comes at a cost. Writers in a free society may surely please themselves, securing what public they can, but there is something curious, if not perverse, in making work opaque with private allusion, obscure mythology, and misunderstood scraps of philosophy, and in the same breath complaining that the work does not sell. Professional writing is a very hard business, and even the moderately successful novelist needs to turn out a supplementary one or two thousand words per week as a journalist or reviewer. The founders of Modernism had small private incomes, found patrons or begged. Dedicated writers today resort to part-time employment that is not too physically or

mentally demanding, but the restricting viewpoints can be to their own and society's disadvantage.

## Elitist Intellectualism

But Modernist writers and their commentators do not regard the narrowly individual outlook a shortcoming, quite the opposite. Nineteenth-century realism was tainted with commerce and the circulating libraries. Twentieth-century realism all too blatantly takes the form of TV soaps and blockbuster novels. God forbid that the modern writer should obey the first tenet of art, and portray something of the world in clearer and more generous contours. That would mean actually experiencing the hard world as it is for most of its inhabitants, of living like everybody else.

The intellect has its demands and pleasures, but the Modernists do not generally live such a life, which requires university tenure or independent wealth. Their learning tends to be fragmentary, with ideas serving ulterior purposes, one of which is social distinction. There is a persistent strain of intellectual snobbery in Modernism — sometimes breaking out in racism and contempt for the masses, sometimes retreating to arcane philosophy: idealism, existentialism, Poststructuralism. {7} Modernists are an aristocracy of the intellect. The cerebral is preferred. Modern dramatists and novelists may appeal to mythology, but their understanding is intellectualised: work is not crafted to evoke the primal forces unleashed in plays by Euripides or Racine, but shaped by concepts that serve for plot and structure.

## Conclusions

Modernism evolved by various routes. From Symbolism it took allusiveness in style and an interest in rarefied mental states. From Realism it borrowed an urban setting, and a willingness to break taboos. And from Romanticism came an artist-centred view, and retreat into irrationalism and hallucinations. Even its founding fathers did not long remain Modernists. Pound espoused doctrinaire right-wing views. Eliot became a religious convert. Joyce's late work verged on the surrealistic. Lewis quarrelled with everyone.

No one would willingly lose the best that has been written in the last hundred years, but the poetry is often built on the flimsiest of foundations: Freudian psychiatry, verbal cleverness, individualism run riot, anti-realism, over-emphasis on the irrational. The concepts themselves are sometimes fraudulent, and the supporting myths too small and self-admiring to show man in his fullest nature. Sales of early Modernist works were laughably small, and it was largely after the Second World War, when the disciples of Modernism rose to positions of influence in the academic and publishing worlds, that Modernism became the lingua franca of the educated classes. The older generation of readers gradually died out. Literature for them was connoisseurship, a lifetime



of deepening familiarity with authors who couldn't be analysed in critical theory, or packed into three-year undergraduate courses.

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## 17.2. SYMBOLIST POETS

Modernism is rooted in Romanticism, which has taken many winding paths over the last two centuries. Symbolism is a convenient place to start.

Symbolism in literature was a complex movement that deliberately extended the evocative power of words to express the feelings, sensations and states of mind that lie beyond everyday awareness. The open-ended symbols created by Charles Baudelaire (1821-67) brought the invisible into being through the visible, and linked the invisible through other sensory perceptions, notably smell and sound. Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-98), the high priest of the French movement, theorized that symbols were of two types. One was created by the projection of inner feelings onto the world outside. The other existed as nascent words that slowly permeated the consciousness and expressed a state of mind initially unknown to their originator.

None of this came about without cultivation, and indeed dedication. Poets focused on the inner life. They explored strange cults and countries. They wrote in allusive, enigmatic, musical and ambiguous styles. Rimbaud deranged his senses and declared 'Je est un autre'. Von Hofmannstahl created his own language. Valéry retired from the world as a private secretary, before returning to a mastery of traditional French verse. Rilke renounced wife and human society to be attentive to the message when it came.

Not all were great theoreticians or technicians, but the two interests tended to go together, in Mallarmé most of all. He painstakingly developed his art of suggestion, what he called his 'fictions'. Rare words were introduced, syntactical intricacies, private associations and baffling images. Metonymy replaced metaphor as symbol, and was in turn replaced by single words which opened

in imagination to multiple levels of signification. Time was suspended, and the usual supports of plot and narrative removed. Even the implied poet faded away, and there were then only objects, enigmatically introduced but somehow made right and necessary by verse skill. Music indeed was the condition to which poetry aspired, and Verlaine, Jimenez and Valéry were among many who concentrated efforts to that end.

So appeared a dichotomy between the inner and outer lives. In actuality, poets led humdrum existences, but what they described was rich and often illicit: the festering beauties of courtesans and dance-hall entertainers; far away countries and their native peoples; a world-weariness that came with drugs, isolation, alcohol and bought sex. Much was mixed up in this movement — decadence, aestheticism, romanticism, and the occult — but its isms had a rational purpose, which is still pertinent. In what way are these poets different from our own sixties generation? Or from the young today: clubbing, experimenting with relationships and drugs, backpacking to distant parts? And was the mixing of sensory perceptions so very novel or irrational? Synaesthesia was used by the Greek poets, and indeed has a properly documented basis in brain physiology.

What of the intellectual bases, which are not commonly presented as matters that should engage the contemporary mind, still less the writing poet? Symbolism was built on nebulous and somewhat dubious notions: it inspired beautiful and historically important work: it is now dead: that might be the blunt summary. But Symbolist poetry was not empty of content, indeed expressed matters of great interest to continental philosophers, then and now. The contents of consciousness were the concern of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), and he developed a terminology later employed by Heidegger (1889-1976), the Existentialists and hermeneutics. Current theories on metaphor and brain functioning extend these concepts, and offer a rapprochement between impersonal science and irrational literary theory.

So why has the Symbolism legacy dwindled into its current narrow concepts? Denied influence in the everyday world, poets turned inward, to private thoughts, associations and the unconscious. Like good Marxist intellectuals, they policed the area they arrogated to themselves, and sought to correct and purify the language that would evoke its powers. Syntax was rearranged by Mallarmé. Rhythm, rhyme and stanza patterning were loosened or rejected. Words were purged of past associations (Modernism), of non-visual associations (Imagism), of histories of usage (Futurism), of social restraint (Dadaism) and of practical purpose (Surrealism). By a sort of belated Romanticism, poetry was returned to the exploration of the inner lands of the irrational. Even Postmodernism, with its bric-a-brac of received media images and current vulgarisms, ensures that gaps are left for the emerging unconscious to engage our interest.

## Symbolism in Literature: France

Where Baudelaire felt life grievously, and developed a style to express that experience, Mallarmé started with words and turned them into beautiful creations that evaded the exterior world. What mattered in Symbolism was the coherence of that inner vision, and the sheer beauty of the verse.

### Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui

The fresh, the beautiful, vivacious day:  
with wing-blow reeling can its brilliance wake  
beneath this haunted, forgotten and frosted lake  
the clear ice-falls of flights not yet fled away?

In past magnificence of thoughts today  
the swan recaptures its freedom but cannot make  
a song from surroundings, and only take  
on the sterile, dull glint of the winter's stay.

Out in white agony the whole neck lies  
in a space inflicted that the bird denies.  
Cold and immobile in its feathered being,  
not in horror of earth but to brightness gone,  
as a dream wrapped in scorn, and a phantom, seeing  
how ineffectual is exile for the Swan.

from *Poésies* (1887) by Stéphane Mallarmé

Could the exterior world be evaded altogether, when poetry would refer to nothing but its own abstractions, and so aspire to music, the most creative of the arts? That hope came from Edgar Allan Poe, but was taken up most enthusiastically by French poets, who strove for a *poésie pure* of unclouded lyric intensity. Ideas of the workaday world, its decencies, passions, or rationale, were unwanted, indeed were detrimental. Only two things counted. There was the language itself: the phonetic properties of words, their connotations, sounds, half-heard melodies, etymologies, etc. And there were symbols: the fire, heaven, ice, lilies, soul, etc. that each poet explored and developed. The symbols were not arbitrary, and were more discovered than created by the poet.

How discovered? There were many views, each spawning a line of poetic development. Some poets regarded symbols as corresponding to an ultimate reality (Baudelaire) or to supernal beauty (Poe). That was the Neoplatonist tradition, which sees poetry as transcending the world of appearances and apprehending divine truth itself. Plato had used myths, images and symbols to express his ideas, and the Neoplatonists added a good deal of their own, from Roman Egypt and middle eastern mythology, alchemy and astrology. The result could be baffling to the uninitiated, but by using these symbols poets

were tapping into what we now call archetypes, and emphasizing the metaphoric nature of language.

All this was far from apparent at the time, and many poets discounted a universe of pure forms existing as the primary heritage of mankind. Nonetheless, poetic language might still be the royal road to understanding, or the medium in which understanding revealed itself, for certainly the society around them provided no such help. The commercial world was crassly materialistic, for all its philanthropy and belief in progress. From such isolation, it was only a short step to the New Criticism doctrine, that a poem is an autonomous object complexly mediated by language, i.e. the poem may or may not refer to real things, but exists only in the form in which it presents itself.

Others were unwilling to grant this exclusive prestige to language. Each art form offered its own vision, as did the compelling power of love or religious experience. In the hermetic tradition, moreover, understanding could not be earned without effort and pain, so that a facile juggling with words would never answer as poetry. Even Wittgenstein believed that philosophy had to be undertaken with the whole being, and not as an intellectual pursuit, and poets faced an equally arduous apprenticeship. Openness to experience was essential, and that experience extended beyond conventional beliefs and behaviour. Yeats and the Italian *ermetismo* movement were much exercised by magic, and indeed by all those abstruse aspects of learning hidden from the profane majority, an attitude that transferred itself to Modernism.

A few travelled beyond poetry. Valéry became more absorbed in the processes of writing than in the final product, magnificent though that often was. Rimbaud deranged his senses to create a startling poetry without verse, or what most would call verse. His work rose with intense feelings from childhood memories into a sort of muscular lyricism, which was uncompromisingly direct. It was certainly poetry, but one without literary precedents — or descendants, since nothing like it has been written since. Genius is the only explanation, but genius that relied on drugs and alcohol. 'Then I would explain my magic sophistries with the hallucination of words,' said their author. Words were the only truth, as the academic Hegel had insisted, but not words of some tidy philosophical system. The irrational gave access to a larger and more liberated world, and from this belief developed Dadaism and Surrealism.

The vast majority of poets, however, saw the matter quite differently. Though impressed by the purity of style, and the originator's obvious integrity, they felt that Mallarmé's approach was wrong-headed. Impressions, feelings and thoughts gave any art its first prompting, and these were then developed in whatever form was appropriate. Technique is therefore what most contemporaries learned from Symbolism: the exquisite musicality without the philosophy.

## Symbolism in Literature: Spain

Symbolism was to take on board a good deal of twentieth century concerns — alienation, loss of communal and spiritual beliefs — but this freight is more obvious with hindsight. Poetry in the Romance languages was initially rather straightforward. In Spanish, Symbolism was only one of many elements introduced by Rubén Darío, the great innovator, who was born in 1867 in Nicaragua, then a remote country of jungles, lakes and volcanoes where the Spanish were never fully at home. Childhood was predictably unhappy, but also productive. As a child prodigy, Darío went to Managua and San Salvador, and then won praise for his first serious collection of poems and stories, *Azúl*, published in 1888. Thereafter, as diplomat, traveller and essayist, he met the most important writers of his day, and was able to fuse traditional Spanish forms with Parnassian and Symbolist elements to produce what he called *modernismo*. Darío was the most influential Spanish poet of his time, and many still feel that Spanish literature was reborn under his direction.

Pain contains and offends us, this is  
continually fate:  
but given also is the flowing noesis  
of the world's state.

And ours also a vibrancy  
as seashell the surf  
sounding in its sufficiency  
sunlight and earth.

Salt in our arteries presses  
its bloodline and sweep  
as sirens in wavering tresses  
keep tritons from sleep.

Fence us in then with ilex and laurel,  
and deeper entrust:  
we, centaurs inclined, have no quarrel  
with satyr's lust.

In us abundances pour  
headlong their breath,  
as richer in love's realms we draw  
and deeper to death.

*Poema del Otoño* from *Poema del Otoño y Otros Poemas* (1910) by Rubén Darío. (Concluding section).

Darío himself was complex: religious, dissolute, solitary, childlike and cynical. The poetry was equally bewildering, but always accomplished. The most demanding forms were handled with effortless facility, complexities of his own being added that defy translation — dissonance, assonance, internal rhyme, borrowed mannerisms, an exuberance of language that could be deftly erotic

but also strikingly fresh and direct. He married three times, returned to Nicaragua in 1906, and produced collections regularly until his death from drink in 1916.

Darío had numerous followers but no real descendants. It was not the formidable technical mastery — which may explain why he is so rarely translated into English — but the eclectic and rootless nature of the achievement. The poems work in and with a style that is distinctive, but do not speak of a larger world which exists independently of their author. Lorca identified with an Andalusian gypsy culture, and Neruda's communist history of Latin America continues to resonate throughout the continent. Darío's world is more self-created: take away the astonishing artistry and only the props of poetry remain: swans, centaurs, stars, etc. From a Left perspective, Darío's poetry may appear bombastic and over-decorative, perhaps like Swinburne to English readers. But to Spaniards in the first decades of the twentieth century, particularly those stifled by the conservative attitudes of provincial Spain, Darío's poetry came as liberation. With the measures he introduced, poetry could accomplish anything.

Take a simple poem of Juan Ramón Jiménez (1881-1958). *No Era Nadie in Jardines lejanos* (1904) opens: — *No era nadie. El agua — Nadie? / Que no es nadie el agua? — No / hay nadie. Es la flor. — No hay nadie? / Pero no Es nadie la flor?* What does it mean? Not very much at first blush. It was no one. Water. No one. / Is the water no one? There / is no one. It is the flower. There is no one / But is the flower no one? But this is not mindless riddling: the rhythmical effects create colour and music. More importantly, they cause us to look at the world afresh. Edmund Husserl stressed the contents of consciousness, and here, quite independently, was one way of bracketing off experience from traditional or mundane concerns.

Frederico Garcia Lorca (1899-1936) went further to introduce Surrealist elements. The opening lines of *Romance Sonambulo (Romancero gitano, 1928)* run: *Verde que te queiro verde. / Verde viento. Verde ramas.* A literal translation conveys very little: Green, I want/love you green. Green wind. Green branches. But the Spanish ear surrenders to the incantation, entranced by the repetition of vowels and the *v*, *r* and *que* sounds. Green evokes leaves and water, moreover, if somewhat garishly in this nightmare setting of a very Spanish story of blood and honour, and that association is important. Trees at night only show their true colour when illuminated, and this mysterious green of the wind and branches utters a warning: the scenes depicted are not real and should not be happening. Later in the poem, when the dead girl is discovered floating in the pool, the greenness is given a sharper twist: *Verde carne, pelo Verde / con ojos de fría plata* Green flesh, green hair / with eyes of chilly silver. A simple device, but one permeating and giving depth to the poem.

What is the point of creating such an unreal world? The freedom to explore issues that were difficult or forbidden — in Lorca's case, his homosexuality and Republican sympathies. Lorca was also markedly self-aggrandizing, so that

the poetry was one way of ensuring that the artist remained spot-lit on his rostrum. No doubt the two went together, the Symbolist legacy being developed as much for personal needs as other considerations.

## Symbolism in Literature: Germany

Rainer Maria Rilke was born in 1875 of German parents in Prague. He was dressed as a girl by his mother and sent to a military academy by his father, and from these confusions and resentments developed a character that became increasingly fastidious, hypersensitive and retiring. Rilke found solace in his own thoughts, but the resulting restrictions and inner discipline that eventually made him one of the greatest of European lyric poets came through a personal reworking of Nietzschean philosophy.

Rilke advanced rapidly. His early work was facile and openly sentimental, winning a wide readership but not critical acclaim. Thereafter he acquired the virtuosos handling of words from the Symbolist poet Stephan George, and from the Danish novelist Jens Peter Jacobsen learned to find sensuous equivalents in nature for personal feelings that were vague and unformed. The experiences of two visits to Russia in the company of Nietzsche's friend Lou Andreas-Salomé were profoundly moving, and from them he developed a sense of the brotherhood between men and inanimate objects. In April 1901 Rilke married the artist Clara Westhoff, but could not support the family, and left after 18 months to pursue a life free of commitments. In Paris he acted as unpaid secretary to Rodin, and was brought to see that an artist cannot rely on inspiration but must work continually to realize his skills and his sensations before nature. The influence of Russia appeared in the collection the *Book of Hours* (1905), and of Rodin in *New Poems* (1907-8). The short novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910) was something of a retreat — it records a sensitive poet recoiling from (and developing inner resources to meet) the loneliness and poverty of Paris life — and the next years were passed in travel to Spain and North Africa, and in translating French, Italian and English poetry into German. In staying at the Schloss Duino in 1912, however, Rilke was overwhelmed by a flood of inspiration, composing the first of what would be published as the *Duino Elegies* in 1923. With their eventual completion came a sonnet cycle, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, and then occasional poems in simpler forms until Rilke's death from leukemia in 1926.

## Antique Torso

We cannot see the famous head, nor learn  
 how eyes like apples would have ripened, yet  
 the torso glows, as if a lantern set  
 the gaze to hold its gleam in, quiet and stern.

How else would it be difficult to read  
 the dazzling curve of chest, the placid hips,

the loins, the smile that tells about the lips  
of that dark centre where genitals seed?

Indeed the stone itself would seem defaced,  
and short the lucid fall to shoulder, graced  
by no beast's fierceness in its glistening skin.

Nor would we feel the broken edges rife  
with starburst's showering rays. You're always in  
their watchful sight. You must change your life.

*Archaischer Torso Apollos* from *Neue Gedichte* (1907-1908)

By his early thirties, Rilke had acquired a virtuosity to turn anything to poetry, and no translations adequately express the beauty of work in *The Book of Hours* or *New Poems*. But it was the *Duino Elegies* that opened up new realms for European poetry. The Symbolist movement gave Rilke a language for the as-yet unsayable, and his verse mastery shaped it to a persuasive view. Nonetheless, Rilke's thought is not orthodox, and its pantheism, mysticism and seeking after God may only appeal to those who experience Rilke's own marginal sense of existence. Lines like *wenn der Wind voller Weltraum / uns am Angesicht zehrt* (when the wind-fuller space erodes our faces) may be wonderfully apt to those oppressed by the insubstantiality and brevity of human existence, but enigmatic to most.

Critics often admire the poetry while rejecting the thought, raising the problem of truth in poetry. Rilke very much believed in what he wrote, and his poetry was a way of divining what he did indeed think and feel. His technical mastery was such that he did not betray beliefs for the felicitous phrase, but could oblige the German language to say beautifully what it had not said before. 'The essential function of art is to think and feel existence to that conclusion which convinces us of its perfection — to affirm, bless and deify existence.' The words are Nietzsche's, but express the aims of much of Rilke's poetry.

It is an odd objective. Nietzsche hated the restrictions of bourgeois German society, and imagined a Greek aristocracy in the sunburnt splendour of its powers. Yet there is something suspect about this view, just as there is in Lorca's gypsies or Neruda's communism. Greece is the foundation of European civilization, but many aspects would be repellent today: slavery, phallic cults, treatment of women, great savagery in war. The German Professor of Philology, sedentary and riddled with syphilis, would not have been at home in Periclean Athens, let alone pre-Socratic Greece. Rilke is an even less heroic figure, and was concerned with refining emotions that would have speedily undone the common purpose of Greek city life. Yet the spiritual sickness of the age, which so many nineteenth century artists complained of, and attempted to overcome through their work, was what Modernism would explore and take further.



## The Duino Elegies

Below is the First of the Duino Elegies, the opening 26 lines of this famous 94-line section.

### The First Elegy

Who, if I cried, could hear me among the angelic orders? And even if one of them impulsively took me to his heart, I should perish in his stronger existence. For the beautiful is nothing but the feared beginning of what we at length endure and that which we admire is its calm disdain to destroy us. Each and every angel is fearful,

And so I repress myself, and swallow the call-note of the dark sobbing. Ah, who is there that we are able to make use of? Not angels, not men, and even the sensing animals know that we are not securely at home in our interpreted world. There remains to us perhaps some tree or other on the hillside to be daily met with again; there is yesterday's street and the spoilt devotion of a habit that liked us and stayed and never gave notice.

Oh, and the night, the night, when the wind-fuller space erodes our faces — for whom would she not remain, the yearned for, the gently disappointing one, whom the single heart arduously is approaching? Is she the truth for lovers? Alas, they only obscure in each other their destiny.

Don't you know that yet? Fling out of your arms the emptiness; add it to the spaces we breathe; maybe the birds will feel the enlarged air with more ardent flight.

## Symbolism in Literature: Britain

Though Symbolism was a French movement in art and literature, formally introduced to English readers by Arthur Symonds's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, {21} W.B. Yeats had anticipated its themes by his first collection.

Crossways (1889) opens {22} with:

The woods of Arcady are dead,  
And over is their antique joy;

Of old the world on dreaming fed;  
 Grey truth is now her painted toy. (*The Song of the Happy Shepherd*)

Already there is the appeal to a lost world of ancient imaginative truth — superior to drab reality (sick children of the world, as he calls it later in the poem) — the appearance of esoteric symbols in the Rood and Chronos, and indeed in W.B. Yeats's views throughout his life:

There is no truth  
 Saving in thine own heart

For words alone are certain good

In the guise of the simple countryman, WBY has adopted the robes of the magus: the natural world will submit to him, and that magic he will perform through his sorcery of words.

Yeats had drawn on earlier English traditions, notably Blake, Shelley and Rossetti to say more than immediately meets the eye through an imagery of symbols. Some were traditional — rose, sea, tower — and others were of his own devising, becoming more complex and interrelated in later poems. Through the works of Madame Blavatsky and others, by attending séances and by mixing in theosophical circles, Yeats came to see the Anima Mundi as a reservoir of everything that has touched mankind, aspects of which may evoked by symbols. Inherent in these views was the doctrine of correspondences, the doctrine of signatures, and the doctrine of magical in connotations and symbols which have power over spiritual and material reality. {23}

When Modernism conquered academic and literary opinion after WWII, there was a natural desire to enlist WBY in its forward-looking movement. His larger views on Ireland and its social emancipation were emphasized, as were his increasing use of everyday language and speech rhythms, and of cinematic approaches, one image following another without much connecting text. All are well documented. The pre-Raphaelite detail is pruned back and made more effective.

Midnight has come, and the great Christ Church Bell  
 and many a lesser bell sound through the room;  
 And it is All Souls' Night,  
 And two long glasses brimmed with muscatel  
 Bubble upon the table. A ghost may come; (*All Soul's Night*)

The exquisite music of the earlier verse with its subtle phonetic patterning and word inversions becomes more natural, the diction more matter of fact —

I met the Bishop on the road  
 And much said he and I,

Those breasts are flat and fallen now,  
Those veins must soon be dry; (*Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop*)

The first twenty lines of *In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz* simply float images on the screen of memory:

The light of evening, Lissadell,  
Great windows open to the south,  
Two girls in silk kimonos, both  
Beautiful. One a gazelle . . .

But at a deeper level, Yeats became a Modernist in his championing of the artist's viewpoint unmediated by social understanding, and by his use of private memory and mythology to assert that artistic creations do not represent reality but in some sense embody reality.

Poems should not express anything but themselves. They should simply be. {24}

'When I try to put it all into a phrase I say, "Man can embody truth, but he cannot know it." I must embody it in the completion of my life.' {25}

But there were problems. In *Sailing to Byzantium* {26}

That is no country for old men. The young  
In one another's arms, birds in the trees,  
—Those dying generations—at their song,  
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,  
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long  
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.  
Caught in that sensual music all neglect  
Monuments of unageing intellect.

How do we read 'commend', which is a transitive verb: to what or whom are the fish, flesh, or fowl being commended? What are the monuments exactly? Why celebrate bodily decrepitude? 'Perne in a gyre' makes sense only in Yeats's *A Vision*. The next phrase — 'It knows not what it is;' — seems innocuous, until we ask what the 'It' is — the heart, the dying animal, the aged man? Why 'artifice of eternity'? Byzantine artists did not make mechanical birds. 'Of what is past, or passing, or to come.' About everything, presumably: how? What knowledge or insight does the poet possess that the lords and ladies would want to hear?

But why did Yeats create such problems? Because, I suspect, he saw himself the medium at a seance, receiving important messages that had to be conveyed verbatim. In time, when Yeats continued to ignore the matter, (as did the other founders of Modernism in their own work), the difficulties became a distinctive and necessary part of modern poetry. The poet wasn't at fault. It was language itself that was faulty. A vast critical movement sprang up in later decades to show that this was necessarily the case,

when poets were simply being more perceptive and honest than writers in more mundane professions. But the larger difficulties are these: If we have to consult specialist guides to understand the poems, they will not make immediate sense to most readers. If those guides, furthermore, suggest readings that make even less sense, we must either give up attempts to fully understand the poem and happily ignore the difficulties:

'It only seems obscure if we try to interpret what we should be content to enjoy. And he added, "It is precisely this desire to interpret instead of to feel, to look for a meaning which is not there, that leads the critics to call symbolist poetry obscure.'" {27}

Or look deeper. Possibly Yeats's *A Vision* held the key. Until recently, *A Vision* remained a literary curiosity, an embarrassment to academics and fellow poets, a hocus pocus whose sole importance had been to keep the man magisterially alive and writing. *A Vision* is now receiving scholarly interest, {29-30} though rather as an anthropologist will explore the myths and rituals of an Amazonian tribe — with informed and critical interest, but not belief. But was Yeats really so gullible as to believe in séances and astrology? He didn't quite say. The 1937 version of the book includes, 'Some will ask whether I believe in the actual existence of my circuits of the sun and moon. . . To such a question I can but answer that if sometimes, overwhelmed by spectacle as all men must be in the midst of it, I have taken such periods literally, my reason has soon recovered; and now that the system stands out clearly in my imagination I regard them as stylistic arrangements of experience comparable to the cubes in the drawing of Wyndham Lewis and to the ovoids in the sculpture of Brancusi. They have helped me hold in a single thought reality and justice.' {28} Real only when overwhelmed by spectacle, symbolically real, a geometric skeleton or convenient mental prop? For all his gifts as talker and revolutionary, Yeats the thinker could be remarkably elusive.

Occult matters were nonetheless central to W. B. Yeats, justifying the select audience and providing depth to his imagery. By 1892 he was saying 'If I had not made magic my constant study I could not have written a single word of my Blake book, nor would *The Countess Kathleen* ever have come to exist. The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write.' {31}

Yeats's interests were of his time, but still influence how we read his poetry. Most scientists are adamant that psi activities cannot occur, and that the evidence must therefore be nonexistent or fraudulent. Yet the evidence does exist, in many thousands of well-documented studies. {32} Astrology is likewise flatly rejected by science, though the supposedly damning research {33} may be flawed. {34} Or rest on doubtful bases: personality measurement, for example, against which astrologer's analyses are often compared, itself suffers from severe problems of theory {35} and application. {36-37} Astrology does not see itself as a science, moreover, as read-

ings are not independent of participants, time or outside circumstances. {38} Some see astrological readings as a form of divination. {39} Small but statistically significant confirmations have been found by Michel Gauquelin {41} (also contested by the scientific establishment) and by John Addey, {42} but they only marginally support astrology. Astrologers tend to see their art as a language, however, a highly technical language with its own belief sets, skills and accepted practices — not in these respects unlike literary criticism.

Then there is the personal element. Evading the difficulties, a text for students sensibly calls *A Vision* 'a mystical theory of the universe, which explained history, imagination, and mythology in light of an occult set of symbols', {40} but that vision was put together from only those of Georgie's automatic writings that would generate a complete system, {43} which is a dangerous way of proceeding. The world views of Spengler or Toynbee, long since passed from vogue, did at least marshal evidence, and the more speculative astrological systems, which can be found in any good New Age bookshop, are closely documented with references to authorities and extensive case notes. *A Vision* has none of these.

But Yeats continued to create his symbols, and these grew more evocative, precise and rich in associations, (as does astrological language, incidentally: no doubt one reason for its appeal to the poet). Yeats's symbols are also of two types, universal and personal and it is the second — the rose (women, beauty, Ireland) and the tower (Yeats's home, loneliness and retreat) — that can baffle the uninitiated, though they also give depth to poems featuring Helen, Maude Gonne, swans, his daughter and future of Ireland. But all operate through Yeats the seer and arbiter of spiritual significance. That seems to me the secret of his power. By themselves, the subjects of his poems are less than revelatory, inconsequential even, but that dreamy voice of authority invests them with something that lies beyond everyday experience. {23}

To find his symbols, Yeats went to romantic literature, folklore, mysticism, theosophy, spiritualism, astrology and Neo-Platonism before devising a symbolic system of his own. *A Vision* sees time as 'gyres' representing opposing cycles, each lasting two thousand years. The Second Coming therefore relates to the antithetical civilization which will come with the third millennium, personified in the rough beast slouching towards Bethlehem as anarchy, horror and the drowning of innocence overrun the world. That 'coat of mythological embroidery' in the last poems is accordingly where a colloquial but ceremonial nakedness prevails. {23}

Is this true? The Tower exhibits a close consistency of outlook and theme, each poem benefiting from others in the collection, but postulating the tower as an esoteric but empowering symbol may be overstating matters. Art, after all, in its most general conception, aims at fullness and fidelity to human experience, and Symbolism can hardly claim that with the unin-

structured common reader. Even 'The New Criticism', which discounts anything but the bare words on the page, and does not require poetry to provide truth, must concede that some outside criteria will be relevant: to be successful, a serious poem cannot entirely affront common sense. {44} Naturally, because modern poetry is on school and university syllabuses in the English-speaking world, it is right and proper that Yeats's name should appear, with reasons for that appearance, but the reasons given can seem special pleading, more hagiography than critical analysis. We can say that *A Vision* makes sense of Yeats's later poems, and that the work itself is important because it encouraged Yeats to go on writing strongly, but that is a purely circular argument. If Yeats was deluded in writing *A Vision* he was deluded in writing his later, supposedly more important poems that call on *A Vision* for their sense.

In short, Yeats' poetry is an adjunct of the man himself. It works within certain parameters, one of which is the circle of Yeats's beliefs, these being derived from his reading and occult experiences. The authoritarian personality, which served him well as leading spirit of the Abbey Theatre, gave him the necessary self-confidence, indeed taking himself so seriously that his more uncharitable contemporaries called him a poseur, which his poet's dress and mannered readings rather illustrated. Nor was he a modest man: only the greatest of thinkers would understand him:

It seems that must bid the Muse go pack,  
Choose Plato and Plotinus for a friend (The Tower)

The mature poetry of W.B. Yeats is couched in that solemnity, verging on grandiosity. Much seems unwarranted, a cheque drawn on his future status, the great magus, Nobel laureate and foremost poet of his time, but also part of the self-created personality of William Butler Yeats, and one that readers simply have to accept.

## Symbolism in Literature: America

Even the *New York Times* seemed nonplussed. *Wallace Stevens, Noted Poet, Dead*, the obituary began. Yes, noted by connoisseurs of Modernist poetry, but never a well-known figure, nor one assiduous of reputation. The thoughts and imagery were foreign, French very probably, and the tone was detached and often cerebral. For all their gaudy celebration of the senses, the poems fought shy of actually saying anything, just as Wallace Stevens himself was cautious of bohemian impropriety. He was a respected officer of a large insurance company who happened to write poetry — very accomplished poetry, but poetry devoid of passion, biography or social comment. Even now, after the excesses of speculative literary theory, to which poetry so empty of obvious content proved irresistible, the question remains: what does the poetry signify?

Wallace Stevens was born in 1879 in comfortable circumstances, became president of the Harvard literary magazine, tried his hand at journalism for

nine months in New York, but then opted for the safety of a dull aspect of the legal profession. He married his long-suffering sweetheart in 1909, delayed having a child for fifteen years, and finally left New York in 1919 with the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, where he reached the position of vice-president in 1934. But for odd trips to collect the honours that accumulated in the last years, Stevens stayed in Hartford for the remainder of his life as a safe company man.

Stevens was in his late twenties when he started writing modernist poetry, and forty-four when his first book, *Harmonium* (1923), was published. Thereafter, the volumes appeared with increasing if not pressing frequency: *A Primitive Like an Orb* (1948), *Transport to Summer* (1949), *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950), *The Collected Poems* (1950) and *Opus Posthumous* (1957). The subjects developed variously, but the themes did not fundamentally change. *Harmonium* is the most original collection, and contains many of his most anthologized poems — *The Emperor of Ice Cream*, *Sunday Morning*, *Peter Quince at the Clavier*, *Anecdote of the Jar*, *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*. *Sunday Morning* was an impressively sustained hedonistic reverie, but the others — were they anything but elaborate entertainments in poetic skill? The New York Times critic couldn't believe so: 'From one end of the book to the other there is not an idea that can vitally affect the mind, there is not one word that can arouse emotions. The volume is a glittering edifice of icicles. Brilliant as the moon, the book is equally dead.' That was overstating matters, but the criticism was just, from a certain point of view.

But Stevens was not writing in the old tradition. As the critic had shrewdly realized, Stevens was creating something exotic: a *poesie pure*, a Symbolist poetry without the usual symbols, a poetry indeed where rhythms, vowels and consonants substituted for musical notes. And that, for the good Percy Hutchinson, was simply not enough. 'Poetry,' he wrote 'is founded in ideas; to be effective and lasting, poetry must be based on life, it must touch and vitalize emotion.'

But Stevens' ideas did affect the mind, at least his own mind, and he went on developing his themes at great length. True, some of the more enigmatic lines: *The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world, to feel that one's desire / Is too difficult to tell from despair*. would have exasperated the moral philosopher. (How are desire and despair being used in this instance, and what is the situation they are describing?) Stevens provides information on neither, which raises spectres of intellectual frivolity, of playing fast and loose with concepts. Poetry is not philosophy, but are his poems — except perhaps *Sunday Morning* — in any way what even Postmodernists call an experience? Perhaps Stevens did see things more intensely than most. Perhaps his reality was crucially that of the imagination. Perhaps the Symbolism he espoused was too rarefied an import for isolationist America, and one that needed café society to thrive. Whatever. Stevens made few converts and founded no movements.

Recognition came belatedly. To the narrower strains of New Criticism, however, his work was living proof that poetry is composed of words used in new and subtle relationships. Postmodernists in their turn found his work a paradigm of true poetry, of artwork entirely sealed from reference to the outside world. Academia found him useful teaching material: students most certainly had to work hard at his poetry: the content was rarefied, the diction unexpected, and the allusions obscure indeed.

The general public was less enthusiastic. Some poems were as fresh and playful as Edith Sitwell's.

Chieftan Iffucan of Azcan in caftan  
Of tan with henna hackles, halt!  
(Bantans in Pine Woods)

Others could be tiresomely clever:

The prince of proverbs of pure poetry,  
(Esthétique du Mal)

And much was simply baffling. What, exactly, did this mean:

Call him the roller of big cigars,  
The muscular one, and bid him whip  
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds  
(The Emperor of Ice-Cream)

Or:

We make, although inside an egg  
Variations on the words spread sail.  
(Things of August)

Was Stevens truly a Symbolist? Certainly he wrote in an allusive, enigmatic, and musical style. He developed the art of suggestion, and employed rare words, private associations and syntactical intricacies. But Symbolism attempted to extend the evocative power of words to express feeling, sensations and states of mind that lie beyond everyday awareness. Scattered jottings suggest that Stevens did indeed identify with these aims, and he certainly read Bergson, Santayana and contemporary art magazines. His later work in fact attempts a more public role, which is rather what Symbolism was designed *not* to do. Of the great mass of people he wrote *The men have no shadows / And the women have only one side*. The note is elegiac, but perhaps a little patronising in:

...that the ignorant man, alone,  
Has any chance to mate with life  
That is sensual, pearly spouse, the life  
That is fluent in even the wintriest bronze



Below is a stanza of Wallace Stevens's celebrated *Sunday Morning*. The poem has a Keatsian-like dwelling on sensation — though not the sustained hush of a too-obvious craftsmanship — but is interesting for another reason. Keats was certainly aware that brevity gives relish to life, but he would not have said *Death is the mother of beauty*. Keats was a Romantic, a child of his time, and those times embraced political change. He was not the sickly idealist sometimes envisaged, but a practical man brought up against the realities of life by his medical training. Dreams and imagination may have been the raw materials of art, but Keats gives them the warmth and individuality that Stevens does not usually attempt. Perhaps only this beautiful poem — of which copyright restrictions allow us to quote only a stanza — shows what Stevens might have written if he not been a Modernist and a cautious man.

#### Stanza V of Sunday Morning

She says, 'But in contentment I still feel  
 The need of some imperishable bliss.'  
 Death is the mother of beauty, hence from her,  
 Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams  
 And our desires. Although she strews the leaves  
 Of sure obliteration on our path,  
 The path sick sorrow took, the many paths  
 Where triumph rang its brassy phrase, or love  
 Whispered a little out of tenderness,  
 She makes the willows shiver in the sun  
 For maidens who were wont to sit and gaze  
 Upon the grass, relinquished to their feet.  
 She causes boys to pile new plums and pears  
 On disregarded plate. The maidens taste  
 And stray impassioned in the littering leaves.

#### Ode on a Grecian Urn

Though still unravished bride of quietness,  
 Thou foster child of silence and slow time,  
 Sylvan historian, who can thus express  
 A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:  
 What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape  
 Of deities or mortals, or of both,  
 In Tempe or dales of Arcady?  
 What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?  
 What mad pursuit, what struggle to escape?  
 What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
 Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;  
 Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,  
 Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave  
 Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;  
 Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,  
 Though winning near the goal — yet, do not grieve;  
 She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,  
 For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

Ah happy, happy boughs that cannot shed  
 Your leaves, nor ever bid the spring adieu,  
 Ah, happy melodist, unwearied,  
 For ever piping songs for ever new;  
 More happy love! More happy, happy love!  
 For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,  
 For ever panting, and for ever young;  
 All breathing human passion far above,  
 That leaves a heart high sorrowful and cloy'd,  
 A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?  
 To what green altar, O mysterious priest,  
 Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,  
 And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?  
 What little river by town or sea-shore,  
 Or mountain built with peaceful citadel,  
 Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?  
 And, little town, thy streets for evermore  
 Will silent be; and not a soul to tell  
 Why thou are desolate, can e'er return.

O Attic shape, Fair attitude! With brede  
 Of marble men and maidens overwrought;  
 With forest branches and trodden weed;  
 Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought  
 As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!  
 When old age shall this generation waste,  
 Thou halt remain, in midst of other woe  
 Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st  
 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,' — that is all  
 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

*Sunday Morning* concerns itself with the impermanence of sensuous happiness, and somewhat contrasts the Christian with Greek views of life. The first sees our life on the earth as a preparation for the next. The second regards present existence as the all important, and one that should be lived to the full. What is meant by *Death is the mother of beauty*? Sensuous matter has beauty because it or we have no extended existence: we prize it more because it is so fleeting? That beauty is conferred on objects by considerations that lie beyond the veil of Death, i.e. Platonic Ideas? Both can be read into the poem, but may

only make sense when we realize that *Sunday Morning* is modelled on George Santayana's philosophy, {47} notably his *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900) {48} Even the stanzas broadly follow the chapters in Santayana's book: stanza I relates to chapter 1, II to 2, III to 3, IV to 4, V to 5, VI to 6, VII to 7 and 8, and VIII to chapters 9 and 10. In our stanza V, the speaker is looking beyond the permanent but cold Platonic Idea to reunion after death — or possibly so, as the stanza returns to the attractions of the present.

I have only touched on Sidney Fleshback's article, which draws together themes of death in other poems by Stevens, notes the attitudes of Whitman, Browning, and Emerson in the poem, and discusses the conflicting images and their possibly satiric intent. But one point is worth stressing. Wallace Stevens wrote his most beautiful, if to my mind only partly successful, poem when he stopped chasing his own evanescent musings and reworked the established themes of European civilization. Sidney Fleshback calls Stevens' handling of the themes 'idiosyncratic', but a blunter term might be muddled. While we stay on the surface of the poem we can admire its treatment of the numinous quality of sensuous life, its underlying mysteries and unfathomable nature. Look deeper, and we begin to wonder whether the poet was not simply toying with concepts and intellectual possibilities: excellent material for academic studies but baffling to the common reader. Symbols — the hermetic with Mallarmé, jewelled with Darío, portentous with Rilke and obscure in much of Stevens's work — do not succeed unless they call on the great commonplaces of life. Poetry may or may not create ideas, but it must give them contemporary identity, a local habitation and a name.

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### 17.3. SURREALISM IN POETRY

The early- to mid-century movement in the arts known as Surrealism attempted to express the workings of the unconscious by fantastic imagery and incongruous juxtaposition of content. The movement grew out of Dadaism, was orchestrated by the French poet and critic André Breton, and had important precursors in Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Lautréamont.

Depending on whom you believe, the movement drew on the troubled politics of the inter-war years, the dream theories of Jung and Freud, studies of the occult and irrational, and the usual opposition to the despised bourgeoisie.

#### Introduction

Dadaism aimed to contravene accepted values of society so as to jolt the public into seeing the world with keener eyes — beyond the hypocrisies, class repressions and stultifying conventions. Surrealism was more positive and proselytizing — was indeed an instrument of knowledge. True reality lay in the subconscious, and Surrealism developed concepts and techniques to explore and express those depths. Painting was the most obvious arena for Surrealism to show its talents, but the movement also included important poets and novelists, initially French but later Spanish and Italian. For Breton and his followers, Surrealism had to be a clearly articulated process, almost a scientific discipline, and the aesthetic and/or political dimensions were secondary. English devotees, ever more cautious, mixed Surrealism with a good deal of pragmatism, so that there are few truly Surrealist poets in English, though many were influenced to some extent — W.H. Auden, Dylan Thomas, Ted Hughes, Robert Bly, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Duncan, etc

How did the automatism work? Writers and artists gave up conscious control of their thoughts, and then put down — rapidly, without interrupting the stream of thought or vision — whatever came to mind. Some painters — Dali for example — were self-conscious perfectionists, but even here the canvas should slowly take shape under promptings cleared of preconceptions. French poets might or might not write under the influence of the alexandrine, but any conscious filtering by technique was frowned upon. Many writers passed through the movement, or were brought to fame by Surrealism, but only Paul Eluard (1895-1952), Louis Aragon (1897-1982) and Federico García Lorca (1899-1936) created their most enduring work under its influence.

Purely automatic writing — which Yeats practised for a while with his wife — produced reams of material interesting to writer and his psychiatrist, but tedi-



ous in the extreme to the reader. Was it permissible to select and shape this material? No, said Breton, but most writers and painters fudged the issue. Surrealist techniques produced vivid raw material, which could then be further developed. Was prior artistic training required, or could anyone practice the techniques with success? Opinion was divided. Many argued that formal training provided the necessary tools of expression, and the better painters and poets did generally possess a formal mastery of their craft. But that was to put the aesthetic above the true aim of Surrealism, thought Breton (generally), and so betray its larger purpose of creating a truer reality from conscious and subconscious elements.

## Critique

Surrealist approaches have today diffused into art and advertising, but do they offer the practising poet more than useful improvisation, a way of getting the creative juices flowing? The difficulty centres on the subconscious. Many Surrealists, though speaking of the subconscious, actually meant the unconscious, and this entity does not exist. Certainly the brain's actions are largely hidden from us, and may well produce regularities that can be called schemas, archetypes, inter-cultural patterns of perception, but there is nothing corresponding to the id, ego and superego of Freud's or Lacan's formulation. Nonetheless, laboratory work has shown that the brain is marvellously retentive, and stores vastly more than we can easily recall. Moreover, it stores speech and perception as transcriptions of experience — i.e. not as language constructs, mental or otherwise, but as diverse guides for subsequent action. Some of these may be universal, as is suggested by occult and shamanistic practices, but most are surely individual. Dreams and trances are not always illuminating, therefore, and Surrealism is not a royal road to the subconscious.

But the greatest drawback is the most obvious. Even if the subconscious were more interesting than the conscious world, simply portraying it will not create art. That needs selection, and a shaping for emotive and aesthetic ends. Surrealist poetry can be novel, whimsical or apocalyptic, but it is not apt to be deeply moving.

Nonetheless, the brain's workings can escape the straitjacket of the conventional, and its exploration is at least useful for that purpose. How imagination is accessed must depend on the equipment the writer brings to the task, the technique and larger objectives. Surrealism did tap into something real and important, but was hampered by simplistic views of free association and natural expression. The brain is an organ that grows according to accumulating need and experience, and is not therefore a repository of primeval truths. Stretching imagination against experience is what opens the writer's portals of vision, just as working at something truly difficult develops the painter's intelligence.



## Hart Crane

Hart Crane's life was certainly unenviable. His parents fought continually, and the poet spent much of his adolescence in the grandparent's home in Cleveland. The father, a prosperous businessman, wished a similar career for the son, but the unsociable young man found work in a munitions plant, in a shipyard, as a reporter, and then as an assistant in his father's candy store. He read voraciously, submitted to avant-garde magazines, and determined on a career in poetry. In 1921 Crane returned to Cleveland to write advertising copy by day and poetry by night — a rather manic-depressive pattern — and in 1923 he completed his first major poem, *For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen*, where his self-education found expression in a truly modern setting.

Unlike contemporaries tackling similar themes, Crane did not use free verse, but traditional forms with dense reference and unexpected imagery. Poetry was to be a celebration of life that conveyed exaltation, power and transcendence. Whatever the claims — and he used a Modernist terminology in corresponding with many contemporary poets — Hart Crane was applying the soaring poetic expression of seventeenth century writers to his own bohemian, homosexual and chaotic existence on the darker fringes of America's jazz age. In 1924, Hart Crane went to New York, eventually finding employment in writing advertising copy. He settled into a room overlooking the East River and Brooklyn Bridge. That window, he wrote to a friend, 'is where I would be most remembered of all: the ships, the harbor, the skyline of Manhattan, midnight, morning or evening, — rain, snow or sun, it is everything from mountains to the walls of Jerusalem and Nineveh, and all related and in actual contact with the changelessness of the many waters that surround it.' These spiritual journeys he worked into *Voyages* and the other poems he wrote in the 1924-5 period, publishing some of them in contemporary magazines, though not without amendment and lengthy explanation. Crane went to Cuba, back to New York, to Hollywood, Paris and Mexico. His first collection, *White Buildings*, was published in 1926, and Crane worked on the more ambitious *The Bridge*, but his social life was disintegrating. He was habitually drunk, abusive, given to violent rages and psychosomatic illness, too often beaten up by casual male lovers, arrested for soliciting. In April 1932, Hart Crane jumped from the ship returning him from Mexico, and the body was never found.

Whatever the life, Hart Crane was remarkably clear-sighted about his literary aims. A poem should be 'a single, new word, never before spoken, and impossible to actually enunciate'. Terms were to be selected for their connotations and associations, and for their 'metaphoric interrelationships'. There was no place for abstract formulations of experience; the poems had to evoke the 'physical-psychic experience' of the subject through which they are viewed. Crane absorbed Eliot's poetry, and the dithyrambs of Whitman, but the style was distinctively his own: dense, allusive and metallic — not unlike a 'plate of vibrant mercury', to quote from his own *Recitative*.

How much is worth reading today? *Voyages* (1921-26), *At Melville's Tomb* (1925), *For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen* (1921-23) in *White Buildings*, *The Broken Tower* (1932) and some sections of *The Bridge* (1923-30). Yet even the minor pieces have a strange power that burn themselves into the memory: *It was a kind and northern face (Praise for an Urn)*, *a steady, winking beat between (Paraphrase)*, *We make our meek adjustments / Contented with such random consolations (Chaplinesque)*, *I have known myself a nephew to confusions (The Fernery)*.

It was on *The Bridge* that Hart Crane's ambitions centred. Though published after *White Buildings*, the poem in its final form was composed over the long interval between Crane's best writing period and the tail-end of his powers. The seventy-odd pages contain fine sections — *To Brooklyn Bridge*, parts of *The Harbor Dawn*, *The River* and *The Tunnel* — but there is also overblown rhetoric and long passages that do not work. The poem is an epic, Crane's answer to Whitman, but the lyric quality could not compensate for the loose integration. The subject matter is arbitrary, and the rhythms too often merely workmanlike. In the best sections, well anthologized, Crane achieved a rare physical immediacy, conveyed with imagery as dense and apposite as that of the later Shakespeare, but these do not unify the whole

That failure is the greatest pity, for what appears in snatches throughout his work is a portrait of America that perhaps Crane alone had the gifts to draw. The writer most called to mind is the novelist Thomas Wolfe (1900-1938), but, in place of Wolfe's odd gift for phrase, there are innumerable telling and beautiful images. Hart Crane's technique is not modern, but his Romantic nineteenth-century approach created vistas beyond those of what most twentieth century poets could achieve, or perhaps even wanted to.

Hart Crane's first important poem, *For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen*, ends :

Anchises' navel, dropping of the sea, --  
The hands Erasmus dipped in gleaming tides,  
Gathered the voltage of blown blood and vine;  
Delve upward for the new and scattered wine  
O brother-thief of time, that we recall.

...

Distinctly praise the years, whose volatile  
Blamed bleeding hands extend and thresh the height  
Of imagination spans beyond despair,  
Outpacing bargain, vocable and prayer.

Such exhortation and density is not easily matched in English. But consider this section from *Lycidus*.

Return, Alphéus, the dread voice is past  
That shrunk they streams; return, Sicilian Muse,  
And call the vales, and bid them hither cast

Their bells and flowerets of a thousand hues.  
 Ye valleys low, where the mild whispers use  
 Of shades and wanton winds and gushing brooks,  
 On whose fresh lap the swart star sparely looks,  
 Throw hither all your quaint enamelled eyes,  
 That on the green turf suck the honied flowers,  
 And purple all the ground with vernal flowers.

Bring the rathe primrose that forsaken dies,  
 The tufted crow-toe, and pale jessamine,  
 The white pink, and the pansie freaked with jet,  
 The glowing violet,  
 The musk rose, and the well-attired woodbine,  
 With cowslips wan that hang the pensive head,  
 And every flower that sad embroidery wears.  
 Bid amaranthus all his beauty shed,  
 And daffadillies fill their cups with tears,  
 To strew the laureate hearse where Lycid lies.

For so to interpose a little ease,  
 Let our frail thoughts dally with false surmise;

Ay me! Whilst thee the shores and sounding seas  
 Wash far away, where'er they bones are hurled,  
 Whether beyond the stormy Hebrides,  
 Where thou perhaps under the whelming tide  
 Visit'st the bottom of the monstrous world;

Or whether thou, to our moist vows denied,  
 Sleep'st by the fable of Bellerus old,  
 Where the great Vision of the guarded mount  
 Looks towards Namancos, and Bayona's hold.  
 Look homeward, Angel, now, and melt with ruth:  
 And, O ye dolphins, waft the hapless youth.

Milton's has the greater range, but the two poems present similar tones and themes. Both are impersonal, and a poetic tour de force. Censorship restricted what Milton could say, and behind the anguish of Crane no doubt lay a good deal of frustration and self-loathing. But public poems were built of public property, and ask to be judged on how effectively they deploy and refresh the great commonplaces by which a society understands itself.

Eliot's escape from personal tragedy was via *The Waste Land*, a bitter collage of fragments that could both refer to standards and mock them. Crane disliked that negativity. Poetry was an affirmation of life, and Crane continually sought a worthy and inspiring theme. Financial worries, alcohol, the degradation forced on him by homosexual affairs were increasing handicaps, but the main

culprit was possibly Modernism itself. So privately-based, inward-looking and antisocial a movement too much denies the communality of beliefs on which epic poetry needs to be built.

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## 17.4 IMAGIST POETRY

Even by twentieth-century standards, Imagism was soon over. In 1912 Ezra Pound published the *Complete Poetical Works* of its founder, T.E. Hulme (five short poems) and by 1917 the movement, then overseen by Amy Lowell, had run its course. {1} {2} {3} {4} {5} The output in all amounted to a few score poems, and none of these captured the public's heart. Why the importance?

First there are the personalities involved — notably Ezra Pound, James Joyce, William Carlos Williams {6} {7} {8} {9} — who became famous later. If ever the (continuing) importance to poets of networking, of being involved in movements from their inception, is attested, it is in these early days of post-Victorian revolt.

Then there are the manifestos of the movement, which became the cornerstones of Modernism, responsible for a much taught in universities until recently, and for the difficulties poets still find themselves in. The Imagists stressed clarity, exactness and concreteness of detail. Their aims, briefly set out, were that:

1. Content should be presented directly, through specific images where possible.
2. Every word should be functional, with nothing included that was not essential to the effect intended.
3. Rhythm should be composed by the musical phrase rather than the metronome.

Also understood — if not spelled out, or perhaps fully recognized at the time — was the hope that poems could intensify a sense of objective reality through the immediacy of images.

Imagism itself gave rise to fairly negligible lines like:

You crash over the trees,  
You crack the live branch... (*Storm* by H.D.)

Nonetheless, the reliance on images provided poets with these types of freedom:

1. Poems could dispense with classical rhetoric, emotion being generated much more directly through what Eliot called an objective correlate: 'The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlate'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external

facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.' {10}

2. By being shorn of context or supporting argument, images could appear with fresh interest and power.

3. Thoughts could be treated as images, i.e. as non-discursive elements that added emotional colouring without issues of truth or relevance intruding too much.

## Difficulties

It is doubtful, first of all, whether specific emotion can be generated in the way Eliot envisaged. Emotive expression is a complex matter, as every novelist or playwright soon discovers.

There is also the difficulty of isolated images. Human beings look for sense wherever possible, and will generally supply any connecting links that the poet has removed, correctly or incorrectly. Poems are not self-sufficient artifacts, moreover, but belong to a community of codes, assumptions and expectations, which we must learn when reading literature of the past. Context is important.

Finally, there is happy assumption that poetry is largely an expression of emotion, and that the intellectual content is immaterial. The briefest course in aesthetics will show the difficulties. Is emotion conveyed or evoked? Is emotion a purely individual matter, or can we talk of emotion appropriate to the situation, when social codes are involved? And what do we make of the general experience of artists who find that emotion emerges as the work develops?

Undeterred, however, the three streams continued as follows.

1. Snippets of mimicry, wide-ranging allusion and striking images gave beauty and power to lyrical passages in *The Cantos* and *Briggflatts*.

2. Disconnected images passed through stridency into gaudy irrationalism as Imagism developed into Dadaism and Surrealism.

3. Abstruse conjecture and name dropping became a necessary ingredient of contemporary poetry — which might have exposed the shaky scholarship of both poet and reviewer had the content been taken seriously. In general, it wasn't, however, and poetry in its more avant garde aspects developed into a rarefied and exclusive game.

Academics knew this well enough. 'The imagination offered a type of knowledge superior to that of rational analysis, superior to the empirical discoveries of science. The image in a poem gave the reader a moment of illumination beyond normal apprehension, and so introduced him to a kind of sensibility not to be found in everyday living. Frank Kermode has described these influences in great detail in *The Romantic Image* (1957), and shown that this

emphasis on the image has had a very considerable effect on techniques of literary analysis. The student has been taught to look mainly at the various effects of individual images, and then to consider the interrelationship of images throughout the poem. Many analyses of poems have paid no attention to rhyme, conventions of genre, or syntax, but have concentrated upon the complex pattern of imagery. The implication has been that a poem has an organisation of its own, based upon the image, and that ordinary grammatical structure is of comparatively small importance. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, of course, demonstrates this conception of linked images. Such analyses of imagery have been applied successfully to the poetry of the metaphysicals, or to Hopkins, for example, but they have had little to say about the typical Elizabethan sonnet or song, or about the structure of the long poems of Milton, Dryden or Pope.' wrote C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson, {11} pointing out that Davie had argued that 'language achieves its effects by a variety of means, and one of the most important is by the use of orthodox syntax. . . Language is thought of as an instrument of articulation, a way of establishing relationships like the harmonies of music or the equations of algebra. . . [In] the second attitude, popular among the poets of the 1920's, language is trustworthy only when it is broken down into units of isolated words, when it abandons any attempt at large-scale, rational articulation. . . 'systems of syntax are part of the heritable property of past civilisation, and to hold firm to them is to be traditional in the best and most important sense . . . the abandonment of syntax testifies to a failure of the poet's nerve, a loss of confidence in the intelligible structure of the conscious mind, and the validity of its activity'. . . Davie requires poets to mean what they say, and to relate their poems to common experience. . . 'His influence prevents a student from an endless search for new subtleties of interpretation, and sends him to study the nature of genres in particular periods. His emphasis on syntax, and the various types of syntax used by poets, offers new, exciting possibilities for analysis. He asserts the value of mind and rational order, and so offers tools with which a reader can assess the organisation of a long narrative poem. He tries to bring poetry back to traditional modes of communication, to make the poet, once again, a man speaking to men' {12}

## Development: Pound's *Cathay* (1915)

Pound's approach was based on a misconception, that Chinese is a pictogram method of writing where the meaning is directly and vividly evoked by images in the script. Put the characters of *sun* and *moon* together and you get the character for *bright*. Unfortunately, very few Chinese words are of this type, and even in these the average Chinese no more reads the pictures than we respond to the etymology of our words. The Chinese script {13} {14} is essentially logographic, where signs represent morphemes, the minimal element of a word that carries meaning. Such elements also represented sound in the early history of the language, and elements called 'radicals' had to be added to clarify the meaning. {15} But Pound, working from notes supplied by Ernest Fenellosa, was too excited by the notion to take advice, and he combined

this supposed directness with a free verse style to create translations that were sometimes excellent, even if establishing an unfortunate orthodoxy of free verse for Chinese translation.

In fact, Chinese poetry is anything but direct, but this misunderstanding allowed the Modernists to strike out in new directions. Where poetry before had been a high art form, with a long tradition and much to learn, the essence of poetry could now be honesty, freedom from encumbering technique, and a stress on surprise (foregrounding) and novelty (make it new). William Carlos Williams was among the first to throw off the constraints of tradition, but the trait appears in many American Modernists, particularly those who dislike western civilization, or what it has become — Bly, {16} Snyder, {17} Kinnell, {18} Wright, {19} Merwyn, {20} etc. {21}

## Larger Issues

Behind these approaches to a sensory directness, and drawing support from them, are some questionable beliefs:

1. Simpler is better, closer to the truth. But:

Poetry is not science, but expression that provides an intense and thickened experience of life.

Attempts to find a simple, logically transparent language have all failed.

2. Complex matters can be expressed in simple structures. This:

Is a assertion of Structuralism, unsupported by the evidence.

Leads to the simplistic arguments of feminism, political correctness and post-colonial studies.

Is not how brain physiology suggests we function.

3. Poets have an individual view of the world, which relieves them of wider responsibilities. Again, this:

Is contrary to what we know of older poets, most of whom were involved in the events and issues of their times.

Contributes to the unpopularity of contemporary poetry: the public expects more than unsupported opinion and knowing cleverness: they want something answering to their own experience, or to an experience they could work towards.

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## 17.5. OPEN FORMS IN POETRY

Poets who write in open forms usually insist on the form growing out of the writing process, i.e. the poems follow what the words and phrase suggest during the composition process, rather than being fitted into any pre-existing plan. Some do employ vestiges of traditional devices — rhyme, metre, alliteration — but most regard them as a hindrance to sincerity or creativity. Many open form types exist, and good poets have often mastered several over the same period, even mixing them in the one poem. Distinctions can be overdone, but it may be helpful to have a broad taxonomy. A very simplistic listing:

High Modernism: lines of unequal length: organized by images or themes rather than argument or narrative: metre: stress verse or rhythmic verse: e.g. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

Early American Free Verse: as above, but rhythmic verse, broader social register and less reliance on traditional techniques: e.g. Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.

Imagism: cadenced rhythmic verse and free-floating images: e.g. T. E. Hulme's <http://www.definition-info.com/Imagism.html> : *A City Sunset*. NNA.

American Free Verse: organized by 'variable feet' and lines set out with spaces and indents: e.g. William's *Patterson*.

Projective verse: organized by the physiology of speech and treating words as things in themselves, not simple referents: e.g. Charles Olson's *Maximus*.

Surrealism: phrases defy rational explanation: e.g. Charles Wright's *After Reading Tu Fu, I Go Outside to the Dwarf Orchard*.

Beat Poetry: rhythmic, rambling and eclectic: e.g. Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*.

Postmodernist: playful assemblages, free-standing creations whose constituents do not necessarily refer to anything in the 'real world': e.g. April Bernard's *Pierced*.

Serious Postmodernist: random but thoughtful examination of the world around: e.g. Andrew Crozier's *High Zero*.

Language Poetry: collages of everyday phrases, often fragmented or fissile in meaning: e.g. Charles Bernstein's *Stele for Lost Time*.

Performance pieces: poems taped or filmed just as the words come: e.g. David Altin's *The Noise of Time*.

Now we must look at the theoretical implications of free forms.

## Argument One: Form is Imprisoning

Poets writing in open forms argue that their approaches make for greater freedom to find the appropriate expression, and that the words are not regimented into set meanings. The spiritual forefather often quoted is Coleridge, whose *Biographia Literaria* (1817) distinguished between 'form as proceeding' and 'shape as superinduced'. In following the first, the so-called 'organic form', the poet shapes the poem as its meaning suggests, whereas something of 'super-induced' form is either the death or imprisonment of the poem. {1}

David Perkins makes the same point. 'The 'organic form,' shaping itself 'as it develops itself from within,' comes into existence, Coleridge said, like a naturally growing thing. The poet, in other words, proceeds in the same way as nature; nature works in and through the creative act of the poet. The possibility of this presupposes 'a bond between nature . . . and the soul of man.' {2}

But Coleridge never saw metre as an impediment to expression, quite the opposite, and his small experiments in *Christobel* were essentially a return to Anglo-Saxon forms, to stress verse where accents and not syllables were counted. 'Meter, for him, is the chief vehicle for achieving the aim of poetry, which is pleasure; it quickens passions; it demands technical skill and knowledge of other and older languages. . . Meter draws its power from both the disciplined will and the body's rhythmical energy; it spans the intersection of mind and body and reconciles head and heart, specifically the heart-beat. . . . Metrical poetry rouses the whole soul to activity; it moves at different speeds, it swerves, pauses, and surges forward, quickening the senses and heartbeat. Chapter 18 of the *Biographia Literaria* insinuates that verse deliberately heightens this physical energy. Despite an opening remark about meter holding 'in check the workings of passion' (2.64), Coleridge is more interested in the opposite impulse, the 'increased excitement' (2.65), the 'vivacity' (2.66), 'the continued excitement of surprize' (2.66). Poetry, 'accompanied by the natural language of excitement,' is 'formed into meter artificially, by a voluntary act, with the design and for the purpose of blending delight with emo-

tion, so the traces of present volition should throughout the metrical language be proportionally discernible' (2.64-65)' {3}

Moreover, until we get to Postmodernism, where words interact with each other more than the outside world, poems offered some viewpoint on society and ourselves. 'Elizabeth Bishop shared their skepticism. With the Lowell who in 1957 told William Carlos Williams, 'it's great to have no hurdle of rhyme and scansion between yourself and what you want to say most forcibly,' Bishop could not agree, because she understood that all forms of poetry, as linguistic confections, offer one or another screen through which the world is experienced.' {4}

In fact, poets writing in strict (i.e. closed) forms often find the requirements anything but restricting. Their minds are more sharply focused by the technical difficulties, and the resulting poem is more concentrated and powerful. The formal requirements act as midwife to the poem, the unyielding demands conjuring up the words as some Ouija board.

## Argument Two: Immediacy of Composition

Most open forms are written in free verse, claimed to better preserve the immediacy of composition. The poet is not continually looking for a word with specific properties but can follow the natural flow of his or her creation. The result? 'The notion that free verse is a more natural form of expression, and therefore easier to write than fixed verse is, I think, a fallacy. The difficulty in composition which free verse presents is that it does not force the poet to contemplate his thought with an intensity which brings out its fullest possibilities. . . The danger of too much freedom is that poetry may easily become the mere jotting down of very casual thoughts in haphazard rhythm.' {5}

But perhaps that haphazardness is a positive virtue. David Perkins again: 'The mind of the poet is not, Duncan explains, 'to be diverted by what it wanted to say but to attend to what [is] happening in the poem.'" {6}

For Robert Duncan, a poem grew out of its making. We set in motion certain attitudes, expectations and compositional devices, and the resulting article inevitably reflects them. A poem written in tight rhyming couplets, for example, will not be the same article as one written in some conversational style. Not only will it not look the same, but it will not be 'saying the same thing', having interrogated experience differently. Moreover — the argument generally continues — an interrogation conducted in a everyday language will result in a more genuine poem, since it will operate on readers in ways that are most natural and real to them.

Perhaps so, but there are some assumptions worth looking at:

1. We understand the world through the language in which we describe it.

This is the Whorfian theory of linguistics, which seems only partly true. Some radical theory goes further, of course, and asserts that language is the only reality. The difficulties of that view are truly enormous, however, in deconstruction and analytical philosophy.

The matter is further complicated by perception, reading and speech being distinct abilities, somewhat variously associated in the brain. The assertion seems not only simplistic, therefore, but distinctly unlikely, given current research findings, {7} though language *may* be necessary for thought. {8}

2. The poetry-writing process largely takes control of our thoughts, or should do so.

Though Yeats experimented with automatic writing, and the Surrealists claimed that the unconscious was the high road to understanding, practically all poets reshape their creations. They periodically step back and ask themselves: What am I trying to say here? Have I got it right? Perhaps what distinguishes the various methods of writing is how often the poet makes these checks, and with what aim.

3. Everyday language is the most powerful.

The claim has often formed the platform of new poetry movements, but is rarely carried through. In general, the language of contemporary poetry is anything but natural, being a mixture of various social registers and fractured syntax. Even the word choice of Ginsberg or William Carlos Williams is guided by aesthetic matters, however disguised. Diction is a complicated matter.

4. The more immediate or instinctive is the more genuine, as it bypasses the stultifying conventions of the socially acceptable, the repressions of the super-ego, and/or the inherent perversions of language.

The view is a Romantic one, underlying much of nineteenth-century philosophy, and some political excesses in the twentieth.

Inner processes are important, and poetry is often written initially in some half-conscious reverie, inspiration at best. But that reverie does not come wholly from the unconscious, which is a trivializing myth, however marketed by the psychoanalyst schools of Freud and Lacan.

### Argument Three: Sensitivity to Word Properties

A sensitivity to words — meanings, connotations, past usages, etymologies, social registers, sound, vowel and stress patterns — is essential to poetry, and an important concern to the serious poet. But open / free verse forms do not necessarily make the task any easier. Strict forms push words closer to each other, emphasizing the overall context in which words are heard and gain their power. That power needs careful handling, and to the extent that it can be misused, or not recognized at all, strict forms tend to make problems for beginners. But matters are reversed with experience, so that the many excellent

poems being written in free form today are in some ways a greater accomplishment, given that the vast repertoire of devices to modify the properties of words, built up by four hundred years of metered verse, is unavailable to them.

## Argument Four: Open Forms Reflect Contemporary Life

To some extent, no doubt, everyone finds life confusing, incomplete and unsatisfying. Why shouldn't poetry reflect the fact? Robert von Hallberg: 'On the other hand are those poets, whom I also admire, like Pound, Olson, and Ashbery who accept the inevitability of incoherence and let economy be damned. For these writers, a principle of coherence is negatively involved; one admires their work despite its moments of apparent incoherence, despite its lack of economy. In fact, incoherence and extravagance are signs that a poem is working at the edges of convention, straining for beauty and meaning that come without coherence.' {9}

It's not difficult to make an incoherent poem. Blindfolded selection of words out of dictionary would do the job admirably (and has been resorted to). That the result would not detain us long, does suggest, however, that something more is needed: in this case selection, rearrangement and organization of the random words. And once we do this, however unconsciously, there enters purpose to our actions. Why? To what end? Emphasizing what features? The incoherence of our lives, feelings and reflections are not to be recreated by incoherent procedures, therefore, but by creations that highlight or reflect on that incoherence. That in turn means making things that are intelligible to us: themes, marshalled thoughts, syntax with some semblance of order. Art is not life as it comes, but inevitably some representation of life, and with that representation come rules or codes to read it by.

So: if the incoherence of life could be represented by incoherent confections of words, then open forms would win hands down, would indeed be the only way of proceeding. Unfortunately, the random remarks, catch phrases, snippets of articles, puns and like — the constituents of the playful and entertaining poems of Ashbery and others — do not come like leggo blocks with universal attachment points but need great craft to make into something worth reading.

We may indeed be creatures living in insecure expectations and generalities, but that is only one aspect of life, and one that becomes tiresome in less-gifted performers, perhaps even pointless. A self-satisfied and philistine bourgeoisie is not to be woken up by such tactics, given that they hardly read poetry, or not contemporary poetry. What we might ask for, as mankind as always looked for down the centuries, is an art that gives beauty and significance to their lives, which is indeed what the von Hallberg quote ends with: 'beauty and meaning that come without coherence.'

Much depends what is meant by coherence, of course, which, as von Hallberg observes (contrary to *The New Criticism*), is never total in any work of art.

Perhaps what is being urged, therefore, is a more generous and sensitive understanding, a coherence that makes greater sense of life in its many contemporary and confusing apparitions.

## Conclusions

Just as no water-tight argument for traditional verse has ever been constructed, so many will feel that no justification is needed for free verse. The poems 'work'. Readers enjoy them — as I do — and are suspicious of intellectual commentators, of their pretensions {14} and self-centered attitudes. Freshness and sensitivity to words are to be praised in any writer, and poets can surely find their own way. The pioneers of open forms indeed had no love for academia, and tended to make ad hoc explanations of their work as they went along, a strategy familiar to anyone who reads poetry manifestos or art gallery catalogues.

While it's not unusual to find editors of very different perspectives making similar selections of poems for a publication, that connoisseurship is acquired over many years of reading, which has been guided by some common beliefs. Many poets today have renounced traditional approaches, and their work is trivial or unintelligible unless we know what they are aiming at. And finally, though some literary commentators do believe that open forms are the only way forward, their critical expositions can be as limiting and/or suspect as any other. {15}

Perhaps the answer lies closer to home: the influence of cinema. Many poems in the twentieth century adopt cinematic devices that are common in novels: 'The discontinuity of the Plot and the scenic development, the sudden immersion of the thoughts and moods, the relativity and the inconsistency of the time standards, are what remind us in the works of Proust and Joyce, Dos Passos, and Virginia Woolf of the cuttings, dissolves and interpolations of the film...' {16} Unattributed scenes appear and dissolve in Eliot's *Wasteland*, cinematic effects of motion in William Carlos Williams {17}, colliding montages in Ezra Pound and Marianne Moore {18}, film reportage in Lawrence Ferlinghetti, {19} and so on — suggesting that it was not theory that won the day, but simple habit: we got used to their viewpoints.

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## 17.6. MINIMALISM IN POETRY

Minimalism was foreshadowed by several twentieth century movements that believed poetry should be more authentic, homespun, contemporary and accessible to the general public. As practised today, minimalism may derive more from Dadaism, concrete poetry and haiku, and it certainly presents parallels to the visual arts. {1} {2} {3} {4} Minimalist poetry focuses on bare words or phrases, sometimes rearranging them on the page so that their most basic and individual properties disclose something unexpected about themselves.

Though slight in themselves, these little exercises can be thoughtful, entertaining and provocative, exploiting language as does all poetry.



## William Carlos Williams

In his own work, books and diary jottings, William Carlos Williams advocated poetry based on live contact with the world. Art should make more vivid what is already there. Poems arise from moments of heightened consciousness in individuals whose sensibilities had been developed and extended by writing a responsive poetic line. His own work exemplified:

1. the discontinuous nature of experience (i.e. composition by juxtaposition)
2. a syntax and diction based on the spoken language
3. observations brought to prominence by framing techniques and not encumbered by connotations, deep questions, symbolism and the like.

Maladroit and banal, mere chopped-up prose, they might appear to the uninitiated, but they were honest and American and the way forward. {5} {6} {7} {8} {9} {10}

William Carlos Williams was not an amateur, and his better pieces did achieve their modest aims. Rather than argue their merits in vacuo, let's compare two pieces of writing. Both are celebrated, unvarnished descriptions of the local scene. The first is the fragmentary opening of William Carlos Williams' *Spring and All* (1923): {11}

By the road to the contagious hospital under the surge of the blue  
mottled clouds driven from the  
northeast — a cold wind. Beyond, the  
waste of broad, muddy fields  
brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen

patches of standing water  
the scattering of tall trees

The second is in the regular — to our ears initially monotonous — measure of late Augustan verse: a short section from *Delay has Danger* (*Tales of the Hall*) by George Crabbe (1754-1832): {12} {13} {14} {15}

Early he rose, and looked with many a sigh  
On the red light that filled the eastern sky;  
Oft had he stood before, alert and gay,  
To hail the glories of the new-born day:  
But now dejected, languid, listless, low,  
He saw the wind upon the water blow.  
And the cold stream curl'd onwards as the gale  
From the pine-hill blew harshly down the dale;

On the right side the youth a wood survey'd,  
With all its dark intensity of shade,  
Where the rough wind alone was heard to move,

In this, the pause of nature and of love,  
When now the young are rear'd, and when the old,  
Lost to the tie, grow negligent and cold —

Far to the left he saw the huts of men,  
Half hid in mist, that hung upon the fen;  
Before him swallows, gathering from the sea,  
Took their short flights, and twittered on the lea;  
And near the beansheaf stood, the harvest done,  
And slowly blacken'd in the sickly sun;

All these were sad in nature, or they took  
Sadness from him, the likeness of his look,  
And of his mind — he ponder'd for a while  
Then met his Fanny with a borrow'd smile

Crabbe's piece is telling a story, using conventional couplets to depict rural life in a realistic and unpalatable manner — more than the pastoral tradition encouraged, or even Wordsworth much attempted. Williams is simply presenting the scene as it strikes him. With Crabbe's piece we can note that 1. the Fenland scene is aptly described, 2. the description sets the mood, 3. the youth's musing on his surroundings give the story a wider significance, 4. the storyline engages our interest and leads us over the banalities of description, 5. the sense is always emphatically clear, 6. considerable variety of expression exists within the regular verse.

The Williams poem illustrates its author's views on poetry. Keenly perceived and convincingly natural, it serves no end beyond making us see the commonplace more acutely. And see it through the author's eyes. Modernist poets are not self-abnegating, not a medium through which to view the world with a little selection and personal colouring. There is no dichotomy between life and art: their experience is the world they present. For this reason, Modernists have generally avoided the novelist's art, making the actual composition the subject of the poem, a way of giving coherence to what would be otherwise be fragmentary and discontinuous.

## Black Mountain School

The Black Mountain poets — Olson, Creeley, Duncan — employed open forms. Poems were expected to grow out of the writing process, rather than being fitted into any pre-existing plan. Nonetheless, for all the manifestos and theorizing, many of their more popular pieces are straightforward and traditional, differing only in using colloquial language,{16} whatever is commonly claimed.

### I Know a Man

As I sd to my  
friend, because I am  
always talking, -- John, I

SD, which was not his  
name, the darkness sur-  
rounds us, what {17}

As always, the groupings cover many aims and styles. Robert Duncan's vocabulary was Romantic or even archaic {18} — 'putting back all the things I have labored a lifetime to remove', grumbled Pound after one of Duncan's visits. An undemanding example: {19} {20}

Ah, but high, high in the air I flew.  
And far, far beyond the curb of her will,  
were the blue hills where the falcons nest.  
And then I saw west to the dying sun--  
it seemd my human soul went down in flames.

I tore at her wrist, at the hold she had for me,  
until the blood ran hot and I heard her cry out,  
far, far beyond the curb of her will

to horizons of stars beyond the ringing hills of the world where the falcons  
nest

I saw, and I tore at her wrist with my savage beak.  
I flew, as if sight flew from the anguish in her eye beyond her sight,  
sent from my striking loose, from the cruel strike at her wrist,  
striking out from the blood to be free of her.

From *My Mother Would Be a Falconress* by Robert Duncan: in *Bending the Bow*. New Directions, 1968.

Unwittingly, Duncan became more a precursor of minimalism in this extract, however, where the fractured syntax follows the poet's breaks of thought: {21}

(Sept 27:) Then Jean Genet's Un Chant d'Amour  
where we witness the continual song that runs thru the walls

I loved all the early announcements of you, the first falling in love,  
the first lovers

(Oct 1)  
mouthing the stone thighs of the night,

murmuring and crying out hopeless words of endearment.

The soldier in the dirty corner of the war  
finding his lover, the lover sending roots of innocence  
into the criminal ground striking a light that illumines  
the dark belly, the old man recalling  
the bird's leap upward to flight towards the heart

from his nest of hair, his

mimesis song makes of the dewy lips the fountain forces.

From *The Currents, Passages* 16 by Robert Duncan

## Minimalist Poetry

Neither the poetry of William Carlos Williams, nor that of the Black Mountain School was minimalist, but by stripping poetry down to its most basic expression, and outlawing most literary devices, they focused attention on individual words, the properties of those words, and how they could be exploited by typography or rearrangement on the page. {22} {23} {24}

In its small way, minimalist poetry has become celebrated, and poems that are fairly traditional sometimes get promoted as examples of this latest trend: an example: {25}

You didn't notice my short dress, or the hint  
of violets I dabbed over my blue-veined heart.

Even as I swayed, so my hem lifted like mist  
over a harvest moon, you read on.

I want to rise over your dark continent,  
drag my hands through thick foliage

cling like thick-sweet mango  
to the roof of your mouth.

From *missing you while you read about Africa* by C.E. Laine: Postcards  
From a Summer Girl. Sun Rising Poetry Press, 2004.

True minimalist poems are very different: briefer, innovative, more cerebral. Typically they use:

1. the fewest words to make their point.
2. typography or visual devices and/or
3. elements smaller than words: letters, typographical marks.

In this example, the *i*'s stolen from missing turn up with the thief: {22}

M SS NG

Thiiief!

*Missing* by George Swede.

As letters are dropped in the following piece, we move from the eternal questions of the world to modern rejection (with an overtone of the Anti-Christ) to a group of individuals (a we) and finally back to the intangible again (awe). {22}

## ANTIQUE QUESTION

anti quest ion

a we

awe

And here it is the ECHO that is being 'reflected', and the counter-image is indeed thin and insubstantial: {22}

E CHOIC E

E CHOIC E

*Choice* by Geof Huth

## Other Forms of Minimalism

There are many types of minimalism. In Hugo Williams's amusing *Old Boy*, the banality is deliberate, a desire not to say more than the facts strictly warrant:

Our lesson is really idiotic today,  
as if Mr Ray has forgotten  
everything he ever knew  
about the Reformation  
and is making it up as he goes along.

I feel like pointing out  
where he's gone astray,  
but I'm frightened he'll hold up  
some of my grey hair  
and accuse me of cheating. {26}

But a poem may also be minimalistic in another sense, of course, and make a point of having nothing to say: {27}

A day like this, perhaps:  
a winter whiteness  
haunting the creation,

as we are sometimes  
haunted by the space  
we fill, or by the forms

we might have known  
before the names,  
beyond the gloss of things. {27}

## Is It Poetry?

Clever, and sometimes amusing, but is it poetry? Minimalists develop certain aspects of words that are always the province of poetry, and their typography takes fewer liberties than those allowed Arabic or Persian verse. Within their limits, the pieces can be very successful — often more so than other styles today. Poetry just about, then — which is as its authors intend: no larger statements or emotional colouring.

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## 17.7. PROSE-BASED POETRY

### Introduction

When free verse lacks rhythmic patterning, appearing as a lineated prose stripped of unnecessary ornament and rhetoric, it becomes the staple of much contemporary work. The focus is on what the words are being used to say, and their authenticity. The language is not heightened, and the poem differs from prose only by being more self-aware, innovative and/or cogent in its exposition.

Nonetheless, what looks normal at first becomes challenging on closer reading — thwarting expectations, and turning back on itself to make us think more deeply about the seemingly innocuous words used. And from there we are compelled to look at the world with sharper eyes, unprotected by commonplace phrases or easy assumptions. Often an awkward and fighting poetry, therefore, not indulging in ceremony or outmoded traditions.

### What is Prose?

If we say that contemporary free verse is often built from what was once regarded as mere prose, we shall have to distinguish prose from poetry, which is not so easy. Prose was once the lesser vehicle, the medium of everyday thought and conversation, what we used to express facts, opinions, humour, arguments, feelings and the like. And while the better writers developed individual styles, and styles varied according to their purpose and social occasion, prose of some sort could be written by anyone. Beauty was not a requirement, and prose articles could be rephrased without great loss in meaning or effectiveness.

Poetry, though, had grander aims. William Lyon Phelps on Thomas Hardy's work: {1}

'The greatest poetry always transports us, and although I read and reread the Wessex poet with never-lagging attention — I find even the drawings in "Wessex Poems" so fascinating that I wish he had illustrated all his books — I am always conscious of the time and the place. I never get the unmistakable spinal chill. He has too thorough a command of his thoughts; they never possess him, and they never soar away with him. Prose may be controlled, but poetry is a possession. Mr. Hardy is too keenly aware of what he is about. In spite of the fact that he has written verse all his life, he seldom writes unwrinkled song. He is, in the last analysis, a master of prose who has learned the tech-



nique of verse, and who now chooses to express his thoughts and his observations in rime and rhythm.'

And:

'If the work fails to survive, it will be because of its low elevation on the purely literary side. In spite of occasional powerful phrases, as

What corpse is curious on the longitude  
And situation of his cemetery!

the verse as a whole wants beauty of tone and felicity of diction. It is more like a map than a painting.'

And:

'Yet as a whole, and in spite of Mr. Hardy's love of the dance and of dance music, his poetry lacks grace and movement. His war poem, 'Men Who March Away', is singularly halting and awkward. His complete poetical works are interesting because they proceed from an interesting mind.'

Note the hallmarks of poetry then: *transports us, possession, soar away, unmistakable spinal chill, beauty of tone, felicity of diction, grace and movement*. Some of those excellences are also to be found in Phelps's own commentary. Prose only, of course: the piece does not lift into imaginative reveries, shadow forth spiritual mysteries or explore the wellsprings of our human natures. But it makes some telling points, and the writing is flexible, urbane and sensitive.

It's also rather dated. The engaging manner hides a good deal of literary artifice — suspicious to our minds: verging on oratory, attempting to win us over in advance of the facts, assuming what should be questioned more closely.

But that was no doubt the literary style of the time, a quieter version of the poetry that Phelps holds up to our admiration:

O Lily of the King! low lies thy silver wing,  
And long has been the hour of thine unqueening;  
And thy scent of Paradise on the night-wind spills its sighs,  
Nor any take the secrets of its meaning.  
O Lily of the King! I speak a heavy thing,  
O patience, most sorrowful of daughters!  
Lo, the hour is at hand for the troubling of the land,  
And red shall be the breaking of the waters.

From *Lilium Regis* by Francis Thompson.

## Contemporary Poetry Examples

How very different is generally the poetry of today. The three examples below come from *The Academy of American Poets*, {2} which spreads the net wide, but does try to present the best of modern and contemporary work. Copyright

restrictions allow only a few lines, but each poem can be found by Internet search.

I had sex with a famous poet last night  
and when I rolled over and found myself beside him I shuddered  
because I was married to someone else,

From *The Star-Spangled Banner* by Denise Duhamel. Southern Illinois University Press, 1999.

'I wonder  
if there are any catfish in this pond?  
It seems like a perfect place for them.'

From: *The Pill Versus the Springhill Mine Disaster* by Richard Brautigan, published by Houghton Mifflin.

It was taken some time ago.  
At first it seems to be  
a smeared  
print: blurred lines and grey flecks  
blended with the paper;

From: *The Circle Game* by Margaret Atwood.

What can we say of these styles: appropriate, unaffected, a trifle flat? Close to prose, in fact. Remove the line arrangements and the sentences would slip unnoticed into a contemporary short story. Something like: 'I wonder if there are any catfish in this pond? It seems like a perfect place for them,' she said, glancing up at the man who was now trying to retrieve the ball from the tangle of weeds into which it had fallen.

## Story Telling

And that may be their intention. The poems tell a story, present a situation, extract something from a world familiar to us. Modest in their aims, the poems show things as through plain glass: life without overt shapings into grand narratives or marked by portentous underlinings. That is how life is, we admit, the way we are. We can read more into the incidents, but are not compelled to do so. Sympathetic observation of character, an ear for dialogue, creation of scene through telling detail — that is what we look for: the storyteller's art. Hardy showed the way, and Margaret Atwood is also a celebrated novelist.

But is this really all that poetry aims at? Wouldn't we be better off with the full story or magazine article of which these seem pared-down versions? We absorb prose at a more comfortable rate than poetry, and contemporary work is hardly popular. Why restrict the readership still further?

Because poetry today, or this type of poetry, focuses on the word itself. Just the word, without ornament or emotional shading, or any regimentation with rhetorical devices. And for these, among other reasons:

Heritage: the way Modernism poetry has developed through Thomas Hardy's occasional pieces, Ezra Pound's interest in Chinese ideograms, Wallace Stevens's Symbolist credo and William Carlos Williams's homespun philosophy.

Honesty: to avoid the corrupting influence of language in business, politics and advertising. Words are a bedrock, whose plain use guarantees sincerity.

Originality: being avant garde, the poetry must oppose the establishment, rejecting the products of a privileged or extended education.

The attitudes are not built on sand, but they do make large assumptions.

But there is a further point. Even supposing these reasons were compellingly self-evident, the poetry would fail if it were simply as we have supposed: pared-down articles, filleted short stories. But it isn't. Once free of conventional usage, words can adopt new strategies.

## Prose-Based Strategies

Here are a few, with sources on the click-throughs:

- paces that allow words or phrases their proper significance. **Jackson Mac Low**: Circulation. And long long /Mind every/ Interest Some how mind and every long
- switches in mid line or stanza that disrupt or reverse expectations. **Elini Sikelianos**: Thus, Speak the Chromograph
- abrupt changes in viewpoint or of characters speaking. **Hayden Carruth**: now content with mystery simple/ and profound you /in the night
- variety in pace or attack: there is no metre to be negotiated. **Mark Strand**: the coming of love, the coming of light./ You wake and the candles are lit as if by themselves,
- fresh expression: **John Canaday**: I dream of grass so green it speaks.
- make large leaps in sense: **Lucille Clifton**: water waving forever/ and may you in your innocence/ sail through this to that
- phrasing based on units of sound rather than syntax: **Cole Swenson**: (the night has houses)/ and the shadow of the fabulous/ broken into handfuls
- repetition of words or phrases that reiterate but make no comment: **E.M. Schorb** : young, old, men women.

- antithesis as structure, not argument: **Shel Silverstein**: Everything's wrong,/ Days are too long,/ Sunshine's too hot,/ Wind is too strong.
- extended personification: **Charles Simic**: How much death works,/ No one knows what a long/ Day he puts in.
- inconsequential remarks linked by common tone: **James Wright**: We prayed for the road home./ We ate the fish./There must be something very beautiful in my body,/ I am so happy..

## Successes

It is these strategies, and many others, that account for the modest successes of this style. A small sample:

1. **At Pleasure Bay** by Robert Pinsky
2. **Adultery** by James Dickey
3. **Flight** by Pamela Alexander
4. **Six O'Clock News** by Tom Leonard
5. **Statement** by Paul Blackburn
6. **Metonymy as an Approach to a Real World** by William Bronk
7. **Women Don't Riot** by Ana Castillo
8. **The Perch** by Galway Kinnell
9. **Meditations at Lagunitas** by Robert Hass
10. **Manifest Destination** by Adrian C. Louis
11. **Mockingbirds** by Mary Oliver
12. **If Not, Not** by Michael Palmer
13. **Mirror** by Sylvia Plath
14. **The Lobster** by Carl Rakosi
15. **You: XVIII** by Ron Silliman
16. **At Tower Peak** by Gary Snyder
17. **Depressed by a Book of Bad Poetry** by James Wright

Could these be phrased in more traditional forms? Yes, but they wouldn't be the same poem: their rightness depends on the way they reflect the awkwardness and general untidiness of life.

## Shortcomings 1: Emotional Charge

Now for the debit side: what could be the shortcomings of so plain a style?

A first point to stress is the variety in the work, the very different themes, aims and levels of accomplishment in contemporary poetry. We cannot reasonably corral such abundance under one heading, and then stamp it with marks of approval or disapproval. Nonetheless, there remain two elements that readers may find largely absent: emotional depth and a compelling truth.

Here, to introduce the first, is an anthology piece of a century back:

'Let us consider, too, how differently young and old are affected by the words of some classic author, such as Homer or Horace. Passages, which to a boy are but rhetorical commonplaces, neither better nor worse than a hundred others which any clever writer might supply, which he gets by heart and thinks very fine, and imitates, as he thinks, successfully, in his own flowing versification, at length come home to him, when long years have passed, and he has had experience of life, and pierce him, as if he had never before known them, with their sad earnestness and vivid exactness. Then he comes to understand how it is that lines, the birth of some chance morning or evening at an Ionian festival, or among the Sabine hills, have lasted generation after generation, for thousands of years, with a power over the mind, and a charm, which the current literature of his own day, with all its obvious advantages, is utterly unable to rival. Perhaps this is the reason of the medieval opinion about Virgil, as if a prophet or magician; his single words and phrases, his pathetic half-lines, giving utterance, as the voice of Nature herself, to that pain and weariness, yet hope of better things, which is the experience of her children in every time.' {3}

Is this prose? In one sense, yes, but possibly poetry too. What it says is a commonplace, but readers may sense in it an emotional power that is largely missing from contemporary poetry. With its playfulness, its variety of subject matter and width of social register, poetry today has accomplished what no one will wish to undo. But with the populist tone has also come an unwillingness to take risks, or construct a heightened awareness of ourselves and surroundings.

## Shortcomings 2: Larger Truth

Now what we might call a compelling truth. The sombre splendour of the Newman passage does not lie wholly in the rhetoric, but what the passage says. We have to accept its meaning to admit the power. Literary wizardry can certainly set content off to its best advantage, but it cannot wholly *create* that content — not unless we accept that old jibe about poetry:

'Poetry is something which appeals to the emotions and feelings. The Quran, on the other hand is designed to inspire by arousing consciousness, conscience and will. When did poetry create a world movement, a civilization and empires? Orientalists who read the Quran as if it were poetry are worse than those who pick up a text book on science and read it as if it were a novel.' {4}

Many novels are entertainments, creations where we can explore the possibilities of human behaviour without crippling responsibility, but they are not serious. Nor is much contemporary poetry. Original and entertaining in small doses, the poems can tire us in the end with their formulaic cleverness and connections too easily made — as in these examples *from The Academy of American Poets*:

**Palea** by Tory Dent (ic, v)  
**Homage to Sharon Stone** by Lynn Emanuel (v, t)  
**Hymn to the Neck** by Amy Gerstler (ic, v)  
**Monologue for an Onion** by Suji Kwock Kim (ic, v)  
**The Blue Cup** by Minnie Bruce Pratt (v)  
**Last Night I Dreamed of Chickens** by Jack Prelutsky (n)  
**The Cities Inside Us** by Alberto Ríos (v, ic)  
**Nearing Autobiography** by Pattiann Rogers (v, ic)

Formulaic cleverness? These are the shortcomings, I suggest, of the poems tagged:

t. trite: a bald observation is tacked on rather than developed through the poem, making the ending trite and unconvincing.

ic. intellectual conceit: the intellectual framework is arbitrary and extended beyond what is illuminating.

v. vacuous: the poem ends up saying nothing of importance.

t. trivial: the subject or theme is not novel, or developed in any interesting way.

c. clichéd: a language not merely undistinguished but too clichéd for even a local newspaper.

Perhaps their authors have written better, when the fault lies with the selections — those in *Modern American Poets* {5} seem better — but the shortcomings are common to this style of writing, which the very directness cannot hide. The subject matter is not the problem. When we turn to *Academy* poems that deal with truly harrowing themes, we are met with the same flat reportage:

racial discrimination: **Worms**

racial slurs: **Niggerlips**

religious intolerance: **Looking for Omar**

bodily change: **Mastectomy**

revenge: **Lucky**

Are we being fair? We have asked for a faithful representation of life, and these, their authors and editors might claim, provide exactly that. They tell it straight. The poems don't make emotional capital out of the incidents but leave facts to speak for themselves.

But they are not 'the facts', but information/opinions/feelings that have been created, selected and presented. We can reasonably ask why, and judge the effect of that presentation.

Their tone may be fairly neutral, but is a tone all the same, establishing *some* relationship between author and reader. We take our cue from that tone.

Why should we want to read them anyway? Newspapers report on real life, on people or events important to us. Novels generate interest through plot and character conflict. Neither can be claimed for these poems, and any 'universality of theme' is ruled out by their modest statements.

The poets concerned are serious, well read in English literature, the winners of numerous grants and prizes, and often run courses or workshops at postgraduate level. Unless the poetry world is a gigantic hoax run for and by a self-perpetuating priesthood of incompetents, is there not something we are missing?

Perhaps an older view of poetry. We have characterized a prose-based poetry as one stripped of unnecessary ornament and rhetoric. In fact, it may be better to think of one rhetoric, that of classical poetry with its elitist and cumbersome devices, as having been replaced by another more appropriate to everyday use. Out has gone artifice, rhythmic subtlety and grand statements, and in its place is the authentic speech of real people in real situations. What is heightened about this language? Nothing: it is not heightened or literary, indeed the very opposite. What distinguishes it from what we use every day of our lives? That is its strength. It is rooted in quotidian usage and draws its strength and *raison d'être* from that usage. Language rooted in current social discourse, in current concerns. True, it looks back to past heroes for its styles, but these only saw more clearly what was really needed.

## Pros and Cons

We might therefore say that the style has these advantages:

versatile, accommodating most themes and approaches.

unpretentious: speech of real people in real situations.

contemporary, unhindered by outmoded forms or preoccupations.

easy to write (though possibly difficult to achieve outstanding results).

And these dangers:

elementary in literary skills, and apt to be unmemorable.

prosaic in thought and/or themes, sometimes trivial.

more clever than genuinely moving.

ineffectual in translating older (formal) poetry.

In summary: if these styles aim at what prose at its best once achieved, they do so by very different routes. And that we have to bear in mind when we ask: Do they engage our interest and sympathies? Do they fittingly express

themselves? Do they say something in the end worth saying? Have they achieved something difficult or impossible in any other form?

## Defamiliarisation

Theory doesn't help us here. It is by puzzling out what these poems are saying that we are led into probing a world that we have hitherto too much taken for granted. Adherents would argue that a prosaic style is a decided advantage, as a heightened language would only bewitch us in the old ways of poetry. Just as Wittgenstein's philosophy tried to untangle the conundrums of language used beyond its proper remit, it's the contemporary poet's task to look at life squarely, without the swelling orchestra of feelings. {6} Hence also the interest in deconstruction, which stresses the arbitrariness of language, and the corresponding need to look carefully at individual words and how they are used in a particular text.

Are the results poetry? Obviously so, in the sense that the installations etc. of contemporary painters and sculptors are art: they try to understand the visual world in a fuller but non-scientific sense. It may be that this poetry is not very popular, with the public {7} or even academia, {8} drawing its acclaim from small groups of enthusiasts. The poetry generally lacks overt emotional appeal, and does not provide — and is not intended to provide — readers with a sense of beauty or their significance in the world. Uncompromising, playful or intellectually austere, the poetry can also need the exegesis of literary theory to fully appreciate. Is too much read into these simple structures and apparently trivial statements? Their advocates say no: these very features become the placeholders for searching questions we are provoked to ask: of social issues, human relationships, and — most of all — language itself. {9}

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## 17.8. MODERNIST POEM ANALYSED

Here is a middle section of a poem in a popular Modernist style: {1}

### A Favor of Love

And Mr. Kim peers down his quizzical nose  
and Mrs. Kim stands in mountain pose

openly hating the girl for dying of an overdose  
among the lemons, mangoes, papayas, and limes  
of the country of her family's origins  
plunging among the plums and dying there  
the color of a plum beneath her dark hair  
for the girl is turning purple.

From the back of the store by the water the boyfriend  
shouts that she's swallowed a lollipop head.

Now she is almost the color of an eggplant,  
and young Mr. Kim by the register is asking her,  
'Should I call 911?' in a pleasant, insistent whisper,  
'Should I call 911?'

Big sound should boom from her, but only a bubble  
squeaks at her lips. 'Call 911!' I speak for her  
raising my woollen arm, aiming for her  
shoulder blades where I whack, whack her again,  
and no lollipop pops out. But sound bellows out!

Like idiots everywhere, her boyfriend shouts  
*Calm down, Calm down*, forcing water into her throat,  
which must help dissolve the candy my backslap dislodged.  
'Where's that Choking Victims poster you're supposed to hang?'  
the boyfriend demands of young Mr. Kim.

Except perhaps for the offbeat humour, the section reads as a commercial short story: a bit wacky but with the incident sharply observed and the dialogue convincing. Where's the poetry? That term is somewhat elastic today, and popular Modernist poetry aims *not* to be 'poetic' in theme or diction. Just prose then?

And Mr. Kim peers down his quizzical nose, and Mrs. Kim stands in mountain pose, openly hating the girl for dying of an overdose among the lemons, mangoes, papayas, and limes of the country of her family's origins, plunging among the plums and dying there the color of a plum beneath her dark hair.

For the girl is turning purple. From the back of the store by the water the boyfriend shouts that she's swallowed a lollipop head. Now she is almost the color of an eggplant, and young Mr. Kim by the register is asking her, 'Should I call 911?' in a pleasant, insistent whisper, 'Should I call 911?'

Big sound should boom from her, but only a bubble squeaks at her lips. 'Call 911!' I speak for her raising my woollen arm, aiming for her shoulder blades where I whack, whack her again, and no lollipop pops out.

But sound bellows out! Like idiots everywhere, her boyfriend shouts *Calm down, Calm down*, forcing water into her throat, which must help dissolve the candy my backslap dislodged. 'Where's that Choking Victims poster you're supposed to hang?' the boyfriend demands of young Mr. Kim.

Not exactly. That rhyming *quizzical nose* and *mountain pose* stand out, and indeed are played with. The poem opens with the wife/speaker running to Kim's market for something undisclosed that *fill a person with simple, healing water*. The water reappears with the boyfriend screaming *Water! Water!* and then the boyfriend's role metamorphoses into the speaker's as the last is accosted by a sobbing girl/girlfriend addressing her as *Mommy*. Now it's the speaker's turn to stand in *mountain pose*, to remember that her dying sister called her *Mommy*, to say mommily, *Now don't eat any more lollipops*, and reflect that *Grown human beings making sacrifices return to the universe a favor of love*.

Confused? Three themes are developed:

personal sacrifices are expected of adulthood.

dominant (boyfriend/Mrs Kim/speaker) and adaptive (husband/Mr Kim/sobbing girl) roles operate to allow sacrifices.

such favours are stored for humanity in general.

The themes are not trivial, but are left to speak for themselves. The diction is too arch or knowing to be realism:

'Thank you for making this sacrifice,'

fill a person with simple, healing water.

And Mr. Kim peers down his quizzical nose  
and Mrs. Kim stands in mountain pose

openly hating the girl for dying

'Should I call 911?' in a pleasant, insistent whisper,

I say mommily,

closing the cosmic circle

Grown human beings making sacrifices  
return to the universe a favor of love.

And the line-breaks are more expressive than is possible with prose. Try changing them:

openly hating the girl for dying of an overdose among the lemons,  
mangoes, papayas, and limes of the country  
of her family's origins  
plunging among the plums and dying there the color  
of a plum beneath her dark hair for the girl is turning purple.

openly hating the girl for dying  
of an overdose  
among the lemons, mangoes, papayas, and limes of the country  
of her family's origins  
plunging among the plums and dying there the color of a plum  
beneath her dark hair  
for the girl is turning purple.

The piece doesn't look like conventional poetry, but the words are ordered for expressive effect, make their point effectively, and round the theme off neatly.

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## 17.9 FREE VERSE STYLES

Modernist poetry, i.e. that written by most serious poets during the last hundred years, comes in a bewildering mix of styles and objectives. Even today, there are poems being written that:

1. Simply replace formal by free verse: i.e. are traditional in 'modern' dress.
2. Deliberately adopt the tenets of Modernism: experimentation, individualism, intellectualism and anti-realism.
3. Appear normal lines of text, but reject any notion of an implied speaker, a rational development or narrative.
4. Are wholly experimental, using words only minimally, and often incorporating sound tracks, graphics or happenings.
5. Seem traditional, even rhyming, but mock or undermine the cultural expectations of previous art forms.

No brief survey can do justice to all these combinations, but here are some of the commoner techniques.

### Verse Itself

Initially, free verse was simply a development of formal verse. It kept metre, but varied the metre and/or line lengths throughout the poem:



Or both rhythm and metre were dispensed with, but not the cadences of verse:

'This music crept by me upon the waters'  
 And along the Strand, up Queen Victoria Street.  
 O City city, I can sometimes hear  
 Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,  
 The pleasant whining of a mandoline  
 And a clatter and a chatter from within  
 Where fishmen lounge at noon: where the walls  
 Of Magnus Martyr hold  
 Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold. {4}

With the popular Modernism came what was essentially prose, but the line breaks directed attention to the rhythmic properties of individual sections, each of which enclosed a thought or concept: {5}

Finally, free verse *was* prose, though sometimes prose heightened by subtle use of assonance or melodic echo:

They lie in parallel rows,  
 on ice, head to tail,  
 each a foot of luminosity  
 barred with black bands,  
 which divide the scales'  
 radiant sections  
 like seams of lead  
 in a Tiffany window.  
 Iridescent, watery  
 prismatics: think abalone,  
 the wildly rainbowed  
 mirror of a soapbubble sphere,  
 think sun on gasoline.  
 Splendor, and splendor,  
 and not a one in any way  
 distinguished from the other --  
 nothing about them  
 of individuality. {6}

Many effects are possible with prose as free verse, not as powerful as those of formal verse, but adding variety and much-needed distinction to the lines: some examples.

## Private Allusion and Symbolism

Private or recondite allusions are a feature of the Symbolist movement, but the intention of Modernist poems is to bypass rational thought and appeal directly to the unconscious: its archetypal images, its deep fears and uncertainties:

The light closes its tiny fist.  
 The trees put up their old ladders.  
 Spring is coming with both its eyes closed,  
 stumbling against brick. Suddenly its left hand  
 is found on my living room floor. {7}

## Feedback as Process

Not only do poems make the actual process of writing the subject of the poem: they thicken the texture by continually drawing on and exploring what has been written before — an approach of all poetry, but now the 'working' is not hidden but placed on the page.

If a poem is a body  
 and desire is more than a word, then I desire the body  
 of this poem, standing beyond these words, naked, unwritten, teasing me  
 by  
 addressing you, reader, judge and executioner of my will, which I am  
 writing in public, counting to six  
 and watching lines pair, as I  
 want to experience this body of writing word by word. If it  
 exhibits crime by writing learnedly ventilator,

it is to give you pleasure,  
 and an irrational return on your reading investment, {8}

## Collage of the Immediately Given

The shapings of narrative, consistent viewpoint or argument are seen as artificial and/or repressions, and to avoid these poems employ collages of remembered thought or conversation, assembled as readymades of life around, the more apparently arbitrary the better.

When I tell my nephew I'm going to Tennessee tomorrow, he says, 'That's where Davy Crockett was born.' History as heroes narrows the story. The man who patented the polygraph also created Wonder Woman. Among the red-assed baboons, what distinguishes the dominant male is not simply the architecture of his anus, but the long grey mane, lion-like, though pacing the hill he walks more like a dog. I can get it for you retail. Behind the state capitol is a rough neighborhood. Constant fan of hotel air conditioning. In the cafe, the headwaiter keeps trying to refill coffee into my cup of tea. Hazy humid morning over the Cumberland River. Cafe music. Backlit display. I roll awake to a new day in a far town. All is cost. Even in a green, spiked metal mask, like an Africanized hockey goalie, his singing voice is clear as the small boy in his lap holds first one book of poems, then another, then an old paperback novel, as he sings from each, simultaneously playing the small piano in a bluesy, neutral accompaniment, although it's unclear how many of the people in the little

crowd around this softball backstop in a small park had anticipated such a performance. After the rain, crickets, and above them, the cicadas. I'm crossing the lawn on the estate of the late Andrew Jackson, past the mansion, away from the circus tent under which a bar band sings, 'Hang on, Sloopy, Sloopy, hang on.' While she waits for them to place their order, the waitress shifts her weight from one foot to the next. After the lights are out, I lay awake, waiting for my body to settle, the mind to drift, no stars but the random squares of light from offices in the next highrise tower. {9}

## Image and Not Argument

To widen the appeal, vivid images only tenuously connected with narrative or general argument of the poem are employed:

hot wind came from the marshes  
                     and death-chill from the mountains.  
 And later Bowers wrote: 'but such hatred,  
                     I had never conceived such'  
 and the London reds wouldn't show up his friends {10}

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## 17.10. CONTEMPORARY STYLES

Styles change in poetry as in everything else, and editors stay abreast of the more promising trends. Poets need to be equally aware of who's taking what in their submission schedules — and indeed angle their writing accordingly if they wish to publish regularly in the small presses.

There are obvious differences between an Elizabethan sonnet:

Fair is my love, and cruel as she's fair:  
Her brow shades frowns although her eyes are sunny,  
Her smiles are lightning though her pride despair,  
And her disdains are gall, her favours honey; {1}

A Victorian one:

O Earth, lie heavily upon her eyes;  
Seal her sweet eyes weary of watching, Earth;  
Lie close around her; leave no room for mirth  
With its harsh laughter, nor for sound of sighs. {2}

And one by a contemporary *New Formalist*:

Timing's everything. The vapor rises  
high in the sky, tossing to and fro,  
then freezes, suddenly, and crystallizes  
into a perfect flake of miraculous snow. {3}

All deal with the great commonplaces of life, with what newspapers term the 'human interest angle', but differ in their imagery, diction, references, poetic devices and much else..

Poets need to read contemporary magazines, {4} and particularly the abundant material on the Poetry Foundation site. {5} Even a few hours spent here will show that poems of the last decade:

1. Use rhyme rarely — generally in *New Formalist* work, or in a loose, jovial way:

To the Metropolitan Police Force, London:  
the asylum gates are locked and chained, but undone  
by wandering thoughts and the close study of maps.  
So from San Francisco, patron city of tramps, {6}

2. Employ very free verse styles. Some work exhibits a keen ear for timing and line break:

All dark morning long the clouds are rising slowly up  
beneath us, and we are fast asleep.  
The mountains unmove

intensely. And so do we. Meadows  
look down. {7}

But more is looser:

The sun is warm, the sky is clear,  
 etc.... Quickly he taps  
 a full nib twice to the mouth of  
 his japan-ink bowl—harder than  
 he had thought, if he had thought—smears  
 the fine spattering with his sleeve,  
 and continues, for whom haste is  
 more purity than certainty,  
 as anarchy is better than despotism— {8}

Or clearly prose:

My father had a steel comb with which he would comb our hair.  
 After a bath the cold metal soothing against my scalp, his hand cupping my  
 chin.  
 My mother had a red pullover with a little yellow duck embroidered  
 on it and a pendant made from a gold Victoria coronation coin. {9}

The free verse of most contemporary poetry lies between samples 7 and 8.

3. Pay little or no attention to cadence or patterning by sound and white space. Poets and editors simply do not hear these features, though they are what distinguishes mastery from beginner's work.

4. Pack little of an emotional punch. Most of the better poems today are intriguing, clever and self-knowing.

And the house, the mansion he  
 grew up in, soon a lawyer will pass

a key across a walnut desk, but even this  
 lawyer will not be able to tell me where this

mansion is. And my father's masterpieces, his  
 many novels, mine

now to publish—I don't have to tell anyone  
 I didn't write them, not a word. {10}

5. Either avoid the great human commonplaces like love, hope, separation (which are left to amateur poetry) or cover them obliquely, in a detached and/or novel way.

I think I always liked the game

because it sounded like my name  
 combined with the concept of alone.  
 (My name really does mean 'alone'  
 in Slovenian!) We don't actually care  
 if it's true, but we want to know  
 the person telling us is telling us  
 the truth. {11}

6. Sometimes use vibrant or surreal images:

The sun is an indistinct moon. Frail sticks  
of grass poke her ankles,  
and a wet froth of spiders touches her legs  
like wet fingers. The musk and smell  
of air are as hot as the savory  
terrible exhales from a tired horse. {12}

7. Are rarely written from a committed political stance, probably because  
dissident views can hurt careers. {13}

Free verse no doubt became the preferred medium of poets in or supported by  
academia — most serious poets today— because free verse could be written  
regularly and generate suitable material for critical study.

Regularly does not mean easily, but in the manner of academic work: a specialist writing for fellow specialists with keen deliberation and intelligence within a community of agreed approaches and standards. Clearly, it's a new type of poetry, depending more on theory than the traditional fusion of craft, sensibility and inspiration, one that perhaps doesn't tap the deep well-pools of emotion, or seek the perfect expression, but can at least be written by sustained effort. If academic verse has become less crafted and adventurous in recent years, {14-15} the work may not only reflect the continuing crisis in the humanities — where many departments have suffered cuts in tenure and funding — but may itself be party to the crisis, in turn giving poets even less independence and time for their craft.

Hank Lazer's recent survey of the current American poetry scene {16} is prefaced by a quote from Jed Rasula: *The fact is that virtually all poetry is now under some kind of institutional supervision*. The poetry referred to is serious poetry, of course, the more demanding literary productions supported by grants, university study, literary magazines and the more discerning newspapers.

True, no one in the United States makes a living directly from the sale of his or her poetry, though popular poets like Billy Collins and Maya Angelou may come close. Indeed one couldn't sell enough poems to paying outlets such as *The New Yorker* and *Poetry* to stay above the poverty line. But literary prizes and appearance in prestigious publications can lead to ancillary sources of income: academic employment, workshops, lectures and more prizes. {16}

But there is no shortage of support for what's become a minority interest. *Poets & Writers* lists more than 9,100 certified authors, and claims that each issue reaches 80,000 writers. Workshops are growing in popularity and, according to AWP (Association of Writers and Writing Programs), now number 852. The AWP itself offers services to over 34,000 writers, 500 member colleges and universities and 100 writers' conferences and centres. Many such courses are held in attractive, holiday-like locations and boast celebrity poets as instructors. {16}

Equally diverse and numerous are the products of the literary institutions. Representing the period 1990 to 2006, *Poetry House* has shelved over 20,000 non-vanity press volumes of poetry. *Bowker* reports 37,450 poetry and drama titles between 1993 and 2006. Amazon was listing 1,971 new titles under the category of poetry in 2009. A typical print run for a small press poetry book is 200 to 1000 copies. Less than 0.5% sell more than a thousand copies or go into a second printing. The boundaries between vanity presses, self-publication, online publication, print-on-demand and refereed publication have become blurred, and some small presses are reciprocal arrangements to publish the work of friends. {16}

United States sees funding from state, federal and local agencies, plus foundations, prizes, literary retreats, and tenure in universities as writers in residence. Tens of thousands of poetry readings are held each year, and more poets publish in books, magazines and websites than ever before. There are 200 odd graduate creative writing courses, and many more undergraduate courses, so that some 2000 university-accredited poets are turned out yearly (making the academic rat-race, fierce in most disciplines {17} even fiercer here). Twenty-five indeed of the US States have poet laureates. Poets appear as personalities in increasing numbers of biographies, and they feature widely in Nobel Prizes. {18}

That symbiosis of serious poetry, academia and funding institutions is also prevalent in England, and encourages a similar consistency of style. As a registered charity, *The Poetry Society* advises, helps and promotes poetry at all levels of the UK's academic and cultural life. In comfortable surroundings on the fifth floor of the Royal Festival Hall on London's South Bank, the *National Poetry Library* provides a working space, helpful staff and a vast collection of books and magazines — practically all the poetry books produced in English in the twentieth century. The larger publishing houses have their new titles, and publishers like Bloodaxe, Carcanet and Peterloo concentrate on poetry, much of it written by unfamiliar or foreign names. On radio and television every year appears the Annual Poetry Day, and each month there are poetry competitions, either as adjuncts to prestigious arts festivals, or run by the small presses. {19}

Clearly the prosaic nature of poetry today does not stem entirely from funding difficulties, but possibly because Modernism, which liberated and deepened poetry for half a century, is going the way of many revolutions, hardening into a free verse orthodoxy that alone gives authenticity.

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15. To judge from David Lehman's *The Oxford Book of American Poetry*, O.U.P., 2006., and Jennifer Ashton's *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry Since 1945*, C.U.P. 2013.

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## 18. POST-MODERNIST POETRY

For poetry in America, the immediate clarion call was Donald Allen's *New American Poetry* of 1960, an introduction to forty-four poets who had come to prominence in radical American poetry between 1945 and 1960. The poets went on to develop in various ways, but already there were groupings that illustrated important features of the new styles. In the Black Mountain School were Olson, Creeley, and Dorn, poets who believed that lines should be constructed on the pattern of taking breath rather than by syllable or metre. The San Francisco Renaissance poets were performance-orientated, known through poetry readings in the Bay Area. Then there were the Beat Poets — Ginsberg, Kerouac, Corso, etc. — who had turned their back on American consumerism. A fourth group comprised the New York poets with links to abstract expressionism — Ashbery, Koch and O'Hara. A fifth group included younger poets like MacClure, Perkoff and Meltzer. The first edition of *New American Poetry* was modest in its claims, but a second edition, which appeared in the late seventies, struck out for higher ground. Theirs was the true descent from Emerson, Whitman, Pound and William Carlos Williams. Not merely an alternative poetry, but the only poetry worth the name: anti-establishment, boldly experimental, keen to embrace spontaneity in choice of subject and technique. That was overstating matters, of course, and the protagonists had already begun their drift towards academia. Poets made tidy sums by selling manuscripts to university archives. Robert Creeley took the Chair of Poetry at the University of New York, and was succeeded by Charles Bernstein, who had earlier created the influential L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine. {3}

Fluid subject matter, open forms, inward-centred themes, a mistrust of official language: the ensuing poetry was never going to overturn the state, or lead to a general burning of books. The average American remained cheerfully indifferent to it, and its theorists were constantly driven to redefine themselves and boost their avant garde status. In due course, the erstwhile firebrands had their work brought out by the big publishing houses, Norton and Harvard among them, and some were included in anthologies intended for school use.

The reasons for the betrayal, if betrayal it was, lies elsewhere, but for the present we return to a purer Postmodernism. Whatever is understood by the term — and many contemporary poets would be hard put to define Postmodernism, or even explain its working in their own productions — a good deal of contemporary poetry is not what the general reader has hitherto regarded as poetry. Some is doubtless window dressing, and some may be hapless incompetence, but there is nonetheless poetry that attempts to be stridently new and to sever all connection with the past. To the uninitiated, the new poetry looks pedestrian, aimless and fragmentary. Indeed, it is often difficult to know what a poem is about, or how its insights matter. And perhaps the poem doesn't even profess to have content or insights.

Still evolving, Postmodernism is not a coherent movement. Its literary expression tends to the experimental (a leftover from Modernism) but its exponents

have certainly not signed up en masse to any unifying concepts like iconoclasm, groundlessness, formlessness and populism. Partially, these elements can be found in all Postmodern work, but not exclusively, which makes the assessment difficult — i.e. poems can succeed despite rather than because of their Postmodernist elements. A case in point is J.H. Prynne's work. Many of the poems in *The White Stones* were enigmatic but beautiful, their extraordinary poise and rhythmic deftness winning an appreciative if limited audience. Thereafter the style changed, and later work made no concessions to older conceptions of art. A very uncompromising strand of Postmodernism was being pursued, and clearly deliberately so.

## 18.1 POST-MODERNIST CHARACTERISTICS

### Iconoclasm

To many artists, Modernism had sold out. Its creations were no longer the preserve of an exclusive avant-garde but the subject of academic study. Post-Impressionist paintings appeared on Christmas cards, and contemporary music featured in popular concerts. Even the originators themselves turned away from their high ideals. Pound espoused right-wing views. Eliot wrote in tight forms, became an establishment figure and received the Nobel Prize. William Carlos Williams's poems served to show freshmen how little there was to fear in poetry. By the 1960s, university courses were stressing the continuity between traditional poetry and the contemporary scene. None of this was congenial to writers suffering the usual privations of the struggling artist. The education industry seemed a sham. For all its stress on authenticity and originality, everyone knew that the literary canon could be probed but not ultimately questioned.

Of course the contemporary writer could always go one better: adopt and improve on the skills of the literary great, but this required enormous time, talent and dedication, with very doubtful chances of success. The public bought as critics directed; the critics wrote as they remembered their university courses indicating; and the courses repeated what had been written before. Very few with any influence on the livelihood of writers actually wrote poetry themselves and so could be expected to have the practitioner's eye for craft and accomplishment. The safer approach was to reject the past, devise new styles however vacuous or wrong-headed, and then promote them as usual in a market-orientated consumer society.

Most conspicuously was this done in the visual arts, but book prizes and regional festivals played their part in the literary world. And with its stress on fashion, the need to keep up to date, the advertising industry was the model to adopt. What counted was the interest swirling around the exhibition or publication, and this naturally drew on and supported contemporary events, fashions and concerns. The artworks could look somewhat arbitrary, and the public

were apt to mutter that they could do as well themselves, but then the general public didn't buy paintings or poetry in any quantity. For those who did, the wealthy industrialists and a cultured intelligentsia, two strategies were employed. The first was a variation of the game of the emperor's new clothes which Modernism had been playing for decades: the priest-like role of cultural arbiter. And the second was an attack on the cultural achievements of the past. Ours was an age of mass literacy and communications, so that the old themes and their master-servant attitudes no longer applied. The old skills were no more than slavish copying: slick, inauthentic, a cultural imperialism.

The strategies worked, though at a cost. English departments, together with the humanities generally, gradually lost their prestige and then their students. {3}. Indeed, if as hermeneutists assert, art is one way in which a society understands itself, poetry must inevitably reflect contemporary attitudes and concerns. But hermeneutists also stress the importance of tradition. Past cultural achievements represent something significant and universal about human nature, indeed must do or we should not respond to them now that their superficial attractions have been stripped away. And against the claims of Postmodernism, the lives and personalities of artists do colour their work. Indeed their lives are so hard, and success so fleeting, that serious artists very much have to believe in the importance of their individual efforts. But then the promoters of Modernism are not generally artists but academics and media salesmen — as indeed most students become — so that any difference between theory and reality is yet another aspect of Postmodernism in which 'anything goes'.

## Groundlessness

Art, politics, public service, life in the great institutions — in none of these could be found any bedrock of unassailable probity. Serious shortcomings could be found in science, mathematics, linguistics, sociology, philosophy — in whatever purported to be true knowledge. All involved assumptions, cultural understandings, agreements as to what counted as important, and how that importance should be assessed. Even our language was imprecise, communal and second-hand. Where did reality stop and interpretation begin? In truth there was no essential difference between art and life: both were fictions. Was psychoanalysis a myth? Very well, so then were science and the humanities. All were self-supporting and self-referencing variably coherent systems with truths that were not transportable.

No doubt history has some ticklish problems of interpretation, but few suppose that the holocaust never happened. Even admirers of Paul de Mann were suddenly aroused from their solipsist musings when damaging evidence was found for their hero's earlier support of Nazi ideas. No one can see how the exterior world can be unmediated by our senses and understandings, but the philosophic problems of asserting that reality is entirely created by language and intellectual concepts are formidable indeed. Science has its procedures



and limitations, but its supposed 'myths' work in ways other myths do not. All disciplines have their own view of the world, but they are not equivalent or equally acceptable. Postmodernism largely overlooks how reality constrains actions, language and art.

## Formlessness

Whence comes this desire for autonomy, for circumscribing form, for aesthetic shape? Look clearly at art and the dissonances will appear just as prominently. The *New Criticism* and traditional aesthetics simply left them out of account. Deviation from the expected, foregrounding, departures from the conventional are the essence of art, as Ramon Jacobson and the Russian formalists demonstrated. Art will be much stronger for being shapeless, indefinite, even incoherent. Nor need we stick rigidly to genres, or refrain from pastiche and parody. Art is the whole world, and the more that can be included the richer the artwork.

But of course no such essence of art was ever demonstrated. No doubt the *New Critics* did speak too glibly of aesthetic harmonies and tension resolution, and poems could always be read that way, given sufficient ingenuity. Yet there are limits. The differences between a competent and an outstanding work of art may be difficult to prove to a first-year student, but everyone attests to the increasing discrimination that comes with love of the subject and prolonged study. It is a common observation that art begins in selection, and that an etching or black and white photograph may possess powers in proportion to what they exclude. If that is denied — and it is denied by Postmodernist — then many contemporary artworks will have no appeal to the more traditionally-minded, which is indeed the case.

## Populism

Postmodernism is very appealing. It is avowedly populist, and employs what is well-known and easily accessible in vivid montages. It welcomes diversity, and seeks to engage an audience directly, without levels of book learning interceding. It encourages audience participation. It mixes genres, and so makes interesting what otherwise would be overlooked. It can illustrate social causes, but does not insist on an underlying seriousness, all matters being equally relative.

But if Postmodernism espouses populism, its works do not generally have mass appeal. Response is via theories which are incomprehensible, and purposely incomprehensible, to all but a well-read elite. We may enjoy something a fifteenth century Flemish painting without understanding the religious iconography, but that is not the case with Postmodernist works. Fail to grasp the theory, and nothing is there — which explains the bewilderment and distrust of the general public. The work seems fragmentary, arbitrary, lacking in skill and overall purpose, which it unashamedly is, from broader perspectives.

What of larger ambitions? Are its artworks at bottom a criticism of life? No, and are not intended to be. Do they sharpen our sensibilities, make us see deeper and more clearly, make us more alive to the beauty of the world and indignant at its injustices? Certainly not. They make us more open to experience and less censorious. Postmodernism is not traditional, is indeed an anti-art in many ways, impatient of grandiose claims and intending no more than entertainment of an easily bored society. Artwork that does more is spurious, and therefore to be excluded from 'serious' consideration.

## Representatives

Poems belonging to Postmodernism in its various phases and manifestations include:

- John Ashbery's *The Burden of the Park* {4}
- Frank O'Hara's *Khrushchev is coming on the right day!* {5}
- Barbara Guest's *Wild Gardens Overlooked by Night Lights* {6}
- Charles Bernstein's *Thinking I Think I Think* {7}
- Andrew Levy's *tom hanks is a homosexual* {8}
- Jim Rosenberg's *Completing the Square* {9}
- Tom Raworth's *All Fours* {10}
- J.H. Prynne's *On the Matter of Thermal Packing* {11}
- David Antin's *War* {12}
- Jackson MacLow's *Very Pleasant Soiling* {13}
- Michael Basinski's *The Atmosphere of Venus* {14}
- Susan Howe's *Eikon Basilike* {15}
- Kenneth Goldsmith's *Fidget* {16}
- Robert Grenier's *Greeting* {17}
- George Hartly's *Envy Pride Gluttony* {18}

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## 18.2. L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E P=O=E=T=R=Y

Language poetry possibly began in 1971 with the NY magazine *This*, which in turn led, seven years later, to a magazine entitled *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*. Its spiritual forefathers were Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein {1} and Louis Zukofsky, {2} and the movement drew on the anti-capitalist, sometimes Marxist, politics of the time, especially the writings of Lacan, Barthes and Foucault. Though initially opposed to the teaching establishment, preferring to operate through the small presses, the movement gradually drew closer to academia, before fragmenting and losing its intellectual ascendancy in the usual avant garde fashion. Many of its one-time member are still well known, however, and writing strongly: Charles Bernstein, {3} Ron Silliman {4} and Bob Perelman. {5}

### Characteristics

Aims are best grasped by what the movement opposed: {6}

1. narrative: no story or connecting tissue of viewpoint or argument: poems often incorporate random thoughts, observations and sometimes nonsense. {7}
2. personal expression: not merely detached, the poems accept Barthe's thesis that the author does not exist. {8}
3. organization: poems are based on the line, not the stanza, and often that line is discontinuous or fragmentary: the poems reject any guiding sense of purpose. {9}
4. control: poems take to extremes the open forms advocated by Williams and the Black Mountain School.
5. capitalist politics and/or bourgeoisie values. {10}

## Some Examples

The above would seem to make language poetry baffling difficult, but generally it isn't. Who could not be charmed by Bernadette Mayer's *Synesthetes at the Writers House*. {11}

I'm pleased to announce  
that staying at the Writers House  
is like living under a multi-colored apple tree  
in winter; syneshetes would tremble with pleasure  
tempera paint and chalk make a formidable coat

of many colors, in summer pink and white blossoms fall on your head  
to the south here, a forest  
to the east, only snow and a garden  
to the north a road and forest  
to the west forest, a blue halloween-observing house

With its playful tone and gentle mockery of social address, the poem is exactly about its subject, synaesthesia, which it aptly demonstrates later with *the sky looks blue which feels like stilettoes / Sophia's plant is green, just like an 'E'*.

*Chronic Meanings* by Bob Perelman has a looser associative thread of meaning, but all lines are opening words of everyday sentences: {12}

The phone is for someone.  
The next second it seemed.  
But did that really mean.  
Yet Los Angeles is full.

Naturally enough I turn to.  
Some things are reversible, some.  
You don't have that choice.  
I'm going to Jo's for.

Now I've heard everything, he.  
 One time when I used.  
 The amount of dissatisfaction involved.  
 The weather isn't all it's.  
 You'd think people would have.  
 Or that they would invent.  
 At least if the emotional.  
 The presence of an illusion.

Why so pleasing? Because the lines themselves make us want to know more. And because they obliquely follow on from each other. What is *Symbiosis of home and prison* but staying put or confined in some way? 'Doing time' is serving a prison sentence, and 'superfluous' points out that time indeed stands still when we have nothing unusual to do: *Then, having become superfluous, time. And then.* And so on: the many teasing connections in the poem hardly need pointing out.

That sense of fun is apparent in **Thinking I Think I Think** by Charles Bernstein:

. . . Dusting the rigor mortis  
 for compos mentis. Rune is bursting  
 out all over a perfidious quarrel  
 sublates even the heckling at  
 the Ponderosa. A bevy of belts.  
 Burl Ives turned to burlap. Who  
 yelled that? Lily by the lacquer  
 (laparotomy). *I'm strictly here on  
 business, literary business.* May  
 I propose the codicil-ready cables?  
 Like slips gassing in the night.  
*Chorus of automatic exclusions.*  
 Don't give me no label as long as I  
 am able. Search & displace, curse  
 & disgrace. Suppose you suppose,  
 circumstances remonstrating. . . {13}

Bernstein goes further by muddling phrases: *Like sl(h)ips g(p)assing in the night.* By adding riddling remarks (in the full poem, the above is an excerpt): *Search & displace, curse & disgrace.* And thoughtful nonsense: *The man the man declined to be.* But it's fun, entertaining, not to be taken too seriously.

Though not deeply personal, poems have their own voices and takes on situations. Here is David Bromige sending up Rilke's *Herbsttag*. {14}

**Fall (Rilke into Californian)**

It's getting chilly, nights. If you don't have a pad by now,  
Too bad. If you're not seeing someone  
You're likely stuck that way, they went back to school.

Crack a book yourself. Write in Starbucks.  
Go walkabout downtown. [Time passes]. Hey, lookit  
the leaves, wind, etc. doing their thing. Rustle rustle.  
Contrast and compare yourself. Cool!

Language poets are not always adverse to using old forms, which they pull  
gentle fun of while still getting something out of. An example is Douglas  
Barbour's *breath ghazal 17*: {15}

hard for a breath i tarry	harried
into the body of time no	please

yet the lack of breath  
s death      even in movement the care

taking the earth & its air	making
the ruined lands fair	again

*breath ghazal 17*: by Douglas Barbour. The East Village Poetry Web

And common to many is an exactness in the speaking voice: they sound as  
a good radio script. Kit Robinson's *line 56*: {16}

Hey, poetry lovers!  
it's good to see you  
here on the page

The white spaces  
are looking good  
today, huh?

Hey, I gotta admit  
I'm not too clear on  
what all the different

Things are that I'm actually  
doing with you guys  
I think maybe we have Bill

Speaking at your  
show in England or  
something like that

From *line 56* by Kit Robinson. The Crave

## Appraisal

For all their playful, throw-away appearance, considerable knowledge and literary skill is needed for these poems. The fragments have to be entertaining, and they have to 'sit right' in the lines.

The playful, the ludic, the 'just suppose' is an important element in art, and we'd be dull creatures not to respond. Naturally, being members of the avant garde, its exponents could lead critics a merry dance into the thickets of radical theory, {17} in which they may or may not have believed.  $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$  poetry is a clever art, sophisticated and fitfully entertaining. Perhaps it's not poetry as was, and undoubtedly it shirks larger responsibilities, but it anticipated our consumerist world of news snippets, ad men and political sound bites, becoming less radical when reality caught up with art.

### Representative Poets

A few of the better-known figures in the movement:

Bruce Andrews {18}  
 Rae Armantrout {19}  
 Steve Benson {20}  
 Charles Bernstein {21}  
 David Bromige {22}  
 Clark Coolidge {23}  
 Alan Davies {24}  
 Ray DiPalma {25}  
 Robert Grenier {26}  
 Carla Harryman {27}  
 Lyn Hejinian {28}  
 Susan Howe {29}  
 Steve MacCaffery {30}  
 Michael Palmer {31}  
 Bob Perelman {32}  
 Kit Robinson {33}  
 James Sherry {34}  
 Ron Silliman {35}  
 Barrett Watten {36}  
 Hannah Weiner {37}

### Outlets

A short list of small presses representing language poetry (and other contemporary) writers:

Futurepoem Books  
 Jacket Magazine  
 Kelsey Street Press  
 Melic Review



Omni dawn  
 Reality Street Editions  
 Salt Publications  
 Sulfur  
 The Brooklyn Rail  
 The East Village

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## 18.3. SOME POSTMODERNIST POETS

### J.H. PRYNNE

J. H. Prynne is a private figure, publishing quietly until recently in the more out-of-the-way small presses. {5} Born in 1936, Prynne pursued an academic career, becoming a lecturer at Cambridge University, and then librarian at Gonville and Caius College. He is still apt to be passed over in surveys of English poetry, though his is one of the few names respected on both sides of the Atlantic. Many of England's more thoughtful poets acknowledge their debt to his scrupulous Postmodernism, and Peter Ackroyd recently described him {5} as 'without doubt the most formidable and accomplished poet in England today.'

Jeremy Prynne's poems were initially conventional. Routledge published his first collection, *Force of Circumstance*, in 1962, but these poems were quickly superseded by Prynne's avant garde's concerns, and have not been republished. Three collections appeared in 1968, followed by *White Stones* in 1969. Collections were brought out every few years thereafter by various small publishers, the bulky *Poems* {6} being published by Bloodaxe in 1999. A few reviews, scattered Introductions, and a short book {7} by Reeve and Kerridge is almost the sum total of the Prynne bibliography. Why the interest?

Prynne's work is often seen as exemplifying key aspects of Postmodernism. The poems are not personal expressions in the conventional sense, but areas of discourse, cleared by the implied narrator, where items of observation, contextual thought and quotation briefly appear. They do not 'close' — i.e. lead to

any conclusion — but seem carefully phrased if rather casual jottings, arbitrary at first. The poems employ an exceptionally wide vocabulary, some of it technical, occasionally geological. Postmodernism often features an overabundance of information, but Prynne's is much more limited, though unfocused on conventional subjects. Some of Julia Kristeva's observations can be applied to Prynne's work, but Kristeva's work is rooted in the dubious ground of Freudian and Lacanian psychology. Some of Lyotard and Habermas's concepts also apply — notably their views of pluralist and fragmented societies, and the public space of lifeworlds. In Prynne's work, the heteroglossia of Bakhtin can also be extended to poetry — against its author's intentions — but the value of the concept lies in the illumination it supplies to a work in question, and Prynne's poetry works differently.

Prynne looks dispassionately on the visceral human being and the way it responds to stimuli. That seems a very technical attitude to poetry, but Prynne is not concerned with metanarratives. The grand themes of life do not interest him, or at least not their truth as such. He evokes the inconsequentiality of existence: the thoughts, observations and associations that pass across the space created by the individual poem. The result may be disorientating and ungrounded — there are no unbiased observations, no pure sense-impressions of the type supposed by philosophers of the British analytical tradition — but the process is intriguing, as though one were watching an alien world through a microscope. Very different elements are juxtaposed without any sense of incongruity:

Pretty sleep lips; the carrots need thinning,  
pork chops are up again. We sail and play  
as clouds go on the day trip... (High Pink on Chrome: 1975)

Opacities appear, and odd trains of thought, but the best poems provide a strange sense of completeness, which resists summary. Often baffling, not always successful, not satisfying to the general reader of poetry, the poems nonetheless convey a quiet sense of authority:

The children rise and fall as they  
watch, they burn in the sun's coronal  
display... (Acquisition of Love in The White Stones 1969)

After feints the heart steadies,  
pointwise invariant, by the drown'd  
light of her fire... (Into the Day: 1972)

Now these hurt visitors submit,  
learning in the brilliant retinue  
to be helpless by refusal... (Lend a Hand in Bands Around the Throat: 1987)

Prynne was closely associated with Edward Dorn, and in fact accompanied the Dorns on their 1965 journey over from the States to Ed's teaching job in East

Anglia. {7} Dorn was a co-founder of the Black Mountain School of Poetry, which held that the breath rhythm is continuous with the deep organic nature of man. But whatever the truth of that (and it certainly allowed its exponents to develop a very exact phrasing in their free verse forms) Prynne and Dorn were both interested in the actual process of poetic composition. Olson and Dorn advocated open forms — not only the line endings appearing where the reader naturally took breath but care being taken to ensure that the disparate elements of the poem (its 'field') were not forced into a linear consistency or predictability. Estrangement, an oblique choice of words, avoidance of a fixed or final interpretation, puns, and a wider subject matter: these are the elements from which Prynne's poetry is built.

## JOHN ASHBERY

The contrast with Prynne could hardly be more striking. John Ashbery is an international celebrity for whom large claims are made, familiar through countless references to a public that generally takes little interest in contemporary writing. Ashbery does not write about experiences, real or imagined, but portrays inner trains of thought. {8} The mental excursions have no particular reference to the exterior world, though they do employ its language in various ways, sometimes playfully, sometimes with a deadpan solemnity. Complex patterns of mimicry, observation and rumination appear and disappear across a space created by the poet for no particular reason. Why read them? Because the poems can be extraordinarily entertaining. At their best, the lines have astonishing charm and freshness — seem exactly what a very gifted poet would begin his creations with. But the inventions are not pursued. Abruptly as they appear they are deflated, evaded, developed in unexpected ways:

The thieves are not breaking in, the castle was not being stormed.  
It was the holiness of the day that fed our notions  
And released them, sly breath of Eros.  
(Sunrise in Suburbia in *The Double Dream of Spring*: 1970)

Many poets would give their eye teeth to have written that second line, which is then happily tossed away. The meaning is problematic, and even more so in the poem's concluding lines that immediately follow:

Anniversary on the woven city lament, that assures our arriving  
In the hours, second, breath, watching our salary  
In the morning holocaust become one vast furnace, engaging all tears.

Some association of ideas is apparent — sunrise: furnace: holocaust: lament — but Ashbery seems more often content to win approval by literary wizardry:

...this moment of hope  
In all its mature, matronly form  
  
... innocent and monstrous  
As the ocean's bright display of teeth

Is this Zen Buddhism, Surrealism, a playful Dadaism? There are many such influences. Nor are the phrases always empty of content:

the loveliest feelings must soon find words, and these, yes,  
Displace them

The winter does what it can for children

John Ashbery was born in 1927, studied at Harvard and Columbia, went as a Fulbright scholar to France in 1955 and stayed ten years, supplying art criticism to the *Herald Tribune* and *Art News*. Continually writing poetry, he returned to the US on the death of his father, and in his 1970 volume *The Double Dream of Spring* developed his disarmingly fluent and discursive style. Always there was experimentation, however, and every few years saw a new departure. The *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975) was straightforward reflection, but the *As We Know* of 1979 began with 70 pages of lines set out with double columns, which readers were invited to combine as they pleased, no 'correct reading' being possible.

Like Wallace Stevens, whose work he admires, Ashbery accepts that we cannot know reality at first hand. But whereas Stevens was content with interpretations of reality that were credible for their time — 'fictions' he called them — Ashbery has speeded up the process. Imagination destroys its fictions as quickly as it creates them. Yet if reality is incoherent or unknowable, a work of art nonetheless requires some form: how do we avoid making that form inauthentic? Ashbery's solution is to create a continual expectation of form that is then frustrated or dissolved away. Life can only be flux, multiplicity and contradictions. Why should we despair at that? Perhaps we are emotionally or morally adrift, but life can be interesting all the same, indeed intellectually exhilarating. All that's required is to be honest to the fundamental human condition.

Such is Ashbery's view, which his work continually expresses. But his ways of deploying that insight are very varied. He muddles up syntax and grammar. He reverses expectations in mid sentence. He constructs collages of contemporary conversation and journalism, not to parody their limitations but to remind us of the multiplicities of 'reality'. His metaphors turn into something else as we read. The long poems wind towards a climax, and abruptly turn into flatter ground. While the pyrotechnics continue we are charmed and satisfied, and it comes as a shock, almost a churlish reflection, to realize that such a wilful misreading of everyday expectations would not survive a moment's operation in the larger world outside.

# JOHN RILEY

Postmodernism is such a varied movement, so often characterized by negatives, that we should first review its features, which essentially mark a distrust of 'grand narratives', an objective reality or what is now seen as elitist views.

Here are the first stanzas of John Riley's *The Poem As Light* {1}

In imagination a building, moving with the seasons,  
Moving on its axis, and in the courtyard a tree,  
Revolving with the motion of the planets  
And answering each heartbeat in token of the time  
When time, with sun and moon, stands still.

And by the courtyard crystal fountains, peonies and Mexicans  
And music  
echoing the spheres of silence  
Upon an instrument of ten strings, and upon the psaltery;  
Upon the harp with a solemn sound.

Rain will fall and not fall : the dream  
Of Byzantium interpreted and re-interpreted :  
Eternity will swallow time and art

Become what is. Art is the building, moved in, breathed in,  
All creatures move in this, and praise the motive, re-inhabiting.

The lines are pleasing, exact and meditative, but there is much to puzzle over:

*Revolving with the motion of the planets* How do trees revolve with planets: a Ptolemaic conceit?

*And answering . . . stands still.* Whose heartbeat, and how does it sound if time stands still?

*crystal fountains, peonies and Mexicans* Where do Mexicans come into this meditation on Byzantium?

*Eternity will swallow . . . what is.* What's here, beyond that the truism that the present contains the past?

*Art is the building . . . re-inhabiting.* Interesting, but left undeveloped.

The second stanza is no clearer, {2} but seems also a dream sequence, with striking but enigmatic lines:

*Countryside almost as white as green:* Real scene or tapestry/imagination?

*Spirit of river, of tree, tell me, tell me:* Tell me what?

*Immortal spirits of river and tree,* Pantheism? In Greek orthodox religion?

*Hurt as we, can rise no higher.* How do immortal spirits hurt?

*Golden throne lowered through the ceiling* Where are we now?

*It was written over nineteen hundred years ago*    Gospels? Clearly not in Byzantium.

Like J.H. Prynne, John Riley belongs to the Cambridge school of Postmodernist poets, but is also deeply involved in the Greek Orthodox faith. These may be private thoughts, but we should take them seriously, and not write them off as pretension or posturing. What is being said?

Perhaps something like this: Art, religion and all that we see around us are creations of our imagination, and are real to the extent we interpret and inhabit those interpretations. Byzantium understood this better than we do, and identified a spirit, which resided in things of the world, but came also from God the Father. That is how we must see their art and religious ceremonies, which seem ethereal but also timeless, still relevant to us.

Does the poem compel that reading? Not entirely: the lines trail off into silence, into things that cannot be said without misrepresentation.

in token of the time / When time, with sun and moon, stands still.  
Become what is

and praise the motive, re-inhabiting.

Since these would not be out of place in a devotional piece, in what sense is the poem Postmodernist? Possibly in its enigmatic nature, which continually exemplifies what Postmodernists believe — there is no reality beyond words, and no final meaning, for all that we settle into comforting interpretations of existence

## 18.4. OBSERVATIONS

Why all the fuss? Why not let Postmodernists pursue their games while the general reader gets back to more rewarding stuff? Yes, but what stuff? Postmodernism is now the style winning the reviews, the commissions and appointments. Between its costive excellences and the cliché-ridden banalities of amateur work (say the material that appears so copiously on [www.poetry.com](http://www.poetry.com) or [www.netpoetry.com](http://www.netpoetry.com)) there is a gap filled by poems that too often seems merely workmanlike. Postmodernist work is astute and restricted; amateur work is unlettered, heartfelt and popular. Neither appeals to the other side very much, and literary scholars often stay clear of both.

Hence many features of the poetry scene. One is the warfare between the poetry schools, with their continual rewriting of the apostolic succession from Modernism's founding fathers. Another is the striking absence of proper argument and reference in literary theory: these studies are written as Postmodernist poems, intentionally fragmentary and hermetic. Older critics are missing the point to complain of specious scholarship, and perhaps are even deluding themselves. Postmodernists appreciate what the critics ignore: that language

is treacherous, self-referencing and arbitrary. And that is true whether the language is of public utterance, science or of everyday affairs.

What does a non-partisan make of this? English Literature classes have lost much of their kudos, and it is not from long-suffering taxpayers but other academics that exasperation is making itself felt. Postmodernists do not read widely enough. Their ignorance of history, mathematics, science, linguistics and philosophy, where the insoluble conundrums of Postmodernist language have been known for generations — not solved entirely, but understood, accommodated, worked with — is truly astonishing, as is their misapplication of scientific terminology in their poems. Can their stance be genuine? Postmodernists expect medical treatment like anyone else, with their medical records correctly filled in. They do not countenance deconstructive sleights of hand applied to their terms of appointment or salary cheques, or indeed in their students' essays.

But poets are not in the business of turning out excellent human beings, merely of writing poems. If deprived of a proper role in contemporary society, that does not mean they should forego the benefits of that society, to which they contribute as best they can. Poetry is arguably an apprenticeship in awareness, and it's inevitable that frank speaking will be unpopular. These and a dozen other arguments can be advanced for the arts to continue the policy of biting the hand that feeds them, but the situation is certainly curious.

One popular explanation runs as follows. {9} Poets are charged with providing a deeper insight into our fundamental human needs and realities. Once Kant had shown that reality itself was unknowable by rational thought, poets were obliged to find irrational routes to their spiritual powers. The Romantics drew their inspiration from Nature, which they attempted to harmonize with their mental and emotional intuitions. But as the nineteenth century wore on, and poets became more city-dwellers, that Nature began to show a darker side. Poverty, overcrowding and child exploitation by the new industrial society disclosed the shabby heart of the common man, and any special place in God's creation was undermined by the findings of geology and evolution. Ignored by society, poets began championing the aristocratic virtues of good form, irony and indifference to popular culture. A spiritual birthright had to be self-generated, made the sharper by opposition to the lumpenproletariat around them. The great art of the past could still be a yardstick, but it was a yardstick appropriated and interpreted by other rules. Art did not represent reality, but created an independent reality given vitality and authenticity by its internal structure. What couldn't be contained by such devices was not suppressed, but purposely offered as a feature. A bric-a-brac of images, broken syntax and abstruse reveries gave readers a simulacrum of the strangeness of real life.

What Modernism crafted metaphorically in art forms, Surrealism and Dada took realistically. Theirs was an assault on the hypocrisies of bourgeois society and so, indirectly, on the ideals of high Modernism. The new movements realized that the disconnected but undeniably powerful images of the unconscious



could be re-invoked in hallucinatory collages of the everyday. And because dreams were beyond the dreamer's control, so these literary collages would escape the limited intentions or even understandings of their authors. World War Two brought an end to such experiments, and the poetry which followed seemed chastened if not spiritually impoverished. What unbridled imagination could achieve was all too evident in Stalin's social engineering, Nazi concentration camps and the widespread atrocities of war. Convention returned, and the New Criticism favoured Eliot and Yeats over Pound, Stevens and Williams.

But the ferment of the interwar years had not been forgotten, and many of its approaches and ideas spoke to a generation that felt stifled or marginalized by an academic art scene. Onto the clean, flat canvases of abstract expressionism were thrown an amazing variety of social comment, parody and technical experiments. Radical American poetry upturned the structural economy and self-ennobling ideals of Modernism and built a platform on which anything could be performed. Confessions, demotic rant, cracker-barrel wisdom — the new poetry gloried in its freedom from good taste and social responsibility. After the Vietnam War, when the arts again realigned themselves with traditional cultural values, poetry dug deeper to find an intellectual framework for its opposition to officialdom. It espoused the teachings of the New Left, and took Derrida, Baudrillard and Lyotard as its champions. The demanding, often elitist poetry of Modernism was superseded by a Postmodernist parody, not now to serve a deeper vision but to show that deeper visions were impossible. The gates to proper appreciation were still guarded by an intellectual aristocracy, but this was now an intelligentsia of reviewers, editors and lecturers in the younger universities. Audacious originality and not skill became the hallmark of art.

But Postmodernism was not simply escaping the restraints of Modernism; it was pursuing its own logic. Artists could no longer claim an heroic independence as their very materials — words, images, content — were complicit with a capitalist world. That was obviously the case for the work to be understood and accepted. After a century of effort, philosophers had not found a logically transparent language, and Derrida repeatedly demonstrated the mutual interdependence of words. Baudrillard analysed the information basis of our modern economies, and Lyotard stressed that the artist cannot by genius reveal hidden universals, as such universals do not exist. The media was our world, and with its terms and materials any art had now to be built.

Postmodernism came as a breath of fresh air. It had many strengths — a protean and egalitarian nature, appeal to the young and disadvantaged, opportunities for columnists and academics. The difficulties arise when the arguments are examined in detail.

Whatever theory might suppose, language does not wholly constrain our thought. A complicit language could not sustain the astonishingly wide range of scholarship today, in and outside academia. Nor could scientists debate rival theories. Or commerce and industry survive where figures and strategies

need continually to be evaluated. The basic postulate of Postmodernism is false because truth does not lie with narrow argument from propositions, but with what people in a pluralist society actually say and do. Postmodernism's besetting sin is hubris. Like medieval scholasticism, it has convinced itself through argument from supposed authorities that certain things cannot be true, and will not go out into the world to see. Often the generalizations do not hold water, but are continually and retrospectively rewritten. Artists at any time are commonly unconscious of belonging to any movement, which makes guiding influences invisible and perhaps suspect. Perhaps science could be blamed for a loss in spiritual faith in the nineteenth century, but the attack came on theology, not religion. Brain functioning, cell metabolism, complexity and self-organisation — in these areas science has left reductionism far behind, and indeed offers vistas as awesome as anything confronting Dante six centuries ago.

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# 19. THE NEW FORMALISM

## Introduction

If *The New Formalism* was a reaction to the perceived failings of free verse — a slovenly technique, indifference to tradition, a self-centred 'anything goes' attitude — the promotion of an iambic cure brought its own problems. The narrowness of its aims, and the drum-beating of its followers, made *New Formalism* a somewhat blunting and wrong-footing movement, though there are still many excellent poets following its prescriptions.

## History

What Arthur Miller wrote on the appearance of *The Formalist* magazine in 1990 was the simple truth: 'I am sure I will not be the only one grateful for *The Formalist*. Frankly, it was a shock to realize, as I looked through the first issue, that I had nearly given up the idea of taking pleasure from poetry.'<sup>{1}</sup>

Formalism arguably began much earlier, with Richard Wilbur, <sup>{2}</sup> whose first collection, *The Beautiful Changes*, was published in 1947. And formalism in one sense had never been dead, <sup>{3}</sup> since crafted verse was the staple of good poetry from De la Mare <sup>{4}</sup> Graves <sup>{5}</sup>, Muir <sup>{6}</sup>, Auden <sup>{7}</sup> Spender, <sup>{8}</sup> Amis <sup>{9}</sup>, Larkin <sup>{10}</sup> Thomas <sup>{11}</sup>, Betjeman <sup>{12}</sup>, and Hill <sup>{13}</sup> in England, and from Frost <sup>{14}</sup> Wylie, <sup>{15}</sup> Teasdale, <sup>{16}</sup> Robinson, <sup>{17}</sup> Ransome, <sup>{18}</sup> Meredith, <sup>{19}</sup> Carruth, <sup>{20}</sup> Booth, <sup>{21}</sup> Hall, <sup>{22}</sup> Davidson, <sup>{23}</sup> Moss, <sup>{24}</sup> Ferry, <sup>{25}</sup> Cunningham, <sup>{26}</sup> Nemerov, <sup>{27}</sup> Lowell <sup>{28}</sup> and Hollander <sup>{29}</sup> in America. And countless others.

But the *New Formalism* was rather different, notably in its proselytizing role, its marked antagonism to free verse, and its stress on metrical correctness.

## Richard Wilbur

Richard Wilbur exemplifies both the successes and some of the shortcomings of the *New Formalism*. Wilbur served with the Infantry during WWII, studied English at Harvard on the GI Bill, made friends there with Robert Frost, and had his first poem published by the *Saturday Evening Post*. <sup>{30}</sup> His first collection, *The Beautiful Changes* (1947), was warmly received, and the second, *Ceremony and Other Poems* (1950), established him as a name to watch. Much-praised collections and translations followed. <sup>{31}</sup> Yet after many accolades, a successful academic career, a Pulitzer Prize and Poet Laureateship of the United States, a William Logan article in *The New Criterion* article could say of him: 'Wilbur had great gifts he didn't squander so much as stop using, at least for his poetry. He became our premier translator of Molière and Racine, but whether he abandoned poetry or poetry abandoned him has never been clear. He has continued to write, doing little more than toying with his

verse, the way a great cat toys with prey. The poems, now simpler and less distractingly ornate, don't seem to matter much to him, and it's hard to see how they can matter much to the reader, even at their best.' {32}

But misgivings had been voiced much earlier by Marjorie Perloff {33} who said of the title poem of *The Things of This World* (1956) collection, which begins:

The eyes open to a cry of pulleys,  
And spirited from sleep, the astounded soul  
Hangs for a moment bodiless and simple.  
As false dawn. Outside the open window  
The morning air is all awash with angels.

that, for all the *New Criticism* values of depersonalization, ambiguity, tension, and paradox so brilliantly displayed, the aloof conceit of washing viewed as disembodied angels took some swallowing. Could we forget what laundry actually involved and looked like from a New York apartment? Wasn't the St. Augustine-derived title, 'Love Calls us to the Things of This World' more a studious, male-orientated avoidance of things as they were in the world? And though written in the peace and prosperity years of the Eisenhower administration, when Russian threats were contained, and both WWII and the Korean War could be set in the past, the poem was nevertheless curiously separated from cultural realities, perhaps being only a painless juggling with words that drew their resonances from literature more than the living speech of everyday joys and perplexities.

Likewise, David Perkins praised the grace, wit and intelligence of the title poem of the second collection, *Ceremony*, which begins:

A striped blouse in a clearing by Bazille  
Is, you may say, a patroness of boughs  
Too queenly kind toward nature to be kin.  
But ceremony never did conceal,  
Save to the silly eye, which all allows,  
How much we are the woods we wander in.

but wondered whether such a dazzling style with its echoes of the English Metaphysical poets did not 'stifle passion and conduce to a bland evasiveness.' {34}

Perloff and Perkins were writing from a committed avant garde position, but their charges make a claim for something crucial to contemporary poetry: openness to larger issues. Poets who neglect this dimension, who remain apart from their anxieties of their age, too much at ease with themselves, can dry up in later life, as Tennyson did, {35} and the cantankerous Pope did not. {36}

But deftness is not necessarily a handicap. In commenting on the accomplished but emotionally narrow work of an earlier poet, Christopher Ricks sug-

gested that the better poems of A.E. Housman succeed because their rhythm and style mitigate and extend what their bald paraphrase is saying. {37} But perhaps it would be better to say that their lapidary exactness inserts them into the grain of language, on which they feed and rework, crystallizing the language into views that seem believable through one of the oldest of devices: creation of a literary personality. Housman was never a yokel, {38} and never drawn to country lasses, but the loneliness and anguish of his homosexuality condensed in poignant expressions of adolescent love, which he placed in a landscape of his own imagining. Wilbur is not an anguished writer, and his personality has been extended through translations of French playwrights.

## Strengths

1. Very pleasing work was created (and continues to be created) under the aegis of *New Formalism*. It can be most things:

playful and telling:

And it turned out in the platoon I had a clone  
 -- Same height, weight, eye color and so forth--  
 Named Morgan. Put fatigues on us  
 And our mothers couldn't tell us apart,  
 So naturally the cadre  
 Was constantly mistaking us too.

I'd stay out of sight and he'd yell, 'Morgan,  
 Clean the shit cans!' or 'Morgan, police

The wrappers--let's see some ass and elbows!'  
 And Morgan, the poor bastard, plodded  
 Week after week through this plain  
 Case of mistaken identity and never did catch on.

The last day, when we were fully trained and terrified  
 The cadre said, 'Well, Morgan, how does it feel  
 To be a killing machine?'  
 I told him the name was Moran  
 And that it felt piss-poor. He stared at me like  
 He'd never seen me before, which of course he hadn't. {39}

accomplished:

Tell it to me, Ralphie...  
 Ralphie, tell it to me under this lean tree...  
 Ralphie, tell me what's happening under the ground  
 That pulses the air lightly  
 Breaking these new buds  
 Over my head...

Tell me why drums beat  
 Out of the ground, Ralphie,  
 Tell me what a long winter it's been,  
 How the drum's talking itself alive,  
 How sweat (flows out of the ground, baby)  
 Makes leather sing... {40}

moving:

Over forty years ago, I saw you  
 in my mirror mornings before the slow  
 days dawned. Working the hootowl shift miles  
 above Bohemia and in love with smiles  
 anyone gave, I was you to the core,  
 looked like you even then. Hung my hands in  
 pockets lightly exactly the way you did,  
 and wore the light blue pants.

Our names the same  
 signaled something I tried my best to grasp.  
 Maybe I have it now. But for you, Jimmy,  
 I would have remained in the north country  
 and never have known the freedom of road  
 and will. I was a slow rebel, double  
 for you in the smoky taverns of Oregon  
 where lost women and mournful men spilled their  
 lives on Saturday nights. {41}

wry:

My buddy says this time I've got it bad.  
 My first love says she can't recall my name.  
 My baby says my singing makes her sad.  
 My dog says that she loves me all the same.

My pastor says to walk the narrow path.  
 My coach says someone else will get the ball.  
 My God says I shall bend beneath his wrath.  
 My agent says Los Angeles may call. {42}

ambitious:

You have half forgotten, you almost remember the dream  
 Of a native country whose language was joy  
 Despite the numerous crosses, the wide denial  
 Of an abundance flowing from the infinite  
 Founding the city upon the reformed heart  
 And sustaining the world through one small land.

It always was about this piece of land



Where a people held together by a dream  
 (Or compressed by surrounding pressures into a heart)  
 Found, between towering walls, the way to joy  
 Just for a moment that seemed infinite  
 Before the jaws of empire closed in denial. {43}

2. *The New Formalists* revived the dying art of verse-writing, and created magazines, courses, university appointments {44} publishing houses and bulletin boards {45} to further its appreciation. The world's poetry is largely in verse, and if that poetry is not read first and foremost as verse then we are struggling in a foreign tongue, one where we may broadly understand the words, but do not feel any exultation or chill in the blood, or any sense of a world beyond the prose meanings.

3. *The New Formalists* brought attention back to poetry as poetry, away from media stunts, political commitment and literary theory.

## Weaknesses

*The New Formalism* was a combative movement, {46} and the opposition soon retaliated, pointing out {47} that:

1. Much was flat-footed and unadventurous. The following poem is making fun of the situation by being so baldly written, but the metre betrays the sense into what could be more interestingly said in prose.

Just one profitable week at the office  
 Will offset a recent manuscript's rejection  
 And white-out bad press in the Book Review section  
 By granting almost every temporal wish.  
 And on days when faithful clients ignore your call,  
 When a slumping stock becomes more than an omen,  
 When you stagger home wasted as Willy Loman,  
 How easy to write a line and damn them all. {48}

2. Correctness was over-emphasized. The preferred metre was a strict iambic, and that heavy-handed requirement closed down the melodies that are played over the regularity in underlying metre — melodies needed to express the finer shades of emotional content, and respect the personalities of individual words. This poem has an unromantic story to tell, but the no-nonsense iambic beat finally alienates us from its pathos:

Sunday morning sitting in the pew  
 She prayed to know what she should do  
 If Haskell Trahan who she figured would  
 Should take her out again and ask her to.

For though she meant to do as she was told  
 His hands were warmer than the pew was cold

And she was mindful of him who construed  
A new communion sweeter than the old. {49}

3. Verse became an end in itself: anything, no matter how trivial, could be written in strict forms, and was valuable to the extent that it demonstrated that reach. The skill is not in doubt in this poem, but the effect is not so much insouciance or brio as heartlessness:

It's almost noon, you say? If so,  
Time flies and I need not rehearse  
The rosebud-theme of centuries of verse.  
If you *must* go

Wait for a while, then slip downstairs  
And bring us some chilled white wine,  
And some blue cheese, and crackers, and some fine  
Ruddy-skinned pears. {50}

4. Its practitioners were as dismissive of the opposition as the opposition became of them. Free verse requires an acute ear for sound and placing, but this the Formalists did not always develop or recognize in others. Words are too press-ganged by the metre in this otherwise simple and quiet poem:

My parents left a handsome stand uncut  
but hacked out all the saplings and the brush.  
On stormy nights with cottage windows shut,  
we heard old boughs creak in the seawind's rush.

One by one the surviving pines were tried  
and the Barrens grew more barren as they died. {51}

5. *New Formalists* seemed to be living in a time-warp, oblivious to the many concerns that Modernism (for all its failings) tried to address, and sometimes to the everyday world of readers. The argument is not passé in this poem, but too much assembled from the Romantics props cupboard:

There'd be no music from Apollo's lyre,  
Nor could the goddess Venus find this place.  
His battered heart would be protected here  
Against impostors wearing masks of truth.  
There'd be no sun, no constellation's light.  
And passion would replace this thing called love.  
Narcissus was the one he'd follow now.  
And so he'd live--the jailor of his soul. {52}

6. Technique became not a means of exploring emotional response, but of evading it. A good ear and clear eye are evident in this poem, but the essential theme, the consolations of art, is not so much explored as tacked on:

At last she stops to watch the paper dry  
as if she guesses when to wait; to see

the deeper tones grow lighter as the eye  
 makes soft flushed hues combine in a mystery  
 which rarely grants itself, as if it chose  
 that paint and water now again make fresh  
 the secret at the centre of a rose,  
 that's only half-remembered in her flesh. {53}

## Representatives

Many. {54} A few of the better known:

Frederick Turner (b. 1943). {55}  
 Gerry Cambridge (b. 1959). {56}  
 Bill Coyle (b. 1968). {57}  
 Dick Davis (b. 1945). {58}  
 Rhina P. Espaillat (b. 1932). {59}  
 Robert Francis (1901-87). {60}  
 Judson Jerome (1927-91). {61}  
 A.M. Juster (b. 1956). {62}  
 X. J. Kennedy (b. 1929). {63}  
 Paul Lake (b. 1951). {64}  
 Gail White (b. 1945). {65}  
 Jennifer Reeser (b. 1968). {66}  
 A. E. Stallings. (b. 1968). {67}

Ezines (plus magazines with online representation) that cater for *New Formalist* poetry:

**Poem Tree** (online anthology of metered poetry)  
**Hypertexts** (reviews and good anthology of NF poets)  
**Contemporary Rhyme** (good selection in quarterly issues)  
**Barefoot Muse** (two issues a year with some 20 poets)  
**AbleMuse** (a review of metrical poetry, now back in expanded form)

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## 20. THE CUTTING EDGE

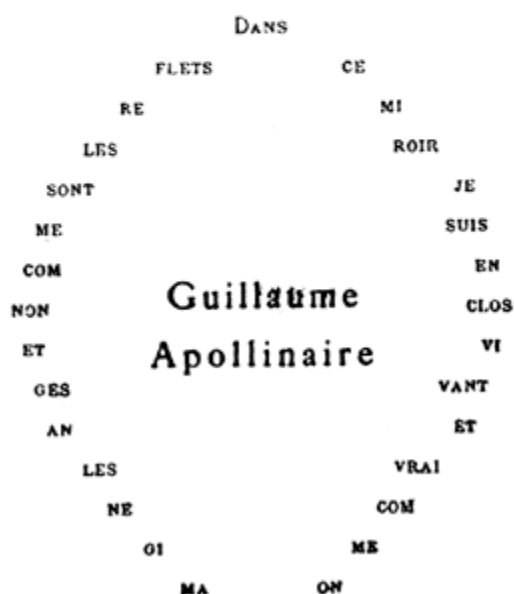
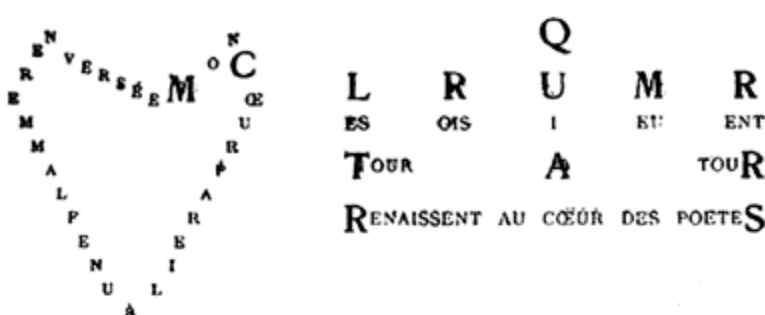
Experimentation is one aspect of all Modernist and Postmodernist poetry, but experimental poetry makes a special point of innovation, sometimes in the belief that current poetry is stereotyped and inadequate, but more often for its own sake. Experimentation in the arts is nothing like its counterpart in science, however, and there are no theories to correspond with observations, fit in with other theories, or broadly make sense. Even such concepts as foregrounding and defamiliarization, basic to much literary theorizing, are more taken as articles of faith than properly established. Visual poetry can be intriguing and pleasing, but it is not poetry as commonly understood by the term, and has therefore to be judged on different grounds, most commonly those of the graphic arts, which it increasingly resembles.

## 20.1 EXPERIMENTAL POETRY: CONCRETE POETRY

Experimental poetry is not easily categorized, but some forms do conform to the aims of Postmodernism, as will be seen most readily in concrete poetry. By being no more than simple letters on the page, the previous cultural standards are decanonized (iconoclasm), the images have no reference beyond themselves (groundlessness), and there is little attempt at harmonious arrangement (formlessness). Even the words are simple and everyday (populism).

Concrete poetry is one in which the typographical arrangement of words is as important in conveying the intended effect as the meaning of words, rhythm, rhyme and so on. {1} But what do the arrangements actually convey? Simply what the words do in the little jokes they play on our conceptions or expectations, the way they open up connections or new possibilities in the most ordi-

nary things. There is no further significance: it's a form of minimalism.



Coeur Couronne et Mirror by  
Guillaume Apollinaire. Calli-  
grammes 1912-18. {2}

## 20.2. VISUAL POETRY

Visual Poetry blurs the distinction between typography and graphics. In one of his pieces from *Poems 1972-1997*, Scott Helmes {3} gives us an ornamental fragment of a line that is joined up and repeated across the page in the manner of a fractal pattern or Chinese landscape. Do we like it?

Well, it's neatly placed on the page, though the intention is not to please but to make statements about the nature of poetry or art. Jessica Smith talks about the need to get the whole surface working: 'Linearity is so inextricably built into the writing process, and into the printing process, that even when we have the resources to make nonlinear objects by using atypical materials such as glass, stamps, wood, ribbons, and other ductable items, we constantly create linear objects.' {4} She approvingly cites John Cage's *Not Wanting to Say Anything about Marcel*, which is a stack of page-like glass rectangles, Kenneth Goldsmith's *Fidget*, where the line is centered by white letters running across the white page at varying heights, and Jackson MacLow's *A Vocabulary for Peter Innisfree*, where the relative weights and scattered locations of words prevent us getting a more complete sense of the piece.

Being statements, and not aesthetic objects, experimental poems need theory (as L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry generally does not). To appreciate it, we have to understand what concept the experimental poem is espousing, though this often no more than novelty of exposition. Poetry and theory merge somewhat, and it's sometimes difficult to tell the two apart. The poetry deliberately uses non-traditional techniques, and theory is written as a Postmodernist poem, with much left unexplained.

Here is the concluding part of Jessica Smith's *Manifest*

1.2 The poem is a set of topological figures or features.

1.2.1 Words are subject to disintegration, death, and other natural events that individuals of all types face.

1.2.2 The words on the page represent the page at a certain geological moment.

1.2.2.1 This moment implies a history.

1.2.2.2 This moment entails a future.

1.2.2.3 The reader sees merely a moment captured.

1.2.3 The 'level of the page' is the only level.

1.2.3.1 The vertical 'reader to page' and 'author to page' and 'author to reader' relationships are eradicated.

1.2.3.2 The horizontal journey through the page, as a hiker on a trail,

is the only way to search for meaning.

1.2.3.2.1 As such meanings will be different for each



traveler.

- 1.2.3.2.2 As such meaning is made through memory.  
Connections are delayed, soundings are delayed, meaning  
is delayed. Meaning is put together.
- 1.2.3.2.3 As such meaning is a compound impression  
of a physically traversed  
space (the eye moves physically through  
the space as the mind  
encounters fragmented signifiers).
- 1.2.3.2.4 Each poem is a microcosm.

2. The page is a slice of geological time. It has a past and a future. It has physical features.

2.1 It could have been otherwise.

3. The poem and the page become topological at the same time; as the reader traverses their space, he or she perceives a shifting, coming-into-being topology. {5}

The whole poem is a series of statements, laid out as an index. The statements are prose, and pass from the dubious (1.2.3 to 1.2.3.2.1) to the highly doubtful (1.2.3.2.3 to 2) and thence to the obvious (2.1). They show no understanding of how reading (vertical. . . relationships are eradicated), the brain (the eye. . . fragmented signifiers) or geology (page. . . geological time) actually work, and frankly tell us nothing that is worth knowing. What's the point of the exercise?

Well, the poem exhibits a concept. As the section below on theory will show, the piece uses strategies common in radical theory. If we believe such theory we will nod our heads in approval; if not we can only pass on: there are no aesthetic qualities to make us linger.

## 20.3. CONCEPTUALISM

Experimental poetry often employs nugatory concepts. The little graphic entitled *Ideograms* by Avelino de Araujo {6} is divided into three sections. The top section shows the silhouettes of two trees. The middle section presents a bar code. And the bottom section shows *to consume is to destroy* (in Portuguese). Once we've got the point, there's nothing more to say.

Happily, that is not always the case. In John Cayley's untitled piece {7} odd phrases and words relating to time are grouped around a circular space in which appears, fragmented, *forever the wind demon time entropy destroyed under*. The words read across the space, but can also be read sequentially down the two halves, left and right of the space. The top sentence reads *each shaped breath tells real time is concealed*, and the bottom sentence makes a little joke: *the speaking clock so unlikely to repeat itself*.

The charm of the piece lies in the words — *forever the wind demon* or *beneath the cyclical behavior of clock and time*, etc. — which are themselves extremely pleasing, and would create a decent traditional poem, and in the typography that reflects the concept of breath: the central emptiness and the scattering of breaks between the disjointed phrases. Oddly, it seems to hang together, and in place of shaping by stanza we have placings that show an equal regard for the connotations and properties of words.

## 20.4. CODE AS TEXT

If we increasingly use the Internet to view poetry, and especially if that poetry has multimedia additions, why shouldn't the coding required to display text be itself a type of poetry? 'Codework is a term for literature which uses, addresses, and incorporates code: as underlying language-animating or language-generating programming, as a special type of language in itself, or as an intrinsic part of the new surface language. . .' {8} An example by the author of this explanation:

Pressing the 'Reveal Code' Key

on write

repeat twice

do 'global ' & characteristics

end repeat

repeat with programmers = one to always

if touching then

put essential into invariance

else

put the round of simplicity \* engineering / synchronicity + one into invariance

end if

if invariance > the random of engineering and not categorical then

put ideals + one into media

if subversive then

put false into subversive

end if

if media > instantiation then

put one into media

end if

else

put the inscription of conjunctions + one into media

end if

if categorical then put false into categorical

put media into ideals

put word media of field 'text' of card understanding & 'text' into potential

if the mouse is down then

put conjunctions into potential

```

    put potential into card field agents
    put true into encoded
    exit repeat
end if {7}

```

Of course this is not true code, but could it not be imitating the hidden codes and control structures written into everyday language? Some theorists believe so. {9}

So this brief survey, which I hope this will not seem too negative. Experimental poetry is not poetry in the usual sense of the word, but something altogether different, a vast field much more varied than this page suggests, with expanding fields in sound, flash, machine-modulated, typewriter, etc. poetry. A search through the outlets listed below will turn up animations that are often entertaining, despite a heavy casing in theory, to which we now turn.

## 20.5. INFLUENCE OF CRITICAL THEORY

Contemporary poetry is commonly intertwined with critical theory, each exemplifying and supporting the other. An example is Alan Grossman's *Pastoral*, {10} which I read as a Postmodernist, anti-Theocritus piece where the concluding lines:

And the other (the right hand of  
Obliterating habit) sleeps.

are perhaps suggesting that poetry creates its own reality to the extent we escape from our usual habits. But it's difficult to be sure, and to know whether the surrealistic touches are decorative, distancing features or saying something substantive.

From a humanist perspective, literary theory often seems a chaotic assemblage of elements borrowed from linguistics, psychiatry, semiotics, Structuralism, Poststructuralism and Left-wing political thought. To varying extents, it suffers from these weaknesses: {11}

1. Theory has replaced appreciation, with poems being valued more for what can be read into them than any literary qualities they may possess.
2. Important aspects of literature — sensibility, generous tastes, wide experience — have been subverted by speculative model-building.
3. Critics do not have the proper training in the disciplines they borrow from: evidence is quoted out of context and/or misunderstood.
4. Often the reasoning is circular, theory employing as evidence what it needs to prove.
5. Many elements of theory are no longer accepted by their parent disciplines.

6. Theory has been pushed to the furthest edge of abstraction, and evacuated of meaning, reference and example.
7. A fissile and convoluted prose makes evaluation difficult, perhaps intentionally so.
8. Though theory is tenaciously entrenched in the newer universities, is widely quoted by critics and writers in serious magazines, it is essentially a 'levelling down' to unexamined standards of political devising: a local currency.

Current literary theory may be a logical continuation of issues that have underlain European thought for centuries. {12} Most fundamental was a divorce between the emotional and rational in human nature. Galileo and Descartes mark the decisive western shift, but the split is an age-old dispute: the Academy versus the Sophists, Legalism versus Daoism, Sufism versus the Sharia, etc. Poetry has naturally championed the instinctive, imaginative and emotional side, as it shares with music and some painting the distinction of being the pre-eminently creative art. Even behind the decorum of Augustan poetry, in the themes and the lives of its better writers, there was a strong current of dissatisfaction with the politeness of the age, and this repressed energy welled out in Romanticism and then into the various strains of Modernism and Post-modernism. All are protests against excessive rationalization. The Romantics sought new areas of feeling — in the past, wild landscapes, the hallucinations of drugs. The Symbolists cultivated unusual states of mind with a fluid and often musical allusiveness. Imagists pared down poetry to a few striking pictures. The Futurists were stridently iconoclastic. Dadaists and Surrealists extended the irrational. The Modernists turned themselves into an exclusive caste — since taken over by academia — who intellectualised their superiority over the conventional majority. The New Critics concentrated on how intricately a poem worked, and were largely unconcerned about what was meant or said about the larger context. Post modernists have retreated further, and claimed that poems exist — and perhaps even reality itself — only in the words themselves.

Learning is meant to be difficult, and academics do not like seeing their subjects popularised. Perhaps there is little advantage in writing in a clear, cogent and engaging manner, and a good deal to be risked — attacks from rivals, ready assessment from other disciplines, astonishment among the laity that these matters need such protracted treatment. And given the extent of knowledge today, and the pressures on tenure, each work is no doubt advancing over minefields imperceptible to the common reader. But to the usual grey language, hair-splitting and endless qualification, an altogether new tier of difficulty has been added by current theory. Is it truly written to defeat summary, analysis or even comprehension?

It is written to keep understanding within rules of its own devising. All professions have their defensive terminologies, their jargon to keep out questions of the emperor's new clothes variety, but literary theory aims at a meta-

language, a Newspeak, that will render impossible any troublesome reference to practical examples, or to other authorities.

If so, then far from protecting the arts, theory may well be assisting in their decline. Ever since the medieval corpus of the humanities was fragmented by the new philosophy, and then overridden by commercial interests, literature has been playing wallflower in the great spectacle of life. Gradually it relinquished its claim to truth, handing this over in the eighteenth century to philosophy. Then it gave up its modest claims to make imaginative recreations of the human affections. Modernist poetry does not deal with the everyday triumphs and afflictions of the human heart, and the mood of most contemporary poetry — the little that is good, and some is very good — is quiet, arcane and self-posing. Generally, leaving aside performance poetry, current literary theory allows the overwhelming emotions and commonplaces that carry the great majority of plain folk through life to be approached only ironically, obliquely, and with pastiche.

Much can be understood in the squeeze on academic tenure, take-overs in the publishing trade, pre-packaging by the culture industry, widening social inequalities, deepening distrust of big business, politics and public life, a general downgrading of intellectual standards and the difficulties most writers currently experience in making even a modest living. But very much better theory has been available in aesthetics for some fifty years, and advances in our understanding of metaphor, hermeneutics, brain function and complex systems are underlining these earlier insights. Scientific theories — abstract, objective, seeking exterior regularities — do not make good models for literature. They work badly for the social sciences, and entirely overlook what is essential for art: a specially thickened and enriched language that models itself on the whole human functioning, in all its aspects: physical, social, historical. Literary theorists tried to make their own theory by borrowing some of the scientific approaches — the search for laws, derivation of context-less generalities of depth and power, the development of a thin, abstruse language that modelled itself on logic and mathematics — but the venture was not only optimistic, but wholly wrong-headed. Mathematics, Anglo-American philosophy and science will continue to explore the abstract and general, even though their hopes of finding a bedrock of logic and unquestionable procedures have been widely disappointed. Art must surely return to understanding that the intellect does not give the whole picture. The language closest to what we essentially are, with all our bodily responses, infatuations, fears and inchoate thoughts, is poetry, not by ancient edict but by the findings of contemporary science. Other languages are less authentic, less precise and less encompassing — are an abstraction for mental reckoning, or an abbreviation for practical purposes. Long ago, Aristotle grasped the essential greatness of poetry, and that insight has been enriched by the newer sciences. Imagination is not a private indulgence, therefore, but an inheritance with demands and responsibilities through which we learn the geography of our common home.

## Outlets

Experimental poetry features largely in these sites.

Poems that Go

Kaldron

Light and Dust Poets

Ubuweb

Digital Poetry

Beehive

Concrete Poetry Index

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## 20.6. LITERARY REVIEWS

What is clearly needed in the Alan Grossman piece noted above is explication. What is the poem saying exactly? How does it work? How does it compare with similar pieces by the author and others? Is it any good?

Poetry reviewers should be playing a key role here, since no one now can read through the great mass of work being published, or even know where to find the more interesting material. But reviewers are not playing that role. To put the matter bluntly — with honourable exceptions, and some well-meaning work in the smaller presses — responsible reviewing is practically extinct. Its place has been taken by the promotional word-spinning familiar to first-nighters at contemporary art shows. Academic criticism continues, but reviewing is a different animal. The academic article is the fruit of long reflection: not riveting reading, but sound and helpful. Reviewing as currently practised aims to entertain: the evaluation is perfunctory, but the writing is very skilled: literary reviews are commonly thoughtful, engaging, respectful and rich in intriguing phrases that will serve for blurbs when collections are published. More than that, the review aims to show the correct credentials. Whose stock is up or down is well known, or can be easily ascertained by phone calls and reading other reviews, so that the reviewer's task is one of giving 'the treatment' to the work in question, as knowingly and entertainingly as possible. Statements to this effect attract abuse, but the evidence is overwhelming: hype of very modest talents, unstinting praise for passages of obvious banality and incompetence in the work of leading names, contempt for sound argument, illustration and proper comparisons. {1}

Articles in the popular press (when they appear at all) are therefore amalgamations of very limited research: consultations with friends and establishment figures, with some personal anecdotes thrown in. Reviews in the small presses tell us more about the reviewer and magazine than the work itself. Interviews with leading poets are reverential for the same reason. And in the mainstream literary magazines? Some do aptly put their finger on a poet's excellences, but always the recommendations need to be carefully assessed in the light of motives and associations of the reviewer. Academics in particular are not going to undermine careers by questioning an author they have made their life's work.

In general, reviews do not now select and introduce the better work to the general reading public because that public no longer cares for poetry. The interest has been killed off by contemporary poetry itself, and by the overprotective attitude of reviewers. Since poetry is an endangered species, and its practitioners earn so little from their efforts, it seems unpardonable brutality to lay about with the big stick. Reviewers are often poets themselves, moreover, needing favourable reviews in their turn.

But why, given that proper reviewing is a delicate, demanding and hazardous occupation, should anyone take on the work at all? {2} Because poets subsist on such things. Even well-known novelists are not living the sybaritic lifestyles

fondly imagined by their public, but depend very much on reviewing to make ends meet. Time allows only a cursory reading of the novel or novels placed each week on their desk, and more effort naturally goes into polishing up the review article that represents their shop-front on the world. Such articles may be little more than entertainment and literary chit-chat, but publicity means sales, and fellow novelists who like to bask in 'another dazzling performance' and other such appraisals will return the favour.

But there is more to reviewing than mutual back-scratching. To review is to belong to a literary aristocracy, an exclusive club that looks after its own. Some candour is allowed in private, but image is vital to all parties, not least to the public who need their illusions. Reviewers can therefore suggest that a certain work does not quite come off, but they cannot usually be precise without unravelling a whole skein of unwarranted assumptions. Nor are they likely to. Club membership is attained only after such prolonged effort and cultivation of the right people that good breeding is assured. If accidents happen — someone crassly reports an actual conversation, or a journalist elicits an unguarded comment — the matter is denied or played down. Only poets of an earlier century with independent means could afford to speak their minds, and even they were mindful of the harsh laws of libel, which allowed fair comment but not damage to careers or reputation.

Ever since inception as a university discipline, English Literature has had to define and defend itself. {8-10} Description, interpretation and evaluation of individual literary productions is the usual claim. And being an academic discipline there had to exist a body of knowledge to impart, and certain skills to teach — hence the literary canon, and academic literary criticism. And for a long time, at least on the surface, all went well. Students dutifully applied themselves before going out to earn a solid living with degrees that no one questioned. Equally unmolested by administrators and politicians, scholars pondered and slowly brought out their articles, monographs and books. To the working poet this material was useful, introducing new authors, and suggesting reasons for modifying or extending appreciation. Used honestly, the critical articles widened their taste and sharpened sensibilities.

All has now changed, for still-debated reasons: funding crises, philistine governments, market accountability, sixties permissiveness, radical ideology, and so on. {1, 6-8} University life is increasingly competitive, and the pressure mounts to turn out quantity rather than quality, to adopt trendy attitudes, and to pull punches when dealing with contemporary idols. Little being produced now is of any practical value to poets — i.e. saying exactly what is wrong with the poems, and demonstrating how that can be put right.

But criticism and poetry were perhaps always very different activities — in approach, finished product, in gifts required. No amount of clever talk on significance can supersede literary sensibility, for knowing instinctively that a particular line is botched, pretentious, too easily obtained. Poets acquire that sense by working at their own lines, and by attempting to emulate and improve on



their predecessors. Academics have a style of their own — too cautious and involuted to interest professional writers — and they wisely concentrate on dead authors comfortably part of every university syllabus.

These separate worlds have now come together. With no wider public to speak of, and standing among fellow practitioners hardly to be counted on, inclusion in the academic canon is now the dream of many professional poets. If that cannot be attained by academic assessment — the matter is too uncertain and time-consuming — then tutors will place friends' work on reading lists for return support. Understandable, of course, but adding to that slow erosion of our trust in public institutions.

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## 21. PERFORMANCE VERSE

Spoken poetry *was* poetry for a long time. Poetry as words on a page is a comparatively recent development, and some of the world's greatest literature originated in recitation handed down by word of mouth. That tradition has hardly survived in the English-speaking world, and performing poetry now means a) slam poetry integrated with improvisation and music as a type of performing art, and b) the reading of poetry aloud in classroom, workshop or poetry reading.

### 21.1. READING VERSUS PERFORMING

The two are not radically different, and the elements of performance govern both. Primarily they are theatre, where the artist engages directly with the audience, and both require an outgoing personality and skills that cannot be learnt from books or the Internet. Practice is essential, and the besetting sin of those who read their work in public is to suppose that clarity and a pleasant delivery are all that is required.

In fact the skills needed to perform poetry are as taxing as those required to write it, and it can be astonishing to hear what a trained voice can do with a very indifferent piece.

Academia bases its assessment on the written word, and many poets dislike a professional polish being given to their productions. Slickness and staginess are the usual complaints, but the truth may be professional jealousy: the spotlight shifts from the writer to the performer.

Important considerations are involved. There is poetry of the greatest refinement that does not come across in readings, and there is poetry deservedly popular in performance that looks crass and bombastic on the page. How these two aspects are to be balanced — dramatic intensity versus quiet integrity — is for the practising poet to decide. Experience is needed in both directions, just as good playwrights have usually trod the boards for a time.

The suggestions below are aimed at poets who read their works in public, and the essential message is practise, practise, practise.

### 21.2. PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

1. Learn the basics of the actor's trade: relaxation, breath control, articulation, voice projection and modulation. Do this as a positive daily workout if you're on the poetry circuit, not as a chore left to the night before.
2. Rehearse the performance so thoroughly that the actual reading seems habitual and natural.

3. Entertain. Be genuinely friendly to the audience. Address them directly. Secure attention. Play to their responses.
4. Memorize the pieces so well that only the odd glance at the script is necessary.
5. Leave nothing to chance. Check lectern, microphone, space on the stage, how you make your entrance, place your script, etc.
6. Know where you are on the evening's list of readers, and arrange your pieces accordingly. You'll feel easier, and so will they.
7. Anticipate interjections and problems; prepare handy responses.
8. Enjoy yourself. Have a good time, and the audience will too.

## 22. WORKING METHODS

What subject makes a good poem? Anything and everything, is the usual answer. But that's not very helpful, and not always true.

Find something that inspires you?

Yes, if you can, and you should, but you can't depend on inspiration. Most poems are unremitting hard work, where 'the appetite grows with eating'. Below are some obvious approaches to writing poetry.

### Options

Readers with some experience of painting may like to think of it this way: The blank page is a canvas. Unless you're an abstract painter, you have two struggles on your hands — depicting what you see, and working with your chosen medium. You have to imaginatively re-create your visual impressions through the medium you employ. *Re-create* is the key word. You cannot show everything, and must therefore select. You cannot simply make a faithful copy — the medium prevents that, even in photography — and you must therefore render the scene through and with the chosen medium. But then comes a difficulty. Once the rendering starts, the painting begins to impose its own rules. Balance, composition, perspective, colour used to denote form, for tonal harmony, expressive power, and a dozen other matters jostle for attention. As the painting progresses these considerations have slowly to be brought together and resolved. And not only does the painting restrict what can be depicted or added, it also changes how you view the scene, and the inner vision that prompted you to paint in the first place. Painting is inescapably an evolving dialogue, between your imaginative conjectures, your visual impressions of the scene, and the opportunities/restrictions that the medium provides.

Poetry is no different. The medium seems less a struggle because we use words without thinking in everyday life, but poetry requires words to be used in special ways. Replacing the rules of painting we have the elements of rhythm, imagery, diction, metre, stanza shaping, and so on. Words and phrases are not casually given, moreover, but have to be worked for, by thinking and observing acutely. What we add alters what's been written so far, and therefore opens up and closes down various opportunities. Soon the original inspiration is overtaken by other considerations, and we must either rescue it, or go with the flow of the new work.

The notes below suggest various ways of starting a poem, but remember that the process is not linear, but reverts continually to earlier stages through selection, combination and re-creation. It's worth noting the process is also more vexed and protracted than the later worked examples indicate. In the interests of space and reader's patience, I have simply not shown all the dead ends and missteps involved.

Also remember Horace's words about putting manuscripts away for a while, so they can be seen more objectively, with fresh eyes. Trust those first impressions, and make the alterations before the words settle into their previous responses.

## Points to Bear in Mind

1. Poets vary widely in their starting methods. Traditionalists commonly need a haunting line or phrase to get them going. Free-verse writers jot down line fragments that introduce their theme. Very experienced writers may plan the whole poem in outline, rather as the old masters created cartoons. But do what seems natural to you, and don't throw away the early jottings.
2. Professional writers are magpies, snappers up of trifles. They keep notebooks, cuttings, jottings, selections from authors new to them. Do the same.
3. Poems that move an audience must also be powerfully meaningful to their originators. Start something you really want to express, and keep at it. You will learn more from failures than successes.
4. Successful poems are written from a personality in balance with others, and particularly raw experiences may be best left until they can be considered in reflection.
5. Is your poem really necessary? The commonplace themes of poetry — love, passage of seasons, bereavement — have been tackled so often that only the greatest writers have something fresh to say. Think of your composition as an article to a local magazine. Would people want to read it? Does it address matters that interest them? In a sharp, engaging, informative way?
6. Write as you can, when you can. Inspiration comes to those who help themselves by setting regular hours and targets.

The ways of writing poetry defy enumeration, but here are just a few, with common faults and strategies to overcome them.

## 22.1. GENERATING MATERIAL

### General Suggestions

1. Plan. Ask yourself:

How much time is available? Opening lines can be dashed off in minutes but completion may take days or weeks. Be cautious, and aim perhaps for 5-10 lines in an evening. Don't wait for the muse, but write what you can when you can. Odd phrases and lines are

at least something to work from, and more inspiring than a blank page.

When you write letters or tell stories, do you usually start from a newspaper article you've read, an anecdote told or overheard, something witnessed, a general reflection? Start a poem in the way you're most comfortable with.

What sort of poem had you in mind? A story, a comment, a tribute, a protest, an elegy, a character study, a memorial? Skim through contemporary examples to start yourself off.

Imagine the poem were a newspaper article: what points would you make, with what evidence and resounding arguments? Got it together? Go on then: let yourself go. Something will emerge.

2. Give yourself up to reverie. Go for a walk, lie on the sofa and close your eyes, go to bed, cut out the surrounding world. Jot down the things that come you, in whatever order or confusion. Put the scribblings away for the present, and only open the folder hours or weeks later to see what you've got. You'll be amazed at what's inside you.

3. Free the imagination. Try:

Automatic writing. Say 5 minutes at a stretch, continuously, never stopping. Go through the material when you've collected in ten pages or so, and circle anything interesting.

Get a friend to say words at random. Write down the first response that comes to you. Build a poem around three of the words.

Open a diary or journal (yours or someone else's) and jot down the first incident on three successive pages. Make a poem of these.

Describe, as closely as you can, some recurring dream or nightmare. Reverse the sequence, and then make a poem.

4. Work through metaphors. Take four lines of any contemporary poem. Identify the metaphors. Then use a thesaurus to find alternatives for the metaphors. Then repeat with the alternatives, finding words even further removed from the originals. Think deeply on three or so of the more interesting words, and see if can draft a poem incorporating them.

5. Write a pastiche. Take a stanza of something well known and rewrite it so that a) the idiom is entirely different, b) the lines end with nonsense rhymes, c) the piece is ruined with the smallest possible change, d) the piece looks completely fresh and contemporary.

7. Take the last line of one of your poems (which needn't be good). Carry on from there, ignoring entirely what you drafted before.
8. Repeat some of these exercises on material swopped with a fellow student or poet.

## Worked Example: Generating the Rough Copy

We start with a pastiche. This might be a typical offering in a small magazine.

### In a Country Churchyard

Effaced by the wind  
Stones stand waiting  
For the human touch.

My caring fingers  
Trace the names of those  
Who walked here once,  
Long ago.

What can we say? The poem is quiet and unpretentious, expressing what everyone feels in such surroundings. Certainly, and that's the trouble. Everyone has felt this, and everyone has said so. There's nothing very distinctive in this contribution, and put as prose — try it — the piece would not merit inclusion in a local newspaper.

Umpteen things can be done:

Visualize the scene in its sensory fullness — the season, weather, surroundings, the hum of insect life, the smell of earth, etc.

Under the skylarks, the hard sunlight, and the frequent bluster  
Of the wind in its shimmy through the laid out rows,  
I kneel down, clear the litter, slit the cellophane wrapper,  
Prop up the flowers, and discard them, one by one...

Develop the theme through the sensory details, making them the actors:

I was glad of the frank ordinariness of the earth beneath —  
Though the grass was unruly, and in the laid path  
I noticed it pushing itself, lush and insistent;  
As much as expectantly on those summer evenings. . .

Recast the form. See what conventional metre and rhyme will do:

Again you have found me at a year's decease,  
With the blue air singing and the green grass spreading;  
Stooping to read, under the familiar heading,  
Words which are final yet give no peace.

Start with some striking phrase and develop its connotations. Tone down the rhythm so it supports the meditation rather than sweeps the reader heedlessly on.

Epiphanies of the evening, and a slight  
Thinning in the wind, which empties its hand  
Over the headstones, mowed plots, the flowers  
Dead as the rest are, and heaped about. . .

Construct a Postmodernist collage of two-dimensional snapshots.

*The body is smoking and the bad teeth go everywhere.  
Daddy wins you, Daddy loves you. Where is that man now?  
He is digging up my garden, he is climbing up my tree.  
Historically, the incidence of incest has been under-reported.*

Introduce a personal element; tell a story.

I can't remember. We didn't come much —  
Just kids then, you know, hanging about.  
Even when Dad died and I did my bit  
Again at the gravestone she was still a blank...

Are these improvements? Not yet. In developing them further, the object would be to:

1. Introduce material that cannot be accommodated by the merely safe and conventional.
2. Recast the poem in forms where more demanding technical requirements apply. To work at all, the new poem would have to be very much better.

## 22.2. NEED FOR PLANNING

Poems take time, skill and a good deal of effort. Most have to be written and rewritten, often many times, but you'll do yourself a favour by planning carefully. Simply being published (small presses being what they are these days), is not necessarily the stamp of approval, and you'll need to keep your critical faculties in proper balance with your writing skills. Be too demanding, and you'll grow discouraged. Be pleased too easily, and you'll never learn.

Traditional verse is a demanding art, and even professional poets spend hours or days correcting a single line. Beginners may find themselves toiling for weeks over a short poem or sonnet, and perhaps they should, as such self-discipline is what gets writers through days when the words won't come. Lyric pieces require a lot of polishing, but in general the longer poems take more work to conceive, develop and write, and it's clearly a madness to start a play in verse without learning the rudiments of both crafts.



Get into the habit of timing yourself, of finding your natural writing schedule — most writers are at their best in the morning and evening, and leave the afternoon for mechanical tasks and chores — and knowing what gets you going. Diet, exercise and company are important. Place, atmosphere, position of desk, view (if any) paper, type of pen and pencil, type of computer are equally vital to writers, and their first action on entering a hotel suite or room lent them is very often to rearrange everything round the writing desk. Some are happiest sitting in cafes, some like loud music and constant stimulation, but most opt for quiet: indeed some are obsessively concerned with seclusion. Work out a regime and stick to it. You can't predict the good days, but you can ensure that you're alert and receptive when they do come.

With practice you'll know the time needed for each poem, how to allocate your working hours between poem generation, development and polishing.

Remember, as mentioned above, to leave intervals — days, weeks, months — between working periods so as to see the work with fresh eyes.

As an example of what happens without sufficient planning, consider what we generated from the previous section:

Epiphanies of the evening, and a slight  
Thinning in the wind, which empties its hand  
Over the headstones, mowed plots, the flowers  
Dead as the rest are, and heaped about. . .

We started with a striking phrase, and aim to develop its connotations, keep the rhythm unflurried, the emotion generalized, the language elevated in tone and diction — in short, write a piece in the early Modernist manner.

If epiphany is the manifestation of Christ to the Magi, or the manifestation of some overwhelmingly significant event, what is meant by the evening's epiphanies? A phrase to clear the scene, move thoughts to the end of life? The tempo and setting portend the impersonal and habitual — epiphanies, not an epiphany — but we cannot say more at present. We need a larger setting, and therefore conjure up the universal rites of passage:

In obdurate splendour the sun sinks over the hill:  
A last brilliance glitters on the laid out rows  
That are tented and bridal; as the clouds mass thickly,  
There is coronal and permanence in the sumptuous dark.

Triumphal in passing? As though in the earth  
Our lives were residual and always friendly, going  
Back as from school but more elated and regal,  
Large in an inheritance that is not our home?

Where do such words come from? No one knows. Writers find and develop their own attitudes and obsessions — surveying the sheer variety of work produced is one of the pleasures of attending or running a workshop — but two

points are worth stressing. Future stanzas are created through the lines already written. The mood suggested by the imagery, tone and rhythm act as it were as godparents to the nascent thought — eliciting and guiding whatever has been accumulated by experience or outside reading. And for most poets, secondly, the process is indirect. Approaches vary with writer and genre, but most poets talk about ‘something in the back of the mind’, pregnant but rather vaguely apprehended, which only finds expression — if it does — when the poem is finished. Poets are not exempt from the need to check facts and sources, but stringing together such facts will not create poetry.

Now we must pause. The lines are rather muddled. The sentiment is not Modernist, which is generally critical of convention. Ambiguities abound, but they are not very helpful — why *obdurate*? And *coronal* is not a noun. The imagery is arbitrary, and the rhythm irregular — indeed practically a hexameter in places. Should we start correcting?

Lines too loose will not spark new thoughts, nor easily create something manageable when polishing is undertaken. Corrections undertaken too early may close off opportunities, however, and stifle development. The present life, the poem is suggesting, is not the focus of existence, but only an interlude. To a consumerist society that is doubtless an odd notion, but it is a Christian one, and one still to be found in country communities with long traditions. Let us continue, therefore, and develop further the themes of rootedness and journey.

That always they had known this? The long rides to school,  
The ink-stains, the torpor, even the double detentions,  
Were something they returned from, their school-friends playing  
As mothers were calling through the pent-up dusk.

However you may view it, it is the poppied land  
Before Flanders, new highways, the Education Acts,  
Beautiful at a distance and only at seasons  
Which came, as the wind does, as unknown guests.

Again we have allusions to darkness, the wind and the past — none of them explicable yet.

Let's tidy up. We remove some of the ambiguities, introduce an unobtrusive abba pararhyme, make the imagery more relevant, and smooth out the rhythm:

Epiphanies of the evening, and a slight  
Thinning in the wind, which assembles and gathers  
In the wrappings of cellophane and the flowers  
That lie as the dead do, strewn about.

In a ragged ebullience the sun batters the far hill,  
And the long fields float into the level haze:

Trees thicken with shadow and the scattered rows  
In the churchyard are bent into the earth's steep pull.

A leaf falls to brilliance. The warm rays stream  
On into something familiar, even residual:  
Life was a holiday, and now frugal or regal,  
In spirit they troop back to their one-time home

Which was always there waiting. Bare schoolroom desk,  
Double detentions, ink stains, the overseeing  
Were something they passed from, with their schoolmates playing,  
As mothers came scolding from the pent-up dusk.

Not bad of its type, but not a contemporary piece. Authors are surely allowed to borrow — indeed have to, since language is clearly inherited — but they're also expected to create something that shows commitment to beliefs that literary theory and criticism have identified as important, which means that deep struggle with contemporary ideas, demands and perplexities that every artist makes individual. Art students are not sent out to paint the world with learnt techniques, but to find their techniques through the integration of craft skills with visual questioning. Poetry grows out of a similar interaction between observing and understanding. Each style is the product of a particular quest, and needs therefore to be modified or abandoned as that quest alters.

Rewrite as a Modernist or Postmodernist piece, therefore? Yes if we were submitting to a poetry magazine. But since these styles are described above, let's go back to the movement out of which Modernism grew: Symbolism.

We need to start afresh, using only the *epiphanies* phrase, which we change to *epiphanies of the late afternoon* to capture the lassitude usual with Symbolist verse. Let us also set the scene indoors, and imagine a coffin, decked with lilies and laid out in an adjoining room. In *epiphanies* we have a symbol expressing a state of mind initially unknown to their originator, and we project the poet's inner mood by slow, wavering rhythms and thick consonants that evoke an atmosphere closed and oppressive.

Epiphanies of the late afternoon. Under the long leaves  
The white-clothed trumpets shake out their flagrant pollen.  
A cloud of incense patters onto the small, closed room  
The grey bones grin evilly in the churchyard plots.

Nothing is good about these lines. The imagery is overwrought, the rhythm defective, and *patters* and *bones* are saying nothing useful. But with *Epiphanies* serving as our rare word, we concentrate on syntactical intricacies, removing the sense links in the first two lines:

Epiphanies of the late afternoon. The quiet leaves clothe.  
Refulgent, the trumpets shake out their flagrant pollen.

The third line we shall leave for the present, but recast the fourth as something like:

Beyond, in the churchyard, the small teeth pick  
Into decencies of the embroidered stone.

What has happened? The lilies have taken over. More exactly, certain aspects of lilies have floated into consciousness — their lambent purity, their martial bearing, their associations with pageantry and death. Since our poem is not about botany, let us put more detail into the setting:

Rain and rain on the window glass, and a cold  
Sky settles on the eyelids. A maid fusses in  
The late silence of doily and needlepoint, which  
At length unravels in the costumed bodies.  
She is one with the epiphanies of the quiet day:  
The unbuttoned trumpets shake out their flagrant pollen.

She hears or does not hear. The powdered head  
Looks upward and beyond the unchanging day  
Tented and bridal in the candlelit chamber, they  
Come to her, bow to her, these embarkations  
Bright with the summer through tea-strewn lawns.  
Tight-lipped, her smile oozes from the velvet skin:  
The gloves, long worn, are shaped on the empty fingers.

Now concentrate on the first line. We have rain, the cold sky outside, and the vacant eyes of the corpse. Try a few variations:

The rain is undone into the window glass and a cold  
Sky settles on the eyelids.

Rain and rain on the window glass, and a cold  
August settles on the eyelids.

The second is the more interesting, but we can do better. If we condense rain, sky and corpse, we get:

A cold August rains into the eyelids.

That is very much in the high Symbolist manner: enigmatic but striking. Note the method — explanation, amplification of detail, removal of everything but a few points of telling detail. The scene has first to be clearly visualized in evocative phrases, and then those phrases reduced to the barest hints.

Now what can we say about *A cold August rains into the eyelids* ? Clearly it is not a first line in any conceivable stanza, nor yet the last. We need beginnings and ends. Let us merge dress and lilies to give the poem a new direction:

Beyond the laid silence of doily and needlepoint,  
A cold August rains into the eyelids.

She is at one with the epiphanies of the quiet day  
As the impudent dresses shake out their flagrant pollen.

What's wrong with these? They're disjointed, reading like a none-too-good translation of Symbolist poetry at its most cerebral. The images may be striking, and the content intriguing, but the lines lack emotion. We are presenting womanhood stifled by proprietary and unspoken disappointments, and Symbolist techniques allow us to suggest what cannot be fully voiced. But by whatever process, rational or irrational, the images have to move us, and that calls on a good deal of the poet's craft.

What's to be done? Try:

Reading poetry by the celebrated masters of Symbolism, in their original French, German and Spanish originals and in translation.

Reading aloud and continually rephrase the lines until something pleasing and arresting emerges.

Searching own poetry for some phrase or line to get us going again.

We take a line *When put down / They were but ciphers of themselves*, to create:

*She was a cipher of herself, and seemed so still*, when the following comes fairly quickly:

Alive, a cipher of herself, she seemed  
So still as worked within the patterned silence.  
The clock ticked busily, the doilies grew  
Slatternly with importance. The gaslight flared  
Into effacement of the silk-hung room.

The days that prick upon the conscience, the fought  
Lasciviousness of linen, the tintured nights  
Are sewn within the eyelids. A cold light clothes  
The litanies of temperance, forbearance: she  
Is at one with the epiphanies of her laying out.

Is she? Tented and bridal in the unlit chamber,  
The satined body waits. All that it had hoped  
For in the sunlight and on croquet lawns  
Is flushed with lilies and their brandished anthers.  
Unworked, the legs shake out their flagrant pollen.

Some improvement is apparent. The poem now:

1. Makes sense. We are clearly dealing with an emptied room, a woman's foibles, and her frustrations.

2. Follows the rules of rhetoric. Lines 1-2 announce the theme. Lines 3-5 draw in the reader by setting the scene. Lines 6-10 are appeals to our good natures: understanding and tolerance. Lines 11-15 start developing the theme: was the life so commendable?
3. Preserves some the better nodal points — eyelids, epiphanies, flagrant pollen.
4. Adds pregnant phrases of its own — slatternly with importance, days that prick upon the conscience, fought licentiousness, brandished anthers.
5. Replaces the merely enigmatic by something meaningful. A laid silence of needlepoint becomes a patterned silence, not simply of the room but the woman's life. The days do not prick the conscience — which is banal — but upon the conscience, which suggests that the conscience is somehow insulated from life.
6. Develops the sense of a life held and cosseted with images from dressmaking: *patterned, silk-hung, (needle) prick, linen, sewn, clothes, satined* (in coffin).
7. Uses metaphor to provide depth.
8. Has a varied but consistent metre.

On the debit side, however, the poem:

1. Is squandering the resources of Symbolism by not saying anything very new or important.
2. Employs a metre that is restrictive, perhaps over-fussy. More fluid and open was the rhythm of the lines which began this poem three issues back: *The epiphanies of the evening and a slight / Thinning of the wind, which empties its hand...*

We therefore start by loosening the rhythm:

Perhaps, then, all her hopes had been a portioning  
 Of self to what was wanted. The hemline and the corseting,  
 The flare of silk, and the body's crimped recalcitrance  
 In lobes and gender and appurtenances — all  
 The tirades of the days gone out were entered on this small, pinched face.

Then we go to the end of the poem and sketch something like:

Always there was visiting, and sunlight, though on autumn days  
 When the wind tore at the last few leaves, and the lifted heart  
 Yearned and turned over the fecklessness of things  
 Not done in time, aright, attempted not at all, there came  
 A cry from the world labouring, piteous and not to be suppressed.

As they stand, these lines are hopelessly banal and rambling. But if we now introduce a long, dropping rhythm, again from another poem, and redraft the last stanza we get:

And afterwards, what is there but the surge  
Of wind through trees, of dust in melancholy rooms,  
Old autumns that feed upon regret, the numberless  
And unassailable infractions of the spirit? All  
That is gone, is past, irretrievably dispersed...

These are Old Testament rhythms of lament, a little too strident in their raw state, but perhaps serving as a bass melody onto which to rewrite the opening stanzas of the last version.

The days that prick upon the conscience, the very  
Patterning of withholding, pained gossip and  
The visiting, the Sèvre and the treasured silk  
Embroidering the cold breasts — matters as these  
Are settled, and far away from the quiet face.

What of remonstrance, the web of influence,  
Lasciviousness of linen, tintured nights?  
All sewn within the eyelids. A cold rain clothes  
The litanies of temperance, forbearance: she  
Is at one with the appurtenances of the quiet house.

Why *house*? Because we have now personified the woman through her surroundings, one way of building up the persona, as we certainly need to do. Poems are no different from novels: we have to shape and care for the characters we create. *Appurtenances* replaces the grandiose *epiphanies* for a similar reason, and to suggest that material possessions have crowded out people. Now we could loosen this rhythm with more detail:

The clock ticks greedily. The maid has banked the fire up,  
Smoothed the coverlet and by the bedside placed  
A nightcap and the latest offerings by Corelli or Hall Caine.  
She who was to read them is not far away,  
Surely, though sleeping, boxed in the next room...

But what of Symbolist approaches? Most of the foregoing is simple narrative, and evokes very little of extra consciousness. We must return to the instructions above: visualize and condense. The first two stanzas, moreover, cover the same ground, and for them we can use the writer's most useful weapon: the blue pencil. For the rest, with the rhythm finally in our head, we gather up the previous phrases and set out something more kindly and understanding:

So, to summarize: we used free association to conjure up images relevant to our theme, and these images were then whittled down to a few telling details. Everyday links were further removed until we were left with condensed but

compelling phrases. The more interesting or beautiful of these phrases were finally picked out and set in lines of some common rhythm and/or syllable count.

That was a way of writing poetry common to the late nineteenth century. It avoided the trivial, and caused its readers to ponder what was said or not being said. Very beautiful work was turned out, which appealed to readers in the same way it appealed to its authors — if only because they were *not* getting some feeling off their chests or riding a particular hobbyhorse. The objectivity guaranteed some quality.

But the emotional distancing could be overdone. Poems need to be deeply-pondered things, which we write and rewrite until they become meaningful to us. Unless we have wrestled with all our powers and experiences, the lines will not become memorable to us — and what we cannot remember will not haunt the imaginations of others. No doubt a poem can be worked on until it starts to take fire, but poems that spring from the heart may carry with them their own potency and shaping power.

## 22.3. DEVELOPING A POEM

As we have seen, a poem often takes on a life of its own from random first attempts. But there are more purposeful ways of proceeding.

### 22.3.1. USING CATALYSTS

One is to borrow a line from another poet or poem, follow where that leads, and then eliminate the borrowing. Here is a stanza from Thomas Hardy's 'Shut out that Moon':

Close up the casement, draw the blind,  
Shut out the stealing moon,  
She wears too much the guise she wore  
Before out lutes were strewn  
With years-deep dust, and names we read  
On a white stone were hewn.

I shall probably annoy lovers of this much-anthologised piece, but to me its sentiment seems commonplace and its metre uncertain.

#### **Step One: Write Versions of the Best Line**

Start by writing versions of *Shut out the stealing moon*:

Do we want *stealing*, with its suggestion of the tawdry and underhand? *Shining* would be better, or perhaps *radiant*, which picks up the 't' sound and deepens the contrast between light and shadow, the promise of then and the scene today:



Shut out the radiant moon.

## **Step Two: Write Jottings Suggested by the Best Line**

Now we indulge in some reverie, and write lines amplifying what is suggested. We aim for rhyme but don't worry too much about achieving it, or about the sense for the moment:

draw tight the curtains, bank up the fire,  
pull the heavy years across:  
who would tell how the ghosts expire,  
the living from the dross?

who would suppose in this quiet room,  
between shadows and the bright swoon  
there would come again the voice in her fevered bloom  
in the tapestries of June?

all that might have happened then, while  
we two cast our chart:  
precipitations in the stoppered phial,  
a murmur in the heart.

late or soon, how the thoughts conspire  
shut out the radiant moon:  
still there fall the shadows and old desire  
like a half-remembered tune.

how unfathomable the bodies were,  
and bulky, but with a breath  
of such fragrance that still there stir  
now with the years passing, the twentieth  
or thirtieth...

Rather mixed stuff, but material to:

1. develop themes
2. maintain a certain (enraptured) tone
3. suggest stanza shapes

## **Step Three: Extract the Themes**

Three themes come through:

1. nostalgia for persons or situations now lost
2. voices and/or breath of a loved one
3. occult preoccupations: astrology, alchemy, visitations

Now some analysis. We can either write prose drafts to tease out the sense, or rewrite lines in the most appropriate stanza form, which is what we consider next.

### Step Four: Polish Up One Stanza

At present we have a ballad form: 4a, 3b, 4a, 3b. Let's polish one stanza:

Let no memories conspire  
in that far distant tune;  
for all its elixir and shimmering fire,  
shut out the radiant moon!

All very neat, but also predictable, banal even. Let's transpose some words:

Let no radiances conspire,  
forgo that fragrant tune;  
for all its elixir and remembered fire,  
shut out the shimmering moon!

Suddenly the verse is much more evocative and enigmatic. Poetry is not an expression in beautiful language of pre-existing thought, but a way of thinking. At this point we can either pursue what is suggested by this stanza, or construct a more demanding stanza form that will force us to say more.

### Step Five: Continue with the Stanzas

Here we follow the first aim, and rework or add to the earlier jottings:

Let no radiances conspire,  
forgo that distant tune;  
for all its elixir and remembered fire,  
shut out the silent moon!

Who could suppose in this small room,  
between the waking and the swoon  
of voices faltering and the heady bloom  
would call up fragrant June?

All that might have happened then, while  
we two cast our chart:  
the darkness glitters in the stoppered phial,  
precipitations in the heart.

How hard and deep the pain intrudes  
that I must fight for breath  
and all the anniversaries, the fire and feuds  
times twentieth or fortieth.

Unfathomable as those bodies were,  
with repentance and long tears,  
to me they call, call still, and stir  
as my neap hour nears.

And I must go walking again, again,  
 prodding the grass and stone:  
 find all sketched out with a poisoned pen,  
 dark and spiteful grown.

I am not as I was, will you hear me?  
 I ask you leave to speak.  
 I have nothing, nothing at all to cheer me  
 in recollections or physique.

But have grown older and I squander  
 what the years won't ratify:  
 I would make a pact with you and fonder  
 stay with you by and by.

### **Step Six: Discard and Add**

Next we discard the worst of the stanzas above and write more to provide an overall shape to the poem:

Let no radiances conspire,  
 forget that fragrant June;  
 for all its elixir and remembered fire,  
 shut out the shimmering moon!

All that might have happened while  
 we two cast our chart:  
 a darkness glitters in the stoppered phial:  
 precipitations of the heart.

How hard and deep the pain intrudes  
 that I must fight for breath:  
 again the impassioned sulks and feuds,  
 times twentieth or fortieth.

Unfathomable as those bodies were  
 with repentance and harsh tears,  
 to me they call, call still, and stir  
 as I walk down the years

Who knows what happens, the how or when?  
 Grey-haired and bewildered grown  
 I view the scribbles of an idle pen  
 beset by grass and stone:

Ramparts of what was possible:  
 how far away it sets,  
 life, the improbable and ineluctable.  
 I ask for no regrets

If you will stop and you will hear me,  
smile a moment, speak  
the old words, the silly things, to cheer me  
this anniversary, our week

of a walking out for a last time, or  
the first, I do not know:  
life passes, and the fragrant and the bitter draw  
of the moon goes down so slow.

### **Step Seven: Analyse and Rewrite**

Now the hard part: analyzing what's wrong and writing better:

#### 1. Meaningless phrases:

a darkness glitters in the stoppered phial:  
precipitations of the heart.

I view the scribbles of an idle pen  
beset by grass and stone

Ramparts of what was possible:

#### 2. Sentimentality or bathos:

Grey-haired and bewildered grown

the old words, the silly things, to cheer me  
this anniversary, our week

of a walking out for a last time,

These we replace or rework to get:

### Let No Radiances Conspire

Let no radiances conspire,  
lay by that distant tune;  
for all its elixir and remembered fire,  
forego the shimmering moon!

All that might have happened while  
we two cast our chart:  
the fragrance in a stoppered phial,  
the murmurings through the heart.

How hard and deep the past intrudes  
that I must fight for breath:  
again the tempest, sighs, the feuds,  
times twentieth or fortieth.

Unfathomable as those bodies were  
with repugnance and hot tears:  
what haste was in the sorcerer,  
what mirages with years!

Am I to say what happens when  
now otherwise has grown  
the hurt that in a fresh-dewed pen  
made silver into stone?

Oh yes, you may hold me, smile, or  
say things that maybe are:  
but slow and bewildering is the draw  
down of the moon and far.

## COMPLEX LYRIC

We developed:

Let no radiances conspire,  
lay by that fragrant tune;  
for all its elixir and shimmering fire  
forego the distant moon!

Pretty enough, but with dangers because:

1. a ballad is too hurried: we are meditating on a situation, not telling a story
2. so strong a form may betray us into using hackneyed rhymes.

A suggestion is provided by *now with the years passing, the twentieth* on the previous page, a happy alternative to the usual *breath/death* rhyme. We now write whatever will make the lines longer and the content bulkier, trying to retain something of the previous rhythm and tone:

Through all this damascene of light and shade,  
in things relinquished or mislaid there stays  
a moment in the fragrant room, the blaze  
of words unspoken or of hopes obeyed:  
shut out the shining moon.

For as much unfathomable as those women were  
and bulky the unwrapped fervour of their breath,  
ah well, that was long ago, and not in the twentieth  
or the thirtieth time of advent do bodies stir:  
dry thoughts: another tune!

however impossible the dreams were or in arrogance  
the years move forward from that last goodnight,  
still diademed in her most tranquil light

the orb of all we were or had been is askance  
of what we will assume.

Not very exciting: should we correct or press on? Much depends on the distress the failings cause, most notably:

the cliché: *last goodnight*

muddled expressions: *mislaid there stays a moment. . time of advent. . . were or in arrogance*, etc.

discordant metre: *still diademed in her most tranquil light* is a beautiful line, but quite out of place here.

Certainly we can't rewrite without rethinking what was aimed for: some stanza that married *shut out the distant moon!* with the more meditative *not in the twentieth or the thirtieth time*. The present shape may well serve for a short lyric, since *tune* has many rhymes, but let's do what we did before: try to get one stanza right.

### Step One: Get One Stanza Right

Start with the second stanza. We can write any number of acceptable last lines: it's the first four that need work. So, first this:

For, however unfathomable those bodies were,  
or the stern fervour of their breath,  
those thoughts were orphaned long ago and not on their twentieth  
or thirtieth advent do the phantoms stir  
in what we hear and would forget.

And then:

For, however unfathomable those bodies were,  
or stern fervour of their breath,  
their forms were orphaned long ago and not  
on their twentieth or their thirtieth  
advent do the phantoms stir  
there with the lies we would forget.  
in this small garden plot.

### Step Two: Write in the New Stanza Form

A bit better: we have replaced the wavering rhythm and irregular form with something more compact and manageable. The new form — 5a 4b 5c 4b 4a 3c — perhaps has narrative possibilities, and we should now be thinking of fervour, orphaned thoughts, evacuated shapes, hallowed ground, etc. in the context of moonlight and her insubstantial promises. We now write more stanzas, as the words come, but keeping to the form, however nonsensical or contrived the result:

For, however unfathomable those bodies were,  
or the wet fervour of their breath,

their forms were orphaned long ago and not  
on their twentieth or their thirtieth  
advent do the phantoms stir  
in this small gardened plot

The walls are as they stood. The wind is bluffing  
to drag out all that was. The tree  
rehearses in the same old tune  
it played for us in turn. You want from me  
well, what then, what? There is nothing  
here but darkness and the moon.

Warm-breathed and fragranced as the voices then,  
from the rich vellum to their fall  
was only decrepitude in bodies thrown  
in softness that again, again  
must flatter as the mosses spawl  
into the lichened stone.

Much as I made of those tendernesses  
Of the dark eyes blinkered and afraid,  
What tarantelle the eyelash made, what braille  
was in light touches laid.  
Hang up the linen sweep of dresses,  
refold the peacock's tail.

Still turning and returning as I was then  
as the dark rifles through the head,  
The heart was in the pounding blood, the course  
over the warm hills and instead  
I see a kindly now old gentleman  
and day and day's remorse.

As ineluctable as we were then, who knew  
what the dark trees carry in their train?  
Yes, life is inexhaustible but choose  
one, one only, and do not stain  
the bright fabric of the small and true  
with the daylight's blunting use.

### **Step Three: Step Back and Polish Up**

Well, sort of. The shortcomings are too obvious to need exposition. We  
have to cut, rework and polish:

#### **That Still Moon in Heaven**

However unfathomable those bodies were  
or the wet fervour of their breath,

their forms were orphaned long ago and not  
on their twentieth or thirtieth  
advent do the phantoms stir  
in this ungardened plot.

Though warm they were, and their voices meet  
in a rich vellum to a fall,  
all was decrepitude, the body's starched  
exactions on the sheet,  
yet still the same the voices call  
as pubis bone is arched.

Though much I learned of tendernesses,  
of dark eyes blinkered and afraid,  
the tarantelle the eyelash made, what Braille  
was in small fingers laid,  
set by the quickstep of the dresses,  
forgo the cuckoo's tale.

Come, return to me as I was then  
as the past pummels through the head:  
the heart was in the pounding blood, the course  
lay always through the bed,  
and not as now old gentlemen  
set by the days' remorse.

As ineluctable as all was then, who knew  
what the dark trees carried in their train?  
That love was inexhaustible but leaven  
only in its gain.  
Chaste and thin the light falls through  
from that still moon in heaven.

The poem began with variations on Hardy's *stealing moon*, which then acted as a catalyst, generating the usual reflections on moonlit assignations and lost opportunities. Job done, the moon shrinks into something hardly perceptible, quite different from the radiant beauty first invoked. That process is not uncommon in poetry, though the trace of commonplace association remains in the shape of the poem, its tone or context. Lyrics often need something like this: other genres are more complexly orchestrated.

### 22.3.2. USING OBSERVATIONS.

Novelists keep diaries where they jot down incidents and observations that may be useful later. So should poets.

We want to write a Modernist piece, which has outside referents and achieves closure. The technique may be a cinematographic, and the speaker obtrusive-



ly present, but these are not private musings. Our example has to be a narrative of sorts, with themes that are not trivial or over-exploited.

1. We start with some jottings in a shopping mall:

'Come along, Tim, we're going home.'

Balloons are back this week.

He dare not watch them going out of sight.

2. And develop them to find some connecting link or theme:

Miles, tell him, will you? They're too expensive.  
 Your mother's right. Come on, son,  
 we'll think about it. Sure, some other time.  
 I want it now! The small fist brandishes  
 the sneaker, petulantly goes to hurl it, sees  
 his father's jaw set hard, his mother stare at him.  
 Yours is he? the assistant quizzes, crouching down  
 and smiling. Gratified, he smiles on back, holds out  
 her present which she takes. He turns to them.  
 His mother looks as though to throttle him, father  
 sighs at his watch, apologizes and apologizing,  
 he takes the offered hand and walks the boy out.  
 She follows, erect in silence. Long silence.  
 Over him the long legs striding, striding  
 and the faces sway benevolent, preoccupied.  
 But he's his buoyant self again, trots off and stops.  
 Oh very well, let's get him something. Here.

Balloons are back this week: green, iridescent  
 red, sunlit blue, it doesn't matter: each small boy can,  
 by a string attached, reach, touch and draw  
 his trembling present back. He hasn't much to do but hold  
 its nascent breath or watch it quietly tumbling in the air.

Down the long mall he watches them, secure on the thread  
 that he is like them and in each airy thought breathes  
 in with them and with their world. He stops  
 and they will wait for him: he runs and they will pick him up,  
 on, on and forever as still more buoyantly the days  
 in the ordinary sunshine accumulate, float them forward,  
 clicking the door open for him, sitting him in front,  
 listening and not answering back until they are a dot  
 on the mall's hard-polished floor from which he will  
 strain his eyes at and dare them never to look back.

Just prose jottings, not connected up. Verse usually needs to be written line by pregnant line, but now we approach the writing as a short story writer,

picking out themes, rearranging material, aiming for a beginning, middle and end:

## Balloons

Mike, tell him, will you? They're too expensive.  
 Son, we'll think about it. Sure, some other time.  
 But I want it now! The small fist snatches at  
 the sneaker, petulantly goes to hurl it, sees  
 his father's jaw set hard, his mother glare at him.

Yours, is he? the assistant quizzes, crouching down  
 and smiling. Gratified, he smiles on back, holds out  
 the offering which she takes, turns back to them.  
 His mother looks as though she'd throttle him.  
 His father sighs and takes the hand and walks it out.

But now he is his sturdy self again, trots off and stops.  
 Oh very well, let's get him something. Mike?

The balloons are watching for him: green and red  
 and sunlit blue. He settles for a red one, runs with it, tugging  
 at the string to reach and touch and draw its trembling  
 presence back, or have it quietly tumbling in the air.

Down the long mall he'll see them as they walk. He'll stop  
 and they will wait for him: he'll fall and they will pick him up,  
 clicking the door open for him, sitting him in front,  
 listening and not listening until they are a dot  
 on the past's hard-mirrored surface, the which he'll  
 strain his eyes to see, and tug more desperately  
 for all the bright days afterwards that won't come back.

### 22.3.3. POETRY IS EVERYWHERE

Suppose you're asked to write a poem on anything you please, but nothing comes: what then?

Here's a worked example that demonstrates that poetry can be written on the most ordinary objects without using words of literary connotation. It's a little deceptive, however, starting low key and aiming for the thoughtful, meditative piece that many small presses now look for, but then opening into something different.

First we choose something off the usual track to escape hackneyed thoughts or outmoded rhythmic cadences. 'Turnips' should be safe.

Then we check what we remember about our subject. [Answers.com](https://www.answers.com) has this entry:

'Turnip, garden vegetable of the same genus of the family Cruciferae (mustard family) as the cabbage; native to Europe, where it has been long cultivated. . . . The turnip is one of the root crops used as a stock feed as well as for human food. The green leaves (greens) are often cooked like spinach. The turnip is a biennial cool-weather crop, grown mostly in cool climates. . . . The most common type of turnip marketed as a vegetable in Europe and North America is mostly white-skinned apart from the upper 1–3 centimeters, which protrude above the ground and are purple, red, or greenish wherever sunlight has fallen. This above-ground part develops from stem tissue, but is fused with the root. The interior flesh is entirely white. The entire root is roughly spherical, about 5–15 centimeters in diameter, and lacks side roots. The taproot (the normal root below the swollen storage root) is thin and 10 centimeters or more in length; it is trimmed off before marketing. The leaves grow directly from the above ground shoulder of the root, with little or no visible crown or neck. Turnip greens are sometimes eaten, and resemble mustard greens, although they must be very fresh and so are normally removed before marketing.'

That done, we start with a prose lead-in:

Whatever you may do with them — boil  
or chop them into pieces, the common  
turnip is a root crop vegetable . . .

Nothing worth saying here, but now we add some adjectives:

The turnip is a root crop vegetable,  
brutal and impertinent without its leaves

Do we believe that? Possibly *brutal* — turnips are graceless, lumpy things — but in what sense are they *impertinent*? Because they have a self-sufficient existence beyond the earth they come from, and because *impertinent* wakes us up a bit: we're going to look at them with fresh eyes. But perhaps *brutal* is too obvious: let's replace and add a few more descriptive phrases:

The turnip is a root crop vegetable,  
imperial and impertinent without its leaves,  
which are dark green and ragged as shrapnel.  
You can picture them exploding into the ground  
patiently, the long lines from the seed drill  
opening their thick dugs into the wet clay  
by degrees, through successions of days  
where the frost doesn't hurt them, or the wind.

Two strategies, therefore: use adjectives a little off the expected, and pursue the trains of thought the adjectives suggest. Here we have impertinent > leaves > shrapnel > exploding > patiently > growth > grossly life-giving (dugs). Now where?

Read the lines again. The last two are beginning to drift off into the usual cadences of poetry: too eloquent, too much concerned with the cycle of the seasons, etc. Let's add the lines we discarded earlier, but concentrate more on the heavy nature of turnips:

Whatever you may do with them, cut  
them up, boil them, feed them to cattle,  
turnips have a rooted nucleus, thickly  
imperial and competent without their leaves  
even, which are dark green, ragged as shrapnel  
that smokes on at intervals from the ground.

Look at them, at the lines from the seed drill  
letting loose their thick dugs into the wet clay,  
extending a network of wired roots so tough  
that the harvester pulls them out as sleek  
tangles, a shameless, rank lubricity  
that multiplies at depth and can't be stopped.

And that is how you must picture them, clipped,  
bruised green and purple, laid out in rows  
inertly malignant as recovered armaments  
from buried caches, still slimed with mud,  
but hard and knotted about some inner  
succulent explosion of vast vegetable white.

But something has clearly gone wrong. Our first three lines are flat, 'imperial and competent' doesn't work, and the last line seems only to be developing the armament conceit. Development is indeed the problem here: we are trying to make something beyond the bare facts or observations of the poem, perhaps to indulge in 'grand narratives' and speak to the universal human condition. Poetry today is more subtle, and we need to a. make some wild leaps of association, and b. develop intelligent linkages. The first:

Here they're stacked: a heavy, awkward squad  
of root crop offerings whose stolid domes  
are smoothly white, a proletariat  
of matted fibres swollen into earth.

Even the leaves, raggedly extravagant  
as a shutter-frozen dark-green shrapnel  
in life, are here lopped off, white stigmata  
on a head that bruises slowly into purple.

Later will come the makers of dreams and scholars,  
great magicians and the writers on liturgy,  
but here it starts, in the shrouded and imponderable  
dark centuries of suffering, brutal life.

The purple colour of turnips has (incredibly, it may seem) suggested Christ's passion and church liturgy. From this sketch, knowing the beginning and end of the poem, we must now rewrite everything, though employing phrases suggested by earlier drafts. First:

An awkward squad of them piled up at market stalls: heavy as armaments and bluntly tapered as though extracted from enormous depths in skins of glaucous or a missy white.

Even these have had their heads lopped off and sit there lawlessly and out of shape. Truncated, pugnacious, their integrity demands no label or a stated use.

How it all started differently in their seeding: not then a shrapnel of exploding leaves, but a tentative haze, in slow motion lifting to patient lines of ragged gunshot smoke.

Those dark green leaves are often eaten, but it's what they spring from with their outlaw stems you notice: the tonsured stigmata'd body crowned with a head that slowly bruises into purple.

Later will come the makers of dreams and scholars, great magicians and the writers on liturgy, but here it starts, in the matter-of-factness earth God took from stone to bid us eat as bread.

And then condensing, going back in part to the penultimate draft, which gave the turnips more physical presence:

## Turnips

Here they're stacked: a heavy, awkward squad of root crop offerings whose stolid domes are smoothly white, a proletariat of matted fibres crammed with earth.

Out of that earth they came, and in their seeding: were not a shrapnel of exploding leaves, but a tentative haze, in slow motion lifting to patient lines of ragged gunshot smoke.

With leaves lopped off, the stems lift up a head that bruises slowly into purple: but here it starts, a matter-of-factness earth God took from stone to have us eat as bread.

We have followed random associations suggested by unusual adjectives to create a novel way of looking at turnips, and then allowed those associations to fall into their own structure.

The poems may start as exercises, but should end by capturing our deeper concerns and enthusiasms. In practice, however, certain problems arise:

First is pretentiousness, claiming a significance beyond what is reasonable in the circumstances.

Second is the arbitrary nature of the adjectives — which we can develop endlessly: only a few possibilities have been sketched in this example.

Third is the lack of deeper relevance: the poems tend to the over clever, which then has to be 'corrected' with doses of unreason.

#### 22.3.4. POSTMODERNIST POEM

Contemporary poets often add a dash of magic realism or surrealism to their lines, as does Traci Brimhall in *Prelude to a Revolution*.

They see their deaths in the sweat darkening

our dresses. To sweeten the hours we share scandals  
from the city, how curators removed an elephant's heart

from the museum because it began beating when anyone  
in love looked at it, how the coroner found minnows

swimming in a drowned girl's lungs. {1}

We shall try something similar, picking up on the concluding sentence of the poem:

while across town the night watchman will stare stunned  
at the moths circling before he realizes he's on fire.

We revert to the themes developed in 23.2 and quickly jot down:

Hard bones in small boots, and always  
in leggings and pinafores the fierce yellow  
smell of winter in the teeth.

From fat maggots come small moths.  
A universal fluttering of suffrage  
about the cottages and dark-mired roads.

Around the poppy-red fields the men  
fall and are sedimented into earth.  
They incrementally will carve their name

on cenotaphs and cold remembrance days  
and so become the country they contain  
in empty spaces at the fireside seat.

The squire will put his pound note on the plate,  
and tennant add a coin to weight it down,  
and both will show the imperishably the imperial

need for order and disciplined mute sacrifice  
(truncated head, the laurelled crisp impression)  
of what till latterly was F.D.C.

Apart from F.D.C., which is a coin- or medal-grading term (Fleur du Coin: absolutely perfect) the general drift should be evident enough. But it's also fragmentary and muddled, so we expand:

In those days of less than universal suffrage  
there were demonstrations and flutterings about wet streets.  
The fierce yellow smell of winter came in the teeth  
of fixed conscriptions. Hundreds, thousands every day,  
lined up for king and country, were consigned to cattle  
trucks and training and short manoeuvres. From khaki  
carnivals came small moths at death. But they were remembered.  
Rain fell on the cenotaph. A nation bowed its head.  
There were absences at fireside seats, but medals  
followed: crisply minted: the truncated head, the laurelled brow,  
with added bars: the massed parades and bunting afterwards  
that sedimented into what they were: a fighting race.  
In time they grew quite homely, those companionable names  
holding the smell of summer grass, Chalk uplands after rain,  
even convivial in their somber but fragrant syllables:  
Ypres, the Somme, Verdun and Passchendaele.  
Yes, almost friendly grew the passionate forgetting  
the whine of shell, the rugged irritant of gas,  
the heave of mud, stench, and passing whiff of pain.  
Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.  
Universal became the suffrage of forgetting. Children  
romped on in naval outfits, pinafores and buttoned boots.  
And what was truly lamentable, that lemming tide of men,  
filed into remembrance books, photos, small gilt frames.  
So were inimitable errors valorized, and, in the fields  
and the high woods all summer long, held their own  
blithe festivals with none to hear them or reflect.

The content is now much clearer, allowing us, by selective condensing and expanding, to get:

## The Small Moths of Death

In those days of less than universal suffrage  
     there were demonstrations  
         and flutterings about wet streets.

Then came a smell of winter in the teeth,  
     and on the carnivals settled the white moths of death.

As one, the nation bowed its head on cold memorial days,  
     and felt true absences at fireside seats, but  
     medals followed:  
         crisply minted:  
 the truncated head, the laurelled brow,  
 with added bars: the massed parades and bunting afterwards  
 commemorating what they were: a fighting race.

In time even those bewildering battles  
     became companionable. The thundery names,  
         the Somme, Verdun, Passchendaele,  
         spoke of their inheritance  
             in popped innocence, in  
                 summer uplands through the rain.

It was a recognition they had earned, obliterating  
     the stench of mud, the shells, the muffled pain.  
         The young men marched in quieter uniforms.  
         In school brigades they repeated:  
             Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.

Later, in a white suffrage of bewilderment  
     about the high fields and woods,  
         the massed lepidoptera held their own  
         blithe festivals with few to hear them  
             or afterwards regret.

That poem might find a home in a more traditional magazine, but probably not in one claiming to be cutting-edge. As section 17.10 indicates, contemporary poetry is not as finished or regular or indeed as obvious in theme.

## References

1. *Prelude to a Revolution* by Traci Brimhall. Poetry Foundation. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/250280>

### 22.3.5. CONTEMPORARY POEM

We should read sections 17 and 18 in this book to understand what contemporary poetry does, and also study the findings of section 17.10. Beyond that



we experiment, trying to make something playful and entertaining from everyday experience. A few minutes' doodling yields:

I am writing this in a bright-lit  
café. Outside it is raining.  
Continually it is raining and I  
sit motionless but writing  
to hold these small scenes to account.

The menu cards sit important and  
sentinel on the tables. The empty chairs  
offer their moralizingly bland  
surfaces of heat-treated wood on chrome  
stilts splayed out like spider's legs.

On the table is a small glass  
of water amazingly inviolable  
though it quivers with expectant  
tranquility as it sense me  
writing continually as the rain falls.

Pedestrians blunder by under broad  
canopies of bright umbrellas,  
green, yellow and importunate blue.  
Processional, they pause and are momentarily  
like the compassionate Buddha.

Cars pass nose to tail  
like small dogs, stopping  
under the plane trees sometimes,  
whose small fresh leaves are miraculously  
motionless in the still falling rain.

All these are continuously giving  
themselves to their motions  
and coalescing again into being themselves  
quiet in their outlines and locking  
themselves into these small words I write.

Now where? Add some story line or human interest? Contemporary poetry rarely does this. Let's add 'maternal' to the umbrella of stanza four:

Pedestrians blunder by under broad  
canopies of bright umbrellas,  
Processional, they pause, tented,  
pointed, swelling and maternal like  
the most compassionate of Buddhas.

With the feminine element suggested, we can add the waitress, connecting the observations by a dedication.

## Still Life with María Jesús

Outside it is raining and I am writing.  
Distant from the table but waiting on  
is the unaccountable María Jesús —  
she whom the menu cards eye warily,  
alert and condescending as they are.

The aloof, full beauty with the tossed-back looks  
has stopped her prowling and with hand  
folded into hip supports like a caryatid  
the washed-clean counter where two coffee cups  
froth with excitement at what I'm writing.

For the few customers today the chairs  
have agreed not to look so rent-a-crowd.  
Each back bends smoothly to a wide seat  
and goes on to extend a half-curved lip  
above the steel-chrome splendid legs.

Outside a cavalcade of bodhisattvas  
with bright umbrellas is in progress. Each  
is tented and maternal, as though filled  
with the divine radiance of a thousand  
companionable María Jesúses.

Like the days themselves, the cars press  
nose to tail, and sometimes bark at  
traffic lights or rain-drenched trees. María  
Jesús pockets the tip, and with one firm  
sweep returns the place to what it was.

But in another far-off but forever  
world they'll all arrive at happiness —  
table, chairs, rain, me writing — as  
the beautiful María Jesús floats  
down in full-enabled, bodied self.

A piece of fun in a familiar vein, but readily adapted to more serious matters. We just have to look around with fresh eyes.

### 22.3.6. PLAIN STYLES

But perhaps we should end on something more challenging. Many poets today use a language close to everyday speech. One such is Louise Glück. As Wendy Lesser noted in the *Washington Post Book World*: 'Glück's language is staunchly straightforward, remarkably close to the diction of ordinary speech. Yet her careful selection for rhythm and repetition, and the specificity of even her idiomatically vague phrases, give her poems a weight that is far from col-

loquial.’ Glück’s themes are disappointment, rejection, loss, and isolation {1} but here we shall pick up the earlier cemetery theme, commenting on the bewildering nature of death. The style — quiet everyday language, lines of no constant length, the content sometimes broken across lines — we shall start by modelling on the better lines in Glück’s *A Summer Garden*. {2} First we jot down something to set the style and mood.

The guests have mostly gone, but here  
under the trailing canopy of clouds and trees,  
half lost in thought, we linger a moment, hearing  
the wind ruffle the cellophane wrappings of the flowers  
heaped loose about the untidy, earth-raw grave.  
Long-stemmed and magnificent, they loll their pollen-  
heavy heads among the homely messages:  
‘The best of Mums.’  
‘Much missed.’  
‘Devoted to the family.’

All very simple. No striking images, no clever phrases. We can write reams of this, and to prevent the threatened verbosity, we draft an ending:

How quietly, in ones or twos  
they take French leave of us.

Then we work on the intervening part, select and thin to get :

### **First Draft**

The mourners have gone, but  
under the thin canopy of the clouds and trees,  
untidy in our thoughts, we linger a moment, hearing  
the wind ruffle the cellophane wrappings of the flowers  
heaped loose about the earth-raw grave.  
Long-stemmed and magnificent, they hold their pollen-  
heavy sheafs among the simple messages:  
‘The best of Mums.’  
‘Much missed.’  
‘Devoted to the family.’

And try not to think of that soft body there,  
the eyes shut fast that were so keen  
to take the puzzling daylight in before  
the pain, the consultations, the guarded hopes.

And try, too, not to feel older, sensing  
the dead are always somewhere else,  
reverential to us, knowing we are children,  
feckless and spiteful, with  
perpetual recriminations.

Otherwise, our lives stay much the same  
 we get up, go about our business, lie down at night  
 buffeted with the same thoughts and confusions.  
 Except the world about us grows a bit  
 more porous, we feel the absences  
 as lights about the evening lands,  
 in farms, suburbs, and apartment blocks  
 that gutter and go out to a darkness  
 which, briefly and differentially  
 we feel attaching itself to the bone,  
 weighing down the finger ends.

And know how quietly, in ones or twos  
 they take French leave of us  
 and go out into the memories  
 we shall have to occupy in time.

## Second Draft

The piece is still rather muddled, however. We need to:

1. Clarify the viewpoint
2. Ensure each detail is pulling its weight.
3. Devise better images for our troubled states of restlessness.

So, although we're now some distance from Glück's style:

## Other People's Lives

The mourners mostly have gone home, but here  
 about these plots of other people's lives  
 I pick my steps, now noticing the trees  
 arrayed in canopies of sun-warmed leaves,  
 how sky beyond goes on diminishing  
 to placid but unbending blue,  
 beneath which lie the raw earth graves  
 and flowers large with messages:  
 'Much missed.' 'You were the best of mums.'  
 'Devoted to the family.'  
 All trite, and heart-felt, hurting those  
 who must not think of that soft body there,  
 with scars for eyes now wide asleep.

Nor let themselves feel older, sensing  
 that the dead are always travelling on,  
 beyond the body or its troubled nights.

Otherwise, our lives stay much the same:  
 we get up, go about our business, nightly

turn to sleep, as through a world  
 become more porous and intractable,  
 more filled with gaps as lights about the evening lands,  
 in farms and suburbs and apartment blocks,  
 go abruptly into darkened rooms,  
 to after-images that wake us with their sudden  
 falls to emptiness and numbing pains.

And so it's quietly, one by one,  
 the living take their leave of us  
 and go out into instances,  
 adrift and tangled as the sunlight is  
 about these wind-touched trails of leaves:  
 beautiful and not disconsolate  
 at time's impenitent affections.

## References.

1. *Louise Glück*. Poetry Foundation.  
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/louise-gluck>
2. Louise Glück's *A Summer Garden*. Poetry Foundation.  
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/243220>

## 22.4. POLISHING

Poems often go to press, and sometimes into collections, before the poet has fully realized what was intended. Here are three examples of polishing by celebrated masters.

### 22.4.1. OLIVER GOLDSMITH

Oliver Goldsmith's best-known poem, *The Deserted Village*, went through several drafts. The original appeared in a letter to his brother, the Rev. Henry Goldsmith, in 1759, where the author introduces 'the hero of the poem, as lying in a paltry alehouse.' {1}

The window, patch'd with paper, lent a ray,  
 That feebly showed the state in which he lay.  
 The sanded floor, that grits beneath the tread:  
 The humid wall with paltry pictures spread:  
 The game of goose was there expos'd to view  
 And he twelve rules the royal martyr drew:  
 The seasons, farm'd with listing, found a place,  
 And Prussia's monarch show'd his lamp-black face.

The morn was cold; he views with keen desire,  
 The rusty grate unconscious of a fire.  
 An unpaid reck'ning on the frieze was scor'd,  
 And five crack'd teacups dress'd the chimney board.

This is conventional eighteenth-century verse, not especially well-turned, but painting the scene aptly and adding a few telling details: *lampblack face*, *unconscious of a fire* and *five crack'd teacups*, etc. The draft was expanded as Letter XXX of *The Citizen of the World*, published in 1762, which explained that the scene was that of the author's bedroom.

Where the Red Lion flaring o'er the way,  
 Invites each passing stranger that can pay;  
 Where Calvert's butt, and Parson's black champagne,  
 Regale the drabs and bloods of Drury-Lane;  
 There is a lonely room, from bailiffs snug,  
 The Muse found Scroggen stretch'd beneath a rug;  
 The window, patch'd with paper, lent a ray,  
 That dimly showed the state in which he lay.  
 The sanded floor, that grits beneath the tread:  
 The humid wall with paltry pictures spread:  
 The royal game of goose was there in view  
 And he twelve rules the royal martyr drew:  
 The seasons, farm'd with listing, found a place,  
 And brave prince William show'd his lampblack face.  
 The morn was cold; he views with keen desire  
 The rusty grate unconscious of a fire.  
 With beer and milk arrears the frieze was scor'd,  
 And five crack'd teacups dress'd the chimney board.  
 A nightcap deck'd his brows instead of bay,  
 A cap by night — a stocking all the day!

What belonged to the author rather than the room, (i.e. *feebly*), has been replaced by *dimly*, *Prussia's monarch* has become *brave prince William*, and the *game of goose* has become *royal*. The gain is in sense, euphony and exact description.

Matters are different when Goldsmith comes to adapt this piece for *The Deserted Village*. It's not that the poet's circumstances have improved, or that Goldsmith wishes to cast the warm hue of nostalgia over the remembered scenes. The verse has now to be fully dressed for the social occasion, and the many touches of affectionate humour (*news much older than their ale went round*) or smiling apology (*parlour splendours*) smoothly worked in.

Low lies that house where nut-brown draughts inspir'd,  
 Where grey-beard mirth and smiling toil retir'd,  
 Where village statesmen talk'd with looks profound,  
 And news much older than their ale went round.  
 Imagination fondly stoops to trace

The parlour splendours of that festive place;  
 The white-wash'd wall, the nicely-sanded floor,  
 The varnish'd clock that click'd behind the door;  
 The chest contriv'd a double debt to pay,  
 A bed by night, a chest of drawers by day;  
 The pictures plac'd for ornament and use,  
 The Twelve Good Rules, the Royal Game of Goose;  
 The hearth, except when winter chill'd the day,  
 With aspen boughs, and flowers, and fennel gay;  
 While broken tea-cups, wisely kept for show,  
 Rang'd o'er the chimney, glisten'd in a row.

To us, of course, the earlier drafts may seem more natural, with less contrivance, less inflation of simple observation into general themes, but generalities are what the eighteenth century expected, and on what poets lavished their skills, very considerable in this case.

The opening lines of the second draft are somewhat shapeless, but in *The Deserted Village* snippet even the sagging roof of the house is precisely evoked by the vowels:

*Low lies* that house where nut-brown draughts *inspir'd*,

and the epithets in the following line are exact: *grey-beard* and *smiling*. The following couplets not only enclose the sense properly but give it pleasing shape:

Where village statesmen talk'd with looks profound,  
 And news much older than their ale went round.

Imagination fondly stoops to trace  
 The parlour splendours of that festive place;

Before that favourite device, antithesis, takes a turn:

The white-wash'd wall | the nicely-sanded floor,  
 The varnish'd clock | that click'd behind the door;

But the device is not overdone, becoming muted in 'The chest contriv'd a double debt to pay' and 'The pictures plac'd for ornament and use', and then broken into three phrases: 'With aspen boughs | and flowers | and fennel gay;'

Much more could be said, particularly about the verse texture and the vowel harmonies, if we read the piece properly. That is not now so easy, as these are the devices that the Romantics threw out, just as Modernism threw out much nineteenth-century craft. But in both cases the cost has been high. Social comment on everyday life becomes difficult, and the jewelled phrasing of Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites takes itself off to remote locations or idealized themes. The Augustans had just as keen an eye as Modernists, but the

sense they made of those observations remained accessible to everyone who cared to think.

## Notes and References

1. A. F. Scott, *The Poet's Craft: A Course in the Critical Appreciation of Poetry* (CUP, 1957), 55-58.
2. Oliver Goldsmith (?1730-1774) *The Deserted Village*.  
<http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/875.html>.

### 22.4.2. ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

That masterpiece of Tennyson's art, *The Lotus Eaters*, began as a pleasing but slight piece in 1833 *Poems* — not as negligible as Lockhart pretended in his *Quarterly Review* of April 1833, {1} but open to many objections:

We have had enough of motion,  
 Weariness and wild alarm,  
 Tossing on the tossing ocean,  
 Where the tusked sea-horse walloweth  
 In a stripe of grass-green calm,  
 At noon tide beneath the lee;  
 And the monstrous narwhale swalloweth  
 His foam mountains in the sea.  
 Long enough the wine-dark wave our weary bark did carry.  
 This is lovelier and sweeter,  
 Men of Ithaca, this is meeter,  
 In the hollow rosy vale to tarry,  
 Like a dreamy Lotus-eater, a delirious Lotus-eater!  
 We will eat the Lotus, sweet  
 As the yellow honeycomb,  
 In the valley some, and some  
 On the ancient heights divine;  
 And no more roam  
 On the loud hoar foam,  
 To the melancholy home  
 At the limits of the brine,  
 The little isle of Ithaca, beneath the day's decline.  
 We'll lift no more the shattered oar,  
 Nor unfurl the straining sail;  
 With the blissful Lotus-eaters pale  
 We will abide in the golden vale  
 Of the lotus-land till the Lotus fail;  
 We will not wander more.  
 Hark! how sweet the horned ewes bleat  
 On the solitary steeps,  
 And the merry lizard leaps,



And the foam-white water pour;  
 And the dark pine weeps,  
 And the lithe vine creeps,  
 And the heavy melon sleeps  
 On the level of the shore:  
 Oh! islanders of Ithaca, we will not wander more.  
 Surely, surely slumber is more sweet than toil, the shore  
 Than labour in the ocean, and rowing with the oar,  
 Oh! islanders of Ithaca, we will return no more.

Lockhart enjoyed himself: 'another and brighter star of that galaxy or *milky way* of poetry of which the lamented Keats was the harbinger . . . Our readers will, we think, agree that this is admirably characteristic, and that the singers of this song must have made pretty free with the intoxicating fruit. How they got home you must read in Homer: Mr Tennyson — himself, we presume, a dreamy lotus-eater, a delicious lotus eater — leaves them in full song.' {2}

It's difficult not to smile. Tennyson was sensitive to criticism, indeed morbidly introspective, but he had the good sense to learn from critics. The idiocies were crafted out, and the 1853 version reads: {3}

The Lotos blooms below the barren peak:  
 The Lotos blows by every winding creek:  
 All day the wind breathes low with mellower tone:  
 Thro' every hollow cave and alley lone  
 Round and round the spicy downs the yellow Lotos-dust is blown.  
 We have had enough of action, and of motion we,  
 Roll'd to starboard, roll'd to larboard, when the surge was seething free,  
 Where the wallowing monster spouted his foam-fountains in the sea.  
 Let us swear an oath, and keep it with an equal mind,  
 In the hollow Lotos-land to live and lie reclined  
 On the hills like Gods together, careless of mankind.  
 For they lie beside their nectar, and the bolts are hurl'd  
 Far below them in the valleys, and the clouds are lightly curl'd  
 Round their golden houses, girdled with the gleaming world:  
 Where they smile in secret, looking over wasted lands,  
 Blight and famine, plague and earthquake, roaring deeps and fiery  
 sands,  
 Clanging fights, and flaming towns, and sinking ships, and praying  
 hands.  
 But they smile, they find a music centred in a doleful song  
 Steaming up, a lamentation and an ancient tale of wrong,  
 Like a tale of little meaning tho' the words are strong;  
 Chanted from an ill-used race of men that cleave the soil,  
 Sow the seed, and reap the harvest with enduring toil,  
 Storing yearly little dues of wheat, and wine and oil;  
 Till they perish and they suffer — some, 'tis whisper'd — down in hell  
 Suffer endless anguish, others in Elysian valleys dwell,

Resting weary limbs at last on beds of asphodel.  
 Surely, surely, slumber is more sweet than toil, the shore  
 Than labour in the deep mid-ocean, wind and wave and oar;  
 O, rest ye, brother mariners, we will not wander more.

## Problems and Improvements

Idiocies? These were the initial shortcomings, and Tennyson's improvements.

1. Tennyson started thinking about what he'd written. We don't have *rowing with the oar* that has been *shattered* a few lines earlier, or *unfurl the straining sail* (which only strains when unfurled).

2. The focus shifts from the sea, which is often strikingly described — *In a stripe of grass-green calm* — to the land, which is where the mariners will stay.

3. Form. The final version is in couplets and quatrains, rhymed ababbcbcc etc. Rhyme in the earlier version is rather more ad hoc, starting as abadefdfghhg but concluding in xyyyxxxxx. Such repetitions, used with short lines, places emphasis on the rhymes themselves, which need to be novel or interesting. They are not in the early version, and Tennyson has therefore lengthened the lines in the revised version.

4. Epithets. A few are striking — the loud hoar foam — which anticipates Pound's *Seafarer* — but many are dull (*yellow honeycomb*: what else would it be?), nonsensical (*solitary*, with sheep), inappropriate (*merry*: do lizards leap?) or unintentionally comic (*heavy melon sleeps*). Epithets are still a problem in the final version, but Tennyson has settled for the safely conventional: *barren peak, winding creek, hollow cave, sinking ships, praying hands*, etc. Tennyson didn't read much Pope, but perhaps should have done.

5. Beauty of phrasing. Tennyson kept and extended the earlier successes. *We have had enough of motion* becomes

*We have had enough of action, and of motion we,  
 Roll'd to starboard, roll'd to larboard, when the surge was seething free,*

And the rather thickly clogged *Oh! islanders of Ithaca, we will return no more* is opened into

*O, rest ye, brother mariners, we will not wander more.*

6. The greatest improvement is in the rhythm. It lacks unity in the earlier version, and occasionally falters (*We will abide in the golden vale*) or attempts things that don't come off (*Long enough the wine-dark wave our weary bark did carry*.) In the revised version the rhythm is a muffled but varied 'alexandrine', i.e. balanced about a somewhat centrally-placed caesura: difficult but achieved superbly:

We have had enough of action | and of motion we ||  
 Roll'd to starboard | roll'd to larboard || when the surge was seething free  
 ||  
 Where the wallowing monster spouted | his foam-fountains in the sea ||  
 Let us swear an oath | and keep it with an equal mind ||  
 In the hollow Lotos-land to live | and lie reclined ||  
 On the hills like Gods together | careless of mankind ||

The result is a substantial poem, not without its faults, but deservedly famous.

## Notes and References

1. A. F. Scott, *The Poet's Craft: A Course in the Critical Appreciation of Poetry* (CUP, 1957), 72-75.
2. The poem is based on an incident in the *Odyssey*, Chapter 9.
3. Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) *The Lotos-eaters*:  
<http://eir.library.utoronto.ca/rpo/display/poem2163.html>.

### 22.4.3. WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

William Wordsworth's *The Daffodils* was modelled on an entry in his wife's prose *Journal* of 1802, and she also contributed what her husband considered the best two lines of the poem: *They flash upon the inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude*. The first version of 1804/07 was as follows:

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
 That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
 When all at once I saw a crowd,  
 A host, of dancing daffodils;  
 Beside the lake, beneath the trees,  
 Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

The waves beside them danced; but they  
 Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:  
 A poet could not but be gay,  
 In such laughing company:  
 I gazed — and gazed — but little thought  
 What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie  
 In vacant or in pensive mood,  
 They flash upon that inward eye  
 Which is the bliss of solitude;  
 And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
 And dances with the daffodils.

Republished in 1815, the poem had two changes and an extra stanza:

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host, of golden daffodils;  
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,  
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine  
And twinkle on the milky way,  
They stretched in never-ending line  
Along the margin of a bay:  
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,  
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they  
Outdid the sparkling waves in glee:  
A poet could not but be gay,  
In such a jocund company:  
I gazed — and gazed — but little thought  
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie  
In vacant or in pensive mood,  
They flash upon that inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude;  
And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
And dances with the daffodils.

Both changes were immense improvements. Replacing *dancing* with *golden* avoided a repetition and gave the flowers a pollen-heavy splendour. And *such a jocund company* has a pleasing fulness of sound missing from *such laughing company*.

The added stanza brought amplitude to the poem — we see the daffodils in their wider setting — though *twinkle* is not quite the right word (milky way stars may glimmer but not twinkle, though we could charitably suppose the milky way referred to the backdrop, not the stars themselves).

In general, however, poems have their optimal tone and size, and Wordsworth in a simple revision found both.

## Notes and References

1. A. F. Scott, *The Poet's Craft: A Course in the Critical Appreciation of Poetry* (CUP, 1957), 55-58.
2. William Wordsworth (1770-1850) *I wandered lonely as a cloud*.  
<http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/2337.html>.

## 22.5. SUBMISSIONS

Editors are people. Many are among the most helpful and charming you'd ever hope to meet. Others, putting matters mildly, are off-hand, opinionated and/or plain daft. All who publish regularly have their own lists. How do you turn the last group into people you enjoy associating with? Probably you can't, since they've been pushed to the brink of madness years ago, but you can save yourself a doctor's prescription and the time wasted in drafting incendiary ripostes, by being soberly effective and professional. Conversely, you can turn a friendly editor into an enemy by:

1. Paying no attention to the publication's guidelines: not taking the trouble to read a few issues, and/or slant work accordingly in content, style, and word length.
2. Pestering with phone calls, emails, letters, manuscript revisions and explanations well before the stated evaluation period is up.
3. Submitting work at the wrong time: magazines generally like to put their Christmas edition to bed by July, for example.
4. Changing everything when only small changes have been requested, not making changes clear, not making the changes at all or on time.
5. Not addressing the editor by name in proposals, or briefly acknowledging courtesies, help or advice given.

Editors in the non-commercial field — experimental fiction, academic articles, poetry — face a spasmodic and smiling amateurism that places the burden of work squarely on their own shoulders: rescheduling for delays, correcting, re-writing, holding the space while ever more bewildering changes and 'improvements' come in.

As a writer, you're selling something into a hopelessly oversubscribed market, where everyone's too busy to give advice, or read beyond a few sentences if the proposal isn't coming good. That also applies to on-line publications. Strange to say, an editor does not want to put in half an hour's work on your behalf if you haven't bothered to spend five minutes clicking through his site. Usually he won't. Life is short, and the occasional kindness can descend into a well-meaning but infuriatingly myopic correspondence, one that leaves both parties feeling confused and aggrieved.

Most magazine provide submission guidelines, and ask for an accompanying letter, which should be friendly, informative and business-like.

That last does not mean a corporation-speak communication built of clichés, but something that denotes professionalism, that an intelligent and well-read author has chosen this particular outlet and is applying to its editor.

The submitted work has also to be appropriate. Many literary magazines want poetry, but they want poetry of a type that fits in with their preconceptions as to what contemporary poetry is and should be doing. What those preconceptions are can be gauged by reading what is published, and by such policy statements as appear in the magazine or in directories of publishing outlets for poets. Sending a carefully-crafted sonnet to an avant garde magazine is a nonsense, and editors continually complain that two thirds of their time is wasted in reading material of the wrong style or content, wrong length, no covering letter addressed to them by name, no publishing history, no SAE for response, etc. Guidelines are given for a reason, and have to be read.

Indeed the whole magazine should be read before submission. Literary magazines are usually labours of love, perilously short of funds and subsisting on grants, competition receipts and the personal generosity of friends. It helps to first send for a trial copy, to read it carefully, and at least take out a year's subscription if the submission is accepted. Editors feel their efforts are truly rewarded if each issue contains a few poems that are really good, and what they ask in publishing your poetry is the financial means to continue providing a platform for new work.

Or the best ones do. Some unfortunately dream of publishing only nationally famous poets, and assess each submission by name rather than by work. Unless well-known on the poetry circuit — and editors are very perceptive here — your poetry goes into a slush pile, to be picked over if space unexpectedly appears when selections have been made from submissions by big names and personal friends. Some magazines accept practically everything, and follow up their flattering words of 'exceptional talent' etc. with offers of overpriced anthologies or conferences of 'selected poets'. Some magazines are the in-house journals of university English departments, and their young editors do not always have the reading and experience to tell the good from the merely fashionable.

## Poetry Submission Routines

You can develop a standard format for such letters, or purchase sample cover letters, but remember to modify for each case.

The well-known magazines are notoriously choosy, accepting only 2% or less of submissions. You can greatly shorten the odds by:

1. Keeping scrupulously to the submission guidelines.
2. Reading the publication carefully and sending exactly what is wanted.
3. Presenting yourself as an old hand.

Unless instructed otherwise:

1. Type/laserprint each poem on quality white paper, double-spaced. In the top left hand corner put your name and address. In the top right hand corner

put the rights for sale: usually first serial rights. Start each poem on a new page, and number the pages sequentially, each with name, address and rights for sale. Run off fresh copies for each submission.

2. Include a one-page covering letter, personally addressed to the editor by name. Phone to get that name if necessary. The covering letter should offer the poems for consideration (list them), say (subtly) why the poems are being submitted, and briefly mention your previous successes.

3. Include a stamped, self-addressed envelope (or self-addressed envelope and IRC if submitting from abroad).

You can kill your chances by:

1. Adding that your schoolteacher or Aunt Mildred thinks your poems are absolutely fantastic.
2. Including silly credits: vanity presses, senior citizen competitions, etc.
3. Insisting that these are just what the magazine needs (that's the editor's job).
4. Overdoing the compliments: *I think this is one of the few magazines. . .*
5. Including notice of copyright, which suggests only trouble.
6. Submitting in longhand.
7. Specifying payment (arranged later).
8. Including drawings or artwork (they're rarely useful).
9. Specifying a deadline for reply.
10. Submitting on coloured/non-standard size paper or with fancy fonts.
11. Pleading, or promising a subscription if accepted.
12. Threatening a personal visit/violence/suicide if not accepted.
13. Sending a follow-up letter a week later: *I need to know because. . .*

## Submission Schedules

Getting your work published with increasing regularity calls for an organized and persistent approach. All freelancers work to schedules, and would quit the business if the odd rejection slip interrupted the creative flow. Here's what to do:

Make a longish list of outlets, the best prospects at the top.

Group your work into batches, each specific to a particular outlet or group of outlets.

Work through the list, sending your batches out to several outlets at a time. Until you're well-known and likely to be published, pay no attention to the usual demands for single submissions to *literary* magazines. Most are hopelessly amateur, will keep you waiting for months, lose your MS, and/or not reply at all.

Send a polite reminder if stated response time is very much exceeded.

Keep a record (see below) of submissions, acceptances and any remarks.

Always keep several batches in circulation, sending the batch off to a new outlet the very day you get a rejection slip from the previous magazine.

Rearrange batches and their contents as necessary.

Don't abandon a work until you've exhausted all possibilities.

Learn from the pattern of response times, rejections, acceptances and comments in publishing your poetry. Read magazines/ezines more carefully as a result, but accept that some editors will never take your work.

Your Submission Record will look something like this:

Batch Name	Submitted To	Date Sent	Response	Response Date	Comments	Suggestions
'red iron'	Thumbscrew	2/1/05	all reject- ed	25/4/05	none	submit 'northern blues'
'northern blues'	Thumbscrew	25/4/05	all reject- ed	7/10/05	liked 'moontown'	submit 'car- lisle castle' batch
'red iron'	London Po- etry	25/4/05	'old foundry' accepted	19/6/05	more like this	reorganize batch
etc.	-	-	-	-	-	-

Detachment is the key. Get your writings published regularly by turning anticipation into a routine. An acceptance? Right: make a note in the record. A rejection? No matter: send the batch to the next on the list. Submitting work takes time and patience, an immense quantity of both, but the strategy at least is within your control.



Remember to not submit anything you're not wholly happy with. Editors have a perverse habit of selecting the worst in the batch, and its appearance in print can cause lasting self-reproach.

Keep copies of everything sent.

## 23. TRANSLATION

### 23.1. APPROACHES

'That it is untranslatable is one of the definitions offered of poetry . . . The distinctive beat of any given tongue, that sustaining undercurrent of inflection, pitch relations, habits of stress, which give a particular motion to prose, is concentrated in poetry so that it acts as an overt, characteristic force. Poetry will not translate any more than music. . . .' (1)

Many theories have been devised to explain or guide the translation process {2-6} to which poets have added their own aphorisms. {7}

In practical terms, however, the methods boil down to three overlapping approaches. {8}

1. Faithful, aimed at conveying the *words and form*. All important is the totality of the original: form, prosody and lexicon should all be rendered as fully as possible.

2. Academic, aimed at conveying *information and ideas*. Literary value is less important than content, which should be conveyed as accurately as possible, generally in prose or 'free verse'.

3. Literary, aimed at conveying the *spirit and style*. Literary effectiveness of the original is the key phrase: form, prosody and lexicon should be *adapted* to the target language. In effect the poem is *recreated* in English so that its literary excellences in the original have representation through similar excellences in the English tradition. Often that calls for earlier poetry styles, as free verse is rather limited in its devices.

Most translation in practice draw on all three approaches to be successful, and, unless a simple crib sheet, even prose requires some literary quality to be enjoyably read.

But many difficulties arise.

#### Approach One

A complete rendering may be achievable where the source language is similar to English, as is German:

#### **The Two**

She held the goblet out to him.  
Her chin and mouth were as the rim.  
So easily the manner filled  
her movement not a drop was spilled.

His hands looked firm but soft as air.  
 He rode, she saw, a yearling horse.  
 She felt his careless gesture force  
 her stay her horse, which quivered there.

But when, however, from her grasp  
 he took the goblet they both found  
 it awkward, when they could not make  
 each trembling hand the other take  
 and fold it in a mutual clasp.  
 The dark blood rolled upon the ground. {9}

*Die Beiden* from *Ausgewählte Gedichte* (1904) by Hugo von Hofmannsthal

Or French sometimes:

Happy, who like Ulysses or that lord  
 Who raped the fleece, returning full and sage,  
 With usage and the world's wide reason stored,  
 With his own kin can wait the end of age.  
 When shall I see, when shall I see, God knows!  
 My little village smoke; or pass the door,  
 The old dear door of that unhappy house  
 That is to me a kingdom and much more?  
 Mightier to me the house my fathers made  
 Than your audacious heads, O Halls of Rome!  
 More than immortal marbles undecayed,  
 The thin sad slates that cover up my home;  
 More than your Tiber is my Loire to me,  
 Than Palatine my little Lyre there;  
 And more than all the winds of all the sea  
 The quiet kindness of the Angevin air. {10-12}

But is much less so when the source is an inflected language (Latin) or uses tones (Chinese) or employs extended allusion and quotation as part of its 'meaning' (Chinese and Persian). The very act of adding prepositions to convey meaning in English destroys the literary fabric of a Latin poem, and the complex allusions of Persian poems draw on an entirely different literary tradition: they can be spelt out in added notes but not properly incorporated into the translation.

Very occasionally, a Chinese poem can be translated virtually in its entirety:

### **Deer Stockade**

Emptiness. Mountains. No one unless  
 in these low voices overheard.  
 Sense falling into forest depths,  
 green in suncastr mosses overhead. {9}

Wang Wei (699-761)

Here the rendering respects the basic structure (4 lines of five characters), the rhyme scheme, and the extended parallelism of the original Chinese, where:

Lines 3 and 4 repeat in reverse the meaning in lines 1 and 2: the world of the senses is an illusion. 'Overhead' repeats in reverse 'overheard'.

Presence contrasts with non-presence: clear in the first line, blurred in the second, more so in the third, and then sharply defined in the clear visual image of the fourth — achieved by sound patterning (e.g. diphthongs in line 2, 'e' sounds in line 3).

Ying alternate with yang elements. Permanence of mountain rising from impermanence (emptiness). That definite emptiness (no one) morphing into vague presence (voices). Dissolving again (sense is lost in darkness) and then regrouped in a definite image (suncast in mosses).

Vertical movement (looking up at mountain) pass to horizontal (voices heard followed by re-entering) and thence back to vertical (overhead).

But allusion is much more culture-bound. An example:

### **The Cloud Rains**

Cloud raining, and I from my friend am separated:  
how can, on such a day, the hearts be so separated?

You and rain and cloud are standing to make farewells  
and I weeping, and you and the rain separated.

Though leaves are new risen, passion is fresh, and the garden green,  
the nightingale is silent, from its sanctuary separated.

As the hair grows, from root to head-top, I am bound in service:  
how can all that longing suddenly be separated?

Let not, when tearfulness holds you in the pupil of vision,  
my eye from that tearfulness be separated.

My pride in observance that stays on from this  
retains its luxury of looking though so separated.

For you the eye has become now a hundred chinked,  
make haste if you'd not from acceptance be separated.

What would you think, that my soul would leave  
with the guardian and garden then so separated?

Nor will your beauty continue if from Khusraw kept  
as a flower from its thorn when so separated. {9}

Abu'l-Hasan Yamīnuddin Amīr Khusraw (1253-1325)

The original has many plays on words, particularly with *sar* (head), *sabz* (green) and *sabzah* (greenery). *Sabz* also means dark when applied to the down of the beloved's lips, so that the beloved is identified with a garden — which is now silent/disgraced or its lover (nightingale/poet) is so.

## Approach Two

Conveying information and ideas is essential for teaching purposes, and a great help to translators working with only with a basic knowledge of the source language. But poets do not write to convey information, and a prose translation will barely hint at how the original was put together or why it is successful. Needed at least is a detailed explanation of how the poem 'works' in the original language — which is the approach of Stanley Burnshaw's *The Poem Itself*. {10}

## Approach Three

The third approach, often regarded as the most attractive, bristles with problems. Steiner {1} was writing fifty years ago, at a time when the High Modernist poets employed the classics in many languages to invigorate and expand their own work — to inspire, allude to or incorporate. Matters are very different today, when many translations fall somewhere between approaches 2. and 3. Their aim is probably to transfer the poem into contemporary forms, and so make it more accessible to the general reader, whose knowledge of the English poetic tradition may be very slight. But then, unfortunately, the excellence of the original, often written in an elevated literary style, may be levelled down to our own everyday language, i.e. to the flat and uninspiring.

If we look at the first two stanzas of the famous Carmen 5 in Book One of Horace's Odes, we note that it's in the Fourth Asclepiadean, which runs:

- - - u u - / - u u - u x  
 - - - u u - / - u u - u x  
 - - - u u - x  
 - - - u u - u -

The third line pulls the movement up short, often giving it emphasis or special focus.

The Latin and word-for-word translation are:

Quis multa gracilis te puer in rosa  
 perfusus liquidis urget odoribus  
 grato, Pyrrha, sub antro?  
 cui flauam religas comam,  
 simplex munditiis? Heu quotiens fidem

mutatosque deos flebit et aspera  
nigris aequora uentis  
emirabitur insolens,

Who much slender you boy on rose  
bathing liquid squeezing with scent  
pleasing, Pyrrha, under cave  
who yellow tie hair,  
Simple appearance? Alas how often faith  
changing gods will weep and fierce  
black sea surface winds  
will be wondering at arrogant

There have been many translations. Here are a few, with comments.

J.D. McClatchy (ed.) 2002

What slip of a boy, all slick with what perfumes,  
is pressing on you now, o Pyrrha, in  
your lapping crannies, in your rosy rooms?  
Who's caught up in your net today, your coil  
of elegant coiffure? He'll call himself  
a sucker soon enough, and often, and rail {13}

The rendering has an attractive forward movement, and the diction is thoroughly up to date. But a poem famous in the original and translation has also been made into a repulsive send-up. The tone is lowered: *slick*, *lapping crannies*, *sucker*. Unnecessary clichés are added: *rosy rooms*, *elegant coiffure*. The content is coarsened: *pressing*, *sucker*. Of the original graceful metre there is no trace, and Horace's mixture of wistful envy and repentance for his own transgressions has passed the translator by.

Tony Kline 2003

What slender boy, Pyrrha, drowned in liquid perfume,  
urges you on, there, among showers of roses,  
deep down in some pleasant cave?  
For whom did you tie up your hair,  
  
with simple elegance? How often he'll cry at  
the changes of faith and of gods, ah, he'll wonder,  
surprised by roughening water,  
surprised by the darkening storms, {14}

The translation is close in tone, fidelity, and shape to the original. There is no beauty in the phrasing or deployment of verse elements, but the syllabic patterning has created a quiet and pleasing expression.

P.E. Knox and J.C. McKeown 2013

What slim youngster soaked in perfumes  
is hugging now, Pyrrha, on a bed of roses  
deep in your lovely cave? For whom  
are you tying up your blonde hair?

You're so elegant and simple. Many's the time  
he'll weep at your faithlessness and the changing gods,  
and be amazed at seas  
roughened by black winds, {15}

Although set out as free verse, the rendering is prose, with prose expressions: *You're so elegant and simple. Many's the time.* The phrasing is not particularly felicitous, i.e. there are problems with the tone in such things as *youngster soaked, lovely cave*, but there is also a reaching out for the evocative and resonating in *he'll weep at your faithlessness and the changing gods*, and the *and be amazed at seas*. The stanza shaping is only approximate, but the rendering does give the reader a good impression of Horace's style.

Colin Holcombe 2014

What slim, rich-scented youth, on roses lain,  
now courts you, Pyrrha, in the grotto's shade?  
Why fasten each blonde skein  
of hair into that modest braid?

Unless for one who learns that gods can change,  
and even faith must meet adversities,  
when sudden storm clouds range  
across the dark, tempestuous seas. {16}

A tightly-shaped version that here employs a 5 5 3 4 stanza and makes much use of traditional verse devices: a quietly modulated rhythm, assonance and rhyme. The wistful tone of the piece is preserved but 'perfusus' is missing and the second stanza is made into a question, which in the Latin it is not.

Strict forms are rarely accepted in serious poetry today, but are — perhaps against expectations — a decided help in re-enacting in English what Horace created in Latin. Horace's jewelled phrases did not use the Latin spoken on the streets, moreover, so there's every point in *not* using a contemporary vernacular. It's through translation that we appreciate how a different world understood itself in the full splendour of its literary powers, something diminished when past magnificence is recast in contemporary tawdriness.

Sometimes rhyme even helps in re-rendering a famous translation. Here is the opening of Ezra Pound's *The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter*

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead  
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.  
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,  
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.

And we went on living in the village of Chōkan:  
 Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.  
 At fourteen I married My Lord you.  
 I never laughed, being bashful.  
 Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.  
 Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back. {17}

And here in strict form:

How simple it was, and my hair too,  
 picking at flowers as the spring comes;  
 and you riding about on a bamboo  
 horse; playing together, eating plums.  
 Two small people: nothing to contend  
 with, in quiet Chang Gan to day's end.

All this at fourteen made one with you.  
 Married to my lord: it was not the same.  
 Who was your concubine answering to  
 the thousand times you called her name?

I turned to the wall, and a whole year passed  
 before my being would be wholly yours — {9}

Both are very free versions, of course, but a more faithful one, even reproducing Li Bai's rhyme scheme in pararhyme, seems less successful:

From first your woman, hair covering forehead,  
 playing at the gate, picking flowers.  
 There you came riding on your bamboo horse,  
 throwing blue plums round trellised house.  
 Just two small people, not not vexed or worried  
 in Chang Gan village, and always close.  
 At fourteen I surrendered whatever powers  
 I had to be yours, but only was  
 shy and embarrassed, could not turn my head  
 however you called, if a thousand times. {18}

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3. *The Art of Poetry and its Translation* by Mariam Hovhannisyan. [Translation Directory](#), accessed July 2015.
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## 23.2. SKILLS

Since languages are the instruments of storage and transmission of legacies of experience and imaginative construction particular to a given community, it is highly unlikely that source and target languages will be isomorphous. Words won't mean quite the same, or have the same connotations and history of usage. A faithful translation will have to steer a median course between literalism and a licentious adaptation. A helpful analogy may be a portrait painting, which, even when it achieves a 'speaking likeness', still needs to be a good painting, i.e. something a photograph cannot achieve. {1}

Because translations bring scant fame or wealth, {2} poets might ask themselves:

1. Is another translation really needed? Many big names have been done to death, and new versions are commonly not a significant improvement on previous.
2. Does the translator have a real empathy with his author? The challenge is that of an actor 'getting inside his part', and one faced by all the performing

arts: music, singing, dancing, slam poetry. If the answer is 'not entirely' then the translation may never rise above the lifeless, i.e. be conscientious and worthy but not breathe the spirit of the original. Translation is an amalgamation of personalities, where the translator merges his gifts and feelings with those of the original author, either naturally or by the craft and self-discipline of the professional performer. It may therefore be wise to translate small sections, and get feedback from poets and academics before proceeding further. Translations of major works are commonly commissioned, of course, but results less than excellent are a monstrous waste of time for all concerned.

3. Does the translator have a wide range of skills in many poetic forms so as to be able to choose the most appropriate? Many today are proficient in free verse only, which will give a very lame result if the original owes its merit to strict rhymed forms, etc. Even back in 1540, Etienne Dolet required a translation to be in 'a sweet and even style so as to ravish the reader's ear and intellect.' {1}

4. Is the translator familiar with the critical literature, or can readily make himself so? How we understand a work, with all its nuances and cultural contexts, has to be conveyed in the translation.

5. Does the translator have the academic credentials to be acceptable to a university publishing house? Requirements vary, as do submission procedures: check on reference 7 below.

## References

1. *After Babel* by George Steiner. O.U.P., 1975. Chapter 4.
2. Steiner, 1975. p. 316. Steiner's comment on contemporary translation is: 'Texts concocted of unexamined lexical transfers, of grammatical hybrids which belong neither to the source nor to the target language are the interzone or rather limbo in which the rushed, underpaid hack translator works.' The whole book is worth reading for many aspects of translation not treated in this simple introduction.
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8. FirstWriter. Advice and extensive resources for publishing your work. <http://www.firstwriter.com/>

6. Poets & Writers Literary Magazines and Journals Database. Find the right outlet for your work. [http://www.pw.org/literary\\_magazines](http://www.pw.org/literary_magazines)

### 23.3. WIDER PICTURE

Translation, according to George Steiner, {1} is both more habitual and challenging than we suppose. Habitual because we are translating every day of our lives, adapting the speech typical of one class, profession, gender, age group and/or social situation to that of another. Challenging because something is lost in the translation: it can never be perfect. Consider an extreme case: Postumus's diatribe against women in Act Two of *Cymbeline*. It opens with:

Is there no way for men to be but women  
Must be half-workers? We are all bastards;  
And that most venerable man which I  
Did call my father, was I know not where  
When I was stamp'd; some coiner with his tools  
Made me a counterfeit: yet my mother seem'd  
The Dian of that time so doth my wife  
The nonpareil of this. O, vengeance, vengeance!  
Me of my lawful pleasure she restrain'd  
And pray'd me oft forbearance; did it with  
A pudency so rosy the sweet view on't  
Might well have warm'd old Saturn; {2}

How are we to understand *coiner*, *tools*, *counterfeit*, *pudency*? Shakespearean scholars will recognize nuances invisible to us, but also admit to some doubt. A complete reading would know how Postumus's diatribe fits 1. within the play, 2. within Elizabethan dramatic conventions and 3. within the large context of seventeenth-century speech habits. The second is difficult; the third is well-nigh impossible. Of course the actor can declaim the words as the type of production suggests (authentic, popular, modern dress), and the common reader skim over the difficulties, but neither option is open to a French translator. And a translation for a Hindi or Japanese audience would run into strong taboos on sexual candour.

There is a further point. What scholars know, or believe they know, may not transfer into effective verse. The good translator of any sort (aiming for 1, 2 or 3) has not only to understand a poem in its historic, cultural and literary context, but transfer that understanding into something appealing to a literate modern audience. Hence the dichotomy between the academic and literary approaches. Scholars stare in disbelief at what Modernists have made of established classics, and lovers of literature are appalled at the execrable verse of the latest academic rendering. Good translations are often works of

collaboration, even of committees (as was the King James's Bible), but the best committee may still be the committee of one. Unless the scholar is something of a poet himself he may be unable to choose properly between the literary versions offered him. Unless the poet understands the scholar's point of view he may not produce any acceptable versions in the first place. Poets who have the chameleon gift of getting inside their characters (as did Ezra Pound, but with some monumental gaffes) may thus be the best placed as translators. Theirs is the instinctive understand of how the poet's mind works, and what they learn from translating others they apply to their own work, growing in personality and cultural dimensions as a result.

## References

1. *After Babel* by George Steiner. O.U.P., 1975. Chapter 1.
2. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. MIT.  
<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/cymbeline/cymbeline.2.5.html>

## 23.4. EZRA POUND'S TRANSLATION OF PROPERTIUS

Ezra Pound was the initiator of today's enthusiasm for poetry translation, but his *Homage to Sextus Propertius* {1} was and remains the most controversial of renderings. It was heartily disliked at the time, and remained largely unappreciated outside Modernist circles for decades. {2} But if the rendering was often careless and wrong-headed, it could also be vivid and beautiful.

Shades of Callimachus, Coan ghosts of Philetas,  
 It is in your grove I would walk. (Pound 1.1-2, Loeb 3.1.1-2)

No, now while it may be, let not the fruit of life cease.  
     Dry wreaths drop their petals,  
         their stalks are woven in baskets,  
 Today we take the great breath of lovers,  
     tomorrow fate shuts us in. (P 8.28-32: 2.15.49-54)

The twisted rhombs ceased their clamour of accompaniment;  
 The scorched laurel lay in the fire-dust; (P 9.1.1-2: 2.28.35-6)

Of course there could be indifferent lines. The guying of academic language in:

Was Venus exacerbated by the existence of a comparable equal?  
     Is the ornamental goddess full of envy?  
 Have you contempered Juno's Pelagian temples,  
     Have you denied Pallas good eyes? (P 8.10-13: 2.28.9-12)

With the doubtful *exacerbated, ornamental, contempted* and *Pallas*. Some lines are plain bad, here the repulsive imagery, not in Propertius:

How easy the moving fingers, if hair is mussed on her forehead,  
If she goes in a gleam of Cos, in a slither of dyed stuff  
(P 5.2.7-8 2.1.5-6)

Or here with translation errors, giving hilarious results:

Io mooded the first years with averted head,  
And now drinks Nile water like a god (P 8 .19-20: 2.28.17-8)

There were also irritating mannerisms: anaphora

When, when, and whenever death closes our eyelids (P 6.1: 2.13.17)

An over-Latinate humour,

The dry earth pants against the canicular heat (P 8.4: 2.28.4)

And an irony that passes into self-mockery.

But in one bed, in one bed alone, my dear Lynceus  
I deprecate your attendance; (P 12.15-6: 2.34.16-7)

Yet what was abundantly achieved was a real voice, a genuine and moving affection for Cynthia, and the poet's acceptance that he will not be understood by his contemporaries, and even less by his mistress.

Great Zeus, save the woman,  
or she will sit before your feet in a veil,  
and pour out a long list of her troubles. (P 9.10-2: 2.28.45-6)

Pound called his work *Homage to Sextus Propertius* but the rendering contained far too much straight borrowing to be either something in the manner of Propertius, or a poem on his themes. Nor was it strictly translation. Pound introduced lines and phrases of his own, and left out mythologies he thought tedious or tending to spoil the verse flow. Indeed, the whole demeanour of the *Elegies* was subtly altered. Propertius's invocation at the beginning of Book Three became an attack on false standards, equating Propertius's wish to avoid writing epics for Augustus with the despair and cynicism that afflicted Europe at the close of the First World War.

Then there were slips with real names:

Polydamas incorrectly made Polydmanus in later editions. (P 1.31: 3.131)

The cheerfully appearance of the odd schoolboy howler:

Nor of Welsh mines and the profit Marus had out of them. (P 5.2.21: 2.1.24)

And scraps of fourth-form humour.

And in the meantime my songs will travel,  
And the devirginated young ladies will enjoy them  
when they have got over the strangeness, (P 1.32-3: 3.2.1-2 )

It was, in short, a most unacademic translation, and one which still divides the Classics and English fraternities. {3, 4} But Pound, in all probability, was not aiming for fidelity to text — he was not a self-effacing man, and corrected very few of the errors pointed out to him {2} — so much as using Propertius for his own writing ends, creating a more flippant and one-sided version than the poetry warrants. Where scholars are undecided about the later elegies, Pound saw them as irony, if only subtle irony, and adopted an engaging but put-down tone. What didn't meet that interpretation, notably the sober elegy of Cornelia that closes Book Four, he happily ignored.

But if the translation infuriated scholars, far more baffled was the general reader. Part of the trouble lay with the 1892 Lucian Mueller text, on which Pound based his translations. It juxtaposed lines and passages that later scholars have moved to more sensible positions, but Pound also rearranged the order of the twelve elegies he chose to translate, and removed large sections of those choices. The translations themselves could be very free, moreover, following the verse opportunities rather than translating what was on the page. Without the Latin to consult, few would guess that:

A new-fangled chariot follows the flower-hung horses;  
A young Muse with young loves clustered about her  
ascends with me into the aether, . . .  
And there is no high-road to the Muses. (P 1.13-6: 3.11-4)

Referred to the Roman triumph, the young loves being the kinsfolk that traditionally rode in the victor's chariot. Or that the mysterious:

Bright tips reach up from twin towers,  
Anienan spring water falls into flat-spread pools. (P 3.3-4: 3.16.3-4)

Simply referred to the waterfalls at Tivoli, where Cynthia instructed Propertius to meet her.

The saving grace was the verse, where Pound developed a style useful to him in the Cantos and to Modernism generally. {5} Because that verse is often misunderstood, allowing contemporary styles to dwindle into little more than prose, it is worth looking at the details. Pound made several innovations.

1. He ignored the elegiac form, replacing the couplets by lines or line segments of varying lengths that were meaningful and cadenced units in themselves.

Love interferes with fidelities;  
The gods have brought shame on their relatives;  
Each man wants the pomegranate for himself (P 12.2-4; 2.34.2-5)

2. He made units some fused evocation of meaning, tone and emotion, often by vivid images that were only loosely linked by argument or narrative.

We, in our narrow bed, turning aside from battles:

Each man where he can, wearing out the day in his manner

(P 5.2. 36-7: 2.1.45-6)

3. He pruned away the unnecessary, leaving words left to fill out with their full meaning:

Rumours of you throughout the city,

and no good rumour among them. (P 11.18-9: 2.32.23-4

And phrases with a reverberating simplicity:

When the Syrian onyx is broken. (P 4.25: 2.13.30)

4. He used a diction that was not contemporary but a judicious mixture of the poetic (aforetime), the academic and the archly self-knowing or deprecating (young ladies): see below.

5. To give rhythmic coherence to the units, Pound adopted the cadences of his skilled contemporaries, but replaced their traditional accentual-syllabic verse by stress verse to no common base, i.e. to free verse. That allowed him to introduce snippets of conversation:

'You need, Propertius, not think

'About acquiring that sort of reputation. (P 2.19-20: 3.3.17-8)

And adjust the tone, here ironic:

She did not respect all the gods

Such derelictions have destroyed other young ladies aforetime.

(P 8.6-7: 2.28.6-7)

And here simple and passionate:

You ask on what account I write so many love-lyrics

And whence this soft book comes into my mouth.

Neither Calliope nor Apollo sung these things into my ear,

My genius is no more than a girl. (P 5.2.1-4: 2.1.1-4)

6. He arranged the units with great skill, ostensibly avoiding the constraints of conventional verse, but actually playing variations on the iambic pentameter that can usually be sensed beneath.

**Nor** at my **funeral** | **either** | **will** there **be** | **any long trail** |

. **bearing ancestral lares** | and **images** ||

Nor **at** | my **fu** | neral **ei** | ther **will** | there **be** |

**any** | long **trail** | bearing | **ances** | tral **la** |

res **and** | **ima** ges || (P 6.13-14: 2.13.19-20)

7. He made typography, the layout on the page, important. Where Pound wanted to emphasize words or thwart expectations, he broke the line, down-setting the important items:

Seeing that long standing increases all things  
 regardless of quality. (P 1.25-6: 3.1.

Suddenly, the *Elegies* became challengingly different, as fresh and relevant to contemporary readers, Modernists believed, as Propertius was to his Roman audience.

In fact Propertius was following in a long tradition, and his lines were startling only in the ease with which he further developed its inherent properties. By contrast, Pound's work was new, and revealed other dimensions, asking for poems to be constructed on fresh principles, and bound together by unusual devices.

The last was the great difficulty. The *Homage* is an untidy poem, with many lines of great beauty and felicity of expression, but not cohering into a satisfying whole. Roman poetry was an extension of oratory, and therefore constructed on a complex rhetoric. The *Homage* was built on Pound's belief in the imaginal nature of Chinese verse. Individual scenes or vignettes are not easily integrated without some intervening narrative, however, as every film director knows, and Pound himself found in the *Cantos*. No doubt links could be made — indeed were made in some faltering way through the *Homage* by the loose association of ideas — but an organizing linkage would doubtless have entailed further departures from the Latin, adding a matrix to images that were most vivid when left to stand for themselves.

That said, the *Homage* does have more unity and compelling beauty than any correct and complete rendering, which necessarily includes many broken, trivial and unsatisfactory elegies. {6}

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## 23.5. PLANNING

Translation of major works of literature requires a great deal of prior thought and planning. For an academic version, the translator should be a specialist in a recognized teaching position — to be fully conversant with the literature, and be acceptable to the academic presses. Requirements for the other approaches are equally onerous.

### Stage One

All approaches will firstly benefit from a careful examination of previous work. Here we look at seven translations of a short section of Homer's *Odyssey* Book V, adding brief comments:

#### Alexander Pope

And now, two nights, and now two days were pass'd,  
 Since wide he wander'd on the watery waste;  
 Heaved on the surge with intermitting breath,  
 And hourly panting in the arms of death.  
 The third fair morn now blazed upon the main;  
 Then glassy smooth lay all the liquid plain;  
 The winds were hush'd, the billows scarcely curl'd,  
 And a dead silence still'd the watery world;  
 When lifted on a ridgy wave he spies  
 The land at distance, and with sharpen'd eyes. {1}

Very typical of its period. Well-turned verse but the couplets create many unnecessary poeticisms: *main*, *liquid plain*, *billows scarcely curled*, *panting in the arms of death*, etc. If Alexander Pope, the great master of the rhymed couplet, cannot do better than this, then we should also take pause.

#### William Cooper

Two nights he wander'd, and two days, the flood  
 Tempestuous, death expecting ev'ry hour;  
 But when Aurora, radiant-hair'd, had brought  
 The third day to a close, then ceas'd the wind,  
 And breathless came a calm; he, nigh at hand  
 The shore beheld, darting acute his sight  
 Toward it, from a billow's tow'ring top. {2}

Blank verse, effective till the last two lines, which are unnecessarily awkward.

## A.T. Murray

Then for two nights and two days he was driven about over the swollen waves, and full often his heart forboded destruction. But when fair-tressed Dawn brought to its birth the third day, then the wind ceased and there was a windless calm, and he caught sight of the shore close at hand, casting a quick glance forward, as he was raised up by a great wave. {3}

A sensible prose rendering. The last sentence is too long, however, causing its concluding clauses to be lamely tacked on.

## Robert Fitzgerald

Two nights, two days, in the solid deep-sea swell  
he drifted, many times awaiting death,  
until with shining ringlets in the East  
the dawn confirmed a third day, breaking clear  
over a high and windless sea; and mounting  
a rolling wave he caught a glimpse of land. {4}

Modern blank verse. A questionable *confirmed* but otherwise pleasing and effective.

## Ian Johnson

avoiding death and Fates. So for two days and nights  
he floated on the ocean waves, his heart filled  
with many thoughts of death. But when fair-haired Dawn  
gave rise at last to the third day, the wind died down,  
the sea grew calm and still. He was lifted up  
by a large swell, and as he quickly looked ahead,  
Odysseus saw the land close by. Just as children {5}

A loose blank verse, pleasing but a little flaccid.

## Tony Kline

Two nights and days he was tossed about on the swollen sea, and many a time he thought himself doomed. But when Dawn of the lovely tresses gave birth to the third day, the wind dropped, and there was breathless calm. Glancing ahead as a long breaker suddenly lifted him, he glimpsed the shore nearby. {6}

A modern prose version, rendering the sense well, but with some questionable phrases: *doomed*, *lovely tresses*, *breathless calm*.

## Stanley Lombardo

Two nights and two days the solid, mitered waves  
 Swept him on, annihilation all his heart could foresee.  
 But when Dawn combed her hair in the third day's light,  
 The wind died down and there fell  
 A breathless calm. Riding a swell  
 He peered out and saw land nearby. {7}

Free verse with some questionable line breaks (*fell*, *swell*) and word choices (*mitered*, *peered*). The personae have become rather domesticated: the goddess Aurora seems more the 'girl next door', and Odysseus has become a surfer.

Of course we'd want to examine a good deal more than this brief snippet, checking carefully with whatever academic reviews were available. And also look at the many translations not on the Internet — by Richard Lattimorer, {8} Robert Fagles {9}, Christopher Logue, {10} etc. But on this showing, the Robert Fitzgerald version is the best, and sets the benchmark for subsequent work. My own guess, looking at the opening (musical but rather flat and unshapely) lines of Fitzgerald's translation —

Sing in me, Muse, and tell the story  
 of that man skilled in all ways of contending,  
 the warrior, harried for years on end;  
 after he plundered the stronghold  
 on the proud height of Troy.

Compare this to a popular version, now very dated, but giving a better narrative sweep:

Tell me, Muse, of that man, so ready at need, who wandered far and wide, after he had sacked the sacred citadel of Troy, and many were the men whose towns he saw and whose mind he learnt, yea, and many the woes he suffered in his heart upon the deep, striving to win his own life and the return of his company. {11}

Even Tony Kline, whose translation tends to the literal, suggests that Fitzgerald's is rather trimmed:

Tell me, Muse, of that man of many resources, who wandered far and wide, after sacking the holy citadel of Troy. Many the men whose cities he saw, whose ways he learned. Many the sorrows he suffered at sea, while trying to bring himself and his friends back alive. {6}

— is that a better version is certainly possible, though the effort would be considerable. The *Odyssey* runs to 12,110 lines of dactylic hexameter, which translates to 3-4 years' work even at a 10 lines/day steady output. We'd also have to read the original Greek, at least sufficiently to understand why previous translations take the form they do.

## Stage Two

Unless the work is to be a reworking of existing versions — a hazardous approach, and not a translation — the translator will need to:

1. Be clear on which approach he is adopting. The academic world publishes and uses academic translations, i.e. something that renders the full sense of the original. Anything combining approaches two and three may therefore fall between both stools, i.e. be neither quite flesh nor fowl. An illustration:

I translated Virgil's *Georgics* in hexameters, first exploring the form in a collection of hexameter poems. {12} An alternative to clipping the sense in a shorter but more malleable line was to render ten of Virgil's hexameters by twelve English pentameters, as Trevelyan did:

What makes the cornfield glad, beneath what star,  
Maecenas, it is well to turn the soil,  
And wed the vine to the elm, how to tend oxen,  
For nurturing flocks and hers what care is needful,  
For keeping thrifty bees what knowledge, now  
Shall I essay to sing. O ye most glorious  
Lights of the universe, that lead along  
Through heaven the gliding years; and you, Liber  
And kindly Ceres, by whose bounty earth exchanged  
Chaonian acorns for the rich ear of corn,  
And blended with pure water from the stream  
And new-found grape; and you Fauns, present deities  
Of country folk (draw together, Fauns  
And Dryad maidens), it is your gifts to men I sing. {13}

But this is not attractive blank verse: the rhythm is uncertain and some half of the lines are clogged by unnecessary syllables.

I went back to the hexameter, still aiming for a combination of approaches two and three. Yet now, after completing the translation, I am not at all sure that a blank verse might not have been preferable, i.e. approach three only. In place of the hexameter noted above in section 5.1 we could have written the more energetic pentameter:

What gladdens cornfields, and beneath what star  
Maecenas, are we made to turn the earth?  
How may the vine be fastened to the elm,  
or cattle tended, and the ox be bred?  
What knowledge is possessed by thrifty bees? —  
such are my themes. Celestial lights that lead  
the seasons in their fruitful dance. How Bacchus  
and propitious Ceres brought Chaonian  
acorn lands to thick-sown fields of wheat,  
10. and formed of Acheloüs new-made wine.

And Fauns, you gods of country folk —so dance  
you Dryad girls and gods — your gifts I praise.

Or shaped the lines with rhyme:

What gladdens cornfields, and what star inclines  
us turn the earth, Maecenus? How may vines  
be trestled by the elm? Or flocks be cared  
for, oxen bred? What qualities prepared  
the bees for hives? And you, celestial lights  
that lead the seasons in their fruitful rites,  
with Lifer and kind Ceres, you who meet  
to turn the acorn lands to thick-sown wheat,  
and mix with Archeloüs new-made wine.  
You Fauns the rustics bless with wayside shrine —  
so dance you Dryad girls and gods — your source  
I celebrate.

All that is water under the bridge now, but the point is worth emphasizing. Into what market are you selling your translation?

## Stage Three

If the aim is a literary translation, and the translator is not thoroughly at home in the source language, the next question is how that language is to be acquired. Are there adequate grammar books and dictionaries, possibly online? Are there courses readily available? For Greek there most certainly are, {14-16} but the same may not be true of other languages, Hopi, for example or central Asian tongues.

## Stage Four

If the translation is not to be done for simple pleasure, perhaps being distributed as a free ebook, then a proposal will need to be put together, and potential publishers contacted.

Only when all for stages have been passed — which may take months or years to accomplish — does the steady work of translation begin.

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## 23.6. EXAMPLE: TRANSLATING LEOPARDI

### Points Illustrated

1. Researching the author
2. Previous translations
3. Italian prosody
4. Checking against the original and scholarly analyses
5. Respecting the form.

## Leopardi

To make something faithful to the original, we must first know something about its author, his style and literary intentions. Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837), the greatest Italian poet since Dante, loved what is not directly given in life. He incorporated words or phrases from earlier poets, but vitalized his meaning by scrupulous attention to sound and rhythm while employing the simplest of vocabularies. Informed by extended scholarship, the poetry has the restraint and clarity of classical literature, which allowed Leopardi to concentrate on his shadow world of 'solid nothingness'. The cornerstones were remembrance and infinity, and through these Leopardi opened the door to Modernism's divorce from social obligations to a poesis pure that anticipated the Symbolists. Leopard composed only forty-one works, {1} of which *L'Infinito* is one of the best known. Its simple beauty has attracted many translators.

First the original:

### L'infinito

Sempre caro mi fu quest'ermo colle  
 E questa siepe che da tanta parte  
 De' ll'ultimo orrizonte il guardo esclude.  
 Ma sedendo e mirando interminati  
 Spazi di là da quella, e sovrumani  
 Silenzi, e profondissima quiete,  
 Io nel pensier mi fingo, ove per poco  
 Il cor non si spaura. E come il vento  
 Odo stormir tra queste piante, io quello  
 Infinito silenzio a questa voce  
 Vo comparando; e mi sovvien l'eterno,  
 E le morte stagioni, e la presente  
 E viva, e' l' suon di lei. Così tra questa  
 Immensità s'annega il pensier mio:  
 E' l' naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare. {3}

The meaning is fairly straightforward. We can get a literal rendering easily enough with *Google Translate*:

Always dear to me was this lonely hill,  
 And this hedge, which has so much  
 Last The endless horizon.  
 But as I sit and gaze, boundless  
 Spaces beyond that, and superhuman  
 Silences, and deepest quiet  
 I thought I pretend; where nearly  
 The heart is overwhelmed. And like the wind  
 I hear rustling through the trees I that  
 Infinite silence to this entry  
 Comparing vo: and I am reminded of the eternal,  
 And the dead seasons, and this  
 And alive, and the sound of it. So in this  
 Immensity my thought is drowned:  
 It is sweet to shipwreck in this sea.

If we clean that up a little, the result is a serviceable first draft.

Always dear to me was this lonely hill,  
and this hedge, which from so much part  
of the ultimate horizon the view excludes.  
But sitting and gazing, boundless  
spaces beyond that, and more than human  
silences and profoundest quiet  
I in thoughts pretend to myself, where almost  
the heart is overwhelmed. And as the wind  
I hear rustle through these plants, I such  
infinite silence to this voice  
go on comparing: and come to mind the eternal  
and the dead seasons, and the present  
and the living, and the sound of it. So through this  
immensity is drowned my thoughts:  
and being shipwrecked is sweet to me in this sea.

### Other Translations

The several versions on the Internet are not too faithful or pleasing:

This lonely hill has always  
Been dear to me, and this thicket  
Which shuts out most of the final  
Horizon from view. I sit here,  
And gaze, and imagine  
The interminable spaces  
That stretch away, beyond my mind,  
Their uncanny silences, Their profound calms; {5}

It was always dear to me, this solitary hill,  
and this hedgerow here, that closes off my view,  
from so much of the ultimate horizon.  
But sitting here, and watching here,  
in thought, I create interminable spaces,  
greater than human silences, and deepest  
quiet, where the heart barely fails to terrify. {6}

This solitary hill has always been dear to me  
And this hedge, which prevents me from seeing most of  
The endless horizon.  
But when I sit and gaze, I imagine, in my thoughts  
Endless spaces beyond the hedge,  
An all encompassing silence and a deeply profound quiet,  
To the point that my heart is almost overwhelmed. {7}

I've always loved this hermit's hill,  
the hedgerow here that mostly hides the view  
of where, far off, earth meets the sky.  
But sitting, gazing, I can dream  
unbounded spaces past that line  
and suprahuman silences,  
a final depth of quietness,  
where for a little while the heart  
is not afraid. {8}



Where is what commentators have stressed with Leopardi: the beauty and simplicity of his language?

Among published sources we have Lorna de' Lucchi's, a little free, {9} and Robert Lowell's unsuccessful rewriting as a Pindaric ode rhymed aabbcbcddefegfghh: {10}

I always loved this solitary hill,  
This hedge as well, which takes so large a share  
Of the far-flung horizon from my view;  
But seated here, in contemplation lost,  
My thought discovers vaster space beyond,  
Supernal silence and unfathomed peace;  
Almost I am afraid; then, since I hear  
The murmur of the wind among the leaves,  
I match that infinite calm unto this sound  
And with my mind embrace eternity,  
The vivid, speaking present and dead past;  
In such immensity my spirit drowns,  
And sweet to me is shipwreck in this sea. {9}

That hill pushed off by itself was always dear  
to me and the hedges near  
it that cut away so much of the final horizon.  
When I would sit here lost in deliberation,  
I reasoned most on the interminable spaces  
beyond all hills, on their antediluvian resignation  
and silence that passes  
beyond man's possibility. {10}

## Italian Verse

*L'infinito* is written in blank (hendecasyllabic) verse: balanced, understated, much use made of the interplay between enjambment (line run on) and diaeresis (adjacent vowels sounded). {11}.

Like other Romance verse, Italian is based on the syllable count, with certain licenses applying. The hendecasyllabic, for example, has a primary accent on the 10th syllable and a secondary stress either on the 4th or on the 6th, but need not necessarily have the same number of syllables. The hendecasyllabic will be "piano" if it adheres to the 11 syllable model, "tronco" if it contains 10 syllables, "sdrucchiolo" if it contains 12 syllables, and "bisdrucchiolo" if it contains 13 syllables. For the purposes of counting, moreover, vowels can be *elided* or pronounced separately. {12}

A possible scansion, with syllable numbers shown in brackets:

Sem pre ca ro | mi fu que st'er mo **col** le (11)  
E que sta sie pe che | da tan ta **par** te (11)  
De'll ul ti mo\_o | riz zon te\_il guar do\_es **clu** de. (11)  
Ma se den do\_e | mi ran do\_in ter mi **na** ti (11)  
Spa zi di la | da quel la\_e so vru **ma** ni (11)  
Si len zi\_e pro | fon dis |si ma qui **e** te, (11)

*I\_o nel pen si\_er | mi fin go, ov e per po co (11)*  
*Il cor non si spa u ra\_E | co me il ven to (11)*  
*O do stor mir | tra que ste pi\_an te,\_i\_o quel lo (11)*  
*In fi ni to si len | zi\_o\_a que sta vo ce (11)*  
*Vo com pa ran | do\_e mi sov vi\_en l'e ter no, | (11)*  
*E le mor te sta gi\_o | ni,\_e la pre sen te | (11)*  
*E vi va\_e'l su\_on di le\_i. | Co si tra que sta (11)*  
*Im men si ta s'an ne | ga\_il pen si\_er mi\_o: (10)*  
*E'l nau fra gar | m'e dol ce\_in que sto ma re. (11)*

We can quarrel about details, and the position of the caesurae |, but we should note how enjambment (interminati... Spazi, sovrumani... Silenzi) speeds up the verse, and the diaeresis slows it down. Also the repetition of 'this', and the unforced **assonance/alliteration**:

Sempre caro mi fu quest'ermo colle  
 E questa siepe che da tanta parte  
 De'l ultimo orrizonte il guarde esclude.  
 Ma sedendo e mirando interminati  
 Spazi di la da quella, e sovrumani  
 Silenzi, e profondissima quiete,  
 Io nel pensier mi fingo, ove per poco  
 Il cor non si spaura. E come il vento  
 Odo stormir tra queste piante, io quello  
 Infinito silenzio a questa voce  
 Vo comparando; e mi sovvien l'eterno,  
 E le morte stagioni, e la presente  
 E viva, e'l suon di lei. Così tra questa  
 Immen<sup>s</sup>ita s'annega il pens<sup>i</sup>er mio:  
 E'l naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare.

## Second Draft

There are no rhymes to find, and we simply have to make a flowing (English) blank verse:

Always dear to me was this lone hill,  
 this hedge about it which excludes so much  
 of the ultimate horizon. In sitting here  
 and gazing out on further boundless spaces,  
 on more than human silences, profoundest  
 quiet my thoughts pretend to apprehend,  
 I find the the heart is almost overwhelmed.  
 I hear the wind that rustle through the leaves  
 but must go on comparing an infinite  
 silence to this voice. So come to mind  
 the eternal and the dead seasons, the present in  
 the living, and the sound of them. In this

immensity are drowned my thoughts, though sweet  
to me is being shipwrecked in this sea.

### Checking the Sense

We are not too far from the sense, {4, 11, 13} but the lines are flaccid and shapeless. And we have also shrunk the piece to 14 lines, no doubt because English is a more concise language. If we wish to preserve the original 15 line length, we can fill out that *ultimo orrizonte* and add a little assonance and alliteration for shaping:

Ever dear to me this unfrequented  
hill and hedge that so obstructs the view  
of endless distances, where earth and sky  
would merge as one. By sitting here and gazing  
out across those boundless intervals  
of space, on more than human silences,  
profoundest depths that I pretend to know,  
the heart is almost overwhelmed. I hear  
the wind that's murmuring among the leaves  
and must go on balancing an infinite  
silence and this voice. So come to mind  
the eternal and the dead seasons, the present  
and the living, the sounds of them.  
In such immensities my meditating drowns,  
though sweet to me the foundering in such sea.

### Other Renderings

Translation often proceeds this way, on a zigzag course between improving the verse and getting back to the meaning.

A literal rendering for the last line would be 'And sweet to me is shipwreck in this sea', but the line has none of the surf-pounding energy needed to round off the poem attractively. We have replaced *ultimo orrizonte* — for which there is no pleasing English equivalent — by an extended phrase that again underlines what is only suggested by the phrase: as the heavens and the earth merge in the horizon, so does the mind of the poet with with the ultimate reality. We have changed 'comparing' to 'balancing' to improve the verse structure and make clear what is only hinted at: it's the quiet sound of the wind that gives depth to the infinite silence in the poet's comparison: the two coexist. The *voice* is not only the wind in the leaves, of course, but the poet's voice, and that of all mankind, as lines 10-12 indicate. An academic rendering would be more circumspect:

Ever dear to me this unfrequented  
hill and hedge that so obstructs the view

of the ultimate horizon. Sitting, gazing  
 out beyond those boundless intervals  
 of space, on more than human silences,  
 through depths of quiet my thought pretends to know,  
 the heart is almost overwhelmed. I hear  
 the wind that's murmuring among the leaves  
 but must go on comparing an infinite  
 silence and this voice. So come to mind  
 the eternal and the dead seasons, the present  
 and the living, and the sounds of them.  
 In such immensities my thought is drowned,  
 though sweet to me the foundering in such sea.

The translation is straightforward if we let it be. There is no need to break Leopardi's clear flow into modernist chunks or Pindaric odes. We simply need to write in an English form that's appropriate to the shape of the original and its period.

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## 23.7. EXAMPLE: TRANSLATING VICTOR HUGO

### Points Illustrated

1. Literal translation.
2. Looking at other translations.
3. Getting the rhymes.
4. English pentameter and French hexameter compared.
5. Understanding the effect intended.

### **Boöz Endormi**

*Boöz Endormi* is a much-celebrated poem from Victor Hugo's *Légends des Siècles* (1859). We look at the last 3 of its 22 stanzas. The French is simple, lyrical and majestic:

20. Ruth songeait et Boöz dormait, l'herbe était noire ;  
Les grelots des troupeaux palpitaient vaguement ;  
Une immense bonté tombait du firmament ;  
C'était l'heure tranquille où les lions vont boire.

21. Tout reposait dans Ur et dans Jérimadeth ;  
Les astres émaillaient le ciel profond et sombre ;  
Le croissant fin et clair parmi ces fleurs de l'ombre  
Brillait à l'occident, et Ruth se demandait,

22. Immobile, ouvrant l'œil à moitié sous ses voiles,  
Quel dieu, quel moissonneur de l'éternel été  
Avait, en s'en allant, négligemment jeté  
Cette faucille d'or dans le champ Des étoiles. {1}

### Literal Translation

And a literal translation is equally straightforward: {2}

Ruth mused/thought over and Boaz slept, the grass was black;  
The little bells of the flocks beat vaguely

An immense kindness fell from the sky/firmament;  
It was the quiet hour where lions go to drink.

All rested in Ur and in Jérimadeth;  
The stars enameled the deep and somber sky:  
The crescent, fine/slim and clear, among the flowers of shade  
Shone in the west, and Ruth asked herself

Immobile, opening the eye a half under its veils,  
What god, what harvester of eternal summer  
Had, in going away, negligently thrown  
This/that golden sickle in the field of stars

## Other Translations

Only a little is available on the Internet: the Blackmores' translation:

The flocks' bells tinkled faintly as they went;  
Ruth pondered, Boaz slept; the grass was dank.  
Blessings descended from the firmament.  
It was the peaceful hour when lions drank.

Ur and Jerimadeth were all at rest;  
The stars enameled heaven's sombre deep;  
A slender crescent sparkled in the west  
Among those flowers of darkness; half-asleep

Lay Ruth, wondering, her veiled eyes half-parted,  
What god, cropping the timeless summer yield,  
Had dropped so carelessly as he departed  
That golden sickle in the starry field. {3} {4} {5}

An unattributed translation:

The stars were glittering in the heaven's dusk meadows,  
Far west, among those flowers of the shadows,  
The thin, clear crescent lustrous over her,  
Made Ruth raise question, looking through the bars  
Of heaven, with eyes half-oped, what God, what comer  
Unto the harvest of the eternal summer,  
Had flung his golden hook down on the field of stars. {6}

When the Blackmores' version is so good {7} — their *Collected Poems of Victor Hugo* won the 2002 International Translation Award {8} — why should anyone want to write another? Well, apart from the challenge, we'd like to see if Hugo's powers can be even more convincingly displayed in English.

## That Last Stanza

We start with the last verse, for which a workmanlike rendering can be sketched in a few minutes. To get around the paucity of rhymes for stars, we could write:

Unmoving, staring through her half-veiled eyes,  
What god, what reaper of eternal summer,  
So carelessly in leaving her had thrown  
That sickle where now among the stars it lies.

but it's clumsy, leaves out the important *golden*, and is not what everyone remembers. Let's try pararhyme:

Unmoving, staring through her half-veiled eyes,  
What god, what reaper of eternal summer,  
So carelessly in leaving her had thrown  
That golden sickle in the field of stars.

But that has important consequences, discussed more below. In fact, we'll probably have to change the first line:

What god, her eyes gazed through their half-veiled bars,  
What harvester of summers yet unsown,  
So carelessly in leaving her had thrown  
That golden sickle into the field of stars.

*Bars?* Hugo wrote veils, emphasizing that Ruth could but dimly see God's purposes, but the general meaning is preserved. {9}

## Last Three Stanzas

Let's modify a little and complete the translation of stanzas 20-22:

Ruth now mused and Boaz slept. The grass  
was black: the sheepbells tinkled as they went.  
An immense kindness fell from the firmament:  
The peaceful hour where thirsty lions pass.

Rest in Ur and Jerimadeth. The flowers  
Of darkness gleamed in deep and somber rest  
And a crescent, thin and clear, lit up the west  
As Ruth still lay there wondering through the hours,

What god, her eyes gazed through their half-veiled bars,  
What summer harvester through times unsown,  
So carelessly in leaving her had thrown  
That golden sickle into the field of stars.

Now we have to ask these questions:

Is the English pentameter appropriate?

Have we captured the sense and feeling of the original?

What further licences can/should we take?

## Hexameter versus Pentameter

English and French verse are built on different principles, one on syllable count under various rules, and the other on metre. {10} Hugo is writing the alexandrine, two hemistichs of six syllables separated by a caesura, with the primary and secondary stresses of the line occurring at the line-end and caesura respectively:

Ruth son geait et Bo oz | dor mait l'her beé tait noire 3 3 | 2 4  
 Les gre lots des trou peaux | pal pit aient va gue ment 3 3 | 3 3  
 U neim men **se** bon té | tomb ait du firm a ment 3 3 | 2 4  
 C'é tait l'heu **re** tran qui | lleoù les li ons vont boire. 3 3 | 3 3

Tout re po sait da nsUr | et dans Jé ri ma deth 4 2 | 2 4  
 Le sas tre sé mai llaient | le ci el pro fond et sombre 3 3 | 3 3  
 Le croi ssant fi net clair | par mi ces fleurs de l'ombre 3 3 | 4 2  
 Bri llait à l'o cci den | tet Ruth se de man dait 2 4 | 2 4

Im mo bile ouv rant l'œi | là moit ié sous ses voiles 3 3 | 2 4  
 Quel dieu quel moi sso nneur | de l'é ter nel ét é 2 4 | 2 4  
 A vait en s'en a llant | né gli ge mment je té 2 4 | 4 2  
 Ce tte fau ci lle d'or | dans le champ de sé toiles 2 4 | 3 3

Matters are much more complicated — particularly where rhyme quality is concerned — but even this simple analysis should show how different is the French conception of verse. (I have shown the groupings of syllable sounded, given the caesura by |, the sounded e by **e**, and the silent line-end e by e. {10-14} The arrangement of hemistich segments — syllables grouped as to where the subsidiary stress falls — are also shown. Except in stanzas 10 and 15, which are rhymed abab, Hugo's 22 stanza poem is rhymed abba.)

We should also note that Hugo's verse is remarkably sonorous and stately: the end-stopped lines giving great dignity to the theme.

The hexameter is the most flexible and widely-used of French verse forms, corresponding to the pentameter in English. But whereas the English pentameter can be unrhymed, even gaining in dramatic or narrative power, the hexameter is always rhymed: there is no equivalent in French to English blank verse. That does not mean that we *cannot* employ blank verse to render *Boöz Endormi*, but does suggest its stately correctness will be lost if we write things like:



Unmoving, staring through her half-veiled eyes,  
 What god, what reaper of eternal summer,  
 So carelessly in leaving her had thrown  
 That golden sickle in the field of stars.

The lines move easily and keep close to the original, but are not the same animal. We are obliged to have rhymed pentameters, I think, and these should a. follow the abba rhyme scheme, and b. reproduce Hugo's straightforward exposition as far the rhyme allows.

## Capturing the Sense and Feeling

A problem arises immediately with the *grass / pass* rhyme in stanza 20. Why has Hugo said the grass was black? To get the rhyme, very probably. The second line is beautiful, but of course leads up to the *immense bonté tombait du firmament*, which is then heightened by the auspicious quietness of the fourth: *when lions drink*. Unfortunately, the chronology is a little muddled. We don't need to be told it's dark outside, and has been all the time that Ruth has been lying asleep, and we know also that the hour of quietness is not the early morning, but the evening.

Yet there is a way in which the blackness outside is or could be important, which would be to isolate Ruth. Hugo has simply seized on the obvious rhyme, and no doubt it seems *lèse majesté* to improve on the great man. But whatever we choose, *when lions pass* will clearly not suffice. To have lions passing is threatening, and from what exactly are they passing? If, however, we return to an almost literal rendering (and in fact powerful) rendering of the last line, we need a rhyme for *drink*. *Clink*? Sheepbells? Something familiar and comforting to Ruth, if we compress events as Hugo has? It's a possibility, though we must also make the words continue the sense and feeling of the stanza. Hugo has the sheepbells trembling with anticipation, which is denied us with *clink*. But perhaps we could stress the ordinariness of the scene:

*A clink / of sheepbells traced the darkness as they went.*

Or, better, find the equivalent to Hugo's effect:

*A clink / of sheepbells sounded: distant, innocent.*

*The clink / of distant sheepbells carried: innocent.*

## Further licences

Several 'corrections' have been made to the full translation, {15} and they illustrate two matters. One is the need to think beyond the literal meanings of lines: we have to understand what their author intended, and why. And secondly, only by deploying the full resources of English verse will we get (in English) the effect achieved by their author in French. For a glaring example of the first, take the last line of the second stanza:

Ce vieillard possédait Des champs de blés et d'orge ;  
 Il était, quoique riche, à la justin encline ;  
 IL n'avait pas de fange en l'eau de son moulin,  
 IL n'avait pas enfer dans le feu de sa forge.

which the Blackmores have very correctly translated as:

He was a rich man, but he was just.  
 The lands he owned grew wheat and barley well.  
 The water of his mill contained no dust;  
 The fire within his forge contained no hell. {3}

Hugo was probably thinking of the local forge, where worn farming implements were refashioned or recast, but what he has written is a nonsense. What hell? In French, with its neat play on *enfer* and *feu*, the line passes muster, and is helped by the pleasingly echo to the preceding line. But it's less convincing when stripped of these supports in English, and I think it better to write something quieter that continues the theme of Boaz's probity:

This old man possessed good fields of wheat,  
 And barley too: was just, though passing rich.  
 His mill ran cleanly, fairly: he didn't switch  
 His neighbour's products from the furnace heat.

Conversely, I have kept Hugo's *Jerimadeth* contrivance, however: too well known to be worth tinkering with. The last three stanzas came eventually to be:

Ruth now pondered; Boaz slept. The clink  
 of sheepbells carried: darkness innocent.  
 An immense blessing fell from the firmament.  
 It was the hour of quiet, when lions drink.

Rest in Ur and Jerimadeth. The flowers  
 of darkness had enamelled sombre rest.  
 A crescent, thin and clear, lit up the west  
 as Ruth, unmoving, wondered through the hours:

What god — her look half lifting through its bars —  
 what summer reaper out of times unknown,  
 in leaving her so carelessly had thrown  
 that golden sickle in the field of stars?

## Concluding Remarks

The complete poem, available in *Diversions*, free from Ocaso Press, {15} follows the original closely, keeping the abba rhyme scheme and indulging in fewer line transpositions than the Blackmores' version.

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## 2.8. TRANSLATING RILKE

### Points Illustrated

1. Looking at previous translations.
2. Examining the German.
3. Maintaining the tone.
4. Finding the appropriate rhymes by trial and error.

Rainer Maria Rilke's *Herbsttag* is a favourite of many German readers.

Herr: es ist Zeit. Der Sommer war sehr groß.  
Leg deinen Schatten auf die Sonnenuhren,  
und auf den Fluren laß die Winde los.

Befiel den letzten Früchten voll zu sein;  
gib ihnen noch zwei südlichere Tage,  
dränge sie zur Vollendung hin und jage  
die letzte Süße in den schweren Wein.

Wer jetzt kein Haus hat, baut sich keines mehr.  
Wer jetzt allein ist, wird Es lange bleiben,  
wird wachen, lesen, lange Briefe schreiben  
und wird in den Alleen hin und her  
unruhig wandern, wenn die Blätter treiben.

### Other Translations

Rilke translation has become an industry, and even the Internet has many renderings of this poem:

1. Lord, it is time. Let the great summer go,  
Lay your long shadows on the sundials,  
And over harvest piles let the winds blow.

Command the last fruits to be ripe;  
Guntram Deichsel 1987/93 {1}

2. Lord: it is time. The summer was great.  
Lay your shadows onto the sundials  
and let loose the winds upon the fields.

Command the last fruits to be full,  
J. Mullen {1}

3. Lord: it is time. The summer was immense.  
Lay your long shadows on the sundials,  
and on the meadows let the winds go free.

Command the last fruits to be full;  
Edward Snow 1991 {1}

4. Oh Lord, it's time, it's time. It was a great summer.  
Lay your shadow now on the sundials,  
and on the open fields let the winds go!

Give the tardy fruits the command to fill;  
Robert Bly 1981 {1}

5. Lord, it is time. The summer was very big.  
Lay thy shadow on the sundials,  
and on the meadows let the winds go loose.

Command the last fruits that they shall be full;  
M. D. Herter Norton 1938 {1}

6. Lord: it's time. Summer was superlative.  
Set your shadow upon the sundials  
and let the wind loose upon the fields.

Command the last fruits to ripen;  
Fred W. Bergmann {2}

7. Lord, it was much, the summer: but it's time now.  
Lay down your shadow on the stone sun dial  
and let the winds run loose upon the meadow.

Command the last fruits to be round and ripe;  
Martin Greenberg 2001 {3}

8. Lord, it is time. The summer is overcooked.  
Time to wrap up the sundials in shadow,  
and over the fields, let the wind loose.

Tell the fruits to fatten on the vine,  
allow them a few more warm days of ease  
Peter Jukes {4}

9. Lord: it is time. The summer was immense.  
Lay your shadow on the sundials  
and let loose the wind in the fields.

Bid the last fruits to be full;  
Galway Kinnell and Hannah Liebmann {5}

10. Lord, it is time. The summer was too long.  
Lay your shadow on the sundials now,  
and through the meadow let the winds throng.

Ask the last fruits to ripen on the vine;  
William Gass {5}

11. Lord: it is time. The huge summer has gone by.  
Now overlap the sundials with your shadows,  
and on the meadows let the wind go free.

Command the fruits to swell on tree and vine;  
Stephen Mitchell {5}

12. Lord, it is time now,  
for the summer has gone on  
and gone on.  
Lay your shadow along the sun-  
dials and in the field  
let the great wind blow free.  
Command the last fruit  
be ripe:  
John Logan {5}

13. Lord, it is time! Your summer's reign was grand.  
Beshadow now the dials of the sun  
and let your winds run rough across the land.

The latest fruits command to fill and shine:  
H. C. Artmann {6}

14. Lord: it is time. The summer was immense.  
Let thine shadows upon the sundials fall,  
and unleash the winds upon the open fields.

Command the last fruits into fullness;  
Cliff Crego {7}

What do we think? Surprisingly, only three versions (listings 1, 10 and 13) retain the rhyme scheme, and then by some contrivance. Listing 4 puffs itself up too much. Version 12 is too much a condensation. Listing 8 is unwittingly comic. Listings 9 and 14 are crisply written, but they don't quite convey the metrical achievements of someone who was 'undoubtedly one of the greatest stylists and artists among German lyric poets.' {8}

## Literal Rendering

As usual, we start by making a literal translation, checking the words {9} {10} {11} to ensure we understand meaning and connotations:

Herr: Es ist Zeit. Der Sommer war sehr groß.  
Lord: it is time. The summer was very ample/big/grand/great/huge/keen/large/tall/wide  
Leg deinen Schatten auf die Sonnenuhren,  
Lay/deposit/cradle your/thy shade/cloud/shadow in/on/at the sundials,  
und auf den Fluren laß die Winde Los  
and in/on/at the leas/fields/entrances/halls let/allow/assume/loose the

winds loose

Befiel den letzten Früchten voll zu sein;  
 Command the latest/last bloom/fruit full/complete/crowded to be  
 gib ihnen noch zwei südlichere Tage,  
 give them still/another two more southern days  
 dränge sie zur Vollendung hin und jage  
 urge them to perfection/completion/consumation and chase/speed  
 die letzte Süße in den schweren Wein.  
 the last/latest sweetness/lusciousness/fragrance in/on/into the heavy wine

Wer jetzt kein Haus hat, baut sich keines mehr.  
 Who now/yet/currently no house has, constructs/rebuilds himself not any more  
 Wer jetzt allein ist, wird Es lange bleiben,  
 Who now/yet/currently alone/lonely/solitary, will/gets/becomes a long time  
 stay/continue/remain/linger  
 wird wachen, lesen, lange Briefe schreiben  
 will waken/watch, read, long letters write/record  
 und wird in den Alleen hin und her  
 and will in/into the avenues to and fro/back and forth  
 unruhig wandern, wenn die Blätter treiben.  
 uneasy/restive/anxiously flit/roam/hike/wander/migrate,  
 if/when/whensoever the leaves/sheets/blades drive/urge/drift/float/compel

## Examining the Original

We note that the piece is written in (fairly) regular pentameters, and divided into three sections rhymed aba cddc edded:

1. Herr: Es ist Zeit. | Der Sommer war sehr groß.  
 Leg deinen Schatten auf die Sonnenuhren,  
 und auf den Fluren laß die Winde Los

2. Befiel den letzten Früchten voll zu sein;  
 gib ihnen noch zwei südlichere Tage,  
 dränge sie zur Vollendung hin und jage  
 die letzte Süße in den schweren Wein.

3. Wer jetzt kein Haus hat, | baut sich keines mehr. |  
 Wer jetzt allein ist, | wird Es lange bleiben, |  
 wird wachen, lesen, lange Briefe schreiben |  
 und wird | in den Alleen | hin und her  
 unruhig wandern, wenn die Blätter treiben.

The patterning is dense, with many beautiful cadences:

und auf den Fluren laß die Winde Los  
wird wachen, lesen, lange Briefe schreiben

giving an overall impression of beauty, stateliness and regret made personal by the speaker's loneliness.

## Considering the Options: Problems

*Sehr gross* is the first problem, end of line 1. Great, grand, very big? — none of these is quite right. We can't say: The summer was great (though some translators have), because the colloquial meaning of great destroys the beauty of the line. We could say vast (though it misses the overtone of great) but will then be stuck with something like *Unloose the winds in fields while these days last* for line 3, which is not what Rilke wrote. Version 10 has used *long*, which has forced *throng* in line 3, which seems contrived. Perhaps the best (though unexpected) choice is *profuse*, when we get:

Lord, it is time. The summer was profuse.  
Lay your shadows as the sundials darken  
and on the meadowlands the winds let loose.

Rilke has many ways of tying his lines together — alliteration on s and z in line 1, for example — which we will have to consider in our polishing. But let's just push on for the moment. The next four lines come fairly obviously:

Command to fullness as the fruits incline,  
but yet afford them two more southern days  
for ripeness, consummation: urge and phase  
the last of sweetness into heavy wine.

But can we do something about the phase/days rhyme? Phase is not appropriate. We could use days/chase, but it's a pararhyme and suggests incompetence. Suppose we change line 5 to get:

Command to fullness as the fruits incline,  
but yet afford them two more days of heat  
for ripeness, maturation, to complete  
the surge of sweetness into heavy wine.

Perhaps. Let's continue:

He who has no house will not rebuild,  
and he who's solitary must long stay so,  
must watch and read, write endlessly, and go  
on long walks pointlessly down thought-filled  
roads where leaves turn round him, to and fro.



## Digression: Diction

Perhaps we've been too dismissive of 'great', and of idiomatic language generally. Suppose, to push the argument to extremes, we use slang — 1920s, English, middle class — for the first three lines:

Gosh, a topping summer! Time, old boy,  
To dosh with shadow the jolly sundials now  
And in the meadowlands the winds let rip.

Nothing wrong with the verse: clean, compact, pleasing assonance. Even as poetry the lines seem believable and affectionate: people did say such things. But the diction is now dated, belonging to a certain period and a certain class, and doesn't convey the impersonal dignity of the original.

So what about *thy*, common in translations to the mid twentieth century, but not thereafter? Dignified, certainly, and telling us immediately that this is poetry. Also a more beautiful and useful word than *your*, which is ungainly and cursed with unfortunate echoes: jaw, sore, yore, etc. Again, it's a matter of conventions, and today we use a contemporary diction without local colouring to give our rendering the widest currency: *your* in this case, but not emphasizing the word by rhyme or stress. (Certainly not much of an argument, but then literature is largely governed by accepted practices, which of course change.)

## Second Draft: Maintaining Original Word Order

What we've rendered so far differs somewhat from other translations: more threatening, and less nostalgic:

Lord, it is time. The summer was profuse.  
Lay your shadows as the sundials darken  
and on the meadowlands the winds let loose.

Command to fullness as the fruits incline,  
but yet afford them two more days of heat  
for ripeness, maturation, to complete  
the surge of sweetness into heavy wine.

He who has no house will not rebuild,  
and he who's solitary must long stay so,  
must watch and read, write endlessly, and go  
on long walks pointlessly down thought-filled  
roads where leaves turn round him, to and fro.

It is also not very good, unfortunately. The wording is very odd in places, and the rendering misses the beauty and stateliness of the original. As *Lord, it is time!* is much more striking in the German than English, we might rearrange the first line, and make minor changes throughout:

The summer was magnificent, profuse.  
Lay shadows, Lord, upon the sundials now,  
and let the meadowlands their winds unloose.

Perhaps we should dump *profuse*. Two possibilities:

From towering summer, lord, it's time. Choose  
to place your shadows on the sundials now,  
and over meadowlands your winds unloose.

One towering summer, lord. The time begins.  
Lay lengthening shadows on the sundials now  
and over meadowlands set loose the winds.

But the rhymes are faulty, and we haven't reproduced the syntax of the first line. Back to *profuse*:

It's time! Magnificent, profuse,  
the summer. Lord, lay shadows on the sundials  
now, and over meadows winds unloose.

Or, better, finally:

Lord, it is time! The summer was profuse.  
Lay lengthening shadows on the sundials now  
and over meadowlands the winds set loose.

### Third Draft: Changing Original Word Order

Or possibly so. The means of tying together the words of the first line with alliteration and assonance — *Herr: Es ist Zeit. Der Sommer war sehr groß* — does not properly exist in English, and close renderings are disjointed, lacking the forward energy of the original. It would seem much better to accept the situation, and move *profuse* from the line ending:

Lord, a towering summer! Time to lay  
your lengthening shadows on the sundials now  
and loose for winds in meadowlands their sway.

Where we've replaced *great* by *towering* and lost the *it's*. Or:

Abundant summer, Lord, it's time to lay  
a lengthening shadows on the sundials now  
and loose for winds in meadowlands their sway.

Where we've replaced *great* by *abundant* and lost the *it's*. Or:

A lofty summer! Lord, it's time to lay  
encroaching shadows on the sundials now  
and give in meadowlands the winds their sway.

Where we've replaced *lengthening* by *encroaching* (though neither exists in the original). Or:

An abundant summer! Lord, produce  
your lengthening shadows on the sundials now  
and over meadowlands the winds unloose.

*Produce* is less reverential than *place* or *lay*, but carries the overtone of 'to extend' (geometrical) and 'to lead' (etymology). Unfortunately, *unloose* is a little Teutonic, and *It's time!* lacks authority. We can replace *unloose* by *set loose*, of course, but it may be better to avoid the industrial overtones of *produce*. Perhaps this, therefore:

Lord, a towering summer! Time to lay  
a lengthening shadow on the sundials now  
and let in meadowlands the winds have sway.

Rather more idiomatic is:

and give in meadowlands their say.

We can also move *Lord* to the end of the line:

A towering summer! Time, O Lord,  
to lay your shadows on the sundials now  
and loose in meadowlands the winds abroad.

#### Fourth Draft: Looking at Previous Work

Translation is a cooperative effort: we learn from previous attempts. Listed above are those by Edward Snow (3) and by Galway Kinnell and Hannah Liebmann (9), which both start:

Lord: it is time. The summer was immense.

That gives us the commence rhyme:

Lord, it is time. The summer was immense.  
Lay your shadows on the sundials now  
and in the meadowlands let winds commence.

Which is better? The verse is better in the first, but the second is closer to the prose sense and dramatic intensity of the original. Is nothing else possible? One we have overlooked is profound, which gives us bound, found, etc. rhymes:

Departing a little from the sense:

Lord, it is time. The summer was profound.  
Lay your shadows on the sundials now  
and let unloosed in fields the winds be found.

Rather lordly and Teutonic:

Lord, it is time. The summer was profound.  
Extend your shadows on the sundials now  
and be in meadowlands the winds unbound.

A weaker second line:

Lord, it is time. The summer was profound.  
Lay your shadows on the sundials and  
let loose the winds across the meadow ground.

## Wrapping It Up

Which is best? I'd prefer:

A lofty summer, Lord! It's time to lay  
your shadows on the sundials now, and let  
once more in meadowlands the winds hold sway.

Command the fruits to fullness and consign  
another two more days of southern heat  
to bring them to perfection and secrete  
the last of bodied sweetness into wine.

He who has no house will not rebuild,  
and he who is alone will long stay so,  
and wake to read, write endlessly, and go  
up and down through avenues now filled  
with leaves and restlessness, blown to and fro.

## Notes and References

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8. H. W. Belmore, *Rilke's Craftsmanship: An Analysis of His Poetic Style* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1954), 1. **Q**
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The final version is included in *Diversions*, a free pdf collection of translations published by Ocaso Press.

## 23.9. EXAMPLE: TRANSLATING KALIDASA

Suppose we wish to translate from a language we have no knowledge of, in this case Sanskrit. A hazardous undertaking, certainly, and one academe frowns on, or requires the poet work with a recognised expert. But the enterpriser can be successful, and rewarding — I shall try to demonstrate — if we aim for the spirit of the original, learn the language sufficiently to read the original, and study cribs and literary criticisms to understand what we're reading. Here is one example, broken into four steps. The first illustrates 3 points:

1. Examining previous translations.
2. Assessing the task: Sanskrit poetry.
3. Making a word-for-word translation.

### 23.9.1. MEGHADUTA

The *Meghaduta* or *Cloud Messenger* is one of the masterpieces of Indian, indeed world literature. {1} Its 120-odd stanzas, each of four unrhymed lines, were written in the Mandakranta {2} metre at some time between 100 BC and 500 AD. {3} The Mandakranta is a long metre, moving slowly like the python, with a form as follows: {4} {5}

Kalakalah, the ferry in the sound, now lets great boats lie. Beneath  
bold, broad, stone forts in which stiff Brits fix pride, lie little boats aground. Wet,  
wild, welcome, warm they hint at bitter storms. Bold, bitten barricades fall.  
Whose to say 'fly,' if nits pick petty fights and the work wanders widely?

Each line has 17 syllables and 10 stresses (or, more accurately, long syllables, as Sanskrit poetry is quantitative.) The stanza is richly elaborated and tightly knit {6}, so that each stands as a somewhat individual creation. When we re-

alize that Indian poetry is often richly sensuous, moreover, with a leaning towards reflection and speculation unlike anything in Chinese, or indeed in English, {7} we begin to appreciate the difficulties. The story is also far from contemporary interests: a lovesick supernatural being (Yaksha) asks a cloud to convey a message across the subcontinent to his loved one. {8}

## Other Translations

There have been many translations. {8} {9} {10} {11} {12} {13} {14}. Here are three Internet versions of the opening stanzas:

A lean and lovesick Yaksha, newly wed,  
Dallied at home avoiding his work.  
His elder, made angry, packed him into exile  
For a year. Now his misery knows no bounds.  
He lives in Ramgiri Parvat near a crystal lake,  
Whose waters once touched by Sita, are holy.

Frustrated and forlorn, distant Chitrakut Mountain  
His new home, Yaksha is lost and starved for love,  
His wrist so thin it sheds its golden jewels.  
Ashar has come, filling the southern sky with  
A cloud, frolicksome as an elephant  
About to charge, he seems to lower his tusks.

Seeing that beautiful cloud high on the mountaintop,  
Filled with desire and tearful, Yaksha  
Plunged into deep reflection. O Cloud!  
Look at me -- how I pine to caress  
The long neck of my beloved.  
Should my feelings not be moved? {8}

Yue-tchi chief, neglectful of his fief,  
Sentenced to suffer exile of one year,  
(A heavy fate to part with his beloved,  
And see his glories, joys and splendours set)  
Came to dwell and wait in abbeys far  
Amidst the ancient trees' sequestered shade,  
Above the Rama-hills by springs wherein  
The daughter of the Prince of Mithila  
Once bathed and hallowed them for evermore.

And on these heights he whiled away some months,  
An ardent lover torn from hapless wife,  
His golden armlets from his wasting wrists  
Slipt loose: Then with the first advent of rains,  
Below him, clinging to the mountain side,  
He spied a cloud, an elephant as 'twere,  
With lowered tusks, against a rampart bent in sportive butt.

I know thou comest of the far-famed race  
 Of rolling, heavy clouds, -- and changing garbs  
 At will, thou ledest troops that serve the God  
 Of Rains, the Bountiful. And I by stroke  
 Of fate and law from dear ones cast afar,  
 Would seek of thee a favour.

Refuge thou art for all that suffer wrong,  
 Distressed and parched, on them thou pourest balm.  
 Then take this message to my love, for we  
 Are torn apart by angry Lord of Wealth. {12}

A certain yaksha who had been negligent in the execution of his own duties, on account of a curse from his master which was to be endured for a year and which was onerous as it separated him from his beloved, made his residence among the hermitages of Ramagiri, whose waters were blessed by the bathing of the daughter of Janaka and whose shade trees grew in profusion.

That lover, separated from his beloved, whose gold armlet had slipped from his bare forearm, having dwelt on that mountain for some months, on the first day of Asadha, saw a cloud embracing the summit, which resembled a mature elephant playfully butting a bank.

Managing with difficulty to stand up in front of that cloud which was the cause of the renewal of his enthusiasm, that attendant of the king of kings, pondered while holding back his tears. Even the mind of a happy person is excited at the sight of a cloud. How much more so, when the one who longs to cling to his neck is far away? {11}

And from printed sources:

This Yaksha, banished a desolate year  
 from his love and from the king whose curse  
 for some carelessness sent him impotent away,  
 spent his exile among the holy retreats  
 of Ramagiri where Sita, bathing, had made  
 the waters holy and where trees cast a rich shade.

On this mountain, months from his mate,  
 aching for love, his wrists so wasted  
 that the gold bracelet he wore slipped off  
 and was lost — he saw at summer's end  
 a cloud swelling against the peak  
 like a great elephant nuzzling a hill.

So he stood there, shaken, this courtier  
 of Kubera, his tears held back, considering  
 the heart-breaking sight a long time.

A sudden cloud can mute the mind  
of the happiest man — how much more  
when the one he is dying to hold is far from him. {13}

A certain nameless Yaksha, divested of his powers by his King and condemned for his dereliction to yearlong exile away from his family, lived in a cottage on Ramagiri hills, where the trees had a gentle shade and where the brooks had become holy from Sita's baths.

A few months of separation from his wife sapped his vigour and the bracelets slipped from his thinned wrists. Then, on the last day of Asadha, he noticed a cloud clinging to the mountain-peak, a visual pleasure, like an elephant playing and butting the peak.

The humble servant of the Sovereign Kubera stood somehow before it, tears welling up inside and lost for long in hesitant thought. Even a happy heart is perturbed at the sight of a cloud in the rainy season; what will be the state of those far off from lovers' embrace? {14}

A demigod who was heedless in his office  
had lost his honored rank--  
his master cursed him to endure  
a year in exile from his love.  
He lived on Mt. Rama  
in the hermit groves  
whose waters were pure from Sita's ablutions. {15}

## Comparing

What do we think? The first is direct and moving, with an authentic touch of poetry in *Whose waters once touched by Sita, are holy*. The language of the second seems a little dated, but the story line is well developed. The third, the McComas Taylor prose version, professes to follow the original closely, and indeed can be divided into 4 lines (with syllable count shown in brackets):

A certain yaksha who had been negligent in the execution of his own duties, on account of a curse (27)  
from his master which was to be endured for a year and which was onerous as it separated him (26)  
from his beloved, made his residence among the hermitages of Ramagiri, whose waters were blessed (27)  
by the bathing of the daughter of Janaka and whose shade trees grew in profusion. (21)

Clearly, it is not the Mandakranta metre with its demanding: G G G G L L L L L G / G L G G L G v, pattern, where G is a guru or heavy syllable, L is laghu or light syllable, / is a yati or caesura and v is a syllable of variable quantity {16}. But the prose is supple, slow-moving, and suggests that free verse might be the most suitable.



The Nathan version {13} is also written in a supple, rhythmic prose but is more concise. The Devadhar version is prose too, but elevated, closer to Edwardian prose-poetry, and that diction also appears in the children's verse of rendering 15 — inexplicably, as Barbara Stoler Miller was a noted Sanskrit scholar and translator.

Let's see how the better candidates, Taylor and Nathan, compare on a demanding part, where Kalidasa has pulled out all the stops. One such is Stanza 99 (or 2.41 in some versions). McComas Taylor:

He whose path is blocked by an invidious command and is at a distance, by means of these intentions, unites his body with yours, the emaciated with the emaciated, the afflicted with the deeply afflicted, that which is wet with tears with that which is tearful, that whose longing is ceaseless with that which is longed for, that whose sighs are hot with those whose sighs are even more numerous. {11}

We shall see later how the original Sanskrit, with its interlinked and repetitious phrases works its magic, but this translation seems to have fallen into the matter-of-factness and circumlocution of a legal document. The Nathan version (his stanza 99) is intelligent and quiet, but also falls rather flat:

'He, far off, a hostile fate blocking  
his way, by mere wish joins his body  
with your body, his thinness with your thinness,  
his pain with your intense pain, his tears  
with your tears, his endless longing  
with your longing, his deep sigh with your sigh. {13}

The difficulties of Sanskrit translations are apparent with this fragment of a Bhartrihari poem. The line consists of eleven syllables in the Indravajra pattern: {16}

- - u | - - u | u - u | - -  
viSramya viSramya vanadrumAnm  
wandering wandering of trees  
chAyAsu tanv vicacAra kAcit  
in shadows slender woman roamed one  
stanottari yena karoddhrtena  
with a breast-cloth held in hand  
nivArayanti SaSino mayUkhAn  
warding off moon's rays

The translation provided:

A certain slender woman was wandering  
seeking solace in shadows of forest trees,  
warding off the moon's scorching rays  
with a silken shawl held by her hand.

is perfectly acceptable, perhaps admirable in its way, but doesn't convey the sound patterns, or achieve the poetic ideal which 'is to compress the profusion of nature's qualities into a palpable, thick, emotion-laden atmosphere, so highly controlled that the audience participates in the aesthetic experience' {16}:

How do other versions of stanza 41 stack up?

With his body thy body he enters; all-haggard body with haggard;  
Fevered with intensely fevered; tear-flowing with tearful; incessantly eager  
With eager; hotly sighing with yet more abundantly sighing;  
In his thoughts, far distant as he is, and the way barred by adverse fate.  
{10}

With body worn as thine, with pain as deep,  
With tears and ceaseless longings answering thine,  
With sighs more burning than the sighs that keep  
Thy lips ascorch -- doomed far from thee to pine,  
He too doth weave the fancies that thy soul entwine. {9}

Say to her: 'Your life's companion  
Pines in far away lands, forbidden  
From return until his sentence is up.  
He is lean, teary-eyed, vexed and penitent.  
Throbbing with warm sighs, he's  
United with you in forelorn desire.' {8}

Obstructed by an angry and inexorable fate, the distant one seeks to unite with you, to mingle tears with tears, arms with arms, pining bodies, anxious heart to heart, sigh with sigh — such are his wishes {14}

Simply as verse, the best is probably the Ryder version, No. 9, but it's not (as we shall see) a close rendering of the meaning.

## Understanding the Sanskrit.

We must now look closely at the Sanskrit. Since the original can be found on several sites, it should be a simple matter to employ a Sanskrit dictionary to arrive at a literal translation. Alas, no:

1. The Sanskrit is commonly written in Devanagari, which take some practice to read: unfamiliar letters, words run together, letters joined up in strange conjuncts, compound words (samahas) and a good scattering of other signs. {18}

2. For transliteration, the Latin alphabet has to be tricked out with capitals and diacritical marks — naturally, as there are 14 Sanskrit vowels/semi-vowels, 33 consonants, etc. Different conventions are in force, however, not widely different, but sufficient to confuse the beginner and cause problems with online dictionaries. The transliterated *Meghaduta* text on the University of

Frankfurt site {20} differs from that on the University of Goettingen site, for example, {21} and neither is in the Harvard-Kyoto convention employed in the large Sanskrit-English-Sanskrit dictionary at the University of Cologne. {22}

3. Sanskrit is an ancient language, and the better dictionaries have large entries — 160,000 in the modified Monier-Williams dictionary at Cologne, for example {22}). Nevertheless, the entries do not cover all eventualities because Sanskrit, like Latin, is an inflected language. When in English we say, *Peter hit David on the foot with a hammer*, the word order matters: transposing *Peter* and *David* changes the meaning, and things like *On the Peter with David foot hit a hammer* make little sense. But Sanskrit indicates relations by inflecting, i.e. adding case endings to the key words: PeterNominative DavidAccusative HitSingularpasttense HammerInstrumental FootLocative. Meaning is retained whatever the word order. But the drawback is that we have to recognize these case endings: just entering segments of the *Meghaduta* text into a dictionary {23} {24} {25} {26} {27} will not generate a proper translation, or usually anything at all. Words are further changed by an extensive system of preserving euphony (sandhi). Naturally, there exist many grammar guides and courses for Sanskrit, {28} {29} some free, {30} {31} {32} but learning sufficient Sanskrit even to use the dictionaries takes time.

4. Several versions of *Meghaduta* exist, with authorities disagreeing on what is genuine and what a later interpolation. E. Hultzsch's *Kalidasa's Meghaduta: Manuscripts With the Commentary of Vallabhadeva and Provided With a Complete Sanskrit-English Vocabulary* (1911/1998) {32} compares the listings of ten authorities to arrive at an 'authentic' 110 verses, but the version by M.R. Kale (which McComas Taylor adopts) allows 120 verses. {34}

5. The *Meghaduta* can be written in other scripts altogether, as would be expected on the subcontinent.

6. Finally, the Internet adds problems of its own. Its stock of European letters for transliteration is somewhat limited, and even sites displaying the same Devanagari text often employ different typefaces, requiring each to be loaded down, installed and the browser adjusted.

In short, reading the original Sanskrit requires extended effort. But the rewards are an appreciation of a beautiful and learned language, and a glimpse of traditions that enrich our understanding of south and south-east Asia. More to our purpose, we remove the filters that particular translations inevitable impose, drawing us closer to what Kalidasa intended.

## Undertaking a Transliteration

To save space, we look at transliterations of two stanzas only: Number 1 of Part One and Number 41 of Part Two, the last numbered 99 in other versions. The Devanagari is taken from Hultzsch's version, and the transliteration follows the Harvard-Kyoto convention. The three lines following the original De-

vanagari show 1. transliteration (with naturally long vowels shown in Capitals), 2. Mandakranta pattern of light (l) and heavy (g) syllables with caesura (/) and syllable of variable quality (v), and 3. a word-for-word translation. {18}

Syllables in Sanskrit are long if they contain a vowel intrinsically long, or the vowel ends in two or more consonants. (But Kh, gh, ch, jh, th, dh th dh, ph and bh are single, breathy consonants.) Devanagari is read from left to right.

### Verse 1 of Part One

कश्चित्कान्ताविरहगुरुणा स्वाधिकारप्रमत्तः

kazcit kAntA**virahaguru**NA sv**Adhik**Ara **pramatta**H

g g g g l l l l l g / g l g g l g v

a\_certain beloved separation hard\_to\_be\_borne his\_own office negligent

शापेनास्तंगमितमहिमा वर्षभोग्येण भर्तुः

zApenAstaM**gamitamahim**A var**Sabhogye**Na bhartu**H**

g g g g l l l l l g / g l g g l g v

curse caused\_to\_set power a\_year to\_be\_endured master

यक्षश्चक्रे जनकतनयास्नानपुण्योदकेषु

yakSaz cakre **janakatana**yAsnAn**apuNyoda**keSu

g g g g l l l l l g / g l g g l g v

Yaksa made janaka daughter bathing pure water

स्निग्धच्छायातरुषु वसतिं रामगिर्याश्रमेषु

snigdha**cchAyAtaru**Su **vasati**M rAm**agiryAzra**meSu

g g g g l l l l l g / g l g g l g v

pleasant tree\_affording\_shade dwelling Rama\_mountain hermitage

### Verse 41 of Part Two (Verse 99 in Hultzsch's version)

अङ्गेनाङ्गं तनु च तनुना गाढतप्तेन तप्तं

aGgenAGgaM **tanu ca tanu**nA gAD**ha**taptena **tapta**M

g g g g l l l l l g / g l g g l g v

body body emaciated and emaciated intense tormented tormented

सास्त्रेणास्रद्रवमविरतोत्कण्ठमुत्कण्ठितेन

sAsreNAsrad**ravam avira**totkaN**Th**am utkaN**Thi**tena

g g g g l l l l l g / g l g g l g v

weeping shedding\_tears continual longing longing

उष्णोच्छ्वासं समधिकतरोच्छ्वासिना दूरवर्ती

uSNocchvAsaM samadhikatarocchvAsinA dUra<sup>v</sup>artI

g g g g | | | | | g / g | g g | g v

ardent sigh excessive sighing staying\_far\_away

संकल्पैस्ते विशति विधिना वैरिणा रुद्धमार्गः

saMkalpais te vizati vidhinA vairiNA ruddhamArgaH

g g g g | | | | | g / g | g g | g v

longing unite\_with fate adverse obstructed path

Now these word-for-for translations, taken from the vocabulary provided by Hultzsch's book, give a general sense of the meaning, but two problems remain. Firstly, without the inflections, we cannot fully understand how the words fit together. And secondly, we are tied to these particular renderings: without having the Sanskrit roots for the words we cannot assess the latitude possible in interpretation, or indeed whether the renderings are entirely correct (a few need amplification). We have to learn some Sanskrit grammar.

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## 23.9.2. TRANSLATING KALIDASA 2

Points illustrated:

1. Establishing the meaning.
2. Understanding Sanskrit poetry conventions.

Improving the Translation.

Previously we succeeded in learning enough Devanagari to read the Megadhuta text and use Hultzsch's vocabulary to set out word-for-word renderings. The result for Stanza 99 was:



aGgenAGgaM tanu ca tanunA gADhataptena taptam  
body body emaciated and emaciated intense tormented tormented

sAsreNAsradravam aviratotkaNTham utkaNThitena  
weeping shedding\_tears continual longing longing

uSNocchvAsaM samadhikatarocchvAsinA dUrvartI  
ardent sigh excessive sighing staying\_far\_away

saMkalpais te vizati vidhinA vairiNA ruddhamArgaH  
longing unite\_with fate adverse obstructed path

Now we use the Monier-Williams dictionary and an elementary knowledge of Sanskrit to note the declension/conjugations of the words and make some sense of the lines. We need to be methodical, keeping a record for later reference. Consult the [textetc.com](http://textetc.com) page for the table.

As far as possible, {1} we have 1. read the Devanagari, 2. picked out the relevant words, 3. changed the word back to its expression before sandhi rules operated, 4. looked up the meaning in the dictionary, {2} 5. consulted tables and textbooks {3} to identify the part of speech, and 6. adjusted the dictionary meaning to get the fuller meaning. Repeating the process for the stanzas 1, 2 and 3:

1. a\_certain beloved separation by\_master own\_office negligent  
with\_curse brought\_to\_an\_end greatness [a year to be endured]  
by\_master

Yaksa made Janaka daughter bathing holy by\_waters  
caused\_by\_thick in\_shady\_ trees dwelling Ramagiri of\_hermitage

2. on\_that on\_mountain much weak separated he longings\_after  
having led months gold bracelet loose bared forearm  
of Ashadha won/completed a day a cloud clung to the summit  
playfully\_butting\_ like\_an\_elephant\_ against\_a\_bank rolling\_down ele-  
phant pleasure\_hurting he\_saw

3. of\_her having\_stayed with\_difficulty before desire impatience desti-  
tute\_of\_wealth cause  
inward\_tear for\_a\_ long\_ time attendant of\_king\_ of\_ kings holding  
cloud in[not\_of\_the\_world] is\_being comfortable although [other\_than con-  
ceals] grief  
head\_and\_neck embrace longing\_for in\_person how\_much again distant  
from\_him

99. with\_body body emaciated and with\_emaciated deep with\_distressed  
distressed  
with\_flowng tear weeping continually longing with\_ longing  
ardent sigh brimful with\_sigh distant  
with\_proper we conjoin by\_fate hostile blocked path



How has this improved matters? Well, firstly, we have found meanings for words missing from or hard to discern in Hultzsich, who has produced an immensely useful volume, but can't be expected to include a Sanskrit grammar as well. We recognize such words as *tasminn*, which is the third person singular locative of the pronoun *saH* (he) or *tat* (it), i.e. on\_him or on\_it, with the final n doubled for euphony (sandhi).

And we know a little more about *kazcit*. It still means *a\_certain*, but we don't now have to transcribe it blindly. A nineteenth century author, for example, might write: *On a certain day towards the end of January, a man was . . .* In a twentieth century, that would probably run: *One day, towards the end of January, a man was. . .* Today we might remove the phrase altogether: *Towards the end of January, a man was. . .* Or we might not, if that particular day was to be stressed: *And on that day, had he been minded to glance down at the street, he would have noticed a young woman dressed. . .* In fact, of the two serious translations of *Meghaduta*, McComas Taylor's has *A certain Yaksha*, whereas Leonard Nathan simply says *This Yaksha*. Does it matter? Not enormously in this instance, but it does bear on the latitude acceptable in translation, with which we shall end our treatment of Kalidasa.

It also helps to get back to the root meanings. Hultzsich translates *prekSaNiyam* perfectly correctly as *worth seeing, beautiful, charming*. The components of the word, *pri* and *kSaNaNa*, mean *pleasure* and *hurting*, however. The Yaksha acknowledges the felicity of the scene, but the image hurts because reminding him of his distant beloved. Equally, no one could quarrel with Hultzsich's translation of *praNayin* is *longing\_for*. But Kalidasa may also be thinking beyond literal meaning, as the common verbal prefix *pra* means *onward*, and *praNa* is *spirit, life* or *vital breath*. The whole poem is some sense a breath of life, the cloud that brings rain also brings the revitalizing desire of the Yaksha for his distant mate. We don't have to overdo the image of the playful elephant butting the ground in stanza 2, therefore: the sexual connotations are present, but not overwhelming so.

Most important of all, we now have the inflections and conjugations, which enables us to rearrange the words within each stanza:

1. a\_certain Yaksha own\_office negligent brought\_to\_an\_end  
greatness with\_curse a year to be endured by\_master  
beloved separation in\_shady\_ trees caused\_by\_thick dwelling of hermitage  
Ramagiri by\_waters made holy Janaka daughter bathing
2. on\_that on\_mountain he much weak separated longings\_after  
having led months gold bracelet loose bared forearm  
pleasure\_hurting he\_saw a day of Ashadha completed a cloud rolling\_down  
clung to the summit elephant playfully\_butting\_ like\_an\_elephant\_  
against\_a\_bank
3. having\_stayed with\_difficulty before desire of\_her cause impatience  
destitute\_of\_wealth attendant of\_king\_ of\_kings holding inward\_tear

for\_a\_ long\_ time  
 is\_being comfortable cloud in\_not\_of\_the\_world although other\_than con-  
 ceals grief  
 how\_much again head\_and\_neck embrace longing\_for in\_person distant  
 from\_him

99 with\_body emaciated and with\_emaciated body deep with\_distressed  
 body  
 distressed with\_flowinɡ tear because\_of\_weeping continually  
 longing with\_ longing ardent sigh brimful with\_sigh distant  
 with\_proper we conjoin by\_(fate hostile) blocked path

Rearranging further:

1. A certain Yaksha, his greatness brought to an end by curse  
 from master at being negligent of his office has a year to be endured  
 separated from beloved in Ramagiry thick-shaded hermitage dwelling  
 by waters made holy by Janaka's daughter bathing
  2. on mountain he much weak from longings spent months separated  
 his gold bracelet loose on bared forearm the sight hurting him  
 he saw the last day of Ashadha a cloud like an elephant  
 roll down, embrace the summit as will an elephant playfully attack a bank.
  3. destitute, the attendant of the king of kings, with difficulty before desire  
 of her  
 having stayed holding an inward tear for a long time, is comfortable  
 with the otherworldly cloud but cannot conceal cause of grief  
 being more impatient to embrace in longing for the head and neck of dis-  
 tant person.
99. his body emaciated by her body emaciated, and deeply  
 distressed by her distressed body, continually weeping as she is weeping,  
 with longing sighs as that distant body is brimful with ardent sighs,  
 to our lawful union hostile fate has blocked the path.

## Sanskrit Poetry

Our translation should represent something of Indian court poetry of the time, which was rather artificial: idealized landscapes, little novelty or character development, impersonal expression. {4} The poetry was chanted, {5} and the poet is not telling us what he feels, but drawing on a very large number of synonyms to develop, ever more richly and sonorously, what his audience was familiar with. The poetry lies not in any western notion of freshness or individuality, but in its creation of a palpable, emotion-laden atmosphere where the audience could realize again the cultural insights of their world. But it is still poetry, and in fact great poetry, which should make us wary of generalizing too much from own perspectives.

## References

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### 23.9.3. TRANSLATING KALIDASA 3

Points illustrated:

1. Devising a stanza form for the translation.

#### Translation: First Draft

We start with the stanza form. Possibilities:

1. Write a quantitative verse that echoes the Sanskrit. Impossible. All attempts to represent Latin verse (which is much simpler than Sanskrit) in quantitative English measures have failed. The English has to be regimented in unnatural ways, and doesn't then read as poetry.
2. Represent each stanza by four-line hexameters. Requires some rearrangement and compression:
  1. By his master banished far from one he loved  
a twelve month for neglecting office, a Yaksha came  
to penance groves, thick-shaded, of the Ramagiry  
and streams the bathing daughter of Janaka blessed.
  2. So separated, gold chain slipping from his wrist,  
he saw, the last day of Ashadha, a cloud roll down  
to butt the summit, as sometimes will the playful  
elephant, a sight that hurt him, sport with ground.
  3. He knew, from tears withheld, how hard that fall, who had  
at one time waited on the King of Kings, when much

the cloud from otherworlds would comfort him, how more  
drew breath in thinking of that neck he clung to still.

99. He feels that body thinned as his is, shedding tears  
as he does, the more tormenting in tormenting:  
for all the pain, the sighs and the excess tears, averse  
to union and against them, fate obstructs the path.

3. Represent each stanza with five-line pentameters. We replace *Janaka's daughter* by *Sita*, as do many translations, and begin to move away from a word-for-word rendering. We add rhyme and slow the metre a little:

1. A year without the loved-one passes slowly:  
So thought a Yaksha by his master sent  
For neglect of office to the Ramagiry:  
Its shaded monasteries his banishment  
And waters Sita's bathing there made holy.

2. Weak from separation, months that found  
The golden bracelet loosed upon his wrist,  
He saw the last day of Ashadha how  
A cloud rolled down and clung as summit mist,  
A playful elephant that nudged the ground.

3. In tears withheld he took that fall from grace,  
From wealth attending on the King of Kings.  
The otherworld that brimmed in cloudy air  
Was still discomfort when far longing brings  
A breath that held him to that neck's embrace.

99. He wastes as she that is his fuller half:  
Across the distance her sad breath he hears  
As breath within her has his copious pain.  
To thwart our union and the mutual tears  
Lies adverse fate that will obstruct the path.

4. Moving back from traditional forms, write a verse modelled on the iambic, but with line lengths more determined by rhythmic cadences:

1. Sent by his master for neglect of duty  
far from amorousness for one long year,  
a Yaksha came to the Ramagiry  
to live in monasteries by trees  
and rivers blest by Sita bathing.

2. There, months on the mountain, separated,  
the gold bracelet slipping from his wasted arm,  
he watched, the last day of Ashadha,  
in play a cloud come down to take the summit,  
joyfully, as elephants will butt the ground.

3. A thought that was unwelcome. Here was one  
who had attended on the King of Kings,  
who knew the comfort of the brimming cloud  
but thought more deeply of that other person,  
the neck that waited for him, far away.

99. The breath that pained her body pained in his;  
he sighed as she sighed, shed her tears,  
was thin with waiting as she wasted.  
Athwart all union and fond hope  
lay adverse fate and blocked the path.

5. Finally — though there's no end to what we could try — we write in a colloquial, more free verse style without regard for classical proprieties:

1. Forgot his duty somehow, and was sent  
post haste, this Yaksha, by an irate master:  
a year cut off from any hanky panky,  
to mope in penance groves and by the rivers  
there known for having witnessed Sita bathing.

2. And so he sat there, on the mountain top,  
the Ramagiry, while his arms grew thin,  
and then — it was the last day of Ashadha —  
he saw a playful cloud bestride the summit  
and thought of elephants that rut the ground.

3. An association most unwelcome  
to a courtier attending to the King of Kings  
and knew what otherworld was in the cloud  
but thought the more of her who waited,  
that neck he'd cling to and so far away.

99. The breath that fills her body brimmed in his,  
he sighs as she sighs, sheds her tears,  
is thin with waiting as she wastes, and is,  
well, inconvenienced by the stumped libido:  
but there it is: fate blocks the path.

## Appraisal

Taking the versions in turn:

1. Slow moving and pleasing version, reasonably close to the original meaning.
2. A quiet, workmanlike rendering, close to the original but a constipated and clumsy rhythm. There are touches of poetry, but the emotional flow is muted.

3. Rather formal, echoing in English verse some of the effects Kalidasa gets in Sanskrit. It's a little too 'measured', however, and rhyme brings some departures from the sense.

4. A rather odd form, but rhythmically deft. The cadences develop harmonies between words as Kalidasa does, but the metre is nothing like the original Mandakranta.

5. Good fun: breezy, irreverent and more contemporary. But it's a travesty as a translation, just as *Homage to Sextus Propertius* was, though Pound created an important and beautiful poem this way. We are not translating the poem so much as distancing ourselves and commenting on it.

The renderings throw up the usual questions any translator faces, notably how contemporary should the language be? Writing in *Dedication of the Aeneis*, Dryden remarked that 'On the whole I thought it fit to steer between the two extremes of paraphrase and literal translation; to keep as near to the author as I could, without losing all his graces. . . I have endeavoured to make Virgil speak such English as he would himself have spoken if he had been born in England, and in the present age.' A translation for his time, therefore. Unfortunately, our time is remarkably unclassical, and its favoured translations do not always capture the graces of the original, or even seem aware of them. {1} Much translation today is in free verse, and it aims for a 'slice of life' vitality that classical authors would not have understood.

Sanskrit drama, and probably its poetry recitations, were formal occasions, given before the whole court. {2} Decorum was important. Kings are somewhat stereotyped, praised for their virtue, prowess on the battlefield and skill in the harem. Wives are dutiful, courtiers faithful and and other women modest. It is a world of great beauty and sensitivity to nature, but the players are not characters in any Shakespearean sense, {3} and vexing social issues do not intrude. The sentiment of Kama or love which underlies these compositions is not the dangerous, fracturing passion of Greek or Jacobean drama, but something accepted, expanded in all its forms and contained by strict rules. Of the fourteen conditions of the Kamasutra, eleven appear in *Meghaduta*: *tantuta* in stanza 2, *cinta* in stanza 3, and *vyadhi* in stanza 99. {4} How sympathetically and movingly the poet can evoke these conditions is what the audience looked for.

Educated connoisseurs, therefore. 'The man of taste is known in Sanskrit theory as the *sahgdaya*, who is regarded as the final court of appeal in all artistic matters. Abhinavagupta lays down clearly that, apart from culture and technical knowledge, the *sahgdaya* must possess the capacity of identifying himself with the poetic creation (*varnianiyanmayibhavanayogyata*). It must be understood that empirically the critic and the poet are not the same, but by the process of idealized contemplation his spirit can be one with that of the poet. That the process is not one of mere understanding is made clear by the observation that the *sahgdaya* is not a mere intellectual cogniser (*boddhg*), but an enjoyer of the idealized bliss produced in his soul by the poetic creation

(rasayitg). Abhinavagupta also recognizes that there may be disturbing elements due to prejudice, perversion, and ignorance; but in the true critic these are eliminated by knowledge and culture, and the mirror of his mind becomes free and clear (vizadibhutamanomukura).’ {5} Sanskrit aesthetics has its problems, but the common reader is clearly not the arbiter.

Who is the judge today, therefore, and why should we bother with this strange world frozen in a language hardly more alive today than liturgical Latin? Because of its artistic achievement. {6} Because it gives us access to a world wholly different from ours, but still vitally human. And because it explored certain aspects of life beyond anything we can conceive of today. Kalidasa is a classical author, resolutely so, and we have to respect that in our translation. Version 3, however remote it may seem today, is probably what we should develop.

But is it not a little too measured, lacking vigour and variety? At this point, clearly yes. But it's often wise to establish some conservative, middle ground before allowing stanzas their individual licence. Changes are not difficult: heightening the passion:

99. Excess of sorrows and her sighs are his  
As he in waiting wastes for her. How raw  
The flooding tears, the hopelessness as fate  
Still blocks the lawful passage that before  
Flung breath and her full body into his.

Or using a more falling measure to emphasize the difficulties of the situation:

99. Excessive sorrows, and her sighs are his  
As he in sighing feels for her: distress  
That wastes her body wastes in his. To block  
All lawful union is the hopelessness  
Of adverse fate athwart their path to this.

We could also convey some of Kalidasa's density (and sonority) with a freer word order:

Far from amorousness, it passes slowly,  
This year, a Yaksha by his master sent  
For scanting duty to the Ramagiry:  
To mope in penance groves as banishment  
By rivers Sita's bathing there made holy.

And so on: all decisions to be taken as translation continues, and the narrative takes clearer shape.

## Verse or Prose?

A free word order common applies to poetry in inflected languages, but Kalidasa's words are jumbled up across the whole stanza, and the inflections do not wholly constrain the meaning. Where exactly do the words *puraH kautukAdhAnahetoH* (before desire of\_her cause impatience) in line one of the third stanza fit in? Translators have generally supposed that *before* referred to standing in front of the cloud:

C.R. Devadhar

The humble servant of the Sovereign Kubera stood somehow before it, tears welling up inside and lost for long in hesitant thought. Even a happy heart is perturbed at the sight of a cloud in the rainy season; what will be the state of those far off from lovers' embrace? {7}

McComas Taylor

Managing with difficulty to stand up in front of that cloud which was the cause of the renewal of his enthusiasm, that attendant of the king of kings, pondered while holding back his tears. Even the mind of a happy person is excited at the sight of a cloud. How much more so, when the one who longs to cling to his neck is far away? {8}

Leonard Nathan:

So he stood there, shaken, this courtier  
of Kubera, his tears held back, considering  
that heart-breaking sight a long time.  
A sudden cloud can mute the mind  
Of the happiest man — how much more  
When the one he is dying to hold is far from him. {9}

They may well be right, and, M.R. Kale's very full commentary on the *Meghaduta* explains that the sight of the cloud was unbearable to the Yaksha because it indicated the approach of the rainy season, when men travelling abroad come home to enjoy the company of their wives. {10}

But *puraH* also means *previously*, and the following *aloke* attached to the cloud has nothing to do with rains but means uncommon, other-worldly, of the spiritual or immaterial. Hultzch's addition of rain in fact comes from the previous stanza: Ashadha is the lunar month of June-July, which is indeed the monsoon season in northern India. That being the case, I suspect the stanza is a linking piece, between the unwelcome associations thrown up by the elephant-shaped cloud that reminds the Yaksha of separation from his beloved, and the stanzas afterwards where the Yaksha begs help of the immaterial being of the cloud, of the otherworld as I have put it.

No translation is perfect, and its practitioners will always disagree on individual points. But McComas Taylor's version, which introduced me to Kalidasa, and



which I think in many ways the best, spells out the meaning far more than the original words really allow. The result is a very straightforward rendering, but also rather prosaic. It seems to me that we should take the meaning of individual words back as far we can by analyzing the samasas, etc. but then render those layers of meaning, with their frequent gaps and obscurities, in a verse that aimed at what Kalidas is famed for: an unpendantic eloquence, a sweetness and fullness of style.

Leonard Nathan aimed for a rendering in contemporary language — *heart-breaking sight, dying to hold* — and many professional translators will today consider that the only acceptable approach. Nathan's volume is immensely useful, and the rendering is quiet, supple and intelligent. The trouble comes with the free verse style, however, where everyday words prevent the syntax conveying the many shades and connotations of meaning essential to poetry.

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## 23.9.4. TRANSLATING KALIDASA 4

Points illustrated:

1. Devising a working practice.
2. Looking closer at the Sanskrit.

3. Hank Heifetz's case for free verse.
4. Dangers of simply rehashing previous translations.

## Working Practices

Previously I recommended looking up every word in the Monier Williams dictionary, and then referencing elementary grammar as necessary. Unfortunately, as should have been obvious from the beginning, the approach suffers from two drawbacks. First, it doesn't always work. What does *hArayiSyān* mean? No, it's not a samasa involving *hara* (bearing/ charming/garland/girl of bad reputation, etc.) but the future participle of the causative of the verb *hRi* to carry: *he caused to be conveyed*. Kalidasa is relatively straightforward, but there are many things not given in Bucknell or elementary grammars. Second is the hermeneutic circle. Many words have alternative meanings, and all have shades of meanings, but we cannot know which to choose until we have understood the whole stanza, which of course depends on choosing the correct meanings in the first place. It's not an insuperable difficulty — stanzas do settle into sense eventually — but it does require us to note all the alternatives, and to draw hints and explanations from earlier translations (though these rest on the same conundrums of course).

Eventually — for those interested in doing something similar — I found this to be the best strategy:

1. Read Nathan, {1} Taylor {2} and Devadhar.{3}
2. Read the Devanagari aloud: {1} or {4}
3. Read the detailed exposition of M.R. Kale. {5}
4. Undertake a preliminary translation based simply on these four sources. This alerts us to where problems will arise in a. meaning and b. rhyme
5. Construct a table where each word of the original can be given its meanings, parts of speech and interpretations by previous workers.
6. Copy into the table the *Meghaduta* text from the Frankfurt University site {10}
7. Check this text against other sources. {1} {2} {3} {4} {5} {10}. (There are a few slips.)
8. Add to the table the vocabulary provided by Hultzsche (two stanzas at a time is easiest).
9. Look up all words not given by Hultzsche in the Monier-Williams dictionary. {9} Also words where there are discrepancies in interpretation.
10. Write out a word-for-word, line by line, literal translation.
11. Rework the translation of 4. from the English words pregnant with meaning, aiming for sonorous beauty of phrase.
12. Now start thinking about the original carefully: what it means, what emotional effect was intended, how that was achieved. Aim to convey that, simply and clearly, eliminating unnecessary words or explanation.
13. Create a sonorous verse on the abcba pattern with the words given. Do not 'versify' the prose translations, but get the properties of the English

words to create useful rhythm and sound patterns.

14. Rearrange to better meet the abcba rhyme pattern, changing the odd word as necessary.

15. Rework to improve its quality as verse per se.

16. Consult 5 and move the verse closer to 10, trying a. eliminate words or meanings not in the original, and b. work in words that the translation has not so far succeeded in including.

17. Again look up key words in Monier-Williams to a. check that previous translations are essentially correct, b. understand better what the samasa mean and c. see if the alternatives offer a deeper meaning or words more useful to the verse.

18. Repeat 11 to 17 until the verse 'shapes up'.

19. Put away for days or weeks, polishing up the stanza(s) as they appear fresh to the eye. Aim to make them beautiful, moving and memorable.

Of course we have to avoid writing 'a poem on the theme of *Meghaduta*', or 'a response to reading *Meghaduta*', by sticking to Kalidasa's words, and not introducing many of our own. But we don't have to reproduce every word, and for these reasons:

1. We are not producing a student's edition. Anyone who studies Sanskrit at college will read Kalidasa, and tutors naturally want literal texts that give all the words and display an awareness of the grammar involved. We are aiming for a literary translation, trying to convey the appeal in English that Kalidasa offers to a Sanskrit reader.

2. A poet uses a particular word for many things: its meanings, connotations, rhythmic properties, colour and vividness of imagery, melodic echo, consonantal texture and so forth. Most of these disappear in the exact, literal equivalent. Had he been writing in another language, the poet would have used words with quite different meanings to secure his effects, inevitably so: it is from this play of effects on many levels that the poetry emerges.

3. Word use is governed by conventions that go far beyond prose meanings: appropriate to genre, period, situation, class structure, tone, etc.

4. There is a some looseness and word repetition in the original, probably to meet the demanding Mandakranta metre.

5. The very free word order of *Meghaduta* requires us to transpose words and hazard guesses at meaning: a literal translation is a long way from acceptable English.

An example may make things clearer: the first line of the third stanza. We could write:

In tears withheld new fell that fall from grace,

Very neat of course, with its play on things outward and inward. But much too clever, almost as over-alliterated as the Act V players' performance in *Midsummer's Night Dream*. What about:

He held his tears, but felt that fall from grace,  
 From wealth attending on the King of Kings.  
 The otherworld that simmered in the clouded air  
 Is but discomfort when such longing brings  
 A breath that holds him to that neck's embrace.

But then we have held / holds. Is that the comparison Kalidasa intends? In fact it may be: the literal translation does indeed suggest a comparison of things **near and far**, of things **inward and outward**:

of\_her **having\_stayed with\_difficulty before desire impatience** desti-  
 tute\_of\_wealth cause  
**[inward tear]** for\_a\_ long\_ time **attendant** of\_king\_ of\_ kings **holding**  
 cloud in[not\_of\_the\_world] is\_being comfortable although [other\_than **con-**  
**ceals]** grief  
 head\_and\_neck **embrace** of\_vital\_breaths in\_person how\_much again **dis-**  
**tant**

Nonetheless, it may be wiser — at least till we assess the balance in other stanzas — to leave these parallels in the background and write:

What tears he stifled on that fall from of grace,

The revised stanzas are below.

1. A year from amorousness: it passes slowly.  
 So thought a Yaksha by his master sent,  
 for scanting duty, to the Rāmagiry:  
 to mope in penance groves as banishment  
 by rivers Sītā's bathing there made holy.

2. Āshādha's ending on the mountain found  
 him weakened, gold ring slipping from his wrist.  
 And mixed his pleasure as a cloud came down  
 so playfully to hug the summit mist,  
 as elephants in heat will butt the ground.

3. In tears withheld he took his fall from grace,  
 from wealth attending on the King of Kings.  
 The otherworld that brimmed in cloudy air  
 was still discomfort when far longing brings  
 a breath to hold him to that neck's embrace.

99. Excessive sorrows, and her sighs are his  
 as he in waiting sighs for her. Distress  
 that wastes her body wears out his. To thwart

once lawful union with a hopelessness  
still lies that fate across their path to this.

## Texture of Sanskrit Poetry

Sanskrit is not an easy language, and many will prefer formal tuition at college or adult learning centre. Those intending home study will probably need an introductory course, and then find MacDonell {12} much easier than Whitney. {7} The online dictionaries are admirable, {13} {14} {15} {16} {17} particularly as they allow existing translations to be checked with English to Sanskrit searches, but they do need some basic grammar. Personally, I have found the Monier-Williams dictionary in book form {9} to be well worth the initial expense and inconvenience.

Being an ancient language, Sanskrit can be somewhat baffling: few relative or subordinate clauses, or even finite verbs very often, but long compounds and gerunds with the passive tense. Prepositions are widely used, and take various tenses, but it is generally the cases of the nouns and compounds that convey the sense.

For poetry that brings benefits and difficulties. The 'precise meaning' — in the way expected of European prose — is not always clear, and interpretations naturally differ. Compounds may also be long and involved — monstrously so in later poetry — but can create compact and evocative similes. A celebrated example is *vIcikSobhastanitavihagazreNikAJcIguNA*, the first line of stanza 28 in *Meghaduta*, which MacDonell {18} construes as 'an appositional descriptive consisting of two main parts. The second, *kAJcI-guNA*, m. *girdle-string*, is a Tatpuruṣa [samasa]. The first is an adjectival descriptive in which the Tatpuruṣa *vihaga-zreNi*, *row of birds*, is described by *vIcikSobhastanita*, *loquacious through wave agitation*. The latter is a compound Tatpuruṣa, in which *stanita* is qualified by the simple Tatpuruṣa *vIci-kSobha*, *agitation of the waves*.' Involved, yes, but through its use Kalidasa can draw a parallel between the river and a woman making her overtures of love. Compound similes operate throughout the *Meghaduta*, where the cloud's life-giving passage across the parched Indian landscape is an extended metaphor for the sexual congress of all nature, one difficult to render in the European tradition and foreign to the Chinese.

These compounds, the inflected nature of Sanskrit, and its euphony also allow great beauty of expression. If we look, for example, at our earlier stanza 1/99:

aGgenAGgaM **tanu**ca **tanunAa** gADha**taptena taptam**  
sAsreNAsrudravamavirat**otkaNTham utkaNThitena**  
uSN**occhvAM** saMsamadhikar**occhvAsenah** dUravartI  
saMkalpaiskalpaiste vizati vidhinA vairiNA ruddhamArgaH

for which the word-for-word translation is:

with body body emaciated and with emaciated deep with distressed dis-  
tressed  
with flowing tear weeping continually longing with longing  
ardent sigh brimful with sigh distant  
with proper them conjoins by fate hostile blocked path

we can see the emotional closeness of the Yaksha and his lover are empha-  
sized by the repetitions of **emaciated**, **distressed**, **longing** and **sigh**, which  
set up a monotonous, dispiriting chant. Then comes the quickening with allit-  
eration on **v**, to be rendered hopeless with **ruddhamArgaH**, the word heavy  
with its two long syllables **ruddhamArgaH** and picking up **rudravam**, weep-  
ing.

aGgenAGgaM tanuca tanunAa gADhataptena taptaM  
sAsreNAs**rudravam**aviratotkaNTham utkaNThitena  
uSNocchvAM saMsamadhikarocch**v**Asenah dUra**v**artI  
saMkalpaiskalpaiste **v**izati **v**idhinA **v**airiNA **ruddhamArgaH**

And so on. Has our translation conveyed that pattern? Somewhat:

Excessive sorrows, and her sighs are his  
As he in waiting wastes for her. How more  
He feels her flooding tears, her hopelessness  
As fate rebukes the lawful union that before  
Flung breath and her full body into his.

or (we can decide on a final version later):

Excessive sorrows, and her sighs are his  
As he in waiting sighs for her. Distress  
That racks her body torments his. To block  
Once lawful union with a hopelessness  
Is adverse fate athwart their path to this.

But not entirely. The monotonous repetition is rendered, but the check of  
*block* comes at the end of the third line and the two succeeding lines fall back  
into the dispiriting rhythms, their ending sibilants echoing the sighing lovers.  
We can't usually capture everything in the one rendering, but to follow the  
Sanskrit word order more closely (free though it is) traditional verse lets us  
write:

Consuming tears and sighs on his behalf  
He also feels and adds to, and recalls  
A wasting body that is one with his.  
Across that lawful union still there falls  
A fate to hurt them and obstruct the path.

## Other Attempts

For Hank Heifetz, however, who has produced a widely-praised translation of Kalidasa's *Kumarasambhava*, {19} traditional verse is precisely the problem. He writes: 'Scholarly translations of Sanskrit poetry into English have generally been of poor literary quality. . . characteristics are stiff, archaizing diction (full of words like 'wanton' and 'charming'); the use of emotionally impoverished, merely 'educated' language; antiquated inversions of sentence structure; and iambic rhythms (used directly or present as underlying patterns) that are inappropriate to the quantitative effects of Sanskrit verse and alien to the far more rhythmic achievements of twentieth-century poetry, developments which open up far more interesting possibilities for the translation of rhythm. The history of translation from Far Eastern poetry stands in interesting contrast. In this area, a tradition of good writing was established earlier in the century by Ezra Pound and Arthur Waley; such contemporary poets as Kenneth Rexroth and Gary Snyder have furthered it.'

Previously, still in his Introduction, {20} he writes 'I have attempted to create a poem in modern American English that conveys some of the greatness of the original through means available in living speech. . . In very case, I have tried to convey what I believe Kalidasa intended. I have sought out equivalents (but not imitations) in English for the rich, penetrating and emotionally precise effects of Kalidasa's stanzas. I have paid a great deal of attention to the rhythmic effects of individual stanzas and continuous sequences by seeking means in English for conveying the rhythmic import of Kalidasa's poetry. . . '

Worthy aims, and Professor Heifetz's comments on previous translations are largely true. *The Origin of the Young God* displays a deep love of the subject, and the detailed commentaries touch on matters that have not received sufficient attention before. However:

### **1. Does *The Origin of the Young God* achieve its aims?**

#### **A. Verse Structure**

As is usual with longer Sanskrit poems, the various chapters of *Kumarasambhava* are written in different metres. Do the translations convey any of this? Here is the opening stanza of the first chapter :

Formed of a living God, Himálaya, supreme  
Rajah of the Mountains, rises in the north  
and bathing in the western and eastern oceans  
stretches out like a rod that could measure the earth.

The Sanskrit is written in the Upajāti metre of eleven syllables. The syllable count for the translation is 13, 11, 13, 13. The caesura in the Sanskrit comes after the fifth syllable. In the translation the syllable falls after syllables 6, 6, 7 and 6.

The opening stanza of the second chapter runs:

That was a time when the gods  
suffering because of the Asura Táraka,  
went with Indra at their head to the realm  
Of that Being Who Exists of His Own Will.

Here the Sanskrit is written in the Zloka metre of eight syllables. The syllable count for the translation is 7, 13, 9, 11. There is no requirement for the caesura position, but the fifth syllable must be short, the sixth long, and the seventh alternately long and short in successive lines. English is not quantitative, but to the extent that stress can take the place of quantity, the fifth, sixth and seventh syllables in the four lines of the translation are 1. stressed, unstressed, stressed, 2. stressed, unstressed, unstressed, 3. unstressed, unstressed, stressed, 4. unstressed, unstressed, stressed.

## B. Verse Texture

Heifetz is concerned to *translate*, i.e. convey to some extent, the alliterative and melodic patterns of the original. He analyzes two examples in his *Introduction*.

The first (2.41) is:

The trees of the Nandana Grove where  
the wives of the immortals by hand  
would gently pick blossoms have learned  
from him to be cut through and fall.

Read aloud, the lines have a pleasing and gently undulating movement. The intention, however, was to echo the harsh syllables in the last line of the original Sanskrit, and here the same rhythm carries through, swamping any slight harshness in *cut*.

The second example (5.79, in the twelve syllable VaMzastha metre) is:

Once it has come to touch that body, I know dust  
from the very ashes of the dead will purify the living  
and so the gods rub their foreheads with it as it falls  
from the play of his limbs in the language of his dancing.

The interest here was the 'dancing rhythm [that] builds up in short steps to the long elegant turn of the compound which ends the third line. . ' That third line '*nRtyAbhinayakriyAcyutam* (literally, 'fallen from the movements of his gestures in the dance:) dances around its beats of 'a' and 'y', while the consonants of *kriyAcyutam* seem to echo the very shaking loose of the dust. This compound, I felt, required an entire line for its movement into translation.'

Again the translation says something different. The syllable counts for the lines are 12, 16, 13, 14. The third line has been transposed to the fourth. The



first three lines do not have a dancing rhythm, and the fourth line is a loose anapaestic.

### C. Greatness of the Original

Does the translation convey 'some of the greatness of the original'? Readers must make their own judgements, but I wouldn't have thought so. As one reviewer put it: 'Although Heifetz's notes call attention to alliterations, metrical subtleties and sonic effects in the Sanskrit, his translation often remains earthbound.'

## 2. Are the aims achievable?

Heifetz's arguments are detailed, and important for translation generally. If we start with that innocuous phrase 'modern American English', we can ask two things.

A. Is modern American English the appropriate medium? Kalidasa wrote in a highly-crafted version of elevated court language.

B. Why should *modern* American English be the touchstone? Isn't this a little neocolonialist? Would we want *Paradise Lost* so translated, for example, rather learning Milton's own thought and language to appreciate him properly? Yes, we can say that if Renaissance literature explored concepts unfamiliar to us, and employed words that have different meanings today, {21} we can nonetheless read its poetry in a way we cannot read classical Sanskrit. Milton was writing in and with a verse technique that we have inherited, that we still 'read'.

But properly? Heifetz is a contemporary poet, and pays the usual tributes to Modernist leaders, whose influence is turning older verse into a lost language. Neither Pound nor Rexroth had sufficient Chinese to produce reliable translations, and what they wrote was evocative prose, often beautiful but nothing like the original. Arthur Waley most certainly did read Chinese, but his cadenced prose set an unfortunate trend for translation, as it was not able to convey into English equivalents the verse on which the poetry of the original Chinese depends. Gary Snyder has a first-hand knowledge of oriental cultures, but not always the verse skill to convey that insight. {22}

No doubt a lot of traditional verse was incompetent, but 'free verse' often avoids the challenge altogether. Subtlety and variety are only possible against some standard or regularity, moreover, and this is what 'free verse' generally rejects. Like blank verse, contemporary styles are easy to write correctly, but phenomenally difficult to write well. They require certain departures from normal speech — melodic patterning, line breaks, unexpected juxtapositions, unusual wordings — to work effectively, and such departures, besides being intrinsically weak, are foreign to the classical tradition.

Hank Heifetz is not suggesting that the Sanskrit marriage of sense and rhythm should be *replicated* in English. 'My interest,' he writes, {20} 'is in *translating*

rhythm, by producing suitable American rhythms at the level of the speaking voice. This is a translation for the ear, meant to be read aloud in the natural emotional tone suiting each stanza or sequence and with the poetic line as the basic unit, receiving its slight stresses at the beginning and end.'

Technically, those aims are achieved. The first of our examples in B. above is not prose, as we can see by running the lines together: *The trees of the Nandana Grove where the wives of the immortals by hand would gently pick blossoms have learned from him to be cut through and fall.* Nor is the second — *Once it has come to touch that body, I know dust from the very ashes of the dead will purify the living and so the gods rub their foreheads with it as it falls from the play of his limbs in the language of his dancing.* — though the line breaks could be arranged differently.

As will be clear, Heifetz's is a very pleasing translation, but somewhat lacks the variety, pace and emotive range needed to keep us turning the pages. Indeed, poets have usually accepted that everyday language needed crafting and heightening to convey the effects proper to poetry, and the argument is really over how this is to be done. 'American rhythms at the level of the speaking voice' would be an admirable place to start — which is what the better contemporary styles perhaps recognize — but it would need to develop an extraordinarily wide vocabulary of expression to convey classical Sanskrit poetry. Perhaps the result would not have American rhythms in any simple fashion, but its own set of techniques and devices — be formal verse, though starting from a different place and with different premises.

Naturally, we can't argue from negatives, and say that the absence of any effective translation of Sanskrit poetry into free verse proves that one cannot be done. But free verse does have its problems, and if its practitioner avoids a lumbering translation in formal verse he may turn out the merely unobjectionable. Every approach comes at a cost, and it would have been less contentious to have employed a four-line stanza for the *Meghaduta* translation, for example, and to have avoided rhyme altogether. But a fifth line I found necessary to capture the content of the long Mandakranta lines, and the acknowledged quality of the Sanskrit called for the larger resources of English verse.

To round off matters, we undertake a verse translation of Heifetz's key example: verse 79 of Chapter 5. The transliterated devanagari showing the vaMSastha (x -x | - - x | x - x | x - x || metre in its **long** and **short** syllables:

Kumarasambhava Chapter 5 Verse 79

**ta** daG **ga** | saM sarg **am** | **a** vAp **ya** | kal **pa** te  
**dhru** vaM **ci** | tA bhasm **a** | **ra** jo **vi** | zuddh **a** ye  
**ta** thA **hi** | nRt yA **bhi** | **na** yak **ri** | yAc **yu** taM  
**vi** lip **ya** | te mau **li** | **bhi** ramb **a** | rau **ka** sAM

The word-for word rendering:

or doing that body contact having obtained is able  
certainly funeral pyre ashes dust completely purified  
for so it has been said movements of the body performing fallen  
is anointed with the head of heavenly beings because of who

Rearranging for a literal translation:

For that body contact the heavenly beings anoint their heads with the purifying ashes of the funeral pyre shaken down in the fervour of his dancing.

A simple verse translation that brings out the meaning:

The gods who crave a contact with that body  
smear their foreheads with the funeral ash  
shaken down by gestures of the dancer's  
deeper fire in purifying dust.

Which we can then vary in tempo to echo the original: drum beats in the first line, maintained in the second, a rhythm to echo Shiva's dancing in the third, and a quiet ending in the fourth.

To touch the dust his limbs have shaken down  
the gods incline their foreheads as forever  
the fire-wreathed fervour of that dancing body  
falls in purifying funeral ash.

A preliminary attempt. It's not particularly close to the literal version, though considerably more to a deeper rendering. {23} We'd want to devise forms for each Sanskrit measure before going further, and modify them as the translation took shape.

Looser styles are the norm today, and readers may prefer Heifetz's translation. But I don't think it can be said that free verse is intrinsically the better medium, either for conveying the original features, or for that amalgam of beauty and content that makes poetry worth reading.

## Getting Back to the Original Words

Returning to *Meghaduta*, even this brief incursion into Sanskrit verse should have shown the dangers of simply reworking previous translations. Important elements of the structure can be missed, and each translation takes us further from the original.

Translations can also be somewhat quixotic, building on words that seem not to be in the text. An example is stanza 1.24, where most versions mention thunder in some form: your thundering on the border of its bank (Kale), at your soft thunder along her banks (Nathan) or which roars pleasantly at the edge of her banks (Taylor). But the original:

teSAM diSu prathitavidizAlakSaNAM rAjadAnIM  
 gatvA sadyaH phalam avikalaM kAmukatvasya labdhA ( phalam atimahat;  
 tv avikalaphalaM. (Kale): phalam api mahat )  
 tIropAntastanitasubhagaM pAsyasi svAdu yat tat ( svadu yatra; svadu yuk-  
 taM; svadu yasmat; svadu yat tva?)  
 sabhrUubhaNgaM mukham iva payo vetravatyAz calormi

has a word-for-word rendering:

in that from direction celebrated Vidizá sign of capital  
 having gone suddenly fruit full of being a lover obtaining  
 bank side murmuring pleasing of water  
 frowning face like water from Vetravati moving wave

with no *thunder*, whatever the version. Devadhar in fact omits *thunder* — *The river Vetravati awaits your charming call in her earlike fringe* — simply seeing the stanza as an extended play on the cloud's courtship of the river, but introduces words of his own. Why this happens I do not know — translators may be referring to earlier commentaries — but the safer approach, I think, is to return to the text as given and make such poetry as we can from its words.

You'll come to Vidizá, the capital  
 Well known across the compass of these quarters,  
 When, like a lover, at the Vetravati,  
 Draw near her face to have the frowning waters  
 Turn to murmuring: and drink your fill.

The author's full (and free) translation of Kalidasa's *Meghaduta* is published in pdf format by the [Ocaso Press](#).

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<http://aa2411s.aa.tufs.ac.jp/~tjun/sktdic/> NNA. Based on *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary* of Vaman Shivaram Apte.

16. *Gérard Huet's Sanskrit-French dictionary*.

<http://pauillac.inria.fr/~huet/SKT/sanskrit.html> NNA. Free to use online or download.

17. *Online Sanskrit Dictionary*. <http://sanskrit.gde.to/dict/>. Cologne University's Sanskrit dictionary, plus a good listing of others.

18. MacDonell 1927, 176.

19. Hank Heifetz, *The Origin of the Young God: Kalidasa's Kumarasambhava* Univ. California Press, 1985 / Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1990.

20. Heifetz 1990, op. cit, 12-15.

21. Isabel Rivers, *Classical and Christian Ideas in English Renaissance Poetry*. Routledge, 1992.

22. Eliot Weinberger, *19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei: How a Chinese poem is translated* (Asphodel Press, 1987), 42-43. Weinberger admires Snyder's translation, but it seems to me a clumsy rendering, with a thoughtless concluding word: moss only forms on trees away from the sun, and more than a trailing proposition is needed to invoke a spiritual dimension.

23. Stanza 5.79 typifies many problems of Sanskrit translation. First there is an error in my copy of *Kalidasa's Kumarasambhava*. The opening word is *tadaGgasamsargam* and not *tandaGgasamsargam*. M.R. Kale (M.R. Kale, *Kumarasambhava of Kalidasa*, Motilal Banarsidass, 2004: 92) gives the correct text, and *tand* etc. will not fit the *vaMSastha* metre. Then there is the word order, so free that one cannot talk about a rhythm coincident with the sense. And finally there is the difficulty of tying down the meaning properly. In the literal translation I have accepted the interpretations of Ka-

lidasas many commentators, as I think Frank Heifetz has, but in the verse translations have gone back more to the meanings of individual words (reading eternity for *dhruvaM* rather than certainty, etc.).

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