



The Poet, Picasso, 1911

On This Short Day of Frost and Sun

An annotated anthology of poems

Terry Picton

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Preface

The poems in this anthology were selected on the basis of my personal preferences. The arrangement of the poems is like the disposition of colors in a painting by Jackson Pollock. The poems are not ordered in any conscious manner, though subconscious forces were doubtlessly at play. Although occasionally related, adjacent poems are typically distant from each other both in time and subject matter. The only definite organizing principle – filling up open spaces – has led to more short poems than usual in a general anthology.

The book includes 337 poems in 271 pages. There are perhaps too few poems about love and too many about death, but this can be expected at my age. My selection is clearly biased toward poems from the 20th Century. Most of the chosen poems follow defined forms, though I have no conscious bias against free verse, and the anthology includes occasional pieces of prose. Indeed, the book's title derives from the prose of Walter Pater (p 186). Several long poems are excerpted, but a few others are included in full.

Most anthologies of poetry contain little comment. What needs to be known for interpreting the poems is relegated to footnotes or appendices. The anthologist generally resists any intrusion between the reader and the poem. In this book, the annotations provide both information necessary for understanding the poems, and comments on the poetic techniques. The pagination of the book is set up so that poem and commentary have the same page number: on the left the poem and on the right the commentary.

I also have put together a set of recordings of various people reciting the poems in the book. Many of the readings are by the poets themselves. Others are by professional actors or enthusiastic amateurs. For Paul Celan's *Todesfuge* ("Death Fugue," p 268), I have included both the author's recitation in German as well as a recitation of the English translation. For some poems, I could not find any recitations, and have made my own. I apologize for my voice: age has replaced its youthful resonance with a reedy sincerity. In the "text and sound" version of this anthology, the recitations will be embedded in the document.

A listing of the contents occurs before the book begins. At the end of the book are an index of authors, an index of titles and first lines, an incomplete index of forms and themes, and a listing of the recitations.

Terry Picton, Toronto, 2021

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Journey of the Magi

“A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.”
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.
Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.
All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

T. S. Eliot, 1927

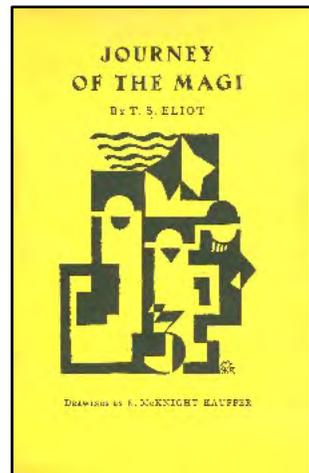
Journey of the Magi

Eliot, who had been brought up as a Unitarian, was baptized into the Church of England in June 1927. Later that year he also obtained British citizenship. Thenceforth, he described himself as “classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion.”

Eliot’s conversion changed his poetry. Earlier poems *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915, p 45) and *The Waste Land* (1922) had portrayed the emptiness and futility of human existence without belief. Later poems *Ash Wednesday* (1930) and *Four Quartets* (1945, pp 116, 203) would consider the issues of religious faith and the effects of divine grace. *The Journey of the Magi* represented a turning point in his poetry.

A few years before, Eliot had become a managing director of the Faber and Gwyer publishing house (later Faber and Faber). One of his early projects was publishing poems in pamphlet form, commissioning modernist art work for the cover and frontispiece – *The Ariel Poems*. *The Journey of the Magi* with illustrations by E. McKnight Kauffer (cover shown on the right) was the eighth pamphlet.

The story of the three wise men who followed a star and visited the newborn Jesus in Bethlehem is told in *Matthew 2: 1-12*. Eliot presents the story in a dramatic monologue, a form developed by Robert Browning (see pp 25 and 35), with one of the magi later recalling what happened on his journey.



The opening lines of the poem are adapted from a sermon preached before James I on Christmas Day, 1622, by Lancelot Andrewes, the Bishop of Winchester and one of the translators of the King James Version of the Bible. The original words are “A cold coming they had of it at this time of the year, just the worst time of the year to take a journey, and specially a long journey. The ways deep, the weather sharp, the days short, the sun farthest off ... the very dead of winter.” About using another author’s work, Eliot (1920) remarked, “Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different.”

The poem makes several allusions to later parts of the Gospel. The three trees refer to the crucifixion, the pieces of silver relate to Judas Iscariot, and the empty wine-skins evoke the parable of the new wine in old wine-skins (*Matthew 9: 17*). The main idea of the poem – “This set down| This” – is the disruption that occurs when a new faith begins. The old dispensations are no longer valid, but the new order is not yet understood. True belief requires a second death: completely giving up oneself to the new faith in addition to forsaking the old. Eliot, by renouncing his childhood Unitarianism and his adolescent agnosticism to convert to Anglicanism, was in fact returning to an older dispensation.

Ozymandias

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said – “two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert ... near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lips, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my Works ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1818

The Windhover To Christ our Lord

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! And the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: sheer plod makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vergence.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, 1877

Ozymandias

Shelley's sonnet was triggered by the news that the British Museum had acquired the upper part of a colossal statue of Ramesses II, an Egyptian pharaoh from the 13th Century BCE, whose name in Greek was Ozymandias (see right). The statue (also known as the "Younger Memnon") arrived in Weymouth in 1818 but was not displayed in the museum until 1821.



The poem imagines how the shattered colossus was discovered in the desert. Shelley's wording of the hieroglyphic inscription on the pedestal derives from Diodorus Siculus (1st Century BCE): "I am Osymandyas, king of kings. If any would know how great I am, and where I lie, let him excel me in any of my works." (from Booth's English translation of Diodorus, 1814).

The main point of the poem is that the statue has long outlasted both the pharaoh, whose passions were portrayed, and the artist, who had mocked them. The broken statue portrays the transience of life as powerfully as the live pharaoh had displayed his magnificence. The alliteration in the concluding lines ("boundless and bare," "lone and level") gives the message a stately splendor.

The Windhover

This sonnet has its own "sprung rhythm" with feet of from one to four syllables and the accent usually falling on the first (or only) syllable. Hopkins described it as the rhythm of music, of nursery rhymes and of English poetry before the Elizabethan age when the iambic foot replaced it. Speaking the poems out loud gives an immediate feeling for the rhythm. The sound pattern of "and striding| High there", with the pause at the end of the line and the stress on the word "high" portrays the falcon as it reaches the apex of its flight. The rest of the line sees the falcon soaring, and then it rapidly turns ("then off") and descends ("forth on swing").

Hopkins had studied Welsh poetry which uses a complex system of alliteration, assonance, accent and rhyme called *cynghanedd*. Hopkins was particularly impressed by alliterative sequences, such as "morning's minion" "wimpling wing," which he called "chimes." Hopkins was also a master of assonance, which he called "vowelling." The first line of the poem varies between a long "o" with a short "i": "this morning, morning's minion, king-".

Hopkins' syntax was highly compressed. Words are linked and phrases appended to nouns much as in Old English or German. "Dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon" portrays a falcon silhouetted against a dappled sky at dawn. "The rolling level underneath him steady air" describes the air that both rolls beneath and steadies the falcon in its flight.

Another appealing aspect of Hopkins is his use of vivid Anglo-Saxon words: "dapple" means to mark with spots or patches of a different shade or color; "wimple" is to twist about or ripple; "gall" is to rub sore by chafing; "sillion," is an old word for the furrow made by a plough

The Second Coming

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

William Butler Yeats, 1921

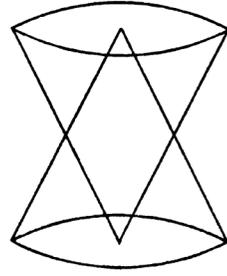
Once

The old rock climber cries out in his sleep,
Dreaming without enthusiasm
Of a great cliff immeasurably steep,
Or of the sort of yawning chasm,
Now far too deep,
That once, made safe by rashness, he could leap.

Richard Wilbur, 2000

The Second Coming

After the Great War, many people felt that history was leading to some great catastrophe. This poem represents this sense of imminent doom. The initial lines describe a falcon circling in the vortices that connect thought and will. In his 1925 book, *A Vision* (from which the diagram on the right is taken), Yeats described vortices as inter-connecting cones that represent opposing forces such as “will” and “thought.” Movement through the vortices is through spirals or “gyres.” To spin in this way is how angels ascend to and descend from the heavens. In his own notes on the poem, Yeats remarked:



The human soul is always moving outward into the objective world or inward into itself. ... The man in whom the movement inward is stronger than the movement outward ... reaches the narrow end of a gyre at death ... and has a moment of revelation.

In Christian theology, the “Second Coming” is the future return of the resurrected Christ to rule the world. At this time Christ will judge all the living and the dead, and will establish his Kingdom. In the Apocalyptic literature, the Second Coming is preceded by a period of plague, war, famine and destruction. During this time an Anti-Christ will falsely claim to be the Messiah.

The *Spiritus Mundi* is a set of images divinely granted to the poet to assist him in interpreting the world. It is not clear exactly who or what Yeats’ “rough beast” represents: perhaps the returning Christ, perhaps the Anti-Christ, or perhaps one of the other beasts foreseen by the prophet John in *Revelation* 13:1:

And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy.

The poem need not be interpreted in terms of specifically Christian eschatology (study of last things), but simply as a prophecy of great changes that are about to happen, changes that will affect the course of future history as much as the birth of Christ in Bethlehem affected the last twenty centuries. When the world suffers from cataclysmic political changes, we are wont to quote the line

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Once

This poem, written when Wilbur was in his late seventies, elegantly portrays the state of old age, wherein one can still remember the exploits of youth, but can only marvel at the ability and confidence that one no longer has.

The first and third lines of the poem have five stresses and an upward trajectory. The four stresses and feminine rhyme of the second and third lines tend downward. The yawning chasm is well portrayed in the poem’s short fifth line, which can best be read by laying equal stress on each of its four syllables. The final line in regular iambic pentameter provides some resolution.

Flying Crooked

The butterfly, a cabbage-white,
(His honest idiocy of flight)
Will never now, it is too late,
Master the art of flying straight,
Yet has – who knows so well as I? –
A just sense of how not to fly:
He lurches here and here by guess
And God and hope and hopelessness.
Even the acrobatic swift
Has not his flying-crooked gift.

Robert Graves, 1938

Ecclesiastes Chapter 12

Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them.

While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain:

In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened,

And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low;

Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets:

Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern.

Then shall the dust return to the dust as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity.

King James Version, 1611

Flying Crooked

The four wings of the butterfly are rigidly fixed to its thorax. Muscles are not attached to the wings. Rather the muscles in the thorax alter its shape and thus change the orientation of the wings. Lift is obtained by flapping the wings. The size of the wings is far larger than necessary for simple lift. However, subtle changes in the orientation of the wings can rapidly alter the direction of flight. These apparently random changes in direction make it very difficult for predators such as birds to catch the butterfly in flight. Graves uses the flight of the butterfly to suggest how sometimes events that appear futile and random can be goal-directed. There is more than one way to fly.

Ecclesiastes

The author of this Hebrew book, probably written in the 3rd Century BCE, was called *Qohelet*. This word derives from a root meaning “to bring people together.” The name thus suggests a sage who teaches a group of disciples. The translators of the King James Version took it to mean someone who preaches in a church (Latin, *ecclesia*).

In the book’s last chapter, Qohelet tells his followers to rejoice in their youth, for everyone must grow old and die. The imagery of the poem is as enigmatic as it is beautiful. A literal interpretation is that the poem describes a village or estate in mourning after the death of a great person. The windows of the house are darkened, the mill is quiet, the mourners go about the streets, and finally dust is scattered over the body as it is buried.

However, a long tradition has interpreted the images allegorically, relating them to the physical and mental decline that attends old age. The underlying idea is that the aging body is like a house in decay. The following are suggestions from the 11th-Century CE Jewish rabbi Rashi:

the keepers of the house: *the ribs and the flanks, which protect the body*

the mighty men: *the legs, upon which the body supports itself*

the grinders cease: *the teeth which fall out with age*

those who look out of the windows: *the eyes.*

the doors shall be shut: *the orifices.*

the sound of the mill is low: *the grinding of food in the stomach*

Other interpretations are more abstract. Does the pitcher broken at the fountain represent the bladder or the loss of the life force? Is the silver cord the spinal column or the genealogical tree that ends at the death of a person with no heirs? Some Hebrew interpretations consider these verses in the context of the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians in 587 BCE. The image of the golden bowl might then represent the broken lamp that no longer lit the temple’s sanctuary. All meanings overlap.

The final lines circle around the concept of *havel*, a Hebrew word meaning “breath,” which is translated as “vanity.” Robert Alter (2010) has described it as “the flimsy vapor that is exhaled in breathing, invisible except on a cold winter day and in any case immediately dissipating in the air.”

In my craft or sullen art
Exercised in the still night
When only the moon rages
And the lovers lie abed
With all their griefs in their arms
I labour by singing light
Not for ambition or bread
Or the strut and trade of charms
On the ivory stages
But for the common wages
Of their most secret heart.

Not for the proud man apart
From the raging moon I write
On these spindrift pages
Nor for the towering dead
With their nightingales and psalms
But for the lovers, their arms
Round the griefs of the ages,
Who pay no praise or wages
Nor heed my craft or art.

Dylan Thomas, 1945

In and Out

We've covered ground since that awkward day
When, thoughtlessly, a human mind
Decided to leave the apes behind,
Come pretty far, but who dare say
If far be forward or astray,
Or what we still might do in the way
Of patient building, impatient crime,
Given the sunlight, salt and time.

W. H. Auden, 1966

In my craft or sullen art

In this poem Thomas tries to describe why he writes poetry. The form of the poem is irregularly regular. Each line has three stresses but there is no regular rhythm. The poem uses five end-rhymes but they do not follow any clear sequence, other than that the first five lines and the last three lines rhyme across the two stanzas.

Thomas describes his writing as a “craft or sullen art.” The word “sullen” originally meant “solitary” and this is Thomas’s primary meaning. The word later evolved to mean “morose” or “gloomy” or “dull” – states that result from a lack of company. Poetry is a solitary act, and poets can become embittered by their solitude. Poetry is not like the other arts, where people interact. “Ivory stages” seems a combination of the ivory tower of the academe and the theater.

Thomas does not try to follow the poets that preceded him – David and his psalms or Keats and his nightingales. His poems are like “spindrift” – the spray that the wind blows from the crests of waves.

Thomas insists that he writes for the lovers, “their arms round the griefs of the ages.” He does not write for worldly ambition or even for his daily living. The lovers “pay no praise nor wages,” being far too much in love to attend to his poems.

In an introductory note to his *Collected Poems* (1959) Thomas wrote a different rationale for his poetry:

I read somewhere of a shepherd who, when asked why he made, from within fairy rings, ritual observances to the moon to protect his flocks, replied: ‘I’d be a damn’ fool if I didn’t!’ These poems, with all their crudities, doubts, and confusions, are written for the love of Man and in praise of God, and I’d be a damn’ fool if they weren’t.

In and Out

Auden used this brief description of human evolution as the epigraph for his 1966 book of poems *About the House*. Given our past, it is not clear whether our future will build upon our achievements or continue toward our destruction.

In 1938 Auden wrote a sequence of 21 sonnets entitled *In Time of War* wherein he considered the history of humanity in more detail. In the beginning

there came a childish creature

On whom the years could model any feature. (Sonnet I)

As civilization flourished

All grew so fast his life was overgrown

Til he forgot what all had once been made for:

He gathered into crowds and was alone. (Sonnet VIII)

And finally

Some lost a world they never understood. (Sonnet XVI)

When I shall be without regret
And shall mortality forget,
When I shall die who lived for this,
I shall not miss the things I miss.
And you who notice where I lie
Ask not my name. It is not I.

J. V. Cunningham, 1947

from **Cymbeline Act 4 Scene 2**

(farewell to Fidele by
Polydore and Cadwal)

Fear no more the heat o'th' sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages.
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone and ta'en thy wages.
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers come to dust.

Fear no more the frown o'th' great,
Thou art past the tyrant's stroke.
Care no more to clothe and eat,
To thee the reed is as the oak.
The scepter, learning, physic must
All follow this and come to dust.

Fear no more the lightning flash,
Nor th'all-dreaded thunder-stone.
Fear not slander, censure rash.
Thou hast finished joy and moan.
All lovers young, all lovers must
Consign to thee and come to dust.

No exorcisor harm thee,
Nor no witchcraft charm thee.
Ghost unlaid forbear thee.
Nothing ill come near thee.
Quiet consummation have,
And renowned be thy grave.

William Shakespeare, 1611

When I shall be without regret

Cunningham was a master of the lean” or “plain” style, one of three modes of speech described in ancient studies of rhetoric (the others being “middle” and “grand”). He described this in *The Quest of the Opal* (1950/64):

His native style was dry, abstract, tightly formal. It derived its texture from a chastity of diction and a crispness of technique, and its inner structure from some odd turn and complication of thought ... It got its drive from a white passion for exactitude of statement.

Cunningham chose this particular epigram as his favorite poem because it was “all denotation and no connotation ... not ironic, paradoxical, complex or subtle.” In highly compressed form, the poem tells of a life lived as a mortal being. Death brings an end to both the thoughts of death and the identity of the thinker. The poem plays on the meanings of the word “miss” as either “not noticing” things or “regretting” their absence, and compares how one can either “regret” or “forget” the past.

Cunningham’s ability to compress great depth of meaning into a small number of words was widely admired by other poets such as Thom Gunn who wrote a memorial poem for JVC (p 43).

Cymbeline

One of Shakespeare’s last plays, *Cymbeline* (1611) is usually classified as a “romance.” Its plot is so convoluted that some have suggested that it might even be a parody. In this scene, the brothers Polydore and Cadwal, have discovered that their new friend Fidele has died. As they prepare him for burial, they sing this song. However, all is not as it seems. Fidele is not dead but only heavily sedated. Furthermore, Fidele is not a young pageboy, but is actually Imogen, the daughter of King Cymbeline. And later we shall find out that Polydore and Cadwal are not two young Welsh hunters, but are actually Cymbeline’s long-lost sons. Imogen is their sister.

The burial song cuts through this completely unreal state of affairs with beautiful simplicity. In his late plays, Shakespeare was far more concerned with emotions than with reality. The plot moves not between events but from one feeling to another. The song runs on two levels. The dead person is now at peace and need no longer suffer the stresses of life. The living are comforted because they can still experience them.

The incantation of the final verse is far more majestic than the strange words written on Shakespeare’s gravestone:

Good friend for Jesus sake forbear,
To dig the dust enclosed here.
Blessed be the man that spares these stones,
And cursed be he that moves my bones.”

Sailing to Byzantium

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, fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

William Butler Yeats, 1927

Sailing to Byzantium

Yeats never visited Constantinople, the city known as Byzantium before 330 CE, and as Istanbul since the 1920s. He had become familiar with the art of the Byzantine Empire from a visit to Ravenna in 1907 with Lady Gregory, and a tour of Sicily in January 1925 with Ezra Pound. Yeats was struck by the beauty of Byzantine mosaics which portrayed saints and emperors in a golden background: “sages standing in God’s holy fire.” Yeats was almost 60 when this poem was written. He was uneasy with the sensual life of the Roaring Twenties, and he longed for something more long-lasting. This is the poem of an ageing man seeking to attain the truth before he gets too old.

The poem is presented in *ottava rima*. This form, derived from Italian epic poetry, uses eight-line stanzas, each with a rhyme scheme *abababcc*. English is not as easy to rhyme as Italian and some of Yeats’s rhymes are slant (e.g. young, song), but by the last stanza all the rhymes are true.

The first stanza describes the realm of the young, caught in the “sensual music” of the present, and oblivious of any art which lasts beyond the moment. In the second stanza Yeats portrays himself as an aged man who has decided to sail to the “holy city of Byzantium,” where he might learn to sing.

In his 1925 book *A Vision*, Yeats claimed that Byzantine Art could render the spiritual in physical terms. He dreamed that he might be transported to 6th Century Byzantium where

I could find in some little wine-shop some philosophical worker in mosaic
who could answer all my questions, ... for the pride of his delicate skill would
make what was an instrument of power to princes and clerics, ... show as a
lovely flexible presence like that of a perfect human body.

In the third stanza Yeats desires to leave the physical world and become part of the “artifice of eternity.” He conceived of the spiritual and physical domains as coming together through vortices (see p. 3): to “perne in a gyre” means to move in spirals between these domains. He requests the holy sages portrayed in the mosaics to change him from a “dying animal” into an immortal work of art.

The fourth stanza describes how Yeats might achieve eternity through a perfect work of art. The Late Byzantine Empire was renowned for the intricacy and extravagance of its art. In his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1788), Gibbons described a reception room which contained

a golden tree, with its leaves and branches, which sheltered a multitude of
birds warbling their artificial notes

Yeats said that he used the golden bird

as a symbol of the intellectual joy of eternity, as contrasted with the
instinctive joy of human life.

He is not clear whether he will achieve immortality by creating such a work of art or whether he will somehow become that creation. Problems arise when poets insist that they will live forever in their works. Though memories live on, poets die. And even golden birds ultimately decay.

from **The Venetian Vespers**

But I find peace
In the arcaded dark of the piazza
When a thunderstorm comes up. I watch the sky
Cloud into tarnished zinc, to Quaker gray
Drabness, its shrouded vaults, fog-bound crevasses
Blinking with huddled lightning, and await
The vast *son et lumière*. The city's lamps
Faintly ignite in the gathered winter gloom.
The rumbled thunder starts – an avalanche
Rolling down polished corridors of sound,
Rickety tumbrels blundering across
A stone and empty cellarage. And then,
Like a whisper of dry leaves, the rain begins.
It stains the paving stones, forms a light mist
Of brilliant crystals dulled with tones of lead
Three inches off the ground. Blown shawls of rain
Quiver and luff, veil the cathedral front
In flailing laces while the street lamps hold
Fixed globes of sparkled haze high in the air
And the black pavement runs with wrinkled gold
In pools and wet dispersions, fiery spills
Of liquid copper, of squirming, molten brass.
To give one's whole attention to such a sight
Is a sort of blessedness. No room is left
For antecedence, inference, nuance.
One escapes from all the anguish of this world
Into the refuge of the present tense.
The past is mercifully dissolved, and in
Easy obedience to the gospel's word,
One takes no thought whatever of tomorrow,
The soul being drenched in fine particulars.

Anthony Hecht, 1978

Pity us
By the sea
On the sands
So briefly

Samuel Menashe, 1982

The Venetian Vespers

Vespers (from the Greek *hespera*, evening) is a sunset prayer-service in the Christian Church. This poem is a long dramatic monologue by an expatriate American living out the evening of his life in Venice some twenty years after World War II. He is a “an invented character, largely a man I knew in Ischia, partly my brother, and necessarily something of myself.”

The speaker lost his father and mother in childhood and was brought up by his uncle, who provided the annuity whereon he now lives in a seedy hotel in Venice. As in the story of *Hamlet*, the uncle may have caused his father’s death and may have seduced his mother. The speaker served in the war as a Medic, experienced terrible things, and was discharged as mentally unsound. He has chosen Venice as his home because of

Its lightness, buoyancy, its calm suspension
In time and water, its strange quietness.

The speaker remembers but does not wish to dwell upon the past. The selected lines come just after he remembers the death of his mother. He attempts to find peace not in the remembered past or the hoped-for future, but in an intense experience of the present. In these lines he provides a stunning description of a thunderstorm seen from Piazza San Marco in Venice. The description abounds in vivid details such as the light mist that forms about three inches above the pavement in a heavy rainfall. The similes are as powerful as the fiery spills of molten metal to which he likens the lamplight on the piazza.

The final lines of this section of the poem are closely linked to the words of Jesus in *Matthew* 6:24

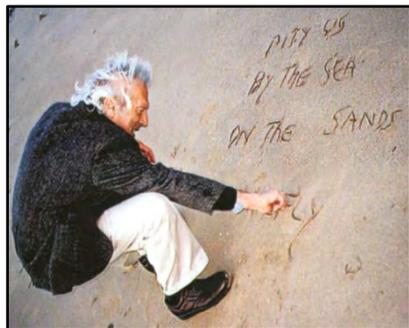
Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought
for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

And so the narrator tries his best to live in the “fine particulars” of the present. As he later says near the end of the poem

I look and look,
As though I could be saved simply by looking.

Pity us by the sea

The poems of Samuel Menashe are both concise and intense. Reading him is like drinking potent spirits. This particular poem summarizes the transience of human life in ten words. We came originally from the sea. We last until the next wave washes the sands clean. As Vergil said, *Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt* (There are tears at the heart of things, and mortality touches the mind.)



No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as any manner of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

John Donne, 1624

They flee from me that sometime did me seek
With naked foot stalking in my chamber.
I have seen them gentle, tame, and meek
That now are wild and do not remember
That sometime they put themselves in danger
To take bread at my hand; and now they range
Busily seeking with a continual change.

Thanked be fortune, it hath been otherwise
Twenty times better, but once in special,
In thin array after a pleasant guise,
When her loose gown from her shoulders did fall
And she me caught in her arms long and small,
Therewithal sweetly did me kiss
And softly said, 'Dear heart, how like you this?'

It was no dream: I lay broad waking.
But all is turned through my gentleness
Into a strange fashion of forsaking.
And I have leave to go of her goodness
And she also to use newfangledness.
But since that I so kindly am served
I would fain know what she hath deserved.

Thomas Wyatt, 1525

No man is an island

In 1623 John Donne, the Dean of Saint Paul's Cathedral in London, became sick with either typhus or relapsing fever. During his recuperation he wrote his *Devotions on Emergent Occasions*. Each of the 23 devotions consists of a meditation, an expostulation and a prayer. Each is preceded by a Latin epigraph.

Meditations 14-18 were triggered by Donne's hearing funeral bells for others who had died of the disease. The Latin epigraphs for these sections read:

Meanwhile, I pass my time sleeplessly telling nights and days; and in the funeral services for others, the clanging bells noisily cry out from the neighboring steeple that my own burial rites fast approach; and now, ringing slow, they say, "thou shalt die"; but once again: "thou art dead," ringing quickly and lively. (translation Mary Arshagouni, 1981)

This selection from Meditation 17 states the principle that human beings are all part of each other. The death of one person diminishes everyone. The corollary is that I may live on in those that survive me. As stated in Tennyson's *Ulysses* (p 42)

I am a part of all that I have met.

They flee from me

In the first verse, Wyatt is likening his mistress to a wild deer. Images of hunting and puns on "heart" and "dear" characterized English courtly love. The stanza describes an amorous affair which now is as lost as the transient relations one has with wild animals. The final line of the stanza describes the life at court, where the day-to-day excitement precludes any lasting relationship.

The middle verse reports one special occasion of erotic exhilaration. The syntax of the first two lines is difficult to follow since the words have several meanings. I believe that "otherwise" means "at other times" rather than "in opposite circumstances," and that "better" means "more" rather than "of higher merit." A paraphrase would then be, "I consider myself fortunate that it occurred many times, but at one particular meeting ...".

The final verse of the poem describes the resolution of his affair. His lover dismisses him, and he is too hurt to protest. "Newfangled" is a derogatory term for "modern" deriving from middle English, with the sense that modern is always overly complicated and without feeling. The poem ends with Wyatt hoping that his lover also feels some pain, but we sense that she does not.

The edginess of the poem comes from the poet's discovery of the sadness inherent in courtly love, wherein animal passions are glossed over by behaviors that prevent the depths of feeling to which they verbally pretend.

The poem is in *rhyme royal*, a form derived from French poetry and first used in English by Geoffrey Chaucer. Each seven-line stanza has a rhyme scheme *ababbcc*. Wyatt's irregular rhythms follow the flow of natural speech. In the line "It was no dream: I lay broad waking," one can hear the speaker's measured insistence of his story's truth.

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Dylan Thomas, 1951

Julia's Clothes

Whenas in silks my Julia goes,
Then, then (methinks) how sweetly flows
That liquefaction of her clothes.

Next, when I cast mine eyes, and see
That brave vibration each way free,
O how that glittering taketh me!

Robert Herrick, 1648

Do not got gentle into that good night

The poem is a villanelle, a form deriving from French poetry. The villanelle consists of five tercets followed by one quatrain. The first and third lines of the first tercet are repeated alternately as the third line of the succeeding tercets. At the end of the final quatrain both lines repeat. The rhyme scheme typically uses only two rhymes. The form is schematized using capitals for the repeating lines and lower-case letters for the rhymes: A₁bA₂ abA₁ abA₂ abA₁ abA₂ abA₁A₂

Thomas wrote the poem for his father David John Thomas (1876-1952), a school teacher who read Shakespeare and the Bible to his children as well as the usual nursery rhymes. He was a proud man, who believed that he could have been much more than he was. He was an atheist whose lack of belief had “nothing to do with whether there was a god or not, but was a violent and personal dislike for God.” He had been suffering from heart disease and partial blindness for several years, and finally died in 1952.

The poem describes his father – his wisdom, goodness, passion and seriousness. Each of the traits is associated with one vivid image: the splitting of lightning, the boats brightly sailing, the catching of the sun, and the blinding vision that might come with insight. All are in some way related to light. Thomas urges his father to “rage against the dying of the light.”

Dylan Thomas died less than a year after his father in New York’s St Vincent’s Hospital. His death was likely caused by a combination of alcoholic intoxication, pneumonia and diabetes. Just before he died Thomas was working on an elegy for his father. This uncompleted poem is partly composed in the *terza rima* of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (*aba bcb*) using both true and slant rhymest begins

Too proud to die, broken and blind he died
The darkest day, and did not turn away
A cold, kind man brave in his burning pride
On that darkest day. Oh, forever may
He lie lightly, at last, on the last, crossed
Hill, under the grass, in love ...

Julia’s Clothes

Robert Herrick was a Cavalier poet (p 213) who published *Hesperides* (Greek “nymphs of evening”), a book of lyric poetry in 1648. He was much in love with life and with women. His most famous poem is *To the Virgins to make much of Time*, which begins

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old time is still a-flying;
And this same flower that smiles today,
To-morrow will be dying.

No one knows who Julia was. She was the muse and subject of several Herrick poems (see also p. 110). Her disrobing is suggested by the shift between the “liquefaction” of the silken clothes in the first verse to the “brave vibration each way free” of the second.

Sonnet 29

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featur'd like him, like him with friends possess'd,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

William Shakespeare, 1609

On First Looking into Chapman's Homer

Much have I travell'd 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-brow'd 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 star'd at the Pacific – and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise –
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

John Keats, 1817

Sonnet 29. When, in disgrace with fortune

Shakespeare published his book of sonnets in 1609. These poems (also pp 57, 166, 253) had been written over the preceding two decades. The book is dedicated to a “Mr W. H.” but no one is sure who this was. Most of Shakespeare’s sonnets, this one included, are addressed to a “fair youth.” As such they run counter to the sonnets of earlier poets, who typically addressed a beautiful but unattainable lady. Shakespeare also modified the form of the sonnet: he used three quatrains rhyming *abab cdcd efef* and finished with a rhyming couplet that usually provided a different view to that of the quatrains.

This particular sonnet describes the poet’s despair at being out of favor, lacking the looks or the talent to rise in society. He is tempted to despise himself, but he then thinks of his love, and realizes that this is worth far more than anything he might desire. This change in thought occurs during the third quatrain, and is summarized in the final couplet. Release from despair has never been more vividly portrayed as in “the lark at break of day arising from sullen earth.”

On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer

Keats’s sonnet describes the emotional epiphany that comes with seeing or understanding something for the first time. Other translations of Homer (Dryden, Pope) were available, but Keats was entranced by the vividness and vigor of Chapman’s version. In 1616, George Chapman had published the first English translation of *The Whole Works of Homer*. His translation of *The Odyssey* used iambic pentameter and rhyming couplets. The following lines begin Book I:

The Man, O Muse, inform, that many a way
Wound with his wisdom to his wished stay;
That wandered wondrous far when he the town
Of sacred Troy had sacked and shivered down.

Keats’s sonnet follows the classical Petrarchan form with a rhyme scheme *abbaabbacdcdd* with a change (*volta*) between the octave and the sestet.

In the octave, Keats states that he had previously read the works of the Greek poets – “travell’d in the realms of gold.” The “western islands” probably are those islands in the Aegean Sea near Delos, the legendary birthplace of Apollo. However, nothing had prepared him for the “pure serene” of Chapman.

In the sestet, Keats likens his reading of Homer to two other discoveries:

- (i) In 1781, William Herschel, an accomplished musician and composer, who had built himself a reflecting telescope and become a dedicated astronomer, identified the planet Uranus. Over his lifetime he published a catalogue of the stars and galaxies that is still used today.
- (ii) By 1520 Hernan Cortez had overcome the Aztecs, captured their capital of Tenochtitlan, and assumed control of Mexico. However, he was not the first European to see the Pacific Ocean. That person was Vasco Nunez de Balboa, who founded the Spanish colony of Darien in southern Panama and reached the Pacific in 1513. The emotions are right but the facts are wrong.

I

There is a gold light in certain old paintings
That represents a diffusion of sunlight.
It is like happiness, when we are happy.
It comes from everywhere and from nowhere at once, this light,
 And the poor soldiers sprawled at the foot of the cross
 Share in its charity equally with the cross.

II

Orpheus hesitated beside the black river.
With so much to look forward to he looked back.
We think he sang then, but the song is lost.
At least he had seen once more the beloved back.
 I say the song went this way: *O prolong*
 Now the sorrow if that is all there is to prolong.

III

The world is very dusty, uncle. Let us work.
One day the sickness shall pass from the earth for good.
The orchard will bloom; someone will play the guitar.
Our work will be seen as strong and clean and good.
 And all that we suffered through having existed
 Shall be forgotten as though it had never existed.

Donald Justice, 1997

Even such is time, which takes in trust
Our youth, our joys, and all we have,
And pays us but with age and dust;
Who, in the dark and silent grave,
When we have wandered all our ways,
Shuts up the story of our days.
But from this earth and grave and dust,
The Lord shall raise me up, I trust.

Walter Raleigh, 1618

There is a gold light in certain old paintings

Published late in his life, this poem presents Justice's farewell to art using identical rhymes. Though often considered an inferior form of rhyming, its very simplicity gives the poem weight. One of the identical rhymes – turned back, beloved back – can be considered “rime riche” in that the rhyming word is used in two different senses.

The first stanza deals with painting and the special gold light that is seen in old paintings like Mantegna's *Crucifixion* (1460) illustrated on the right. Like divine love it falls even on the soldiers who cast lots for Christ's garments.

The second stanza considers music and wonders what Orpheus sung after Eurydice had been taken back to Hades. In Gluck's opera *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762), Orpheus sings

Che farò senza Euridice?

Dove andrò senza il mio ben?



What will I do without Euridice?

Where will I go without my beloved?

Justice imagines that the words of Orpheus were different.

The final stanza of the poem refers to the ending of Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* (1897). The poem almost directly quotes Sonya's speech of reconciliation to Vanya after the visitors are gone and they are left alone to manage the estate. Life will go on. There will be suffering. Ultimately those who work hard should be rewarded in heaven. The greatness of Sonya's speech lies in the uncertainty about how much Sonya believes what she is saying and how much she is just pretending. The main question of the play is whether this really matters.

Even such is time

Walter Raleigh was a man of many talents. He was involved the colonization of Virginia; brought tobacco to Europe, searched for gold in South America, fought against the Spaniards, and wrote poetry. After the death of Elizabeth I, he was accused of participating in a plot against James I and in 1603 he was imprisoned in the Tower. While there, he wrote his 5-volume *History of the World*. Designed to teach statecraft to the Prince of Wales, it further angered James, who accused him of being “too sawcie in censuring Princes.” Finally released from the Tower in 1616, Raleigh returned to South America to search for the legendary city of *Eldorado*. His men were involved in unsanctioned actions against Spanish settlers in Guyana. At the behest of Spain, on his return to England Raleigh was condemned to death for treason, and beheaded in 1618. On the night before his execution, he added two lines to the end of a poem that he had written earlier. The final version serves as his epitaph. The tone of the poem changes between the two sections. The closer one comes to death, the more difficult it is to accept.

The Day Is Done

The day is done, and the darkness
Falls from the wings of Night,
As a feather is wafted downward
From an eagle in his flight.

I see the lights of the village
Gleam through the rain and the mist,
And a feeling of sadness comes o'er me
That my soul cannot resist:

A feeling of sadness and longing,
That is not akin to pain,
And resembles sorrow only
As the mist resembles the rain.

Come, read to me some poem,
Some simple and heartfelt lay,
That shall soothe this restless feeling,
And banish the thoughts of day.

Not from the grand old masters,
Not from the bards sublime,
Whose distant footsteps echo
Through the corridors of Time.

For, like strains of martial music,
Their mighty thoughts suggest
Life's endless toil and endeavor;
And to-night I long for rest.

Read from some humbler poet,
Whose songs gushed from his heart,
As showers from the clouds of summer,
Or tears from the eyelids start;

Who, through long days of labor,
And nights devoid of ease,
Still heard in his soul the music
Of wonderful melodies.

Such songs have power to quiet
The restless pulse of care,
And come like the benediction
That follows after prayer.

(ctd)

The Day Is Done

Longfellow (1807-1882) composed these verses as a “proem” or preface to *The Waif*, an anthology of 50 poems from lesser celebrated poets – poetical waifs – that he published in 1844.

The general theme is that simple poems – those characterized more by sentiment than by significance – have the ability to provide comfort. This idea was shared by other anthologists. T. E. Lawrence, the leader of the Arab Revolt during World War I (p 198), kept with him a small notebook into which he had written (from 1919-1927) poems that he had found meaningful: “some are the small poems of big men: others the better poems of small men.” This was later published in 1972 as *Minorities*. The idea also has resonance with Dylan Thomas’s poem *In My Craft or Sullen Art*, wherein he states that he writes not “for the towering dead with their nightingales or psalms but for the lovers” (p 5)

Longfellow was a master of poetic rhythm. His long poem *Evangeline* (1847) was written in dactylic hexameter, the rhythm of Homer:

| / - - | / - - | / - - | / - - | / / |
This is the forest primeval. The murmuring pines and the hemlocks
| / - - | / - - | / - | / - - | / - - | / / |
Bearded with moss, and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight

Most of the feet are dactylic (/ - -), with occasional spondaic (/ /) and trochaic (/ -) feet. The term *dactyl* derives from the Greek *dactylos*, for finger – the lengths of the syllables are like the three sections of a finger.

In *Hiawatha* (1855), Longfellow used a trochaic tetrameter:

| / - | / - | / - | / - |
By the shores of Gitche Gumee
By the shining Big Sea Water

This is an unusual rhythm in English, which tends almost always to the iambic. Basbanes (2010) called it a “tom-tom rhythm” and it has been mercilessly parodied (e.g. Lewis Carroll’s “In an age of imitation, I can claim no special merit for this slight attempt at doing what is known to be so easy.”).

So it is noteworthy that the rhythm of *The Day Is Done* is irregular. For the most part each line contains three stresses, but it is often not clear how to divide the lines into feet. This irregularity perhaps fits with idea in the poem of “the restless pulse of care” (this particular line being a regular iambic trimeter).

In the poem, Longfellow created striking similes that over time have almost become clichés; the darkness falling from the “wings of night,” the footsteps echoing “through the corridors of time,” and the cares of the day that shall “fold their tents, like the Arabs, and as silently steal away.” His likening of sadness and longing to the mist is truly memorable:

A feeling of sadness and longing,
That is not akin to pain,
And resembles sorrow only
As the mist resembles the rain.

Then read from the treasured volume
The poem of thy choice,
And lend to the rhyme of the poet
The beauty of thy voice.

And the night shall be filled with music,
And the cares, that infest the day,
Shall fold their tents, like the Arabs,
And as silently steal away.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1844

Heraclitus

They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead;
They bought me bitter news to hear and bitter tears to shed.
I wept as I remembered how often you and I
Had tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky.

And now that thou art lying, my dear old Carian guest,
A handful of grey ashes, long long ago at rest,
Still are thy pleasant voices, thy nightingales, awake,
For Death, he taketh all away, but them he cannot take.

William Johnson Cory, 1858

Vitae summa brevis spem nos vetat incohare longam

They are not long, the weeping and the laughter,
Love and desire and hate:
I think they have no portion in us after
We pass the gate.

They are not long, the days of wine and roses:
Out of a misty dream.
Our path emerges for a while, then closes
Within a dream.

Ernest Dowson, 1896

Heraclitus

This is a translation of a Greek poem by Callimachus, who worked in the library of Alexandria in the 3rd century BCE. He believed that brevity and simplicity were the essential attributes of poetry. Heraclitus was a poet from Asia Minor. The “nightingales” refer to his poems. Of these, only an epitaph remains:

I am Aretemias of Cnidos,
wife of Euphron; I died
giving birth to twins.
I left one with his father
to care for him as he grows old.
I kept with me the other
to remind me of my love.

The poem describes the death of a mother during labor with twins. The mother describes the fate of her children as an act of will. However, her choice was but a delusion. Aretemias could no more control what happened to her two boys than she could prevent her own death.

“Carian” refers to a region in southwest Turkey. In the 4th Century BCE, the capital of Caria was Halicarnassus and its ruler was Mausolus. When he died, his wife erected in his memory a huge tomb of white marble: the “mausoleum at Halicarnassus.”

The poem differs from the original in its use of repetition. This has been disparaged by some critics who feel that it betrays the restraint of Callimachus. For me, the repetition sounds like someone speaking at a memorial service. Overcome by grief, the eulogist pauses, composes himself, and then starts again. The last five words defiantly insist that the poems will not die. However, like the mausoleum at Halicarnassus and the library at Alexandria, the nightingales of Heraclitus now exist only in fragments.

Vitae summa brevis

Dowson prefaced his book of *Verses* with this short poem. The title comes from Horace (*Odes* I: 4): “Life's short span forbids us to entertain long-term hopes.” The theme is one Horace returned to in the 11th Ode:

*spem longam reseces. dum loquimur, fugerit invida
aetas: carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero*

Hold not far-reaching hopes. While we speak, envious Time
Is flying. Seize the present day! Trust not to the future.

Dowson describes both the emotional intensity and the ultimate transience of life. His own life was both passionate and brief. He died of tuberculosis and alcoholism at age 32.

The poem is quoted by Edmund, the younger son, in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956). The stage directions state “sardonically.” O'Neill was well aware how seductive these ideas were, how easy it was to fall into the life of intoxication and oblivion, where talent is wasted and hopes washed away in the beauty of what might have been.

This Be the Verse

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn
By fools in old-style hats and coats,
Who half the time were sippy-stern
And half at one another's throats.

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself.

Philip Larkin, 1971

Requiem

Under the wide and starry sky,
Dig the grave and let me lie,
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.

This be the verse you grave for me:
*Here he lies where he longed to be,
Home is the sailor, home from sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.*

Robert Louis Stevenson, 1880

Epigram

(engraved on the collar of a dog
which I gave to his Royal Highness)

I am his Highness' Dog at Kew
Pray tell me Sir, whose Dog are you?

Alexander Pope, 1738

This Be the Verse

Larkin's most famous poem is predictable: three iambic-tetrameter quatrains, each rhyming *abab*. What is unexpected is the vernacular language. The word "fuck" is uncommon in poetry (see p 88, also Larkin). This is unfortunate since the word has a great depth of connotation. As a verb it means either to have sexual intercourse with, or to damage. The latter sense was perhaps related to an unmarried woman's ruined reputation when she fucked around. The verb makes phrases indiscriminately: one can fuck with, up, over, off, and around. To "fuck up" a person is to damage that person emotionally.

Freud proposed that our character is largely determined by interactions with our parents in infancy and childhood. If our parents fail to provide the right moral and emotional support, we may not become fully competent adults. Since Freud concentrated on the sexual relations between children and their parents, "fucked up" is a fitting description for this failed result.

In the second verse the poem takes an unexpected turn. Our parents are not to blame: "they were fucked up in their turn" by their own parents. There is no excuse for the state we are in.

The final verse turns once again, and provides the conclusion to this line of thinking – "don't have any kids yourself." The reader wonders if this advice comes from Larkin or from his imagined narrator. Larkin lived his life as a bachelor and had no children. So is he serious? Or is he just fucking with you?

Larkin's title refers to a poem by Robert Louis Stevenson (below) proposing words for his epitaph. Larkin's actual grave has a plain marble stone engraved

PHILIP LARKIN
1922-1985
WRITER

Requiem

Stevenson suffered from tuberculosis throughout his life. Death was always close. A requiem (Latin, "rest") is a dirge or mass sung for the repose of the dead. This epitaph was initially written in 1880 when Stevenson was very sick in Monterey, California. At the time he also added the following comments.

You, who pass this grave, put aside hatred; love kindness; be all services remembered in your heart and all offences pardoned; and as you go down again among the living, let this be your question: can I make some one happier this day before I lie down to sleep?

Stevenson survived this illness, and later travelled to Samoa where he bought an estate in 1890. His health improved but he died suddenly of a cerebral hemorrhage in 1894. This poem is written on his grave in Samoa.

Epigram

Dogs and humans live in social hierarchies. Everyone has a master.

Poetry

I too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers that there is in it after all, a place for the genuine.

Hands that can grasp, eyes
that can dilate, hair that can rise
if it must, these things are important not because a

high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are useful; when they become so derivative as to become unintelligible, the same thing may be said for all of us, that we do not admire what we cannot understand: the bat, holding on upside down or in quest of something to

eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf under a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that feels a flea, the base ball fan, the statistician—
nor is it valid
to discriminate against “business documents and

school-books”; all these phenomena are important. One must make a distinction however: when dragged into prominence by half poets, the result is not poetry, nor till the poets among us can be “literalists of the imagination”—above insolence and triviality and can present

for inspection, “imaginary gardens with real toads in them,” shall we have it. In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand, the raw material of poetry in all its rawness, and that which is on the other hand, genuine, then you are interested in poetry.

Marianne Moore, 1924

Poetry

I, too, dislike it.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it, after all, a place for the genuine.

Marianne Moore, 1967

Poetry

Moore first published this poem in 1919 in *Others for 1919: An Anthology of the New Verse*. In her *Complete Poems* (1967) she reduced it to three lines, but included the original long version in the notes. The poem is free verse in the sense that it has no regular rhythm and no rhyme. However, the poem follows formal rules. There are five verses, each consisting of six lines except for the third. The number of syllables in each verse follows a pattern:

Verse	Line					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	19	22	11	5	8	13
2	19	21	12	5	8	13
3	19	22	8	5	-	14
4	19	22	10	5	8	13
5	19	12	11	5	8	13

Moore's poem includes three quotations, the first from Tolstoy's *Diary* (1912):

Where the boundary between prose and poetry lies, I shall never be able to understand. The question is raised in manuals of style, yet the answer to it lies beyond me. Poetry is verse; prose is not verse. Or else poetry is everything with the exception of business documents and school books.

She then quotes from Yeats's 1897 essay on *William Blake and the Imagination*:

The limitation of his view was from the very intensity of his vision; he was a too literal realist of imagination, as others are of nature; and because he believed that the figures seen by the mind's eye, when exalted by inspiration were 'eternal existences,' symbols of divine essences, he hated every grace of style that might obscure their lineaments.

The third quotation (and most memorable image of the poem) about "imaginary gardens with real toads in them" appears to be her own. The poet has invented a garden but the toad she describes tells us about real toads.

Moore is presenting two main ideas. First, we can write poetry about anything, provided that we have something original and genuine to say. Second, poetry must be both useful and understandable: "we do not admire what we cannot understand."

In *The Hatred of Poetry* (2016) Ben Lerner describes his difficulty in school when he chose to memorize the shortest poem he could find – the short version of Moore's *Poetry*. He found

fourteen of Shakespeare's lines easier to memorize than Moore's three, each one of which is interrupted by a conjunctive adverb—a parallelism of awkwardness that basically serves as its form. That, plus the four instances of "it," makes Moore sound like a priest begrudgingly admitting that sex has its function while trying to avoid using the word, an effect amplified by the deliberately clumsy enjambment of the second line and the third ("in / it"). In fact, "Poetry" is a very difficult poem to commit to memory.

The Last Wave before the Breakwater

The engine dies. The dream has by degree
Come to where the green is lightening, the rocks
Are somewhere in the civil distance—sea
Is moving up in mist, a paradox
Within this calm. Something is now to be.

The storm is distant, just the lights behind
The eyes are left of lightning's ambushade,
But still the swell is present in the mind
And now the panoply of waves is made
By memory and allegory combined.

And it is here, the last surviving wave
Which starting years away was following,
A true occasion which the heart might save
Its courage for. A very little thing,
It says to die, to rhyme into a grave.

And know the dreaming self will not relent
Or convalescent mind afford its hope,
The voyage ending here before its end,
No harbour lights, no casting of a rope,
Wordless, auxiliary and irredent.

Peter Porter, 2004.

The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
For—put them side by side—
The one the other will contain
With ease—and You—beside—

The Brain is deeper than the sea—
For—hold them—Blue to Blue—
The one the other will absorb—
As Sponges—Buckets—do—

The Brain is just the weight of God—
For—Heft them—Pound for Pound—
And they will differ—if they do—
As Syllable from Sound—

Emily Dickinson, 1862

The Last Wave before the Breakwater

A “breakwater” is a coastal structure built to protect an anchorage from the effect of weather, or to prevent the erosion of a shore. Porter uses it in the first sense. He describes an allegorical dream in which he is coming to the end of a sea-journey. As the boat nears the shore the mist becomes apparent. The storm that they have passed through is now receding behind them but the waves reaching the shore still show the storm’s power.

There is just one final wave before the breakwater and the quiet waters beyond. The wave, which started long ago, will finish the poem of his life. Yet there is no dream of heaven. At the end there will be no safe harbor, no one to greet him, no friendly words, no help.

Porter’s poem is the opposite of Tennyson’s *Crossing the Bar* (1889) both in the direction of the journey (Tennyson is going out to the sea) and in the nature of the journey’s end (Tennyson hopes to see his “Pilot face to face”).

“Irredent” (unredeemed) is used to describe land once part of a country, which by dint of war or politics is now beyond its present borders. “Irredentism” was used to describe France’s claim to Alsace-Lorraine, and Italy’s claim to Trieste and Istria. In Porter’s dream, the engine dies, the voyage ends, nothing is redeemed.

The Brain is wider than the Sky

The human brain only weighs about 3 pounds (1400 gm) but contains about 80 billion neurons, with over 10 trillion connections between them.

Emily Dickinson’s poem is every bit as complex as the brain: it also has a surface structure and a deep meaning. The poem is written in ballad form: quatrains with a prevailing iambic rhythm, with lines alternating between four and three stresses, and with only the second and fourth lines rhyming. Her characteristic punctuation is the dash which indicates a pause. Some have suggested that her handwriting distinguished between short and long dashes.

In some way, we know not yet how, the brain embodies all our thinking. It can comprehend the depth of the sea even though that is much larger than itself. To illustrate this idea, Dickinson uses the image of a sponge absorbing all the water in a bucket. More generally, the brain acts as a sponge that soaks up experience and arrives at understanding

Why is the brain the weight of God? The word “weight” has developed meanings of “importance” or “influence” in addition to “heaviness.” Dickinson is saying that the brain and God are comparable in their significance.

The divinity creates a universe in which sounds occur but only the brain can understand some of these sounds as syllables. One of the most important achievements of the human brain is language. This allows us to communicate with each other, to build a store of knowledge, and to maintain that store from one generation to another.

A God creates; the brain perceives. Modern physics suggests that the universe may exist only as it is consciously perceived.

from **Romeo and Juliet Act I: Scene5**

Romeo: O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!
It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night
Like a rich jewel in an Ethiope's ear;
Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!
So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows,
As yonder lady o'er her fellows shows.
The measure done, I'll watch her place of stand,
And, touching hers, make blessed my rude hand.
Did my heart love till now? forswear it, sight!
For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night.

Romeo: If I profane with my unwortheist hand
This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this:
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

Juliet: Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
Which mannerly devotion shows in this;
For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,
And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.

Romeo: Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?

Juliet: Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.

Romeo: O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do;
They pray, grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

Juliet: Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake.

Romeo: Then move not, while my prayer's effect I take.
[He kisses her]
Thus from my lips, by yours, my sin is purged.

Juliet: Then have my lips the sin that they have took.

Romeo: Sin from thy lips? O trespass sweetly urged!
Give me my sin again.

[He kisses her]
Juliet: You kiss by the book.

William Shakespeare, 1595

Romeo and Juliet

Shakespeare wrote most of his plays in blank verse – unrhymed iambic pentameter. However, he did use rhyme extensively in many of his early plays such as *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Richard II*, and he continued to use rhyming couplets in the plays of his maturity, typically as a way of announcing the end of a scene. *Romeo and Juliet* begins with a sonnet, the second quatrain of which is

From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life,
Whose misadventured piteous overthrows
Doth with their death bury their parents' strife.

A few couplets occur as Benvolio and Romeo talk about love but the first extensive rhyming sequence in the play occurs when Romeo notices Juliet at the Capulet ball. Here, the rhyme highlights how Romeo's attention is attracted to the beautiful young Juliet. As William James stated in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), attention is

the taking possession of the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought.

The images in these couplets add to the rhyme: Juliet is brighter than the torches, glows more than a jewel on black skin, and appears as a snow-white dove amidst crows. Nothing else matters. Romeo is in love.

This first meeting between Romeo and Juliet is in the form of a shared sonnet. In our fantasies, true love should be expressed in poetry. In reality, young lovers are typically inarticulate. Shakespeare derived his play from a 1562 poem by Arthur Brooke, who describes Romeo at this first meeting as tongue-tied:

Then she with tender hand his tender palme hath prest
What joy trow you was graffed so in Romeus brest
The soodain sweete delight hath stopped quite his tong.

The lovers' sonnet consists of two quatrains (*abab cdcd*), one each by the two lovers, followed by a sestet (*efefgg*) that is shared between them. The main conceit of the initial octet concerns a pilgrim. This may stem from Romeo's name which derives from the Italian for "wander." When pilgrims reached Jerusalem, they were rewarded with a palm leaf, and were thenceforth also known as "palmers." This allows a play on words: palm as tree and palm as hand.

The sestet moves from hands to lips and considers the idea that kisses may be both an act of worship and a sin, and furthermore may be both given and taken. The sonnet culminates in a kiss. Once the kiss is tasted they begin another sonnet, but a second kiss takes precedence over the poetry. And then they are interrupted by Juliet's nurse.

Their complex and tragic history follows from this initial meeting. The play ends with another sonnet shared between their fathers Montagu and Capulet and the Prince of Verona. The final couplet:

For never was a story of more woe
Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.

from **The Age of Anxiety**
(Malin's speech from Part I)

Let us then
Consider rather the incessant Now of
The traveller through time, his tired mind
Biased towards bigness since his body must
Exaggerate to exist, possessed by hope,
Acquisitive, in quest of his own
Absconded self yet scared to find it
As he bumbles by from birth to death
Menaced by madness; whose mode of being,
Bashful or braggart, is to be at once
Outside and inside his own demand
For personal pattern. His pure I
Must give account of and greet his Me,
That field of force where he feels he thinks,
His past present, presupposing death,
Must ask what he is in order to be
And make meaning by omission and stress,
Avid of elseness. All that exists
Matters to man; he minds what happens
And feels he is at fault, a fallen soul
With power to place, to explain every
What in his world but why he is neither
God nor good, this guilt his insoluble
Final fact, infusing his private
Nexus of needs, his noted aims
With incomprehensible comprehensive dread
At not being what he knows that before
This world was he was willed to become.

W. H. Auden (1947)

I may, I might, I must

If you will tell me why the fen
appears impassable, I then
will tell you why I think that I
can get across it if I try.

Marianne Moore, 1959

Age of Anxiety

The Age of Anxiety, Auden's longest (and perhaps least read) poem, follows the interactions between four characters who meet in a bar in lower Manhattan during World War II. Auden called it a "Baroque Eclogue." An eclogue (Greek "selection") derives from Virgil's *Eclogues* (38 BCE), in which country folk discussed the state of the world. Why he considered it "baroque" is not clear – perhaps because it has the unnecessary exuberance of baroque art, perhaps because it is concerned with the modern world rather than a pastoral arcadia

The poem begins on All Souls Night (Halloween). There are four characters: Quant (intuition), a clerk in a shipping office near the Battery; Malin (thought), an Intelligence Officer in the Canadian Air Force (apparently based on the psychiatrist John W. Thompson); Rosetta (feeling), a Jewish buyer for a department-store; and Emble (sensation), a handsome young naval recruit. They talk of many things, drink a lot, leave the bar and wind up in Rosetta's apartment. After more drinking, the older men leave, and the young man passes out on Rosetta's bed.

Most of the poem follows the rules of Old English alliterative verse, epitomized in the epic *Beowulf* (see also *The Seafarer*, p 250). Each line is divided in two by a caesura. Each half line has two stresses. Alliteration occurs between stressed syllables. The first stressed syllable in the second half-line alliterates with one or both of the stressed syllables of the first half-line. All initial vowels alliterate together. Consonant clusters, such as "sp" and "st" are separate sounds. The stresses and alliteration are shown in the following selection:

- / - - - / || - / - /
The traveller through time, his tired mind
/ - - - / - || - - / - /
Biased towards bigness since his body must

This particular speech describes the human condition: a quest for of all that is beyond the individual person: immortality, understanding, goodness. Like Freud, Auden considered the self to have different parts. The ego ("his pure I") must somehow make sense of the emotions and desires of the id ("his Me"). Auden adds to this a general sense of original sin. Man is able to understand God and good but fails to live up to them. He is filled with anxiety

At not being what he knows that before
This world was he was willed to become

Bernstein based his 2nd *Symphony* (1949, revised 1965) on Auden's poem. The piano solo in the second movement seems to me to portray Malin's speech.

I may, I might, I must

This poem crystallizes the optimism of its author, who was a great fan of baseball. Dressed in her trademark tricorn hat, she threw out the opening ball for the 1968 season of the New York Yankees. The poem describes how any player in any sport must approach a crucial moment. A fen is a marshy area with alkaline water. The oldest stadium in baseball is Boston's Fenway Park.

The Listeners

'Is there anybody there?' said the Traveller,
Knocking on the moonlit door;
And his horse in the silence champed the grasses
Of the forest's ferny floor:
And a bird flew up out of the turret,
Above the Traveller's head:
And he smote upon the door again a second time;
'Is there anybody there?' he said.
But no one descended to the Traveller;
No head from the leaf-fringed sill
Leaned over and looked into his grey eyes,
Where he stood perplexed and still.
But only a host of phantom listeners
That dwelt in the lone house then
Stood listening in the quiet of the moonlight
To that voice from the world of men:
Stood thronging the faint moonbeams on the dark stair,
That goes down to the empty hall,
Harkening in an air stirred and shaken
By the lonely Traveller's call.
And he felt in his heart their strangeness,
Their stillness answering his cry,
While his horse moved, cropping the dark turf,
'Neath the starred and leafy sky;
For he suddenly smote on the door, even
Louder, and lifted his head:—
'Tell them I came, and no one answered,
That I kept my word,' he said.
Never the least stir made the listeners,
Though every word he spake
Fell echoing through the shadowiness of the still house
From the one man left awake:
Ay, they heard his foot upon the stirrup,
And the sound of iron on stone,
And how the silence surged softly backward,
When the plunging hoofs were gone.

Walter de la Mare, 1912

The Listeners

This dream-like poem describes how a traveler knocked on the door of an ancient castle but was unable to arouse any response. The illustration at the right shows a 1924 woodcut by Raymond McGrath. Several other de la Mare poems deal with similar situations: *In Vain* (1906) describes a child knocking at a door, *The Dark Château* (1912) perhaps describes the castle, and later long poem *The Traveller* (1945) may tell what happens after he leaves the unanswered door.



The poem is concerned with the spiritual quest. As such it resonates with John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), though in the poem the quest is unfulfilled. The poem is open to many interpretations. The traveler has tried his best to find the gods, but perhaps they have died and their castle is now deserted, only phantoms remaining. Such was the spiritual malaise of the early 20th Century (cf. Hardy's *Plaint to Man*, 1914, p 224)

Knocking on the door is an important image in Christian thought:

Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.
(*Revelation* 3:20)

However, it is God who knocks, not man. Salvation comes by the grace of God, and not from the action of the seeker.

The sound of the poem is bewitching. Rhyming occurs unobtrusively only on every second line. The rhythm is irregular with frequent anapests:

| - - / | - - / | - / | -

And he felt in his heart their strangeness

The final two lines beautifully portray the silence which “surged softly backward” after the traveler gallops away.

In 1948, T.S. Eliot wrote a poem in honor of de la Mare's 75th birthday. It concludes with a description of de la Mare's “mystery of sound:”

When the nocturnal traveler can arouse
No sleeper by his call; or when by chance
An empty face peers from an empty house,
By whom: and by what means was this designed?
The whispered incantation which allows
Free passage to the phantoms of the mind?
By you: by those deceptive cadences
Wherewith the common measure is refined;
By conscious art practiced with natural ease;
By the delicate invisible web you wove –
An inexplicable mystery of sound.

Ode to a Nightingale

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
But being too happy in thine happiness,—
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees
In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singing of summer in full-throated ease.

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stained mouth;
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

(ctd)

Ode to a Nightingale

In December 1818 after the death of his brother Tom of tuberculosis, Keats took lodging with his friend Charles Brown in Wentworth Place in Hampstead, North London, staying until September 1820. There he met his muse and later fiancée, Fanny Brawne, who lived in the other half of the house. In the spring of 1819, Keats was entranced by the song of a nightingale who had made a nest in a nearby tree.

The opening lines of the Keats ode recall Horace's *Epode XIV* (30 BCE), a literal translation of the first four lines reading

Why has this feeble lethargy diffused such a total forget-fulness through my inmost senses, as if, to slake my thirst, I had quaffed some cups that induce the sleep of Lethe? (translation by Rudd, 2004)

So we see Keats in his Hampstead garden, reading Horace, contemplating Tom's death and his own mortality, and suddenly bewitched by the song of a nightingale.

The ode has eight stanzas, each of which, like an abbreviated sonnet, is composed of a quatrain rhyming *abab* followed by a sestet rhyming *cdecde*. The lines mainly follow an iambic pentameter rhythm. However, the lines sometimes begin with a spondee or a trochaic inversion:

| / / | - / | - / | - / |
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot

And occasionally the lines become completely irregular:

| / - | - / | - - / | / - | / | ?
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

The eighth line of each stanza is shortened to iambic trimeter, providing a striking emphasis. The gist of the poem can be recalled from these shortened lines.

The main theme of the poem is that

The world of the imagination offers a release from the painful world of actuality, yet at the same time it renders the world of actuality more painful by contrast. (Cleanth Brooks, 1939)

The first stanza introduces us to the nightingale, "the light winged Dryad of the trees" and tells of the happiness that its song evokes in the poet, despite his feeling as though he had drunk some "dull opiate." Ecstasy conflicts with anesthesia. Hemlock is the poison that brought about the death of Socrates. Lethe is the river in Hades whose waters caused the drinker to forget the past. A dryad is a wood nymph.

The second stanza wishes for some of the joys of life: a vintage wine, a country dance and a Provençal song. Flora is the goddess of flowers. Provence in Southern France was a center of troubadour poetry. Petrarch met Laura in Avignon, the capital of Provence. The Hippocrene ("horse spring") is a fountain on Mount Helicon in Greece, which allegedly began when the ground was struck by the hoof of Pegasus, the winged horse of poetic inspiration. The spring is sacred to the Muses.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?

John Keats (1819)

The third stanza contrasts the joys of the previous stanza with the reality of actual life: the “weariness, the fever and the fret.”

Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,

Where beauty of the loved one fades and the life of the lover is curtailed.

And so, in the fourth stanza Keats submits to his imagination. He will be no longer be carried by Bacchus, the god of wine, whose chariot is typically drawn by leopards. Rather he will fly away on the invisible wings of poetry. The result is ambiguous. Although he hopes to see the tender night arrayed with the moon as its queen and the stars as her attendants, he finds that “here there is no light” other than a few stray beams blown in on the breeze.

The fifth stanza finds his imagination failing. He cannot see the flowers that he tries to imagine, and can only guess their “soft incense.” All is in “embalmed darkness.” Everything he tries to imagine actually derives from the real world.

The sixth stanza realizes that his imagination is considering his own death. “Darkling” means growing dark; however, since the suffix “-ling” is a diminutive, the word may also refer to the nightingale that he is listening to – the little dark one. The climax of the poem comes in this stanza as Keats admits that he has “been half in love with easeful Death.” The lines continue rhapsodically:

To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!

But the stanza ends with the reality that, despite the music, death will render him no more than a lump of earth.

The seventh stanza addresses the nightingale. Not the actual one whose song initiated the poem, but the nightingale of his imagination. One that never dies. The nightingale that comforted the Moabite Ruth as she worked far from home in the fields of Boaz, whom she would later marry. The nightingale that charmed the windows of faery castles in “lands forlorn.”

The final stanza repeats that word: “forlorn.” The word derives from the German *verlieren* (to lose) and means “abandoned.” In describing the fairy castles, it means “long lost.” However, Keats realizes that the word is also an apt description of his present state. He is indeed abandoned. His imagination cannot rescue him: “the fancy cannot cheat so well.” He returns to reality as the bird’s song fades away and all that he experienced is gone. He does not know what was real and what was dream.

The poem considers many aspects of the relation between imagination and reality. Imagination is an integral part of consciousness. And human consciousness is acutely aware of its own transience, which the nightingale “among the leaves hast never known.” Reality is not aware of itself or of its passing. The nightingale – real or imagined – is not conscious. It is in artless harmony with its world, existing forever as a part of nature. Our human consciousness separates us from this harmony.

When I set out for Lyonesse,
A hundred miles away,
The rime was on the spray,
And starlight lit my lonesomeness
When I set out for Lyonesse
A hundred miles away.

What would bechance at Lyonesse
While I should sojourn there
No prophet durst declare,
Nor did the wisest wizard guess
What would bechance at Lyonesse
While I should sojourn there.

When I came back from Lyonesse
With magic in my eyes,
All marked with mute surmise
My radiance rare and fathomless,
When I came back from Lyonesse
With magic in my eyes!

Thomas Hardy, 1914

The Silken Tent

She is as in a field a silken tent
At midday when a sunny summer breeze
Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,
So that in guys it gently sways at ease,
And its supporting central cedar pole,
That is its pinnacle to heavenward
And signifies the sureness of the soul,
Seems to owe naught to any single cord,
But strictly held by none, is loosely bound
By countless silken ties of love and thought
To every thing on earth the compass round,
And only by one's going slightly taut,
In the capriciousness of summer air,
Is of the slightest bondage made aware.

Robert Frost, 1939

When I set out for Lyonesse

Lyonesse (or Lyonesse) was a legendary country west of Cornwall, the site of the final battle between King Arthur and Mordred. With the demise of King Arthur, the land of Lyonesse fell beneath the waves. Tennyson's *Morte d'Arthur* (1842, p 148) begins

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,

In 1870, Thomas Hardy, a young assistant architect, was sent to restore the parish church of St Juliot, near Boscastle in Northern Cornwall. There he met and fell in love with Emma Gifford. Their courting was recounted in Hardy's second novel *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873), though most of the plot of the novel is completely fictional. Emma and Thomas married but their marriage was not happy. After Emma died in 1912, Hardy was seized by regret that he had not done more to make their marriage work. He revisited the places in Cornwall where they had first met, and wrote *Poems of 1912-13*, an elegiac sequence of 21 poems, which includes *Beeny Cliff* (p 128). At the same time, he finally published this poem, first written in 1870 when he fell in love with Emma.

The "rime was on the spray" means that the spray from the waves turned to ice as it touched a surface, though Hardy was certainly aware of the links between "rime" and "rhyme."

The poem recalls the joy of falling madly in love. The first and second lines of each verse repeat at the end of the verse; the first and fifth lines of each verse all end (and the fourth line rhymes) with "Lyonesse." Such incantatory repetitions evoke the "radiance rare and fathomless" of a young man's passion.

The Silken Tent

After the death his wife Elinor in 1938, the 64-year-old Frost began an affair with the 39-year-old Kay Morrison, the wife of Ted Morrison, the director of the Breadloaf Writers' Conference at Middlebury College in Vermont. Kay became his mistress, muse and amanuensis for the rest of his life. She remained married, the illicitness of their affair adding to the excitement. Frost said that, though her husband gave her a ring to keep her virtuous, he gave her "an earring for erring" and "a necklace for being so sinfully reckless."

Frost wrote this poem for his late-in-life lover. The sonnet has a Shakespearean format and is expressed in one complete sentence using the single image of a silken tent to describe his love. The tent exists in a field at midday, like a woman in her prime. The guy ropes that hold her steady have relaxed and the tent sways "at ease." Nevertheless, the central cedar pole holds fast. Frost was impressed by Kay's independence and poise. She remained her own person despite having affairs with Frost and with several other men.

The central image of the poem may allude to the *Song of Songs* (1:5) wherein Solomon's lover says that she is comely "as the tents of Kedar."

The Tyger

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

In what distant deeps or skies.
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

William Blake, 1794

Epitaph on a Tyrant

Perfection, of a kind, was what he was after,
And the poetry he invented was easy to understand;
He knew human folly like the back of his hand,
And was greatly interested in armies and fleets;
When he laughed, respectable senators burst with laughter,
And when he cried the little children died in the streets.

W. H Auden, 1939

The Tyger

Blake's poem, the most widely anthologized poem in English, was published in his *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, a book is concerned with the contrary states of human life. *The Tyger* is brother to *The Lamb* which begins

Little Lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?
Gave thee life & bid thee feed
By the stream & o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing, wooly, bright

The poem is in rhyming couplets arranged in 6 quatrains with the last quatrain repeating the first. The prevailing rhythm is trochaic (/ -) tetrameter with the last syllable of the line removed (catalectic). Blake also uses alliteration (frame thy fearful symmetry, distant deeps) and internal rhymes (dread/deadly) to accentuate the driving rhythm of the questions.

No one has thoroughly understood the beautiful image of the stars throwing down their spears. Some have suggested that it describes the defeat of the rebel angels in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667, Book VI)

they, astonisht, all resistance lost,
All courage; down their idle weapons dropt.

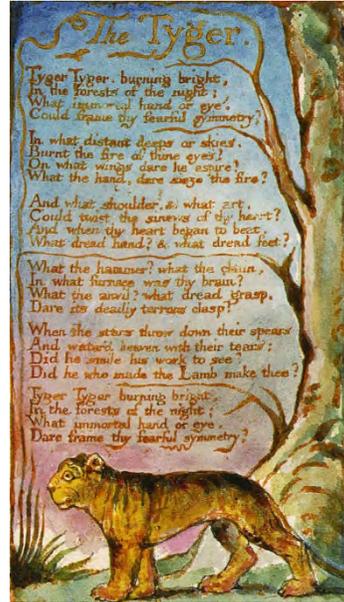
Others have considered the image as representing the dawn of creation, when the stars of night vanish in the brightness of the new day.

The essential idea of the poem is that the universe contains both good and evil. There is a fearful symmetry to creation. If there is a God, he is to be feared as well as loved. He can both punish and forgive our sins. We need to reconcile these contraries.

Epitaph on a Tyrant

In the 1930s Europe saw the rise of four murderous dictators: Josef Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Francisco Franco, and Benito Mussolini. They anointed themselves as leaders of their people: Father of Nations, Führer, Caudillo, Duce. They sought to create the master race and the perfect state. They understood how to use fear to get people to do things. The elementary poetry of their slogans served not to promote ideals but simply to unify the people behind them. They caused the death of millions.

In *The Rise of The Dutch Republic* (1856) John Motley wrote that when William of Orange (1533-84), the beloved leader of the Dutch Revolt against the Spanish Hapsburgs, died, "the little children cried in the streets." Auden reverses the verbs to describe the murderous activity of our more modern leaders.



A Toccata of Galuppi's

Oh Galuppi, Baldassaro, this is very sad to find!
I can hardly misconceive you; it would prove me deaf and blind;
But although I take your meaning, 'tis with such a heavy mind!

Here you come with your old music, and here's all the good it brings.
What, they lived once thus at Venice where the merchants were the kings,
Where Saint Mark's is, where the Doges used to wed the sea with rings?

Ay, because the sea's the street there; and 'tis arched by . . . what you call
. . . Shylock's bridge with houses on it, where they kept the carnival:
I was never out of England – it's as if I saw it all.

Did young people take their pleasure when the sea was warm in May?
Balls and masks begun at midnight, burning ever to mid-day,
When they made up fresh adventures for the morrow, do you say?

Was a lady such a lady, cheeks so round and lips so red, –
On her neck the small face buoyant, like a bell-flower on its bed,
O'er the breast's superb abundance where a man might base his head?

Well, and it was graceful of them — they'd break talk off and afford
— She, to bite her mask's black velvet — he, to finger on his sword,
While you sat and played Toccatas, stately at the clavichord?

What? Those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths diminished, sigh on sigh
Told them something? Those suspensions, those solutions – “Must we die?”
Those commiserating sevenths – “Life might last! we can but try!

“Were you happy?” – “Yes.” – “And are you still as happy?” – “Yes. And you?”
– “Then, more kisses!” – “Did I stop them, when a million seemed so few?”
Hark, the dominant's persistence till it must be answered to!

So, an octave struck the answer. Oh, they praised you, I dare say!
“Brave Galuppi! that was music! good alike at grave and gay!
“I can always leave off talking when I hear a master play!”

Then they left you for their pleasure: till in due time, one by one,
Some with lives that came to nothing, some with deeds as well undone,
Death stepped tacitly and took them where they never see the sun.

But when I sit down to reason, think to take my stand nor swerve,
While I triumph o'er a secret wrung from nature's close reserve,
In you come with your cold music till I creep thro' every nerve.

(ctd)

A Toccata of Galuppi's

This dramatic monologue describes the thoughts evoked by a piece of Venetian music. A toccata is a “touch piece”– something that highlights the technical virtuosity of the performer. It is not clear whether the speaker of the poem is listening to someone else play the toccata or whether he is playing it himself. My sense of the poem is the latter. He is paying too much attention to the chords to be simply listening.

Browning was an adept keyboard player. However, he is not the speaker of the poem, who we soon find out later “was never out of England.” Rather the speaker is someone who knows physics, and “something of geology.” He realizes that souls do not rise to heaven, but like butterflies proceed to extinction. He wishes it were not so, but finds no consolation in the music that he is playing.

Baldassare Galuppi (1706-1785) was a Venetian composer and musician. He was born on the island of Burano in the Venetian lagoon and often signed his name as *Il Buranello*. He rose rapidly to fame in Venice as a composer of operas and as a keyboard virtuoso. His music was characterized by “*vaghezza, chiarezza, e buona modulazione*” (vaguensss – perhaps in the sense variability or charm, clearness, and good modulation).

Most of Galuppi's keyboard works were published as sonatas. However, there are some manuscripts in which these sonatas are named toccatas. Whether Browning owned the scores of one or more of these is not known. Charles van der Buren (1923) wondered whether Browning was referring to a D-minor sonata/toccata which indeed uses minor thirds, but it is likely that no particular piece needs to be identified. Many of the Galuppi sonatas have a slow and melancholy first movement followed by a faster conclusion.

Browning's poem is written in fifteen rhymed tercets using a trochaic (/ -) rhythm. The stress falling at the beginning of the poetic foot makes it similar to music which, in most types of Western music, accents the first beat of a bar. Browning's lines are long – with eight stresses – and the last foot is missing its final unstressed syllable. The full name for the prevailing rhythm is thus trochaic octameter catalectic (*kata* during, down + *lektikos* stop):

/ / - / / - | / - / / - | / - / / - | / - | / / |
Oh Galuppi, Baldassaro, this is very sad to find!
/ / - | / - | / - | / - | / - | / - | / - | / / |
I can hardly misconceive you; it would prove me deaf and blind;
/ / - | / - | / - | / - | / - | / - | / - | / / |
But although I take your meaning, 'tis with such a heavy mind!

The poetic rhythm does not give the same sound as the music. However, its sprightliness does reflect the *style galant* of 18th Century Venetian music.

Browning describes the music very well. “Lesser” or minor thirds are indeed plaintive chords, as are the dissonant diminished sixths. Dominant chords provide an instability that needs to be resolved, often by proceeding to an octave chord.

Yes, you, like a ghostly cricket, creaking where a house was burned:
“Dust and ashes, dead and done with, Venice spent what Venice earned.
“The soul, doubtless, is immortal – where a soul can be discerned.
“Yours for instance: you know physics, something of geology,
“Mathematics are your pastime; souls shall rise in their degree;
“Butterflies may dread extinction, – you'll not die, it cannot be!
“As for Venice and her people, merely born to bloom and drop,
“Here on earth they bore their fruitage, mirth and folly were the crop:
“What of soul was left, I wonder, when the kissing had to stop?
“Dust and ashes!” So you creak it, and I want the heart to scold.
Dear dead women, with such hair, too – what's become of all the gold
Used to hang and brush their bosoms? I feel chilly and grown old.

Robert Browning, 1855

Postscript

And some time make the time to drive out west
Into County Clare, along the Flaggy Shore,
In September or October, when the wind
And the light are working off each other
So that the ocean on one side is wild
With foam and glitter, and inland among stones
The surface of a slate-grey lake is lit
By the earthed lightning of a flock of swans,
Their feathers roughed and ruffling, white on white,
Their fully grown headstrong-looking heads
Tucked or cresting or busy underwater.
Useless to think you'll park and capture it
More thoroughly. You are neither here nor there,
A hurry through which known and strange things pass
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.

Seamus Heaney, 1996

The Venetian Republic lasted from 697 to 1797 CE. The city was founded on the islands of the Venetian lagoon. The Rialto district (and its famous bridge) was named for the “High Bank” of the main water channel between the islands. The republic was governed by a Council representing the richest families of the city, and led by a Doge, elected by that Council and serving for life. The wealth of the republic derived from overseas trade, and every year on Ascension Day the Doge dropped a consecrated ring into the Adriatic Sea in the *Sposalizio del Mare* (Marriage of the Sea) to wed the city to the sea.

After the 15th Century, the Italian wars and the rise of the Ottoman Empires caused Venice to fall into decline. The city became a place of decadence, where the aristocrats of Europe went for pleasure, where courtesans vied with musicians to see who could make the most out of the night. The speaker talks in wonder of the beautiful women and their lovers. In 1797 the city was captured by Napoleon, and the republic finally came to an end – “dust and ashes, dead and done with, Venice spent what Venice earned.”

The speaker imagines all those beautiful women with their abundant bosoms and their gold necklaces, but realizes that they are now no longer. He worries where was the soul in all their amorous adventures. His science suggests that there was and is no soul. Though he yearns not to die, his reason tells him otherwise, and the music provides no consolation. He feels “chilly and grown old.”

Postscript

This was the last poem in Heaney’s collection *Spirit Level*. It recounts his experience on a drive with friends along the southern coast of Galway Bay.

Lough Muree is a salt-water lagoon in County Clare, separated from Galway Bay by the Flaggy Shore. The latter is named after the limestone flags (rock looking like pavement) left by the glaciers that moved over the area many thousand years ago. The glaciers ground down and incised the rocks to leave a “glacio-karst” landscape. The lough is home to a flock of swans.

Heaney’s poem uses unrhymed five-stress lines without any regular rhythm. It sounds very conversational. The poem’s great attractions are its way of speaking – the invitational cadence of “and some time make the time” – the remembered intensity of “wild with foam and glitter” – and its vivid imagery – the “earthed lightning” capturing the brightness of the white swans on the dark grey lake.

For me the most memorable line in the poem is its description of the human condition – transient, both knowing and unknowing:

You are neither here nor there,
A hurry through which known and strange things pass

Some experiences come quickly are gone almost before we realize them. Heaney later told Dennis O’Driscoll (2008) that “I had this quick sidelong glimpse of something flying past.” But if the moment is caught in time, nature can then sometimes completely overwhelm us with its beauty – “catch the heart off guard and blow it open.”

The Embankment

(The fantasia of a fallen gentleman on a cold, bitter night.)

Once, in finesse of fiddles found I ecstasy,
In the flash of gold heels on the hard pavement.
Now see I
That warmth's the very stuff of poesy.
Oh, God, make small
The old star-eaten blanket of the sky,
That I may fold it round me and in comfort lie.

T. E. Hulme, 1912

The Sunlight on the Garden

The sunlight on the garden
Hardens and grows cold,
We cannot cage the minute
Within its nets of gold,
When all is told
We cannot beg for pardon.

Our freedom as free lances
Advances towards its end;
The earth compels, upon it
Sonnets and birds descend;
And soon, my friend,
We shall have no time for dances.

The sky was good for flying
Defying the church bells
And every evil iron
Siren and what it tells:
The earth compels,
We are dying, Egypt, dying

And not expecting pardon,
Hardened in heart anew,
But glad to have sat under
Thunder and rain with you,
And grateful too
For sunlight on the garden.

Louis MacNeice, 1937

The Embankment

The Victoria Embankment, completed in 1870, was one of the great achievements of civil engineering in London. The embankment, containing an underground railway and surmounted by a road, was built on the north bank of the Thames from Blackfriars Bridge to Westminster. Gardens planted on the recovered land became a place where those down on their luck could sleep in the rough.

Ezra Pound arranged for *The Complete Poetical Works of T. E. Hulme* – five brief poems of which this is one – to be published in *The New Age* magazine in 1912. These poems became a major source for the Imagist movement (see p 36).

The most striking feature of the poem is the image of the sky as a moth-eaten blanket through which the starlight glimmers. The sound of the poem with its internal rhymes (cold, gold, old, fold) and its alliteration (finesse fiddles flash) is marvelous. Most important is the poet's realization that keeping warm on a freezing night is the true subject of poetry.

The Sunlight on the Garden

Louis MacNeice married Mary Ezra in 1929. His father, a bishop in the Church of England, was horrified that he had married a Jew, and Mary's family insisted on a pre-marital neurological evaluation because MacNeice's brother had Down's Syndrome. The couple separated in 1934 and were divorced in 1936, though they continued to have deep affections for each other. At the time of their separation, MacNeice was living in a ground-floor flat in Hampstead near the house where Keats had written *Ode to a Nightingale* (p 21).

The poem uses 4 stanzas each containing of 6 lines. The most fascinating aspect of the poem is its intricate rhyme scheme. The end of the first line rhymes with the beginning of the second and the end of the third with the beginning of the fourth. The fourth line is the focus of the stanza. It differs from the others by having only two stresses rather than three and by rhyming its end word with the end word of the fourth line. The stanza then ends with a line that rhymes with the first line, the process coming full circle. This sense of completion is also conveyed by having the final line of the fourth stanza refer back to the first line of the first stanza. Jon Stallworthy (1996) describes the movement of the poem as more spiral than circular, its end "revealing ... a wisdom not present in the beginning."

"We are dying Egypt dying" recalls the words of the dying Anthony in Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra* (IV: 15):

I am dying, Egypt, dying. Only
I here importune death awhile, until
Of many thousand kisses the poor last
I lay upon thy lips.

At about the same time as this poem, MacNeice wrote his *Last Will and Testament* in *Letters from Iceland* (1937), a compendium of essays and poems by Auden and MacNeice, saying of Mary:

And may her hours be gold and without number.

from **The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam**
(1st Edition)

I

Awake! for Morning in the Bowl of Night
Has flung the Stone that puts the Stars to Flight:
And Lo! the Hunter of the East has caught
The Sultan's Turret in a Noose of Light.

XI

Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough,
A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse—and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness—
And Wilderness is Paradise enow.

XIV

The Worldly Hope men set their Hearts upon
Turns Ashes—or it prospers; and anon,
Like Snow upon the Desert's dusty Face
Lighting a little Hour or two—is gone.

XXVI

Oh, come with old Khayyam, and leave the Wise
To talk; one thing is certain, that Life flies;
One thing is certain, and the Rest is Lies;
The Flower that once has blown for ever dies.

XXVII

Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Doctor and Saint, and heard great Argument
About it and about: but evermore
Came out by the same Door as in I went.

XXXII

There was a Door to which I found no Key:
There was a Veil past which I could not see:
Some little Talk awhile of ME and THEE
There seemed—and then no more of THEE and ME.

XXXVI

For in the Market-place, one Dusk of Day,
I watch'd the Potter thumping his wet Clay:
And with its all obliterated Tongue
It murmur'd—"Gently, Brother, gently, pray!"

(ctd)

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam

Omar Khayyam (1048-1131 CE) was a Persian mathematician, astronomer, philosopher and poet. Khayyam means “tentmaker” in Arabic, the name likely deriving from the trade of his ancestors. Khayyam wrote poetry in the form of quatrains (*rubai* in Farsi/Persian, plural *rubaiyat*) with an *aaba* (occasionally *aaaa*) rhyme scheme. Rubai were considered a minor poetic form and often dealt with subjects, such as wine and women, not considered proper by the religious authorities. Since later poets often attributed their rubaiyat to Khayyam to escape censure, no one knows how many of Khayyam’s rubaiyat are authentic.

Edward Fitzgerald, though belonging to one of the richest families in England, lived unostentatiously near Woodbridge, Suffolk. Not needing employment, he devoted his life after graduating from Cambridge University to studying languages and writing poetry. In 1856 a friend of his gave him a copy of some rubai of Khayyam held in Oxford’s Bodleian Library. Fitzgerald was entranced, obtained further examples from other sources, and worked on translating his collection over the next two years. Fitzgerald kept the rhyme scheme of the originals, but his rhythm was strictly iambic pentameter and unrelated to the sound of the Persian poetry.

Unable to get them accepted in *Fraser’s Magazine*, Fitzgerald published his rubaiyat anonymously with a London bookdealer in 1859 at his own expense. The booklet of 75 quatrains did not sell, and was ultimately consigned to the penny-box (the Victorian version of remaindering). Oblivion beckoned. However, someone bought a copy, and told his friends; over the years the book slowly became recognized, and a second edition (expanded to 110 quatrains) was published in 1868. Thenceforth, *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* became the world’s most famous book of poetry.

Although far from literal, the translations accurately convey the thought if not the exact wording of the originals. Some of the translations collapse two original rubaiyat into one. The following is a more literal translation (Peter Avery and John Heath-Stubbs, 1979) of Fitzgerald’s *Rubai XI*:

I need a jug of wine and a book of poetry,
Half a loaf for a bite to eat,
Then you and I, seated in a deserted spot,
Will have more wealth than a Sultan’s realm.

The original rubaiyat in the various collections have no clear sequence. Fitzgerald loosely ordered his translations to form one long poem, suggesting that Khayyam

begins with Dawn pretty sober and contemplative; then as he thinks and drinks, grows savage, blasphemous, etc. and then again sobers down into melancholy at nightfall. (letter to his publisher, 1868)

Rubai I describes the rising sun and *Rubai LXXIV* the rising moon. The first stanza presents one of the most vivid opening images of any poem. Flinging a stone into a cup was the signal for “To Horse!” in the desert (Arbery, 1959). The Hunter in the East – the rising sun – gallops out and captures the “Sultan’s Turret in a Noose of Light”

XLII

And lately, by the Tavern Door agape,
Came stealing through the Dusk an Angel Shape,
 Bearing a vessel on his Shoulder; and
He bid me taste of it; and 'twas—the Grape!

XLIX

'Tis all a Chequer-board of Nights and Days
Where Destiny with Men for Pieces plays:
 Hither and thither moves, and mates, and slays,
And one by one back in the Closet lays.

L

The Ball no Question makes of Ayes and Noes,
But Right or Left as strikes the Player goes;
 And He that toss'd Thee down into the Field,
He knows about it all—HE knows—HE knows!

LI

The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
 Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.

LII

And that inverted Bowl we call The Sky,
Whereunder crawling coop't we live and die,
 Lift not thy hands to IT for help—for It
Rolls impotently on as Thou or I.

LIII

With Earth's first Clay They did the Last Man knead,
And then of the Last Harvest sow'd the Seed:
 Yea, the first Morning of Creation wrote
What the Last Dawn of Reckoning shall read.

LXXIII

Ah, Love! could thou and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
 Would not we shatter it to bits—and then
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's Desire!

Edward FitzGerald, 1859

Khayyam's themes in his poetry included the transience of human life, the inevitability of fate, the consolation of wine, and the love of women. Some have suggested that Khayyam may have been a Sufi, and that allusions to wine in his poetry were related to how wine can facilitate their experience of the divine (cf *Rubai XLII*). Most scholars, however, believe him to have been an agnostic about God and a skeptic about the religious systems of his day. These characteristics resonated with the religious doubts of the Victorian age. In the rubaiyat that he selected for translation, Fitzgerald tended toward the quatrains about fate and justice and away from those about wine and women.

A prominent concern of the Victorian age was the idea of predestination, that we had no power to alter the cause of our lives but must submit to fate. Before the Enlightenment, this was attributed to an omniscient and omnipotent God. Although it dispensed with the need for God, science did not alter the course of fate: material determinism replaced divine predestination. *Rubayit XLIX-LI* provide striking images for this determinism: our lives are played out passively as though we were the pieces in a chess game, the pins in a game of bowls or the words written down on paper.

The principles of determinism were set out by Pierre-Simon Laplace (1812):

We ought then to regard the present state of the universe as the effect of its anterior state and as the cause of the one which is to follow. Given for one instant an intelligence which could comprehend all the forces by which nature is animated and the respective situation of the beings who compose it – an intelligence sufficiently vast to submit these data to analysis – it would embrace in the same formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the lightest atom; for it, nothing would be uncertain and the future, as the past, would be present to its eyes.

If determinism is taken seriously, then the present is determined by the immediate past, that past itself determined by what preceded it, and so on. Ultimately, everything must have been decided when the world began. All our present actions were determined 13.8 billion years ago at the moment of the Big Bang. *Rubait LIII* restates this using the ideas of the Christian religion – the creation when man was made from the dust of the earth and the final judgment when everything is harvested and the grain separated from the tares.

There are two ways to accept determinism. One is to retreat into a passive melancholy and give up trying to change the world. The other is to accept enthusiastically what is set out for one's life: to fulfil one's destiny.

Rubai LXXIII contains the essence of Khayyam and of Fitzgerald. The world – “this sorry Scheme of Things entire” – is not as it should be. Perhaps we might change it? But by this time, night is near, the moon is rising and Khayyam may not live much longer (*Rubai LXXIV*):

Ah, Moon of my Delight who know'st no wane,
The Moon of Heav'n is rising once again
How oft hereafter rising shall she look
Through this same garden after me – in vain!

To be or not to be

from *Hamlet* Act III: Scene 1

To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. To die: to sleep,
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die: to sleep;
To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub:
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause—there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life.
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of dispriz'd love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of th'unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.

William Shakespeare, 1601

To be or not to be

This soliloquy, the most famous sequence of words in English, has been interpreted in many ways. Like all great art it is “tolerant of a wide variety of readings” (Kermode, 1975). The speech has three parts: Hamlet contemplates the nature of human existence; within this context he considers whether someone should take his own life; he then worries about how to decide on action. Hamlet distances himself from the questions, never once using “I” or “me”

Religion and philosophy have long considered the question of being. The *Creation Hymn* of the Hindu *Rigveda* (2nd Millennium BCE) states that before the beginning of the universe was “neither being nor not-being.” The Greek philosopher Parmenides (5th Century BCE) proposed that truth can only be determined by distinguishing what is from what is not. The Existentialists of the 20th Century wondered why there were beings at all instead of nothing.

To evaluate the choice between life and death, Hamlet likens death to sleep. This comparison also occurs in Thomas Browne’s *Urn Burial* (1658):

Since the brother of death [sleep] daily haunts us with dying mementos, and time that grows old itself, bids us hope no long duration: Diuturnity [lasting forever] is a dream and folly of expectation.

Two responses follow Hamlet’s “to die: to sleep.” The first is that death will end “the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to.” The second is a question: “what dreams may come?” Hamlet is thinking of the various afterlives that we have imagined (dreamed), many more frightening than any mortal life. Hamlet realizes that “we should rather bear the ills we have than fly to others that we know not of.”

The speech concludes with the difficulty of making decisions. Human beings imagine the consequences of actions. This playing out of possible futures can help us decide about what to do. But if the imagined consequences do not clearly favor one or other action, we may be unable to act. Hamlet does not know what to do now that Claudius has assumed a throne that rightfully should have been his. “Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.” The word “conscience” was originally used in English to mean consciousness (as it still does in French). By the late Middle Ages, it was also being used to denote a personal sense of right and wrong. Hamlet uses both senses.

The soliloquy has left us with several memorable words and expressions. The “mortal coil” that Hamlet imagines shuffling off (removing) is all that is inherent in human life. “Contumely” is contemptuous behavior. “Despriz’d” is undervalued (and thus unrequited). “Quietus” now means death in the sense of a release from life. The term originated in the Latin expression “quietus est” used to denote the discharge of a debt. A “bodkin” is a small dagger or strong needle. Shakespeare’s father would have used one in sewing leather gloves. A “fardel” is a burden. “Bourn” is an old word for boundary. “Pitch” is the uppermost height reached by a soaring falcon before it swoops down for the kill. “Moment” has two distinct meanings: a brief period of time, and the significance of something. Hamlet uses both: he has important decisions to make and very little time.

old age sticks
up Keep
Off
signs)&

youth yanks them
down(old
age
cries No

Tres)&(pas)
youth laughs
(sing
old age

scolds Forbid
den Stop
Must
n't Don't

&)youth goes
right on
gr
owing old.

e e cummings, 1958

On The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Deyman

A winter so cold that, walking on the Breestraat and you passed from sun to shadow, you could feel the difference run down your skull like water. It was the hunger winter of 1656 when Black Jan took up with a whore named Elsje Ottje and for a time they prospered. But one icy January day Black Jan was observed robbing a cloth merchant's house. He ran, fell, knifed a man and was hanged on the twenty-seventh of January. How he fared then is no doubt known to you: the cold weather permitted Dr. Deyman to turn the true eye of medicine on Black Jan for three days. One wonders if Elsje ever saw Rembrandt's painting, which shows her love thief in violent frontal foreshortening, so that his pure soles seem almost to touch the chopped-open cerebrum. Cut and cut deep to find the source of the problem, Dr. Deyman is saying as he parts the brain to either side like hair. Sadness comes groping out of it.

Anne Carson, 1992

old age sticks

The poem deals with how the old lay down rules against which the young rebel. In the poem the comments of the old are placed in parentheses and break through the comments of the young. The old become limited in what they can do and try to impose these limits upon the young. They forbid what they find no longer possible. They refuse to give up to the young what they feel is rightfully theirs.

Although the poem initially appears random, it follows very strict rules. Each of the 5 stanzas contains 4 lines and the number of syllables in each line follows the sequence 3-2-1-2. Life proceeds from youth to age according to unyielding laws.

The first closing parenthesis occurs without any paired opening. This suggests that the cycling of youth into age is open-ended and that the poem began before its first line when those that were old now were originally young.

Fracturing words and phrases at the line-breaks allows for multiple meanings. Old age slows down (“sticks”) but erects (“sticks up”) signs. The line “up keep” when separated from the preceding and following lines (“sticks up Keep Off signs”) suggests the increasing physical maintenance required as we grow old. In the second stanza, old age “cries No” but, when we read the next stanza, we realize that this is really just another assertion that they are in control (Notres is “ours”). And then we see the combination No +tres+pas+sing. In the third stanza we find old age scolding youth for its singing. This is “forbidden.” But then old age gets confused and doesn’t really know what one must and must not do.

In the final stanza, youth grows “gr” but cannot avoid growing old. In keeping with this inevitability, the poem ends just as it began with the word “old.”

On The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Deyman

This is one of Carson’s “short talks,” a sequence of brief prose poems. This particular talk is concerned with a 1656 painting by Rembrandt. Much of the canvas was destroyed by fire in 1723. The original painting was meant to show the professor and his students in much the same way as the earlier painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* (1632). All that remains is the cadaver of Joris Fonteyn, known as Black Jan, and the professor’s assistant holding the calvarium which has just been removed to expose the brain.

Carson uses two striking images – the transition from sun to shadow like water on the skull, and the parting of the brain like hair. She remarks on the foreshortening – Rembrandt was using Mantegna’s *Lamentation of the Dead Christ* (1480) as a model. And she sadly links the soles of the feet to the soul of Black Jan, recently released from his cerebrum.



To His Coy Mistress

Had we but World enough, and Time,
This coyness Lady were no crime.
We would sit down, and think which way
To walk, and pass our long Love's Day.
Thou by the Indian Ganges side
Should'st Rubies find: I by the Tide
Of Humber would complain. I would
Love you ten years before the Flood:
And you should if you please refuse
Till the Conversion of the Jews.
My vegetable Love should grow
Vaster than Empires, and more slow.
A hundred years should go to praise
Thine Eyes, and on thy Forehead Gaze.
Two hundred to adore each breast:
But thirty thousand to the rest.
An Age at least to every part,
And the last Age should show your Heart.
For Lady you deserve this State;
Nor would I love at lower rate.

But at my back I always hear
Times winged chariot hurrying near:
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast Eternity.
Thy Beauty shall no more be found,
Nor, in thy marble Vault, shall sound
My echoing Song: then Worms shall try
That long preserv'd Virginity:
And your quaint Honour turn to dust;
And into ashes all my Lust.
The Grave's a fine and private place,
But none I think do there embrace.

Now therefore, while the youthful hew
Sits on thy skin like morning dew,
And while thy willing Soul transpires
At every pore with instant Fires,
Now let us sport us while we may;
And now, like am'rous birds of prey,
Rather at once our Time devour,
Than languish in his slow-chapt pow'r

(ctd)

To His Coy Mistress

During the English Civil War and the strict Puritanism that followed, many poets such as Marvell proposed that it was better to seize the moment than to wait for fulfilment in eternity. The idea goes back to Horace's *Odes* I:11 (23 BCE):

dum loquimur, fugerit invida
aetas: carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero.

While we speak, envious Time
Is flying. Seize the present day! Trust not to the future

Marvell's poem is probably the most famous of the English *Carpe diem* poems, together with Herrick's *To the Virgins, To Make Much of Time* (1648):

Gather ye Rose-buds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying:
And this same flower that smiles today,
Tomorrow will be dying.

Marvell's poem is written using rhyming couplets and iambic tetrameter. The first verse suggest how the poet and his mistress might engage in courtship for years, provided that they had "but World enough, and Time" Marvell would complain on the banks of the Humber near his home in Hull while his mistress would refuse his advances until the Conversion of the Jews, an event prophesied for the end of time in *Romans* 11:26. The second stanza points out the problems with this idea: Time is passing and Death is coming:

The Grave's a fine and private place,
But none I think do there embrace

The third stanza therefore urges his mistress not to be slowly devoured ("slow chapt") by time but to

tear our Pleasures with rough strife,
Thorough the Iron gates of Life.

The poem has been widely referred to in subsequent literature. Archibald MacLeish based his poem *You, Andrew Marvell* (p 61) on its ideas, and T.S Eliot alludes to it in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (p. 46).

A. D. Hope imagined the mistress's rejoinder (1981), beginning

Since you have world enough and time
Sir, to admonish me in rhyme,
Pray Mr Marvell, can it be
You think to have persuaded me?
Then let me say: you want the art
To woo, much less to win my heart.
The verse was splendid, all admit,
And, sir, you have a pretty wit.
All that indeed your poem lacked
Was logic, modesty, and tact,
Slight faults and ones to which I own,
Your sex is generally prone;

Let us roll all our Strength, and all
Our sweetness, up into one Ball:
And tear our Pleasures with rough strife,
Thorough the Iron gates of Life.
Thus, though we cannot make our Sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

Andrew Marvell, 1650?

Kubla Khan

Or, a vision in a dream. A Fragment.

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round;
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momently was forced:
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:
And mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momently the sacred river.
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean;
And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far *(ctd)*

Kubla Khan

Coleridge wrote this poem in 1797 or 1798 while living in a lonely cottage in Nether Stowey, Somerset. When it was finally published in 1816, Coleridge provided a brief preface describing how the poem was composed.

After taking two grains of opium for some gastrointestinal problems Coleridge lapsed into a state of reverie. He had been reading a book by Samuel Purchas entitled *Purchas, His Pilgrimes* (1613), and was intrigued by a sentence describing what Marco Polo had reported in his visit to China in 1275.

In Xandu did Cublai Can build a stately Pallace, encompassing sixteen miles of plaine ground with a wall, wherein are fertile Meddowes, pleasant Springs, delightfull streames, and all sorts of beasts of chase and game, and in the midst thereof a sumptuous house of pleasure, which may be moved from place to place.

Kublai Khan (1212-1294) was the grandson of Genghis Khan. In 1260 he became the Mongol Emperor and in 1271 founded the Yuan dynasty in China. Xanadu (also known Shangdu) is located about 350 km north of Beijing.

During his opium-induced reverie Coleridge believed that he had composed about 200-300 lines of poetry:

all the images rose up before him as things, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort. On awaking he appeared to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved. At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock, and detained by him above an hour, and on his return to his room, found, to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away. (from preface)

From Coleridge's description of how the poem was written, we can presume that the first part of the poem to "sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean" (lines 1-28) was written before the poet was interrupted, and that the next 8 lines up to "sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!" was what he was able to remember after the person from Porlock had left. The final section of the poem would then be a later commentary on the fragment of his dream. Here Coleridge states the perhaps if he could revive his muse – the damsel with a dulcimer – he might be able to recreate his opium-induced dream.

Purchas also reported the travels of Francisco Alvarez (1465–1541), a Portuguese explorer who had visited Abyssinia (present-day Ethiopia) and described Mount Amara (likely Coleridge's Mount Ahora) near Lake Tana, the source of the Blue Nile. Coleridge had also read more recent travel books such as James Bruce's *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* (1790) which described the cataracts on the upper Nile River, and Thomas Maurice's *The History of Hindostan* (1795) which described the caves of ice in the glaciers of the Himalayas and the fountains of Cashmere. All these reports were mingled in Coleridge's dream.

Ancestral voices prophesying war!
The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves;
Where was heard the mingled measure
From the fountain and the caves.
It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssinian maid
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

Samuel Coleridge, 1797

The Jewel Stairs' Grievance

The jewelled steps are already quite white with dew,
It is so late that the dew soaks my gauze stockings,
And I let down the crystal curtain
And watch the moon through the clear autumn.

Li Bai, 8th Century, translated by Ezra Pound, 1909

Notes: Jewel stairs, therefore a palace. Grievance, therefore there is something to complain of. Gauze stockings, therefore a court lady, not a servant who complains. Clear autumn, therefore he has no excuse on account of weather. Also she has come early, for the dew has not merely whitened the stairs, but has soaked her stockings. The poem is especially prized because she utters no direct reproach.

Alph, the sacred river is likely one of the four rivers that ran from the garden of Eden (*Genesis* 2: 10-14). The Tigris and Euphrates are two of the rivers. The Nile is another, but it must have traveled in underground channels to spring out again in Ethiopia. The Alpheus, a river in Greece that passes Mount Olympia and runs through gorges and underground channels may be the fourth.

The poem is delightfully musical. The prevailing rhythm is iambic tetrameter. All lines rhyme but they follow no regular scheme, except that the first 7 lines of the first two stanzas are both *abaabcc*. Some of the enjoyment of listening to the poem comes from wondering when the rhyme will occur. Alliterations abound (“measureless to man,” “damsel with a dulcimer”).

Though the images in the poem may be as meaningless as the phantasmagoria of a dream, a common interpretation is that they represent the creative process. The fountain that gives birth to the sacred river may be the unconscious erupting into consciousness. A more mundane interpretation might be that the deep romantic chasm and the erupting fountain refer to sexual orgasm.

Another possibility is that Coleridge is describing how human creativity might build a paradise on earth, setting the man-made beauty (“miracle of rare device”) of the dome in nature’s landscapes. In his notebooks from 1816 he remarked

If a man could pass through Paradise in a dream, and have a flower presented to him as a pledge that his soul had really been there, and if he found that flower in his hand when he awoke – Aye? and what then?

The last image of the poem represents the inspired poet, and alludes to Plato’s *Ion* (380 BCE), wherein the poet Ion states that good poets are:

like Bacchic maidens who draw milk and honey from the rivers when they are under the influence of Dionysus but not when they are in their right mind.

The Jewel Stairs’ Grievance

Li Bai (701-762 CE), also known as Li Po or Rihaku, was one of the poets of the Tang dynasty who called themselves the *Eight Immortals of the Wine Cup* (an irreverent allusion to the *Eight Immortals of Taoism*). He was a devotee of Taoism (see p 205), a fine swordsman, and a lover of wine. Legend has it that he died drunkenly trying to embrace the moon’s reflection in the Yangtze River.

The first major translations of Chinese poetry into English were by Ezra Pound in his 1915 book *Cathay* (see p 111). At the time, Pound knew no Chinese, and his translations were based on the notes that Ernest Fenollosa, an American art historian working in Tokyo, had taken from discussions with two Japanese professors (Mori and Ariga). The explanatory comment that Pound added to his translation suggests the depth of meaning in the original poem.

The story behind the poem is only hinted at. A lady in love with the emperor finds herself no longer in his fancy. The autumn moon suggests the cooling of their summer passion. The crystal curtains suggest that the scene is viewed through tears. Pound put the poem into the first person. Though not indicated in the original, this personal point of view accentuates the longing and the regret.

My Last Duchess

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
"Fra Pandolf" by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek; perhaps
Fra Pandolf chanced to say, "Her mantle laps
Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat." Such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart—how shall I say?— too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men—good! but thanked
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech—which I have not—to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark"—and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse—

(ctd)

My Last Duchess

This poem is a “dramatic monologue.” The form, of which Browning was an acknowledged master, requires that the poet impersonate a character talking to an audience in a particular situation (Sessions, 1947). The speaker’s words also indicate actions that occur while he or she is speaking. The interactions between the speaker and the audience reveal the personality and motives of the speaker.

This particular monologue is written in “heroic couplets,” rhyming couplets with iambic pentameter as the prevailing rhythm, though there is little heroic about its content. Browning frequently changes the first foot of his iambic line to a trochee. This gives a variability to the rhythm that makes it more conversational.

Enjambement – the carryover of one line to the next without any grammatical break, the opposite of end-stopped lines – serves the same purpose.

This context of the poem was first reported by Louis Friedland in 1936. In 1558, Alfonso II d’Este, Duke of Ferrara, married the 14-year-old Lucrezia Medici. She died three years later, and Alfonso then sought the hand of Barbara, the niece of the Count of Tyrol. Nikolaus of Mardruz was the count’s envoy, in charge of negotiating the marriage. Browning’s poem imagines what the Duke said to Nikolaus during these discussions.

Much of his speech concerns a painting of the late duchess by Fra Pandolf. The painting and the painter are fictitious. However, Bronzino did paint a striking portrait of Lucrezia in 1560 (shown on the right). The story of the painting allows the duke to suggest that something might happen to the second wife if she does not grant him the respect that he deserves.

The duke also points out a bronze sculpture of *Neptune Taming a Seahorse* by Claus of Innsbruck. This is also a fictitious work. Innsbruck was within the domain of the Count of Tyrol. The sculptor is mentioned to show that Ferrara’s influence already extends beyond Italy. The Duke can buy the best that Tyrol can offer.



The Duke informs the envoy that his new wife should be more circumspect about whom she smiles at than his previous wife. When questioned, “Was she in fact shallow and easily and equally well pleased with any favour or did the Duke so describe her as a supercilious cover to real and well justified jealousy?” Browning answered: “As an excuse -- mainly to himself -- for taking revenge on one who had unwittingly wounded his absurdly pretentious vanity, by failing to recognise his superiority in even the most trifling matters” (Brockington, 1932). The poem climaxes at the comment “all smiles stopped together.” Lucrezia might have been murdered or shut away in a convent. The former seems more likely.

E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretense
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

Robert Browning, 1842

The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

William Carlos
Williams, 1923

Richard Howard's 1999 poem *Nikolaus Mardruz to his Master, Ferdinand, Count of Tyrol, 1565* imagines a letter about the negotiations sent by the envoy back to Count of Tyrol. Though the Duke of Ferrara believes himself in complete control of the situation, Howard's poem suggests that the Duke is being played by a far more Machiavellian negotiator. The terms that are being set up will guarantee Barbara's safety and allow her free rein to conduct her own amorous affairs behind the Duke's back. The duke is the subject of mockery rather than the source of fear. The poem uses a format much freer than the Duke's:

My Lord recalls Ferrara? How walls
rise out of water yet to recede
identically
into it, as if
built in both directions: soaring and sinking...
Such mirroring was my first dismay—
my next, having crossed
the moat, was making
out that, for all its grandeur, the great
pile, observed close to, is close to a ruin!

Although it gives immense satisfaction to imagine the Duke of Ferrara outmaneuvered, Howard's poem is even more fictitious than Browning's. Barbara was frail and pious, and lived for only 7 more years after her marriage in 1565. The Duke subsequently married a third wife, Margherita Gonzaga. He had no children, and many have supposed that he was either homosexual or impotent. At his death, Ferrara was incorporated into the Papal States.

The Red Wheelbarrow

Imagism, an important movement in English poetry at the beginning of the 20th Century, derived from several sources: the *Symboliste* movement in French poetry, the intense images and concise forms of Japanese poetry, and the precision of ancient Greek epigrams and poetry. F. S Flint (1913) defined its main principles: direct treatment of the thing, precision of expression, and musical rhythm. Important early imagist poems were written by T. E. Hulme (p 27) and Ezra Pound (p 121).

Williams's poem presents a vivid image of a red wheelbarrow and some white chickens in the rain. The poem has been interpreted in many ways. Perhaps it represents some essential features of rural life. Perhaps it recounts something that the pediatrician-poet saw while caring for a severely ill child. However, like abstract paintings, an imagist poem likely has no meaning beyond what is seen. – “no ideas but in things” (p 209). In 1954 Williams wrote that the poem “sprang from an affection” for an old fisherman in Gloucester, MA:

In his back yard I saw the red wheelbarrow surrounded by the white chickens.
I suppose my affection for the old man somehow got into the writing.

Nevertheless, the red-white contrast of the image has a tension that needs resolution – by the passage of time, the changing of the weather, or the development of affection.

The Darkling Thrush

I leant upon a coppice gate
When Frost was spectre-grey,
And Winter's dregs made desolate
The weakening eye of day.
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky
Like strings of broken lyres,
And all mankind that haunted nigh
Had sought their household fires.

The land's sharp features seemed to be
The Century's corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
The wind his death-lament.
The ancient pulse of germ and birth
Was shrunken hard and dry,
And every spirit upon earth
Seemed fervourless as I.

At once a voice arose among
The bleak twigs overhead
In a full-hearted evensong
Of joy illimited;
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,
In blast-beruffled plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
Upon the growing gloom.

So little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.

Thomas Hardy, 1900

The Darkling Thrush

This poem was first published on December 29th, 1900 – at the end of the 19th Century or after the new century’s first year, depending on how you date the transition. Hardy celebrates the moment in four eight-line stanzas with an *ababcdcd* rhyme scheme and alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter lines.

A “coppice” (or “copse”) is a group of trees that have been specially cultivated to provide wood. The main trunk of the tree is cut back just above the ground, causing the tree to sprout numerous “bine-stems” that grow rapidly over the next few years and are then harvested for firewood, poles, or charcoal. (“Pollarding” is a similar technique carried out at a higher level on the tree.) Coppicing maintains the trees in juvenile form – they never grow old or die, and their rate of wood-production is much higher than in mature trees. Coppices are usually fenced to prevent grazing animals from eating the growing shoots. Because of the reduced leaf canopy, coppices are wonderful places for spring flowers such as bluebells. Hardy enjoyed the sound-similarity of coppice and “corpse” (second stanza).

The song-thrush, a small bird native to Southern England, may or may not migrate south during winter. It has brown wings, black-spotted underparts and a very pleasant song. Its Latin name *Turdus philomenos* refers to the mythological Philomena, who had her tongue cut out by Tereus after she was raped to prevent her from accusing him. The gods took mercy on Philomena and changed her into a songbird, though the story usually translates this as the nightingale, *Luscinia megarhinchos* (“night bird with a large beak,” see also p 21).

To “darkle” is to grow dark, perhaps the antonym of “sparkle.” The word also occurs Arnold’s *Dover Beach* (p 40). The 19th Century dramatically altered the role of religions in human life: human beings evolved rather than were created; moral behavior followed reason rather than divine commandments; perhaps there was no God. The role of the church declined but the comfort and consolation that religion provided were sorely missed. Hardy was much affected by these changes (see also *The Oxen*, p 167, and *Plaint to Man*, p 224)

Hardy’s idea of “some blessed hope” brings up the idea that optimism is most necessary in the worst of times. Hope must be entertained even if it cannot be understood. A recent book by Jonathan Lear discussed the idea of *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (2008):

Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it.

The other famous quotation about hope is from Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Man* (1734, I:95, see also p 182):

Hope springs eternal in the human breast;
Man never is, but always to be blessed:
The soul, uneasy and confined from home,
Rests and expatiates in a life to come.

To “expatiate” is to roam beyond one’s usual bounds (see also p 182). However, Pope’s idea is quite different from *The Darkling Thrush*, where there is no thought of comfort in the life to come.

Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility –

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess – in the Ring –
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
We passed the Setting Sun –

Or rather – He passed Us –
The Dews drew quivering and Chill –
For only Gossamer, my Gown –
My Tippet – only Tulle –

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground –
The Roof was scarcely visible –
The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity –

Emily Dickinson, 1862

Why speak of the use
of poetry? Poetry
is what uses us.

Hayden Carruth, 1970

Because I would not stop for Death

When published posthumously in 1890, Mabel Todd and Thomas Higginson gave this poem the title “The Chariot.” They interpreted the poem as describing how Death’s chariot swings low to carry us off to our eternal home in Paradise.

Dickinson’s meaning is far less comforting. Death invites her into his carriage. Immortality is a third occupant – perhaps serving as chaperone, clearly convincing her that she has nothing to fear.

The carriage drives slowly past the school and the wheatfields. One of Dickinson’s key words is “strove.” We are always urged to strive for perfection, for knowledge, for salvation. Tennyson’s *Ulysses* (p 42) ends with

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

But what avails this striving? The sun sets and the poet begins to feel cold, dressed as she is only in a light gown of gossamer with a tippet (shawl) of tulle (a light net fabric).

And then she realizes that the carriage is a hearse, that she is dressed in her funeral clothes, and that their destination is the grave. This final dwelling has its cornice – a decorative moulding at the top of a wall just below the roof – at the level of the ground. In effect this is the “coping” – the low stone wall that outlines a grave. The repetition of the word “Ground” emphasizes her realization.

As the poem ends, the consolation of Immortality – the persistence of the person after death – is replaced by the oblivion of Eternity – the persistence of time, which has no regard for us.

Poetry

Hayden Carruth wrote this haiku for his book *The Clay Hill Anthology*. A haiku is a Japanese verse form, composed of three lines with 5, 7 and 5 syllables. The haiku usually refers in some way to one of the seasons, and typically has a *kireji* or cutting word that changes the direction of the thought.

Stephen Addis provided calligraphy of the Chinese character for poetry – *shī* – to illustrate a broadside of Carruth’s poem. The left part of the character is *yán*. This carries the meaning of “word” or “speech.” The character begins at the bottom with the open-square radical for “mouth” and perhaps the lines above it are the waves of sound coming from the mouth. The right part of the character is *sì* which means temple or court. The lower radical of this means “small” The upper radical *tǔ* means “earth” – perhaps a cross stuck in the earth. The idea of a temple perhaps means a small piece of sanctified land. Taken all these ideas together gives the sense of poetry as “temple speech.” This fits with Hayden Carruth’s idea that poetry is “what uses us” – how the transcendent is made manifest by the transient.



Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep

Robert Frost, 1922

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

W. B Yeats, 1893

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

The poem tells a simple story of the poet stopping to watch the snow falling. However, underneath the story is a depth of meaning. The fact that he is not sure “whose woods these are” suggest that the poet may be lost. This state may allude to the opening of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (1320) where the poet finds himself, at the middle of his life, lost in a wood. The peaceful beauty of the woods seems related to death, as portrayed in *The Phantom Wooer* (1851) by Thomas Beddoes

Young soul put off your flesh, and come
With me into the quiet tomb,
Our bed is lovely, dark, and sweet;
The earth will swing us, as she goes,
Beneath our coverlid of snows,
And the warm leaden sheet.

The poet however rejects the seduction. Though “the woods are lovely, dark and deep,” he has “promises to keep” and “miles to go” before he sleeps.

The rhyme scheme *aaba* is the same as used by Fitzgerald in his translation of the Rubaiyat (p 28). In addition, the unrhymed third line of one stanza rhymes with the first, second and third line of the next (*aaba bccb*) much like Dante’s *terza rima* (*aba bcb*).

When you are old

In 1889 Yeats fell in love with Maud Gonne, a beautiful, passionate, rich young woman, who had taken up the cause of Irish nationalism. Yeats first proposed marriage in 1892, and he repeated his offer several times over the following years, but Maud steadfastly refused his love. When Yeats claimed that he could never be happy without her, she replied,

Oh yes, you are, because you make beautiful poetry out of what you call your unhappiness and are happy in that ... Poets should never marry.

This poem, written soon after the rejection of Yeats’s first proposal, derives from one of *Sonnets pour Hélène* (1578) by Pierre de Ronsard, which begins

Quand vous serez bien vieille, au soir à la chandelle,
Assise auprès du feu, dévidant et filant,
Direz chantant mes vers, en vous émerveillant:
“Ronsard me célébrait du temps que j’étais belle.”
When you are old, at evening by candlelight
Sitting by the fire, unraveling and spinning wool,
You will recite my verses and marvel that
Ronsard praised me in the days when I was beautiful

Ronsard, the “prince of poets and poet of princes,” wrote his sequence of sonnets at the request of his sovereign Catherine de Médici for her protégée Hélène de Surgières. Yeats’s translation is a better poem. Although it expresses the same regret for a love that might have been, it is gentler in its tone and contains more striking images: the moments of “glad grace,” the “pilgrim soul,” and love hiding in a “crowd of stars.”

Dover Beach

The sea is calm tonight.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Matthew Arnold, 1867

She walks in Beauty, like the Night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes;
Thus mellowed to the tender light
Which Heaven to gaudy day denies.

One shade the more – one ray the less
Had half impaired the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress
Or softly lightens o'er her face
Where thoughts serenely sweet express
How pure – how dear their dwelling place!

And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
So soft – so calm – yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent –
A mind at peace with all below –
A Heart – whose love is innocent!

George Gordon, Lord Byron, 1815

Hope

What's the use
of something
as unstable
and diffuse as hope—
the almost-twin
of making-do,
the isotope
of going on:
what isn't in
the envelope
just before
it isn't:
the always tabled
righting of the present.

Kay Ryan, 1996

She walks in Beauty, like the Night

This is the first of Byron's *Hebrew Melodies*. In 1814 Byron received a letter from Isaac Nathan soliciting some lyrics to be set to music:

I have with great trouble selected a considerable number of very beautiful Hebrew melodies of undoubted antiquity, some of which are proved to have been sung by the Hebrews before the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem. I am most anxious that the poetry for them should be written by the First Poet of the present age,

The first poems that Byron sent were not based on Jewish topics, but he later did write some poems derived from Old Testament stories, the most famous of which is *The Destruction of Sennacherib* based on the siege of Jerusalem by the Assyrian king Sennacherib (2 Kings 18-19), with its driving anapestic rhythm:

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

Nathan set *She walks in Beauty* to a Hebrew melody, though one of doubtful antiquity, and one that did not fit the words.

Byron's poem was written about his cousin, Mrs. Anne Wilmot, whose poise and beauty had struck him one evening at a party in London. The poem is in three six-line stanzas, each rhyming *ababab*. The rhythm is iambic tetrameter. Alliteration ("cloudless climes and starry skies") accentuate the poem's quiet music.

Byron was said to have been "in a sad state" after meeting his cousin. Beauty, particularly that which is unattainable, sometime does that.

Hope

Hope is often characterized by the song of birds, something beautiful that keeps us going despite the bleakness of the present: Dickinson's *Hope is the Thing with Feathers* (p 82) and Hardy's *The Darkling Thrush* (p 37).

Ryan points out that hope does not make things happen: hoping more does not make what we hope for more likely. Hope is something that facilitates making do with what we have, or continuing despite an unpromising future. She uses the scientific image of the isotope – the same chemical element with a different atomic weight – to indicate that hopefully going on is really no different from simply going on.

Her most vivid image derives from the annual Academy Awards, when the name of one of the nominated candidates is, or more likely isn't, in the envelope prepared by Price Waterhouse to announce the winner of an award.

The poem is written in lines of three to five syllables. Some end rhymes (hope/isotope/envelope; twin/in) occur in the poem but these follow no clear schema – they are as unpredictable as the future that we hope for. Other almost-rhymes occur at the ends (something/twin; on/in; unstable/abled; isn't/present) or at other places in the lines (use/diffuse). Hope is irrepressible. -

Ulysses

It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole
Unequal laws unto a savage race,
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.

I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees: All times I have enjoy'd
Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone, on shore, and when
Thro' scudding drifts the rainy Hyades
Vext the dim sea: I am become a name;
For always roaming with a hungry heart
Much have I seen and known; cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments,
Myself not least, but honour'd of them all;
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.
I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades
For ever and forever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!
As tho' to breathe were life! Life piled on life
Were all too little, and of one to me
Little remains: but every hour is saved
From that eternal silence, something more,
A bringer of new things; and vile it were
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,
And this gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

This is my son, mine own Telemachus,
To whom I leave the sceptre and the isle,—
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil
This labour, by slow prudence to make mild
A rugged people, and thro' soft degrees
Subdue them to the useful and the good.
Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to fail
In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet adoration to my household gods,
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.

(ctd)

Ulysses

Although it was not published until 1842, the poem was written in 1831 soon after Tennyson learned of the death of his dear friend Arthur Hallam. In an essay on *Dante and Tennyson* (1894), Francis Thackeray reported Tennyson's comments on this poem:

how it was written under a sense of loss, and that all had gone by, but that still life must be fought out to the end

Many have considered the poem as a dramatic monologue: the farewell speech of Ulysses as he leaves on his final journey. However, this does not ring true. A crafty speaker, Ulysses would not address his listeners as a "savage race," nor call Penelope an "aged wife." The poem is perhaps better viewed as an interior monologue, similar to one of Shakespeare's soliloquies, as Ulysses thinks through his decision to leave and imagines what to say on his departure. The description of the Ithacans, who "hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me" recalls Hamlet's soliloquy in Act IV:

What is a man
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.

The idea of a final voyage was mentioned briefly in the prophecy of Tiresias in Book XI of Homer's *Odyssey*, but he foretold that Odysseus would return from that voyage and die of old age at home

And at last your own death will steal upon you ...
a gentle painless death, far from the sea it comes
to take you down, borne down with the years in ripe old age
all your people there in blessed peace around you.
(Fagles translation, 1996)

The other great difference from Homer is that all of the mariners who originally sailed with Odysseus were drowned in the shipwreck of Book XII. Odysseus returned to Ithaca alone.

The voyage described in Tennyson's poem derives from Canto XXVI of Dante's *Inferno* (1320, translation by Clive James, 2013). No known ancient source exists for this episode, one of Dante's most beautiful:

l'ardore
ch'i' ebbi a divenir del mondo esperto
e de li vizi umani e del valore;
the passion that I had, to gain
Experience of the world, and know the sum
Of virtue, pleasure, wisdom, vice and pain.

Dante is quite ambivalent about Ulysses, giving him some of his most beautiful poetry, but placing him in the 8th Circle of Hell, among the counselors of fraud, because of "the clever plan of the gift horse" that led to the fall of Troy. Tennyson seems to share some of this ambivalence: although his last voyage is laudable, Ulysses is clearly neglecting his duties as king, husband and father.

There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail:
There gloom the dark, broad seas. My mariners,
Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me—
That ever with a frolic welcome took
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
Free hearts, free foreheads—you and I are old;
Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
'T is not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Alfred Tennyson, 1842

JVC

He concentrated, as he ought,
On fitting language to his thought
And getting all the rhymes correct,
Thus exercising intellect
In such a space, in such a fashion,
He concentrated into passion.

Thom Gunn, 1992

Tennyson has a marvelous way with sounds. He often varies the iambic pentameter with an initial trochaic foot:

Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy

He uses internal assonance and rhyme, such as the “ringing/windy” of the above line or the “wrought/thought” of

Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me—

To me the most memorable line is

I am a part of all that I have met

We are made by what we have encountered in our life.

Tennyson’s poem is full of lines that have since been used to rally us from despondency and exhort us to achievement:

To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

Not to seek out new experience is “on this short day of frost and sun, to sleep before evening” (Pater, 1868, see p 186).

The final line of the poem is inscribed on a cross on Observation Hill, near McMurdo Station in Antarctica, in memory of the ill-fated expedition of Robert Falcon Scott to reach the South Pole in 1912:

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

The goal of Tennyson’s Ulysses is that he might be able to reach the Happy Isles. These are the “Islands of the Blessed” where the heroes went after death.

Tennyson is likely referring to Arthur Hallam as the Achilles who is waiting there. Perhaps through his own striving for excellence, Tennyson will find his friend.

In the *Inferno*, however, Ulysses did not reach the Happy Isles. Dante describes how Ulysses and his mariners passed through the gates of Hercules (the Straits of Gibraltar), and proceeded south. They came within site of the mountain of *Purgatorio*, but a storm sunk their ship and they all descended into Hell.

Tennyson will have none of this divine justice, and the last line of his poem recalls the defiance of Satan in Book I of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667):

All is not lost; the unconquerable Will,
And study of revenge, immortal hate,
And courage never to submit or yield:

JVC

Thom Gunn wrote this brief poem in memory of J.V Cunningham (1911-1985). Cunningham composed poetry characterized by its brevity and clarity, and by its adherence to formal rules of rhythm and rhyme. Gunn’s poem is remarkably accurate in its rendering of Cunningham’s style (for examples see pp 6, 126, 147, 170 and 178). This poem also comments on the process of poetry – how language must be fit to thought, how the words must follow form, and how experience is concentrated into passion. As Frost (1923) proposed, “A complete poem is one where an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found the words.”

The Sun Rising

Busy old fool, unruly sun,
Why dost thou thus,
Through windows, and through curtains call on us?
Must to thy motions lovers' seasons run?
Saucy pedantic wretch, go chide
Late school boys and sour prentices,
Go tell court huntsmen that the king will ride,
Call country ants to harvest offices,
Love, all alike, no season knows nor clime,
Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time.

Thy beams, so reverend and strong
Why shouldst thou think?
I could eclipse and cloud them with a wink,
But that I would not lose her sight so long;
If her eyes have not blinded thine,
Look, and tomorrow late, tell me,
Whether both th' Indias of spice and mine
Be where thou leftst them, or lie here with me.
Ask for those kings whom thou saw'st yesterday,
And thou shalt hear, All here in one bed lay.

She's all states, and all princes, I,
Nothing else is.
Princes do but play us; compared to this,
All honor's mimic, all wealth alchemy.
Thou, sun, art half as happy as we,
In that the world's contracted thus.
Thine age asks ease, and since thy duties be
To warm the world, that's done in warming us.
Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;
This bed thy center is, these walls, thy sphere.

John Donne, 1633

The Sun Rising

As well as religious verse, John Donne wrote some of the best love poetry in English. As a young man in 1601, he had recklessly married Anne More against the wishes of her father, who refused to provide any dowry. The Donnes lived in love and poverty until Anne died in 1617. One imagines their union to have been passionate. In *Elegy XIX, Going to Bed* (p 254) he wrote

License my roving hands, and let them go
Before, behind, between, above, below.
O my America! My new-found-land,
My kingdom, safeliest when with one man mann'd

Much of Donne's love poetry was written after 1615 when he was ordained a priest in the Church of England. He may have had mistresses, but Helen Gardner has suggested that many of his love-poems are based on imagined situations.

The Sun Rising is an "aubade," a song at dawn (French *aube*). These songs, which became popular in France and Spain in the days of the troubadours, served various purposes. In the days of courtly love, they might describe the need for the lover to leave before being discovered. They could give thanks for the wonderful night of love. They could metamorphose into mournful songs describing the end of love. Finally, they could consider the problems that need to be faced in the new day (see p 48). Donne's poem is the opposite of the troubadour aubade. The lover is most definitely not leaving; instead, the sun is the one who should go away.

The poem is in three 8-line stanzas, each with a rhyme scheme *abbacdcdee*. The rhythm is irregular. The lines vary in length between 4 and 5 stresses except for the short second line.

The main conceit of the poem is that the lovers contain all the world within themselves. Nothing else matters. Donne asks the sun to return tomorrow and tell him whether the Indies of spice and mine remain in the world or have been subsumed in this new cosmos of the lovers' bed. Europeans had just discovered the spices of the East Indies and the gold and silver of the West Indies.

At the time that Donne was writing this poem, the place of the sun in the universe was under much debate. Although Copernicus had claimed in 1543 that the earth orbited around the sun, the Roman Catholic Church, insisted that the Earth was the center of the universe. For supporting Copernicus, Galileo Galilei was brought before the Inquisition and found guilty of heresy in 1633, the year that Donne's poems were posthumously published. Poetry is wildly different from science: Donne claims that the universe has its center in his love. All is relative to me.

I cannot resist quoting Wendy Cope's 1983 limerick that summarizes the poem:

The fine English poet John Donne
Was wont to admonish the Sunne
'You busie old foole
Lie still and keep coole
For I am in bed having funne.'

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

*S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,
Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.
Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo
Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.*

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question ...
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

And indeed there will be time
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,
Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

(ctd)

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

Eliot said that the title was based on Kipling's poem *The Love Song of Har Dyal*, originally published in the story *Beyond the Pale* in the 1888 book *Plain Tales from the Hills*. The story tells of a tragic affair between an Englishman and a young Indian widow. Har Dyal is a name in a lament that the widow sings:

My bread is sorrow and my drink is tears,
Come back to me, Beloved, or I die!

A main theme of the poem is Prufrock's great difficulty in communicating with women. Despite his vivid imagination and acute sensitivity, he considers the female sex "beyond the pale." The expression, which comes from the fence that long ago surrounded the area of Ireland under English control, now describes unacceptable behavior. Kipling's use of the term combined the sense of moral prohibition with racial differences (love outside the white race). Kipling's story begins "A man should, whatever happens, keep to his own caste, race and breed."

Eliot wrote the poem during the year (1910-1911) that he spent in Europe before beginning graduate studies. On the urging of Ezra Pound, Harriet Munro accepted it for publication in the magazine *Poetry* in 1915.

During Eliot's European year, he shared lodgings in Paris with Jean Verdenal, a French medical student. When the poem was later published in the 1917 book *Prufrock and Other Observations*, it was dedicated to Verdenal, who had died in 1915 serving as a medical officer in the Dardanelles (Gallipoli) campaign. Included with the dedication was a quote from Dante's *Purgatorio* about the meeting between Virgil and Statius, describing the intense love between them, a love that persisted even when they were no longer living but only shadows: "Now can you understand the quantity of love that warms me towards you"

Eliot and Verdenal shared an enthusiasm for the poems of Jules Laforgue (1860-1887), who wrote poems that used formal rhyme schemes but were rhythmically variable – very similar Prufrock's rhyming free verse. During the poem, a rhyming couplet about Michelangelo occurs twice, almost as if it were a refrain:

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo

Some critics have considered this a translation of a couplet by Laforgue:

Dans la pièce les femmes vont et viennent,
En parlant des maîtres de Sienna

Although they certainly sound like Laforgue, the lines are actually from a 1947 French translation of Eliot's poem. Laforgue never wrote them. Eliot was imitating the style of Laforgue, not quoting his words.

The name "Prufrock" probably alludes to Touchstone, a fool in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, although, unlike Prufrock, Touchstone wins the luscious Audrey for his wife. In Eliot's poem, the narrator admits that he is "almost, at times, the Fool." "J. Alfred" relates to Eliot who, at that time, signed himself as "T. Stearns Eliot." Perhaps Eliot signed his name that way rather than "T. Eliot" because of how that version reads backward.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

And indeed there will be time
To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"
Time to turn back and descend the stair,
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair —
(They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!")
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin —
(They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!")
Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all:
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room.
So how should I presume?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume?

And I have known the arms already, known them all—
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare
(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)
Is it perfume from a dress
That makes me so digress?
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.
And should I then presume?
And how should I begin?

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? ... (ctd)

The epigraph to *Prufrock* is from Canto XXVII of Dante's *Infern.*: In the Eighth Circle of the Inferno (where the fraudulent burn in eternal fire), Dante meets Guido da Montefeltro who agrees to talk to him:

If I but thought that my response were made to one perhaps returning to the world, this tongue of flame would cease to flicker. But since, up from these depths, no one has yet returned alive, if what I hear is true, I answer without fear of being shamed."

The idea is that this poem is an intimate confession, only made because the poet knows it will never become public. The poem is a dramatic monologue. The poet invents the person of Prufrock and has him reveal his desires and failures by speaking to an audience – the “you” of the poem’s first line. However, this particular poem is unlike most other dramatic monologues (e.g. Browning’s *My Last Duchess*, p 35, or *Bishop Blougram’s Apology*, p 190) in two ways. First, the person who speaks is far too similar to the poet to represent an independent character. Second, the audience is not defined: Prufrock could be speaking to someone accompanying him to an evening reception, but he is more likely talking to himself, or to the reader. As such it is more like a stream of consciousness – an “interior monologue”

The first stanza begins with the striking image of the evening

spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;

Ether was first used as an anesthetic during dentistry and surgery in Boston in the 1840s. Eliot would have been familiar with the Ether Monument in Boston’s Public Gardens. Poets had become fascinated with how ether and chloroform could remove pain and alter consciousness, and by the deathlike appearance of the anesthetized patient. For example, Laforgue (1886) described the moon

Morte? Se peut-il pas qu’elle dorme
Grise de cosmiques chloroformes
[Dead? Perhaps she is just sleeping
Topsy from the cosmic chloroform]

The first stanza follows streets that lead “like an insidious argument” to an “overwhelming question,” but Prufrock refuses to identify it. Later in the poem specific questions are posed:

Do I dare disturb the universe?
How should I presume?
How should I begin to spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
Should I ... have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?
Would it have been worth while?

The poet dismisses older questions such as that posed by Marvell about rolling all our strength and sweetness together and hurling it through the gates of life (*To His Coy Mistress*, p 32) or the questions about being posed by Hamlet (p 30). Rather the poem ends with the querulous

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!
Smoothed by long fingers,
Asleep ... tired ... or it malingers,
Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.
Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet — and here's no great matter;
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,
And in short, I was afraid.

And would it have been worth it, after all,
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,
Would it have been worth while,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it towards some overwhelming question,
To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"—
If one, settling a pillow by her head
Should say: "That is not what I meant at all;
That is not it, at all."

And would it have been worth it, after all,
Would it have been worth while,
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor—
And this, and so much more?—
It is impossible to say just what I mean!
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:
Would it have been worth while
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
And turning toward the window, should say:
"That is not it at all,
That is not what I meant, at all." (ctd)

We shall never know the nature of the overwhelming question. Perhaps Prufrock was to ask a beloved to accept his suit but was unable to bring himself to it.

The poem provides vivid images of Prufrock's complete lack of self-respect. He considers his life to have been meaningless: "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons." He feels dismissed as insignificant, fixed "in a formulated phrase," "sprawling on a pin," "pinned and wriggling on the wall." He considers escaping like a crab "scuttling across the sea floor." He imagines his head brought in on a platter together with the tea and cakes. This all culminates in

I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,

Throughout the poem Prufrock makes allusions to other works. His statement

Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions

clearly refers to Quatrain XXXII of Fitzgerald's translation of Khayyam's *Rubaiyat* (p 28):

Some little Talk awhile of ME and THEE
There seemed—and then no more of THEE and ME.

and his comment

But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:
recalls Quatrain LXVIII

We are no other than a moving row
Of Magic Shadow-shapes that come and go
Round with the Sun-illuminated Lantern held
In Midnight by the Master of the Show;

The section about time beginning

There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;

recalls the verses of Chapter 3 of *Ecclesiastes*:

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the
heaven:
A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up
that which is planted;

The "voices dying with a dying fall" are like the music requested by Count Orsino in the first scene of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*: music to soothe him after his love has been rejected by the Lady Olivia:

That strain again! It had a dying fall.

However, Prufrock's love never reaches the stage of expression let alone rejection. The tragedy of the poem is that a young man of immense imagination and sensitivity cannot steel himself to communicate with his beloved. He is frightened that he will be ignored and that his protestations of love will be considered out of place – "That is not what I meant at all." His desire is thus thwarted before it is even expressed.

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
Almost, at times, the Fool.

I grow old ... I grow old ...
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black.
We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

T. S. Eliot, 1915

Aubade

I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.
Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.
In time the curtain-edges will grow light.
Till then I see what's really always there:
Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,
Making all thought impossible but how
And where and when I shall myself die.
Arid interrogation: yet the dread
Of dying, and being dead,
Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.

(ctd)

Prufrock insists that he is not Prince Hamlet. He is simply an attendant lord. Perhaps a little like the tedious Polonius of Shakespeare's play. Prufrock does not wish to have any important effect. He spends his time in foolish uncertainties about his hair and dress. Hair parted behind and combed forward is likely what we would call a "Caesar haircut." Jules Laforgue styled his hair in this way. Eating a peach runs the risk of the juice staining one's shirt front.

The final section of the poem alludes to stories of the mermaids whose singing entices sailors to their death. One such story is the episode in Book 12 of *The Odyssey*. In the straits of Messina (between Sicily and Italy) Sirens enchanted the mariners with their singing. Under their spell the sailors were unable to navigate their ship between the monsters Scylla and Charybdis. Their ships foundered and the seamen drowned. On the advice of Circe, Odysseus plugged up the ears of his crew with wax and had them tie him to the ship's mast. In this way Odysseus could hear the hear the song of the sirens but not be seduced. This story was a common subject of for paintings in late Victorian days, since it allowed the artist to paint both the sensuousness

of the sirens and the restraint of the hero. The illustration on the right shows *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1909) by Herbert James Draper. Prufrock has heard the mermaids singing to each other, but he doubts that they will ever sing to him. And so Prufrock retreats his imagination where he can linger with the sea-girls until he is brought back to reality.



Aubade

An aubade is a dawn song, a form dating back to the days of the troubadours, and concerned with romantic love (cf Donne's *The Sun Rising*, p 44). Larkin's aubade deals with death.

Larkin had worked on this poem for several years. The death of his mother in November, 1977, led to its final completion. The poem was published in the *Times Literary Supplement* on December 23, 1977. Larkin remarked in a letter that it was "a real infusion of Christmas cheer by yours truly!"

The poem is composed of five stanzas each of ten lines. The structure of a stanza shows some similarities to that used by Keats in his *Ode to a Nightingale* (p 21), another poem which deals with human mortality and how we might cope with its inevitability. Larkin shortened the ninth line whereas Keats shortened the eighth, and Larkin's rhyme scheme has couplets at the center and near the end of the stanza: *ababccdeed*. The shortened line and the couplets slow down the poem, making it more meditative than lyrical.

The mind blanks at the glare. Not in remorse
—The good not done, the love not given, time
Torn off unused—nor wretchedly because
An only life can take so long to climb
Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never;
But at the total emptiness for ever,
The sure extinction that we travel to
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
Not to be anywhere,
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

This is a special way of being afraid
No trick dispels. Religion used to try,
That vast moth-eaten musical brocade
Created to pretend we never die,
And specious stuff that says No rational being
Can fear a thing it will not feel, not seeing
That this is what we fear—no sight, no sound,
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
Nothing to love or link with,
The anaesthetic from which none come round.

And so it stays just on the edge of vision,
A small unfocused blur, a standing chill
That slows each impulse down to indecision.
Most things may never happen: this one will,
And realisation of it rages out
In furnace-fear when we are caught without
People or drink. Courage is no good:
It means not scaring others. Being brave
Lets no one off the grave.
Death is no different whined at than withstood.

Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape.
It stands plain as a wardrobe, what we know,
Have always known, know that we can't escape,
Yet can't accept. One side will have to go.
Meanwhile telephones crouch, getting ready to ring
In locked-up offices, and all the uncaring
Intricate rented world begins to rouse.
The sky is white as clay, with no sun.
Work has to be done.
Postmen like doctors go from house to house.

Philip Larkin, 1977

Larkin was acutely aware of his mortality. In a review of *The Oxford Book of Death* (1983) he wrote

Man's most remarkable talent is for ignoring death. For once the certainty of permanent extinction is realized, only a more immediate calamity can dislodge it from the mind, and then only temporarily.

Over the years we have developed many ways of thinking about death. Religion offers us the idea of eternal life. Yet the art and the music that accompany this promise of salvation no longer seem to work. Most rational beings have figured out that these promises are empty and all that awaits is personal extinction.

The Epicureans proposed that no one should be afraid of death. Death cannot be painful because when we are dead we are no longer aware of pain. In his *Letter to Menoeceus*, Epicurus (341-270 BCE) wrote

Accustom yourself to believe that death is nothing to us, for good and evil imply awareness, and death is the privation of all awareness; therefore a right understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not by adding to life an unlimited time, but by taking away the yearning after immortality. For life has no terror; for those who thoroughly apprehend that there are no terrors for them in ceasing to live. Foolish, therefore, is the person who says that he fears death, not because it will pain when it comes, but because it pains in the prospect. Whatever causes no annoyance when it is present, causes only a groundless pain in the expectation. Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not. It is nothing, then, either to the living or to the dead, for with the living it is not and the dead exist no longer. (Hicks translation, 1911).

Larkin rightly points out that this argument misses the point. Death is horrifying not because we might feel pain after death, but because we shall not feel anything:

No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
Nothing to love or link with

The “anaesthetic” that Larkin mentions recalls John Betjeman’s poem *Before the Anaesthetic* (1945), wherein he hopes that God may save him:

Now, lest this “I” should cease to be,
Come, real Lord, come quick to me.

And writes a letter to be given to his wife in case he does not awaken.

In the last stanza, Larkin realizes that though we refuse to accept death, it cannot be escaped. “One side will have to go” may allude to Oscar Wilde’s apocryphal last words when he died in a hotel room in Paris in 1900: “This wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. Either it goes or I do.”

In the final verse Larkin decides that he will have to accept the inevitable. In the meantime, he might be consoled by work and by communicating with those he loves through letters. Larkin was one of the greatest letter writers of the 20th Century: honest, perceptive, and immensely entertaining.

When he died in 1985, Larkin’s last words were “I am going to the inevitable.”

Jersey Rain

Now near the end of the middle stretch of road
What have I learned? Some earthly wiles. An art.
That often I cannot tell good fortune from bad,
That once had seemed so easy to tell apart.

The source of art and woe aslant in wind
Dissolves or nourishes everything it touches.
What roadbank gullies and ruts it doesn't mend
It carves the deeper, boiling tawny in ditches.

It spends itself regardless into the ocean.
It stains and scours and makes things dark or bright:
Sweat of the moon, a shroud of benediction,
The chilly liquefaction of day to night,

The Jersey rain, my rain, soaks all as one:
It smites Metuchen, Rahway, Saddle River,
Fair Haven, Newark, Little Silver, Bayonne.
I feel it churning even in fair weather

To craze distinction, dry the same as wet.
In ripples of heat the August drought still feeds
Vapors in the sky that swell to smite the state –
The Jersey rain, my rain, in streams and beads

Of indissoluble grudge and aspiration:
Original milk, replenisher of grief,
Descending destroyer, arrowed source of passion,
Silver and black, executioner, font of life.

Robert Pinsky, 2000

The Secret Sits

We dance round in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

Robert Frost, 1942

Jersey Rain

The first line of the poem alludes to the beginning of Dante's *Inferno* (1320), which Pinsky had translated in 1994.

*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
ché la diritta via era smarrita.
Ahi quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura
esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte
che nel pensier rinova la paura!
Tant' è amara che poco è più morte;
ma per trattar del ben ch'ì vi trovai,
dirò de l'altre cose ch'ì v'ho scorte.*

Midway on our life's journey, I found myself
In dark woods, the right road lost. To tell
About those woods is hard – so tangled and rough
And savage that thinking of it now, I feel
The old fear stirring: death is hardly more bitter.
And yet, to treat the good I found there as well

Dante's epic is written in *terza rima*, with the second line of one verse rhyming with the first and third of the next: *aba bcb*. Pinsky replicates this schema using the similarity between the end-consonants as a basis for the rhyme. Translation is never perfect.

In his poem *Jersey Rain*, Pinsky uses a simple *abab* rhyme scheme with some rhymes true and others slanted like the rain.

Pinsky is rueful about his "art"

That often I cannot tell good fortune from bad,
That once had seemed so easy to tell apart.

And tries to understand the rain – a life force that is both creative and destructive;

The source of art and woe aslant in wind
Dissolves or nourishes everything it touches.

Pinsky calls upon the rain to cleanse himself and the world he lives in. He lists various places in the state, their names conjuring up the indigenous people (Metuchen, Rahway), the European colonists (Saddle River, Newark, Bayonne) and the simple beauty of the land (Fair Haven, Little Silver)

The Secret Sits

Many things in life are mysterious. We wave our hands and dance around and think that we have some understanding. But we do not. Frost's simple epigram reminds me of the physics of the Black Hole, though this was initially described much later than Frost's poem. No information can come from out such an opening in the fabric of the universe. We can wonder at where it might lead, but we shall never know

Those Winter Sundays

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

Robert Hayden, 1962

An Upward Look

Oh heart green acre sown with salt
by the departing occupier

lay down your gallant spears of wheat
Salt of the earth each stellar pinch

flung in blind defiance backwards
now takes its toll Up from his quieted

quarry the lover colder and wiser
hauling himself finds the world turning

toys triumphs toxins into
this vast facility the living come
dearest to die in How did it happen

In bright alternation minutely mirrored
Within the thinking of each and every

mortal creature halves of a clue
approach the earthlights Morning star

evening star salt of the sky
First the grave dissolving into dawn

then the crucial recrystallizing
from the inmost depths of clear dark blue

James Merrill, 1995

Those Winter Sundays

With its fourteen lines, this poem is a sonnet though it has no regular rhyme scheme and it separates into three parts rather than two.

As pointed out by David Hubble (1995), the poem is sonically marvelous. The first section describes how the poet's father would get up early on Sundays even though it was not a workday so that he could start a fire for his family. One can hear the cold in the repeating 'k' sounds of "blueblack ... cold ... cracked ... ached ... weekday ... banked ... thanked." In the second section the 'k' sounds are intermixed with 's' as the fire begins to catch: "cold splintering breaking." And by the third section, the 'o' sounds suggest the warmth spreading through the house, culminating in

of love's austere and lonely offices.

The poem briefly notes the emotional state of the house: the father chronically angry at his life of "labor in the weekday weather," yet devoted to his family; the son sullen and unaware, "speaking indifferently to him."

Physical poverty often leads to emotional poverty. The poem is therefore relevant regardless of the race of the poet. The fact that Hayden was African-American nevertheless bears on the poem: the poverty it describes was (and is) often a result of racial discrimination.

An Upward Look

This is the last poem in Merrill's last book of poetry, *A Scattering of Salts*, published posthumously after his death from AIDS.

The form of the poem is striking:

its two-part lines and central spiral of white space suggest the double helix of DNA, blueprint for every living creature, encoding the "clue" to life's renewal as well as to its "mortal" limits (Sastri, 2004).

The form is also reminiscent of Old English alliterative verse. Wherein each half of a line has two stresses. Fittingly, Merrill scatters alliteration over the poem: "sown with salt ... minutely mirrored ... dissolving into dawn." Like English poetry we have come far from our beginnings. Yet still we die.

The poet considers his illness and his approaching death through the idea of salt. The acts of homosexual love turned out to be like sowing fields with salt. Blake may have had the angels "lay down their spears" in praise of God's creation (p 24), but the field of love must now lay down its "spears of wheat."

In the first poem of the book, *A Downward Look*, Merrill imagined how the gods scattered the world with salts that would somehow lead to life:

On high, the love
That drew the bath and scattered it with salts y

As he – the result of this "salt of the sky" – approaches death, he hopes for

the crucial recrystallizing
from the inmost depths of clear dark blue

Question

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

Where will I sleep
How will I ride
What will I hunt

Where can I go
without my mount
all eager and quick
How will I know
in thicket ahead
is danger or treasure
when Body my good
bright dog is dead

How will it be
to lie in the sky
without roof or door
and wind for an eye

With cloud for shift
how will I hide?

May Swenson, 1978

Nickles' Song (from *JB*)

I heard upon his dry dung heap
That man cry out who cannot sleep:
“If God is God He is not good,
If God is good He is not God;
Take the even, take the odd,
I would not sleep here if I could
Except for the little green leaves in the wood
And the wind on the water.”

Archibald MacLeish, 1958

Question

From time immemorial, we have believed that we exist as a spiritual “soul” within a physical “body.” In *Genesis 2:7*, God breathed a soul into the dust:

And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.

In this austere poem, Swenson wonders about what might happen to the soul when the body dies (cf p 176). She likens her body to a house, which provides shelter, a horse, which transports her from one place to another, and a hound which senses out what is happening. The body is beautiful: the horse is “eager and quick” and the hound is a “good bright dog”

The poem gives a litany of questions: where ... how ... what ... where ... how ... how ... how. None of these have easy answers. The poet believes that the soul will persist beyond death, when the house is fallen and the horse and the hound are dead. Yet she cannot understand where the soul will then exist. “Freed of the flesh, are we liberated or merely exposed?” (Marc Doty, 2006)

Swenson’s view of the body differs completely from that of the Apostle Paul who believed the body to be the source of sin rather than shelter (*Romans 7: 18*)

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not.

and who longed to be released from the body (2 *Corinthians 5:1-2*):

For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven:

Nickles’ Song

In the play *JB*, a retelling of the story of *Job*, Nickles plays the role of Satan, “Old Nick” being a folk name for the devil. God gives him free rein to test God’s servant Job by bringing down upon him calamity and disease. From his dung heap, Job finally demands that God justify Himself, but God refuses.

Nickles’ song is a simple statement of the problems that attend any justification of God (“theodicy,” from *theos*, God and *dike*, judgment). How can God be omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent, given the existence of Evil. In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), David Hume paraphrased Epicurus in discussing the answer to the question of why God permits evil:

Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?

In Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), Ivan Karamazov was driven mad by theodicy. Yet, like Nickles at the end of his song, Ivan still maintained that life was meaningful:

Though I do not believe in the order of things, still the sticky little leaves that come out in the spring are dear to me.

anyone lived in a pretty how town
(with up so floating many bells down)
spring summer autumn winter
he sang his didn't he danced his did.

Women and men(both little and small)
cared for anyone not at all
they sowed their isn't they reaped their same
sun moon stars rain

children guessed(but only a few
and down they forgot as up they grew
autumn winter spring summer)
that noone loved him more by more

when by now and tree by leaf
she laughed his joy she cried his grief
bird by snow and stir by still
anyone's any was all to her

someones married their everyones
laughed their cryings and did their dance
(sleep wake hope and then)they
said their nevers they slept their dream

stars rain sun moon
(and only the snow can begin to explain
how children are apt to forget to remember
with up so floating many bells down)

one day anyone died i guess
(and noone stooped to kiss his face)
busy folk buried them side by side
little by little and was by was

all by all and deep by deep
and more by more they dream their sleep
noone and anyone earth by april
wish by spirit and if by yes.

Women and men(both dong and ding)
summer autumn winter spring
reaped their sowing and went their came
sun moon stars rain

e e cummings, 1940

anyone lived in a pretty how town

A play of names runs through the poem, one of Cummings's great achievements: the man is named "anyone" and the woman who loves him is named "noone." At the specific level, the ballad tells the love story of a lonely man who found someone to share his life with – to laugh in his joy and cry in his grief. At a more general level, it describes the essential loneliness of human beings, a loneliness that can only be overcome by love.

Throughout the poem, the passage of time is told by the bells that ring up and down, by the passing seasons, and by the changing hours and weathers of the day. The seasons occur three times: "spring summer autumn winter ... autumn winter spring summer ... summer autumn winter spring" The skies are also repeated: "sun moon stars rain ... stars rain sun moon ... sun moon stars rain."

The repetitions and the sense of time passing recall the ideas and the rhythms of *Ecclesiastes* (3: 1-3):

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;

A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

We live but briefly. Most importantly during our short life we love our love. This makes everything possible – noone can live with anyone, the earth can experience spring, wishes can be granted, and the possible can be realized:

noone and anyone earth by april
wish by spirit and if by yes

Cummings's poem is written using the 4-line stanzas of the ballad. Unusual among his other work, this poem is rhythmic with each line having four stresses. The first two lines of each stanza rhyme, sometime regularly (town/down; ding/spring) and sometimes using only the last consonant (moon/explain; guess/face). The last two lines do not rhyme. The repetition of words (more by more; little by little; deep by deep) adds to the poem's music.

Cummings stretches the syntax and meaning of his words. A "how town" suggests a conservative manufacturing town, one that is concerned with how things get done rather than why. The expression "went their came" makes an intransitive verb take an object and makes this object a verb in the past tense. As Job states (1:21), we leave life as we came:

Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.

Cummings also notes how memory can work against time but even memory does not last forever:

children are apt to forget to remember
with up so floating many bells down

The poem actually remember very little specific about its two lovers. With the passage of time, they have become abstracted into anyone and noone.

Spring and Fall

(to a young child)

Margaret, are you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leaves, like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
Ah! as the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
And yet you will weep know why.
Now no matter, child, the name:
Sorrow's springs are the same.
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, 1880

In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations'

Only a man harrowing clods
In a slow silent walk
With an old horse that stumbles and nods
Half asleep as they stalk.

Only thin smoke without flame
From the heaps of couch-grass;
Yet this will go onward the same
Though Dynasties pass.

Yonder a maid and her wight
Come whispering by:
War's annals will cloud into night
Ere their story die.

Thomas Hardy, 1915

Spring and Fall

Hopkins wrote this poem while serving as a priest in Liverpool. After his training in the beautiful setting of St Beuno's College in Wales, he was severely depressed by the industrial cityscape. He is perhaps recalling Goldengrove farm near St Beuno's. This poem was written after an autumn walk in the countryside near Liverpool. Margaret is an imagined child.

Hopkins uses the falling of the leaves in autumn to portray the fall of man: the "blight man was made for." For eating of the Tree of Knowledge, Adam and Eve were cast out of Eden (*Genesis* 3: 19):

In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground;
for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

Autumn does indeed bring out the thoughts and emotions associated with death and the first tentative realization of this in childhood can be acute.

Gardner interprets "wanwood leafmeal lie" as pale leaves falling one by one to lie on the forest floor, with "leafmeal" being an adverb like "piecemeal."

The poem is written in the irregular three- and four-stress lines of nursery rhymes. Most of the rhyming is in couplets though there is a triplet in the center. Hopkins used "unleaving" instead of "unleafing" to make the rhyme with "grieving."

In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations'

The poem was written during the early months of World War I. The title derives from *Jeremiah* 51:20:

Thou art my battle axe and weapons of war: for with thee will I break in
pieces the nations, and with thee will I destroy kingdoms

After the plough has turned the sod, the larger clods of earth are broken down with a harrow. An old spike-harrow is illustrated on the right. Modern versions use cutting discs rather than spikes. The word "harrow" also means to wound or distress. The "harrowing of hell" is the defeat of hell and the release of its prisoners, an action carried out by Christ between his death and his resurrection.



Although "couch-grass" can be eaten as forage by grazing animals, it is considered a weed when trying to grow crops, and therefore burned.

Despite the war, the land will still bring forth a new crop, and the maid and her wight (cf p 166) will wed and have children. Life will go on. However, Hardy's hopes that the war would be over by spring came to naught. The horror continued for four more years.

Adlestrop

Yes. I remember Adlestrop
The name, because one afternoon
Of heat, the express-train drew up there
Unwontedly. It was late June.

The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.
No one left and no one came
On the bare platform. What I saw
Was Adlestrop—only the name

And willows, willow-herb, and grass,
And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,
No whit less still and lonely fair
Than the high cloudlets in the sky.

And for that minute a blackbird sang
Close by, and round him, mistier,
Farther and farther, all the birds
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.

Edward Thomas, 1915

Erat Hora

“Thank you, whatever comes.” And then she turned
And, as the ray of sun on hanging flowers
Fades when the wind hath lifted them aside,
Went swiftly from me. Nay, whatever comes
One hour was sunlit and the most high gods
May not make boast of any better thing
Than to have watched that hour as it passed.

Ezra Pound, 1909

Adlestrop

Adlestrop is a tiny village in Gloucestershire near the border with Oxfordshire. The Cotswold Railway Line from Oxford to Hereford follows the valley of the Evenlode River and until 1966 the trains stopped at the Adlestrop station in the open countryside about half a mile south of the village.

On June 24, 1914, Edward Thomas and his wife were travelling by train to visit Robert Frost who was living in a cottage near Ledington in Gloucestershire.

Thomas, a critic, book-reviewer, and travel-writer, recorded in his notebooks:

Then we stopped at Adlestrop, through the willows could be heard a chain of blackbird songs at 12.45 and one thrush and no man seen, only a hiss of engine letting off steam. Stopping outside Campden [the next stop on the line] by banks of long grass willow herb & meadowsweet, extraordinary silence between the two periods of travel – looking out on grey dry stones between metals and the shining metals and over it all the elms willowly and long grass – one man clears his throat – a greater than rustic silence. No house in view. Stop only for a minute till signal is up.

Frost suggested to Thomas that he try his hand at poetry, and Thomas began writing poems in late 1914. Adlestrop was written in early 1915.

Despite or because of its simplicity, the poem powerfully evokes the peaceful beauty of the English countryside – the grass and flowers, the clouds in the sky and the singing birds. And through the beauty one can hear an elegy for lost innocence. By the time the poem was written, the Great War had begun

Frost returned to America in the spring of 1915. Thomas enlisted in the Artists Rifles in July 1915. Frost had sent his friend a copy of his poem *The Road not Taken* (p 56), which was based on their many walks together, and Thomas's frequent inability to decide which path to take. This may have triggered Thomas's decision to enlist, something that was not required of him at his age. Thomas was killed by a shell blast near Arras in 1917.

Erat Hora

The title – “There was an hour” – refers to those memorable times when the actual attained the ideal. We do not know who it was that Pound met. The woman kindly thanked him for his advice. One feels this might have been something like the words of another expatriate American living in Europe:

The great thing is to *live*, you know—to feel, to be conscious of one's possibilities; not to pass through life mechanically and insensibly, like a letter through the post-office. (from Henry James, *A Bundle of Letters*, 1881)

A sister poem to this is *Horae Beatae Inscripto* – a “writing down of the blessed hours” – to be savored when later remembered

How will this beauty, when I am far hence,
Sweep back upon me and engulf my mind!
How will these hours, when we twain are gray,
Turned in their sapphire tide, come flooding o'er us!

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Robert Frost, 1916

b o d y

Look closely at the letters. Can you see,
entering (stage right), then floating full,
then heading off — so soon —
how like a little kohl-rimmed moon
o plots her course from *b* to *d*

—as *y*, unanswered, knocks at the stage door?
Looked at too long, words fail,
phase out. Ask, now that *body* shines
no longer, by what light you learn these lines
and what the *b* and *d* stood for.

James Merrill, 1995

The Road Not Taken

The idea of Frost's poem derived from his walks in rural England with Edward Thomas, who often had difficulty deciding which woodland path to take and often later regretted that he had taken one and not another

Most people remember the idea in the poem's last three lines and consider these to represent its meaning: one should take untraveled paths, and thereby achieve the otherwise impossible.

Yet this is not what the poem states. Frost is really not sure why he took one road rather than the other. Indeed, the more he thinks about it the paths were really not much different: "the passing there had worn them really about the same." He repeats this fact to make the reader quite sure of it: "both that morning equally lay in leaves no step had trodden black."

In the future he will remember that he took the path less traveled, but this is not true. Our memories interpret what happened in the past and are often distorted to make ourselves more like our ideals. We remember what we would like to have happened.

Frost leaves open why one road was taken and not the other. Was there some reason that he now cannot remember? Was it a random choice? Was it something that was determined by everything that had preceded? Did this occur without any intervention of free will? Are all our interpretations of why we choose to do something simply rationalizations of what is determined by causes that are actually beyond our conscious control?

Frost tells his story in four five-line stanzas. The rigorous rhyme scheme – *abaa*b – perhaps suggests that our life is, like the poem's words, completely controlled by an underlying order. Yet from the beginning, the rhythm varies greatly from iambic pentameter:

| / / | - / | - - / | - / |
Two roads diverged in a yellow wood

Our life is a conversation between constraint and freedom.

body

In this brief poem from his last collection, Merrill considers the letters of the word "body" and finds in them some understanding of the course of human life. The "o" appears like "a little kohl-rimmed moon" – a mascara-outlined eye. Through a punning reference to "eye," this becomes the "I" – a representation of the soul. This journeys in the left-right direction of our script from "b" to "d," the usually abbreviations for birth and death. Even visually the letters have their vertical lines (what they stand for) at the extremes of the "course from *b* to *d*."

The word ends with "y" – a punning reference to "why?" The question stands at the stage door, bearing reference to Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (II:7)

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances

Sonnet 147

My love is as a fever longing still,
For that which longer nurseth the disease;
Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,
The uncertain sickly appetite to please.
My reason, the physician to my love,
Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,
Hath left me, and I desperate now approve
Desire is death, which physic did except.
Past cure I am, now Reason is past care,
And frantic-mad with evermore unrest;
My thoughts and my discourse as madmen's are,
At random from the truth vainly express'd;
For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

William Shakespeare, 1609

Abou Ben Adhem

Abou Ben Adhem (may his tribe increase!)
Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace,
And saw, within the moonlight in his room,
Making it rich, and like a lily in bloom,
An angel writing in a book of gold:—
Exceeding peace had made Ben Adhem bold,
And to the Presence in the room he said
"What writest thou?"—The vision raised its head,
And with a look made of all sweet accord,
Answered "The names of those who love the Lord."
"And is mine one?" said Abou. "Nay, not so,"
Replied the angel. Abou spoke more low,
But cheerly still, and said "I pray thee, then,
Write me as one that loves his fellow men."

The angel wrote, and vanished. The next night
It came again with a great wakening light,
And showed the names whom love of God had blessed,
And lo! Ben Adhem's name led all the rest.

Leigh Hunt, 1838

Sonnet 147. My love is as a fever

Sonnets 127-152 have long been considered the “Dark Lady” sonnets to distinguish them from the earlier sonnets addressed to a “Fair Youth.” However, no one is sure who this dark lady was, or indeed whether she really existed. Shakespeare was supremely adept at creating fully formed characters for his plays. Perhaps the Dark Lady lived only (or mainly) in his imagination.

In this sonnet Shakespeare likens his love for her to a fever. He longs not for a cure but for that which makes his fever worse. His reason, like a good doctor, tries to restrain his desire, but ultimately gives up. The poet then “approves” (finds out from experience) that his desire, which his physician did “except” (forbid), will lead to his death. Lust (*luxuria*) is one of the seven deadly sins (pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony, and sloth). And the wages of sin is death (*Romans* 6:23)

Shakespeare plays with the old saying “Past cure, past care,” a simple proverb roughly equivalent to “No use crying over spilt milk.” In the sonnet, the sense is inverted – the poet’s love is without cure because his reason can no longer care.

Now that his Reason has left him, the poet’s thoughts have become “at random from the truth” (totally divorced from reality). The word random derives from the French *randonner* (gallop, run rapidly). The thoughts may thus be manic as well as incorrect. The poet thus insists that his mistress is fair (in the moral sense) though she is dark as night (in both complexion and character).

About Ben Adhem

Ibrahim ibn Adham (718-782 CE, anglicized as Abou Ben Adhem) was a Sufi saint. In a manner similar to the legend of Gautama Buddha, he renounced his privileged life as king of Balkh (also known as *Bactria*) a region north of the Hindu Kush Mountains and south of the Pamir Mountains, to become an ascetic.

Many are the stories of his conversion. In one, the messenger (Khidr) of Allah came searching for a camel on the roof of his palace. The king called him foolish for one would never find a camel on a roof. The messenger replied ‘Why then do you seek for God in silken clothes, asleep upon a golden couch?’

After giving up his throne, Ibrahim wandered around the Arabic world, working, teaching and praying. He is purportedly buried in Jableh, on the Mediterranean coast of Syria. He is considered one of the founders of Sufism.

In this poem, Hunt recounts the idea that on the night of *Shab-e-Barat* (from *Sha’ban*, the eighth month of the Islamic calendar which begins in August, and *Bara’at*, records), Allah decides on the fortunes of individuals for the coming year – whether they will be forgiven, whether they will die. Hunt had read about both Ibrahim and this festival in Barthélemy d’Herbelot’s *Bibliothèque orientale* (1697).

Hunt combines Ibrahim’s renunciation of his kingdom to become an ascetic with the idea that a true believer should reject a life of religious observance (the love of God) for a life of human compassion (“the love of his fellow men”).

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more, Death thou shalt die.

John Donne, 1609

i like my body when it is with your
body. It is so quite new a thing.
Muscles better and nerves more.
i like your body. i like what it does,
i like its hows. i like to feel the spine
of your body and its bones, and the trembling
-firm-smooth ness and which i will
again and again and again
kiss, i like kissing this and that of you,
i like, slowly stroking the, shocking fuzz
of your electric fur, and what-is-it comes
over parting flesh... And eyes big love-crumbs,

and possibly i like the thrill

of under me you so quite new

e e cummings, 1922

Death be not proud

This is the most famous of Donne's *Holy Sonnets*. These nineteen poems were likely written during the period when Donne was converting from Catholicism to Anglicanism. The sonnet is basically Petrarchan in its form: the thought is divided between an octet rhyming *abbaabba*, wherein it likens death to sleep, and a sestet rhyming *cddcee*, wherein it claims that Death shall die. However, the sonnet ends with a rhyming couplet which is Shakespearean rather than Petrarchan in style. And this final couplet has a slant rhyme (as though it is not sure of itself).

Many other poets have likened death to sleep (see p 30), but no evidence supports the hope that death might provide rest and somehow lead to re-awakening. As John Stachniewski (1981) remarked, the tone of the poem is "one of bravado rather than assurance."

Margaret Edson's 1995 play *Wit* tells the story of Professor Vivian Bearing, an expert on Donne's poetry, who is undergoing chemotherapy for ovarian cancer. The play comments insightfully on Donne's poems as well as on the heartlessness of modern medicine. One idea is that the *Holy Sonnets* are symptomatic of "salvation anxiety:"

... you know you're a sinner. And there's this promise of salvation, the whole religious thing. But you just can't deal with it ... It just doesn't stand up to scrutiny. But you can't face life without it either.

i like my body when it is with your body

Cummings wrote many erotic poems. These vary in their sensitivity. One of his famous poems likens making love to a woman to driving a new car:

she being Brand
-new;and you
know consequently a
little stiff ...

The extended metaphor makes it all seem far too mechanical. Other poems more playfully render the verbal interactions that occur during foreplay and consummation:

may i feel said he
(i'll squeal said she
just once said he)
it's fun said she ...

The beauty of *i like my body* is that it is as much concerned with the feelings of the woman as with the desires of the poet.

Although it does not appear on first glance to have much in the way of form, the poem is a sonnet. The poem's striking enjambments – "with your/body" and trembling/-firm-smooth ness" – fits with the linked limbs of the lovers and the etymology of the word (French *jambe*, leg), and gives poetic connotation to the slang term "leg over" for the sexual act.

We real cool

THE POOL PLAYERS.
SEVEN AT THE GOLDEN SHOVEL.

We real cool. We
Left school. We
Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We
Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We
Jazz June. We
Die soon.

Gwendolyn Brooks, 1960

Into my heart an air that kills
From yon far country blows:
What are those blue remembered hills,
What spires, what farms are those?

That is the land of lost content,
I see it shining plain,
The happy highways where I went
And cannot come again.

A. E. Housman, 1896

Venice

Water and marble and that silentness
Which is not broken by a wheel or hoof;
A city like a water-lily, less
Seen than reflected, palace wall and roof,
In the unfruitful waters motionless,
Without one living grass's green reproof;
A city without joy or weariness,
Itself beholding, from itself aloof.

Arthur Symons, 1903

We real cool

In this jazz-poem Brooks gives voice to seven black teenage pool players. Each of the first seven lines ends on an off-beat with the word “we,” giving an existential thrust to their attempts to define themselves. “Seven” may be related to the seven deadly sins although the seven claims (before they die) do not relate to any normal listing of the sins. The poem has been occasionally banned because “jazz” can sometimes mean to have sexual relations with. However, Brooks said that she used it to mean the music one dances to in June when school is out. For these youths who are skipping school, it is always June. The poem is ambivalent. On the one hand, it appears to enjoy the youths’ transgressions; on the other hand, it realizes that they will come to grief. The bass-line of the poem’s music is the injustice that these young men could not succeed even if they followed the rules



Into my heart an air that kills

In this poem from *A Shropshire Lad*, Housman realizes that the past is no more. At Oxford he had fallen in love with Moses Jackson, who was unable to return his feelings. This joy of his first and only love could never come again.

In 2011 Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education, recommended that British children should learn poetry by heart. On the TV program *Question Time*, panelists were asked if they if they could recite a poem they had learnt in school and explain how this had been useful in their subsequent careers. The panelists blathered on about how understanding was far more important than memorization. Only Christopher Hitchens rose to the challenge and recited this Housman poem:

I am very pleased that I am full of things like that ... I feel very sorry for anybody who hasn't had a chance to learn them ... and have their minds furnished with beauty for the remainder of their lives

This was one of Hitchens's last appearances. He died later that year of esophageal cancer and the TV program was first aired after his death.

Venice

Arthur Symons was a critic, poet and travel writer. His most important work was *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899, revised 1919) which introduced the modernism of Baudelaire, Laforgue and Mallarmé to the English-speaking world. This poem provides a brief introduction to Venice. Probably the most surprising sensation when exiting the train-station in Venice is the quietness. There are no taxis and no buses. Symons also mentions how everything is reflected in the canals, and how the buildings are closed against the outside. The city has lasted long by holding itself aloof from the passing of time.

from **A Letter from Li Po**

Fanfare of northwest wind, a bluejay wind
announces autumn, and the equinox
rolls back blue bays to a far afternoon.
Somewhere beyond the Gorge Li Po is gone,
looking for friendship or an old love's sleeve
or writing letters to his children, lost,
and to his children's children, and to us.
What was his light? of lamp or moon or sun?
Say that it changed, for better or for worse,
sifted by leaves, sifted by snow; on mulberry silk
a slant of witch-light; on the pure text
a slant of genius; emptying mind and heart
for winecups and more winecups and more words.
What was his time? Say that it was a change,
but constant as a changing thing may be,
from chicory's moon-dark blue down the taut scale
to chicory's tenderest pink, in a pink field
such as imagination dreams of thought.
But of the heart beneath the winecup moon
the tears that fell beneath the winecup moon
for children lost, lost lovers, and lost friends,
what can we say but that it never ends?
Even for us it never ends, only begins.
Yet to spell down the poem on her page,
margining her phrases, parsing forth
the sevenfold prism of meaning, up the scale
from chicory pink to blue, is to assume
Li Po himself: as he before assumed
the poets and the sages who were his.
Like him, we too have eaten of the word:
with him are somewhere lost beyond the Gorge:
and write, in rain, a letter to lost children,
a letter long as time and brief as love.

Conrad Aiken, 1955

A Letter from Li Po

This is the first section of a long poem that considers the nature of poetry. The opening lines describe the clarity of an autumn afternoon in New England before shifting to the China of Li Po (Li Bai in pinyin, see pp 34, 111 and 205), a Chinese poet of the 8th Century CE. Late in his life Li Po was banished from the court and travelled to western China. Beyond the gorges of the Yangtze River was a land dotted with occasional temples for meditation and inns for drinking. Li Po remembered his family and realized his intense loneliness.

Aiken is invoking his predecessor, trying to understand the process of poetry as it was then and as it is now: the spelling down of meaning on the page, or as he says in a later section of the poem, transforming “all things to a hoop of flame where through tigers of meaning leap.”

Aiken was a master of sounds. Alliterations such as “back blue bays” and “sifted by leaves, sifted by snow; on mulberry silk” are entrancing. The repetition of “beneath the winecup moon” sounds like an incantation. The multiple l-sounds in the last line of this first section – “a letter long as time and brief as love” – bring to mind the liquid sounds of falling rain.

Aiken is very precise in his imagery. In the first line he mentions the “bluejay wind.” Bluejays do not always migrate, but they often move toward the south along the Atlantic seaboard in the fall. Sometimes flocks of a hundred or more, appear as if the northwest wind had just blown them down from Canada. Aiken’s description of the petals of the chicory flower changing from “moon-dark blue” to “tenderest pink” made me aware of colors that I had not previously noticed: the central origin of the blue petals can be a very light pink before changing to the flower’s characteristic blue.

Aiken was a philosophical poet and his poetry is very concerned with ideas. In this first section he asks about the inspiration of Li Po: “What was his light?” His focuses on the idea that everything changes: “Say that it changed.” This recalls Heraclitus, a pre-Socratic Greek philosopher, whose thought revolved about the idea of change (see p 200). Nothing is ever the same: “one cannot step twice into the same river, for the water into which you first stepped has flowed on” (translation by Davenport, 1995). The poet, be he Li Po or Conrad Aiken, must somehow determine how to deal with this continual change. Poetry is one way. For a moment poetry can stop the world and crystallize its meaning

Aiken characterizes the poet as one who has “eaten of the word.” The allusion is primarily to the Christian Eucharist wherein the wafer and the wine are considered by the communicant to represent the body and blood of Christ, who called himself the Word. But the word of Aiken’s poem is actual word as well as philosophical *logos*. The poet experiences the joy of using words to make thoughts more memorable and meaningful. This is the experience of Mark Strand in his poem *Eating Poetry* (1969) which begins

Ink runs from the corners of my mouth.
There is no happiness like mine.
I have been eating poetry.

You, Andrew Marvell

And here face down beneath the sun
And here upon earth's noonward height
To feel the always coming on
The always rising of the night:

To feel creep up the curving east
The earthy chill of dusk and slow
Upon those under lands the vast
And ever climbing shadow grow

And strange at Ecbatan the trees
Take leaf by leaf the evening strange
The flooding dark about their knees
The mountains over Persia change

And now at Kermanshah the gate
Dark empty and the withered grass
And through the twilight now the late
Few travelers in the westward pass

And Baghdad darken and the bridge
Across the silent river gone
And through Arabia the edge
Of evening widen and steal on

And deepen on Palmyra's street
The wheel rut in the ruined stone
And Lebanon fade out and Crete
High through the clouds and overblown

And over Sicily the air
Still flashing with the landward gulls
And loom and slowly disappear
The sails above the shadowy hulls

And Spain go under and the shore
Of Africa the gilded sand
And evening vanish and no more
The low pale light across that land

Nor now the long light on the sea:
And here face downward in the sun
To feel how swift how secretly
The shadow of the night comes on ...

Archibald MacLeish, 1930

You, Andrew Marvell

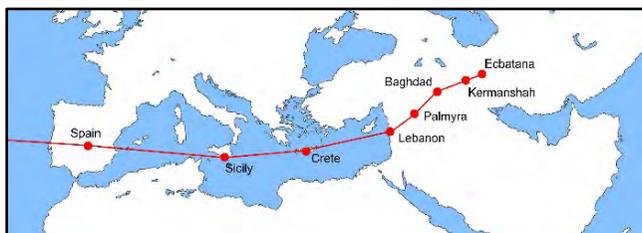
After serving as an ambulance driver in World War I, and then practicing law in Boston, MacLeish decided to become a writer in 1923 and went to Paris. In 1926, he visited Persia (present day Iran) for the League of Nations to report on ways to reduce opium production. This introduction to diplomacy led to his later service as Assistant Secretary of State during World War II. While in Persia, MacLeish was notified of his father's approaching death. He returned home to Illinois, where his father died in 1928. This poem, initially drafted at about that time, concerns the inevitability of death.

The poem alludes to Andrew Marvell's *To his Coy Mistress* (p 32). MacLeish's image of "the shadow of the night" relates to Marvell's "Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near."

The poem contains nine quatrains with a simple *abab* rhyme scheme. The rhythm is a very regular iambic tetrameter. What is unusual is the absence of punctuation. The coming of the night brooks no delay however short. The whole poem is one sentence. Even the sentence is not normal:

In fact, the poem is not a sentence at all, but three adverbial phrases that modify three infinitive phrases (Hendricks, 2003).

The poem describes the imagined actions of the night. The three infinitives are all "to feel." Each is followed by the various actions that are felt: "creep up," "grow," "take," etc. The word order is distorted. "Strange" is used as an adverb.



Lying on a shore in North America, MacLeish imagines the journey of the night from East to West. Cities and countries succumb to darkness just as the empires that built them passed away. The great pleasure of the poem comes from the recitation of the ancient names.

Ecbatana was the Capital of the Median Empire in the 8th Century BCE; Kermanshah was the capital of the Persian Empire in the period of the Sassanids and the Parthians (3rd-4th Century CE); Baghdad was the great center of science and culture in the Abbasid Caliphate (8th-11th Century CE); Palmyra reached its acme as a trading city in Hellenistic and Roman periods (300 BCE-300 CE); Lebanon was the center of the Phoenician Empire (1100-200 BCE); Crete was home to the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations; Sicily was ruled successively by Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs and Normans; before 1492 Spain was controlled by Romans, Visigoths, and Muslims. MacLeish fails to mention any Christian centers (Jerusalem, Rome), perhaps because our Christian civilization has not yet passed

The Shooting of Dan McGrew

A bunch of the boys were whooping it up in the
Malamute saloon;
The kid that handles the music-box was hitting a jag
time tune;
Back of the bar, in a solo game, sat Dangerous Dan
McGrew,
And watching his luck was his light-o'-love, the lady
that's known as Lou.

When out of the night, which was fifty below, and into
the din and the glare,
There stumbled a miner fresh from the creeks, dog-
dirty, and loaded for bear.
He looked like a man with a foot in the grave and
scarcely the strength of a louse,
Yet he tilted a poke of dust on the bar, and he called
for drinks for the house.
There was none could place the stranger's face, though
we searched ourselves for a clue;
But we drank his health, and the last to drink was
Dangerous Dan McGrew.

There's men that somehow just grip your eyes, and
hold them hard like a spell;
And such was he, and he looked to me like a man who
had lived in hell;
With a face most hair, and the dreary stare of a dog
whose day is done,
As he watered the green stuff in his glass, and the
drops fell one by one.
Then I got to figgering who he was, and wondering
what he'd do,
And I turned my head — and there watching him was
the lady that's known as Lou.

His eyes went rubbering round the room, and he seemed
in a kind of daze,
Till at last that old piano fell in the way of his wan-
dering gaze.
The rag-time kid was having a drink; there was no one
else on the stool,
So the stranger stumbles across the room, and flops
down there like a fool

(ctd)

The Shooting of Dan McGrew

Born in Lancashire, Service emigrated to North America in 1894. After traveling around, he obtained a job with the Bank of Commerce in British Columbia, who posted him to the Yukon in 1904. He published *Songs of a Sourdough* (also known as *The Spell of the Yukon*) in 1907. This book contained his most famous ballads: *The Shooting of Dan McGrew* and *The Cremation Sam McGee*. Though he later professed to loathe these poems, they made him rich and famous.

Sourdough is a way of making bread using the naturally occurring lactobacilli and yeast rather than cultivated bakers' yeast. A small portion of the dough is kept from the baked bread to maintain the culture. The bread typically has a sour taste. Although this technique goes back to ancient times, it has become firmly associated with San Francisco and the 1849 California Gold Rush. From there it was exported to the Klondike. The miners often carried a small pouch of sourdough on their body to keep it from freezing. This led to their being themselves called "sourdoughs."

Some people consider the poetry of Robert Service as inferior doggerel recounting trivial stories. I find his verse rhythmic and exciting, and I am happy to surrender myself to the melodrama. Service is very similar to Kipling in his control of sound and story. Kipling was also criticized, but even T. S. Eliot recognized his poetic talent. The kind of poetry written by Kipling and Service later developed into country-western songs, cowboy poetry, and rap music.

On the left I have replicated the layout of the poem in the book *Songs of a Sourdough*. The form appears unusual on first glance. The long lines seem unprecedented. However, they basically represent the age-old ballad form. Ballads were typically written with four-line stanzas. The lines alternated between tetrameter and trimeter (four and three stresses). The rhythm used mainly iambic feet (- /), but anapests (- - /) are also common – they give the rhythm a lilt. The second and fourth lines rhymed. All that Service has done is join the second line to the first and the fourth line to the third. The first two lines of the poem could thus be represented in ballad form:

A bunch of the boys were whooping it up	- / - - / - / - - /
In the Malamute saloon;	- - / - / - /
The kid that handles the music-box	- / - / - - / - /
Was hitting a jag-time tune;	- / - - / - /

The events of the poem take place in a saloon named after the Alaskan Malamute, a large strong dog used in the Polar regions to pull sleds and to aid in hunting. The dog came to the North America from East Asia with the Thule people, ancestors of the modern Inuit. These replaced an earlier Dorset people between 900 and 1200 CE.

The discovery of gold near the Klondike River, which drains into the Yukon River at Dawson City, led to some 100,000 men from various parts of North America travelling to the Yukon Territory. They came by sea to Dyea in the Alaskan Panhandle, and then traveled through the mountains to reach the Yukon River, an arduous journey taking up to two years.

In a buckskin shirt that was glazed with dirt he sat,
and I saw him sway;
Then he clutched the keys with his talon hands—my
God! but that man could play.

Were you ever out in the Great Alone, when the moon
was awful clear,
And the icy mountains hemmed you in with a silence
you most could hear;
With only the howl of a timber wolf, and you camped
there in the cold,
A half-dead thing in a stark, dead world, clean mad
for the muck called gold;
While high overhead, green, yellow and red, the North
Lights swept in bars? —
Then you've a hunch what the music meant. . . .
hunger and night and the stars.

And hunger not of the belly kind, that's banished with
bacon and beans,
But the gnawing hunger of lonely men for a home and
all that it means;
For a fireside far from the cares that are, four walls
and a roof above;
But oh! so cramful of cosy joy, and crowned with a
woman's love—
A woman dearer than all the world, and true as Heaven
is true—
(God! how ghastly she looks through her rouge,—the
lady that's known as Lou.)

Then on a sudden the music changed, so soft that you
scarce could hear;
But you felt that your life had been looted clean of
all that it once held dear;
That someone had stolen the woman you loved; that
her love was a devil's lie;
That your guts were gone, and the best for you was to
crawl away and die.
'Twas the crowning cry of a heart's despair, and it
thrilled you through and through—
"I guess I'll make it a spread misere", said Dangerous
Dan McGrew.

(ctd)

The main route to the Yukon was the Chilkoot trail which went from Dyea on the coast up about 1000 meters over a mountain pass into Canada. Each prospector had to take with him about 1000 kg of supplies – food and clothing to last a year as well as mining equipment. Without these supplies they could be turned back from the Canadian border at the height of land. Less than half those who set out made it to Dawson City, and most arrived to find that every claim had already been staked. The city itself was a center for banking, drinking, gambling, and prostitution. The miners in the Klondike region would dig and sluice for gold on their claim. The gold could then be exchanged for money or for goods in Dawson City. The gold was often carried in a “poke” – a small sack or bag (from the French *poche* for pocket.)

A good sense of this trek to the Klondike is available in the novel *The Man from the Creeks* (1998) by the Canadian poet and novelist Robert Kroetsch. This imagines a backstory for the events in the poem *The Shooting of Dan McGrew*. Like many an ancient ballad, Service’s poem can be filled out in many different ways. There was clearly a prior relationship between the miner and Lou, one that had been broken by Dangerous Dan. There was likely even further cause for enmity, perhaps involving the theft of a claim. And although at the end of the poem we are urged to think of Lou as an unfeeling opportunist, there was probably much more to her story than the narrator recognized. Perhaps she used the gold to escape from her life of prostitution.

The game that Dan McGrew is playing “back of the bar” is Solo, a gambling game for four people. Each player is dealt 13 cards and trump is declared. The play involves taking tricks as in Whist or Bridge. The players bid on how many tricks they might win or lose. An “Abundance” is a bid by one player to take all the tricks. A “Misère” is a bid to lose all the tricks; a “Spread Misère” or “Misère Ouverte” is a bid to lose all the tricks even when the cards have been turned up and played by the opponents.

The miner’s drink was absinthe, a green spirit distilled from wormwood by Pernod et Fils. Absinthe was popular in France and Europe in the 19th Century. Of high alcohol-concentration, it was usually drunk after being diluted with water. One technique was to drop ice-cold water over a sugar cube held in a slotted spoon into a glass of absinthe. This turns the absinthe an opalescent pale green.

As he watered the green stuff in his glass, and the
drops fell one by one.

Several associations between absinthe and violent behavior have suggested that the drink might contain some dangerous psychoactive chemicals. More likely the violence was related to the alcohol. As the narrator of the poem states the miner may have been drinking home-made spirits (“hooch” or “moonshine”) before he came to the bar. Because of its association with violence, absinthe was banned in several countries in the early 20th Century, though it was once again produced for legal consumption in the 1990s.

The music almost died away . . . then it burst like a
pent-up flood;
And it seemed to say, "Repay, repay," and my eyes
were blind with blood.
The thought came back of an ancient wrong, and it
stung like a frozen lash,
And the lust awoke to kill, to kill . . . then the music
stopped with a crash,
And the stranger turned, and his eyes they burned in
a most peculiar way;
In a buckskin shirt that was glazed with dirt he sat,
and I saw him sway;
Then his lips went in in a kind of grin, and he spoke,
and his voice was calm,
And "Boys," says he, "you don't know me, and none
of you care a damn;
But I want to state, and my words are straight, and I'll
bet my poke they're true,
That one of you is a hound of hell. . . . and that one
is Dan McGrew."

Then I ducked my head, and the lights went out, and
two guns blazed in the dark,
And a woman screamed, and the lights went up, and
two men lay stiff and stark.
Pitched on his head, and pumped full of lead, was Dan-
gerous Dan McGrew,
While the man from the creeks lay clutched to the
breast of the lady that's known as Lou.

These are the simple facts of the case, and I guess I
ought to know.
They say that the stranger was crazed with "hooch,"
and I'm not denying it's so.
I'm not so wise as the lawyer guys, but strictly between
us two—
The woman that kissed him and—pinched his poke—
was the lady that's known as Lou.

Robert Service, 1907

One of the fascinating questions raised by Service's poem is the nature of the music played by the man from the creeks. Before he sits down to play, the music was a "jag-time tune." This would have been one of the syncopated ragtime pieces that were popular at the turn of the 20th Century, such as the *Maple Leaf Rag* (1899) or *The Entertainer* (1902) by Scott Joplin. But what music did the miner play? Perhaps it was just an improvisation. But perhaps it was a wildly romantic virtuoso piece like Chopin's Scherzo in B minor (1832), something that a civilized man from the south might have learned to play in his youth before winding up in the Yukon. The scherzo has various sections that can fit with the description of the music in the poem:

And hunger not of the belly kind, that's banished with
bacon and beans,
Then on a sudden the music changed, so soft that you
scarce could hear;
But you felt that your life had been looted clean of
all that it once held dear;
The music almost died away. . . then it burst like a
pent-up flood;
And it seemed to say, "Repay, repay", and my eyes
were blind with blood

Two themes run through the poems of Robert Service. One is the attraction that some men feel for the solitude and hardship of untamed nature. In this particular poem this idea is only briefly mentioned:

Were you ever out in the Great Alone, when the moon
was awful clear,
And the icy mountains hemmed you in with a silence
you most could hear;

Other poems in the *Songs of a Sourdough* are more expansive. *The Call of the Wild* begins

Have you gazed on naked grandeur where there's nothing else to gaze on,
Set pieces and drop-curtain scenes galore,
Big mountains heaved to heaven, which the blinding sunsets blazon,
Black canyons where the rapids rip and roar?

The other theme is the lure of home, the desire to return to warmth and love and comfort.

But the gnawing hunger of lonely men for a home and
all that it means;
For a fireside far from the cares that are, four walls
and a roof above;

These two forces forever pull against each other.

Jabberwocky

'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!”

He took his vorpal sword in hand;
Long time the manxome foe he sought—
So rested he by the Tumtum tree
And stood awhile in thought.

And, as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
And burred as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.

“And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!”
He chortled in his joy.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll), 1871

Jabberwocky

Carroll began writing this poem in 1855 to entertain his siblings. The finished version was finally included in the first chapter of *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871). Alice found it in a book of reversed writing after entering looking-glass world. Although she was able to read the writing by viewing it in a mirror, she could not understand the words.

A few chapters later Humpty-Dumpty famously claimed that “When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.” In reply to Alice’s question whether you can make words mean so many different things, he then replied “The question is which is to be master – that’s all.” He then proceeded to explain many of the words in *Jabberwocky*. One principle is the “portmanteau word” – where two meanings were packed up into one suitcase-word.

The following are either explanations provided by Humpty Dumpty or those given by Carroll in response to later questions from readers:

Jabberwocky: jabber (voluble discourse) + *wocer* (Anglo-Saxon, offspring). John Tenniel’s illustration on the right appears to be based on the dragon in Paolo Uccello’s *St George and the Dragon* (1470) in London’s National Gallery. Carroll’s monster may have derived from the Viking legends of northeastern England where Carroll spent his childhood. One example is the Sockburn Worm, a winged serpent (wyvern) killed by a young champion using the Falchion sword, a copy of which is preserved in Durham Cathedral. The monster Grendel in *Beowulf* is another Viking legend.



Brillig: from bryl (broil), the time for broiling dinner, i.e. late afternoon; *slythy*: slimy + lithe; *tove*: a species of badger, something like lizards and something like corkscrews (toves nest under sundials and live on cheese); *gyre*: go round and round; *gimble*: make holes; *wabe*: way + before/behind, the grassplot around a sundial; *mimsy*: flimsy + miserable; *borogove*: a thin shabby-looking bird with feathers sticking out, like a live mop; *mome*: short for “from home,” a long way from home; *rath*: a sort of green pig; *outgribing*: something between bellowing and whistling with a sneeze in the middle; *Jubjub bird*: a bird with a scream like a pencil squeaking on a slate; *frumious*: fuming + furious; *Bandersnatch*: a creatures with snapping jaws; *manxome*: perhaps from the Isle of Mann; *Tumtum tree*: a tree that sounds like a plucked stringed instrument; *vorpal sword*: perhaps the Falchion sword; *uffish*: a state of mind when the voice is gruffish, the manner roguish and the temper huffish; *whiffle*: blow unsteadily; *burble*: bleat + murmur + warble; *snicker-snack*: derives from an old word snickersnee for a large knife; *galumph*: gallop + triumphant; *beamish*: shining brightly, radiant; *chortle*: chuckle +snort; *frabjous*: fabulous + joyous; *callooh*, *callyay*: variants of the Greek word *kalos* (beautiful, good, virtuous)

Sea-Gulls

For one carved instant as they flew,
The language had no simile –
Silver, crystal, ivory
Were tarnished. Etched upon the horizon blue,
The frieze must go unchallenged, for the lift
And carriage of the wings would stain the drift
Of stars against a tropic indigo
Or dull the parable of snow.

Now settling one by one
Within green hollows or where curled
Crests caught the spectrum from the sun,
A thousand wings are furled.
No clay-born lilies of the world
Could blow as free
As those wild orchids of the sea.

E. J. Pratt, 1923

Politics

‘In our time the destiny of man presents its
meaning in political terms’ Thomas Mann

How can I, that girl standing there,
My attention fix
On Roman or on Russian
Or on Spanish politics?
Yet here's a travelled man that knows
What he talks about,
And there's a politician
That has read and thought,
And maybe what they say is true
Of war and war's alarms,
But O that I were young again
And held her in my arms!

W. B. Yeats, 1938

Sea-Gulls

Published in *Newfoundland Verse* (1923), his first collection of poetry, this became Pratt's signature poem. Fred Varley used a sea-gull design on the original cover of *Newfoundland Verse*, and a variant of this is used for the website devoted to Pratt's works at Trent University.



Sea-gulls are common in coastal regions, and are not usually considered beautiful. Pratt proposes that we have been wrong to dismiss them. The poem lists various similes that fail to capture their beauty – “silver, crystal, ivory were tarnished” The whiteness of the gulls in the blue sky would even “dull the parable of snow.” In this respect he follows Shakespeare who in Sonnet 18 finds that his love is far more beautiful than summer:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:

He does admit two likenesses that capture the beauty of the sea-gulls: a white frieze etched on blue, perhaps like Wedgewood pottery, and the “wild orchids of the sea” which have more freedom than any “clay-born lilies.”

This poem, wherein every line is rhymed, is often paired with *The Shark*, a free-verse poem wherein nature is described as fearful and foreboding rather than as free and beautiful:

That strange fish,
Tubular, tapered, smoke-blue

Politics

As one grows older, thoughts often tend toward sex and politics. During the 1930s Yeats became far more conservative in his political views than in his youth. He expressed skepticism about democracy and flirted with the possibility of fascism. To counteract his failing sexual vigor, he underwent the Steinach operation in 1934 (a partial unilateral vasectomy, later deemed to have no significant effect), and engaged in erotic affairs with younger women. This brief poem portrays how fervently the old wish that they were young again.

Robert Browning describes a similar feeling in *Summum Bonum* from *Asolando* his last book of poems (1889):

All the breath and the bloom of the year in the bag of one bee:
All the wonder and wealth of the mine in the heart of one gem:
In the core of one pearl all the shade and the shine of the sea:
Breath and bloom, shade and shine, wonder, wealth, and—how far above them—
Truth, that's brighter than gem,
Trust, that's purer than pearl,—
Brightest truth, purest trust in the universe—all were for me
In the kiss of one girl.

Yeats's poem uses a conversational rhythm and rhymes on the alternate lines. Browning's poem is strictly rhymed and its rhythm is mainly anapestic (- - /). The differences befit the times wherein they wrote.

Love is not all: it is not meat nor drink
Nor slumber nor a roof against the rain;
Nor yet a floating spar to men that sink
And rise and sink and rise and sink again;
Love cannot fill the thickened lung with breath,
Nor clean the blood, nor set the fractured bone;
Yet many a man is making friends with death
Even as I speak, for lack of love alone.
It well may be that in a difficult hour,
Pinned down by pain and moaning for release,
Or nagged by want past resolution's power,
I might be driven to sell your love for peace,
Or trade the memory of this night for food.
It well may be. I do not think I would.

Edna St. Vincent Millay, 1931

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough,
And stands about the woodland ride
Wearing white for Eastertide.

Now, of my threescore years and ten,
Twenty will not come again,
And take from seventy springs a score,
It only leaves me fifty more.

And since to look at things in bloom
Fifty springs are little room,
About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.

A. E. Housman, 1896

Love is not all: it is not meat nor drink

In Act IV Scene 3 of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, Rosalind, disguised as a young man, coaches Orlando on how to express his love. On his claiming that he would die if he failed to attain his lady, Rosalind replies

men have died from time to time and worms have eaten them, but not for love.

In this Shakespearean sonnet, St. Vincent Millay agrees that "love is not all" – it does not provide food or shelter, and it does not rescue the dying from shipwreck or disease. And yet she recognizes that

many a man is making friends with death
Even as I speak, for lack of love alone.

Although Rosalind is correct that the traditional expressions of courtly love are wildly exaggerated, some men do die of the despair that comes from lack of love.

And so, St. Vincent Millay changes the question to one about the value of love. Would she sell "your love for peace" from pain? Would she give up "the memory of this night for food"? She realizes that she might, but thinks not. Her claim is not the protestation of a courtly lover, but it is far more powerful.

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now

This poem from *A Shropshire Lad*, describes how a young man of twenty realizes that life is too short not to enjoy the beauty of the cherry blossoms.

This poem has received more musical settings than any other poem in the English language. The poem is quite intriguing in its rhythm. Most lines are iambic tetrameter, but several begin with a stressed syllable, like music's stress on the first beat of a bar. Housman does this by substituting a dactyl for the first foot

/ - - | - / | - / | - /
Loveliest of trees, the cherry now

or by simply clipping off the first unstressed syllable

/ | - / | - / | - /
Wearing white for Eastertide

The mention of seventy years as the normal human lifespan comes from:

The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away. (*Psalms* 90:10)

The poem makes many other references to the passing of time. The church year is divided into set periods with Eastertide being the seven weeks between Easter Sunday and Pentecost – a time coinciding with the period of the cherry blossoms. The liturgical color for Eastertide is white.

A Shropshire Lad describes how young men like the one in this poem forgo the beauties of the countryside and the pleasures of love, go to war and die before their time. Although he wrote these poems long before World War I, Robert Lowell (1953) felt that he predicted its horrors: "One feels that Housman foresaw the Somme," (the 1916 battle that resulted in over a million casualties).

There Was a Saviour

There was a saviour
Rarer than radium,
Commoner than water, crueller than truth;
Children kept from the sun
Assembled at his tongue
To hear the golden note turn in a groove,
Prisoners of wishes locked their eyes
In the jails and studies of his keyless smiles.

The voice of children says
From a lost wilderness
There was calm to be done in his safe unrest,
When hindering man hurt
Man, animal, or bird
We hid our fears in that murdering breath,
Silence, silence to do, when earth grew loud,
In lairs and asylums of the tremendous shout.

There was glory to hear
In the churches of his tears,
Under his downy arm you sighed as he struck,
O you who could not cry
On to the ground when a man died
Put a tear for joy in the unearthly flood
And laid your cheek against a cloud-formed shell:
Now in the dark there is only yourself and myself.

Two proud, blacked brothers cry,
Winter-locked side by side,
To this inhospitable hollow year,
O we who could not stir
One lean sigh when we heard
Greed on man beating near and fire neighbour
But wailed and nested in the sky-blue wall
Now break a giant tear for the little known fall,

For the drooping of homes
That did not nurse our bones,
Brave deaths of only ones but never found,
Now see, alone in us,
Our own true strangers' dust
Ride through the doors of our unentered house.
Exiled in us we arouse the soft,
Unclenched, armless, silk and rough love that breaks all rocks

Dylan Thomas, 1940

There Was a Saviour

This poem was written at the beginning of World War II. The devastation (“lost wilderness”), death (“murdering breath”) and irrationality (“tremendous shout”) of the war cast a piercing light on the deficiencies of normal religion. Thomas proposes that we should not hide in the platitudes of formal religion but should simply learn to love our fellows. As Tindall (1962) says, Thomas is “an unbelieving ex-believer, with charity for all – except believers.

For this poem, Thomas uses a stanza-form from Milton’s *On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity* (1629), although he reverses the indentations and uses assonance rhymes (*aabccbdd*) rather than full rhymes. The following is Milton’s verse describing the music that attends the birth of the Christ.

Ring out ye crystal spheres!
Once bless our human ears
 (If ye have power to touch our senses so)
And let your silver chime
Move in melodious time,
 And let the bass of Heav'n's deep organ blow;
And with your ninefold harmony
Make up full consort to th'angelic symphony.

Rather than celebrating the birth of Christ, Thomas’s poem criticized Christianity for its failure to live up to its ideals. Religion had become out of touch with the world. Believers listened to lessons that repeat like a phonographic recording – the “golden note” that turns “in a groove.” They withdrew from the world and meditated forever over the insoluble intricacies of such things as the Trinity and consubstantiation – they “locked their eyes in the jails and studies of his keyless smiles.” They hid in the silence as the earth grew loud with the “tremendous shout” of war. They cried for the unearthly story of their saviour, but “could not cry on to the ground when a man died.”

The poem changes abruptly from then to now in the last line of the third stanza

Now in the dark there is only yourself and myself.

when the poet urges us to interact directly with each other, and to care for those who have suffered and need our help. He realizes we have been concerned only with ourselves. We are “two proud, blacked brothers” – dark in our selfishness and dark in the wartime blackouts.

The change is reinforced in the “Now” of the last line of the fourth stanza: “Now break a giant tear ...” We who were so concerned about the fall of Adam now realize that we should be far more worried about the fate of real human beings, those who have lost their homes or died in battle. We should consider our fate:

Now see alone in us
Our own true strangers' dust
Ride through the doors of our unentered house.

And we must realize that all we can do is love one another with the “silk and rough love that breaks all rocks.”

Simplify Me When I'm Dead

Remember me when I am dead
and simplify me when I'm dead.

As the processes of earth
strip off the colour of the skin:
take the brown hair and blue eye

and leave me simpler than at birth,
when hairless I came howling in
as the moon entered the cold sky.

Of my skeleton perhaps,
so stripped, a learned man will say
"He was of such a type and intelligence," no more.

Thus when in a year collapse
particular memories, you may
deduce, from the long pain I bore

the opinions I held, who was my foe
and what I left, even my appearance
but incidents will be no guide.

Time's wrong-way telescope will show
a minute man ten years hence
and by distance simplified.

Through that lens see if I seem
substance or nothing: of the world
deserving mention or charitable oblivion,

not by momentary spleen
or love into decision hurled,
leisurely arrive at an opinion.

Remember me when I am dead
and simplify me when I'm dead.

Keith Douglas, 1941

Simplify Me When I'm Dead

The poet asks to be remembered when he dies, but he asks that the memory be simplified – the details do not matter, all that is important is whether he was

substance or nothing: of the world
deserving mention or charitable oblivion

Douglas' poem was written while he was in training before he had experienced battle. He later fought in the tank campaigns in North Africa, and then died during the Norman Invasion of 1944

The rhyme scheme is quite formal. The first and last stanzas are the same rhyming couplet. The identical rhyme gives a sense of finality to the idea of death. The couplet also contains its own simplification as "I am" becomes "I'm." The other stanzas each have three lines. These stanzas are set up in pairs with each line of one pair rhyming with the next: *abc abc*. In a similar way might reality rhyme with its image, or history with its memory.



The illustration shows what is perhaps the greatest of war memorials, erected to the US soldiers who died on Omaha Beach on D-Day (June 6, 1944). The sculptor Anilore Banon described its three parts:

The Wings of Hope: So that the spirit which carried these men on 6th June 1944, continues to inspire us, reminding us that together it is always possible to change the future.

Rise of Freedom: So that the example of those who rose up against barbarity, helps us remain standing strong against all forms of inhumanity.

The Wings of Fraternity: So that the surge of brotherhood always reminds of our responsibility towards others as well as ourselves. On 6th June 1944, these men were more than soldiers, they were our brothers.

The sculpture in its abstract simplicity is far more powerful than other memorials to the invasion which provide more realistic portraits of the soldiers. "Simplify me when I'm dead" is the right and proper approach to remembrance.

Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae

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.

All night upon mine heart I felt her warm heart beat,
Night-long within mine arms in love and sleep she lay;
Surely the kisses of her boughed red mouth were sweet;
But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
When I awoke and found the dawn was gray:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

I have forgot much, Cynara! gone with the wind,
Flung roses, roses riotously with the throng,
Dancing, to put thy pale lost lilies out of mind;
But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
Yea, all the time, because the dance was long:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

I cried for madder music and for stronger wine,
But when the feast is finished and the lamps expire,
Then falls thy shadow, Cynara! the night is thine;
And I am desolate and sick of an old passion,
Yea, hungry for the lips of my desire:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

Ernest Dowson, 1891

Thaw

Over the land freckled with snow half-thawed
The speculating rooks at their nests cawed
And saw from elm-tops, delicate as flower of grass
What we below could not see, Winter pass.

Edward Thomas, 1910s

Sub regno Cynarae

The title is from Horace (*Odes* IV: 1): “I am not the same as when I was ruled by the good Cynara.” The ode is quite different from Dowson's poem. Horace is asking Venus not to tempt him with new passions now that he is in his fifties and not the man he was, when he made love to his mistress, the beautiful Cynara. She died young. In *Odes* IV: 13): Horace remarks that “To Cynara, the fates allowed few years.” It is not clear whether Cynara left Horace before she died. My intuition is that she did, and that his real regret at her leaving is tinged with the bitterness of a rejected lover.

The situation in Dowson's poem is more similar to the relations between Propertius, another Augustan poet, and his mistress Cynthia. Cynthia and Propertius experienced both high passion and extreme jealousy, being most in love when they were unfaithful to each other. Propertius reports how he retaliated after Cynthia deceived him: with Phyllis and with Teia “we scattered simple roses for their scent” (*Odes* IV:8). He also describes the return of Cynthia's ghost after her death (*Odes* IV:7). The ghost swears “I kept my faith to you” and prophecies that “though others may possess you, later I shall hold you alone and clutching closely, bone to bone” (translations by Gilbert Highet). In Propertius it is the ghost who insists on her faithfulness: in Dowson it is the lover.

The poem is also related to the ideas expressed in Baudelaire's *Enivrez-vous*

Be always drunken. Nothing else matters: that is the only question. If you would not feel the horrible burden of Time weighing on your shoulders and crushing you to the earth, be drunken continually. (from *Paris Spleen*, 1864)

Dowson's poem is technically brilliant. The repetitions give a strong slow rhythm to the poem. Since the two repeating lines of each verse are separated by a new line, this rhythm is gained without loss of interest. Even within the repetition, there is novelty: the variation from “and” to “but” and back, and the final change into the present tense – “I am desolate and sick ...” The images are balanced: her warm heart leads to “her bought red mouth” and the riotous roses to “pale lost lilies.” The sounds provide musical accompaniment to the images: the echoing *l*, *m* and *n* sounds of the line “Night-long within my arms in love and sleep she lay.”

Dowson's poem to Cynara exerted an immense impact on the culture of the 20th Century. Lines from the poem show up in the titles of books and movies (*Gone with the Wind*, and *The Days of Wine and Roses*), and in popular songs (*Always True to You in my Fashion*).. T. S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men* (see p 158) echoes Dowson's terror:

Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow

Thaw

This brief poem marks the moment when winter changes to spring, a time of new beginnings and growing hopes, a moment we may not notice.

Sanctuary

My land is bare of chattering folk;
The clouds are low along the ridges,
And sweet's the air with curly smoke
From all my burning bridges.

Dorothy Parker, 1931

One Art

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

Elizabeth Bishop, 1976

Sanctuary

To “burn one’s bridges” originally derived from the military strategy of destroying a bridge after it had been crossed to give an army no choice but to advance further. The phrase now denotes an action that commits a person to a particular course and precludes any alternative. It is much like “crossing the Rubicon” (Caesar’s decision in 49 BCE to cross the Rubicon River in Northern Italy and advance on Rome) – committing oneself irrevocably to revolution.

However, Parker uses the expression in yet a different way – defensively rather than aggressively. Hurt by her interactions with others, she has retreated to a sanctuary, burning all the bridges she has crossed to prevent anyone from following her. And for a brief while, there was perhaps some peace for this acerbic member of the Algonquian Round Table, a group of New York writers who chattered during lunch at the Algonquian Hotel from 1919-1929.

One Art

In 1970 Bishop was invited to teach a course on creative writing at Harvard University. While at Harvard, the Bishop began a passionate affair with the much younger Alice Methfessel. In the fall of 1975, their relationship, strained to breaking by Bishop’s drinking and Alice’s involvement with a young man, came to an end. Bishop felt herself abandoned. This was but one more in a long sequence of losses. This poem was her attempt to come to grips with what had happened.

The poem is a villanelle (see p 10). The constraints of the form – two rhyming sounds and two repeating lines – serve to mitigate the underlying agony. However, although the first line of the poem is repeated exactly, the third line only maintains the last word – “disaster.” The enjambment between the lines and the parenthetical remarks make the poem resemble a letter to herself – “Write it!” Bishop admits to losing many things, almost as if the things were themselves consciously trying to be lost. Losing appears to be the “one art” that we must always practise to be better at.

As the poem proceeds, the losses become more significant. Bishop had lost both her parents in early childhood. She later lost the watch that was a keepsake from her mother. The “three loved houses” were: the house in Key West that she bought with Louise Crane in 1938; *Fazenda Samambaia*, the house near Petropolis, Brazil, that she shared with Lota de Macedo Soares from 1951 to 1967; and the house in Ouro Prêto, Brazil, that she bought and renovated in 1965 and stayed in with Suzanne Bowen. The two cities are probably New York, where she lived after her graduation from Vassar College, and Rio de Janeiro, to which she could no longer return after Lota’s suicide.

The last stanza finally comes to Bishop’s most recent loss – Alice Methfessel – the final disaster. In early drafts “the joking voice, a gesture I love” was “eyes of the Azure Aster,” referring to Alice’s striking blue eyes. As fate would have it, Alice returned to Bishop in early 1976, at about the same time that the poem was published in the *New Yorker*. They stayed together until Bishop’s death in 1979.

Byzantium

The unpurged images of day recede;
The Emperor's drunken soldiery are abed;
Night resonance recedes, night-walkers' song
After great cathedral gong;
A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains
All that man is,
All mere complexities,
The fury and the mire of human veins.

Before me floats an image, man or shade,
Shade more than man, more image than a shade;
For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth
May unwind the winding path;
A mouth that has no moisture and no breath
Breathless mouths may summon;
I hail the superhuman;
I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.

Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,
More miracle than bird or handiwork,
Planted on the starlit golden bough,
Can like the cocks of Hades crow,
Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud
In glory of changeless metal
Common bird or petal
And all complexities of mire or blood.

At midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit
Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,
Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame,
Where blood-begotten spirits come
And all complexities of fury leave,
Dying into a dance,
An agony of trance,
An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.

Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,
Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,
The golden smithies of the Emperor!
Marbles of the dancing floor
Break bitter furies of complexity,
Those images that yet
Fresh images beget,
That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.

William Butler Yeats, 1932

Byzantium

Sailing to Byzantium (p. 7) described Yeats's journey in hope of attaining eternity through art. In *Byzantium*, Yeats has reached his destination. Now more directly concerned with death, he presents a disconcerting vision of the afterlife.

The poem is in 8-line stanzas, but the rhyme scheme *aabbcdcc* differs from that of *Sailing to Byzantium*, the rhyming is more often slant than true, and lines 6-7 of each stanza are shortened, as though purged of what was unnecessary.

The initial stanza describes the poet's arrival in the city. The gong is a "semantron," a large sounding board of wood or metal, used to summon the faithful to prayer in Eastern Orthodox churches. The "great cathedral" of Hagia Sophia stands above and beyond "all that man is." In its shadow "the fury and the mire of human veins" become insignificant.

In the second stanza, the soul separates from the body and becomes a "shade" or "image." Hades's bobbin is likely the "Spindle of Necessity" described in the last section of *The Republic* (375 BCE), where Socrates considered the myth (or "account") of Er, a soldier who had died but returned to life to describe what happens in Hades. The souls of the newly dead are justly rewarded or punished. Those that have not attained release from reincarnation, then come before the Spindle of Necessity. From this Spindle the Fates select for each soul the thread of their next life. The souls then drink from the River Lethe which removes any memories of their past life, and are sent back to the earth.

The third stanza describes the golden bird from the ending to *Sailing to Byzantium*. The artist's achievement "planted upon the starlit golden bough" no longer sings to the "lords and ladies of Byzantium." Now it crows like the "cocks of Hades." Eugenie Strong in her 1915 *Apotheosis and After Life* remarked about the image of the cock on Roman sarcophagi:

as herald of the sun he becomes by an easy transition the herald of rebirth and resurrection.

The fourth stanza describes the flames wherein "blood-begotten spirits" lose all their "complexities of fury." The imagery is more related to the ideas of Purgatory, which evolved in the Middle Ages, than to ancient views of the afterlife.

The final stanza describes how artists – "the smithies of the emperor" – attain immortality through their work, and are taken out of the cycle of reincarnation. According to Eugenie Strong, dolphins are frequently portrayed on Roman sarcophagi because they

form a mystic escort of the dead to the Islands of the Blest, and at the same time carry with them an allusion to the purifying power of water.

However, this final vision of apotheosis is made up of mortal things. The dolphins are made of the same "mire and blood" as mortal humans. The echoes of the gong still lead to torment. No matter how deep our faith in art, immortality remains a vision, an image that begets more images. It is not real. The final line better describes our life than any afterlife.

Divinely Superfluous Beauty

The storm-dances of gulls, the barking game of seals,
Over and under the ocean...
Divinely superfluous beauty
Rules the games, presides over destinies, makes trees grow
And hills tower, waves fall.
The incredible beauty of joy
Stars with fire the joining of lips, O let our loves too
Be joined, there is not a maiden
Burns and thirsts for love
More than my blood for you, by the shore of seals while the wings
Weave like a web in the air
Divinely superfluous beauty.

Robinson Jeffers, 1924

Musée des Beaux Arts

About suffering they were never wrong,
The old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position: how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

W. H. Auden, 1939

Divinely Superfluous Beauty

Robinson Jeffers lived most of his adult life in Carmel, California, where he and a stone-mason built Tor House on Carmel Point. He and his wife Una lived there for the rest of their lives. From the house and the adjacent Hawk Tower, they could watch the waves and listen to the seals.

The poem's rhythm is irregular and there is no rhyme. Long lines alternate with pairs of shorter lines. The final image of the flying seagulls – “while the wings weave like a web in the air divinely superfluous beauty” – sums up the poet's response to nature: there is no need for it to be so beautiful, and yet it is.

Musée des Beaux Arts

Auden and Isherwood visited Brussels at the end of December 1938, just before they emigrated to America. At the *Musée des Beaux Arts*, Auden was struck by the paintings of Pieter Bruegel the Elder.

In this poem he describes details from three of the paintings. *The Massacre of the Innocents* shows Herod's soldiers murdering the babies of Bethlehem, while dogs play and a horse scratches his head against a tree (“behind” sounds better). *The Census at Bethlehem* shows Joseph and Mary arriving at the inn amidst all the activity in a Flemish winter village, such as the children skating on the frozen pond. Finally, in *The Fall of Icarus*, the amazing event of a boy falling out of the sky and disappearing into the water is portrayed as a minor detail in the lower right of the painting. Everything



else goes on as if nothing had happened. This is the message of the poem. Momentous happenings and great disasters occur, but life goes on as if they had not. This response may appear cold and cruel but is, in fact, an affirmation that human beings will survive come what may.

The poem uses lines of irregular length and variable rhythm. Every line except one (“place”) rhymes with another line but there is no definite rhyme scheme. Despite its irregularities, the poem sails calmly on.

This Side of Truth

(for Llewelyn)

This side of the truth,
You may not see, my son,
King of your blue eyes
In the blinding country of youth,
That all is undone,
Under the unminding skies,
Of innocence and guilt
Before you move to make
One gesture of the heart or head,
Is gathered and spilt
Into the winding dark
Like the dust of the dead.

Good and bad, two ways
Of moving about your death
By the grinding sea,
King of your heart in the blind days,
Blow away like breath,
Go crying through you and me
And the souls of all men
Into the innocent
Dark, and the guilty dark, and good
Death, and bad death, and then
In the last element
Fly like the stars' blood

Like the sun's tears,
Like the moon's seed, rubbish
And fire, the flying rant
Of the sky, king of your six years.
And the wicked wish,
Down the beginning of plants
And animals and birds,
Water and Light, the earth and sky,
Is cast before you move,
And all your deeds and words,
Each truth, each lie,
Die in unjudging love.

Dylan Thomas, 1945

This Side of Truth

At the time this poem was written, Llewelyn Thomas (1939-2000) was the only son of Dylan and Caitlin Thomas. He was a quiet and sensitive child. His father likely expected him to enjoy life more enthusiastically.

The philosophy of the poem is one of divine predestination or mechanical determinism. Everything that happens is either fore-ordained by God or brought about through the unchangeable laws of physics. It harkens back to the fatalism expressed by Edward Fitzgerald in his translation of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* as in quatrain LXVIII in the fifth edition of 1889:

We are no other than a moving row
Of Magic Shadow-shapes that come and go
Round with the Sun-illuminated Lantern held
In Midnight by the Master of the Show.

There are two ways of handling this state of affairs. One can just accept one's fate and not try to change it; or one can assume one's destiny and rise to greatness. The main problem is that everything is "cast before you move" and we are not responsible for our behavior:

all is undone,
Under the unminding skies,
Of innocence and guilt
Before you move to make
One gesture of the heart or head.

In keeping with a philosophy whereby the universe plays out according to strict and unchanging rules, the poem uses regularly rhyming triplets (*abcabcdefdef*).

It is difficult to understand what Thomas is trying to tell his son. Predestination is not a philosophy of joy or freedom. A sense of futility may be what the father has come to believe but, as Tindall (1962) remarks, this is not really something to tell a six-year-old. Perhaps Thomas is telling his son not to worry – what happens is not really his fault. He should enjoy his days of innocence as

King of your blue eyes
In the blinding country of youth

before the sorrows accumulate.

The poem ends with a belief (or hope) that everything happens according to Providence, and that

all your deeds and words,
Each truth, each lie,
Die in unjudging love.

The physics of the 20th century moved away from determinism. Determinism proposes that if the state of the universe at one time is completely known and if all the laws governing the universe are understood, the future is completely predictable. Werner Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle (1927) states that at subatomic levels this is untrue. And at the level of the brain, the future can be determined by what the brain imagines is possible.

The Book of Yolek

*Wir Haben ein Gesetz,
Und nach dem Gesetz soll er sterben.*

The dowsed coals fume and hiss after your meal
Of grilled brook trout, and you saunter off for a walk
Down the fern trail. It doesn't matter where to,
Just so you're weeks and worlds away from home,
And among midsummer hills have set up camp
In the deep bronze glories of declining day.

You remember, peacefully, an earlier day
In childhood, remember a quite specific meal:
A corn roast and bonfire in summer camp.
That summer you got lost on a Nature Walk;
More than you dared admit, you thought of home:
No one else knows where the mind wanders to.

The fifth of August, 1942.
It was the morning and very hot. It was the day
They came at dawn with rifles to The Home
For Jewish Children, cutting short the meal
Of bread and soup, lining them up to walk
In close formation off to a special camp.

How often you have thought about that camp,
As though in some strange way you were driven to,
And about the children, and how they were made to walk,
Yolek who had bad lungs, who wasn't a day
Over five years old, commanded to leave his meal
And shamble between armed guards to his long home.

We're approaching August again. It will drive home
The regulation torments of that camp
Yolek was sent to, his small, unfinished meal,
The electric fences, the numeral tattoo,
The quite extraordinary heat of the day
They all were forced to take that terrible walk.

Whether on a silent, solitary walk
Or among crowds, far off or safe at home,
You will remember, helplessly, that day,
And the smell of smoke, and the loudspeakers of the camp.
Wherever you are, Yolek will be there, too.
His unuttered name will interrupt your meal.

(ctd)

The Book of Yolek

This poem concerns one of the children of the Jewish orphanage in Warsaw, which was managed by Janus Korczak. In August, 1942, German soldiers took the 196 children (ranging in age from 2 to 13 years) from the orphanage and transported them to their death in Treblinka. Korczak refused the Nazi offer of sanctuary on the “Aryan side,” and stayed with the children. The title refers to the story of Yolek in the same way that one mentions the books of the Bible – the *Book of Job*, the *Book of Psalms*. There is a lesson to be learned.

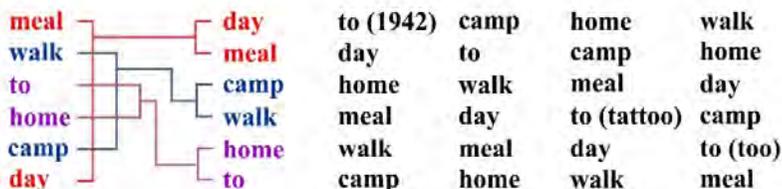
The epigraph to the poem is a quotation from Luther’s translation of the Bible – “We have a law and by our law he ought to die” (*John* 19:7). Jewish priests said this of Jesus who had blasphemously called himself the Son of God. This verse is one of the reasons for the virulent hatred of Jews – that their priests had urged the death of Christ.

Hecht’s poem uses the sestina form invented by Arnaut Daniel (about 1170-1220), a Provençal troubadour poet. The form was only occasionally used in English until the late 19th Century when poets became more adventurous. Its strict rules give the poem strength and seriousness.

The basic rules of the sestina are:

- (i) six stanzas of six lines each followed by an envoi of three lines.
- (ii) the first stanza sets the end-words that will be used in later stanzas
- (iii) after the first stanza, the end-words of the first and second lines of one stanza are the same as those of the sixth and first line of the preceding stanza, the third and fourth lines the same as the fifth and second, and the fifth and sixth the same as the fourth and third.
- (iv) the envoi must use all the different end-words

The rules are more easily diagrammed than stated. The end-words for each stanza are:



In the envoi the repeating words are delineated in bold:

Prepare to receive him in your **home** some **day**.
 Though they killed him in the **camp** they sent him **to**,
 He will **walk** in as you’re sitting down to a **meal**.

Hecht’s poem begins with a description of a summer campsite. The poem is written in the second-person – it directly involves you; it is your campsite. We all have probably experienced being at a camp “among the midsummer hills” and remembered “the deep bronze glories of declining day.”

Prepare to receive him in your home some day.
Though they killed him in the camp they sent him to,
He will walk in as you're sitting down to a meal.

Anthony Hecht, 1990

La Belle Dame Sans Merci

Ah, what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
Alone and palely loitering;
The sedge is wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing.

Ah, what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
So haggard and so woe-begone?
The squirrel's granary is full,
And the harvest's done.

I see a lily on thy brow,
With anguish moist and fever dew;
And on thy cheeks a fading rose
Fast withereth too.

I met a lady in the meads
Full beautiful, a faery's child;
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.

I made a garland for her head,
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;
She look'd at me as she did love,
And made sweet moan.

I set her on my pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long;
For sideways would she lean, and sing
A faery's song.

She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna dew;
And sure in language strange she said,
'I love thee true.'

(ctd)

The second stanza is a memory of a camp during your childhood and the frightening experience of being lost. And then the story of Yolek comes to mind – Yolek who went to a very different “camp” where there were electric fences, and where everyone received a numerical tattoo. Never again can you enjoy camping, or any other activity, without Yolek coming to mind. You will smell the smoke, and hear the loudspeakers of the camp where he was murdered.

La Belle Dame Sans Merci

Keats’s poem *The Eve of Saint Agnes*, written in early 1819, recounts the tale of Madeline, who dreams about her true love on the night when lovers are supposed to see “the lad who is to marry me.” She is woken from her dream by Porphyro who has secreted himself in her bedchamber:

He play’d an ancient ditty, long since mute,
In Provence call’d, “La belle dame sans mercy:”

Keats is referring to is Alain Chartier’s 1424 poem of courtly love, which Keats had read in a translation, at that time attributed to Chaucer, but now ascribed to Richard Roos. In this poem the lover, using the language of courtly love, professes his devotion to the lady, but she refuses to return his feelings.

What-ever he be that sayth he loveth me,
And peradventure, I leve that it be so,
Ought he be wroth, or shulde I blamed be,
Though I did nought as he wolde have me do?

Madeline is not the lady of Chartier’s poem. She gives herself to Porphyro, and the two lovers flee into the night

And they are gone: ay, ages long ago
These lovers fled away into the storm.

The idea of Chartier’s lady, however, remained with Keats and transformed itself into a strange ballad about a beautiful spirit who heartlessly enthralls an innocent knight and leaves him to die of his love on a cold hillside. Keats’s poem follows the classical ballad form – alternating tetrameters and trimeters with the latter rhyming – except that the final line is abbreviated to four or five syllables.

In the first three stanzas, the narrator questions a knight about his illness. Keats had been trained in medicine at Guy’s Hospital and the narrator could easily be a physician taking a patient’s history. Keats had been reading Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), who had described the symptoms of melancholy as similar to those of Bellerophon in the *Iliad*

That wandered in the woods sad all alone
Forsaking men’s society, making great moan

The knight then tells the story of how he was enthralled by a lady with “wild eyes,” and how he then dreamed his own death amidst all the others that had come under her spell.

By early 1819, Keats realized that he was ill with consumption, now known as tuberculosis. His mother had died of the disease when he was 14 years old, and he

had nursed his younger brother Tom, who had just died in December 1818. Keats had just fallen in love with Fanny Brawne, but knew that their relationship would come to naught, because of his approaching death. He devoted himself to his poetry and the amount and quality he produced in the year 1819 is unsurpassed. This magical ballad has no simple meaning. The “beautiful lady without mercy” combines attributes of the muse, of human love and of death. An early draft of the third stanza identifying death was revised to be less specific:

I see death’s lily on thy brow,
With anguish moist and fever dew;
And on thy cheeks death’s fading rose
Fast withereth too.

In a letter to Fanny Brawne in July 1819, Keats wrote

I have two luxuries to brood over in my walks – your loveliness and the hour of my death. O, that I could have possession of them both in the same minute. I hate the world: it batters too much the wings of my self-will and would I could take a sweet poison from your lips to send me out of it. From no others would I take it.

The poem became a favorite of the Pre-Raphaelites and the late Victorian painters who followed them. On the right is a 1901 painting by Frank Dicksee. It shows the lady, riding on the knight’s “pacing stead” and singing her “faery’s song.” The countryside in the painting is not as desolate as in the poem.



Canto LXXXI

Pound began writing *The Cantos* during World War I. He conceived of the poem as a modern epic in the mold of Homer, Virgil and Dante. The final version of the first Canto (circa 1922) begins with Odysseus setting out to sea:

And then went down to the ship,
Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea

By 1969 Pound had completed 109 Cantos and drafts and fragments of 8 others. During World War II, Pound supported the government of Benito Mussolini, and gave anti-Semitic and anti-American broadcasts. *The Pisan Cantos* (74 to 84), published in 1948, were written in 1945 while he was imprisoned near Pisa by the US Army, after having been captured and charged with treason.

The final version of *The Cantos* is a sprawling, chaotic mixture of history, culture, economics and politics, impossible to read without a detailed guide. Amid the dross, however, are occasional jewels as evidenced by this selection from *The Pisan Cantos* that circles around the word “reft,” past participle of “rieve” (rob), most commonly found in the word “bereft” (deprived).

The Attack

At dawn the ridge emerges massed and dun
In the wild purple of the glow'ring sun,
Smouldering through spouts of drifting smoke that shroud
The menacing scarred slope; and, one by one,
Tanks creep and topple forward to the wire.
The barrage roars and lifts. Then, clumsily bowed
With bombs and guns and shovels and battle-gear,
Men jostle and climb to meet the bristling fire.
Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear,
They leave their trenches, going over the top,
While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,
And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,
Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop!

Siegfried Sassoon, 1918

Outer Banks

Rain to which I wake
Cold into which I go
Little song, little song . . .

And the coarse unkillable cordgrass
On the dunes, detritus
Too ruined to recognize
Bare shell that shelters nothing
Nothing tells
What it has undergone

The pelican plunges
And the water closes over it

Wind lays its blade along the beach
Leaving shapes the beach can't keep

Whiter than the gulls the morning

Cry of hunger
Cry of warning

Christian Wiman, 2003

The Attack

The poem describes a dawn attack on the German lines during World War I. The tanks begin to advance. An artillery barrage is used to suppress activity in the German lines. Sometimes a creeping barrage was used with the attacking soldiers following behind it, but in this case the barrage ceases and the soldiers exit their trenches to meet the “bristling fire” that the barrage has failed to inhibit.

Although wrist watches had been invented before, they came into widespread use during World War I, because they freed the soldiers’ hands for action. Soldiers were issued with wristwatches so that they could tell the time when the artillery barrage was supposed to end, and could synchronize their attack with other units:

They leave their trenches, going over the top,
While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists

The poem is one line short of a sonnet. Sassoon may have used the form to comment on how much the war had not lived up to expectations. The poem’s irregular rhyme scheme – *aabacbdcedffe* – may serve the same purpose.

In July, 1916, Sassoon was awarded the military cross “for conspicuous gallantry” One year later, Sassoon sent a letter to his commanding officer entitled *Finished with War: A Soldier’s Declaration*, which was read out in parliament

I have seen and endured the sufferings of the troops and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust.

Outer Banks

The Outer Banks are the barrier islands, shoals and spits of land that separate the Atlantic Ocean from North Carolina. These are mainly composed of sand dunes, which are continually shifting with the wind and the waves. The banks are partially stabilized by the root-systems of cordgrass (*Spartina alterniflora*) in the more marshy areas and beachgrass (*Ammophila breviligulata*) on the dunes:



Wiman begins his poem with a “little song” that to me recalls Hadrian’s brief poem on the fate of the human soul after death (p 176). For the poet the future appears rainy and cold. His description of the banks is apocalyptic. Nothing remains but the “unkillable cordgrass” and “bare shells” that shelter nothing.

The poem is impressively onomatopoeic. One can clearly hear the plunge of the pelican, the wind moving over the beach, and the cries of the gulls.

The pelican was once thought to feed its chicks by wounding its breast to provide them with blood. As a result, it came to symbolize the passion of Christ and the celebration of the Eucharist wherein the wine represents the blood shed to bring about human salvation.

somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond
any experience,your eyes have their silence:
in your most frail gesture are things which enclose me,
or which i cannot touch because they are too near

your slightest look easily will unclose me
though i have closed myself as fingers,
you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens
(touching skilfully, mysteriously) her first rose

or if your wish be to close me,i and
my life will shut very beautifully,suddenly,
as when the heart of this flower imagines
the snow carefully everywhere descending;

nothing which we are to perceive in this world equals
the power of your intense fragility:whose texture
compels me with the colour of its countries,
rendering death and forever with each breathing

(i do not know what it is about you that closes
and opens;only something in me understands
the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)
nobody,not even the rain,has such small hands

e. e. cummings, 1931

A Dream Deferred

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore –
and then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over –
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load

Or does it just explode?

Langston Hughes, 1951

somewhere i have never travelled

In this poem Cummings considers the process of falling in love: travelling where he has never been before. He worries about the paradox of being too close to touch – so entranced that one cannot have any effect on the beloved.

The second and third verses talk of opening and closing. One can open up and confide in another person but that means surrendering secrets known only to oneself to the evaluation of another. Perhaps it is better to maintain some boundaries – to keep things close – just in case winter is not yet over.

The fourth verse is rife with ambiguity. The “power of your intense fragility” is an oxymoron, a figure of speech that combines contradictory meanings to reveal a paradox. The term comes from the Greek words *oksos* (sharp) and *moros* (dull) and is therefore “autological” (an example of itself). The concluding line of the verse brings together death and forever – love that ends and love that endures.

In the final verse the lover confesses that he does not know what it is “that closes and opens.” However, eyes deeper than all roses and hands smaller than the rain have worked their incomprehensible magic. Without knowing why or how, he accepts that he is in love.

The poem is set up in five quatrains. The irregular punctuation serves mainly to give the reader pause. There is no regular rhythm and no rhyme until the last quatrain with its *abab* rhyming scheme. Perhaps this suggests that at the end everything finally makes sense.

A Dream Deferred

In 1951 Hughes published a book of poems, *A Montage of a Dream Deferred*, based on the life and music of Harlem, a neighborhood in upper Manhattan, predominantly inhabited by African-Americans. The poems use the rhythms of jazz, boogie-woogie, blues, be-bop and ragtime. The first poem begins

Good morning, daddy!
Ain't you heard
The boogie-woogie rumble
Of a dream deferred?

The Thirteenth Amendment of the Constitution of the United States (1865) abolished slavery and involuntary servitude. The Fourteenth Amendment (1868) promised equal protection under the law to all citizens. The Fifteenth Amendment (1870) states that citizens cannot be denied the right to vote on the basis of their race, color or previous condition of servitude. These amendments gave African-Americans the right to dream that they would live equal to any other citizen. Various states, however, enacted “Jim Crow” laws to restrict the rights of African-Americans and to enforce segregation. (Jim Crow was a racist caricature of a black slave developed by the actor Thomas Rice in the early 19th Century.)

Hughes’s poem foresaw the violence that would soon break out in the United States as African-Americans refused to accept any further deferral of their dream: the riots in Watts, Los Angeles (1965), Newark (1967), Detroit (1968), and Washington (1968).

Fern Hill

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.

And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns
About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,
 In the sun that is young once only,
 Time let me play and be
 Golden in the mercy of his means,
And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves
Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold,
 And the sabbath rang slowly
 In the pebbles of the holy streams.

All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the hay
Fields high as the house, the tunes from the chimneys, it was air
 And playing, lovely and watery
 And fire green as grass.
 And nightly under the simple stars
As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away,
All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the nightjars
 Flying with the ricks, and the horses
 Flashing into the dark.

And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer white
With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoulder: it was all
 Shining, it was Adam and maiden,
 The sky gathered again
 And the sun grew round that very day.
So it must have been after the birth of the simple light
In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm
 Out of the whinnying green stable
 On to the fields of praise.

(ctd)

Fern Hill

During his childhood, Dylan Thomas would spend many holidays at the farm called Fern Hill near Llangain, a village, about 30 km northwest of Swansea. (The village name derives from the church dedicated to St Cain or Keyne, a 5th-century hermitess). The farm was owned by his uncle Jim Jones and his beloved Aunt Annie. The photograph on the right shows the farm a few years after Thomas's



death. While staying at the farm, the child Dylan was free to do and to imagine whatever he wished. When Ann Jones died in 1933, and Thomas wrote the poem *After the Funeral* to remember the woman “whose hooded, fountain heart once fell in puddles round the parched worlds of Wales.”

The poet's memory of his visits to the farm Fern Hill allows him to extol the joys of childhood and to lament their passing. On one day the boy climbs one of the trees in the orchard and lords it over all that surrounds him. Happy and carefree he races about the farmyard, amid the sounds of the nearby calves and distant foxes. At night he dreams that the farm is flying away, but when he awakens everything is there as though it has been created anew. The adult poet sadly realizes that such experiences are no more. Time has taken away his childhood. As Shakespeare says (p 6)

Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers come to dust

The poem is full of intensely compressed images. The “rivers of the windfall light” suggest that sunlight flowed like water through the orchard. This perception was as free and unexpected as the apples that fall from the trees. The sabbath that “rang slowly in the pebbles of the holy streams” compares the sound of the water tumbling down through stones to the ringing of the Sunday bells in the village church. The image of time that “held me green and dying, though I sang in my chains like the sea” tells how time insists that death is an intrinsic part of life (“green and dying”). However, despite the limits of a life we can achieve something, just like the sea cannot stop moving though it be forever confined.

The marvel of this poem is its sound. Listening to the poet in full flight as he recites its lines is a joy for the ears. As Tindall (1962) remarked:

The young and easy rhythm, below a timing or above it, conspires with alliteration and assonance to shape a symphony in green and gold major,

Ancient Welsh poetry followed the rules of *cynghanedd* (harmony) to combine alliteration, assonance and stress into an intensely musical experience. Thomas did not speak Welsh, and was unaware of Welsh poetry. However, something in his inheritance made him a master tunesmith, worthy of the ancient bards.

And honoured among foxes and pheasants by the gay house
Under the new made clouds and happy as the heart was long,
 In the sun born over and over,
 I ran my heedless ways,
 My wishes raced through the house high hay
And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows
In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs
 Before the children green and golden
 Follow him out of grace,

Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would take me
Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,
 In the moon that is always rising,
 Nor that riding to sleep
 I should hear him fly with the high fields
And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.
Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,
 Time held me green and dying
 Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

Dylan Thomas, 1945

from **Intimations of Immortality**

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.

William Wordsworth, 1804

The verses are composed of lines of different lengths. Lines 1, 2, 6 and 7 are 14-syllables long and each have 5 stresses. Their rhythm is irregular, though frequent anapestic sequences (- - /) give a lilting sound. Lines 3, 5 and 7 are 9-syllable long and have 4 stresses. Lines 3 and 9 are between 5 and 7 syllables long and have 3 stresses. These lines slow down the ongoing rush of the words. The last line of the last verse is longer than expected, slowing the poem for its final words.

Most readers do not initially notice the assonance-rhymes at end of the lines. However, each verse follows the same rhyme scheme: *abcddabcd*. The assonance-rhymes between lines 3 and 8 involve two syllables: starry/barley, only/slowly, maiden/stable. Occasionally the rhymes involve more than just the vowel: white/light, hand/land. The rhymes follow out their sequences even though we may not notice.

Alliteration occurs throughout the poem, providing its own pulsating rhythm: “green and golden, huntsman and herdsman,” “house high hay,” “tuneful turning,” “the farm forever fled,” “at the mercy of his means.”

The verbal music combines a lament for all that time has taken from us with an insistence that it could not take away the song.

Intimations of Immortality

Wordsworth begins his poem *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood* with his childhood memories:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.

From this, he reasons that our soul comes from “afar” and enters into the body when we are born. The soul of a child retains some of the holiness of its origin and “Heaven lies about us in our infancy!” The idea that the child is born innocent runs counter to the Christian doctrine of original sin. Wordsworth thus aligns himself with the British ascetic Pelagius (390-418 CE) who was excommunicated for believing that, since God created man in his image, we are all born without sin. Most of the writings of Pelagius were destroyed, and what we know about him comes from the works of his opponents. The most important of these was Augustine of Hippo who promulgated the idea that man was inherently sinful and in need of salvation by the grace of God.

Wordsworth’s ideas may have derived from Book X of Plato’s *Republic*, wherein he recounts the *Myth of Er*, who returned from the dead to tell of a place where souls returned after death to be reincarnated into newborn bodies (see p 72).

Since the soul pre-existed with God before birth, the soul of the child is able to recognize the divine in nature. This ability fades as we grow older but we can occasionally re-experience “the vision splendid” – “a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused” (p 86) – if we open ourselves up to the beauty and power of the natural world.

from **Man on His Nature**

In the great head-end which has been mostly darkness springs up myriads of twinkling stationary lights and myriads of trains of moving lights of many different directions. It is as though activity from one of those local places which continued restless in the darkened main-mass suddenly spread far and wide and invaded all. The great topmost sheet of the mass, that where hardly a light had twinkled or moved, becomes now a sparkling field of rhythmic flashing points with trains of traveling sparks hurrying hither and thither. The brain is waking and with it the mind is returning. It is as if the Milky Way entered upon some cosmic dance. Swiftly the head mass becomes an enchanted loom where millions of flashing shuttles weave a dissolving pattern, always a meaningful pattern though never an abiding one; a shifting harmony of subpatterns. Now as the waking body rouses, subpatterns of this great harmony of activity stretch down into the unlit tracks of the stalk-piece of the scheme. Strings of flashing and travelling sparks engage the lengths of it. This means that the body is up and rises to meet its waking day.

Charles Scott Sherrington, 1940

“Hope” is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all,

And sweetest in the gale is heard;
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chilliest land,
And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me.

Emily Dickinson, 1862

Man on His Nature

Sherrington was a neurophysiologist who studied the spinal reflexes of the cat. In 1897 he proposed that neurons interacted by means of tiny contacts called “synapses.” His magnum opus was *The Integrative Action of the Nervous System* (1906). *Man on his Nature* is a more philosophical book that begins with the French physician Jean Fernel (1497-1558) who said that

The brain is the citadel and dwelling of the human mind, the abode of thoughts and of the reason, the wellspring and origin of movement and of every sense.

Sherrington uses three levels of metaphor to describe the activity of the cerebral cortex – “the great head-end.” First, he likens the cerebral cortex to an “enchanted loom” on which various patterns of neuronal activity are played. The loom he is considering is a Jacquard Loom (1804) which used punch-cards to produce complex patterns in textiles. The loom is the anatomical brain, the program is the neuronal activity and the product is behavior. Second, the neuronal activity is compared to sparks in a complex electrical circuit. Finally, he likens these sparks to stars engaged in a “cosmic dance.”

Sherrington proposed that as the brain awakens from sleep the neurons in the cortex change from quiescence to activity, sending instructions down the spinal cord – “the stalk-piece” – to arouse the body from its slumber. Later research showed that cortical neurons are every bit as active during sleep as during wakefulness, though the patterns of their activity are completely different. Nevertheless, Sherrington’s “enchanted loom” and Fernel’s “citadel and dwelling of the human mind” persist as our most famous metaphors for the human brain.

Hope is the thing with feathers

In Christianity hope is one of the three virtues: faith, hope and charity (see p 197). In Greek mythology, hope was all that was left after Pandora (“all-giving”), the first human female, defiantly opened a box created by Zeus and released the spirits of greed, envy, hatred, mistrust, sorrow, anger, revenge, lust, and despair.

In this poem Dickinson tries to understand the nature of hope. She distances herself from any direct metaphor, telling it slant (p 130) by calling hope the “thing with feathers.” She focuses on a bird’s abilities – to sing, to fly and to live independently – rather than on the bird itself. The poem suggests that hope would sing throughout the storm and “in the chilliest land.” However, real birds, Hardy’s thrush (p 37) excepted, tend not to sing in foul weather and leave for sunnier climes in winter. Dickinson thus hopes that her hope is a very special bird.

The poem alternates between iambic tetrameter and trimeter, except for the first line which begins with a trochee and ends unstressed. The trimeter lines rhyme, slantly in the first verse and strictly thereafter. The form thus proceeds from irregular to regular as hope becomes established.

Johnathan Lear (2008) described the need in times of despair for a “radical hope” (see p 37) “directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is.” Such hope is a thing beyond the reach of metaphor.

They Feed They Lion

Out of burlap sacks, out of bearing butter,
Out of black bean and wet slate bread,
Out of the acids of rage, the candor of tar,
Out of creosote, gasoline, drive shafts, wooden dollies,
They Lion grow.

Out of the gray hills
Of industrial barns, out of rain, out of bus ride,
West Virginia to Kiss My Ass, out of buried aunties,
Mothers hardening like pounded stumps, out of stumps,
Out of the bones' need to sharpen and the muscles' to stretch,
They Lion grow.

Earth is eating trees, fence posts,
Gutted cars, earth is calling in her little ones,
"Come home, Come home!" From pig balls,
From the ferocity of pig driven to holiness,
From the furred ear and the full jowl come
The repose of the hung belly, from the purpose
They Lion grow.

From the sweet glues of the trotters
Come the sweet kinks of the fist, from the full flower
Of the hams the thorax of caves,
From "Bow Down" come "Rise Up,"
Come they Lion from the reeds of shovels,
The grained arm that pulls the hands,
They Lion grow.

From my five arms and all my hands,
From all my white sins forgiven, they feed,
From my car passing under the stars,
They Lion, from my children inherit,
From the oak turned to a wall, they Lion,
From they sack and they belly opened
And all that was hidden burning on the oil-stained earth
They feed they Lion and he comes.

Philip Levine, 1972

They Feed They Lion

Levine, born and raised in a poor family in Detroit, began working in the auto factories at age 14. He later remembered one particular experience:

In 1953 I was working in a Detroit grease shop with a tall, slender black man with a wonderful wit and disposition. His name was Lemon Still Jr., and he was a delight to work with. One day we were dividing used crosses that are the heart of a universal joint, which is a component of a transmission and not an enormous reefer. One pile was junk, the other pile was made up of those which could be refinished and sold as new. Before we stuffed the hopeless ones into a burlap sack, Lemon held the bag before me and pointed at the white lettering which read, "Detroit Municipal Zoo," and he uttered a single memorable sentence, "They feed they lion they meal in they sacks." I was stunned by the sentence itself as well as Lemon's ability to simplify English grammar by reducing all third-person pronouns to the one "they."

This memory led to the powerful poem that was written when Levine returned to Detroit in 1968 and saw the devastation that had occurred with the riots in 1967. Levine described his poem:

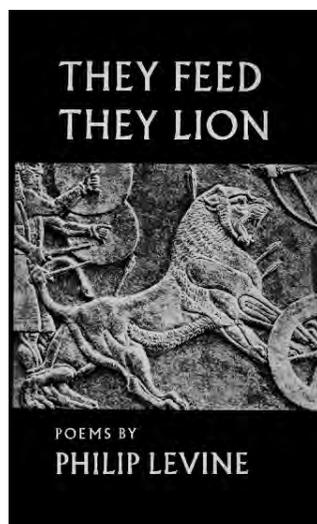
It is, I believe, the most potent expression of rage I have written, rage at my government for the two racial wars we were then fighting, one in the heart of our cities against our urban poor, the other in Asia against a people determined to decide their own fate. The poem was written one year after what in Detroit is still called "The Great Rebellion" although the press then and now titled it a race riot. I had recently revisited the city of my birth, and for the first time I saw myself in the now ruined neighborhoods of my growing up not as the rebel poet but as what I was, middle-aged, middle-class, and as one writer of the time would have put it "part of the problem." Out of a dream and out of the great storm of my emotions the poem was born.

One of the characteristics of African-American Vernacular English (Black English) is the elimination of inflections: Thus "they" and "their" both become "they," and verbs do not add an "s" in the third person.

The poem uses the recurring "They lion grow" to denote the accumulating anger of the poor blacks who had migrated to the northern industrial cities to find work and been rewarded with discrimination and exploitation. Levine mixes Black English with normal syntax to give the final warning:

They feed they Lion and he comes.

The poem gave its name to his 1972 book of poetry. The cover (illustrated on the right) showed an Assyrian relief of a lion hunt now in the British museum.



Dulce et Decorum Est

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.—
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.

Wilfred Owen , 1918

from **Epitaphs of War**

If any question why we died,
Tell them, because our fathers lied.

Rudyard Kipling, 1919

Dulce et Decorum Est

In 1909 Fritz Haber discovered a way to produce ammonium from the nitrogen in the air. This allowed the economical production of ammonium compounds for fertilizer. Haber was awarded the 1918 Nobel Prize in chemistry for this work that brought *Brot aus Luft* (bread from the air). During World War I Haber supervised the German chemical warfare program, which used chlorine, phosgene, and mustard gas and to kill or incapacitate enemy troops – *Tod aus Luft* (death from the air).

Chlorine damages the eyes and lungs. Phosgene damages the lungs and causes asphyxiation. Mustard gas caused blistering of the skin, conjunctivitis, choking in the lungs and internal bleeding.

The title and last lines of this poem come from Horace *Odes* III: 2 – “It is sweet and proper to die for one’s country.” Owen contrasts the sentiment of these lines with the reality of death by poison gas. The green color described in the poem suggests that the gas was either chlorine or phosgene. The soldiers could defend themselves against gas attacks using gas masks, provided that they had them and could put them on in time.

Despite the violence of its story the poem is tightly constrained to its alternating *ababcdcd* ... rhyme scheme. The final rhymes from English to Latin – *zest est*, *glory, mori*. – are very effective.

“Five-Nines” refer to the shells from a German Howitzer artillery gun. The shells were of a diameter 150 mm which is equivalent to 5.9 inches. In the poem the British troops had advanced through the artillery barrage which now fell behind them, only to encounter gas.

In 1919 John Singer Sargent painted *Gassed* which shows British soldiers blinded during a gas attack being led to a first aid station:



Epitaphs of War

Kipling modelled these poems on the brief epitaphs published in *The Greek Anthology*. A. E. Housman acted similarly in his *Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries* (p 94). This particular epitaph is acutely personal. At the beginning of the war Kipling had patriotically supported Britain’s war effort. After the death of his son in the Battle of Loos in 1915, he realized the terrible result of his blind enthusiasm.

Note to My Neighbor

We might as well give up the fiction
That we can argue any view.
For what in me is pure Conviction
Is simple Prejudice in you.

Phyllis McGinley, 1952

Japanese Maple

Your death, near now, is of an easy sort.
So slow a fading out brings no real pain.
Breath growing short
Is just uncomfortable. You feel the drain
Of energy, but thought and sight remain:

Enhanced, in fact. When did you ever see
So much sweet beauty as when fine rain falls
On that small tree
And saturates your brick back garden walls,
So many Amber Rooms and mirror halls?

Ever more lavish as the dusk descends
This glistening illuminates the air.
It never ends.
Whenever the rain comes it will be there,
Beyond my time, but now I take my share.

My daughter's choice, the maple tree is new.
Come autumn and its leaves will turn to flame.
What I must do
Is live to see that. That will end the game
For me, though life continues all the same:

Filling the double doors to bathe my eyes,
A final flood of colors will live on
As my mind dies,
Burned by my vision of a world that shone
So brightly at the last, and then was gone.

Clive James, 2014

Note to My Neighbor

Phyllis McGinley wrote what she described as “sonnets from the suburbs.” In 1960, she became the first poet to win a Pulitzer prize for light verse – for *Times Three* (cover illustration on the right). She claimed that “the appeal of light verse is to the intellect and the appeal of serious verse is to the emotions.” Criticized by feminists for her domesticity, she replied with *The Old Feminist* (1954):



Snugly upon the equal heights
Enthroned at last where she belongs
She takes no pleasure in her Rights
Who so enjoyed her Wrongs.

Japanese Maple

Clives James, poet, song-writer, journalist and broadcaster, was diagnosed with leukemia in 2010. Since he also suffered from emphysema, his prognosis was gloomy. Nevertheless, he was still able to complete his translation of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (2013) using quatrains which fit the English language more easily than *terza rima*, and allow the inclusion of some commentary (see also p 42). The following quatrain translates the notice on the gates of hell that states *Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch’intrate* (Abandon all hope ye who enter here):

From now on, every day feels like your last
Forever. Let that be your greatest fear.
Your future now is to regret the past.
Forget your hopes. They were what brought you here.

James thought that *Japanese Maple* would be his last poem, but he lived on for several more years, and wrote several more poems. This poem is highly crafted, using a strict *ababb* rhyme scheme. The lines are mainly iambic pentameter except for the third line which contains only two feet, and allows the poet time to catch his breath.

The poet notes that although he feels tired, his senses are enhanced by the imminence of death. The maple tree that his daughter planted in the back garden of his home in Cambridge is especially beautiful, its reds mingling with the orange and brown of the garden walls to appear as stunning as the famous Amber Room in Catherine’s palace in Tsarskoye Selo near St. Petersburg (a wall of which is illustrated on the right). He hopes to see the tree in autumn when its leaves “turn to a flaming red.” It would be wonderful to have the world shine “so brightly at the last.” James lived on to see several more autumns before he died in 2019.



from **Lines Composed a Few Miles
above Tintern Abbey**

For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue.—And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,
And what perceive; well pleased to recognise
In nature and the language of the sense
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

William Wordsworth, 1798

Valentine

My heart has made its mind up
And I'm afraid it's you.
Whatever you've got lined up,
My heart has made its mind up
And if you can't be signed up
This year, next year will do.
My heart has made its mind up
And I'm afraid it's you.

Wendy Cope, 2002

Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey

The original full title of the poem was *Lines, written a few miles above Tintern Abbey, On revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798*.

According to the poet the poem was written down on his return to Bristol and immediately handed to his publisher for inclusion in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), a volume of poetry by Coleridge and Wordsworth. The River Wye flows from the Cambrian Mountains south to the Severn Estuary. The ruins of Tintern Abbey are located in the lower part of the river, about 10 km north of the Severn

Wordsworth remembers when he first came to the Wye valley 5 years previously, and he notes how his memory of the visit stayed with him:

The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion.

Now that he is older, the sight of the valley has a deeper and more meaningful effect. He senses the presence of something that “rolls through all things.” This is the pantheism of Spinoza (1632-1677), the idea that God permeates everything:

Deus est omnium rerum causa immanens
God is the immanent cause of all things

Wordsworth had several such epiphanies during his life. In the *Prelude XIII* (1850) he described an experience when the moon broke through the clouds while he was climbing up Mount Snowdon and he felt

The perfect image of a mighty Mind,
Of one that feeds upon infinity,
That is exalted by an underpresence,
The sense of God, or whatsoe’er is dim
Or vast in its own being

Although Wordsworth was unaware of the Eastern religions, his understanding of the world is very similar to the basic ideas of Hinduism and Buddhism (cf p 205)

Valentine

Saint Valentine was a Christian who was martyred in Rome on February 14, 269 CE. In the Middle Ages, the commemoration of his martyrdom began to be associated with lovers, perhaps because the birds begin their mating season in mid-February. It is now customary for couples to express their romantic love for each other on Valentine’s Day.

This brief valentine letter is a triolet, a French verse form characterized by repeating lines and rhymes. The first, fourth and seventh lines are identical, as are the second and final lines. The third and fifth and sixth lines all differ, but rhyme with the first, and the sixth line rhymes with the second. One can represent this as *ABaAabAB* with capitals signifying repeated lines and lower-case signifying end-rhymes. The rhythm is iambic trimeter, except that the end foot of the *A* and *a* lines is an amphibrach (three syllables with the stress on the middle one):

| - / | - / | - / - |
My heart has made its mind up

Strange Meeting

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.

Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,—
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

With a thousand fears that vision's face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
"Strange friend," I said, "here is no cause to mourn."
"None," said that other, "save the undone years,
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
Now men will go content with what we spoiled.
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.
Courage was mine, and I had mystery;
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:
To miss the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels that are not walled.
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.
I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.

(ctd)

Strange Meeting

Owen completed this poem in Ripon just before going back to France in 1918. He also wrote a preface to a collection of war poems that he hoped to publish:

This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them.

Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War.

Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.

My subject is War, and the pity of War.

The Poetry is in the pity.

Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory.

They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why true Poets must be truthful.

In this poem Owen imagine what might happen when he dies in battle. He foresees a journey into the netherworld where he finds other recently dead soldiers. One of them recognizes Owen as the one who had killed him. He describes the life he might have led, the laughter and the tears cut short:

The pity of war, the pity war distilled.

As the poem ends, the dead combatants fade into sleep. The truth remains untold. World literature provides many descriptions of a hero's visit to the underworld: Book XI of Homer's *The Odyssey*; Book VI of Virgil's *The Aeneid*; Orpheus and Eurydice from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In most myths the hero returns but brings no one with him. In Owen's vision even the hero does not return.

The poem's title derives from Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam* (1818), though the context in that poem is one of peacemaking rather than mutual slaughter

whom now strange meeting did befall

In a strange land

The poem is written in parhyming couplets. Almost all of English rhyming verse involves strict rhyme at the end of a line. Other types of rhyme are less common:

Cvc	alliteration	bad boy
cVc	assonance	back rat
cvC	consonance	back neck
CVc	reverse rhyme	back bat
CvC	pararhyme (slant)	back buck
cVC	strict rhyme (canonical)	back rack
CVC	rhyme riche (identical)	bat bat

The very slantness of the rhyme adds to the uneasiness of his dream of death. Owen also rhymes more conventionally using strict rhyme or rhyme riche both within and across the lines.

“None,” said that other, “save the **undone** years,
The **hopelessness**. Whatever **hope** is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting **wild**
After the **wildest** beauty in the world,

“I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now. . . .”

Wilfred Owen, 1918

High Windows

When I see a couple of kids
And guess he’s fucking her and she’s
Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,
I know this is paradise

Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives—
Bonds and gestures pushed to one side
Like an outdated combine harvester,
And everyone young going down the long slide

To happiness, endlessly. I wonder if
Anyone looked at me, forty years back,
And thought, *That’ll be the life;*
No God any more, or sweating in the dark

About hell and that, or having to hide
What you think of the priest. He
And his lot will all go down the long slide
Like free bloody birds. And immediately

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.

Philip Larkin, 1974

After writing this poem, Owen returned to France. On November 4, 1918, exactly one week before the war ended, he was shot and killed at the Sambre-Oise Canal. The world did not learn from its mistakes: within a generation another war began. The Owen memorial in Shrewsbury – *Symmetry* by Paul de Monchaux (1993) – consists of granite blocks inscribed with “I am the enemy you killed, my friend.”



High Windows

After World War II, two developments led to a radical change in sexual mores in Western society. The atrocities of the war had further weakened our belief in God and his commandments. And in the late 1950s contraceptive pills became freely available. Fucking could now be enjoyed without fear of damnation or risk of pregnancy. Free love became the byword of the 1960s. In his midlife, Larkin looks enviously at the young people who now enjoy a paradise that “everyone old has dreamed of all their lives.” He remembers his youth, when sex was sinful: one sweated in the dark about hell, and had to hide what one thought.

And yet something is missing in this new sexual liberty. We are still imprisoned by desire. We have not yet attained the freedom that can be seen out of high windows:

the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless

In discussing the poem in 1981, Larkin said

One longs for infinity and absence, the beauty of somewhere you're not ...
one wants to be somewhere where there's neither oppressed nor oppressor,
just freedom.

Barbara Everett (1980) remarks upon the relationship of Larkin's vision to the concept of *l'azur* in the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé:

The radiant colour and the 'nothingness' are too Mallarmean to be only coincidentally similar. *'L'azur'* (the blue) is Mallarmé's most consistent and philosophical symbol, delineating both the necessity and the absence of the ideal, an ideal which we imprint on the void sky by the intensity of our longing; his poetry is full of *'De l'éternel Azur la sereine ironie'* (the calm irony of the-endless blue). The poem by Mallarmé in which this image becomes most definitive is *'Les Fenêtres'* (the Windows), which compares the state of the poet, sickened by existence and enduring the perpetual lifegiving suffering of an always despairing and then re-purified idealism, to that of an old man dying in a dreary hospital, his face wistfully pressed to the windows, longing for the blue sky outside.

Appointment in Samarra

There was a merchant in Bagdad who sent his servant to market to buy provisions and in a little while the servant came back, white and trembling, and said, Master, just now when I was in the marketplace I was jostled by a woman in the crowd and when I turned I saw it was Death that jostled me. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture; now, lend me your horse, and I will ride away from this city and avoid my fate. I will go to Samarra and there Death will not find me. The merchant lent him his horse, and the servant mounted it, and he dug his spurs in its flanks and as fast as the horse could gallop he went. Then the merchant went down to the marketplace and he saw me standing in the crowd and he came to me and said, Why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning? That was not a threatening gesture, I said, it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Bagdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra

W. Somerset Maugham, 1933

Composed upon Westminster Bridge September 3, 1802

Earth has not any thing to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

William Wordsworth, 1802

Appointment in Samarra

Maugham used this story in his last play *Sheppey* (1933). His source was probably the Sufi parable *When Death Came to Baghdad* from the *Hikayat-I-Naqshia* (“Tales formed according to a design”) by Fudail ibn Ayad who lived in the 9th Century CE. Samarra is a city about 125 km north of Baghdad, and home of the Al ‘Askarī Shrine, one of the holiest sites of Shīa Islam. The *Mishnah* of the *Babylonian Talmud* from around 200 CE has an even older version of the story in *Sukkah 53a*.

Boris Karloff gave a magnificent presentation of this story in the 1968 movie *Targets*, directed by Peter Bogdanovich. Karloff played an elderly horror-film actor who suggested to an interviewer that he tell this story to illustrate the nature of horror rather than answer foolish questions.

Donald Justice added a twist to the story in his 1967 poem *Incident in a Rose Garden*. After his frightened gardener sees Death and flees, a lord comes upon Death in his garden. Death explains

As for your gardener,
I did not threaten him.
Old men mistake my gestures.
I only meant to ask him
To show me to his master.
I take it you are he?

Composed upon Westminster Bridge

Early one morning in 1802. William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy traveled to Calais, France, to meet with Annette Vallon, with whom Wordsworth had fathered a daughter, Caroline, in 1792. Their objective was to arrange matters with Annette prior to Wordsworth’s upcoming marriage with Mary Hutchison. Dorothy described the scene in her diary:

It was a beautiful morning. The city, St. Paul's, with the river, and a multitude of little boats, made a most beautiful sight as we crossed Westminster Bridge. The houses were not overhung by their cloud of smoke, and they were spread out endlessly, yet the sun shone so brightly, with such a fierce light; that there was something like the purity of one of nature's own grand spectacles.

Westminster Bridge had been built in 1750 and lasted until the middle of the 19th Century when it was replaced by the present structure. The view to the north encompassed the dome of St Paul’s cathedral, as shown in a detail from a large panorama of London by Pierre Prévost (1815).



The Idea of Order at Key West

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.
The water never formed to mind or voice,
Like a body wholly body, fluttering
Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion
Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,
That was not ours although we understood,
Inhuman, of the veritable ocean.

The sea was not a mask. No more was she.
The song and water were not medleyed sound
Even if what she sang was what she heard,
Since what she sang was uttered word by word.
It may be that in all her phrases stirred
The grinding water and the gasping wind;
But it was she and not the sea we heard.

For she was the maker of the song she sang.
The ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea
Was merely a place by which she walked to sing.
Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew
It was the spirit that we sought and knew
That we should ask this often as she sang.

If it was only the dark voice of the sea
That rose, or even colored by many waves;
If it was only the outer voice of sky
And cloud, of the sunken coral water-walled,
However clear, it would have been deep air,
The heaving speech of air, a summer sound
Repeated in a summer without end
And sound alone. But it was more than that,
More even than her voice, and ours, among
The meaningless plungings of water and the wind,
Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped
On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres
Of sky and sea.

It was her voice that made
The sky acutest at its vanishing.
She measured to the hour its solitude.
She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we, (ctd)

The Idea of Order at Key West

The Florida Keys compose a coral archipelago that begins at the Southeastern tip of Florida and then curves to the southwest with Key West as the most westward of the inhabited islands. The word “key” (Spanish *cayo*) derives from an indigenous word for the islands.

In the 20th Century, Key West became popular with many writers. Ernest Hemingway, Tennessee Williams and Elizabeth Bishop all owned houses, and Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens spent winters there. In 1936, Stevens got into a fist-fight with Hemingway. And in 1940, Stevens and Frost bitterly argued: Stevens accused Frost of writing about “subjects” and Frost accused Stevens of writing about “bric-a-brac.” The argument highlights their differences, with Frost focusing on his subjective responses to reality, and Stevens on the creative imagination. The word “bric-a-brac,” deriving from a French nonsense phrase, *à bric et à brac*, meaning “at random,” is a derisory description of the meaningless works of art that are also known as knick-knacks or *tchotchkas* (Yiddish)

In this poem Stevens and Ramon Fernandez, an imagined colleague, listen to woman singing as she walks along the beach with the sound of the waves as a background.

Stevens was long concerned with the contrast between philosophy and poetry, the latter considered in its original sense of the creative imagination (Greek *poieo*, make, create). In his 1951 collection of essays *The Necessary Angel*, he states

In philosophy we attempt to approach truth through the reason ... in poetry we attempt to approach truth through the imagination.

Stevens rebelled against “logical positivism,” the dominant philosophy of the mid-20th Century, which claimed that all that we can know must be derived from experience or from the self-evident truths of logic and mathematics (*positus* is the past participle of *ponere*, place, i.e. that which is placed in the minds). Philosophy and science have moved on from these ideas, and now the creative imagination is recognized as being as important to science as empirical data. We cannot find an order in the world, until we have imagined that it is possible.

In its first three stanzas, the poem makes three claims about the song and the sea.

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.

The word “genius” (from the Latin *gignere*, beget) is the innate character or guardian spirit of a person or place (*genius loci*). Stevens claims that the singing was “beyond” (in transcendental terms) what could be explained by the sound and power of the sea. Nature is unable to express itself in ideas or words: “never formed to mind or voice.” The sea can only be understood by the creative mind.

The sea was not a mask. No more was she.

Both the sea and the singer were as they were. The sea was reality and the song the human understanding of its meaning.

For she was the maker of the song she sang

The song contained within itself the essence of the sea. By her singing the woman was “the single artificer of the world.” The world is nothing if not perceived.

As we beheld her striding there alone,
Knew that there never was a world for her
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,
Why, when the singing ended and we turned
Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,
The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,
As the night descended, tilting in the air,
Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,
Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
The maker's rage to order words of the sea,
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
And of ourselves and of our origins,
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

Wallace Stevens, 1934

On His Blindness

When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodg'd with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide;
"Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"
I fondly ask. But Patience to prevent
That murmur, soon replies: 'God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts; who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
And post o'er land and ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait.'

John Milton, 1655

In his essays in *The Necessary Angel*, Stevens notes that both the past and future are only accessible to us via the imagination. Furthermore, only the imagination can conceive of ideas that are not present in the world – beauty, justice, happiness:

The imagination is the power of the mind over the possibilities of things.

As the poem ends, Stevens claims that the song has given order to the world. Things that initially were unclear now make sense.

In a later poem *Angel Surrounded by Paysans* (1950), Stevens attempted to understand a still-life painting by Tal Coat. The painting depicts a beautiful bowl of Venetian glass surrounded by other lesser objects. The poet imagined that bowl as an angel appearing to peasants. And at a second level of imagining that angel is a metaphor of the creative imagination:

Yet I am the necessary angel of earth,
Since, in my sight, you see the earth again

On His Blindness

By the 1652 Milton had become completely blind. Modern ophthalmologists have disputed whether this was due to glaucoma or to retinal detachment. All of Milton's later poems were later dictated to various *amanuenses* (from Latin *a manu*, handwriting + *ensis*, belonging to) – daughters, secretaries and colleagues (one of which was Andrew Marvell).

The sonnet refers to the parable of the talents in the gospels of *Matthew* and *Luke*. Although it now means some natural (God-given) ability or skill, a talent (Greek for “scale”) was originally a large amount of silver. In the parable, a master puts his servants in charge of his talents while he is away; upon his return, the master rewards those that had made a profit, and casting the servant who had hidden his talent in the ground into outer darkness (*Matthew* 25:29):

For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.

The parable likely uses the talent to signify God's mercy, which should be disseminated to others. Nevertheless, the capitalistic connotations of the parable run strangely counter to other teachings of Jesus.

Milton wonders whether God still requires his poetic talents now that he can no longer see what he must write about. Ultimately, he is reconciled:

God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts; who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best.

It is only human, however, to resist such acquiescence. Milton later rebelled when he wrote so sympathetically about Lucifer in his great epic *Paradise Lost* (1667, p 270). William Blake noted:

The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when he wrote of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it. (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 1808)

Gentleman Rankers

To the legion of the lost ones, to the cohort of the damned,
To my brethren in their sorrow overseas,
Sings a gentleman of England cleanly bred, machinely crammed,
And a trooper of the Empress, if you please.
Yea, a trooper of the forces who has run his own six horses,
And faith he went the pace and went it blind,
And the world was more than kin while he held the ready tin,
But to-day the Sergeant's something less than kind.

*We're poor little lambs who've lost our way,
Baa! Baa! Baa!
We're little black sheep who've gone astray,
Baa—aa—aa!
Gentlemen-rankers out on the spree,
Damned from here to Eternity,
God ha' mercy on such as we,
Baa! Yah! Bah!*

Oh, it's sweet to sweat through stables, sweet to empty kitchen slops,
And it's sweet to hear the tales the troopers tell,
To dance with blowzy housemaids at the regimental hops
And thrash the cad who says you waltz too well.
Yes, it makes you cock-a-hoop to be "Rider" to your troop,
And branded with a blasted worsted spur,
When you envy, O how keenly, one poor Tommy being cleanly
Who blacks your boots and sometimes calls you "Sir".

If the home we never write to, and the oaths we never keep,
And all we know most distant and most dear,
Across the snoring barrack-room return to break our sleep,
Can you blame us if we soak ourselves in beer?
When the drunken comrade mutters and the great guard-lantern gutters
And the horror of our fall is written plain,
Every secret, self-revealing on the aching white-washed ceiling,
Do you wonder that we drug ourselves from pain?

We have done with Hope and Honour, we are lost to Love and Truth,
We are dropping down the ladder rung by rung,
And the measure of our torment is the measure of our youth.
God help us, for we knew the worst too young!
Our shame is clean repentance for the crime that brought the sentence,
Our pride it is to know no spur of pride,
And the Curse of Reuben holds us till an alien turf enfolds us
And we die, and none can tell Them where we died.

Rudyard Kipling, 1892

Gentleman Rankers

In the British Army, a “gentleman ranker” was a young man of high birth and education serving in the “ranks” as a common soldier – a “trooper of the Empress.” This state of affairs usually occurred after the young man had somehow disgraced himself, and was then forced to serve apart from a society that scorned him (like a flock of sheep that shuns the occasional lamb that is, unlike its fellows, black). This reason is mentioned in the poem as the “Curse of Reuben,” referring to Jacob’s damning his son Reuben for having had sexual relations with Jacob’s concubine Bilhah (*Genesis* 49:3-4):

Reuben, thou art my firstborn, my might, and the beginning of my strength,
the excellency of dignity, and the excellency of power:
Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel; because thou wentest up to thy father's
bed; then defiledst thou it: he went up to my couch.

Because of his background, a gentlemen ranker was often a good horseman, therefore designated as a “Rider,” and qualified to wear a special spur insignia on their uniform. “Cock-a-hoop” is a term of celebration deriving from the opening of the tap to allow the beer to flow.

A common soldier – “Tommy” – could recognize a gentleman ranker by his accent and education, and would reflexly call him “Sir.” The word “Tommy” comes from “Thomas Atkins,” a name used as a model in official army forms.

Gentlemen rankers often served under assumed names. When they died, they were buried in an “alien turf” and none told their families where they were buried.

Kipling’s poem is intensely musical. Multiple anapestic feet are interspersed among the iambs to give it a driving rhythm. The lines rhyme *ababcdcd* with multiple internal rhymes (cock-a-hoop/troop; mutters/gutters; repentance/sentence). Alliteration abounds (“sweet to sweat through stables; great guard lantern gutters”). Balanced structures make it easy to remember the words

If the home we never write to, and the oaths we never keep,

It is therefore fitting that the refrain of Kipling’s poem became the basis of the *Whiffenpoof Song*, a four-part *a cappella* arrangement by Meade Minnigerode and George Pomeroy in 1909 for the Whiffenpoofs, a male chorus at Yale University:

To the tables down at Mory's,
To the place where Louis dwells,
To the dear old Temple Bar
We love so well,
Sing the Whiffenpoofs assembled
With their glasses raised on high,
And the magic of their singing casts its spell.
... We will serenade our Louis
While life and voice shall last
Then we'll pass and be forgotten with the rest.

The song refers to *Mory's Temple Bar* in New Haven and its owner, Louis Linder. The name “Whiffenpoofs” is nonsensical.

Pied Beauty

Glory be to God for dappled things –
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;
And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, 1877

The Snow Man

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Wallace Stevens, 1921

Pied Beauty

Hopkins called this shortened form of the sonnet a “curtal” sonnet. The first section has 6 rather than 8 lines, and the second section just over 4 lines. The rhyme scheme is *abcabc dcbdc*, with the second section partially linked to the first. The rhythm is irregular with 4 or 5 stresses per long line. The expressive style is as compressed as the overall form. “Pied” means having two colors; the word originally meant black and white like a magpie. “Dappled” is covered with patches of light or color. “Fresh-firecoal chestnut falls” are chestnuts fallen from the trees, appearing dark brown and light red like the embers of a fire. “Brinded” or “brindled” means tawny streaked with darker brown. Many of the words are linked by alliteration as much as by meaning: “fickle, freckled,” “sweet, sour.” Like the “gear and tackle and trim” of other trades, Hopkins loved the tools of his poetry. There is perhaps a subtle change between the first and second sections. The first is concerned with the glory of the multicolor world, whereas the second notes specifically how the coupling of opposites can make them beautiful: “adazzle, dim”.

The Snow Man

Stevens’ poem begins with a bravura description of the winter landscape: the “juniper branches shagged with ice,” the “distant glitter of the January sun.” The poem then contrasts the reality that we perceive with the meaning that we derive from it. It is so easy to think of misery when we see the frost and hear the wind. Yet if we develop a “mind of winter” like that of the snow man, we can experience what really exists. The last two lines describe the true experience beyond our preconceived notions. If we empty ourselves, we no longer see things that are not there. We come face-to-face with the truth, realizing that it is as empty as the perceiving self. There are three nothings: the nothing of the emptied self, the “nothing that is not there,” and “the nothing that is.”

The poem has been interpreted in different ways, depending mainly on how the critic considers the “nothing that is.” For some, the nothing that concludes the poem is but the first stage on the path to imagination. One must remove the old ways of looking and then create a better way. Others propose that the nothing that concludes the poem may be an end in itself. Stevens’ conclusion would then relate to Eastern philosophies, wherein the goal is to lose oneself in the universal. The wording of the poem’s last two lines then brings to mind the *koan* riddles of Zen Buddhism, verbal tricks to help the meditator reach true understanding.

The poem’s vision is austere. Not one that the western mind can easily grasp. The goal is to lose one’s self. Not to gain comfort, not to make oneself better, not to determine how things work. Yet by losing ourselves we might be released from suffering, learn what is right, and gain true understanding. Ralph Waldo Emerson in *Nature* (1836) described a similar state:

Standing on the bare ground, my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.

Sandpiper

The roaring alongside he takes for granted,
and that every so often the world is bound to shake.
He runs, he runs to the south, finical, awkward,
in a state of controlled panic, a student of Blake.

The beach hisses like fat. On his left, a sheet
of interrupting water comes and goes
and glazes over his dark and brittle feet.
He runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes.

— Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them,
where (no detail too small) the Atlantic drains
rapidly backwards and downwards. As he runs,
he stares at the dragging grains.

The world is a mist. And then the world is
minute and vast and clear. The tide
is higher or lower. He couldn't tell you which.
His beak is focussed; he is preoccupied,

looking for something, something, something.
Poor bird, he is obsessed!
The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray,
mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst.

Elizabeth Bishop, 1965

Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries

These, in the day when heaven was falling,
The hour when earth's foundations fled,
Followed their mercenary calling
And took their wages and are dead.

Their shoulders held the sky suspended;
They stood, and earth's foundations stay;
What God abandoned, these defended,
And saved the sum of things for pay.

A. E. Housman, 1917

Sandpiper

Bishop's poem provides a beautifully accurate description of the life of sandpipers. Ignoring the shaking world and the continuously moving water, they find their food – small insects, worms, shrimp, and other tiny animals, cast by the waves on the multicolored grains of sand.



The images are strikingly compressed. The “student of Blake” refers to Blake's *Auguries of Innocence*: “To see a world in a grain of sand” (p 146). There is a mysticism to the sandpiper's focused attention, but there is also an obsession with detail that brings to mind Blake's mad prophecies (p 153). Somehow one must control the panic. The beach “hisses like fat” in a hot frying pan, and the sandpiper must keep moving to prevent his toes from burning. The final description of the sand comes from a poet who has looked as closely at the grains as any sandpiper.

The simple rhyme scheme, either *abcb* or *abab*, suits the coming and going of the waves. The rhythm of the words and the repetition of the sibilant sounds imitates their sound:

The world is a mist. And then the world is
minute and vast and clear.

Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries

At the beginning of World War I, Britain had a small professional army whereas the continental powers had much larger conscripted armies. The vastly outnumbered British Expeditionary Force (BEF) of 85,000 soldiers fought against the German Army in Belgium, retreating slowly until the Germans were finally halted in Northern France, and the long drawn-out trench-war began. By the end of 2014, one third of the original BEF were dead. Following a rumor (likely initiated by the British) that the Kaiser had considered them “a contemptible little army,” the BEF thereafter proudly called themselves the “Old Contemptibles.”

The poem sets several ideas into opposition. “Mercenary,” unlike “professional,” is a term of contempt. Yet these mercenaries saved the “sum of things.” A “calling” is usually followed for love and not for pay. Although these men considered soldiering as just a job, their actions were completely heroic – “they held the sky suspended” and let the Allies regroup to fight another day.

The line “And took their wages and are dead” recalls the tender eulogy for Fidele in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* – “Home art gone and ta'en thy wages.” (p 6). Housman's epitaph also resonates with that written by Simonides for Leonidas and the Spartans, who died stopping the invading Persian Army at Thermopylae in 480 BCE (translation by William Golding, *The Hot Gates*, 1965):

Stranger, tell the Spartans that we behaved
as they would wish us to, and are buried here.

The Great Figure

Among the rain
and lights
I saw the figure 5
in gold
on a red
firetruck
moving
tense
unheeded
to gong clangs
siren howls
and wheels rumbling
through the dark city.

William Carlos
Williams, 1920

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying What I do is me: for that I came.

Í say móre: the just man justices;
Kéeps gráce: thát keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—
Chríst—for Chríst plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, 1981

The Great Figure

In his *Autobiography* (1948), Williams wrote

Once on a hot July day coming back exhausted from the Post Graduate Clinic, I dropped in as I sometimes did at Marsden's studio on Fifteenth Street for a talk, a little drink maybe and to see what he was doing. As I approached his number I heard a great clatter of bells and the roar of a fire engine passing the end of the street down Ninth Avenue. I turned just in time to see a golden figure 5 on a red background flash by. The impression was so sudden and forceful that I took a piece of paper out of my pocket and wrote a short poem about it.

The New York Fire Department still has an Engine 5 stationed at 14th St and 1st Ave. The poem vividly recreates the poet's experience. A deeper level of meaning can perhaps be elicited from the title, which could refer to a famous person, who is carried around the dark city to the accolades of gongs and sirens.

Echphrasis (Greek for "speaking out") is the process whereby one piece of art describes another. This typically involves a verbal description of a painting or sculpture. However, the process is sometimes reversed. In 1928 (eight years after the poem), Charles Demuth painted a striking representation of Williams's poem, presently in The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



As kingfishers catch fire

Hopkins's thought revolved around the concept of "inscape," a word he coined to describe the particular pattern or design of something. The idea derived from Duns Scotus (1266-1308 CE), who maintained that we could know the reality and the uniqueness of individual things. Scotus called the specific nature of a thing its "thisness" or *haecceitas* (see p 182). By apprehending the particularity of a thing, the mind can grasp its universal meaning (its "whatness" or *quidditas*): seeing an actual tree leads us to understand what trees are in general. Hopkins captured the details of his experience in his poetry in order to convey underlying truths.

Inscape requires a force – "instress" – that binds the particular to the universal. For Hopkins this force derives from God, and to experience it through inscape leads to ecstasy. Christ is the ultimate manifestation of instress, of the infinite working itself out through an individual.

In the image of pebbles tumbled over the rim of round wells and echoing when they reach the water, the words follow the sound of the stones. The syntax of "Deals out that being indoors each one dwells" is as intricately ambiguous as the fusion of body and soul. It could mean that each mortal thing is a manifestation of the soul which dwells within it, or that each person can only live by being within one body. Being is both noun and verb.

Futility

Move him into the sun—
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields unsown.
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds—
Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs so dear-achieved, are sides
Full-nerved,—still warm,—too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

Wilfred Owen, 1918

Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind,
But as for me, *hélas*, I may no more.
The vain travail hath wearied me so sore,
I am of them that farthest cometh behind.
Yet may I by no means my wearied mind
Draw from the deer, but as she fleeth afore
Fainting I follow. I leave off therefore,
Sithens in a net I seek to hold the wind.
Who list her hunt, I put him out of doubt,
As well as I may spend his time in vain.
And graven with diamonds in letters plain
There is written, her fair neck round about:
Noli me tangere, for Caesar's I am,
And wild for to hold, though I seem tame.

Thomas Wyatt, 1557

Futility

This poem recalls the death of one of Owen's fellow soldiers. The sun will not wake him now. Perhaps his life might have been better never lived than brought to this futile ending.

The poem consists of two stanzas each of seven lines. The first deals with this particular death, the second with its significance. The rhythm is irregular with four stresses per line. The rhyme scheme is *ababccc*. All rhymes are slant with the exception of the fifth and seventh which are strict.

Owen is buried in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery in Ors, near where he was killed. His mother chose a quotation from her son's poem *The End* for the epitaph:

Shall Life renew these bodies? Of a truth
All death will he annul

It is a misquotation. The second sentence, which continues “, all tears assuage?” is a further question not an answer. The answer to both questions is no.

Whoso list to hunt

To “list” is to desire. The word comes from the same root as “lust,” but it has been refined for the games of courtly love. The sonnet may relate to Wyatt's relationship with Anne Boleyn, who became the mistress of Henry VIII in 1527. Her story easily fits with the narrative of Wyatt's sonnet – the wild young woman who became dear to the king. Anne married the king in 1533 and soon gave birth to Elizabeth. In 1536, Anne Boleyn had a miscarriage, was accused of adultery and incest, imprisoned in the Tower, and executed. Thomas Wyatt was held in the Tower at the same time, and likely saw her beheading.

Wyatt's sonnet is a loose translation of Petrarch's *Rime* 190, which described his initial meeting with Laura in Avignon in 1327. Laura was already married, and Petrarch's love could not be physical. His sonnet therefore related a mystical vision of the beautiful: *una candida cerva sopra l'erba| verde m'apparve con duo corna d'oro* (“a white hind appeared to me upon the green grass, with two golden antlers”). Italian commentaries report a legend that one of Caesar's deer appeared thirteen centuries after Caesar's death with a necklace denoting her master. Petrarch's inscription differs from Wyatt's – *Nessun mi tocchi libera farmi al mio Cesar parve* (Do not touch me ... it has pleased Casear to set me free). However, the inscription in the legend – *Noli me tangere, Caesaris sum* – is the same as Wyatt's. It combines what Christ told Mary Magdalene after the resurrection with what he told the Pharisees about the things of the world.

The lines of Wyatt's sonnet vary between nine and eleven syllables. There are generally five stresses per line, but these do not follow any regular meter. Iambic pentameter was not to become the main rhythm of English poetry until late in the 16th Century. Wyatt's sonnet reads like free verse. The changing feet of the last line – iamb, anapest, spondee, iamb – give it a wonderful ringing sound.

- / | - - / | / / | - /
And wild for to hold, though I seem tame

Warming Her Pearls

(for Judith Radstone)

Next to my own skin, her pearls. My mistress
bids me wear them, warm them, until evening
when I'll brush her hair. At six, I place them
round her cool, white throat. All day I think of her,

resting in the Yellow Room, contemplating silk
or taffeta, which gown tonight? She fans herself
whilst I work willingly, my slow heat entering
each pearl. Slack on my neck, her rope.

She's beautiful. I dream about her
in my attic bed; picture her dancing
with tall men, puzzled by my faint, persistent scent
beneath her French perfume, her milky stones.

I dust her shoulders with a rabbit's foot,
watch the soft blush seep through her skin
like an indolent sigh. In her looking-glass
my red lips part as though I want to speak.

Full moon. Her carriage brings her home. I see
her every movement in my head.... Undressing,
taking off her jewels, her slim hand reaching
for the case, slipping naked into bed, the way

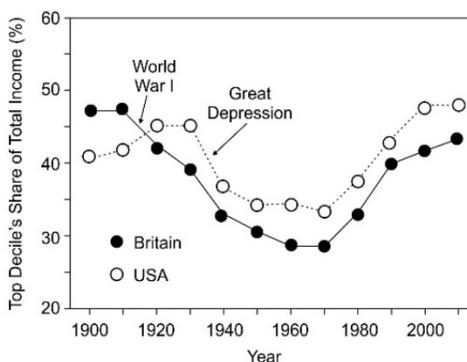
she always does.... And I lie here awake,
knowing the pearls are cooling even now
in the room where my mistress sleeps. All night
I feel their absence and I burn.

Carol Ann Duffy, 1987

Warming Her Pearls

A common practice in Victorian and Edwardian England was to have the maid wear one's pearls during the daytime so that her body heat would enhance their luster for the evening. Duffy learned about this from the bookseller and bibliophile, Judith Radstone (1925-2001), and from it fashioned a powerful poem about desire and class.

At the beginning of the 20th Century social inequality was at an all-time high. The rich were obscenely rich and the poor were terribly poor. The period was called the Gilded Age in the United States and *La Belle Epoque* in France. The diagram at the right (from Piketty, 2014) shows how much of the total income was taken by the top 10% of society. This inequality was



decreased by the Great War and the Great Depression. However, at the beginning of the 21st Century, we are again experiencing similar levels of inequality.

The poem considers this from the perspective of a lady's maid in a rich household. She wears here mistress's pearls while she does housework, and then in the early evening prepares here mistress for her night on the town.

The maid is intensely attached to her mistress – “All day I think of her ... I dream about her ... I burn.” She imagines her “slipping naked into bed” Yet she is unable to express her love: relations between members of the same sex or of different social class were not tolerated. She looks at herself in her mistress's looking glass, attempts to speak her love, but cannot.

We do not know the feelings of the mistress. When the maid dusts her shoulders, the mistress blushes. Perhaps she feels the same attraction as the maid.

Pearls have been used to mean two completely different things. In a religious context they signify truth and wisdom:

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: Who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it. (*Matthew* 13:45-46)

In secular contexts pearls are often associated with sex. *The Pearl* was a London pornographic magazine published briefly from 1879-80 before it was closed down for obscenity. Female homoerotic literature often uses the pearl as a clitoral image. Even in non-erotic literature, the pearl often occurs in lesbian fantasies:

... an exquisite suspense, such as might stay a diver before plunging while the sea darkens and brightens beneath him, and the waves which threaten to break, but only gently split their surface, roll and conceal and encrust as they just turn over the weeds with pearl. (Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 1925).

Requiem for the Croppies

The pockets of our greatcoats full of barley...
No kitchens on the run, no striking camp...
We moved quick and sudden in our own country.
The priest lay behind ditches with the tramp.
A people hardly marching... on the hike...
We found new tactics happening each day:
We'd cut through reins and rider with the pike
And stampede cattle into infantry,
Then retreat through hedges where cavalry must be thrown.
Until... on Vinegar Hill... the final conclave.
Terraced thousands died, shaking scythes at cannon.
The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave.
They buried us without shroud or coffin
And in August... the barley grew up out of our grave.

Seamus Heaney, 1969

Scrambled Eggs and Whiskey

Scrambled eggs and whiskey
in the false-dawn light. Chicago,
a sweet town, bleak, God knows,
but sweet. Sometimes. And
weren't we fine tonight?
When Hank set up that limping
treble roll behind me
my horn just growled and I
thought my heart would burst.
And Brad M. pressing with the
soft stick and Joe-Anne
singing low. Here we are now
in the White Tower, leaning
on one another, too tired
to go home. But don't say a word,
don't tell a soul, they wouldn't
understand, they couldn't, never
in a million years, how fine,
how magnificent we were
in that old club tonight.

Hayden Carruth, 1995

Requiem for the Croppies

In 1798 the Society of United Irishmen, inspired by the American and French Revolutions, rebelled against British rule in Ireland. The society began with Presbyterian radicals in the North and attracted the Catholic majority in the South. The rebels wore their hair closely cropped in sympathy with the French revolutionaries who hated the long hair and wigs of the aristocracy. The Irish rebels, poorly armed and ill supplied, were no match for the British forces. The final battle occurred at Vinegar Hill, near Enniscorthy in County Wexford, on June 21. The photograph on the right shows a monument to the Pikemen (Irish, *Fauscailt*) by Eamonn O'Doherty erected in 1998.



The octave of Heaney's sonnet describes the guerilla tactics of the croppies and the sestet considers their final defeat. Freedom was not gained in 1798 but the idea continued – like the barley in their greatcoats. Heaney's poem gains immediacy by being presented in the voice of the dead croppies.

Scrambled Eggs and Whiskey

Early in the morning after a late-night gig, the musicians retire to and all-night diner for scrambled eggs and whiskey. White Tower Restaurants were founded in the 1920s. Though they originally copied the crenellated fortress architecture of the earlier White Castle Restaurants, law suits made



them change to a more Art-Deco look. The illustration at the right shows a 1984 model of a typical White Tower Restaurant by the artist Alan Wolfson.

The whiskey is a bourbon, served surreptitiously from a personal bottle in a paper bag, since the restaurant did not serve alcohol.

The musicians are feeling good about how well they played: Hank the pianist, Brad the drummer, Joe-Anne the vocalist, and the speaker as the horn player who “thought my heart would burst.” The listeners were likely enthralled by their performance, but if they weren't, it would not matter. The musicians know how “magnificent” they were.

Jazz is characterized by variation and improvisation. The White Tower was an architectural variation on the White Castle, itself an imitation on the Chicago Water Tower. Bourbon whiskey made from corn is a variation on Scotch whisky made from barley. Whiskey with breakfast is an improvisation.

Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore

From Brooklyn, over the Brooklyn Bridge, on this fine morning,
 please come flying.
In a cloud of fiery pale chemicals,
 please come flying,
to the rapid rolling of thousands of small blue drums
descending out of the mackerel sky
over the glittering grandstand of harbor-water,
 please come flying.

Whistles, pennants and smoke are blowing. The ships
are signaling cordially with multitudes of flags
rising and falling like birds all over the harbor.
Enter: two rivers, gracefully bearing
countless little pellucid jellies
in cut-glass epergnes dragging with silver chains.
The flight is safe; the weather is all arranged.
The waves are running in verses this fine morning.
 Please come flying.

Come with the pointed toe of each black shoe
trailing a sapphire highlight,
with a black capeful of butterfly wings and bon-mots,
with heaven knows how many angels all riding
on the broad black brim of your hat,
 please come flying.

Bearing a musical inaudible abacus,
a slight censorious frown, and blue ribbons,
 please come flying.
Facts and skyscrapers glint in the tide; Manhattan
is all awash with morals this fine morning,
 so please come flying.

Mounting the sky with natural heroism,
above the accidents, above the malignant movies,
the taxicabs and injustices at large,
while horns are resounding in your beautiful ears
that simultaneously listen to
a soft uninvented music, fit for the musk deer,
 please come flying.

(ctd)

Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore

In her final year at Vassar College in 1934, Bishop was introduced to Marianne Moore. The two poets corresponded extensively, and Moore became Bishop's poetic mentor. Bishop was particularly impressed by the accuracy of Moore's descriptions and the precision of her syllabic rhythms (see p 16), described in this poem as "a musical inaudible abacus."

This poem, written while Bishop was living in Manhattan and Moore was in Brooklyn mourning the death of her mother, with whom she had lived for her whole life, "quite literally invites Moore out of grief and back into the world." (Millier, 1993).

Brooklyn is southeast of Manhattan. Between the two New York boroughs, the Hudson and the East River (actually an estuary rather than a river) join to form Upper New York Bay. The Brooklyn Bridge, completed in 1883, connects northern Brooklyn to southern Manhattan.

Bishop called her mentor "the world's greatest living observer." In this invitation, Bishop imitates the exact detail characteristic of Moore's poetry. Her image of jelly-fish dragging their silver chains under an umbrella-like bell similar to a cut-glass epergne (an ornamental centerpiece for a table used to hold fruit, finger food or flowers) is vividly accurate. Bishop is also very precise in her description of Moore with her patent leather shoes, black cape, and tricorne hat.



The invitation is permeated with wondrously witty images. Bishop likens poetry to the natural rhythms of the waves

The waves are running in verses this fine morning.

She provides a beautiful description the city in the sunlight

Facts and skyscrapers glint in the tide; Manhattan
is all awash with morals this fine morning

She considers the sometimes complex syntax of poetry as

grammar that suddenly turns and shines
like flocks of sandpipers flying

For whom the grim museums will behave
like courteous male bower-birds,
for whom the agreeable lions lie in wait
on the steps of the Public Library,
eager to rise and follow through the doors
up into the reading rooms,
 please come flying.

We can sit down and weep; we can go shopping,
or play at a game of constantly being wrong
with a priceless set of vocabularies,
or we can bravely deplore, but please
 please come flying.

With dynasties of negative constructions
darkening and dying around you,
with grammar that suddenly turns and shines
like flocks of sandpipers flying,
 please come flying.

Come like a light in the white mackerel sky,
come like a daytime comet
with a long unnebulous train of words,
from Brooklyn, over the Brooklyn Bridge, on this fine morning,
 please come flying.

Elizabeth Bishop, 1948

from **Hamlet Act II: Scene 2**

I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors. What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god, the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals—and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me.

William Shakespeare, 1601

Bishop likens Manhattan's museums to bowerbirds, who are renowned for their unique courtship behavior: in order to attract a mate, the males build a complex nest decorated with sticks and brightly colored objects that they have collected.

Bishop's poem ends with the Brooklyn Bridge. Marianne Moore later described the bridge in her 1966 poem *Granite and Steel*:

Enfranchising cable, silvered by the sea,
of woven wire, grayed by the mist,
and Liberty dominate the Bay—
her feet as one on shattered chains,
once whole links wrought by Tyranny.

The bridge portrays a state of mind that was essentially American – a symbol of freedom and a prospect of the future.

I have of late

In this speech Hamlet describes his state of mind to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He contrasts the beauty of the world (“this most excellent canopy ... fretted with golden fire”) with his perception thereof (“sterile promontory ... congregation of vapors”). Fretwork is an architectural technique whereby ornamental patterns are inlaid in or embossed onto walls and ceilings. The word comes from the French *frette*. It has no relation to another sense of “fret,” deriving from the German *fressen* to devour, which means to corrode when transitive and to be anxious when not, though anxiety is Hamlet's prevailing mood, and Shakespeare was likely aware of the different meanings.

For Hamlet's praise of man, the text on the facing page largely follows Harold Jenkins (1982). There is much dispute over where to place the commas (or other punctuation). Anne Thompson and Neil Taylor (2006) suggest

how noble in reason; how infinite in faculties, in form and moving; how express and admirable in action; how like an angel in apprehension; how like a god; the beauty of the world; the paragon of animals.

The second half of Hamlet's speech contrasts the greatness of man (“the paragon of animals”) with his own perception of his meaningless (“quintessence of dust”). A “paragon” is a model of excellence, a shining example. The word “quintessence” derives from ancient philosophy's idea that in addition to the four elements (earth, air, fire and water), there is a fifth that forms the heavens, and exists in latent form in every earthly object as its defining characteristic. Hamlet says that the human quintessence is the dust that God used to form the first man and the dust that we return to after death

And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life (*Genesis* 2:7)

In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. (*Genesis* 3:19)

Hamlet's perceptions do not fit the world. His words do not fit any regular rhythm. His poetic ideas come out in prose. The time is out of joint.

After Apple-Picking

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
Toward heaven still,
And there's a barrel that I didn't fill
Beside it, and there may be two or three
Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.
But I am done with apple-picking now.
Essence of winter sleep is on the night,
The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.
I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight
I got from looking through a pane of glass
I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough
And held against the world of hoary grass.
It melted, and I let it fall and break.
But I was well
Upon my way to sleep before it fell,
And I could tell
What form my dreaming was about to take.
Magnified apples appear and disappear,
Stem end and blossom end,
And every fleck of russet showing clear.
My instep arch not only keeps the ache,
It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.
I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.
And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
The rumbling sound
Of load on load of apples coming in.
For I have had too much
Of apple-picking: I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired.
There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.
For all
That struck the earth,
No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,
Went surely to the cider-apple heap
As of no worth.
One can see what will trouble
This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.
Were he not gone,
The woodchuck could say whether it's like his
Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
Or just some human sleep.

Robert Frost, 1914

After Apple-Picking

The poem is spoken by an exhausted apple-picker who is ready for sleep after a long day of work. He remembers how he picked up a piece of ice from the water trough in the morning and looked through it at the frost upon the grass. This alludes to the verse in *I Corinthians* 13 (p 197):

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

He senses that he is about to meet his maker. He can tell what form his dreaming will take. The ladder that is so fixed in his mind – “sticking through a tree toward heaven still” – recalls the ladder of Jacob’s dream in Bethel

And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the Lord stood above it (Genesis 28: 12-13)

The apple-picker remembers how he sorted the apples into those for keeping and those for the cider-apple heap, and he knows “what will trouble this sleep of mine.” He has apocalyptic thoughts:

And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
The rumbling sound
Of load on load of apples coming in.

In the days of judgment, the Lord will consider the harvest and, like choosing between the apples, will divide the wheat from the tares:

Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn. (*Matthew* 13:30)

Finally, the apple-picker gives in to sleep, not knowing whether it will be a simple sleep from which he will wake on the morrow, or a longer sleep like that of the hibernating woodchuck from which he will wake to a completely new world.

He is worried about “the great harvest I myself desired.” Has he accomplished all that he set out to do, or all that he was supposed to do? The apple-picker has become the poet. Worried that he has not been able to gather all the poems his experience has granted him, he shares the same creative anxiety as Keats (p 187):

When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain,
Before high-pilèd books, in charactery,
Hold like rich garners the full ripened grain;

The poem is a glorious mix of form and freedom. All of the lines in the poem end with rhymes although these follow no regular scheme: *abbacdedfef ghhhgijgkjlkl mnmoo pqrpqststr*. The rhymes are like the waves of sleepiness that slowly overcome the speaker. The poem’s rhythm is also irregular though most lines fit loosely into iambic pentameter. Occasional short lines break up the incantatory sound, as though the poet is trying to stop himself from “drowsing off.” Frost creates a marvelous music from the sibilant sounds in

Essence of winter sleep is on the night,
The scent of apples: I am drowsing off

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.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

William Butler Yeats, 1890

The Parable of the Old Man and the Young

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
And took the fire with him, and a knife.
And as they sojourned both of them together,
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
and builded parapets and trenches there,
And stretchèd forth the knife to slay his son.
When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.

But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

Wilfred Owen, 1818

The Lake Isle of Innisfree

Innisfree (Irish *Inis Fraoch*, "heather island") is a small island in Lough Gill in County Sligo, where Yeats spent much of his childhood. In his *Autobiographies* (1926), he described passing a shop-window on the Strand where "a little ball was kept dancing by a jet of water." The sound triggered memories of Sligo and led to this poem. In *John Sherman* (1891), Yeats attributed to his fictional hero his own nostalgia for Innisfree:

Often when life and its difficulties had seemed to him like the lessons of some elder boy given to a younger by mistake, it had seemed good to dream of going away to that islet and building a wooden hut there and burning a few years out, rowing to and fro, fishing, or lying on the island slopes by day, and listening at night to the ripple of the water and the quivering of the bushes—full always of unknown creatures—and going out at morning to see the island's edge marked by the feet of birds.

"Wattle" is a fence or wall constructed out of interlaced branches. Yeats explained "and noon a purple glow" as the reflections of heather in the water.

Yeats recorded this poem for the BBC in 1932, stating

I'm going to read my poems with great emphasis upon their rhythm ... It gave me a devil of a lot of trouble to get into verse the poems that I am going to read, and that is why I will not read them as if they were prose.

With its accentuated rhythms, the recording sounds like the chanting of an ancient bard.

The Parable of the Old Man and the Young

This is one of the last poems that Owen wrote before returning to France. The first 14 lines follow the account in Genesis 22: 1-19 of the Binding of Isaac – the *Akedah* – the most terrifying incident in the Bible. On the right is Rembrandt's 1645 etching.

Owen follows the King James version closely: "clave the wood" (3), "took the fire in his hand, and a knife" (6), "the lamb for the burnt offering?" (7), "Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son" (10) "Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him" (12) "a ram caught in a thicket by his horns" (13).



However, Owen reports that Abraham built trenches rather than an altar:

Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
and builded parapets and trenches there

Then Abraham refused to sacrifice his Pride and slew his son.

And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

from **What He Thought**
for Fabio Doplicher

We last Americans
were due to leave tomorrow. For our parting evening then
our host chose something in a family restaurant, and there
we sat and chatted, sat and chewed,
till, sensible it was our last

big chance to be poetic, make
our mark, one of us asked
"What's poetry?
Is it the fruits and vegetables
and marketplace of Campo dei Fiori or
the statue there?" Because I was

the glib one, I identified the answer
instantly, I didn't have to think – "The truth
is both, it's both!" I blurted out. But that
was easy. That was easiest to say. What followed
taught me something about difficulty,
for our underestimated host spoke out
all of a sudden, with a rising passion, and he said:

The statue represents Giordano Bruno,
brought to be burned in the public square
because of his offence against
authority, which is to say
the Church. His crime was his belief
the universe does not revolve around
the human being: God is no
fixed point or central government but rather is
poured in waves, through all things. All things
move. "If God is not the soul itself, He is
the soul of the soul of the world." Such was
his heresy. The day they brought him
forth to die, they feared he might
incite the crowd (the man was famous
for his eloquence). And so his captors
placed upon his face
an iron mask, in which

he could not speak. That's
how they burned him. That is how
he died: without a word,
in front of everyone.

(ctd)

What He Thought

This poem describes an exchange between American and Italian poets in Rome. One of the Italian poets, Fabio Doplicher (1938-2003), was in charge of administrative matters, arranging accommodation and meals for the visitors. On the last evening of the exchange, he took the three remaining American poets to a restaurant on the *Campo dei Fiori* (Field of Flowers), a square which hosts a busy market for fruit and vegetables in the daytime. Until then everyone had considered their host in the gray suit the “most politic and least poetic” of the Italians. However, in one of his poems, Doplicher had written

se preparati non siete a morire non tentate il canto
(if you are not prepared to die, you should not try to sing)



At dinner the conversation turned to the nature of poetry, and whether it is more closely related to the market or to the statue in the center of the square. After some glib and easy answers, Doplicher told the story of the difficult story of Giordano Bruno (1548-1600).

Born near Naples, Bruno entered the Dominican order, but was accused of heresy and forced to flee. He taught philosophy at various cities in Europe, supporting the Copernican view of the universe but having a more mystical view of physics than other scientists of his era.

God is no
fixed point or central government but rather is
poured in waves, through all things

Bruno was arraigned before the Roman Inquisition, found guilty of heresy and burned at the stake in the *Campo dei Fiori*. The statue by Ettore Ferrari was erected in 1889 despite opposition by the Vatican.

The true subject of the poem, however, is not the tragic story of Bruno. Rather it is the nature of poetry. Doplicher claims that poetry is truth. It is what Bruno wanted to say even though he could not. The truth has its own particular beauty, and poetry can serve to reveal this. These ideas have much in common with Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (p 106) which proposes that "beauty is truth, truth beauty." They are a far cry from Auden's *In Memory of W.B Yeats* (p 132) which claims that "poetry makes nothing happen" though Auden does point out that poetry is a way of bearing witness to what happens. Perhaps poetry is somewhere between the romantic idea that it tells the truth and the skeptical idea that it is without effect. Marianne Moore finds in poetry "a place for the genuine" (p 16).

Riprap

While studying at Reed College in Portland, Snyder worked several summers creating and maintaining trails in the mountains. Riprap is the way that stones are laid down to make the trail.

Trails in the mountains are different from those on the flat, in having three rather than two spatial dimensions. You have to fit the stones vertically as well as horizontally

Snyder likens the technique to that of writing poetry where the words must be laid down together to give the meaning. Like the granite rocks used to make the trail, the words are themselves melded together



Ingrained
with torment of fire and weight
Crystal and sediment linked hot

The game of Go is a Japanese game wherein one places stones on a board at the intersections of a 19x19 grid. The intent is to surround and capture the stones of one's opponent. A three-dimensional version of the game would be close to impossible. Snyder adds time as his fourth dimension.

Snyder spent much time in Japan learning the art of Zen Meditation. In the book that took its title from this poem, he also included translations of poems by Han Shan, a Chinese mountain madman of the 8th Century CE. The first begins

The path to Han Shan's place is laughable
A path, but no sign of cart or horse.

and ends

And now I've lost the shortcut home,
Body asking shadow, how do you keep up.

The Weary Blues

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
I heard a Negro play.
Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light
He did a lazy sway. . . .
He did a lazy sway. . . .
To the tune o' those Weary Blues.
With his ebony hands on each ivory key
He made that poor piano moan with melody.
O Blues!
Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.
Sweet Blues!
Coming from a black man's soul.
O Blues!
In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—
“Ain't got nobody in all this world,
Ain't got nobody but ma self.
I's gwine to quit ma frownin'
And put ma troubles on the shelf.”

Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
He played a few chords then he sang some more—
“I got the Weary Blues
And I can't be satisfied.
Got the Weary Blues
And can't be satisfied—
I ain't happy no mo'
And I wish that I had died.”
And far into the night he crooned that tune.
The stars went out and so did the moon.
The singer stopped playing and went to bed
While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.
He slept like a rock or a man that's dead.

Langston Hughes, 1925

The Weary Blues

Hughes began this poem in 1922 after listening to a piano-player at a club in Harlem. Lenox

Avenue (now also named Malcom X Boulevard) is the primary North-South road through Harlem. He was unsatisfied with the poem's form, and kept revising it. In 1925, while

working as a bus boy at the Wardman Park Hotel in Washington, Hughes gave this and two other poems to the poet Vachel Lindsay, who was dining in the hotel. Lindsay, very much an oral poet, was impressed by the sound of the poems, and proclaimed Hughes to the press as the Negro "bus-boy poet." Photographers came to take his picture, and within a year he was able to publish his first book of poems, also entitled *The Weary Blues*, with a striking dust jacket designed by Miguel Covarrubias.



The blues originated during the late 19th Century from African-American work songs in the Southern United States. The "blue devils" was a term used to represent depression. The basic structure of a blues lyric involves the repetition of a two-part statement and then a second statement that rhymes with the first and either intensifies or subverts the feeling: ABABcb. The following are *The Weary Blues*, as remembered by Hughes, and *The St Louis Blues* (Handy, 1914):

I got the Weary Blues	I hate to see
And I can't be satisfied.	De ev'nin sun go down
Got the Weary Blues	I hate to see
And can't be satisfied—	De ev'nin sun go down
I ain't happy no mo'	Cause my baby
And I wish that I had died.	He done lef dis town

The music involves simple chord progressions with some chords having flattened notes ("blue notes"). Some variants of the blues also use syncopation (a stress off the beat). Performers often interject musical or verbal commentary between the lines, and the audience can interject calls of their own – "O Blues!"

Hughes recreates the sound patterns of the blues. The longer lines are in two parts much like the statements in the classical blues lyrics:

In a deep song voice
with a melancholy tone
I heard that Negro sing,
that old piano moan—

The popularity of the blues stems from its ability to release emotions and thereby to provide relief from sadness – *catharsis* (Greek, purification). This process works for both the performer and the listener

Ode on a Grecian Urn

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the 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;
And, 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 town by river 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 art desolate, can e'er return.

(ctd)

Ode on a Grecian Urn

The British Museum was opened to the public in 1759. In 1805, it obtained the Townley Vase, a large sculpted-marble Roman vase from the 2nd Century CE, and in 1816 the Elgin Marbles, sculpted for the Parthenon under the direction of Phidias in the 5th Century BCE.

No one has identified any particular Grecian Urn as the one that Keats apostrophizes in his ode. Most interpreters have suggested that it is imaginary, but loosely based on scenes shown in the Townley Vase and the Elgin Marbles:



The illustrations above seem to represent the two scenes described in the poem, one a bacchanalia taking place in either the Vale of Tempe in Thessaly, the haunt of Apollo (God of Art) or in the Dales of Arcady in the central Peloponnese, home to Pan (God of Nature):

Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal

and the other a sacrificial procession

To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies

Keats contrasts the transience of human life to the permanence of art. His own life was so marked by death and loss that it was perhaps only natural to grasp at art as something that would last. As he proposed at the beginning of *Endymion* (1818):

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.

He sees this contrast between art and reality according to the theory of ideas or forms proposed by Plato. The idea (*eidōs*) of something is separate from its physical appearances (*phainōmena*). Any specific tree is just a manifestation of the idea of a tree. The ideal tree is timeless and beautiful; its manifestation is transient and imperfect. Keats believes that art is a way to approach the ideal. This differs from Plato who thought that artistic representations are even more imperfect than that which they claim to portray.

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt 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.

John Keats, 1819

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
Is my destroyer.

And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.

The force that drives the water through the rocks
Drives my red blood; that dries the mouthing streams
Turns mine to wax.

And I am dumb to mouth unto my veins
How at the mountain spring the same mouth sucks.

The hand that whirls the water in the pool
Stirs the quicksand; that ropes the blowing wind
Hauls my shroud sail.

And I am dumb to tell the hanging man
How of my clay is made the hangman's lime.

The lips of time leech to the fountain head;
Love drips and gathers, but the fallen blood
Shall calm her sores.

And I am dumb to tell a weather's wind
How time has ticked a heaven round the stars.

And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb
How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm.

Dylan Thomas, 1934

The poem is in five ten-line stanzas. The initial quatrain is rhymed *abab*, and the rhyme scheme of the following sestet begins *cde* but ends variably (*dce*, *ced*, *cde*) like the manifestations of the ideal. Keats's language is made intensely musical by means of repeating words ("For ever"), and alliteration ("marble men and maidens"). One particularly impressive technique is the assonance in the line

Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd

where "en" and "ear" are both repeated.

The last two lines of the poem have been extensively discussed. The chiasmic apothegm "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" is clearly the message of the urn. The words that follow are a commentary on that message, and it matters not whether these are spoken by the urn or by the poet. All we need to know is that beyond this transient world exists is a world of ideas that are both true and beautiful, that are accessible through the creative imagination, and that last for ever.

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower

The poem deals with the fact that life ends in death. This is a recurrent theme in the Bible:

For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away. (*1 Peter* 1: 23).

and in the poetry of Blake's *The Sick Rose* (p 169) and Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress* (p 32). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud proposed that we are each driven by two contrary forces – *Eros* (desire, sexuality, creativity and procreation) and *Thanatos* (death).

The poem is striking in its syntactical repetition, which gives the poem the rhythm of an incantation. Each of the main verses states the contradictory theme in the first three lines. The shortened third line provides a pause to let the contradiction sink in. In the last two lines the poet is unable to explain why this is so

And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose

My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.

The rhymes of the poem are imperfect. The first two verses rhyme the last consonants according to an *ababa* scheme, but this becomes variable in the later verses (the third verse is irregular and the fourth is *aabab*). The poem makes much use of alliteration: "force/fuse/flower," "mouth/mountain"

The imagery of the poem is intense. "Quicksand" can be the mixture of soil and water that cannot support any weight or it can refer to the sands of time that flow quickly through the hourglass. The "shroud sail" combines the sail that keeps the boat moving and the shroud that clothes the corpse. The "hangman's lime" is the quicklime that was used to dispose of the corpses of the executed criminals.

Quicklime, or calcium oxide, is made by heating calcium carbonate (in limestone, sea shells, bones) in a lime kiln. It is an essential ingredient in mortar and cement. Thomas is saying that his own clay – the bones that survive his death – can be used to get rid of other bodies. The image of time that has "ticked a heaven round the stars" likens the night sky to a clock face.

from **The Tempest Act IV: Scene 1**

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.

William Shakespeare, 1611

He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

William Butler Yeats, 1899

Our revels now are over

During a masque of spirits summoned by Prospero and Ariel for the entertainment of Miranda and Ferdinand, Prospero is informed that Caliban and two drunken reprobates are on their way to murder him. He dismisses the spirits and comforts the young couple with this uncomfortable speech.

The syntax of his speech is as undefined as in a dream. The actors are indeed “melted into air,” but then what exactly shall dissolve? Prospero is claiming that the real world –of towers and palaces - is just as insubstantial as the pageant (“this vision”) that they have just witnessed. All things must pass: all that we have built, even the world we live in: “We are such stuff as dreams are made on.”

The words play with different meanings. The globe is both the planet Earth and the Globe Theatre in which the play was presented. The word “rack” can mean a frame (such as would hold the scenery of the masque), a mist (the most insubstantial of real things) or a wreck (things disappear without leaving any evidence that once they were). “Rounded” can mean surrounded (our life is but a brief period of wakefulness in an eternal sleep) or “smoothed” (death removes the roughness of our suffering).

Images of sleep and dreaming occur throughout the play. Caliban describes the beautiful music he hears when he is spellbound, and when he wakes he cries to dream again. The image of sleep is undefined. Is our life a period of wakefulness between sleeps, or is it just a dream between periods of deeper sleep?

The Tempest is much concerned with the relation between reality and art. At the end of the play Prospero requests the audience to set him free – a fictional person asks for liberty. What we dream or imagine can be as important as what is real.

He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven

This is one of a sequence of poems about the Poet, following *The Poet Pleads with the Elemental Powers* and *He Wishes his Beloved Were Dead*. Written for Yeats’s muse Maud Gonne (see p. 39), it describes how a lover sacrifices his dreams to his beloved.

The poem is written in a simple eight-line stanza with an *ababcdcd* rhyme-scheme. It could form the beginning of a sonnet, the ending of which would depend on the response of the beloved. What is striking is that the poem uses identical rhymes, which are highly unusual in English rhymed verse (for another example see p. 12). This gives it an appealing sincerity: the poet’s profession of love is simple and heartfelt; it is not a complicated game.

The poem’s main conceit recalls the story of Sir Walter Raleigh who supposedly spread his expensive cloak over a puddle so that Queen Elizabeth would not get her feet wet. However, this poem was written for another queen. Yeats and Lady Gregory produced the play *Cathleen hi Houlihan* at the Abbey Theatre in 1902 with Maud Gonne playing Cathleen. Cathleen, the personification of Ireland, appears as an old woman to ask a young man to sacrifice his life for the cause of Irish freedom. He becomes a martyr, and Cathleen becomes a young and beautiful queen. The queen of Yeats’s poem was Maud Gonne

Variations on the Word *Sleep*

I would like to watch you sleeping,
which may not happen.
I would like to watch you,
sleeping. I would like to sleep
with you, to enter
your sleep as its smooth dark wave
slides over my head

and walk with you through the lucent
wavering forest of bluegreen leaves
with its watery sun & three moons
towards the cave where you must descend,
towards your worst fear

I would like to give you the silver
branch, the small white flower, the one
word that will protect you
from the grief at the center
of your dream, from the grief
at the center. I would like to follow
you up the long stairway
again & become
the boat that would row you back
carefully, a flame
in two cupped hands
to where your body lies
beside me, and you enter
it as easily as breathing in

I would like to be the air
that inhabits you for a moment
only. I would like to be that unnoticed
& that necessary.

Margaret Atwood, 1981

Variations on the Word *Sleep*

This poem follows the form of a set of musical variations. The theme is initially presented: "I would like to watch you sleeping." It is then repeated and extended:

to enter your sleep
your sleep as its smooth dark wave
slides over my head

The poet is asking to enter into the dreams of her loved one, and to accompany him in that unconscious of subconscious world even to the dark cave of his "worst fear."

She would like to give him some talisman to protect him. The silver branch recalls the "golden bough" that the Sybil of Cumae told Aeneas to take with him as an offering to Proserpina (Persephone), when he descended into the underworld at Avernus. This is described in Book VI of Vergil's *Aeneid* (translated by Seamus Heaney):

Hid in the thick of a tree is a golden bough
Gold to the tips of it leaves and the base of its stem,
Sacred (tradition declares) to the queen of that place.
.... No one is ever allowed
Down to earth's hidden places unless he has first
Plucked this sprout of fledged gold from its tree
And handed it over to fair Proserpina.

James G. Frazier's comparative study of religion and mythology, *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915) derived its title from this passage in the *Aeneid*.

In the ancient legends we descended into the underworld to consult with the Gods and converse with the dead. Now we descend into the subconscious to understand the emotions and fears that drive our behavior. In the early 20th Century, Sigmund Freud and Karl Jung proposed that the study of dreams can help us to understand why we behave the way we do.

The poet offers to become the boat that rows her lover back from the world of his dreams. She uses an image of a flame protected by her two cupped hands to denote the soul that needs to leave the world of dreams and enter once again into its body. Fire has long been used to represent the special essence that makes a human being. Fire was stolen from the Gods by Prometheus (p 178), and given to man. The image of the soul as a tiny flickering flame highlights its transience and its fragility.

The soul then enters the body as the air that is breathed in, recalling the Judeo-Christian description of the creation of Adam:

And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul (*Genesis 2:7*)

Atwood's poem ends with one of the most beautiful expressions of love: the desire to be as unnoticed but as necessary as the air that is breathed.

Upon The Nipples of Julia's Breast

Have ye beheld (with much delight)
A red rose peeping through a white?
Or else a cherry (double graced)
Within a lily? Centre placed?
Or ever marked the pretty beam
A strawberry shows half drowned in cream?
Or seen rich rubies blushing through
A pure smooth pearl, and orient too?
So like to this, nay all the rest,
Is each neat niplet of her breast.

Robert Herrick, 1648

Differences of Opinion

He tells her that the earth is flat —
He knows the facts, and that is that.
In altercations fierce and long
She tries her best to prove him wrong.
But he has learned to argue well.
He calls her arguments unsound
And often asks her not to yell.
She cannot win. He stands his ground.
The planet goes on being round.

Wendy Cope, 2001

Résumé

Razors pain you;
Rivers are damp;
Acids stain you;
And drugs cause cramp.
Guns aren't lawful;
Nooses give;
Gas smells awful;
You might as well live.

Dorothy Parker, 1926

Upon The Nipples of Julia's Breast

Herrick tries to find the most appropriate metaphor for the beautiful bosom of his mistress Julia (see also p 10). “A red rose peeping through a white” may conjure thoughts of peace. The Wars of the Roses were a prolonged series of civil wars fought between the House of York (whose emblem was a white rose) and the house of Lancaster (whose emblem was a red rose). The resolution came when Henry VII established the Tudor family (House of Lancaster) upon the throne of England and married Margaret of York, taking as his emblem a white rose in the center of a red. Cherries and lilies are symbols of purity and are often associated with the Virgin Mary. Strawberries and cream remain to this day the food of erotic desire. Rubies set in pearls were only available to the obscenely rich, but a poor lover can easily find their equivalent in the charms of his beloved.

Differences of Opinion

An argument in logic is a series of propositions (premises) organized to support another proposition (conclusion). If one accepts the truth of the premises, the conclusion necessarily follows. An argument in real life is an angry dispute about the truth of a statement. Such an argument pays little attention to logic and is often settled by who shouts the loudest. In arguments between married couples the winner is therefore more often than not the male. And more often than not he is wrong. In the best of all possible worlds, disputes should be settled by recourse to the facts, but unfortunately beliefs about the facts are usually the source of the argument in the first place.

Cope begins her poem using rhyming couplets and then alternates the rhymes until finally one of the rhymes is chosen for the conclusion: *aabbcdcd d*. The rhyme scheme thus suggests the to-and-fro course of the argument. And the isolated last line indicates that some things are indeed true, no matter what is claimed.

Résumé

Dorothy Parker was one of the founding members of the Algonquin Round Table that met for lunch at the Algonquin Hotel on West 44th St in New York from 1919 to 1929. This group of writers exchanged witticisms as they deplored the state of the world and its people. Parker lived in a room in the hotel. She said that all she needed was “a place to lay my hat and a few friends.”

Parker was married twice and remarried once. She had numerous affairs and an illegal abortion (“It serves me right for putting all my eggs in one bastard”). Beneath her acid wit and devil-may-care attitude lay an abiding depression. She answered each doorbell with “What fresh hell can this be?”

A résumé is a summary. The word only came to be used to denote a summary of one’s experience – a curriculum vitae – in the 1930s. However, since Parker did attempt suicide several times in her life, both connotations of the word apply to this brief poem, written just after an unsuccessful attempt to kill herself with barbiturates.

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 Chokan:
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.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours
Forever and forever and forever.
Why should I climb the lookout?

At sixteen you departed,
You went into far Ku-to-en, by the river of swirling eddies,
And you have been gone five months.
The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went out.
By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,
Too deep to clear them away!
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
Over the grass in the West garden –
They hurt me. I grow older.
If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,
Please let me know beforehand,
And I will come out to meet you
As far as Cho-fo-Sa.

Li Bai (Li Po, 8th Century CE)
translated by Ezra Pound (1915)

The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter

This poem is from *Cathay* (1915) Pound's book of translations from classical Chinese poets. His translations were based on the notes of Ernest Fenollosa, who had studied Chinese poetry in Japan. Although neither Pound nor Fenollosa could speak Chinese, Pound seems to have been able to catch the meaning of the poems, despite occasional mistranslations (Yip, 1969).

In this poem a young wife recalls how she first met and married her husband. The couple lived in Chang'an, a suburb of Nanjing ("southern capital") which is situated on the delta of the Yangtze River, the largest river in Asia. This region was one of the most prosperous in China because of the arable land and the trade with the interior provided by the river.

The letter-writer remembers the innocence of their childhood. Pound is uncertain how to translate the "bamboo stilts" – the original refers to a toy much like the Western hobby horse. Yet he does vividly portray the essence of their friendship when they were "two small people, without dislike or suspicion."

She then recalls her reticence when she was fourteen and they were married. However, one year later she fell in love with her husband and desired her dust to be mingled with his. This does not translate well into English, where dust is associated with death. In Buddhism, *hong chen* (red dust) means the world of mortals. So a better translation might be "to spend one's life together."

In this section of the poem Pound omits a phrase in the original that alludes to the story of Wei Sheng, a young man who promised to meet his love under a bridge in Chang'an. The girl did not appear but the young man persisted in his vigil while the river rose and, ultimately, he drowned. Pound's repetition of "forever" catches the gist but not the detail.

When his wife was sixteen the husband journeyed up the river reaching the Qutang Gorge, the furthest of the Three Gorges. Now, he has been gone five months and has not yet written. The young woman is desolate. In Chinese culture the sound of a monkey conveys sorrow and despair. Another poem by Li Bai – *Tale of Sorrowful Song* was used in a German adaptation by Mahler at the beginning of *Das Lied von Der Erde* (1909). In a close translation it ends

Everyone lives and dies only once
Lonely ape sits, howls the moon over the grave
Must empty this cup of wine in one gulp.

The young wife insists that she will come to meet her husband if he decides to come back through the Yangtze Gorges ("the narrows of the river Kiang"). However, she is still young and naive. There is no way that she can travel alone to Chang-feng Sha which is several hundred miles upriver from Chang'an. Is she too innocent to be aware that he might not be coming back?

And what of the merchant? Late in his life Li Bai was exiled to the West (cf p 60) where he greatly missed his friends and family. Was the merchant similarly lonely? Or was he now remarried? Li Bai was actually married four times. Conventions were different in those days. The emotions were the same.

Low Tide on Grand Pré

The sun goes down, and over all
These barren reaches by the tide
Such unelusive glories fall,
I almost dream they yet will bide
Until the coming of the tide.

And yet I know that not for us,
By any ecstasy of dream,
He lingers to keep luminous
A little while the grievous stream,
Which frets, uncomforted of dream –

A grievous stream, that to and fro
Athrough the fields of Acadie
Goes wandering, as if to know
Why one beloved face should be
So long from home and Acadie.

Was it a year or lives ago
We took the grasses in our hands,
And caught the summer flying low
Over the waving meadow lands,
And held it there between our hands?

The while the river at our feet –
A drowsy inland meadow stream –
At set of sun the after-heat
Made running gold, and in the gleam
We freed our birch upon the stream.

There down along the elms at dusk
We lifted dripping blade to drift,
Through twilight scented fine like musk,
Where night and gloom awhile uplift,
Nor sunder soul and soul adrift.

And that we took into our hands
Spirit of life or subtler thing –
Breathed on us there, and loosed the bands
Of death, and taught us, whispering,
The secret of some wonder-thing.

(ctd)

Low Tide on Grand Pré

The poetry of Bliss Carman melded ideas from European Romanticism (Wordsworth, Goethe) and American Transcendentalism (Emerson, Thoreau). Both movements looked to nature as a source of comfort and inspiration.

The *Grand Pré* (“large meadow”) region of Nova Scotia is located on the Bay of Fundy on the Western coast of Nova Scotia. In the late 17th century, French immigrants settled in this area, calling their colony *Acadie* after the Greek province of *Arcadia*, considered in ancient times as an idyllic place.

During the French and Indian War (1754-63), the British expelled the Acadians, forcibly deporting them to France or the Thirteen Colonies. Many escaped and went to Louisiana, becoming Cajuns. Longfellow’s 1847 epic poem *Evangeline* tells of this “Great Upheaval.” The poem recounts the story of a young Acadian woman who was separated from her fiancé by the expulsion. At the beginning Longfellow describes the setting in dactylic (/ - -) hexameter:

In the Acadian land, on the shores of the Basin of Minas,
Distant, secluded, still, the little village of Grand-Pré
Lay in the fruitful valley. Vast meadows stretched to the eastward,
Giving the village its name, and pasture to flocks without number.
Dikes, that the hands of the farmers had raised with labor incessant,
Shut out the turbulent tides; but at stated seasons the flood-gates
Opened, and welcomed the sea to wander at will o’er the meadows.

The photograph below shows the region of Grand Pré. On the left is the church built in 1922 to commemorate the expulsion of the Acadians. In the distance is Cape Blomidon which juts out into the Bay of Fundy. The country is gorgeous at sunset when the light reflects off the tidal flats and the streams as “running gold.”



Carman’s poem is similar in many ways to Wordsworth’s 1798 poem *Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey* (p 86). In both poems the author speaks to someone who is not there but who shared an earlier experience of the place. Wordsworth was speaking to his sister; no one is sure to whom Carman was speaking, but the words suggest that it was perhaps someone he once loved. Both poems remark on the inevitable flow of time and the intimations of mortality. Both find comfort in the experience of natural beauty which can sometimes make time appear to stop:

Then all your face grew light, and seemed
To hold the shadow of the sun;
The evening faltered, and I deemed
That time was ripe, and years had done
Their wheeling underneath the sun.

So all desire and all regret,
And fear and memory, were naught;
One to remember or forget
The keen delight our hands had caught;
Morrow and yesterday were naught.

The night has fallen, and the tide . . .
Now and again comes drifting home,
Across these aching barrens wide,
A sigh like driven wind or foam:
In grief the flood is bursting home.

Bliss Carman, 1887

Not Waving but Drowning

Nobody heard him, the dead man,
But still he lay moaning:
I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning.

Poor chap, he always loved larking
And now he's dead
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,
They said.

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning.

Stevie Smith, 1957

So all desire and all regret,
And fear and memory, were naught;
The keen delight our hands had caught;
Morrow and yesterday were naught.

Carman's poem, however, has an undercurrent of sorrow. He is not clear about what happened on that beautiful evening "a year or lives ago." To me it seems that, emboldened by the beauty of sunset, he had decided it was time to settle down, and that he had proposed to his loved one:

I deemed
That time was ripe, and years had done
Their wheeling underneath the sun.

I may be overstepping the bounds of interpretation but I further believe his proposal was declined. This explains the dejection of the final verse. The experience of universal love in nature does not always translate to a commitment of romantic love between two people. Carman never married, although he had a long and intimate relationship with a married woman, Mary Perry King, whom he met in 1896.

The poem is written in iambic tetrameter. The five-line stanzas follow a rhyme scheme *ababb*. Carman is a master of portraying the sound of nature:

Now and again comes drifting home,
Across these aching barrens wide,
A sigh like driven wind or foam

Not Waving but Drowning

This poem describes a drowned man upon the beach. The poet imagines him moaning that everyone had mistaken his gestures of distress for happy waving. However, he had not been joking. Everyone would prefer to believe that he died from an unexpected heart attack, since this would leave them without blame for not going to his assistance. Smith illustrated the poem with a drawing that seemed to represent not a drowned man but a bedraggled woman like herself.



Smith was depressed throughout her life and much of her poetry was concerned with death. However, although she seemed "half in love with easeful Death" (p 22), she was able to keep suicide at bay. She believed that death had to be deserved. In a 1966 poem entitled *Exeat* (Latin, 3rd person singular present subjunctive – "let him/her leave") she wrote

So I fancy my Muse says, when I wish to die:
Oh no, Oh no, we are not yet friends enough

In the end she died of a brain tumor. In one of her last poems, she called on death:

Come, Death, and carry me away.
Ah me, sweet Death, you are the only god
Who comes as a servant when he is called.

Snake

A snake came to my water-trough
On a hot, hot day, and I in pyjamas for the heat,
To drink there.

In the deep, strange-scented shade of the great dark carob-tree
I came down the steps with my pitcher
And must wait, must stand and wait, for there he was at the trough before me.

He reached down from a fissure in the earth-wall in the gloom
And trailed his yellow-brown slackness soft-bellied down, over the edge of the stone
trough

And rested his throat upon the stone bottom,
And where the water had dripped from the tap, in a small clearness,
He sipped with his straight mouth,
Softly drank through his straight gums, into his slack long body,
Silently.

Someone was before me at my water-trough,
And I, like a second comer, waiting.

He lifted his head from his drinking, as cattle do,
And looked at me vaguely, as drinking cattle do,
And flickered his two-forked tongue from his lips, and mused a moment,
And stooped and drank a little more,
Being earth-brown, earth-golden from the burning bowels of the earth
On the day of Sicilian July, with Etna smoking.

The voice of my education said to me
He must be killed,
For in Sicily the black, black snakes are innocent, the gold are venomous.

And voices in me said, If you were a man
You would take a stick and break him now, and finish him off.

But must I confess how I liked him,
How glad I was he had come like a guest in quiet, to drink at my water-trough
And depart peaceful, pacified, and thankless,
Into the burning bowels of this earth?

Was it cowardice, that I dared not kill him? Was it perversity, that I longed to talk
to him?

Was it humility, to feel so honoured?
I felt so honoured.

And yet those voices:
If you were not afraid, you would kill him! And truly I was afraid,
I was most afraid,

(ctd)

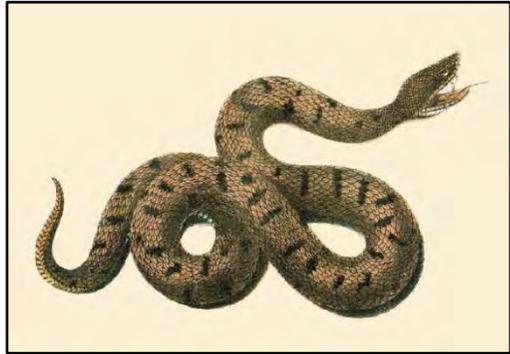
Snake

In 1912, Lawrence began a passionate affair with the wife of his tutor at the University of Nottingham – Frieda Weekley (née von Richthofen). They were married in 1914. Because of his pacifism and her German birth, they were persecuted in England during World War I, and went into voluntary exile when the war ended.

In February, 1920, the couple moved to Taormina in Sicily, overlooking the Bay of Naxos, where colonists from the Greek Island of Naxos had settled in the 8th Century BCE. Nearby was Mount Etna, a volcano that was at the time actively expelling lava from some of its craters. The Lawrences rented the Villa Fontana Vecchia named after an old fountain in its garden:

We have quite a lovely villa on the green slope high above the sea, looking east over the blueness, with the hills and the snowy, shallow crest of Calabria on the left across the sea where the straits begin to close in. The ancient fountain still runs in a sort of little cave-place down the garden. (from *Letters*)

The poem describes Lawrence's encounter with a snake at the water trough by the fountain. The snake was an asp viper (*Vipera aspis*). On the right is an old illustration. The snake is typically about 60 cm (2 feet) long, golden brown with dark markings. Its bite is venomous and often fatal; most scholars believe that this is the species of snake that Cleopatra used to bring about her death.



We have an instinctual fear of snakes. This mainly derives from the fact that many snakes are venomous. Emily Dickinson's poem *A narrow Fellow in the Grass* (1865) concludes with

Several of Nature's People
I know, and they know me
I feel for them a transport
Of Cordiality
But never met this Fellow
Attended or alone
Without a tighter Breathing
And Zero at the Bone.

The fear has been mythologized in the Judeo-Christian story of the Garden of Eden, wherein Eve was convinced by a serpent to eat of the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.

For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. (*Genesis 3: 5*)

But even so, honoured still more
That he should seek my hospitality
From out the dark door of the secret earth.

He drank enough
And lifted his head, dreamily, as one who has drunken,
And flickered his tongue like a forked night on the air, so black,
Seeming to lick his lips,
And looked around like a god, unseeing, into the air,
And slowly turned his head,
And slowly, very slowly, as if thrice adream,
Proceeded to draw his slow length curving round
And climb again the broken bank of my wall-face.

And as he put his head into that dreadful hole,
And as he slowly drew up, snake-easing his shoulders, and entered farther,
A sort of horror, a sort of protest against his withdrawing into that horrid black
hole,

Deliberately going into the blackness, and slowly drawing himself after,
Overcame me now his back was turned.

I looked round, I put down my pitcher,
I picked up a clumsy log
And threw it at the water-trough with a clatter.

I think it did not hit him,
But suddenly that part of him that was left behind convulsed in undignified haste.
Writhed like lightning, and was gone
Into the black hole, the earth-lipped fissure in the wall-front,
At which, in the intense still noon, I stared with fascination.

And immediately I regretted it.
I thought how paltry, how vulgar, what a mean act!
I despised myself and the voices of my accursed human education.

And I thought of the albatross
And I wished he would come back, my snake.

For he seemed to me again like a king,
Like a king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld,
Now due to be crowned again.

And so, I missed my chance with one of the lords
Of life.
And I have something to expiate:
A pettiness.

D. H. Lawrence, 1923

For eating of the forbidden tree, Adam and Eve were exiled from Eden and the serpent was cursed:

And the Lord God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life:

And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel. (*Genesis* 3: 14-15)

The snake plays different roles in other legends and religions. Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent, is a prominent deity in the myths of Mexico and Central America. The Hindu god Shiva is often represented with a snake coiled around his neck. In Greek legends the *caduceus*, a staff entwined with two snakes, was the symbol for Hermes the messenger of the gods, and the rod of Asclepius, a staff entwined with a single snake, was the symbol of medicine, perhaps because an old and sick snake could shed its skin and become young and healthy.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud considered the snake as a phallic symbol and an exaggerated dread of snakes as indicating sexual repression and neurosis.

Lawrence initially feels humbled by this visit of the snake, “honoured still more that he should seek my hospitality.” Yet voices in his mind tell him that he should be frightened and should kill the snake. Though he resists these calls, he ultimately throws a stick at the snake as it is retreating back into the fissure whence it had come. He then feels petty. He has done wrong. He needs to expiate his foolish and disrespectful act. To “expiate” is to atone or make amends for a wrong action. He feels cursed like Coleridge’s sailor in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) who shot the albatross that had led his ship to safety.

Lawrence had missed his chance with “one of the lords of life.” The expression derives from an essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson on *Experience* (1844). The epigraph to the essay is a poem that begins

The lords of life, the lords of life,—
I saw them pass,
In their own guise,
Like and unlike,
Portly and grim,
Use and Surprise,
Surface and Dream,
Succession swift, and spectral Wrong,
Temperament without a tongue,

Later in the essay Emerson states that

Illusion, Temperament, Succession, Surface, Surprise, Reality, Subjectiveness,
—these are threads on the loom of time, these are the lords of life.

How we handle these aspects of experience, how we use them to build ourselves and our lives – this is how we achieve our genius.

from **Burnt Norton**

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind.

T. S. Eliot, 1936

After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –
The stiff Heart questions ‘was it He, that bore,’
And ‘Yesterday, or Centuries before’?

The Feet, mechanical, go round –
A Wooden way
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

This is the Hour of Lead –
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go

Emily Dickinson, 1862

Burnt Norton

This excerpt is the beginning of the first poem of what was to become *Four Quartets*. In these poems Eliot was attempting to interweave different themes in the way that happens in music. The title of the first poem refers to an estate in Gloucestershire that Eliot visited with Emily Hale in 1934. The original manor house had belonged to Sir William Keyt, who took as his mistress his wife's maid, and in 1741 drunkenly set fire to the house and died in the blaze. All that remains are the rose garden and two empty pools that used to contain waterlilies. In the bright sunshine, Eliot but imagined the pools to be as they once were:

And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,
The surface glittered out of heart of light

Eliot realized that in the mind of an omniscient god, and in the human imagination, all time is eternally present, an idea presented in *Ecclesiastes* 3:15:

That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been
The past can be remembered but cannot be changed. We can imagine what might have been and suffer regret. This must be accepted:

What might have been and what has been
Point to one end which is always present

...

the boarhound and the boar
Pursue their pattern as before
But reconciled among the stars.

After great pain, a formal feeling comes

This poem recounts what happens after a great pain. Most interpreters presume that this pain was incurred by the death of someone dear to the poet.

The first stanza is presented in rhyming pentameter couplets, as befits the formality of a funeral. The mourners sit numbly around the coffin, and a preacher tries to assuage the grief by telling of how Christ took upon Him our sins and died so that we may be resurrected after death. His sacrifice occurred centuries ago but the benefit of this came into effect only yesterday when this specific person died. The poet feels completely numb; her heart is stiff and unable to feel.

In the second stanza the lines break up and the only rhyme is at the end. Its first image is of a treadmill (Logan 2017) where the feet move the wheels but go nowhere. The second is of a crystal of quartz, contented not to feel.

The final stanza recounts how a person freezes to death. The extreme heaviness one feels turns first to coldness, and then consciousness decreases. The final phrase is ambivalent: it can mean the death of the mourner or it can denote the decision to allow the person being mourned to depart into their death.

In *Of Death and Dying* (1969) Kübler-Ross described five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. Dickinson's poem is mainly concerned with the last two stages.

Punishment

I can feel the tug
of the halter at the nape
of her neck, the wind
on her naked front.

It blows her nipples
to amber beads,
it shakes the frail rigging
of her ribs.

I can see her drowned
body in the bog,
the weighing stone,
the floating rods and boughs.

Under which at first
she was a barked sapling
that is dug up
oak-bone, brain-firkin:

her shaved head
like a stubble of black corn,
her blindfold a soiled bandage,
her noose a ring

to store
the memories of love.
Little adulteress,
before they punished you

you were flaxen-haired,
undernourished, and your
tar-black face was beautiful.
My poor scapegoat,

I almost love you
but would have cast, I know,
the stones of silence.
I am the artful voyeur

(ctd)

Punishment

In the mid-1960s, violence between the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland increased. British troops were sent in to keep the peace, and the country descended into the 30 years of conflict known as “The Troubles.” Heaney’s cousin Colum McCartney was murdered by loyalist paramilitaries in 1975. Heaney wrote an elegy, *The Strand at Lough Beg*, wherein he imagined washing the body, much as Virgil had washed Dante when he exited from Hell:

Then kneel in front of you in brimming grass
And gather up cold handfuls of the dew
To wash you, cousin. I dab you clean with moss
Fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud.
I lift you under the arms and lay you flat.
With rushes that shoot green again, I plait
Green scapulars to wear over your shroud.

It is difficult to write poetry about murder. In section VIII of *Station Island* (1984) Heaney imagined Colum claiming that he had “whitewashed ugliness” and “saccharined my death with morning dew.”

Heaney found a way to consider the conflict by trying to understand those who died senseless deaths many centuries ago. In 1969, P. V. Glob summarized what was then known about the bodies that had been preserved in the bogs of Northern Europe: *The Bog People*. At the time of their death about 2000 years ago, the dead were normally buried or cremated. The bodies in the bog appear either to have been sacrificed to the gods, or punished for some crime. In 1972, Heaney imagined going to see the body of *The Tollund Man* in Denmark

Out here in Jutland
In the old man-killing parishes
I will feel lost,
Unhappy and at home.

Punishment is loosely based on the one of the Windeby bodies found in Northern Germany. Glob imagined the body as that of an adulterous girl with her hair shaved off and blindfolded before her execution.



Heaney considered her death as similar to the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, when Irish girls had their heads shaved or were cauled in tar for going out with British soldiers.

of your brains exposed
and darkened combs,
your muscles' webbing
and all your numbered bones:

I who have stood dumb
when your betraying sisters,
cauled in tar,
wept by the railings,

who would connive
in civilized outrage
yet understand the exact
and tribal, intimate revenge.

Seamus Heaney, 1975

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not. Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

William Wordsworth, 1807

Heaney's view of the girl and her story represents his attempt to come to grips with the emotions underlying *The Troubles*. He is moved by her beauty – he imagines her awaiting her execution, naked as the wind “blows her nipples to amber beads.” He takes pity on her frailty as the wind “shakes the frail rigging of her ribs.” And yet he also feels the outrage of those whom she has wronged and realizes that he would likely be among the first to cast a stone. The reference is to the episode of the woman taken in adultery in *John* 8: 1-11, wherein Jesus says

He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.

Heaney is the “artful voyeur” – the observer who somehow must try to put into poetry the emotions that swirled around the long-ago execution. And by extension run beneath the tribal violence of *The Troubles*.

The poem is in eleven quatrains with no formal rhyme or rhythm. The poem's imagery is striking. The “brain-firkin” is the skull, a firkin being a small cask. Her shaved head is like a “stubble of black corn” and the exposed brain like the “combs” of the honeycomb. The “numbered bones” allude to *Psalms* 21:18 in the Catholic Bible:

They have numbered all my bones. And they have looked and stared upon me.

The museum had likely also numbered the bones.

Recent studies have suggested that the Windeby girl was actually a young man, and that the blindfold was likely a headband that had later slipped over the eyes. Our distance from the past increases. The violence stays the same.

The world is too much with us

By the time that this poem was written, the Industrial Revolution was in full flight. Mines and factories were replacing farms. People were changing: “getting and spending” were replacing prayer and charity. Wordsworth uses the term “world” to mean the commercial world as opposed to the natural world. Wordsworth's feelings about the new industrial world were similar to those of William Blake (p 153).

At the end of the sonnet's octave, Wordsworth acknowledges that there is still hope: “we are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers” and may yet awaken. Yet we are presently “out of tune” – the old harmony between man and nature is no more, and we have ceased to care.

The sestet presents a possible solution. He is ambivalent about returning to paganism since that is indeed “a creed outworn.” The most important thing is the exercise of the imagination so that we may see into the magic of nature, like the ancients who created myths to understand the workings of the universe rather than the science to control it.

In Greek mythology, Proteus and Triton are the sons of the sea god Poseidon (Neptune). Proteus embodied the ever-changing nature of the sea (whence comes the word “protean” meaning “changeable” or “versatile”). Triton, the messenger and ambassador of Poseidon, was usually portrayed as a merman blowing upon a conch shell (cf p 36). Wordsworth wishes for change (Proteus) and wants the natural world to speak to us once again (Triton).

Ithaka

As you set out for Ithaka
hope your road is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
angry Poseidon—don't be afraid of them:
you'll never find things like that on your way
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
as long as a rare excitement
stirs your spirit and your body.
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
wild Poseidon—you won't encounter them
unless you bring them along inside your soul,
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.

Hope your road is a long one.
May there be many summer mornings when,
with what pleasure, what joy,
you enter harbors you're seeing for the first time;
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations
to buy fine things,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
sensual perfume of every kind—
as many sensual perfumes as you can;
and may you visit many Egyptian cities
to learn and go on learning from their scholars.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you're destined for.
But don't hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you're old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.
Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.
Without her you wouldn't have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you'll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.

Constantine P. Cavafy, 1911
(translated Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, 1975)

Ithaka

Ithaka was the legendary kingdom of Odysseus (Ulysses in Latin), the Greek hero whose long journey home from the Trojan War was described in Homer's *The Odyssey* (8th Century BCE). No one is sure, but most locate the Homer's Ithaka in the island of Ithaca in the Ionian Sea northwest of the larger island Kefalonia. Among the famous episodes of Odysseus' journey home were his capture by the Cyclops, the loss of most of his men to the giant cannibalistic Laestrygonians, the escape from the enchantress Circe, the calling up of the seer Tiresias from the dead, the voyage through the perils of the Sirens and the whirlpool Charybdis, and his final shipwreck in a storm brewed by Poseidon.

Many works of Western literature have referred to Homer's epic. Dante met Odysseus in Canto 26 of his *Inferno* (1320); Tennyson's poem *Ulysses* (1842) portrayed Odysseus' as he left on a final voyage after his return to Ithaka (p 42); James Joyce based his novel *Ulysses* (1922) on the events of the *Odyssey*; and Ezra Pound's *Cantos* (1915-1962) begins with a retelling of the Tiresias episode. Cavafy was a Greek poet, homosexual, and civil servant, who lived and died in Alexandria. In his book *Pharos and Pharillon* (1923), named after the wondrous lighthouse and its feeble successor, E. M. Forster described him as:

a Greek gentleman in a straw hat, standing absolutely motionless at a slight angle to the universe ... he may be prevailed upon to begin a sentence—an immense complicated yet shapely sentence, full of parentheses that never get mixed and of reservations that really do reserve; a sentence that moves with logic to its foreseen end, yet to an end that is always more vivid and thrilling than one foresaw.

The sentence that Forster describes has much in common with the poem *Ithaka*. In this poem, Cavafy advises us that our journey is every bit as important as our destination, that what we encounter on the journey depends as much on what we bring to the experience as on what actually happens, and that we should not be unhappy if the destination turns out to be poorer than we assumed. Its purpose was to initiate the journey not to reward its completion.

The poem is set in ancient times, as though it were the advice of an early sage. Cavafy mentions "Phoenician trading stations" and the scholars studying in "Egyptian cities." The Phoenicians were a mercantile nation that established colonies throughout the Mediterranean, with important centers at Tyre in Lebanon and Carthage in North Africa. They were at their most powerful from 1500 to 300 BCE. Egypt was a center of learning throughout ancient times. The library of Alexandria was founded in the 3rd Century BCE as a repository for all of human knowledge, a place to learn the wisdom.

Cavafy never journeyed away from his birthplace in Alexandria, where he lived as a Greek expatriate. The city was sufficient for him. In 1968, George Seferis, another expatriate Greek poet, interpreted *Ithaka* as a summary of Cavafy's development as a poet – "the long wandering towards a poetic expression faithful to himself and to his world." To excite himself to write, and to convey ideas both sensual and learned, he accepted Alexandria as his Ithaka.

Durer: Innsbruck, 1495

I had often, cowed in the slumbrous heavy air,
Closed my inanimate lids to find it real,
As I knew it would be, the colourful spires
And painted roofs, the high snows glimpsed at the back,
All reversed in the quiet reflecting waters –
Not knowing then that Durer perceived it too.
Now I find that once more I have shrunk
To an interloper, robber of dead men's dream,
I had read in books that art is not easy
But no one warned that the mind repeats
In its ignorance the vision of others. I am still
The black swan of trespass on alien waters.

Ern Malley, 1943

For Sidney Bechet

That note you hold, narrowing and rising, shakes
Like New Orleans reflected on the water,
And in all ears appropriate falsehood wakes,

Building for some a legendary Quarter
Of balconies, flower-baskets and quadrilles,
Everyone making love and going shares—

Oh, play that thing! Mute glorious Storyvilles
Others may license, grouping around their chairs
Sporting-house girls like circus tigers (priced

Far above rubies) to pretend their fads,
While scholars *manqués* nod around unnoticed
Wrapped up in personnels like old plaids.

On me your voice falls as they say love should,
Like an enormous yes. My Crescent City
Is where your speech alone is understood,

And greeted as the natural noise of good,
Scattering long-haired grief and scored pity.

Philip Larkin, 1954

Durer: Innsbruck, 1495

This poem was the first of several submitted by James McAuley and Harold Stewart to Max Harris, the editor of the Australian modernist magazine *Angry Penguins*, claiming that they were written by the recently deceased Ern Malley. In fact, the poems were a hoax designed to show that current trends in modernist poetry produced nothing more than gibberish. The poems were published.

The first poem was, however, a poem previously written by McAuley and only slightly revised. One assumes that it was the hook designed to catch the editor's attention. The poem's title comes from a watercolor of Innsbruck by Albrecht Dürer (shown on the right). The poet claims that he imagined this scene, without knowing that Dürer had already perceived and painted it. He



becomes painfully aware that “the mind repeats in its ignorance the vision of others,” and feels like “the black swan of trespass” in alien (?Australian) waters.

For centuries all swans were believed to be white. In the 17th Century, Australia's black swans were first reported and our ideas of swans had to be completely revised. Nassim Taleb in his 2007 book *The Black Swan* described a “black swan event” as something that could not be expected from previous experience, such as the dissolution of the Soviet Union, or the attacks of September 11, 2001.

For Sidney Bechet

Poets of the 20th Century became enamored of Jazz (see also pp 98, 105). The music was both free and rhythmic, attributes they sought in their poetry.

Sidney Bechet (1897-1959) was born in New Orleans as a “Creole of color.” He played saxophone and clarinet with some of the rising jazz bands, and was one of the earliest jazz musicians to record as a soloist.

New Orleans is located on the great final crescent-like turn of the Mississippi before it reaches the sea. Storyville is an area (quarter) in the *Faubourg Tremé* of New Orleans, that was set aside in 1897 by Alderman Sidney Story as a regulated red-light district to control prostitution. Many believe that jazz had its main origins in the bars and brothels of Storyville. In 1917 prostitution was made illegal in New Orleans and most of the buildings of Storyville were demolished in the 1930s so that block housing could be built. “Priced far above rubies” refers to the description of a virtuous woman in *Proverbs* 31:10. The “enormous yes” likely refers to Molly's monologue at the end of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922).

Larkin's poem is in *terza rima*, the rhyme scheme of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1320). The carryover of the rhymes between the verses – *aba bcb* – may allude to how jazz maintains some modicum of the original tune through its many variations. The use of Dante's format may also highlight the holiness of the music despite its lowly origins.

Otherwise

I got out of bed
on two strong legs.
It might have been
otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did
the work I love.

At noon I lay down
with my mate. It might
have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together
at a table with silver
candlesticks. It might
have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the walls, and
planned another day
just like this day.
But one day, I know,
it will be otherwise.

Jane Kenyon, 1993

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in a crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough

Ezra Pound, 1913

Otherwise

Kenyon wrote this poem while she was terminally ill with leukemia. She was living with her husband Donald Hall in Eagle Pond Farm in Wilmot, New Hampshire (see also p 157). She died in 1995.

The poem considers the idea of what “might have been.” One of the intriguing abilities of the human mind is to consider what is counterfactual. Our language has many different *irrealis* moods to express the subjunctive (possible), conditional, hypothetical, presumptive, imperative, or optative (hoped for) states of mind. During her illness, Kenyon is glad to get out of bed, eat breakfast, take the dog for a walk, etc. She knows that she might have died and that these things could just as easily not have happened.

“Otherwise” also plays an essential role in our understanding of human free will (Van Inwagen, 1983, 2008). Free will means that we are sometimes in the position, with respect to a contemplated future act, that we are able either to perform that act or to do otherwise. The claim that we can choose between these two futures is incompatible with the philosophy of determinism: that the past and the laws of nature together determine, at every moment, a unique future.

“Otherwise” is thus part of our essence. It is a necessary part of our ability to hope for things that might not be; it is the basis of our gratitude for what is rather than what might have been, and it is the key to our being able to choose freely between possible futures.

In a Station of the Metro

On the facing page, I have used the spacing that Pound proposed for the first publication of the poem in the magazine *Poetry*, rather than later more regularized formats.

In an essay on Vorticism (1914) Pound described how this poem came about:

Three years ago in Paris I got out of a “metro” train at La Concorde, and saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child’s face, and then another beautiful woman, and I tried all that day to find words for what this had meant to me, and I could not find any words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion. And that evening, as I went home along the Rue Raynouard, I was still trying and I found, suddenly, the expression. I do not mean that I found words, but there came an equation... not in speech, but in little splotches of colour.

The resultant poem is in the form of a Japanese haiku. It does not follow the 5-7-5 syllable count used in Japanese, but it does present a single meaningful image.

This became one of the classic poems of the Imagist movement (cf. p 27). Pound noted that the image is not symbolic since it has multiple meanings. Furthermore, the image is not an impression since it abstracts from rather than represents the original experience. The image presents what the poet expressed in *Horae Beatae Inscriptio* (1911, “description of an hour of happiness” see also p 77):

How will this beauty when I am far from hence
Sweep back upon me and engulf my mind?

The Mind is an Enchanting Thing

is an enchanted thing
 like the glaze on a
katydid-wing
 subdivided by sun
 till the nettings are legion.
Like Gieseking playing Scarlatti;

like the apteryx-awl
 as a beak, or the
kiwi's rain-shawl
 of haired feathers, the mind
 feeling its way as though blind,
walks along with its eyes on the ground.

It has memory's ear
 that can hear without
having to hear.
 Like the gyroscope's fall,
 truly unequivocal
because trued by regnant certainty,

it is a power of
 strong enchantment. It
is like the dove-
 neck animated by
 sun; it is memory's eye;
it's conscientious inconsistency.

It tears off the veil, tears
 the temptation, the
mist the heart wears,
 from its eyes—if the heart
 has a face; it takes apart
dejection. It's fire in the dove-neck's

iridescence; in the
 inconsistencies
of Scarlatti.
 Unconfusion submits
 its confusion to proof; it's
not a Herod's oath that cannot change.

Marianne Moore, 1943

The Mind is an Enchanting Thing

In this poem Moore tries to understand the workings of the human mind. As the title states, she finds her gift of consciousness and thought completely fascinating (“enchancing”). In the first line of the poem, she realizes that the mind that is enchanting her is “enchanted” by some magical spell that is beyond understanding, but can perhaps be glimpsed through the



poetic processes of simile and metaphor. She first likens the mind to the wing of a katydid, a large grasshopper of the family *Tettigoniidae*. Its onomatopoeic name comes from the sound made by vibrating its forewings. These anterior wings are also often used to camouflage the insect as a leaf. Moore is referring to the posterior wings which are diaphanous and shimmer in the light. She likens this to the playing of Scarlatti by Walter Giesecking, a French-German pianist who toured the US to great acclaim in the 1920s and 1930s. The words used to describe his playing were “limpid” and “enthraling.” So we come to the idea that mind is played out on the brain as music on the piano. Enchantment has its etymology in *cantare*, to sing.

In the second verse, Moore considers the uniqueness of the mind. The *Apteryx* (kiwi) is a bird unlike any other bird. Its wings are rudimentary and it cannot fly; its feathers are fluffy and waterproof – more like fur than normal feathers; its beak is elongated like an awl for poking into the ground; it is almost blind and it seeks out food by smell rather than by sight.



A striking aspect of memory is that we “can hear without having to hear.” We can remember what we heard and imagine what we might hear. Part of the memory is the sense of being a person – our “regnant certainty” – that like a gyroscope stays stable through our changing life.

Our mind is as difficult to explain as the iridescence on the neck of a dove or pigeon. We know that this occurs as light is refracted and reflected through the microscopic layers of the feathers. Yet we do not know why. Does the refracted light help the doves to communicate or to identify each other? We need to figure this out – “tear off the veil.”

The poem ends with the idea of the mind’s morality. Herod promised his stepdaughter Salome anything she desired if she would dance for him (*Matthew* 14:6-11). She asked for the head of John the Baptist. We should keep our oaths (*Numbers* 30:2), but not when they lead to evil.

Moore uses a strictly defined format to try to capture the magic of the mind. Each of the 6 stanzas has 6 lines. Line lengths are determined by the number of syllables: 6,5,4,6,7, and 9. The fourth and fifth lines rhyme.

The Troubles of a Book

The trouble of a book is first to be
No thoughts to nobody,
Then to lie as long unwritten
As it will lie unread,
Then to build word for word an author
And occupy his head
Until the head declares vacancy
To make full publication
Of running empty.

The trouble of a book is secondly
To keep awake and ready
And listening like an innkeeper,
Wishing, not wishing for a guest,
Torn between hope of no rest
And hope of rest.
Uncertainly the pages doze
And blink open to passing fingers
With landlord smile, then close.

The trouble of a book is thirdly
To speak its sermon, then look the other way,
Arouse commotion in the margin,
Where tongue meets the eye,
But claim no experience of panic,
No complicity in the outcry.
The ordeal of a book is to give no hint
Of ordeal, to be flat and witless
Of the upright sense of print.

The trouble of a book is chiefly
To be nothing but book outwardly;
To wear binding like binding,
Bury itself in book-death,
Yet to feel all but book;
To breath live words, yet with the breath
Of letters; to address liveliness
In reading eyes, be answered with
Letters and bookishness.

Laura Riding, 1938

The Troubles of a Book

From 1925 until 1939 Laura Riding was the muse, mistress and collaborator of Robert Graves (p 4). Each separately wrote their own poetry, and they worked together on various works of criticism, such as *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927, the essential guide to the poetry of the early 20th-Century

This particular poem deals with the 'idea' of a book. Some truth must exist in spiritual form, and then make itself manifest by occupying the head of an author. After finding its way into print, it must finally be received by a reader. Once the idea starts to live in the mind of the reader, the book dies.

In 1941 Riding renounced poetry. In the ensuing years she tried to explain this disavowal of all that she had written. In an unfinished essay *The Failure of Poetry*, finally printed posthumously in 2007, she described the problem as an irreconcilable difference between the "creed" and the "craft" of poetry. By creed she meant that the goal of poetry was to articulate the truth:

This poetic state is conceived to be at a height of removal from the ordinary mixed condition of the human personality at which the emotions become purified, the thinking-energies harmonized, and the whole being transformed into a vibrantly articulate intelligence, is vested in words of an eternal truth-value. ... The odor of poetry suggests an aroma of immortal truth humanly spoken, it excites a feel of the ultimate virtue throbbing in the words.

The craft of poetry – making the words memorable through rhythm, rhyme and imagery – acts against the creed. The sensuality of the sound and the vividness of the images do not make something true; rather they often distort the truth or distract the reader. In the poem *Come, words, away* (1938) she urged

Come, words, away to where
The meaning is not thickened
With the voice's fretting substance

Riding was always fascinated by the precision of words: how each word could express some specific meaning. For example (1980)

If you take two words like 'tame' and 'domesticated', you're forced to think of the divergence in meaning, not the similarity. You say to yourself, in getting it clear, "A dog is a tame wolf, a cat is a domesticated tiger." A cat never really tames, while tameness is the essence of a dog's soul. You tame the wolf into a dog, but the tiger domesticates itself into a cat.

Together with her husband, Schuyler Jackson, Riding spent the rest of her life thinking about the relations between words and their meanings. Initially Riding had conceived of assembling a *Dictionary of Exact Meanings*, but Riding and Jackson finally settled on a more philosophical treatise – *Rational Meaning: A New Foundation for the Definition of Words*. Their premise was that we should adjust our usage so that each word could have a single and precise meaning. This ran counter to the new linguistics, which had determined that meaning followed usage rather than *vice versa*. Their ideas about meaning occupied their heads but never made it into print during their lifetimes. Their unfinished work, edited and published posthumously in 1997, was not widely read.

God Only Knows

God only knows

if Bach's greatest work
was just an improvised
accompaniment
between two verses of a hymn,
one that stopped the burghers
squirming in their pews
and made them not only
listen to the organ in the loft
but actually hear the roof
unbend itself
and leave the church wide
open to a terrifying sky
which he had filled with angels
holding ledgers
for a roll call of the damned,
whom they would have named,
had not the congregation
started up the final chorus
and sung

to save their souls.

Dana Gioia, 1986

A Noiseless Patient Spider

A noiseless patient spider,
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.

Walt Whitman, 1891

God Only Knows

In the context of the poem Bach's "greatest work" is likely the *Toccatà and Fugue in D Minor*. Exactly when and why this was composed is not known. It is perhaps an early work composed soon after Bach visited Buxtehude in Lübeck. Gioia imagines that it was used "between two verses of a hymn." If so, it would certainly have grabbed the attention of the "burghers." The power of the music could easily evoke a vision of the roof being blown away and the sky being "filled with angels." Such a vision would have left the congregation frightened for their souls, and ready to demonstrate their faith by loudly singing the praises of their lord.

Bach's performance of this *Toccatà* is presented with a gentle humor. Gioia is making fun of the sinners in their pews, who have to be shocked into realizing that they may be damned.

The initial and final lines are isolated from the rest of the poem. They relate to two articles of faith in the Christian religion. The first is that God is omnipotent and omniscient. Only God is aware of everything. He knows what we do not know. The second article is that human beings are in dire need of salvation, which can only be attained is by faith in God.

Gioia expresses important thoughts using expressions that are so common as to be almost hackneyed: "wide open," "roll call." Their predictability is subverted by the context: the congregation is squirming in the pews rather than in their seats, and the roll call is that of the damned during the final judgment.

Even the important truths of the first and last lines are almost clichés. "God only knows" is usually an admission of human ignorance. Running away "to save their souls" is an expression of cowardice. The poem is thus like Bach's *Toccatà*, which has been used so often in movies, like *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *Fantasia*, that it can seem commonplace. However, if listened to with innocent ears, the *Toccatà* is a source of awe.

A Noiseless Patient Spider

In this poem Whitman describes the "ballooning" behavior of spiders, wherein they release from their spinnerets several silk threads to catch the wind. The spider may then be carried aloft and move from one location to another. At other times this behavior is the beginning of web construction. A sticky thread is released and carried by air currents across a gap. When the far end sticks to a surface, the spider can sense the change in tension. It then moves across the gap adding further filaments until the original thread is strong enough to support the web. The tensile strength of spider silk is greater than that of steel.

Whitman uses this behavior of spiders as a metaphor for the human condition. We send out tentative threads into "the measureless oceans of space" hoping to find a connection, and then to build a bridge into the unknown.

According to legend, Robert Bruce (1274-1329), King of the Scots, discouraged by defeat, gained new optimism by watching a spider as it finally succeeded in making its web after many failed attempts.

Snow

The room was suddenly rich and the great bay-window was
Spawning snow and pink roses against it
Soundlessly collateral and incompatible:
World is suddener than we fancy it.

World is crazier and more of it than we think,
Incorrigibly plural. I peel and portion
A tangerine and spit the pips and feel
The drunkenness of things being various.

And the fire flames with a bubbling sound for world
Is more spiteful and gay than one supposes—
On the tongue on the eyes on the ears in the palms of one's hands—
There is more than glass between the snow and the huge roses.

Louis MacNeice, 1935

No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,
More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.
Comforter, where, where is your comforting?
Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?
My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief
Woe, world-sorrow; on an age-old anvil wince and sing—
Then lull, then leave off. Fury had shrieked 'No ling-
ering! Let me be fell: force I must be brief.'

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there. Nor does long our small
Durance deal with that steep or deep. Here! creep,
Wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind: all
Life death does end and each day dies with sleep.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, 1885

Snow

In January 1935, MacNeice, an Assistant Professor of Classics at the University of Birmingham spent an evening at the home of his mentor, Professor E. R. Dodds. As they sat by the fire in his study, peeling and eating tangerines, it began to snow. The snow contrasted starkly with a big bowl of roses from the heated greenhouse that Dodds's wife had placed before the study window.

From this experience MacNeice fashioned his paean to the plurality of the world – the “drunkenness of things being various.” Philosophers have long considered the world in different ways: monism in which everything can be reduced to some simple basic element; dualism in which mind is separate from matter; and pluralism in which each thing is its distinct self. The world is experienced as many, but can perhaps be understood as one.

However, MacNeice is having none of this oneness: his experience is “incorrigibly plural.” Each of his senses is providing different experiences. Things are too crazy to be reasoned together. The snow and the roses are not just separated by the window: they are completely distinct. As Hopkins claimed “Glory be to God for dappled things.” (p 93)

No worst, there is none

In 1885 Hopkins became severely depressed. He was frustrated by his inability either to satisfy his priestly duties or to have his poetry accepted by his superiors in the Jesuit Order. During his anguish, he wrote six “terrible sonnets” or “sonnets of desolation,” of which this is the most memorable (see also p 232).

Hopkins attributed his depression to his own sinfulness. In St. Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* (1524), “desolation” is defined as the opposite of consolation:

darkness of soul, turmoil of spirit, inclination to what is low and earthly, restlessness rising from many disturbances and temptations which lead to want of faith, want of hope, want of love. (from *Rules for the Discernment of Spirits*, Puhl translation, 1951)

These poems recall *The Dark Night of the Soul* (1579) of St John of the Cross

This dark night is an inflowing of God into the soul, which purges it from its ignorance and its habitual – natural and spiritual – imperfections. for as this Divine infused contemplation comprises in itself a plenitude of the highest perfections, and since the soul which receives them is not yet wholly purified and thus still engulfed in a sea of miseries, it follows that – because two contraries cannot exist in one subject – the soul must of necessity endure much pain and suffering. (II:I:V, Reinhardt translation, 1957).

In the sonnet Hopkins uses alliteration (“pitched past pitch”) and internal rhymes (“steep, deep, creep”) to render his description more insistent. His words have multiple connotations: pitch alludes to the frequency of a sound, the steepness of a slope, the distance of a throw, the darkness of tar. “Schooled at forepangs” means that grief has learned from previous episodes how to become wilder. Hopkins's anguish gives no respite: “no lingering.” Comfort comes not from God but only from the thought that ultimately death will come and suffering cease.

The Predestined Space

Simplicity assuages
With grace the damaged heart,
So would I in these pages
If will were art.

But the best engineer
Of metre, rhyme and thought
Can only tool each gear
To what he sought

If chance with craft combines
In the predestined space
To lend his damaged lines
Redeeming grace.

J. V. Cunningham, 1942

I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air -
Between the Heaves of Storm –

The Eyes around – had wrung them dry –
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset – when the King
Be witnessed –in the Room –

I willed my Keepsakes – Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable – and then it was
There interposed a Fly –

With Blue – uncertain – stumbling Buzz -
Between the light – and me –
And then the Windows failed – and then
I could not see to see –

Emily Dickinson, 1863

The Predestined Space

Cunningham describes poetic creation in terms of some Christian concepts. The future of the universe is predestined. Individual free will often leads to sin. Redemption from sin cannot be earned but only occurs by the grace of God. In the poem, the rhyme and meter form the predestined space, within which the craftsman-poet works, occasionally achieving something of beauty, but only by the grace of God.

The poem plays with double meanings: “grace” can be beauty or mercy, “simplicity” can describe innocence or plainness.

The meter is more complex than it appears. Although mainly iambic, the rhythm breaks at times into trochee and anapest. “But the best engineer” is rhythmically the least predictable of the lines.

Cunningham was a master of the “lean style,” one of the modes of speech described in ancient studies of rhetoric. Cicero described it as *orationis subtilis*. It has been described as the “plain” style, although this misrepresents its elegant simplicity. Cunningham described himself in the third person:

His native style was dry, abstract, tightly formal. It derived its texture from a chastity of diction and a crispness of technique, and its inner structure from some odd turn and complication of thought ... It got its drive from a white passion for exactitude of statement. (*The Quest of the Opal*, 1950)

I heard a Fly buzz – when I died

The first line of the poem is arresting since it is spoken by someone who is already dead. And the most important thing she has to tell us concerns a fly that she perceived the very moment of her death.

The blow fly lays its eggs in carrion and dung and these hatch to form larvae, commonly called “maggots” – the “worms” that feed on our dead bodies:

For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that
he shall stand at the latter day upon the
earth:

And though after my skin worms destroy
this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God
(*Job* 19: 25-6)



The dying poet willed away all those things that were hers to give. The common belief is that portion of her that was unassignable – the soul – then goes to meet its maker, the king of heaven and of earth. Yet all that the dying poet perceived is a blue and buzzing fly. Then her eyes no longer worked – the Windows failed. She lost consciousness – she neither saw nor understood why she could not see. The terrifying possibility is that there is no maker to be met. Only the fly, the maggots and the body’s slow decomposition.

The Man with Night Sweats

I wake up cold, I who
Prospered through dreams of heat
Wake to their residue,
Sweat, and a clinging sheet.

My flesh was its own shield:
Where it was gashed, it healed.

I grew as I explored
The body I could trust
Even while I adored
The risk that made robust,

A world of wonders in
Each challenge to the skin.

I cannot but be sorry
The given shield was cracked,
My mind reduced to hurry,
My flesh reduced and wrecked.

I have to change the bed,
But catch myself instead

Stopped upright where I am
Hugging my body to me
As if to shield it from
The pains that will go through me,

As if hands were enough
To hold an avalanche off.

Thom Gunn, 1992

The Man with Night Sweats

The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) made its way to North America in 1960. The first reported cases occurred in 1981 in gay men and drug addicts in California and New York, who presented with Kaposi's sarcoma, an unusual skin cancer, and Pneumocystis Pneumonia, a fungal infection. Both diseases occurred because the virus altered the normal immune response, resulting in an Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). Pneumocystis was just one of many different opportunistic infections – infections easily prevented by a normal immune system – that occurred in patients with AIDS. HIV was spread by unprotected sex, contaminated blood transfusions and hypodermic needles. Most of the initial cases were gay men or drug users. The stigma attached to these groups made it difficult to get government support for research and treatment. Half a million people in the USA died of AIDS before effective antiretroviral therapy became available in the later 1990s.

Infections typically cause a fever. The increased temperature may be triggered by material in the infecting organism or by chemicals released by the immune cells responding to the disease. Fever is brought about by shivering (the chills), and increasing the layers of clothing. If the temperature goes too high, sweating attempts to cool it back down. At night this can result in a drenching of the sheets – night sweats.

In 1954 Thom Gunn emigrated to the United States with his lover Mike Kitay, with whom he stayed until his death in 2004. Gunn enthusiastically took up the bohemian gay life of sex and drugs in San Francisco. He adored the risks his body took to experience life and he ultimately died of acute polysubstance abuse. Although many of his colleagues and lovers developed AIDS he did not.

The poem describes a patient with AIDS waking up with night sweats, probably caused by some opportunistic infection occurring as a result of his deficient immune response. His body is no longer a shield against the world. He hugs it in a vain attempt to stave off the inevitable “avalanche” of disease.

The poem alternates quatrains rhyming *abab* with rhyming couplets. Some of the rhymes are slant; like the speaker's immune response they are not as robust as they might be. The quatrains describe what is happening to him; the couplets realize what it means.

The illustration shows a 16th Century sculpture of *Death* by Ligier Richier. The style is *écorché* (flayed): the flesh has decayed and only the bones remain intact. This illustration was used on the cover of Gunn's 1992 book which shared its title with this poem.



Beeny Cliff

(March 1870 – March 1913)

O the opal and the sapphire of that wandering western sea,
And the woman riding high above with bright hair flapping free –
The woman whom I loved so, and who loyally loved me.

The pale mews plained below us, and the waves seemed far away
In a nether sky, engrossed in saying their ceaseless babbling say,
As we laughed light-heartedly aloft on that clear-sunned March day.

A little cloud then cloaked us, and there flew an irised rain,
And the Atlantic dyed its levels with a dull misfeatured stain,
And then the sun burst out again, and purples prinked the main.

Still in all its chasmal beauty bulks old Beeny to the sky,
And shall she and I not go there once again now March is nigh,
And the sweet things said in that March say anew there by and by?

What if still in chasmal beauty looms that wild weird western shore,
The woman now is – elsewhere – whom the ambling pony bore,
And nor knows nor cares for Beeny, and will laugh there nevermore.

Thomas Hardy, 1913

from **Macbeth Act V: Scene 5**

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

William Shakespeare 1606

Beeny Cliff

Beeny Cliff faces westward over the Celtic Sea just north of Boscastle, Cornwall. In 1870 Hardy first met Emma Gifford, whom he married in 1874. Emma was the model for Elfride Swancourt in Hardy's 1873 novel *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, which contains an episode on Beeny Cliff. Stephen Smith, one of Elfride's suitors, chases



his wind-blown hat, slips on the rain-soaked grass to the edge of the cliff, and is in danger of falling over. Elfride rescues him by making a rope out of her underclothes. This episode was literature's first "cliffhangers."

This poem was written just after the death of Emma in November 1912. She left an incomplete memoir of her early life, *Some Recollections* (finally published in 1961), in which she described her time in Cornwall when she met Hardy:

scampering up and down the hills on my beloved mare alone, wanting no protection, the rain going down my back often and my hair floating on the wind.

Hardy read the manuscript and was filled with regret about their unhappy marriage and his lack of attention. In the spring he revisited the places of their courtship in Cornwall and wrote a sequence of poems (see also p 23). This poem's "bright hair flapping free" clearly derives from "my hair floating on the wind" in Emma's recollections.

The lines are much longer than is usual in English poetry. Rhyming triplets are even more unusual. The absence of the fourth line suggests an incompleteness.

Hardy enjoyed archaic English words: "mews" are gulls (the word comes from their mewling cry); to "plain" is to complain (cf. complaint); to "prink" is to adorn or show off; the "main" is the open sea. Hardy heightened his language with alliteration: "purples prink" and "wild weird western." Another characteristic was making verbs out of nouns: the "irised rain" is the rainbow (iris) seen in the rain.

Tomorrow and tomorrow

This is Macbeth's speech of despair. The forces of Macduff and Malcolm are besieging his castle. He has just been told that his wife has committed suicide.

Bradley (1904) suggested that the tragedy of Macbeth turns on the "incalculability of evil" – how we do not realize that evil, once allowed, will slowly destroy the soul. Although Macbeth has deteriorated into a trapped and desperate tyrant, he still feels some sympathy for him, because he realizes how far he has fallen:

..... that which should accompany old age,
As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have

His life no longer has the meaning it once had. He has failed to become what he might have been.

Still I Rise

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.
Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.
Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.
Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?
Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.
You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.
Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?
Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

Maya Angelou, 1978

Still I Rise

Angelou's poem insists that, despite the lies of white folk, she has the same right to her own sassiness and sexiness as any other person. She makes fun of uptight white folk who cannot dance to save their souls:

Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

The poem owes some of its structure and rhythm to the "call and response" mode of communication used in African-American spirituals. For example

Rise and shine and give God your glory *glory!*
Children of the Lord.

Angelou allows the audience to join her with "I rise."

The poem follows the relaxed rhythms of African-American speech. The lines generally use four stresses and most lines begin with a stressed syllable. The number of syllables per beat varies.

/ - - - / - / - - /
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear

This variability is carried to an extreme in hip hop and rap poetry, where the "flow" of the words is usually fit to a four-beat bar (downbeat, weak beat, on-beat, upbeat). Tupac Shakur (1971-1996) refers to Angelou in his posthumous album *Still I Rise* (1999):

I was born not to make it but I did
The tribulations of a ghetto kid
Still I rise

The poem follows a long tradition of poetry by African-Americans, wherein injustice is denounced and freedom prophesied. Sterling Brown's poem *Strong Men* (1931) begins:

They dragged you from homeland,
They chained you in coffles
They huddled you spoon-fashion in filthy hatches,
They sold you to give a few gentlemen ease.
They broke you in like oxen,
They scourged you,
They branded you,
They made your women breeders,
They swelled your numbers with bastards. . . .
They taught you the religion they disgraced.

"Coffles" are groups of slaves chained or roped together for transport. The poem's chorus is

The strong men keep a-comin' on
The strong men git stronger.

In 1994, Nelson Mandela recited *Still I Rise* when he was inaugurated as the President of South Africa.

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind —

Emily Dickinson, 1872

Longing

Come to me in my dreams, and then
By day I shall be well again!
For so the night will more than pay
The hopeless longing of the day.

Come, as thou cam'st a thousand times,
A messenger from radiant climes,
And smile on thy new world, and be
As kind to others as to me!

Or, as thou never cam'st in sooth,
Come now, and let me dream it truth,
And part my hair, and kiss my brow,
And say, My love why sufferest thou?

Come to me in my dreams, and then
By day I shall be well again!
For so the night will more than pay
The hopeless longing of the day.

Matthew Arnold, 1850

Tell all the truth but tell it slant

In this brief poem, Dickinson presents her idea of how poetry works. Poetry can present Truth – the nature of the universe and its creator – by means of simile and metaphor, rhythm and rhyme. Truth otherwise would be incomprehensible. She is not concerned with the simple truths of what happened today and when, but with the great truths of why these things happened at all.

After describing his vision of the lotus flowers in the garden at *Burnt Norton* (p 116), Eliot realized that we are too small to see the truth about the universe other than through fleeting visions. We live only briefly whereas the truth lasts forever:

human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.

The dazzling nature of truth was described by Plato in his “Allegory of the Cave” in Book VII of *The Republic* (375 BCE):

Anyone who has common sense will remember that the bewilderments of the eyes are of two kinds, and arise from two causes, either from coming out of the light or from going into the light, which is true of the mind's eye, quite as much as of the bodily eye; and he who remembers this when he sees any one whose vision is perplexed and weak, will not be too ready to laugh; he will first ask whether that soul of man has come out of the brighter life, and is unable to see because unaccustomed to the dark, or having turned from darkness to the day is dazzled by excess of light.

Longing

Arnold wrote two sequences of love poems prior to his marriage in 1851. The first entitled *Switzerland* (1848-1849) was addressed to “Marguerite.” We know about as much about Marguerite as we do about Shakespeare’s Dark Lady (p 57). She was likely a beautiful young woman with whom Arnold had an affair during his travels in Europe. We can only speculate that the lovers were too different in language, religion or class to consider a more lasting relationship. In one of the *Switzerland* poems, Arnold describes his separation from Marguerite:

Who order'd, that their longing's fire
Should be, as soon as kindled, cool'd?
Who renders vain their deep desire?—
A God, a God their severance ruled!
And bade betwixt their shores to be
The unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea.

The second sequence, entitled *Faded Leaves*, from which this poem is taken, may also be also related to Marguerite. However, the sequence more likely concerns Frances Wightman, whom Arnold was to ultimately to marry in 1851, but who, in 1850, had been forbidden by her father to see her lover. Separation characterized the passions of the young poet.

The poem beautifully describes the poet’s longing for his beloved, and how his dreams of her might assuage his suffering. “My Love, why sufferest thou?” brings to my mind the “Dear heart, how like thou this” of Wyatt’s lover (p 9)

from **Antigonick**

Many terrible quiet customers exist but none more
terribly quiet than man

His footsteps pass so perilously soft across the sea
in marble winter
up the stiff blue waves and every Tuesday
down he grinds the unastonishable Earth
with horse and shatter

Shatters too the cheeks of birds and traps them in his forest
headlights,

Salty silvers roll into his net, he weaves it just for
That

This
terribly quiet
customer

He dooms
animals and mountains technically
By yoke he makes the bull bend, the horse to its
knees
and
utterance and thought as clear as complicated air
and
moods that make a city moral these he
taught himself

the showy cold he knows to flee
and
every human exigency crackles as he plugs it in
every outlet works but

one
: Death stays dark

Death he cannot doom
Fabrications notwithstanding
Evil
Good
Laws
Gods
Honest oathtaking notwithstanding

Hilarious in the high city
to see him cantering just as he please
the lava up to here

Anne Carson, 2012

Antigonick

Antigonick is Carson's free translation of Sophocles' *Antigone* (441 BCE), the third in time but the first written of his three Theban plays (*Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*). The play recounts the aftermath of the rebellion against Creon's rule of Thebes by Polynices. Creon commands that Polynices' body should be denied funeral rites and lie unburied. Antigone defies this order because, although it is the law of the state, it is against the natural law. She is therefore condemned to death.

This passage, the second chorus of the play, is a commentary on the nature of man. Man can travel over the sea, cultivate the land, and trap wild beasts. He lives together with his fellows and makes laws so that all may benefit. Yet he cannot conquer death. Sometimes he takes it upon himself to assert his freedom against the laws of the state. Yet these actions are wrong, and those that act against the common good should be condemned.

George Young's verse translation (1888) begins

Much is there passing strange;
Nothing surpassing mankind

A literal translation of Richard Jebb (1891) ends

When he honors the laws of the land and the justice of the gods to which he is bound by oath, his city prospers. But banned from his city is he who, thanks to his rashness, couples with disgrace. Never may he share my home, never think my thoughts, who does these things!

Carson modernizes the words and places them upon the page so as to accentuate their meaning. Man becomes not just passing strange but "a terribly quiet customer." One of her most striking images is

every human exigency crackles as he plugs it in
every outlet works but
one
: Death stays dark

The final image of a person such as Antigone, who defies the law of the state, exaggerates the foolishness of his (or her) actions

Hilarious in the high city
to see him cantering just as he please
the lava up to here

Antigone, however, insists that she is right. She tells Creont:

nor did I deem
Your ordinance of so much binding force,
As that a mortal man could overbear
The unchangeable unwritten code of Heaven;
This is not of today and yesterday,
But lives forever, having origin
Whence no man knows (Young, 1888)

Antigone is the tragedy of the individual in conflict with the state.

In Memory of W. B. Yeats

I

He disappeared in the dead of winter:
The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted,
And snow disfigured the public statues;
The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.
What instruments we have agree
The day of his death was a dark cold day.

Far from his illness
The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,
The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays;
By mourning tongues
The death of the poet was kept from his poems.

But for him it was his last afternoon as himself,
An afternoon of nurses and rumours;
The provinces of his body revolted,
The squares of his mind were empty,
Silence invaded the suburbs,
The current of his feeling failed; he became his admirers.

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,
To find his happiness in another kind of wood
And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.
The words of a dead man
Are modified in the guts of the living.

But in the importance and noise of to-morrow
When the brokers are roaring like beasts on the floor of the bourse,
And the poor have the sufferings to which they are fairly accustomed
And each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom
A few thousand will think of this day
As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual.

What instruments we have agree
The day of his death was a dark cold day.

(ctd)

In Memory of W. B. Yeats

Yeats died on January 28, 1939 at the Hôtel Idéal Séjour in Menton, on the French Riviera, in the company of his wife Georgie. He was buried in nearby Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, although his remains were transferred back to Drumcliff in County Sligo, Ireland, after the war. The epitaph on his gravestone comes from his 1938 poem *Under Ben Bulbin* (which refers to a hill in Sligo):

Cast a cold eye
On life, on death
Horseman, pass by!

Auden wrote his memorial poem soon after Yeats's death and it was published in his 1940 collection *Another Time* as one of several "occasional poems." These included two other memorial poems: one for Ernest Toller, the German expressionist playwright, who committed suicide in New York on May 22, 1939; and the other for Sigmund Freud who died in Hampstead, North London, on September 23, 1939. Both Toller and Freud were exiles from Nazi Germany. 1939 was a momentous year, most obviously with the onset of World War II, which Auden also memorialized in his poem *September 1, 1939*, beginning:

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade:

Auden was ambivalent about Yeats. Soon after Yeats's death he published a paper imagining how the poet's achievements would be assessed in a court of law: *The Public v. the Late Mr William Butler Yeats*. The prosecution criticizes Yeats' strange supernatural beliefs, his aristocratic leanings, and the fascist ideas he toyed with in his later life. However, the defense points out that Yeats was always able to react emotionally to life and to convey that genuineness to others in words. The defense admits that

If not a poem had been written, not a picture painted, not a bar of music composed, the history of man would be materially unchanged.

Nevertheless, poetry might through the "strength and clarity" of its words improve the way we understand each other.

When we are at a loss about what to say, we often talk about the weather, and Auden begins his memorial with comments on how cold it was on the day of Yeats's death. However, he soon gets to what he wishes to say in this first section of the memorial: first, that the death of the poet has little effect on the life of the poems, which will survive on their own merits; and second how the poet will continue past his death in the memories of those who admire his poems. Indeed, both the poet and his poems will change as the memories "are modified in the guts of the living"

One of the striking images of this section is how death mimics the invasion of a country with the provinces rebelling against the capital, and the cities emptying themselves out.

II

You were silly like us; your gift survived it all:
The parish of rich women, physical decay,
Yourself. Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.
Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,
For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.

III

Earth, receive an honoured guest:
William Yeats is laid to rest.
Let the Irish vessel lie
Emptied of its poetry.

In the nightmare of the dark
All the dogs of Europe bark,
And the living nations wait,
Each sequestered in its hate;

Intellectual disgrace
Stares from every human face,
And the seas of pity lie
Locked and frozen in each eye.

Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice;

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.

W. H. Auden, 1939

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Now fades the glimm'ring landscape on the sight,
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;

Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tow'r
The moping owl does to the moon complain
Of such, as wand'ring near her secret bow'r,
Molest her ancient solitary reign.

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,
Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap,
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn,
The swallow twitt'ring from the straw-built shed,
The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.

For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,
Or busy housewife ply her evening care:
No children run to lisp their sire's return,
Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.

Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield,
Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke;
How jocund did they drive their team afield!
How bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;
Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile
The short and simple annals of the poor.

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r,
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
Awaits alike th' inevitable hour.
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

(ctd)

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

In English, an “elegy” is a poem lamenting the death of a specific individual together with a more general meditation on human mortality. The word derives from the Greek *elegos*, which originally described a funeral lament, often performed with flute accompaniment. The elegy provides words that can express our grief and ideas that can lead to consolation. In addition, however, an elegy may refer to a poem written in a specific format (the “elegiac couplet” – a dactylic hexameter followed by a pentameter) regardless of its content. Many classical Greek and Latin poems using this format were not concerned with death. Other languages have used the term for poems in the classical style without regard to either format or subject matter, e.g., Goethe’s erotic *Roman Elegies* (1788), and Rilke’s mystical *Duino Elegies* (1923).

Gray’s elegy was written over the course of many years. In 1742 he had been devastated by the death of Richard West, a friend from his school days at Eton, and an unpublished fellow poet. Gray’s sonnet lamenting the death of West describes how his grief finds no solace in a happy world:

Yet Morning smiles the busy race to cheer,
And new-born pleasure brings to happier men;
The fields to all their wonted tribute bear;
To warm their little loves the birds complain;
I fruitless mourn to him that cannot hear,
And weep the more because I weep in vain.

Gray spent most of his life in Cambridge as a scholar and later as a professor of history. As a retreat from his studies, he would spend time with relatives in a village in Buckinghamshire called Stoke Poges (“Stoke” is an old English word for stockade and “Poges” is likely a variant of the name Pugeys). Gray’s aunt Mary Antrobus died in 1749, and was buried in the graveyard of St. Giles Church.

Her death and the church inspired him to complete the elegy which he had begun many years before when West died. The picture of the church at the right is an engraving from an 1834 edition of the poem. It derives from a drawing by John Constable. (The steeple was removed in 1924.) Gray was himself buried in Stoke Poges in 1771, and a monument commemorating



Gray by James Watt was erected there in 1799. Gray’s elegy was immensely popular from the moment of its publication. The poem is immediately accessible: it makes no allusion to classic mythology; it does not conjure up anything that would not have been experienced by an English reader.

Nor you, ye proud, impute to these the fault,
If Mem'ry o'er their tomb no trophies raise,
Where thro' the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault
The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.

Can storied urn or animated bust
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,
Or Flatt'ry soothe the dull cold ear of Death?

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
Hands, that the rod of empire might have sway'd,
Or wak'd to ecstasy the living lyre.

But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page
Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll;
Chill Penury repress'd their noble rage,
And froze the genial current of the soul.

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:
Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Some village-Hampden, that with dauntless breast
The little tyrant of his fields withstood;
Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood.

Th' applause of list'ning senates to command,
The threats of pain and ruin to despise,
To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land,
And read their hist'ry in a nation's eyes,

Their lot forbade: nor circumscrib'd alone
Their growing virtues, but their crimes confin'd;
Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne,
And shut the gates of mercy on mankind,

The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide,
To quench the blushes of ingenuous shame,
Or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride
With incense kindled at the Muse's flame.

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;
Along the cool sequester'd vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way. *(ctd)*

The elegy makes occasional historical references to notable figures of the preceding century: Oliver Cromwell was the leader of the forces against the monarchy in the English Civil War and the Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England (1649-1660); John Hampden argued against the arbitrary taxation of Charles I (1637), and participated in the English Civil War; Milton was the poet of *Paradise Lost* (1667), and the elegy *Lycidas* (1637).

Very few of the words in Gray's elegy need explanation even now. A "curfew" was a bell that told the villagers to put out their hearth fires (French, *cuvrir* + *feu*) and go to bed. Nowadays it has come to mean the regulations that require people to stay home. "Rude" originally meant uneducated or unrefined, and only recently has come to indicate offensiveness. A "hamlet" was a tiny village. The "glebe" was a piece of land in a village, the produce of which was allocated to the village's pastor. "Penury" means extreme poverty. A "swain" is a country lad.

Most importantly the elegy has a marvelous sound. It begs to be recited. Gray uses all the tricks – rhyme alliteration, assonance – to make it musical. In the first two lines, one can hear the bell tolling in the "l" sounds of "toll" and "knell" and its echoes in the long "o" sounds of "lowing" and "slowly." The rhythm is a regular iambic pentameter. The end rhymes, which follow an *abab* scheme, are occasionally enhanced by internal rhymes such as the "lowing" and "slowly" in the second line. Assonance (beetle/wheels, forbade/wade, tale/relate) and alliteration (plowman/plods, sturdy/stroke, longing/ling'ring) abound. William Harmon (1990) has noted how these techniques are often intertwined. The last words of the eleventh stanza follow an *abab* pattern in their rhymes and an *aabb* pattern in the initial consonants of these rhymes:

Can storied urn or animated bust
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,
Or Flatt'ry soothe the dull cold ear of Death?

The elegy is divided into three parts. The first is a vivid account of nightfall as seen from the graveyard of St. Giles Church. Gray describes everything in the present tense. We feel that we are there. We sense that this is the way it has been and forever will be. The glimmering landscape of the second verse was illustrated in the 1834 edition by Copley Fielding.



Now fades the glimm'ring landscape on the sight,
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds

Yet ev'n these bones from insult to protect,
Some frail memorial still erected nigh,
With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture deck'd,
Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.

Their name, their years, spelt by th' unletter'd muse,
The place of fame and elegy supply:
And many a holy text around she strews,
That teach the rustic moralist to die.

For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,
This pleasing anxious being e'er resign'd,
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
Nor cast one longing, ling'ring look behind?

On some fond breast the parting soul relies,
Some pious drops the closing eye requires;
Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,
Ev'n in our ashes live their wonted fires.

For thee, who mindful of th' unhonour'd Dead
Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;
If chance, by lonely contemplation led,
Some kindred spirit shall inquire thy fate,

Haply some hoary-headed swain may say,
"Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn
Brushing with hasty steps the dews away
To meet the sun upon the upland lawn.

"There at the foot of yonder nodding beech
That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,
His listless length at noontide would he stretch,
And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

"Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,
Mutt'ring his wayward fancies he would rove,
Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,
Or craz'd with care, or cross'd in hopeless love.

"One morn I miss'd him on the custom'd hill,
Along the heath and near his fav'rite tree;
Another came; nor yet beside the rill,
Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;

"The next with dirges due in sad array
Slow thro' the church-way path we saw him borne.
Approach and read (for thou canst read) the lay,
Grav'd on the stone beneath yon aged thorn." *(ctd)*

As he observes the graves of the hamlet's "rude forefathers," Gray begins the second section of the poem wherein he considers how their lives had been completely determined by their birth. Those born in poverty had generally remained uneducated and simply followed the occupations of their parents. He contrasts their lives – "the short and simple annals of the poor" – to those of the well-born, who could indulge their ambitions and attain fame and glory. He notes all men must die regardless of whether they be rich or poor, famous or humble:

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r,
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
Awaits alike th' inevitable hour.
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Furthermore, the lowly position of the poor in society protect them from the possibility that their ambition could lead to crime. Their lot

Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne,
And shut the gates of mercy on mankind

At the time of Gray's elegy, half of the English population was illiterate. Compulsory schooling for children was not to be formally legislated in England until 1880, and in 1870 only half of the children between 5 and 14 attended school (Soysal and Strang, 1989). The 17th and 18th Centuries were considered the Age of Enlightenment. Yet the ideals considered at that time – that all men were created equal, and that everyone had the right to life liberty and the pursuit of happiness – remained largely unenacted. In 18th Century England, the differences between aristocrat and commoner was considered part of the natural order – the way things were.

Gray regrets that this state of affairs might lead to the waste of inborn talents:

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:
Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

In *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935), William Empson considered Gray's elegy to be "an odd case of poetry with latent political ideas." Referring to this particular verse, he remarked

What this means ... is that eighteenth-century England had no scholarship system or *carrière ouverte aux talents*. This is stated as pathetic, but the reader is put into a mood in which one would not try to alter it. ... By comparing the social arrangement to Nature, he makes it seem inevitable, which it was not, and gives it a dignity which was undeserved.

In the final section of the poem beginning with "For thee," Gray considers his own lot in life. He changes perspective. He no longer considers the world but imagines how he is viewed by the world. He looks ahead to his own death. Perhaps some young man from the village might remember how he tended to wander around the countryside "mutt'ring his wayward fancies," and how he finally died and was buried in the churchyard.

THE EPITAPH

*Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth
A youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown.
Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth,
And Melancholy mark'd him for her own.*

*Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,
Heav'n did a recompense as largely send:
He gave to Mis'ry all he had, a tear,
He gain'd from Heav'n ('twas all he wish'd) a friend.*

*No farther seek his merits to disclose,
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,
(There they alike in trembling hope repose)
The bosom of his Father and his God.*

Thomas Gray, 1751

Indian Summer

Along the line of smoky hills
The crimson forest stands,
And all the day the blue-jay calls
Throughout the autumn lands.

Now by the brook the maple leans
With all his glory spread,
And all the sumachs on the hills
Have turned their green to red.

Now by great marshes wrapt in mist,
Or past some river's mouth,
Throughout the long, still autumn day
Wild birds are flying south.

Wilfred Campbell, 1888

Gray's parents were sufficiently well-off that he was able to attend Eton College and Cambridge University. Unlike his friend Horace Walpole, had not accomplished much by the time he wrote his elegy. Feeling unsuited to the law or politics, he devoted himself to poetry and to knowledge. The illustration on the right from the 1834 edition of the poem shows a drawing by George Barret



There at the foot of yonder nodding beech
That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,
His listless length at noontide would he stretch,
And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

In the elegy, Gray presumes that he will die “to Fortune and to Fame unknown.” He consoles himself that he will have been remembered as sincere, and that he will have enjoyed his thoughts of God. However, the humble end that he predicted was not to be. The elegy made him immediately famous. On the eve of the Battle of Quebec in 1759, General James Wolfe declared that he would rather have written the Elegy than to have captured the city.

Indian Summer

The term “Indian summer,” a period of warm dry hazy weather following the first frost of autumn, originated in North America and should probably be specific to that location, where maples and sumac add a glorious crimson to the autumn colors.

Wilfred Campbell was one of the Confederation Poets, born near the time when Canada became an independent country. These poets celebrated the distinctive beauty of the Canadian landscape, later to be painted by the Group of Seven. The illustration on the right shows Tom Thomson's *Autumn Foliage* (1916).



The smoky hills may be caused by the dust of the falling leaves, or by the custom of burning the fields after the harvest. The mists of autumn are caused by warm humid air coming into contact with cold ground.

For the Union Dead

The old South Boston Aquarium stands
in a Sahara of snow now. Its broken windows are boarded.
The bronze weathervane cod has lost half its scales.
The airy tanks are dry.

Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass;
my hand tingled
to burst the bubbles
drifting from the noses of the cowed, compliant fish.

My hand draws back. I often sigh still
for the dark downward and vegetating kingdom
of the fish and reptile. One morning last March,
I pressed against the new barbed and galvanized

fence on the Boston Common. Behind their cage,
yellow dinosaur steamshovels were grunting
as they cropped up tons of mush and grass
to gouge their underworld garage.

Parking spaces luxuriate like civic
sandpiles in the heart of Boston.
A girdle of orange, Puritan-pumpkin colored girders
braces the tingling Statehouse,

shaking over the excavations, as it faces Colonel Shaw
and his bell-cheeked Negro infantry
on St. Gaudens' shaking Civil War relief,
propped by a plank splint against the garage's earthquake.

Two months after marching through Boston,
half the regiment was dead;
at the dedication,
William James could almost hear the bronze Negroes breathe.

Their monument sticks like a fishbone
in the city's throat.
Its Colonel is as lean
as a compass-needle.

(ctd)

For the Union Dead

The title of Lowell's poem alludes to the Allen Tate's 1928 poem *Ode to the Confederate Dead*. That poem, set in an unnamed Southern graveyard, begins.

Row after row with strict impunity
The headstones yield their names to the element,
The wind whirrs without recollection;
In the riven troughs the splayed leaves
Pile up, of nature the casual sacrament
To the seasonal eternity of death;
Then driven by the fierce scrutiny
Of heaven to their election in the vast breath,
They sough the rumour of mortality.

Although it mentions some of the battles of the Civil War, Tate's poem is mainly concerned with the poet's sense of his own mortality. Tate, himself, called the work narcissistic.

Lowell's 1964 poem begins with his childhood memories of the South Boston Aquarium. This building was built in 1912 and was run by the city's parks department. Without any private benefactors, the aquarium slowly became derelict and finally closed in 1954. Some local businessmen worked to fund a new and far more successful building – the New England Aquarium, which later opened in 1969. At the time of Lowell's poem, the loss of the old aquarium was a sign of how wonderful things can be lost to so-called "progress."

After this brief memory, Lowell turns to the city's current construction project. A parking lot is being built under Boston Common, founded in 1634, the oldest city park in the United States. The construction has required protective supports for the Massachusetts State House on the Northern edge of the park, and for the Robert Gould Shaw Memorial in its northeast corner.

In 1862 Colonel Robert Gould Shaw (1837-1863), a white officer, took command of the all-black 54th Massachusetts Regiment, the first group of African-American enlistees to fight in the Civil War. He convinced his men to refuse their pay until it was equal to that of white soldiers. He and many of the men in the regiment died in a futile attempt to take Fort Wagner in South Carolina in 1863. Shaw was contemptuously buried by the Confederates "in the common trench with the niggers that fell with him." However, Shaw would have considered it an honor to be buried with his men. The 1989 film *Glory* starring Matthew Broderick, Morgan Freeman and Denzel Washington, tells the story of the regiment.

The monument at the edge of Boston Commons is a bronze relief sculpture created by Augustus Saint-Gaudens in 1898. The sculpture shows the regiment as it marched down Beacon Street on its way to fight in the Civil War. The work is intriguing since it replaces the usual equestrian monument with a relief sculpture that allows the men of the regiment to be portrayed as well as their commander. William James gave the oration at its dedication and Lowell quotes him in the poem.

He has an angry wrenlike vigilance,
a greyhound's gentle tautness;
he seems to wince at pleasure,
and suffocate for privacy.

He is out of bounds now. He rejoices in man's lovely,
peculiar power to choose life and die—
when he leads his black soldiers to death,
he cannot bend his back.

On a thousand small town New England greens,
the old white churches hold their air
of sparse, sincere rebellion; frayed flags
quilt the graveyards of the Grand Army of the Republic.

The stone statues of the abstract Union Soldier
grow slimmer and younger each year—
wasp-waisted, they doze over muskets
and muse through their sideburns . . .

Shaw's father wanted no monument
except the ditch,
where his son's body was thrown
and lost with his "niggers."

The ditch is nearer.
There are no statues for the last war here;
on Boylston Street, a commercial photograph
shows Hiroshima boiling

over a Mosler Safe, the "Rock of Ages"
that survived the blast. Space is nearer.
When I crouch to my television set,
the drained faces of Negro school-children rise like balloons.

Colonel Shaw
is riding on his bubble,
he waits
for the blessed break.

The Aquarium is gone. Everywhere,
giant finned cars nose forward like fish;
a savage servility
slides by on grease.

Robert Lowell, 1964

The inscription on the memorial reads *Omnia Relinquit Servare Rem Publicam* (“He gave up everything to serve the Republic”). In the poem, Lowell changes it to the plural so that it might honor the regiment as well as its colonel. The memorial differs from other New England memorials to the Civil War in that it depicts black soldiers.



The main focus of Lowell’s poem is the memorial and the regiment it honors. However, Lowell is also concerned about our current inability to memorialize or even to remember what is important in our history. Shaw and his men fought so that all Americans would have equal rights. Yet, when Lowell wrote this poem, the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968) was fighting against the segregation of the races in the American South.

Lowell is ashamed how commercial interests – parking garages, advertising, finned cars – have demeaned our lives. We have become the slaves of progress. Perhaps his most disconcerting example is an image of Hiroshima used to sell the brand of safe that survived the blast of the first atomic bomb.

Colonel Shaw is no longer connected to our thoughts: he is “riding in a bubble.” We need to break the bubble and understand our history. This would be a blessing just like that which Christ gave as he broke the bread and fed the multitudes. And pronounced a new covenant based on the ideas that one should take no thought for worldly things and that one must love one’s neighbor as oneself.

Thanatopsis

To him who in the love of Nature holds
Communion with her visible forms, she speaks
A various language; for his gayer hours
She has a voice of gladness, and a smile
And eloquence of beauty, and she glides
Into his darker musings, with a mild
And healing sympathy, that steals away
Their sharpness, ere he is aware. When thoughts
Of the last bitter hour come like a blight
Over thy spirit, and sad images
Of the stern agony, and shroud, and pall,
And breathless darkness, and the narrow house,
Make thee to shudder, and grow sick at heart;—
Go forth, under the open sky, and list
To Nature's teachings, while from all around
Earth and her waters, and the depths of air—
Comes a still voice—Yet a few days, and thee
The all-beholding sun shall see no more
In all his course; nor yet in the cold ground,
Where thy pale form was laid, with many tears,
Nor in the embrace of ocean, shall exist
Thy image. Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim
Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,
And, lost each human trace, surrendering up
Thine individual being, shalt thou go
To mix for ever with the elements,
To be a brother to the insensible rock
And to the sluggish clod, which the rude swain
Turns with his share, and treads upon. The oak
Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mould.

Yet not to thine eternal resting-place
Shalt thou retire alone, nor couldst thou wish
Couch more magnificent. Thou shalt lie down
With patriarchs of the infant world—with kings,
The powerful of the earth—the wise, the good,
Fair forms, and hoary seers of ages past,
All in one mighty sepulchre. The hills
Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun,—the vales
Stretching in pensive quietness between;
The venerable woods—rivers that move
In majesty, and the complaining brooks

(ctd)

Thanatopsis

This poem was first begun when Bryant was a mere 17 years old, and revised to its final version when he was 27. Bryant became the oldest of the “fireside poets,” a group of American poets (Bryant, Longfellow, Whittier, Lowell, Holmes), whose poems exhorting the upright life were suitable for family reading. This particular poem is a consideration of death (Greek *thanatos*, death, *opsis*, sight).

The poem is constructed in much the same manner as a sermon (McLean, 1960). Puritan homiletics (the rhetoric of public preaching, from the Greek *homilos*, an assembled crowd) divided sermons into “text, doctrine, reason and use” (White, 1972). The text is not stated but is akin to Claudio’s speech on death in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* (3: 1)

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot;
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice;
To be imprison’d in the viewless winds,
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendent world

We might also consider a text about Ezekiel’s experience of God:

And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake:

And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. (*I Kings* 19 11-12)

The first section of the poem presents the “doctrine” of the sermon, wherein some points of teaching are derived from the text or texts. Bryant points out all human beings are destined for the grave. With death we must shall surrender up our “individual being” and be mixed “for ever with the elements.”

In the poem’s second section. Bryant proposes two “reasons” why this doctrine should not be feared. First is that we are not alone. Everyone must die. We shall share the experience of death with all of those who have preceded us upon this earth: the patriarchs and the kings, the wise and the good, the beautiful and the visionary. And as “the long train of ages glides away, all who follow us – young and old, matron and maid” shall “one by one be gathered” to our side.

The second reason is that we shall be buried in a magnificent tomb. The sublime world of nature – hills, sun, rivers, brooks, meadows, oceans

Are but the solemn decorations all
Of the great tomb of man

When we shall enter our last sleep, we could not wish a “couch more magnificent.”

That make the meadows green; and, poured round all,
Old Ocean's gray and melancholy waste,—
Are but the solemn decorations all
Of the great tomb of man. The golden sun,
The planets, all the infinite host of heaven,
Are shining on the sad abodes of death,
Through the still lapse of ages. All that tread
The globe are but a handful to the tribes
That slumber in its bosom.—Take the wings
Of morning, pierce the Barcan wilderness,
Or lose thyself in the continuous woods
Where rolls the Oregon, and hears no sound,
Save his own dashings—yet the dead are there:
And millions in those solitudes, since first
The flight of years began, have laid them down
In their last sleep—the dead reign there alone.
So shalt thou rest, and what if thou withdraw
In silence from the living, and no friend
Take note of thy departure? All that breathe
Will share thy destiny. The gay will laugh
When thou art gone, the solemn brood of care
Plod on, and each one as before will chase
His favorite phantom; yet all these shall leave
Their mirth and their employments, and shall come
And make their bed with thee. As the long train
Of ages glide away, the sons of men,
The youth in life's green spring, and he who goes
In the full strength of years, matron and maid,
The speechless babe, and the gray-headed man—
Shall one by one be gathered to thy side,
By those, who in their turn shall follow them.

So live, that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan, which moves
To that mysterious realm, where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,
Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,
Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave,
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.

William Cullen Bryant, 1821

Bryant thus found comfort in the sublime beauty of Nature. He was a friend of Thomas Cole (1801-1848), who founded the Hudson Valley School of American painting. In 1850 Asher Durand, one of Cole's followers, painted *Landscape – Scene from Thanatopsis*:



A funeral is taking place in the woods. The setting for the burial is sublime. In the foreground are the ruined graves of those who have preceded us, and on the hills are their castles and cathedrals. In the valley, the farmer plows the land.

Bryant mentions two of the emptiest regions of the world and claims that even there the dead are gathered. The “Barcan wilderness” is the Libyan Desert. A “barchan” is a crescent-shaped sand-dune. During the First Barbary War, William Eaton led his forces from Alexandria across this desert to defeat the forces of the Barbary States at the Battle of Derna (1805). The “Oregon” was the name first given to the Columbia River. From 1803 to 1806, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark led an expedition up the Missouri river to determine whether its source might lie near that of the Columbia. Their expedition successfully crossed the Great Divide and descended to the Pacific.

The final section of the poem describes what “use” can be made of the doctrine that has been expounded. The basic lessons Bryant draws are not to fear death, to accept it as the natural end of life, and to trust that all will be well. Bryant makes no mention of God and Christ, or of Heaven and eternity. These Christian teachings are taken for granted. In *To a Waterfowl* (1818), Bryant watches as the bird flies northward to its nesting ground:

He, who, from zone to zone,
Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight,
In the long way that I must tread alone,
Will lead my steps aright.

The comfort that Bryant finds in his unstated beliefs may not be readily available to those in whom belief in God has faded.

Thyme Flowering among Rocks

This, if Japanese,
Would represent grey boulders
Walloped by rough seas

So that, here or there,
The balked water tossed its froth
Straight into the air.

Here, where things are what
They are, it is thyme blooming,
Rocks, and nothing but –

Having, nonetheless,
Many small leaves implicit,
A green countlessness.

Crouching down, peering
Into perplexed recesses,
You find a clearing

Occupied by sun
Where, along prone, rachitic
Branches, one by one,

Pale stems arise, squared
In the manner of Mentha,
The oblong leaves paired.

One branch, in ending,
Lifts a little and begets
A straight-ascending

Spike, whorled with fine blue
Or purple trumpets, banked in
The leaf-axils. You

Are lost now in dense
Fact, fact which one might have thought
Hidden from the sense,

Blinking at detail
Peppery as this fragrance,
Lost to proper scale

(ctd)

Thyme Flowering among Rocks

Thymus vulgaris or garden thyme is a small bushy evergreen plant with white, pink or purple flowers. Its elliptical leaves are set in opposing pairs and alternate orthogonally up the stem. Fresh or dried leaves are used in cooking to impart a



peppery, woody, grassy flavor. It is a member of the mint family *Lamiaceae*, which includes other culinary herbs such as basil, mint, rosemary, sage, oregano, and marjoram.

Wilbur begins his poem by comparing the thyme he sees among rocks to Japanese rock gardens, wherein rocks are set among rivers or seas composed of fine stones. The illustration at the right shows some of the rocks at the Datokuji temple in Kyoto.



In the Western world, “where things are what they are,” the thyme does not represent the spray of waves washing up on boulders, but is just a plant flowering among rocks. Nevertheless, Wilbur composes his poem using the Japanese haiku form with lines of 5,7 and 5 syllables. Rhyme is not a formal requirement for Japanese haiku, although haiku poets frequently use alliteration and assonance. Wilbur rhymes the first and third lines, following a form originated by the Japanese-American translator Kenneth Yasuda in his 1957 book *The Japanese Haiku*. The following compares a Yasuda translation of the most famous haiku by Matsuo Basho (1644-1694) to the more exact translation by R. H. Blyth:

Ancient pond unstirred
Into which a frog has plunged,
Now a splash is heard

The old pond.
A frog jumps in—
Plop!

Wilbur becomes fascinated by the details of the thyme plant. The branches are thin and “rachitic,” as if they were limbs suffering from rickets, most commonly caused by a deficiency of vitamin D. From these branches arise the stems, whereupon the leaves are arrayed in orthogonal doublets like mint (*Mentha*). the flowers nestled in the angles between the leaves and stems (“axils”).

As he becomes lost in all the complex facts about the plant, he is much like William Beebe and Otis Barton who between 1930 and 1934 used a bathysphere (from Greek *bathus*, deep, and *sphaira*, sphere) to study the flora and fauna that exist at great depths in the ocean off the coast of Bermuda. Like these deep-sea divers, Wilbur loses sight of the whole in the contemplation of its parts.

As, in the motion
Of striped fins, a bathysphere
Forgets the ocean.

It makes the craned head
Spin. Unfathomed thyme! The world's
A dream, Basho said,

Not because that dream's
A falsehood, but because it's
Truer than it seems.

Richard Wilbur, 1969

Reading Vermeer

“The poet,” says the poet, “strives to ask
not more, but other. He works alone, outside.
Risk is the fuel he runs on, and his pride
is harnessed to his task.”

But I must beg (outsiders do and thrive!)
to differ. For example, read Vermeer,
whose people, drenched in light, like honey, wear
the blessing of the hive.

No sullen, driving, arbitrary hill
grudges his flat world its serenity
or mocks the decent soul to wrench it free
of maps that hold it still.

Framed by her room, pleased for acquaintance's sake,
the woman reads a letter: nothing new.
The other pours, glad of what's left to do,
glad of her bread to bake.

Of course, I could be wrong.
Both may be adding up their model's wages,
and mine the only poem on these pages
to celebrate a life that slows to song.

Rhina Espaillat, 1998

In the last two verses of his poem, Wilbur considers the nature of the real world and of time – thyme’s homophone. He wonders about one of Basho’s haiku that retells the story of the Buddhist philosopher Chuang Tzu (4th Century BCE), who, on awakening from sleep, was unsure whether he was Chuang Tzu who had just woken up from a dream of being a butterfly, or whether he was now a butterfly dreaming that he was Chuang Tzu. The illustration shows Ike no Taiga’s representation of this story (18th Century CE). Basho’s haiku (translated by Robert Aitken) reads:



You are the butterfly
And I the dreaming heart
Of Chuang-tzu

Reading Vermeer

In this poem Espaillat presents several different views of the creative process, and considers some general ideas about the interpretation of art. She begins by quoting an unnamed poet who states that a poet strives to “ask not more, but other.” This is not a direct quotation, but it likely alludes to Ezra Pound’s “Make it new!” (1935). Espaillat claims rather that poetry can simply describe the “serenity” of the commonplace, as in Vermeer:

whose people, drenched in light, like honey, wear
the blessing of the hive.

Espaillat’s opposite view may be partly related to gender. A female poet is attuned to the pleasures of a life “that slows to song.” She refers to the two paintings shown on the right. In both, a woman goes about her normal life: reading a letter or baking bread.

Then, at the end, she undercuts her own position by realizing

that art does not simply represent the world. Rather it selects what to portray and arranges the world to fit what the artist wishes to say about it. Vermeer paid his models to pretend to be going about their simple tasks, and bathed them in windowlight.



Johannes Vermeer

Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window (1859)

The Kitchen Maid (1858)



Diffugere Nives

(Ode IV.7)

All gone, the snow: grass throngs back to the fields,
the trees grow out new hair;
earth follows her changes, and subsiding streams
jostle within their backs.

The three graces and the greenwood nymphs,
naked, dare to dance.
You won't live always, warn the year and the hour
seizing the honeyed day.

Cold softens in breezes, spring fades into summer's heat
no sooner felt than doomed
when autumn pours out its harvest fruits, and soon
ice-solid winter steps back.

Swift-changing moons repair these heavenly hurts.
But we, when we go down
where pious Aeneas, rich Tullus, and Ancus have gone,
we're nothing but dust and shade.

Who knows how many tomorrows the gods will add
to today's small sum?
Whatever you spend in pleasure now, you won't
leave in your heir's moist grip.

Once you've died, and Minos has passed his mighty
sentence on you, Torquatus,
not family name, nor virtue, nor ingenious speeches will ever
spirit you back to life.

Not even Diana frees chaste Hippolytus
from the underworld dark;
and Theseus hasn't the strength to loosen death's chains
from Pirithous, whom he loved.

Quintus Horatius Flaccus (Horace), 13 BCE,
translated by Rosanna Warren, 2002

Diffugere nives

A. E. Housman (1859-1936), author of *A Shropshire Lad* (see pp 59, 67, 151) and renowned professor of Latin considered Horace's description of spring as "the most beautiful poem in ancient literature." He translated the opening lines

*Diffugere nives, redeunt iam gramina campis
arboribusque comae,
mutat terra vices et decrescentia ripas
flumina praetereunt,*

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.

His rhymed iambic pentameter lines bear no relation to the Latin poetic form. Latin poetry has no rhyme. Its rhythmic structure depends on the duration of the sounds whereas English rhythms are based on stress. Horace's ode is written with shorter lines alternating with longer in a meter called the "First Archilochian" – a dactylic (/ - -) hexameter followed by half of a dactylic hexameter. As Llewelyn Morgan (2010) notes, the meter itself represents "the inevitable truncation of human felicity and hope." Warren's translation alternates pentameter and trimeter lines.

The poem is concerned with the passage of time. The coming of spring is full of hope and happiness. However, spring also tells us not to hope for immortality (*immortalia ne speres*, or in the Warren translation "You won't live always"). Horace poses to his friend Torquatus the essential question (my translation):

Who knows if the gods will add more tomorrows
to the sum of our todays?

We should therefore seize the day (the *Carpe diem* of Horace's Ode I:11, see p 32) and live life to the fullest, for when we die there is no hope that we can return. In some Roman versions of the afterlife, Minos became the judge for all who die, deciding where in Hades each soul shall reside. None return to life.

Diffugere nives thus concludes with the fact that no mortal ever escapes from the underworld. Diana could not release Hippolytus nor could Theseus free Pirithous. The latter story had special meaning for Housman. At Oxford, Housman had fallen in love with Moses Jackson, a fellow student. Jackson was the opposite of Housman: scientist rather than classicist, athlete rather than aesthete, heterosexual rather than homosexual. They remained friends, but friendship is not the same as love. Housman considered Jackson to be Theseus, the hero who slew the Minotaur; he considered himself to be Pirithous, Theseus' friend. Late in their life, the mythic pair tried to steal Persephone from Hades. They were both captured and chained to the Seat of Forgetfulness. When Hercules came to Hades to capture the three-headed dog Cerberus, he released Theseus from his bondage, but he could not dislodge Pirithous. Although Persephone returns annually from Hades in the spring, Pirithous remains forever frozen. In a way, Housman's life remained forever fixed in his unrequited love for Jackson.

The Mercy

The ship that took my mother to Ellis Island
Eighty-three years ago was named "The Mercy."
She remembers trying to eat a banana
without first peeling it and seeing her first orange
in the hands of a young Scot, a seaman
who gave her a bite and wiped her mouth for her
with a red bandana and taught her the word,
"orange," saying it patiently over and over.
A long autumn voyage, the days darkening
with the black waters calming as night came on,
then nothing as far as her eyes could see and space
without limit rushing off to the corners
of creation. She prayed in Russian and Yiddish
to find her family in New York, prayers
unheard or misunderstood or perhaps ignored
by all the powers that swept the waves of darkness
before she woke, that kept "The Mercy" afloat
while smallpox raged among the passengers
and crew until the dead were buried at sea
with strange prayers in a tongue she could not fathom.
"The Mercy," I read on the yellowing pages of a book
I located in a windowless room of the library
on 42nd Street, sat thirty-one days
offshore in quarantine before the passengers
disembarked. There a story ends. Other ships
arrived, "Tancred" out of Glasgow, "The Neptune"
registered as Danish, "Umberto IV,"
the list goes on for pages, November gives
way to winter, the sea pounds this alien shore.
Italian miners from Piemonte dig
under towns in western Pennsylvania
only to rediscover the same nightmare
they left at home. A nine-year-old girl travels
all night by train with one suitcase and an orange.
She learns that mercy is something you can eat
again and again while the juice spills over
your chin, you can wipe it away with the back
of your hands and you can never get enough.

Philip Levine, 1999

The Mercy

Ellis Island is a tiny island in the upper reaches of New York Bay, close to the shore of New Jersey and just north of the Statue of Liberty, which was begun in 1875 and finally completed in 1886. A sonnet by Emma Lazarus, *The New Colossus*, written in 1883 was inscribed on a plaque within the pedestal of the statue. She called the statue the “Mother of Exiles” and contrasted it to the Colossus of Rhodes that was a symbol of power. The sonnet ends

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

Between 1892 and 1954, immigration officers on Ellis Island inspected and processed more than 12 million people on their way to settle in the United States. The photograph on the right from the Ellis Island archive shows a group of immigrants on the island’s dock, looking across the misty bay toward New York.

One of the immigrants was Levine’s mother: Esther Priscol (Pryszkulnik) traveled alone from Russia to Ellis Island in 1916. After a period of quarantine, she was allowed to journey on to Detroit, where her father, who had immigrated earlier, had been able to find work. Levine heard this story as a child and then looked up the ships in the files kept at the New York Public Library at 5th Avenue and 42nd Street.



In Europe, the Industrial Revolution had led to riches for few and poverty for most. The United States held out a beacon of hope to the poor of the world. However, although there was work aplenty, the workers were still terribly exploited. When the miners in Pennsylvania and West Virginia tried to unionize, the owners brought in new immigrants to replace the old. The English were replaced by the Irish, and the Irish by the Italians. As Levine notes the working conditions in the American mines were no better than those in Europe.

The main point of the poem is the wonder of mercy – symbolized by the orange – which is freely given and fully enjoyed

something you can eat
again and again while the juice spills over
your chin, you can wipe it away with the back
of your hands and you can never get enough.

This is the mercy that Portia described in her famous speech in *The Merchant of Venice*, though she failed to heed it in her actions (p.208).

To Autumn

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,
Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
Spare the next swath and all its twined flowers:
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
Steady thy laden head across a brook;
Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,
Thou watchest the last ooziings hours by hours.

Where are the songs of spring? Ay, Where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river shallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

John Keats, 1819

Life flows to death as rivers to the sea,
And life is fresh, and death is salt to me.

J. V. Cunningham, 1949

To Autumn

In a letter to John Reynolds, Keats described how he composed this poem on September 19, 1819, on an evening walk near Winchester in Hampshire.

How beautiful the season is now – How fine the air. A temperate sharpness about it. Really, without joking, chaste weather – Dian skies – I never liked stubble fields so well as now – Aye better than the chilly green of the Spring. Somehow a stubble plain looks warm – in the same way that some pictures look warm – this struck me so much in my Sunday's walk that I composed upon it.

Keats added an extra line to the quatrain-sestet form that he had used in earlier odes (pp 21, 106), using a rhyme scheme of *ababcdedcce* in the first verse and *ababcdecddde* in the second and third

The main theme of the poem is the passage of time. The first verse considers how time brings everything to fruitfulness; the second describes how time's passing brings a need for self-reflection; the third states that we should not regret what is no more. The last verse begins with the nostalgia of *Ubi sunt?* A phrase deriving from the apocryphal book of *Baruch* in the *Latin Vulgate*.

Ubi sunt principes gentium ... exterminati sunt et ad inferos descenderunt et alii loco eorum exsurrexerunt. [Where are the princes of the nations ... They have vanished and gone below, and others have arisen in their place]

Keats exhorts the reader to cease regret and to accept the beauty of the season.

On August 16 1819, calvary was used to disperse a crowd that had gathered in St. Peter's Field Manchester to hear Henry Hunt talk about reform, and eighteen people were killed (the "Peterloo" Massacre). In response, Shelley wrote *The Masque of Anarchy* which ends

Rise like Lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number -
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you -
Ye are many – they are few.

Shelley's poem was submitted to *The Examiner* but Leigh Hunt decided not to publish, and the poem did not appear in print until 1832. Some critics (e.g. Paulin, 2008) have read into *To Autumn* a coded response to what happened in Manchester. Though Keats sympathized with the reformers, I doubt the poem contains any political message.

Life flows to death as rivers to the sea

This is a translation of a Latin epigram of John Owen, published in the early 17th Century (*Epigrammata* I: 32). The images of the river and the sea represent the movement of life as opposed to the stillness of death. Cunningham's version is more fluent and more vivid than the original:

Ad mortem sic vita fluit, velut ad mare flumen: vivere nam res est dulcis, amara mori. [To death thus life flows, even as does to the sea a river: for to live is a sweet thing, and to die is bitter]

The Lion of Antonello da Messina

My lion tells me
that the word can kill and will do so
without warning. Together we have
house-trained terror till it's fit
to undertake a miracle for Science.
The underworld of things is Paradise,
the sun in stained-glass portholes made
to adore the laws of its dismantling
and all the books which must be studied
if Creation is to stay on course—
witness then the sheer assemblage
of this quiet; has any other sainted cell
so radiant a cross-section?

Without my lion nothing would connect,
he is the way imagination went
while God was still explaining it.
Antonello can't domesticate
my cauldron of a mind and so
he tidies everything and has the lion state
Jerome is king of thinking beasts.
But to get the entire world into
so small a painting is more than skill,
it adds up to theology.
Of all the lions I've had, this beast
of Antonello's is the most complete;
he lays his muzzle in my lap
as if he knows it is a fearful thing
to fall into the hands of the living god.

Peter Porter, 1997

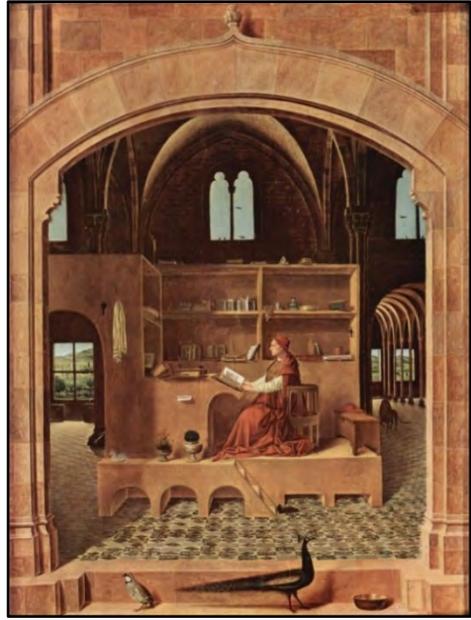
from **Auguries of Innocence**

To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.

William Blake, 1804

The Lion of Antonello da Messina

The poem is based on the painting *Saint Jerome in His Study* (1474) by Antonello da Messina. Saint Jerome (342-420 CE, Latin, *Hieronymus*) is best known for his translation of the Bible into Latin (the *Vulgate*). After his conversion to Christianity, Jerome spent a period of ascetic penance in the deserts of Syria, during which time he learnt the Hebrew language. A legend recounts how he tamed a lion by removing a thorn from its paw, and how thenceforth the lion accompanied him wherever he went. The painting shows Jerome reading in his study, revealed through a door in a gothic monastery. In the foreground the partridge, peacock, and water-bowl symbolize worldliness, immortality and ascetic purity. His lion can be seen in the shadows to the right of the study.



For Porter the lion represents the word of God, domesticated through translation but still incredibly powerful. The word also represents the creative imagination, which leads to knowledge (“Science”)

and all the books which must be studied
if Creation is to stay on course

In addition, the relationship between the lion and Jerome parallels that between man and God.

he knows it is a fearful thing
to fall into the hands of the living god

Auguries of Innocence

These are the first four lines of a long and perhaps incomplete poem that laments our inability to live in harmony with nature. Augury was a Roman practice of predicting the future from the flights of birds (*auspices*, looking at the birds) and the entrails of animals (*haruspices*, looking at the intestines).

In order to understand the world and heaven Blake instructs us to think differently from the way we do. Not to limit ourselves to the here and now, but to consider things from the point of view of infinite space and eternal time. Then we would not offend heaven by imprisoning or misusing animals:

A Robin Red breast in a Cage
Puts all Heaven in a Rage

from **Morte d'Arthur**

Then quickly rose Sir Bedivere, and ran,
And, leaping down the ridges lightly, plunged
Among the bulrush-beds, and clutch'd the sword,
And strongly wheel'd and threw it. The great brand
Made lightnings in the splendour of the moon,
And flashing round and round, and whirl'd in an arch,
Shot like a streamer of the northern morn,
Seen where the moving isles of winter shock
By night, with noises of the northern sea.
So flash'd and fell the brand Excalibur:
But ere he dipt the surface, rose an arm
Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful,
And caught him by the hilt, and brandish'd him
Three times, and drew him under in the mere.
And lightly went the other to the King.

Then spoke King Arthur, drawing thicker breath:
“Now see I by thine eyes that this is done.
Speak out: what is it thou hast heard, or seen?”

And answer made the bold Sir Bedivere:
“Sir King, I closed mine eyelids, lest the gems
Should blind my purpose, for I never saw,
Nor shall see, here or elsewhere, till I die,
Not tho' I live three lives of mortal men,
So great a miracle as yonder hilt.
Then with both hands I flung him, wheeling him;
But when I look'd again, behold an arm,
Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful,
That caught him by the hilt, and brandish'd him
Three times, and drew him under in the mere.”

And answer made King Arthur, breathing hard:
“My end draws nigh; 't is time that I were gone.
Make broad thy shoulders to receive my weight,
And bear me to the margin; yet I fear
My wound hath taken cold, and I shall die.”

So saying, from the pavement he half rose,
Slowly, with pain, reclining on his arm,
And looking wistfully with wide blue eyes
As in a picture. Him Sir Bedivere
Remorsefully regarded thro' his tears,

(ctd)

Morte d'Arthur

In the early 1830s just after leaving Cambridge University, Tennyson thought about writing a large epic based on the legends of on King Arthur. Some of this would be allegorical, with Arthur representing Faith, Guinevere Christianity, Merlin Science, and Modred (or Mordred) Skepticism. Tennyson shared his enthusiasm for this project with his great friend and fellow poet, Arthur Hallam.

While traveling with his father in Europe, Arthur Hallam died suddenly and unexpectedly in 1833. Tennyson was devastated. He renounced his great epic, based as it was on a young king who shared both the name and character of his lost friend. Much later, in 1842, he published *Morte d'Arthur* along with a brief introductory poem suggesting that it was one of twelve original books, the rest having being consigned to the fire as “nothing-worth, mere chaff and draff.” In 1859 he published several poems based on other Arthurian legends with the title *Idylls of the King*. An idyll is a poetic description of a pleasurable scene or event in the past, the word deriving from a diminutive of the Greek *eidōs* (image, idea, form). Over the years until 1885, Tennyson expanded his collection of idylls to 12 books, including a slightly revised *Morte d'Arthur*

Much of Tennyson's poem derives from a compilation of the Arthurian legends entitled *Le Morte d'Arthur* (French for “The Death of Arthur,” although mort(e) should be feminine), written by Sir Thomas Malory, and published in 1485 by William Caxton, who had set up the first printing press in England. At the time that *Le Morte d'Arthur* was printed, there were several knights named Thomas Malory, and no one is now sure which one had written the book.

At the beginning of Tennyson's *Morte d'Arthur* we are told of the great battle in Lyonesse (see p 37) between the armies of Arthur and of Modred, his nephew and the usurping king of England. At their meeting

Modred smote his liege
Hard on that helm which many a heathen sword
Had beaten thin; while Arthur at one blow,
Striking the last stroke with Excalibur,
Slew him, and all but slain himself, he fell.

The dying Arthur is carried by Sir Bedivere to a ruined chapel beside a lake near the field of battle. Arthur asks Bedivere to throw his sword Excalibur into the lake. Bedivere twice pretends to do so, but instead hides the sword amid the rushes at the water's edge. Arthur is not deceived, and instructs Bedivere once again to do what must be done.

Arthur's sword was named “Excalibur,” likely from the Welsh *Caledfwlch*, composed of *caled* (hard) and *fwlch* (cleft). Other etymologies are also suggested, e.g. from the Greek *chalebs*, steel. In Malory's epic, the sword was wrought by the Lady of the Lake, an enchantress, also known as Nimuë, who stated that the name meant “cut steel.” The Arthurian legends also tell of the “Sword in the Stone,” that young Arthur withdrew from the stone, thus proving himself the true king of England. According to Malory, this was shattered in battle with King Pellinore, and replaced with Excalibur.

And would have spoken, but he found not words,
Then took with care, and kneeling on one knee,
O'er both his shoulders drew the languid hands,
And rising bore him thro' the place of tombs.

But, as he walk'd, King Arthur panted hard,
Like one that feels a nightmare on his bed
When all the house is mute. So sigh'd the King
Muttering and murmuring at his ear, "Quick, quick!
I fear it is too late, and I shall die."
But the other swiftly strode from ridge to ridge,
Clothed with his breath, and looking, as he walk'd
Larger than human on the frozen hills.
He heard the deep behind him, and a cry
Before. His own thought drove him like a goad.
Dry clash'd his harness in the icy caves
And barren chasms, and all to left and right
The bare black cliff clang'd round him, as he based
His feet on juts of slippery crag that rang
Sharp-smitten with the dint of armed heels—
And on a sudden, lo! the level lake,
And the long glories of the winter moon.

Then saw they how there hove a dusky barge
Dark as a funeral scarf from stem to stern,
Beneath them; and descending they were ware
That all the decks were dense with stately forms
Black-stoled, black-hooded, like a dream—by these
Three Queens with crowns of gold—and from them rose
A cry that shiver'd to the tingling stars,
And, as it were one voice, an agony
Of lamentation, like a wind, that shrills
All night in a waste land, where no one comes,
Or hath come, since the making of the world.

Then murmur'd Arthur, "Place me in the barge,"
And to the barge they came. There those three Queens
Put forth their hands, and took the King, and wept.
But she that rose the tallest of them all
And fairest, laid his head upon her lap,
And loosed the shatter'd casque, and chafed his hands,
And call'd him by his name, complaining loud
And dropping bitter tears against his brow
Striped with dark blood: for all his face was white
And colourless, and like the wither'd moon
Smote by the fresh beam of the springing east; *(ctd)*

The arm that rises out of the lake to catch and brandish Excalibur is “clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful.” Samite is a heavy silk fabric often with interwoven gold or silver threads. The word comes from the Greek *hexamiton* (six threads). The fabric is similar to satin, though that word comes from the Arab name (*zayton*) for the Chinese port of Quanzhou, whence it was imported.

Sir Bedivere carries the dying king over the rocks to the shore where they find a “dusky barge” filled with mourners clad in black, led by three queens with “crowns of gold.” Malory identified the three queens on the barge: Morgan Le Fay (Arthur’s sister), the Queen of the Northgales (another enchantress, also known as Sebile, that name deriving from the Cumaean Sibyl), and the Queen of the Waste Lands (who had instructed Sir Perceval in his quest for the Grail). Accompanying the queens was Nimuë (the Lady of the Lake, who had given Arthur Excalibur). The barge takes Arthur away to Avilion (Avalon) where he will find rest.

The worldly location of Avalon is unknown. The name derives from the Cornish *Enys Avalow*, the isle of fruit trees. Many consider that Avalon may be found in the region of Somerset near Glastonbury. Long ago this was fenland, and higher regions such as the hill of Glastonbury Tor may have been considered islands. The region is also associated with the legend of Joseph of Arimathea, the man who buried the crucified Christ, and brought the Holy Grail to Britain.

Avalon is described as paradise on earth:

Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,
Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies
Deep-meadow’d, happy, fair with orchard-lawns
And bowery hollows crown’d with summer sea

Refuges of peace and happiness have long been part of human thought. These may be considered regretfully as places lost in the past like the Garden of Eden, or optimistically as places we may reach in the afterlife like Christianity’s promised Heaven. The discovery of the New World evoked ideas of the Fountain of Youth or the wonderful city of Eldorado. The Buddhist concept of hidden valleys where the faithful could retreat in times of strife and persecution gave rise to the modern stories of Shangri-La.

The ending of Tennyson’s poem differs a little from Malory’s narrative. Malory was ambiguous about what actually happened to the dying Arthur. The morning after Arthur is taken away, Sir Bedivere comes to a chapel where he finds a newly graven tomb. The hermit at the chapel says that a group of ladies asked him to bury there one who had newly died. However, Bedivere still wonders:

Yet some men say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead, but had by the will of our Lord Jesu into another place; and men say that he shall come again, and he shall win the holy cross. I will not say it shall be so, but rather I will say: here in this world he changed his life. But many men say that there is written upon his tomb this verse:

HIC JACET ARTHURUS, REX QUONDAM, REXQUE FUTURUS.
(Here lies Arthur, the once and future king.)

And all his greaves and cuisses dash'd with drops
Of onset; and the light and lustrous curls—
That made his forehead like a rising sun
High from the daïs-throne—were parch'd with dust;
Or, clotted into points and hanging loose,
Mix'd with the knightly growth that fringed his lips.
So like a shatter'd column lay the King;
Not like that Arthur who, with lance in rest,
From spur to plume a star of tournament,
Shot thro' the lists at Camelot, and charged
Before the eyes of ladies and of kings.

Then loudly cried the bold Sir Bedivere:
“Ah! my Lord Arthur, whither shall I go?
Where shall I hide my forehead and my eyes?
For now I see the true old times are dead,
When every morning brought a noble chance,
And every chance brought out a noble knight.
Such times have been not since the light that led
The holy Elders with the gift of myrrh.
But now the whole ROUND TABLE is dissolved
Which was an image of the mighty world;
And I, the last, go forth companionless,
And the days darken round me, and the years,
Among new men, strange faces, other minds.”

And slowly answer'd Arthur from the barge:
“The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfils Himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.
Comfort thyself: what comfort is in me?
I have lived my life, and that which I have done
May He within Himself make pure! but thou,
If thou shouldst never see my face again,
Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice
Rise like a fountain for me night and day.
For what are men better than sheep or goats
That nourish a blind life within the brain,
If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer
Both for themselves and those who call them friend?
For so the whole round earth is every way
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.
But now farewell. I am going a long way
With these thou seest—if indeed I go—
(For all my mind is clouded with a doubt) (ctd)

In *The Coming of Arthur*, the first of Tennyson's final *Idylls of the King*, Tennyson recounted several tales about the birth of Arthur. In one, a dragon-winged ship "bright with a shining people" had appeared on the coast near Tintagel Castle in Cornwall, and a naked babe was cast by the waves at the feet of Merlin. The taking away of Arthur in the barge by the three queens thus brings the legend full circle.

In the poem there is no overt mention of Arthur's return. However, Tennyson's first version of *Morte d'Arthur* concluded with some lines describing the poem's first effect on its listeners. This led to a dream:

And so to bed; where yet in sleep I seemed
To sail with Arthur under looming shores,
Point after point; till on to dawn, when dreams
Begin to feel the truth and stir of day,
To me, methought, who waited with a crowd,
There came a bark that, blowing forward, bore
King Arthur, like a modern gentleman
Of stateliest port; and all the people cried,
'Arthur is come again: he cannot die.'

The return of the king is a recurrent theme in human myth and religion. The Danes have a legend about Ogier Danske, a great warrior who will return to Elsinore should Denmark have need of him. The *Nicene Creed* of the Christian religion is focused on the idea that Christ will return:

He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead
and his kingdom will have no end.

Many branches of Buddhism believe that in the future, when the teachings of Gautama Buddha – the *dharma* – will have been forgotten, a new Buddha will appear: Maitreya (Sanskrit, loving kindness) will usher in a society of tolerance and love. In Hinduism, Krishna returns to the Earth whenever necessary to ensure that good prevails (*Bhagavadgita* II: 1-12):

When righteousness
Declines, O Bharata! when Wickedness
Is strong, I rise, from age to age, and then take
Visible shape, and move a man with men,
Succouring the good, thrusting the evil back,
And setting Virtue on her seat again.

The most memorable line from Tennyson's poem is

The old order changeth, yielding place to new

During the time that Tennyson worked on the *Idylls* – from 1830 to 1885 – Britain changed irrevocably. The Reform Act of 1832 greatly expanded the political franchise, granting many members of the middle class the right to vote. Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) questioned the belief that man was the special creation of God. The world was new, and poets like Tennyson were filled with uncertainty.

To the island-valley of Avilion;
Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,
Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies
Deep-meadow'd, happy, fair with orchard-lawns
And bowery hollows crown'd with summer sea,
Where I will heal me of my grievous wound."

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.

Alfred Tennyson, 1842

When I was one-and-twenty
I heard a wise man say,
"Give crowns and pounds and guineas
But not your heart away;
Give pearls away and rubies
But keep your fancy free."
But I was one-and-twenty,
No use to talk to me.

When I was one-and-twenty
I heard him say again,
"The heart out of the bosom
Was never given in vain;
'Tis paid with sighs a plenty
And sold for endless rue."
And I am two-and-twenty,
And oh, 'tis true, 'tis true.

A. E. Housman, 1896



So we leave Arthur at rest in on the Island of Avalon. The above illustration shows *The Last Sleep of Arthur in Avalon*, a massive painting (6.5 m wide) that Edward Burne-Jones worked on from 1881 until his death in 1898. The following description is from an essay by Debra Mancoff (2000):

the king reclines on a richly draped couch in a marble cloister. He is sheltered by a bronze canopy, embellished with gilded plaques that tell the history of the Holy Grail. Seated at his head and feet are the guardian queens, keeping their vigil in silent contemplation. Attendants play gentle music to soothe their sovereign's slumber, and, to the right, noble women bear his arms and armor. Guards are stationed at the entries to the cloister. They hold horns and trumpets instead of weapons; they will wake the king at the time of his return. In this tranquil atmosphere, safe from harm and disturbance, Arthur enjoys the sleep of revitalization. His pain has passed; his wounds are healing. He rests content in the knowledge that his former task is concluded and his future challenge is not yet at hand.

When I was one-and-twenty

In 1880, At the age of twenty-one, Housman realized that his deep love for Moses Jackson, his room-mate at Oxford University, was unrequited. His emotional despair likely contributed to his failure at the examination in "Greats." At the age of twenty-two, Housman found himself without any hope for love or for career.

Housman and Jackson continued to be friends, but by 1889 Jackson was married and in India. Housman maintained contact with Moses's brother Adalbert. The death of Adalbert from typhus appears to have triggered a return of Housman's youthful emotions and led to the writing of *A Shropshire Lad*.

Housman wrote his second book of poetry *Last Verse* in 1922 after he learned that Moses was dying of cancer. After the death of Moses, Housman composed a poem describing his feelings for Moses, and predicting his own death. Its first and last verses are:

Because I liked you better
 Than suits a man to say
 It irked you and I promised
 To throw the thought away

Halt by the headstone shading
 The heart you have not stirred
 And say the lad that loved you
 Was one that kept his word.

When I am dead, my dearest

When I am dead, my dearest,
Sing no sad songs for me;
Plant thou no roses at my head,
Nor shady cypress tree:
Be the green grass above me
With showers and dewdrops wet;
And if thou wilt, remember,
And if thou wilt, forget.

I shall not see the shadows,
I shall not feel the rain;
I shall not hear the nightingale
Sing on, as if in pain:
And dreaming through the twilight
That doth not rise nor set,
Haply I may remember,
And haply may forget.

Christina Rossetti, 1862

Peace

When will you ever, Peace, wild wooddove, shy wings shut,
Your round me roaming end, and under be my boughs?
When, when, Peace, will you, Peace? I'll not play hypocrite
To own my heart: I yield you do come sometimes; but
That piecemeal peace is poor peace. What pure peace allows
Alarms of wars, the daunting wars, the death of it?

O surely, reaving Peace, my Lord should leave in lieu
Some good! And so he does leave Patience exquisite,
That plumes to Peace thereafter. And when Peace here does house
He comes with work to do, he does not come to coo,
He comes to brood and sit.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, 1879

When I am dead, my dearest

Cristina Rossetti was the younger sister and sometime model of the painter-poet Dante Gabriele Rossetti, one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848. This group rebelled against the recent developments in painting and reverted to the painting styles of the late medieval period. They rejected *chiaroscuro* – the use of light-dark shading to achieve a sense of volume – and *sfumato* – the softening of the transitions between colors. Instead, they promoted bright colors and clear outlines. The brotherhood also sought to elevate the subject matter of painting – to give it moral value. Cristina’s poetry can be described in similar terms: it considers moral issues with a limpid simplicity.

The family was very devout. They were caught up in the Oxford Movement (Tractarianism) which began in 1833 and sought to return the Church of England to the liturgy and rituals of Roman Catholicism. Her poetry had a considerable effect on the beliefs and the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, who, unlike the Rossettis, did ultimately convert to Roman Catholicism.

More than half of Rossetti’s poems were religious in nature. Many considered the nature of death and its effect on others. Rossetti believed that at death she would dissolve into the infinite, where she would dream in an eternal twilight. In this poem, Rossetti asks that her mourners not spend much time or ceremony on her remembrance. She herself will be at peace and they should not lament her passing. The word “haply” means by chance but also brings to mind the thought that she will be happily at rest.

Peace

This curial sonnet (cf. *Pied Beauty*, p 93) written in Alexandrines (iambic hexameters) is one of the first indications of the mental suffering that would lead a few years later to the Sonnets of Desolation (p 125). Hopkins characterizes the peace he is seeking as a wild dove who is too shy to stay for more than brief periods in the branches of his tree.

The poem shows Hopkins’s love of words. To “reave” is to steal; its past participle is “reft” – a word that is used by Pound in his *Canto LXXXI* (p 87). It is related to “bereave” where the prefix “be-” means completely.

In the final section, Hopkins admits that God sometimes gives patience instead of peace. And patience may “plume” to peace. The word “plume” means to spread out like a feather (or like smoke from a fire). The image of the “dove” is used in the Bible to signify the Holy Ghost. This was the force that moved over the surface of the deep during the creation of the universe, the spirit that descended into Jesus at his baptism and the *Paraclete* (advocate or helper) that Jesus promised to send to his disciples after he is no longer on the earth

But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.

Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.

(John 14: 26-27)

from **Jerusalem**

Abstract Philosophy warring in enmity against Imagination
(Which is the Divine Body of the Lord Jesus, blessed for ever).
And there Jerusalem wanders with Vala upon the mountains,
Attracted by the revolutions of those Wheels the Cloud of smoke
Immense, and Jerusalem & Vala weeping in the Cloud
Wander away into the Chaotic Void, lamenting with her Shadow
Among the Daughters of Albion, among the Starry Wheels;
Lamenting for her children, for the sons & daughters of Albion

Los heard her lamentations in the deeps afar! his tears fall
Incessant before the Furnaces, and his Emanation divided in pain,
Eastward toward the Starry Wheels. But Westward, a black Horror,
His spectre driv'n by the Starry Wheels of Albions sons, black and
Opake divided from his back; he labours and he mourns!
For as his Emanation divided, his Spectre also divided
In terror of those starry wheels: and the Spectre stood over Los
Howling in pain: a blackning Shadow, blackning dark & opake
Cursing the terrible Los: bitterly cursing him for his friendship
To Albion, suggesting murderous thoughts against Albion.

Los rag'd and stamp'd the earth in his might & terrible wrath!
He stood and stamp'd the earth! then he threw down his hammer in rage &
In fury: then he sat down and wept, terrified! Then arose
And chaunted his song, labouring with the tongs and hammer:
But still the Spectre divided, and still his pain increas'd!

In pain the Spectre divided: in pain of hunger and thirst:
To devour Los's Human Perfection, but when he saw that Los
Was living: panting like a frightened wolf, and howling
He stood over the Immortal, in the solitude and darkness:
Upon the darkning Thames, across the whole Island westward.
A horrible Shadow of Death, among the Furnaces: beneath
The pillar of folding smoke; and he sought by other means,
To lure Los: by tears, by arguments of science & by terrors:
Terrors in every Nerve, by spasms & extended pains:
While Los answer'd unterrified to the opake blackening Fiend

And thus the Spectre spoke: Wilt thou still go on to destruction?
Till thy life is all taken away by this deceitful Friendship?
He drinks thee up like water! like wine he pours thee
Into his tuns: thy Daughters are trodden in his vintage

(ctd)

Jerusalem

In the latter half of his life, Blake's poems turned from lyric to prophetic. Like Isaiah and Jeremiah, he lamented the world and its failings. His prophetic works were engraved and printed in books with extremely powerful illustrations. These poems are difficult to read. The characters metamorphose into others, change from people into places, and divide into Spectres, Shadows and Emanations. Blake's prophetic books are far more looked at than listened to.

Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion, Blake's last and greatest book of prophecy, describes the story of Los, symbol of the Creative Imagination. Driven by his demonic Spectre, he must destroy the present state of England (personified by the Giant Albion), which has fallen into desolation, and reforge a new world. The selection on the facing page is from plates 5 and 6 of the book. The depiction of Los and his Spectre, shown on the right, is on plate 6.



On plate 10 of *Jerusalem* Los states

I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Man's;
I will not Reason and Compare: my business is to Create.

The basic idea of *Jerusalem* is expressed in the first line of this excerpt. Mankind is no longer whole: reason and imagination are at war with each other. These two forces that should work together in any living person have separated from Los to form a "Spectre" – a negative force of selfish individualism – and an Emanation – a sensitive feminine force. The Spectre of Los attempts by telling lies, to convince Los to cease his love of Albion. The Emanation of Los, called "Enitharmon," will ultimately be rejoined to Los. In books other than *Jerusalem*, Los and Enitharmon have a son Orc, who is the personification of Revolution.

Blake was appalled by the changes in England wrought by the Industrial Revolution: the replacement of the rural countryside by the filth of mines and the smoke of manufacturing, and the exploitation of the workers. Vala, the Goddess of nature laments the state of Albion. *Jerusalem* joins her in her weeping.

The character *Jerusalem*, as distinct from the place, is the personification of Liberty. She is the Emanation of Albion. The inscription on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia (from *Leviticus* 25:10) is the message of *Jerusalem*:

Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof:

As the poem proceeds, Los keeps rebuilding, Albion awakens and perceives that Los is Christ. Everything reunites in one Divine Body.

He makes thy Sons the trampling of his bulls, they are plow'd
And harrow'd for his profit, lo! thy stolen Emanation
Is his garden of pleasure! all the Spectres of his Sons mock thee
Look how they scorn thy once admired palaces! now in ruins
Because of Albion! because of deceit and friendship!

William Blake, 1818

The Circus Animals' Desertion

I

I sought a theme and sought for it in vain,
I sought it daily for six weeks or so.
Maybe at last being but a broken man
I must be satisfied with my heart, although
Winter and summer till old age began
My circus animals were all on show,
Those stilted boys, that burnished chariot,
Lion and woman and the Lord knows what.

II

What can I but enumerate old themes,
First that sea-rider Oisín led by the nose
Through three enchanted islands, allegorical dreams,
Vain gaiety, vain battle, vain repose,
Themes of the embittered heart, or so it seems,
That might adorn old songs or courtly shows;
But what cared I that set him on to ride,
I, starved for the bosom of his fairy bride.

And then a counter-truth filled out its play,
'The Countess Cathleen' was the name I gave it,
She, pity-crazed, had given her soul away
But masterful Heaven had intervened to save it.
I thought my dear must her own soul destroy
So did fanaticism and hate enslave it,
And this brought forth a dream and soon enough
This dream itself had all my thought and love.

(ctd)

Jerusalem thus ends with man ecstatically reunited with God. The illustration on the right is from plate 99 of the book

All Human Forms identified, even Tree,
Metal, Earth & Stone: all
Human Forms identified, living, going forth
and returning wearied
Into the Planetary lives of Years, Months,
Days & Hours reposing,
And then Awakening into his Bosom in the
Life of Immortality.
And I heard the Name of their Emanations:
they are named Jerusalem



The Circus Animals' Desertion

This was one of the last poems written by Yeats. In 1939, at the age of 73 years, he found it increasingly difficult to create poetry. He likens his poems to the animals in the circus that were previously always available to him, but now were nowhere to be seen.

The poem is written in *ottava rima*, a form deriving from the Italian Renaissance. The stanzas are composed of eight iambic pentameter lines using an *abababcc* rhyme scheme. Most of the rhymes are strict, but as the poem progresses, Yeats occasionally uses slant rhymes (bread/said/deed; can/began/gone). Yeats had previously used *ottava rima* in his 1927 poem *Sailing to Byzantium* (p 7)

The first part of the poem tells of the poet's current state of writer's block. In the second part of the poem, the poet, unable to produce anything new, remembers back to when he was able to create at will. He first recalls his 1889 poem *The Wanderings of Oisín*. Oisín was the legendary Irish poet who married the fairy Niamh and ruled in *Tír na nÓg*, the "Land of Youth." Yeats's youthful poem actually begins with an aged Oisín recalling his life for St Patrick:

But the tale, though words be lighter than air
Must live to be old like the wandering moon.

Then Yeats's recalls his verse drama *The Countess Cathleen* (1892, revised 1911). The play tells of an Irish noblewoman who sells her soul to the Devil during the Great Famine (1845-1852) so that she can save her tenants from starvation. In the end, however, she is redeemed by the angels:

She gave away her soul for others — God,
Who sees the motive and the deed regards not,
Bade us go down and save her from the demons,
Who do not know the deed can never bind.

The play was fierce in its condemnation of the English, who had precipitated the famine and provided no relief. The play was dedicated to Maud Gonne, the great love of Yeats's youth (see pp 39, 108). Those were the times when the poet wrote about his dreams of love and freedom.

And when the Fool and Blind Man stole the bread
Cuchulain fought the ungovernable sea;
Heart mysteries there, and yet when all is said
It was the dream itself enchanted me:
Character isolated by a deed
To engross the present and dominate memory.
Players and painted stage took all my love
And not those things that they were emblems of.

III

Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind but out of what began?
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone
I must lie down where all the ladders start
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.

William Butler Yeats, 1939

Prayer

Echo of the clocktower, footstep
in the alleyway, sweep
of the wind sifting the leaves.

Jeweller of the spiderweb,
connoisseur of autumn's opulence, blade of lightning
harvesting the sky.

Keeper of the small gate,
choreographer of entrances and exits,
midnight whisper travelling the wires.

Seducer, healer, deity or thief,
I will see you soon enough—
in the shadow of the rainfall,

in the brief violet darkening a sunset—
but until then I pray watch over him
as a mountain guards its covert ore

and the harsh falcon its flightless young.

Dana Gioia, 1990

In the fourth verse of the poem Yeats recalls how he reworked the legendary stories of *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* collected and published by Isabella Augusta, Lady Gregory, in 1902. The first of these works was *On Baile's Strand*, a play performed at the Abbey Theatre in 1904. While overseas, Cuchulain had fallen in love with the Princess Aife, and unbeknown to him she had given birth to his son, Conall. Much later, Conall comes to Ireland to seek out his father. Challenged by Cuchulain he refuses to reveal his identity and is slain by his father. Discovering what he has done, Cuchulain goes mad and proceeds to battle with the waves, finally succumbing to their invincible power. The Fool and the Blind Man, comic relief for this tragic tale, realize that, now that Cuchulain has gone to fight the waves, they can raid the ovens with impunity.

In the poem's final section Yeats tries to recall how the images that led to his poems and his plays actually began. He realizes that they are the detritus from his life accumulated by his subconscious like a rag-and-bone man who scours the streets for refuse that can somehow be re-used. He once had a ladder that allowed him to descend into "the foul rag and bone shop of the heart," pay the "raving slut who keeps the till" for his poetic images, and then ascend again to write them into plays and poems. Now the ladder is gone. He lies down "where all the ladders start" and hopes that he can still perhaps create. The word "start" contains within itself some hope for renewal.

Prayer

In 1987 Gioia's first son died at the age of 4 months from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, a disorder we still do not understand. Gioia's grief was intense and his Catholic faith shaken. Nothing questions more acutely the existence of a benevolent God than the death of an innocent child.

In this poem Gioia asks whatever power that rules the universe – "seducer, healer, deity or thief" – to watch over his son until he himself dies and joins him.

The poem is remarkable for its images of divinity as the "jeweller of the spiderweb," and the "choreographer of entrances and exits" and the intense love that the author still feels for his lost son.

Children should not die before their parents. Martial, the scathingly satirical epigrammatist of 1st-Century CE Rome, lost his daughter Erotion just before her sixth birthday. In *Epigram XXXIV* he commends her to the care of his own departed parents, asking them to protect her from the terrors of the afterlife. In Peter Porter's 1971 translation, the epigram ends

May my name
be burbling on her tongue, the childish gift
of sorrow spent on age.
And monumental earth,
draw back eternal weight from her
small bones;
don't be severe
and tread on her with gravity,
she never did on you.

North Haven

In memoriam: Robert Lowell

*I can make out the rigging of a schooner
a mile off; I can count
the new cones on the spruce. It is so still
the pale bay wears a milky skin, the sky
no clouds, except for one long carded horse's-tail.*

The islands haven't shifted since last summer,
even if I like to pretend they have
– drifting, in a dreamy sort of way,
a little north, a little south or sidewise,
and that they're free within the blue frontiers of bay.

This month our favorite one is full of flowers:
Buttercups, Red Clover, Purple Vetch,
Hawkweed still burning, Daisies pied, Eyebright,
the Fragrant Bedstraw's incandescent stars,
and more, returned, to paint the meadows with delight.

The Goldfinches are back, or others like them,
and the White-throated Sparrow's five-note song,
pleading and pleading, brings tears to the eyes.
Nature repeats itself, or almost does:
repeat, repeat, repeat; revise, revise, revise.

Years ago, you told me it was here
(in 1932?) you first “discovered *girls*”
and learned to sail, and learned to kiss.
You had “such fun,” you said, that classic summer.
 (“Fun” – it always seemed to leave you at a loss ...)

You left North Haven, anchored in its rock,
afloat in mystic blue ... And now – you've left
for good. You can't derange, or re-arrange,
your poems again. (But the Sparrows can their song.)
The words won't change again. Sad friend, you cannot change.

Elizabeth Bishop, 1978

North Haven

Bishop met Robert Lowell in 1947 at a dinner party hosted by Randall Jarrell. They had both just published their first books – *North and South* and *Lord Weary's Castle*. They became good friends and lifelong correspondents. Lowell once considered asking Bishop to marry him, but he never did. Both poets are similar in the intensity and precision of their images. However, Bishop was highly focused and Lowell often digressed.

During his adolescence, Lowell had spent summer holidays in Penobscot Bay, a beautiful island-filled inlet on the coast of Maine, long celebrated by painters such as John Marin, whose 1922 watercolor is shown on the right. Elizabeth Bishop came to know the region through Lowell, and spent her last summers with Alice Methfessel (see p 71) in a rented farmhouse on North Haven, one of the islands in the bay. She was there when she heard about Lowell's death on September 12, 1977.



Bishop's poem is an elegy for Robert Lowell and a meditation on the passage of time. The rhythm is conversational; the only rhyme between the third and last lines of each five-line stanza, sometimes regular and sometimes slant.

The initial verse appears to recall a conversation (*stichomythia* – alternating speakers) between Lowell and Bishop as they observed the sea, land and sky of New Haven. “Carding” uses a brush to disentangle wool fibers prior to spinning, but the same brush can also be used to groom a horse. Horse-tail or mare’s tail clouds are wispy cirrus clouds that usually predict rain within the next few days.

The second verse describes how some things do not change – the islands in the bay are fixed no matter how much we may wish them free. The next two verses catalog the wildflowers that return each year “to paint the meadows with delight” and the birds and their songs. The returning flowers and birds are not same as those of the previous year, but “others like them.” Repetition and revision are the principles by which time operates. The fifth verse deals with the changes that occur in memory, how some things can be re-experienced. Bishop lovingly remembers that Lowell often seemed unable to enjoy the simple pleasures.

At the end of the poem Bishop remarks about how Lowell used to revise his poems over and over again. Now both the poems and the poet have become fixed and cannot change any further. Bishop chooses the word “derange” to allude gently to Lowell's troubles with manic depressive disorder.

You can't derange, or rearrange,
your poems again. (But the sparrows can their song.)
The words won't change again. Sad friend, you cannot change.

Elizabeth Bishop died two years after her friend on October 6, 1979.

Iron Spike

So like a harrow-pin
I hear harness-creaks and the click
of stones in a ploughed-up field.
But it was the age of steam

at Eagle Pond, New Hampshire,
when this rusted spike I found there
was aimed and driven in
to fix a cog on the line.

It flakes like dead maple leaves
in the track of the old railway,
eaten at and weathered
like birch stumps dressed by beavers.

What guarantees things keeping
if a railway can be lifted
like a long briar out of ditch-growth?
I felt I had come on myself

in its still, grassed-over path
where I drew the iron like a thorn
or a dialect word of my own
warm from a stranger's mouth.

And the sledge-head that drove it
with a last opaque report deep
into the creosoted
sleeper, where is that?

And its sweat-cured, polished haft?
Ask those ones on the buggy,
inaudible and upright
and sped along without shadows.

Seamus Heaney, 1983

Iron Spike

In 1981-2 Heaney was a visiting professor at Harvard University. During his tenure there, he visited the poets Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon on their farm at Eagle Pond in New Hampshire. An old railway used to run north beside the pond. Now all that is left is the grassed-over trackway and some iron spikes that used to fix the rails to the creosoted wooden sleeper-ties. The rails and the ties would have been used again elsewhere.

This poem is one of several about found-objects in a group entitled *Shelf Life*, referring more to the persistence of the objects than to their “best-before date.” Among the other objects were a chip off the wall of Joyce’s Martello Tower and a stone from Delphi.

Heaney likens the spike to the iron pins used in a harrow (cf p 54), which was the subject of a poem he was to write some twenty years later. In that poem the pin invokes how the blacksmith he knew as a child taught the children what was right

a harrow-pin
Was correction’s veriest unit.
Head-banged spike, forged fang, a true dead ringer

Out of a harder time, it was a stake
He’d drive through aspiration and pretence
For our instruction.

Harrows with iron pins have been in use since the Middle Ages, but the idea of using iron spikes with asymmetrical heads for fixing rails stemmed from Robert L. Stevens in the 1830s. Originally the spikes were driven into the wood with a special sledge-hammer called a “spike maul,” but soon machines took over the task.



Heaney wonders about how the railway that is no more, and imagines the ghostly workers who laid the rails speeding away on their handcar.

The poem uses some vivid imagery – the flakes of rust on the spike like maple leaves, the spike itself “like birch stumps dressed by beavers,” the rails like long briars, and the spike like a word from the past (the harrow-pin of his childhood).

The poem contains sevens quatrains with no formal rhythm or rhyme scheme. However, assonance occurs throughout: field/steam, leaves/beaver. And there are occasional slant rhymes: Hampshire/there, in/line.

In the sixth verse, the repeating “t” sounds evoke the slow rhythmic hammering of the spike into the sleeper;

And the sledge-head that drove it
with a last opaque report deep
into the creosoted
sleeper, where is that?

from **The Hollow Men**

*Here we go round the prickly pear
Prickly pear prickly pear
Here we go round the prickly pear
At five o'clock in the morning.*

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow
For Thine is the Kingdom

Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the Shadow
Life is very long

Between the desire
And the spasm
Between the potency
And the existence
Between the essence
And the descent
Falls the Shadow
For Thine is the Kingdom

For Thine is
Life is
For Thine is the

*This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.*

T. S. Eliot, 1925

The Hollow Men

This is the fifth and final section of Eliot's poem describing us as hollow men: though we know what should be done, we somehow cannot bring ourselves to do it. The title may derive from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (IV: 2), when Brutus worries about his allies before the Battle of Philippi, in which he will be defeated:

But hollow men, like horses hot at hand,
Make gallant show and promise of their mettle;
But when they should endure the bloody spur,
They fall their crests, and, like deceitful jades,
Sink in the trial.

The epigraph to the complete poem ("A penny for the Old Guy") alludes to the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 wherein a group of English Catholics attempted to blow up Parliament. The plot was discovered, and Guy Fawkes was arrested with the gunpowder in the cellars of the House of Lords. Since then, Bonfire Night as been celebrated throughout England by the burning of straw effigies of Guy Fawkes.

The introductory lines of this last section of the poem mimic the nursery rhyme *Here we Go Round the Mulberry Bush*. This song was sung by female prisoners and their children as they exercised by dancing round a mulberry tree in the courtyard of Wakefield Prison, but likely has a more ancient origin. As Frazer noted in *The Golden Bough* (IV:77)

... how often with the decay of old faiths the serious rites and pageants of grown people have degenerated into the sport of children.

The nursery rhyme recalls an ancient fertility dance, but does not work in this infertile land. The bonfire recalls the burning of effigies of ancient gods in the hope of their later resurrection.

The shadow that falls between the idea and the reality derives from Dowson's *Non Sum Qualis Eram Bonae Sub Regno Cynarae* (p 70) wherein the memory of his old love prevents all present enjoyment:

I cried for madder music and for stronger wine,
But when the feast is finished and the lamps expire,
Then falls thy shadow, Cynara! The night is thine

In the years that followed World War I, the world was paralyzed. The old truths no longer seemed relevant. The end of the Lord's prayer (*Matthew* 6:13) – "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever" cannot be completed.

There seemed no hope for salvation. We are left in a desolate world to await our final death. The comment "Life is very long" is likely a parody of the Latin aphorism *Ars longa vita brevis* ("Art is long and life is short")

Nevil Shute's 1957 novel *On the Beach*, which imagined the end of the world following an atomic war, took its title from lines in section IV of the poem:

We grope together
And avoid speech
Gathered on this beach of the tumid river

And quotes the final lines of section V in its epigraph.

The Way Things Are

No, the candle is not crying, it cannot feel pain.
Even telescopes, like the rest of us, grow bored.
Bubblegum will not make hair soft and shiny.
The duller the imagination, the faster the car,
I am your father and this is the way things are.

When the sky is looking the other way,
do not enter the forest. No, the wind
is not caused by the rushing of clouds.
An excuse is as good a reason as any.
A lighthouse, launched, will not go far,
I am your father and this is the way things are.

No, old people do not walk slowly
because they have plenty of time.
Gardening books when buried will not flower.
Though lightly worn, a crown may leave a scar,
I am your father and this is the way things are.

No, the red woolly hat has not been
put on the railing to keep it warm.
When one glove is missing, both are lost.
Today's craft fair is tomorrow's car boot sale.
The guitarist gently weeps, not the guitar,
I am your father and this is the way things are.

Pebbles work best without batteries.
The deckchair will fail as a unit of currency.
Even though your shadow is shortening
it does not mean you are growing smaller.
Moonbeams sadly, will not survive in a jar,
I am your father and this is the way things are.

For centuries the bullet remained quietly confident
that the gun would be invented.
A drowning surrealist will not appreciate
the concrete lifebelt.
No guarantee my last goodbye is an au revoir,
I am your father and this is the way things are.

Do not become a prison-officer unless you know
what you're letting someone else in for.
The thrill of being a shower curtain will soon pall.
No trusting hand awaits the falling star,
I am your father, and I am sorry,
but this is the way things are.

Roger McGough, 1999

The Way Things Are

In philosophy, “the way things are” is the nature of reality. In politics, it is an excuse for not doing anything. In teaching, it is the final recourse when one runs out of reasons why. In this poem, the expression is the way that a father keeps his child’s imagination from going too far into fantasy. The fun is in how far the child will go.

The child happily inverts cause and effect and attributes the winds to the clouds rushing around the sky. Generalization can only go so far: if we can use seashells as money, why not deckchairs?

A child tends to attribute sentience to objects that have no minds. The woolly hat, which was put on the railing because someone had dropped it, might just as well have served to keep the railing warm. Telescopes are not excited by what they look at; guitars and candles do not weep.

While correcting of his child’s misinterpretations of reality, the father provides basic advice for living. Using your imagination can be far more fun than even the fastest car. Simple games like skipping pebbles are more interesting than complicated games, whose batteries will run out.

Much of the humor comes from wordplay. One often worries what one is letting oneself in for. However, as the father says

Do not become a prison-officer unless you know
what you're letting someone else in for

The poem is in free form except for the repetition of the last line across the different verses and the rhyming of the last two lines of each verse. The end is signified by a change in its ending as the father apologizes for the way things are.

A sense of sadness underlies many of the father’s comments. As an aging person I am happy to use the excuse that I move slowly because I have plenty of time and do not need to hurry, though I know that actually the time left to me is rapidly shortening. And there is no guarantee that I shall see you again after my last good-bye. Death comes to all of us, even the most imaginative.

In another poem, McGough considered the possibilities of his own death

Let me die a youngman's death	When I'm 73
not a clean and inbetween	and in constant good tumour
the sheets holywater death	may I be mown down at dawn
not a famous-last-words	by a bright red sports car
peaceful out of breath death	on my way home
	from an allnight party

At the time of writing that poem, he was 84 and was considering

Or when I'm 91
with silver hair
and sitting in a barber's chair
may rival gangsters
with hamfisted tommyguns burst in
and give me a short back and insides.

The Flaying of Marsyas

nec quicquam nisi vulnus erat
(Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VI, 388)

I

A bright clearing. Sun among the leaves,
sifting down to dapple the soft ground, and rest
a gilded bar against the muted flanks of trees.
In the fluttering green light the glade
listens in and breathes.
A wooden pail; some pegs, a coil of wire;
a bundle of steel flensing knives.

Spreadeagled between two pines,
hooked at each hoof to the higher branches,
tied to the root by the hands, flagged
as his own white cross,
the satyr Marsyas hangs.

Three stand as honour guard:
two apprentices, one butcher.

II

Let's have a look at you, then.
Bit scrawny for a satyr,
all skin and whipcord, is it?
Soon find out.
So, think you can turn up with your stag-bones
and outplay Lord Apollo?
This'll learn you. Fleece the fucker.
Sternum to groin.
Tickle does it? Fucking bastard,
coming down here with your dirty ways ...
Armpit to wrist, both sides.
Chasing our women ...
Fine cuts round hoof and hand and neck.
Can't even speak the language proper.
Transverse from umbilicus to iliac crest,
half-circling the waist.
Jesus. You fucking stink, you do.
Hock to groin, groin to hock.
That's your inside leg done:
no more rutting for you, cunt.

(*ctd*)

The Flaying of Marsyas

The story of Marsyas is briefly told in the Ovid's *Metamorphoses Book VI* (8 CE). The satyr Marsyas, having boasted that he could make more beautiful music than Apollo, was challenged to a contest by the god, the victor having the right to do whatever he wished with the loser. Marsyas lost and was flayed alive by Apollo. Marsyas screams "*Quid me mihi detrahis? A! piget! A! Non est tibia tanti!*" (Why do you strip me of myself? Ah! I repent! Ah! A flute is not worth this much!") Robertson quotes in the epigraph from Ovid's following lines

*Clamanti cutis est summos direpta per artus
Nec quicquam nisi vulnus erat: cruor undique manat*

But as he cried out, the skin was stripped from his limbs
so that there was nothing that was not a wound; blood flowed everywhere.

The story is often conflated with a similar tale told in *Metamorphoses XI* wherein the god Pan competes musically with Apollo. This contest was judged by the mountain god Tmolos who awarded the prize to Apollo even though King Midas preferred Pan's music. Apollo therefore changed Midas's ears to donkey ears, but took no revenge on Pan, who was like him a god. The *Metamorphoses* also included other stories of how the gods punished mortals for trespassing on their domain. The marvelous weaver Arachne was changed into a spider (Book VI); and the hunter Actaeon was transformed into a deer and killed by his own hounds for having unwittingly stumbled upon Diana bathing (Book III).

The story of Marsyas has been interpreted in many different ways. Perhaps it is the culmination of the conflict between Dionysius, the god of wine and dance, and the inspiration of the satyrs, and Apollo, the god of the sun and music, and the patron of prophecy. Dionysius represented disorder, emotion, and ecstasy, whereas Apollo represented harmony, reason, and insight. Our inability to reconcile these two aspects of our character is the source of our human tragedy (cf *Only Connect* p 269). A related interpretation centers on human *hubris*, the arrogance whereby we attempt to be the equal of the gods. Others have suggested that the flaying represents the release of the eternal spirit of Marsyas ("the inner man") from his mortal skin but this interpretation seems wishful thinking in the face of horror.

Robertson's poem considers the story as showing the difficulty that we have in accepting "others:" those who differ from us in the color of their skin, the religion that they follow, or the politics they espouse. These difference can incite terrible violence.

The first part of Robertson's poem sets the scene. The dappled sunlight sifting down through the leaves highlights the tools set out for the torture. Flensing knives are specifically design to remove the skin of an animal or the blubber of a whale. The victim is "spreadeagled" upside-down between two pines. The term comes from heraldry which displayed the eagle with wings and legs outstretched. The satyr has become an inverted symbol of himself. Beside him are his torturers: two apprentices and one butcher. Apprentices are always available and willing to learn the trade of butchering.

Now. One of you on each side.
Blade along the bone, find the tendon,
nick it and peel, nice and slow.
A bit of shirt-lifting, now, to purge him,
pull his wool over his eyes
and show him Lord Apollo's rapture;
pelt on one tree, him on another:
the inner man revealed.

III

Red Marsyas. Marsyas écorché,
splayed, shucked of his skin
in a tug and rift of tissue;
his birthday suit sloughed
the way a sodden overcoat is eased
off the shoulders and dumped.
All memories of a carnal life
lifted like a bad tattoo,
live bark from the vascular tree:
raw Marsyas unsheathed.

Or dragged from his own wreckage
dressed in red ropes
that plait and twine his trunk
and limbs into true definition,
he assumes the flexed pose of the hero:
the straps and buckles of ligament
glisten and tick on the sculpture
of Marsyas, muscle-man.
Mr Universe displays the map of his body:
the bulbs of high ground carved
by the curve of gully and canal,
the tributaries tight as ivy or the livid vine,
and everywhere, the purling flux of blood
in the land and the swirl of it flooding away.

Or this: the shambles of Marsyas.
The dark chest meat marbled with yellow fat,
his heart like an animal breathing
in its milky envelope,
the viscera a well-packed suitcase
of chitterlings and palpitating tripe.
A man dismantled, a tatterdemalion
torn to steak and rind,
a disappointing pentimento
or the toy that can't be reassembled
by the boy Apollo, raptor, vivisector.

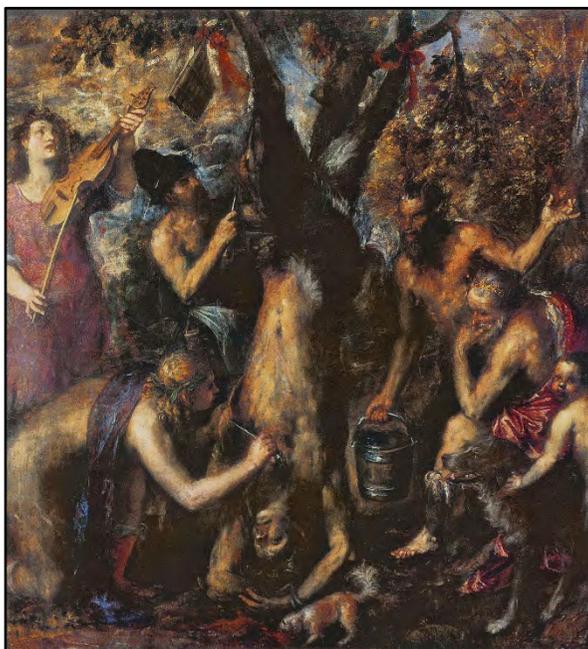
(ctd)

The second part of the poem describes the flaying in the vernacular of the torturers. Robertson alternates how the teacher coolly describes the different cuts necessary for the flaying, and adds a vicious commentary to justify each cruel slice:

Hock to groin, groin to hock.
That's your inside leg done:
no more rutting for you, cunt.

In the third part of the poem Robertson describes the result of the flaying. He provides three versions: the red Marsyas *écorché* (French, flayed) hanging like raw meat from the trees; the heroic Marsyas; with his muscles clearly defined now that he has no skin; the shambles of Marsyas – a confused mess of body parts. (“Shambles” was originally used to denote a butcher’s slaughterhouse, and “tatterdemalion” means reduced to rags.) Robertson accepts the last version as most appropriate to the cruelty of the story.

Many painters and sculptors have represented the story of Marsyas. One of Titian’s last pictures is *The Flaying of Marsyas* (1576). The painting housed in the Archbishop’s Palace in Kromeriz, Czech Republic, was little known until its exhibition in London in 1983. The painting depicts Marsyas suspended by his hoofs. Golden-haired Apollo is intently removing the skin on the upper thorax. An assistant begins to flay the satyr’s hairy legs. The god Pan



is holding a bucket for the blood and pointing to the skin that has already been removed and is hanging from a branch on the far right. A melancholy King Midas, perhaps a self-portrait of Titian, sits beside the flayed satyr. A small dog is lapping up the blood that drips from the flayed body, while a larger dog is being held back on the right. On the left, Olympus, a disciple of Marsyas, plays a melody on the *lira di braccio*. It is not clear whether the music is to comfort the dying satyr or to praise the God Apollo. Probably the latter, since Olympus is playing the instrument of Apollo and not the pipes of Marsyas which hang from a branch on the left.

The sail of stretched skin thrills and snaps
in the same breeze that makes his nerves
fire, his bare lungs scream.
Stripped of himself and from his twin:
the stiffening scab and the sticky wound.
Marsyas the martyr, a god's fetish,
hangs from the tree like bad fruit.

Robin Robertson, 1994

Non piangere, Liù

A card comes to tell you
you should report
to have your eyes tested.

But your eyes melted in the fire
and the only tears, which soon dried,
fell in the chapel.

Other things still come –
invoices, subscription renewals,
shiny plastic cards promising credit –
not much for a life spent
in the service of reality.

You need answer none of them.
Nor my asking you for one drop
of succour in my own hell.

Do not cry, I tell myself,
the whole thing is a comedy
and comedies end happily.

The fire shall come out of the sun
and I shall look in the heart of it.

Peter Porter, 1978

Robertson ends his poem with the skin of Marsyas hanging from a branch and waving in breeze as the dying satyr screams. His last line recalls the horror of the lynchings that occurred in America, and the song *Strange Fruit* written by Abel Meeropol in 1937 and sung by Billy Holiday.

Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swingin' in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees

The flaying of Marsyas was the gratification of an unholy desire by those entitled not ever to be challenged. The horror of the event and the fear that it might still occur cannot be glossed over. We must continue to challenge anything that limits the freedom of any group in our society.

Non piangere liu

Giacomo Puccini's opera *Turandot* was unfinished at the time of his death in 1924. Completed by Franco Alfano and first performed in 1926, the opera is the complicated story of the ice-cold Princess Turandot who refuses all her suitors. Prince Calaf decides to attempt the three riddles that must be solved to win the hand of Turandot. Failure means death. Liu, a slave-girl, who is in love with the prince, entreats him not to take Turandot's challenge. He gently tells her not to cry in the aria *Non piangere Liu*. Calaf then solves the riddles:

What is born each night and dies each dawn? "Hope."
What flickers red and warm like a flame, but is not? "Blood"
What is ice which gives you fire and which your fire freezes still more?
"Turandot."

As an act of love, Calaf then grants Turandot his life if she can discover his name. Turandot tortures Liu to find out the name, but Liu commits suicide rather than reveal it. Turandot is struck by the power of Liu's love and ultimately capitulates to Calaf.

Any sensible person cries out at the story. What is the attraction of the icy princess? Liu is the real heroine of the tale. The opera is a comedy in the sense that it ends happily with a wedding. But it is really a tragedy since Liu is dead.

Porter married Jannice Henry in 1961, and they had two daughters. The marriage was not happy, and in 1974, when Porter began an affair with another woman, Jannice committed suicide. Porter was wracked by grief and guilt.

The poem tells of the notices for appointments and the subscription-renewals that come in the mail following the death of his wife. Minor reminders that serve only to accentuate the poet's grief. A grief that is greater than the fire in which his wife's body was cremated.

All through the poem time we hear in the background Calaf's attempt to convince Liu not to cry. Everything will end happily. Except that it didn't then, and it won't now.

A Wall in the Woods: Cummington

1

What is it for, now that dividing neither
Farm from farm nor field from field, it runs
Through deep impartial woods, and is transgressed
By boughs of pine or beech from either side?
Under that woven tester, buried here
Or there in laurel-patch or shrouding vine,
It is for grief at what has come to nothing,
What even in this hush is scarcely heard –
Whipcrack, the ox's lunge, the stoneboat's grating,
Work-shouts of young men stooped before their time
Who in their stubborn heads foresaw forever
The rose of apples and the blue of rye.
It is for pride, as well, in pride that built
With levers, tackle, and abraded hands
What two whole centuries have not brought down.
Look how with shims they made the stones weight inward,
Binding the water-rounded with the flat;
How to a small ravine they somehow lugged
A long smooth girder of a rock, on which
To launch their wall in air, and overpass
The narrow stream that still slips under it.
Rosettes of lichen decorate their toils,
Who laboured here like Pharaoh's Israelites;
Whose grandsons left for Canaans in the west.
Except to prompt a fit of elegy
It is for us no more, or if it is,
It is a sort of music for the eye,
A rugged ground bass like the bagpipe's drone
On which the leaf-light like a chanter plays.

2

He will hear no guff
About Jamshyd's court, this small
Striped, duff colored resident
On the top of wall,

Who having given
An apotropaic shriek
Echoed by crows in heaven,
Is off like a streak.

(ctd)

A Wall in the Woods: Cummington

Cummington, a small town in western Massachusetts, was where the American poet William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878, see p 140) lived during his youth and whither he retired in his old age. He was a great lover of the natural world and in 1821 published *An Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood*, which begins

Stranger, if thou hast learned a truth which needs
No school of long experience, that the world
Is full of guilt and misery, and hast seen
Enough of all its sorrows, crimes, and cares,
To tire thee of it, enter this wild wood
And view the haunts of Nature. The calm shade
Shall bring a kindred calm, and the sweet breeze
That makes the green leaves dance, shall waft a balm
To thy sick heart.

Wilbur also lived in Cummington and this poem is about an 18th-Century wall in the woods near his home. Like Frost in his 1914 poem *Wall Mending*, he is uncertain as to the purpose of the wall. Frost and his neighbor met each spring to mend their wall but there was really no reason for this:

There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, ‘Good fences make good neighbors.’

Most people remember the neighbor’s aphorism, but Frost was actually saying that perhaps we should not keep building walls between ourselves.

Wilbur is impressed by the skill of those who made his wall, which has survived for two whole centuries under the “woven tester” (the canopy of a four-poster bed) of the trees. They were proud of their work and their wall was built to last – they “foresaw forever.”

However, the builders of the wall, like the Israelites in Egypt who departed for Canaan, left long ago to find their own homesteads in the Western United States.

The wall now commemorates their departure, serving as the “rugged ground bass” on a bagpipe drone “on which the leaf-light like a chanter plays.” The illustration to the right shows a carving of an angel in the Thistle Chapel in St Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh. The angel is playing on the chanter of a bagpipe with two drones supported over her left shoulder.



There is no tracing
The leaps and scurries with which
He braids his long castle, ra-
Cing, by gap, ledge, niche

And Cyclopean
Passages, to reappear
Sentry-like on a rampart
Thirty feet from here.

What is he saying
Now, in a steady chipping
Succinctly plucked and cadenced
As water dripping?

It is not drum-taps
For a lost race of giants,
But perhaps says something, here
In Mr. Bryant's

Homiletic woods,
Of the brave art of forage
And the good of a few nuts
In burrow-storage;

Of agility
That is not sorrow's captive,
Lost as it is in being
Briskly adaptive;

Of the plenum, charged
With one life through all changes,
And of how we are enlarged
By what estranges.

Richard Wilbur, 2000

from **An Essay on Criticism**

A little Learning is a dang'rous Thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian Spring:
There shallow Draughts intoxicate the Brain,
And drinking largely sobers us again.

Alexander Pope, 1709

The second part of Wilbur's poem is strikingly different from the first. The serious blank verse changes to a much more light-hearted set of quatrains with rhymes on the second and fourth lines (and sometimes also on the first and third). The change is triggered by the sight and sound of chipmunk on the wall. This excitable creature will "hear no guff" (worthless talk) about how time passes and leaves us only ruins.

"Jamshyd's court" alludes to quatrain XVII of Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat* (p 28) as translated by Edward Fitzgerald:

They say the Lion and the Lizard keep
The Courts where Jamshyd gloried and drank deep:
And Bahram, that great Hunter—the Wild Ass
Stamps o'er his Head, and he lies fast asleep.

Jamshyd was a legendary king of Persia. Bahram V, who reigned as king of Persia from 421–438 CE, was famous for his skill in hunting the onager, a Persian wild ass, also known as a "gur." He was therefore often known as Bahram Gur. Many tales of both Jamshyd and Bahram occur in the Persian epic poem *The Shahnama* ("Book of Kings") written by Ferdowsi in 1010 CE.

"Apotropaic" (Greek *apo*, away, *tretein*, turn) means "warding off" and describes behavior used to avert evil, such as making sacrifices to appease the gods, or putting gargoyles above doors to scare off evil spirits.

The chipmunk is a creature of the present not the past. In a way he is giving us a lesson much like William Cullen Bryant. "Homiletics" is the art of sermonizing. The chipmunk tells us how important it is to put stores away for winter, and how one must always be able to adapt to what happens.

And in the final quatrain Wilbur unites the chipmunk's idea of the "plenum, charged with one life through all the changes" to the wall and "how we are enlarged by what estranges." Walls demarcate the differences between individuals and thus define the great variety that is life.

An Essay on Criticism

An Essay on Criticism was Pope's first major poem. It is written in "heroic couplets" – iambic pentameter lines in rhyming pairs. In this brief excerpt, he advises us not to jump to conclusions before we have learned enough to understand what we are talking about. The poem continues

Fir'd at first sight with what the Muse imparts,
In fearless youth we tempt the heights of Arts,
While from the bounded level of our mind
Short views we take, nor see the lengths behind

The Pierian Spring, located near Mount Olympus in Macedonia, was sacred to the Muses. It is named after the daughters of Pierus who challenged the Muses to a singing contest, and who were changed into magpies when they lost. The Hippocrene spring on Mount Helicon in Boeotia is also considered a source of poetic creativity. And Delphi has the Castalian Spring where priests were cleansed and poets inspired. The muse appears in many different places.

Morning on the Lièvre

Far above us where a jay
Screams his matins to the day,
Capped with gold and amethyst,
Like a vapor from the forge
Of a giant somewhere hid,
Out of hearing of the clang
Of his hammer, skirts of mist
Slowly up the woody gorge
Lift and hang.

Softly as a cloud we go,
Sky above and sky below,
Down the river; and the dip
Of the paddles scarcely breaks,
With the little silvery drip
Of the water as it shakes
From the blades, the crystal deep
Of the silence of the morn,
Of the forest yet asleep;
And the river reaches borne
In a mirror, purple gray,
Sheer away
To the misty line of light,
Where the forest and the stream
In the shadow meet and plight,
Like a dream.

From amid a stretch of reeds,
Where the lazy river sucks
All the water as it bleeds
From a little curling creek,
And the muskrats peer and sneak
In around the sunken wrecks
Of a tree that swept the skies
Long ago,
On a sudden seven ducks
With a splashy rustle rise,
Stretching out their seven necks,
One before, and two behind,
And the others all arow,
And as steady as the wind
With a swivelling whistle go,
Through the purple shadow led,

(ctd)

Morning on the Lièvre

This poem had its beginning in the spring of 1886, when Lampman and his friend and fellow-poet Duncan Campbell Scott went on a canoe trip on the Lièvre (“hare”) River, which runs from the Laurentian Mountains south to join the Ottawa River just east of the city of Ottawa. A companion sonnet *Dawn on the Lièvre* was written later:

Up the dark-valleyed river stroke by stroke
We drove the water from the rustling blade;
And when the night was almost gone we made
The Oxbow bend; and there the dawn awoke;
Full on the shrouded night-charged river broke
The sun, down the long mountain valley rolled,
A sudden swinging avalanche of gold,
Through mists that sprang and reeled aside like smoke.
And lo! before us, toward the east upborne,
Packed with curled forest, bunched and topped with pine,
Brow beyond brow, drawn deep with shade and shine,
The mount; upon whose golden sunward side,
Still threaded with the melting mist, the morn
Sat like some glowing conqueror satisfied.

Whereas the *Dawn* poem is a regular Petrarchan sonnet, the *Morning* poem has a far looser form. Its mainly tetrameter lines have an irregular rhythm. Although almost all lines have end-rhymes, there is no regular rhyme scheme.

Lampman, Charles G. D. Roberts, Duncan Campbell Scott, Bliss Carmen (p 112), and William Wilfred Campbell (p 137) were considered the “Confederation Poets.” These celebrated the beauties of their newly recognized nation. They were to Canadian literature what the Group of Seven were to Canadian painting.

In 1961 the National Film Board of Canada released *Morning on the Lièvre*, a 13-minute film wherein two canoeists travelled down the Lièvre River (a still from the film is shown on the right). The sound track was George Whalley’s recitation of Lampman’s two Lièvre poems (together with three other sonnets), and music by Eldon Rathburn.



Lampman died from rheumatic heart disease in 1899. His friend Duncan Campbell Scott went on to lead the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs from 1913 to 1932. This department oversaw a policy of forced assimilation for Canada’s First Nation, Indian and Métis peoples, removing children from their families and taking them to residential schools. The romantic idealization of a country can blind one to its original inhabitants. A love of poetry does not protect one from callous indifference to one’s fellow men.

Till we only hear their whir
In behind a rocky spur,
Just ahead.

Archibald Lampman, 1888

Heaven-Haven

(A nun takes the veil)

I have desired to go
Where springs not fail,
To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail
And a few lilies blow.

And I have asked to be
Where no storms come,
Where the green swell is in the havens dumb,
And out of the swing of the sea.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, 1864

Sonnet 106

When in the chronicle of wasted time
I see descriptions 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.

William Shakespeare, 1609

Heaven-Haven

Hopkins converted to Roman Catholicism in 1866 while studying at Oxford. At that time the Tractarian Movement was reacting against rationalism, promoting a return to the mystery and ritual of earlier Christianity, and to faith rather than reason as a criterion for truth. The movement inevitably led people to convert to the Roman Catholic Church. John (later Cardinal) Newman, became a Catholic in 1845 and was instrumental in Hopkins's conversion. After graduating in 1867, Hopkins joined the Society of Jesus

What led Hopkins into the Jesuits? He was a brilliant and sensitive student. He had studied with Walter Pater (p 186), and had thought of becoming a painter. However, Newman was persuasive, and the beauty of the church and its traditions appealed to him. There may also have been some desire for solace from a world whose suffering dismayed him.

When he joined the Jesuits, Hopkins burned almost all his poetry. He began to write again just before his ordination. However, the order decided not to publish Hopkins's poem *The Wreck of the Deutschland*. After this rejection, Hopkins refused to publish anything, lest it run counter to his calling. He entrusted his poems to his friend, Robert Bridges, who published them after Hopkins's death. *Heaven-Haven* is one of Hopkins's early poems that somehow escaped burning. It embodies the idea of Christ's invitation in *Matthew 11: 28*

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Sonnet 106. When in the chronicle of wasted time

The main idea of this sonnet is that, in describing the poet's beloved, past poets might have succeeded where present poets fail. The sentiment is similar to that of Sir Philip Sidney who in his *Defence of Poesy* (1595) said of Chaucer:

I know not whether to marvel more, either that he in that misty time could see so clearly, or that we in this clear age walk so stumblingly after him.

The thought becomes more original when we work out Shakespeare's explanation. Past poets were blessed in two ways. First, they did not experience "even such a beauty as you master now" directly and were therefore not dumbfounded. Second, their experience was one of prophecy or divination and was thus imbued with inspiration from the beginning.

How then were they able to prophesy? Beauty is a force that the beautiful lady (or man) transiently "masters." When time passes, and beautiful ladies grow old and die, beauty will continue but it will be mastered by others. The poem is quite direct in this regard: "ladies dead."

The word "wight" harkens back to the past poets, who used it in various senses: simply as a human being (as in this sonnet and by Hardy on p. 54), as a creature deserving of pity, as an inhuman spirit from which we should be protected, and as a strong or brave man. A poetic "blazon" (cf p 254) denotes a listing of the woman's beauties, but the word also links to medieval times when it meant the description of the armorial bearings of a family as represented on their shields.

Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white;
Nor waves the cypress in the palace walk;
Nor winks the gold fin in the porphyry font.
The firefly wakens; waken thou with me.

Now droops the milk-white peacock like a ghost,
And like a ghost she glimmers on to me.

Now lies the Earth all Danaë to the stars,
And all thy heart lies open unto me.

Now slides the silent meteor on, and leaves
A shining furrow, as thy thoughts in me.

Now folds the lily all her sweetness up,
And slips into the bosom of the lake.
So fold thyself, my dearest, thou, and slip
Into my bosom and be lost in me.

Alfred Tennyson, 1847

The Oxen

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.
"Now they are all on their knees,"
An elder said as we sat in a flock
By the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures where
They dwelt in their strawy pen,
Nor did it occur to one of us there
To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years! Yet, I feel,
If someone said on Christmas Eve,
"Come; see the oxen kneel,

"In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
Our childhood used to know,"
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.

Thomas Hardy, 1915

Now sleeps the crimson petal

This poem describes the coming of the evening: the flowers close into themselves, the firefly wakens, the stars appear, and a meteor slides across the sky. The poet asks his love to fold herself into his bosom and be lost in the darkness with him.

The poem is an irregular sonnet. Although its 14 lines are written in a regular iambic pentameter rhythm, its structure – two quatrains separated by three couplets – is unlike any other sonnet. The first word of each section is “Now” and the final word is “me.” Otherwise, there are no other end-rhymes. Words and phrases repeat to give the poem an incantatory sound:

The firefly wakens; waken thou with me.
... like a ghost ... and like a ghost
... slips into the bosom ... slip into my bosom.

There are two striking images. Tennyson likens the appearance of the stars to the sudden shower of golden rain that fell on Danaë. Danaë, the daughter of King Acrisius, was imprisoned by her father because an oracle had foretold that he would be killed by his daughter’s son. Zeus came to her in the form of golden raindrops and she conceived a son, Perseus, who much later accidentally killed his grandfather.

Tennyson then likens the passage of a meteor across the sky to that of some divine plow that “leaves its shining furrow.” He further likens that to the effect of his lover’s thoughts upon him.

The Oxen

During the 18th and 19th Centuries the role of the church in society declined. Philosophers like Hume expressed skepticism about the existence of God and miracles; Darwin proposed that human beings had evolved from lower organisms and had not been specially created; physicists like Carnot and Kelvin showed that the universe was headed toward a state of maximum entropy and not the final judgement. The old ideas of Christianity no longer had their original strength, and people ceased to believe.

This poem is about an old belief that, at midnight on Christmas Eve, farm animals knelt in homage to the Nativity of the Lord. Though once considered true, most people now would consider the story a wishful “fancy.”

With the decline in religion, human beings no longer experienced the comfort of the divine presence, no longer felt like sheep protected by their shepherd, and no longer knew what they should be doing. The world, without these comforting illusions, had become a dark and lonely place. This is a poem of regret for the simple ideas we once believed in, but which are no longer true.

The old words – “barton,” an enclosed area of land reserved for the use of the lord of the manor, “coomb” a narrow valley usually in chalky hills – are now seldom used. Like our beliefs, our language has changed. Both the word and the world have moved on.

from **Midsummer Night's Dream Act V: Scene 2**
(Thisbe's speech)

Asleep, my love?
What, dead, my dove?
O Pyramus, arise!
Speak, speak! Quite dumb?
Dead, dead? A tomb
Must cover thy sweet eyes.
These lily lips,
This cherry nose,
These yellow cowslip cheeks,
Are gone, are gone:
Lovers, make moan:
His eyes were green as leeks.
O Sisters Three,
Come, come to me,
With hands as pale as milk;
Lay them in gore,
Since you have shore
With shears his thread of silk.
Tongue, not a word:
Come, trusty sword;
Come, blade, my breast imbrue:
(*Stabs herself*)
And, farewell, friends;
Thus Thisbe ends:
Adieu, adieu, adieu.

William Shakespeare, 1596

Opposite

I wonder if you've ever seen a
Willow sheltering a *hyena*?
Nowhere in nature can be found
An opposition more profound:
A sad tree weeping inconsolably!
A wild beast laughing uncontrollably!

Richard Wilbur, 1991

Midsummer Night's Dream

After all the lovers are reconciled, the working men of Athens put on a play to celebrate the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta. They have chosen to portray

A tedious brief scene of young Pyramus
And his love Thisbe, very tragical mirth

The story derives from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8 CE). Forbidden by their parents to be wed, the lovers Pyramus and Thisbe arrange to meet by Ninus Tomb. Thisbe arrives first, but is surprised by a lion and flees. Pyramus finds her blood-stained scarf and, believing that she has been killed, slays himself. Thisbe returns, finds the dead body of her lover, and kills herself with his sword

The working men of Athens present the story as best they can, but their clumsy attempts at poetry are received as farce. Shakespeare gives them doggerel to speak: their words lack any rhythm, the rhymes don't quite fit (dumb/tomb; gone/moan) and the images are bizarre: "eyes green as leeks." Shakespeare is making fun of those who would write poetry without having the talent to do so.

Francis Flute, a bellows mender, plays Thisbe and his speech concludes the play-within-a-play. Thisbe suddenly realizes that her lover is dead. She laments his beauty and asks the Sisters Three – the *Moirai* (Fates), *Clotho* ("spinner"), *Lachesis* ("allotter") and *Atropos* (the "unturnable" one who finally cuts the thread of life") to bring her life to its end.

The speech is generally played for laughs. However, it is possible, as the speech progresses, to imbue the clumsy words with great emotional power. In real life severe stress often makes one completely inarticulate. One should not ignore the depth of feelings just because the words don't rhyme.

Opposite

Richard Wilbur had four children and delighted in the way they learned to play with words. He wrote and illustrated several books of poetry for children, among them *Opposites* (1973) and *More Opposites* (1991). Words have wonderful sounds, and rhymes can be made in many innovative ways such as "seen a/hyena." Words have both literal and metaphorical meanings: a willow does not really weep nor does a hyena laugh.



A poem from *Opposites* (1973) plays on the multiple meanings of the word fast.

The opposite of *fast* is *loose*
And if you doubt it you're a goose,
"Nonsense!" you cry. "As you should know
The opposite of fast is *slow*."
Well, let's not quarrel: have a chair
And see what's on the bill of fare.
We should agree on this at least:
The opposite of fast is *feast*.



Extreme Unction

Upon the eyes, the lips, the feet,
On all the passages of sense,
The atoning oil is spread with sweet
Renewal of lost innocence.

The feet, that lately ran so fast
To meet desire, are soothly sealed;
The eyes that were so often cast
On vanity, are touched and healed.

From troublous sights and sound set free;
In such a twilight hour of breath,
Shall one retrace his life, or see,
Through shadows the true face of death?

Vials of mercy! Sacring oils!
I know not where nor when I come,
Nor through what wanderings and toils,
To crave of you Viaticum.

Yet when the walls of flesh grow weak,
In such an hour, it well may be,
Through mist and darkness, light will break,
And each anointed sense will see.

Ernst Dowson, 1896

The Sick Rose

O Rose thou art sick.
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm:

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

William Blake, 1794

Extreme Unction

Dowson's 1896 book of *Verses* was dedicated to Adelaide Foltinowicz, the daughter of the owner of a small restaurant in London. Dowson fell in love with her youth and innocence, but his passion came to naught: "she listened to his verses, smiled charmingly, under her mother's eyes, on his two years' courtship, and at the end of two years married the waiter instead" (as described by Arthur Symons – see p. 59). A little later, both of Dowson's parents committed suicide. Dowson fell into a life of dissipation and died of alcoholism and tuberculosis at the age of 32 in 1900.

Though brought up in Church of England, Dowson had been received into the Roman Catholic Church in 1892. This may have resulted in part from his courtship of Adelaide, and in part from the fact that it was the thing to do in the years that followed Cardinal Newman's conversion. In the Roman Catholic Church "extreme unction" is the anointing – touching with holy oil – of a dying person. The actual anointing is done on the forehead, with the prayer "Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit," and on the hands, with the prayer "May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up."

Anointing dates back long before the Christian religion. Perfumed oils have long been used to preserve and clean the body before burial. Special oils were used in many cultures to anoint those who rule over us.

"Viaticum" is the set of provisions for a journey. The word denotes the final Eucharist for someone dying, but hearkens back to Roman days, and Hadrian's idea of the soul released from the body (see p 176). Dowson's poem recalls Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1885). Marius had considered the many philosophies of Rome, but ultimately died a Christian martyr:

Gentle fingers had applied to hands and feet, to all those old passage-ways of the senses, through which the world had come and gone for him, now so dim and obstructed, medicinale oils.

The Sick Rose

An engraving of this poem was included in Blake's *Songs of Experience*. Those who wish for goodness and beauty must ensure their desires be not waylaid by evil forces. The poem recalls Viola's description of how her imaginary sister pined away because she did not tell her love:

She never told her love,
But let concealment, like a worm i' the bud,
Feed on her damask cheek: she pined in thought,
And with a green and yellow melancholy
She sat like patience on a monument,
Smiling at grief.

(Shakespeare, 1602, *Twelfth Night* II: 4)



Timor Dei

Most beautiful, most dear,
When I would use Thy light,
Beloved, omniscient Seer,
Thou didst abuse my sight;

Thou didst pervade my being
Like marsh air steeped in brine;
Thou didst invade my seeing
Til all I saw was Thine.

Today, from my own fence
I saw the grass fires rise
And saw Thine old incense
Borne up on frosty sighs.

Most terrible, most rude,
I will not shed a tear
For lost beatitude,
But I still fear Thy fear.

J. V. Cunningham, 1938

January

There's the horizon still in place,
gray ribbon threaded taut and lean
through those bare twigs that summer-long
hid it behind a scrim of green.

I liked it green—as well as bare—
my quarter acre in the sun;
I would not dress it otherwise
than seasons in their turn have done,

but do give thanks that sultry weather
of much to feel and less to know
gives way after a time, to this
clear view of where horizons go.

Rhina Espailat, 1998

Timor Dei

“Timor dei” is the fear of the lord, a phrase used several times in the Bible, e.g.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding. (*Proverbs* 9: 10)

The beginning of the poem is a loose translation of Baudelaire's poem *Hymne* from *Fleurs du mal* (1857), of which the second verse reads:

Elle se répand dans ma vie	She permeates in my life
Comme un air imprégné de sel,	Like air infused with salt
Et dans mon âme inassouvie	And into my unsated soul
Verse le goût de l'éternel.	Pours the taste of the eternal

The words are similar but the thoughts they express are completely opposite: "l'air imprégné de sel" becomes "marsh air steeped in brine" and instead of pouring into the hungry soul "a taste of the eternal" the experience leads to a loss of sight.

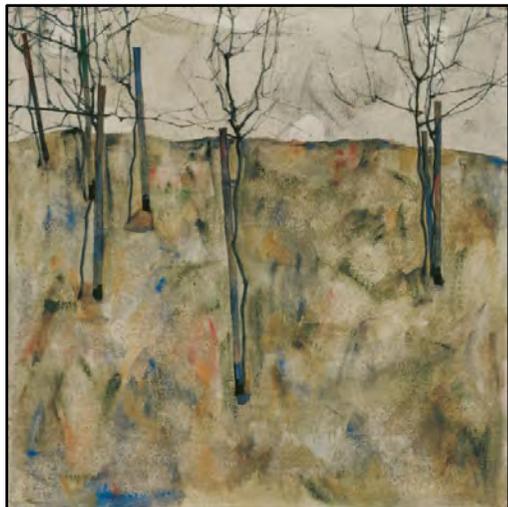
Cunningham lived his early life in Montana and then attended a Jesuit High School in Colorado. In *The Quest for Opal* (1950), Cunningham described himself (in the third person) in this poem:

He was a Catholic by tradition, training, and deep feeling, but the Absolute is greedy, as pervasive and as destructively absorbent as sensation or passion or sympathy. Hence his own identity he fenced off, and though it formed part of the terrain it had its property lines. Yet he could look back to the smoke of burning leaves and grass, of the swinging censers, and of breath in the chill Northern air of his boyhood and almost acquiesce: for though he would not regret the loss of what he would not have, the traditional patterns of feeling still had power to dominate him.

One can build the fences but it is difficult to escape the Lord that one believed in as a child. The “Absolute is greedy.”

January

In this brief poem Espaillet contrasts the view of the world in winter and in summer. In summer life is in abundance. The trees are covered with leaves. There is “much to feel and less to know” One revels in the beauty and is not concerned with what might underlie the experience. In winter the leaves are gone and one has a “clear view of where horizons go.” This is illustrated on the right in Egon Schiele’s 1912 painting of *Bare Trees*. Both ways of looking are necessary.



A Measuring Worm

This yellow striped green
Caterpillar, climbing up
The steep window screen,

Constantly (for lack
Of a full set of legs) keeps
Humping up his back.

It's as if he sent
By some sort of semaphore
Dark omegas meant

To warn of Last Things.
Although he doesn't know it,
He will soon have wings,

And I, too, don't know
Toward what undreamt condition
Inch by inch I go.

Richard Wilbur, 2008

The Dug-Out

Why do you lie with your legs ungainly huddled,
And one arm bent across your sullen, cold,
Exhausted face? It hurts my heart to watch you,
Deep-shadowed from the candle's guttering gold;
And you wonder why I shake you by the shoulder;
Drowsy, you mumble and sigh and turn your head...
You are too young to fall asleep for ever;
And when you sleep you remind me of the dead.

Siegfried Sassoon, 1918

A Measuring Worm

The caterpillars of geometer moths do not have legs on the central part of their body. To move they extend their anterior legs and allow their body to raise up when the posterior legs follow. They thus appear to be measuring the surface on which they walk. For his poem Wilbur uses rhyming haiku (see p 142) a format that fits the measuring worm. The illustration shows the caterpillar and adult form of the “blackberry looper” geometer moth.



Wilbur notices the caterpillar – also known as an inch-worm – on his window screen. When the central part of the body is raised up the caterpillar assumes the shape of the last letter of the Greek alphabet: omega (Ω). This letter has apocalyptic associations – it can “warn of Last Things.”

I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty. (*Revelations* 1:8)

What will happen when one comes to the end of life is unknown. Will there be nothing or will there be some transformation into another form of life?

The Dug-Out

In his autobiographical *Sherston's Progress* (1936) Sassoon recalled one night in August 1918, in St. Venant, France, stepping into his dug-out:

Everything seems to be going on quite well, I thought, groping my way in, to sit there, tired and wakeful, and soaked and muddy from my patrol, while one candle made unsteady brown shadows in the gloom, and young Howitt lay dead beat and asleep in an ungainly attitude, with that queer half-sullen look on his face.

With the “clairvoyance of sleeplessness,” he strove to achieve

some sort of mastery over the experience which it shared with those dead and sleeping multitudes, of whom young Howitt was the visible representation. I wanted to know—to understand—before it was too late, whether there was any meaning in this human tragedy which sprawled across France, while those who planned yet further slaughter were like puppets directing operations on which the unknown gods had turned their backs in boredom with our blundering bombardments.

Planet Earth

It has to be spread out, the skin of this planet,
has to be ironed, the sea in its whiteness;
and the hands keep on moving,
smoothing the holy surfaces.

— *In Praise of Ironing*, Pablo Neruda

It has to be loved the way a laundress loves her linens,
the way she moves her hands caressing the fine muslins
knowing their warp and woof,
like a lover coaxing, or a mother praising.
It has to be loved as if it were embroidered
with flowers and birds and two joined hearts upon it.
It has to be stretched and stroked.
It has to be celebrated.
O this great beloved world and all the creatures in it.
It has to be spread out, the skin of this planet.

The trees must be washed, and the grasses and mosses.
They have to be polished as if made of green brass.
The rivers and little streams with their hidden cresses
and pale-coloured pebbles
and their fool's gold
must be washed and starched or shined into brightness,
the sheets of lake water
smoothed with the hand
and the foam of the oceans pressed into neatness.
It has to be ironed, the sea in its whiteness.

and pleated and goffered, the flower-blue sea
the protean, wine-dark, grey, green, sea
with its metres of satin and bolts of brocade.
And sky – such an O! overhead – night and day
must be burnished and rubbed
by hands that are loving
so the blue blazons forth
and the stars keep on shining
within and above
and the hands keep on moving.

(*ctd*)

Planet Earth

This poem is a *glosa*, an early Renaissance form that was developed by poets of the Spanish court in the 14th and 15th centuries. The word likely derives from the Latin *glossa*, an explanatory note (cf “gloss”). The poem quotes a quatrain from another poet, and uses each of these four lines as the last line for four new stanzas, each generally ten lines long. The *glosa* usually includes end-rhymes between the 6th and 9th lines and the borrowed 10th line. In this particular *glosa*, Page uses many other rhymes, often slant, both as end-rhymes (mosses/cresses) and internal interlinear rhymes (laundress/caressing, grasses/brass). And abundant alliteration: “stretched and stroked,” “blue blazons,” “the rods of its rain.”

Page starts *Planet Earth* with a quatrain from Neruda's ode *In Praise of Ironing*. Page has written many other poems in this *glosa* format using lines from Auden, Rilke, Graves and others as a starting point for her own poetry. Her 2009 book *Coal and Roses* contains 21 *glosas*.

Pablo Neruda's *Ode on Ironing* (1962, translated Ben Belitt, 1974) begins

*La poesía es blanca:
sale del agua envuelta en gotas,
se arruga, y se amontona,
hay que extender la piel de este planeta,
hay que planchar el mar de su blancura
y van y van las manos,
se alisan las sagradas superficies
y así se hacen las cosas:
las manos hacen cada día el mundo,
se une el fuego al acero,
llegan el lino, el lienzo y el tocuyo
del combate de las lavanderías
y nace de la luz una paloma:
la castidad regresa de la espuma.*

Poetry is white:
it comes out of the water covered with drops,
it wrinkles and piles up in heaps.
We must spread out the whole skin of this planet,
iron the white of the ocean:
the hands go on moving,
smoothing the sanctified surfaces,
bringing all things to pass.
Hands fashion each day of the world,
fire is wedded to steel,
the linens, the canvas, coarse cottons, emerge
from the wars of the washerwomen;
a dove is born from the light
and chastity rearises from the foam.

Page uses her own translation of lines 4-7 of the ode as the basis for her *glosa*.

It has to be made bright, the skin of this planet
till it shines in the sun like gold leaf.
Archangels then will attend to its metals
and polish the rods of its rain.
Seraphim will stop singing hosannas
to shower it with blessings and blisses and praises
and, newly in love,
we must draw it and paint it
our pencils and brushes and loving caresses
smoothing the holy surfaces.

P. K. Page, 1994

Flamingo Watching

Wherever the flamingo goes,
she brings a city's worth
of furbelows. She seems
unnatural by nature—
too vivid and peculiar
a structure to be pretty,
and flexible to the point
of oddity. Perched on
those legs, anything she does
seems like an act. Descending
on her egg or draping her head
along her back, she's
too exact and sinuous
to convince an audience
she's serious. The natural elect,
they think, would be less pink,
less able to relax their necks,
less flamboyant in general.
They privately expect that it's some
poorly jointed bland grey animal
with mitts for hands
whom God protects.

Kay Ryan, 1994

Page remarked about the *glosa* form in the introduction to *Hologram* (1994):

You work towards a known. I liked being controlled by those three
reining rhymes—or do I mean reigning?—and gently influenced by the
rhythm of the original . . . A curious marriage—two sensibilities
intermingling.

Page uses the image of women ironing as a way of representing how we must take care of the world in which we live, treating it gently and with love. And if we take care of it, the Archangels and the Seraphim will shower it with blessings.

The United Nations chose this poem in 2000 for their celebratory “Year of Dialogue among Civilizations.” The poem was then recited at various gatherings in diverse parts of the world.

Flamingo Watching

Flamingos are large, gregarious wading-birds. The name derives ultimately from the Latin *flamma* for flame. Their bill is curved to facilitate the gathering of food from the bottom of the lake or marsh in which they graze. Their pink color comes from the shellfish in their diet.

Science is not clear how the flamingo evolved to its present highly intricate form. One of the great evolutionary just-so stories once proposed that their color evolved as camouflage so that they would not be seen against the setting sun when predators came to the lake at evening to drink. This is nonsense since any animal, regardless of their actual color, is seen as black when the sun is behind them. The pink hue of flamingos may, however, have evolutionary advantage, because it shows that they are well-nourished and therefore worth mating with.



A furbelow is pleated or gathered material in a garment, typically a “flounce” “ruffle” or “frill” on a skirt or dress. Many aspects of the flamingo seem as unnecessary and as beautiful as these clothing embellishments.

Ryan points out that we know very little about how forms evolve. Utility is only part of nature’s driving force. Many living things are far more beautiful than they need be. Ryan wonders whether the “elect” – those supposedly chosen by God are more bland – “less flamboyant” – than those evolved in nature.

The poem uses lines that vary in length between four and ten syllables. Much of the appeal of the poem derives from its internal rhymes (flamingo/goes; think/pink), and its rhyming across the lines (act/exact). The following lines are typical, with the cross-line rhyming of “-ous” and internal rhyming of “-nce”:

too exact and sinuous
to convince an audience
she’s serious

Acquainted with the Night

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-bye;
And further still at an unearthly height,
One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night.

Robert Frost, 1927

To the Stone Cutters

Stone-cutters fighting time with marble, you fore-defeated
Challengers of oblivion
Eat cynical earnings, knowing rock splits, records fall down,
The square-limbed Roman letters
Scale in the thaws, wear in the rain. The poet as well
Builds his monument mockingly:
For man will be blotted out, the blithe earth dies, the brave sun
Die blind, his heart blackening:
Yet stones have stood for a thousand years, and pained thoughts found
The honey of peace in old poems.

Robinson Jeffers, 1924

Acquainted with the Night

Frost's poem addresses the human experience of homelessness, the state of having nowhere to go when it gets dark. Any hope that someone might cry out to call one back or even to say goodbye is no more. The moon in the sky marks the passage of time but gives it no sense of either right nor wrong.

With the death of the old gods who gave us purpose and told us how we should behave, 20th-Century man came to experience "metaphysical homelessness." Frank Lentricchia (1975) relates the poem to some comments by Wallace Stevens (1951) on the death of our idea of the gods:

It was their annihilation, not ours, and yet it left us feeling that in a measure we, too, had been annihilated. It left us feeling dispossessed and alone in a solitude, like children without parents, in a home that seemed deserted, in which the amical rooms and halls had taken on a look of hardness and emptiness. ... At the same time, no man ever muttered a petition in his heart for the restoration of those unreal shapes. There was always in every man the increasingly human self, which instead of remaining the observer, the nonparticipant, the delinquent, became constantly more and more all there was or so it seemed; and whether it was so or merely seemed so still left it for him to resolve life and the world in his own terms.

The eponymous hero of Marilynne Robinson's 2020 novel *Jack* considered this his favorite poem, and lived out the despair that it portrays.

The poem is a *tour de force* of form. It has the sonnet's 14 lines, but these are divided into four tercets and a final couplet. The rhyme scheme is Dante's terza rima: *aba bcb cdc eae* with the final couplet the circling back to the first line.

To the Stone Cutters

Robinson Jeffers apprenticed himself to the stone mason whom he hired to build his home – Tor House – and Hawk Tower in Carmel, California. He enjoyed the work, and considered poetry as another human skill. In this poem he lauds the actual stone-cutters, those who engrave on marble the names and dates of those who pass. The letters do not last. Frost and rain slowly erase them. Yet they stand for a time, just as poems persist and provide the "honey of peace" in times of pain.

The poem alternates long and short lines – with either 13-14 or 7-8 syllables. Perhaps like the alternation of large and small stones. Alliteration gives a subtle rhythm to the lines that are otherwise stressed irregularly: "stones have stood" and "monument mockingly."

The poem is memorable for its description of humanity's attempt to challenge time – like the stone-cutters we are the "fore-defeated challengers of oblivion."



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.

They would not think to lie so long.
Such faithfulness in effigy
Was just a detail friends would see:
A sculptor's sweet commissioned grace
Thrown off in helping to prolong
The Latin names around the base.

They would not guess how early in
Their supine stationary voyage
The air would change to soundless damage,
Turn the old tenantry away;
How soon succeeding eyes begin
To look, not read. Rigidly, they

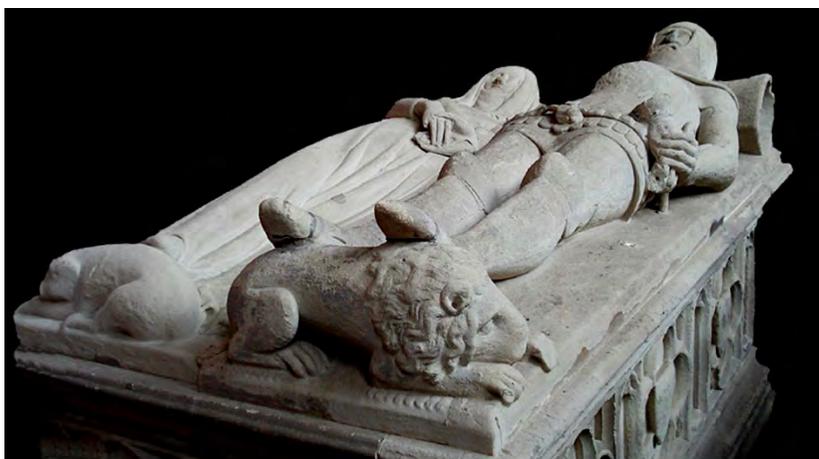
Persisted, linked, through lengths and breadths
Of time. Snow fell, undated. Light
Each summer thronged the glass. A bright
Litter of birdcalls strewed the same
Bone-riddled ground. And up the paths
The endless altered people came,

Washing at their identity.
Now, helpless in the hollow of
An unarmorial age, a trough
Of smoke in slow suspended skeins
Above their scrap of history,
Only an attitude remains:

(ctd)

An Arundel Tomb

Larkin's poem describes the memorial statues on the 14th-Century tomb of the Earl of Arundel and his wife in Chichester Cathedral. The earl's feet rest upon a lion, the symbol of courage, and his wife's upon a dog, the symbol of fidelity. Unusually for the memorials of that time, the couple are holding hands. Although, Larkin was later led to believe that the hand-holding was an artifact of a late Victorian restoration (when the separated effigies were put back together), most recent evidence, however, indicates its medieval origin.



This striking detail, the most memorable part of the memorial, proves

Our almost-instinct almost true:
What will survive of us is love.

These final lines are inscribed on Larkin's memorial in Westminster Abbey.

The poem uses seven-line stanzas with a rhyme scheme of *abbcac*. The lines are generally iambic tetrameter, with an occasional clipping or inversion of the first foot:

/ | - / | - /| - / |
Side by side, their faces blurred,
/ - | - /| - / | - / |
Time has transfigured them into

Larkin's memory gets some things wrong: the earl's feet rest on a lion and not on a dog; there is no Latin inscription around the base; and it is the knight's right-hand gauntlet that is held in the left hand. Time blurs our personal memories in the same manner as it erodes historical details.

The central part of the poem describes the passage of the "lengths and breadths of time." The effigies persist, but the people who visit the cathedral to view the tomb "have endlessly altered." They have no knowledge of the persons who are memorialized and no understanding of their lives. They only note that they once held hands, or that the sculptor decided to portray them thus.

Time has transfigured 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.

Philip Larkin, 1956

Seven Last Words of the Emperor Hadrian

*Animula vagula blandula
hospes comesque corporis,
quae hunc abibis in loca,
pallida, rigida, nudula,
nec, ut soles, dabis iocos?*

1.

Dear soul mate, little guest
and companion, what
shift will you make
now, out there
in the cold?
If this is a joke,
it is old, old.

2.

Soul, small wandering one,
my lifelong companion,
where will you go
— numb, pale, undefended —
now the joke we shared is ended?

3.

Little lightfoot
spirit, house
mate, bedfellow, where are you off
to now? Cat got
your tongue? Lost your shirt, caught
your death? Well, the last laugh
is on you. Is on us.

(*ctd.*)

Bayley (1988) suggested that the final stanza alludes to Mallarmé's 1877 poem *Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe* which begins

Tel qu'en lui-même enfin l'éternité le change
[Changed by eternity to himself at last]

Mallarmé claimed that time has taken away the irrelevant details and finally changed Poe into his true self. Larkin's concept is different. He proposes that time takes away the reality of the people and leaves only the relations between them. All that we remember of the earl and his wife is that once they might have been in love, something that should have been true even if we are not sure:

Time has transfigured them into
Untruth. The stone fidelity
They hardly meant has come to be
Their final blazon.

Seven Last Words of the Emperor Hadrian

Hadrian (76-138 CE) was one of the great Roman Emperors. He consolidated the empire, rebuilt the Pantheon in Rome, made for himself a villa in Tivoli, and constructed Hadrian's Wall in Northern England to protect the empire from the Scots. He was fascinated by Greek philosophy, and just before his death, wrote a brief poem about the fate of the soul after death. Hadrian described the relationship between soul and body using the ancient concept of hospitality, wherein the word *hospis* means both guest and host.

The following is the Latin original and my simple close translation:

<i>Animula, vagula, blandula</i>	Small wandering amiable soul
<i>Hospes comesque corporis</i>	Guest and companion of my body,
<i>Quae nunc abibis in loca</i>	Will you now live where all is
<i>Pallidula, rigida, nudula,</i>	Pale, hard and barren,
<i>Nec, ut soles, dabis iocos</i>	Alone and not making jokes?

Byron (1806) wrote a more romantic translation:

Ah! gentle, fleeting, wav'ring Sprite,
Friend and associate of this clay!
To what unknown region borne,
Wilt thou, now, wing thy distant flight?
No more with wonted humour gay,
But pallid, cheerless, and forlorn.

In *Blandula, Tenulla, Vagula* (1911), Ezra Pound advised his soul to forget about heaven and spend eternity in Sirmione on Lake Garda, home of Catullus (84-54 BCE). The word *tenulla* is a diminutive of *tenuis* (delicate). The poem begins:

What hast thou, O my soul, with paradise?
Will we not rather, when our freedom's won
Get us to some clear place wherein the sun
Lets drift in on us through the olive leaves
A liquid glory?

4.

Sweet urchin, fly
-by-night, heart's guest, my
better half and solace,
you've really done it
this time. You've played one trick
too many. Fool, you've laughed us
both out of breath.

5.

If this is one of your jokes,
my jack, my jack-in-the-box,
lay off. Where
have you got to?
It's cold out there.
And what will you do
without me, you sweet idiot? Go naked?
Homeless? Come back to bed.

6.

What's this, old mouse, my secret
sharer? Gone
where? Did you think I'd let
you slip away without me after
a lifetime of happy scrapes? Who
warmed you, clothed you, fed you, paid with laughter
for your tricks, your japes? Is this the one
joke, poor jackanapes, dear bugaboo,
your emperor does not get?

7.

So you're playing fast
and loose, are you? You've cut
the love knot. Well let's see how you get
on out there without me. Who's kidding
who? Without my body, its royal
breath and blood to warm you, my hands, my tongue
to prove to you what's real,
what's not, poor fool, you're nothing.
But O, without you, my sweet nothing,
I'm dust.

David Malouf, 2003

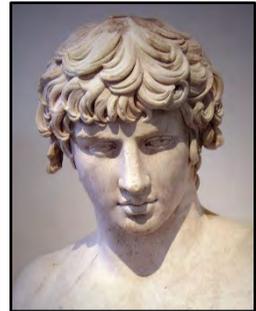
Hadrian understands the soul when it is in the body, but is unsure what will happen when the body dies and the soul is released. Where will it go? What will it do for fun? May Swenson's poem *Question* (p 59) considers similar problems.

Malouf presents seven different translations. In western culture seven is considered magical. There are seven oceans, seven wonders of the ancient world, seven deadly sins, seven notes in a major scale, seven colors in the spectrum, and seven days in the week. In terms of last words, Christ is reported to have made seven statements during his crucifixion:

Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do
(to one of the thieves) Verily, I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in Paradise
(to his mother) Woman, behold thy Son. (to the disciple) Behold thy Mother.
My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?
I thirst
It is finished
Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit

Malouf's translations all play with Hadrian's mention of joking in the last line of the poem. Is the soul making fun of the body? Was our life together just a farce? Is the joke on me or on you? Is this one trick too many? Did you fail to see the result of your prank? Is this a joke that I don't understand? Who's kidding who? The last translation points out that without the body the soul will not know "what's real, what's not," but without the soul the body is dust.

Another theme running through the translations is that the relation between the body and the soul is similar to the love that Hadrian experienced for Antinous (111-130 CE), a beautiful young man whom Hadrian met when the emperor was in his late forties and Antinous in his teens. After 128 CE Antinous lived with Hadrian in his villa at Tivoli and accompanied him on his travels through the empire. In 130 CE the young man drowned during an imperial excursion on the Nile River. Hadrian was devastated; Antinous was deified.



We can conclude with the last words of Hadrian as imagined by Marguerite Yourcenar in her 1951 novel *Mémoires d'Hadrien* (translated in 1954 by her lifelong companion Grace Frick):

Petite âme, âme tendre et flottante, compagne de mon corps, qui fut ton hôte, tu vas descendre dans ces lieux pâles, durs et nus, où tu devras renoncer aux jeux d'autrefois. Un instant encore, regardons ensemble les rives familières, les objets que sans doute nous ne reverrons plus... Tâchons d'entrer dans la mort les yeux ouverts...

[Little soul, gentle and drifting, guest and companion of my body, now you will dwell below in pallid places, stark and bare; there you will abandon your play of yore. But one moment still, let us gaze together on these familiar shores, on these objects which doubtless we shall not see again... Let us try, if we can, to enter into death with open eyes...]

from **Prometheus Unbound**
(speech of Demogorgon)

This is the day, which down the void abysm
At the Earth-born's spell yawns for Heaven's despotism,
And Conquest is dragged captive through the deep:
Love, from its awful throne of patient power
In the wise heart, from the last giddy hour
Of dread endurance, from the slippery, steep,
And narrow verge of crag-like agony, springs
And folds over the world its healing wings.

Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom, and Endurance,
These are the seals of that most firm assurance
Which bars the pit over Destruction's strength;
And if, with infirm hand, Eternity,]
Mother of many acts and hours, should free
The serpent that would clasp her with his length;
These are the spells by which to reassume
An empire o'er the disentangled doom.

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;
To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;
This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.

Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1820

Dark thoughts are my companions. I have wined
With lewdness and with crudeness, and I find
Love is my enemy, dispassionate hate
Is my redemption, though it come too late,
Though I come to it with a broken head
In the cat-house of the dishevelled dead.

J. V. Cunningham, 1943

Prometheus Unbound

After defeating the Titans, Zeus proposed to destroy humanity. However, the Titan Prometheus defied Zeus: he showed humanity the use of fire and he taught them the arts. For this, Prometheus was chained to a rock in the mountains of Scythia, where an eagle daily attacked his vital organs. From this myth Aeschylus (5th Century BCE) fashioned a trilogy of plays – the *Promethea* – of which only the first – *Prometheus Bound* – has survived. The lost plays – *Prometheus Unbound* and *Prometheus the Fire-Bringer* describe how Herakles releases Prometheus and how ultimately Prometheus and Zeus are reconciled. Prometheus is not an Aristotelian hero with a tragic flaw (*harmartia*) that leads to his downfall. Rather he is a hero who fights against adversity for what is right.

Shelley composed his “closet drama” (one not meant to be performed) to complete the story of Prometheus but not as in lost plays of Aeschylus:

I was averse from a catastrophe so feeble as that of reconciling the Champion with the Oppressor of mankind. (Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*)

Shelley introduces the Demogorgon as a force that brings about the fall of Jupiter (Zeus). The nature of the Demogorgon is not clear. When asked, he described himself as “Eternity.” He is perhaps Absolute Necessity, something omnipotent and incomprehensible: the source of all that drives the universe and the inspiration of poets. From his abode arise the vapors:

Which lonely men drink wandering in their youth,
And call truth, virtue, love, genius, or joy,
That maddening wine of life, whose dregs they drain
To deep intoxication

When Demogorgon brings about the fall of Jupiter, truth breaks through illusion:

The painted veil, by those who were, called life,
Which mimicked, as with colours idly spread,
All men believed or hoped, is torn aside;
The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains
Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man
Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless,
Exempt from awe, worship, degree, the king
Over himself; just, gentle, wise: but man.
Passionless? — no, yet free from guilt or pain

In the final speech of the play (facing page) Demogorgon describes the triumph of Love over Conquest and prophesies a glorious future for Prometheus and for man.

Dark thoughts are my companions

This brief poem may be Cunningham’s reaction to his critics. However, it is also more general, providing an intense description of the bitterness to which the idealist might descend when his ideals do not work out. The enjambment of the lines is a fine device to catch the process of disillusion: a pause occurs before we find that “love is my enemy.” The “cat-house of the dishevelled dead” is a vivid invocation of the resultant state of mind: a brothel with neither class nor life.

Pantoum of the Great Depression

Our lives avoided tragedy
Simply by going on and on,
Without end and with little apparent meaning.
Oh, there were storms and small catastrophes.

Simply by going on and on
We managed. No need for the heroic.
Oh, there were storms and small catastrophes.
I don't remember all the particulars.

We managed. No need for the heroic.
There were the usual celebrations, the usual sorrows.
I don't remember all the particulars.
Across the fence, the neighbors were our chorus.

There were the usual celebrations, the usual sorrows
Thank god no one said anything in verse.
The neighbors were our only chorus,
And if we suffered we kept quiet about it.

At no time did anyone say anything in verse.
It was the ordinary pities and fears consumed us,
And if we suffered we kept quiet about it.
No audience would ever know our story.

It was the ordinary pities and fears consumed us.
We gathered on porches; the moon rose; we were poor.
What audience would ever know our story?
Beyond our windows shone the actual world.

We gathered on porches; the moon rose; we were poor.
And time went by, drawn by slow horses.
Somewhere beyond our windows shone the world.
The Great Depression had entered our souls like fog.

And time went by, drawn by slow horses.
We did not ourselves know what the end was.
The Great Depression had entered our souls like fog.
We had our flaws, perhaps a few private virtues.

But we did not ourselves know what the end was.
People like us simply go on.
We have our flaws, perhaps a few private virtues,
But it is by blind chance only that we escape tragedy.

And there is no plot in that; it is devoid of poetry.

Donald Justice, 1995

Pantoum of the Great Depression

The Great Depression was a worldwide economic catastrophe that began with a huge sell-off of stocks on the New York Stock Exchange on October 29, 1939 (Black Tuesday). Unemployment in the United States quickly rose to about 20% and did not return to normal until the country entered World War II in 1941. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected in 1932 and his New Deal with its sponsoring of Public Works limited the extent of unemployment. The depression was exacerbated by the failure of agricultural practices in the Southern Plains which resulted in the Dust Bowl. During the 1930s the people lived from day to day. They were thankful to survive and did not indulge in dreams.

Born in 1925, Donald Justice was a child during the Great Depression. He describes his memories in a pantoum, a poetic form that derives from the *pantun berkait*, a type of oral poetry in the Malay language of South East Asia. The strict pantoum form used quatrains that rhyme *abab* with the second and fourth lines of one quatrain repeating as the first and third lines of the subsequent quatrain. The form was introduced to the West by Victor Hugo in 1829. French poets have since then used variants of the form, perhaps the most famous being Baudelaire's incantatory *Harmonie du Soir* (1857).

Justice's poem uses the repetitions of the pantoum but not the rhymes. In the depression there was no use for unnecessary adornments. In addition, he does not always repeat the lines exactly. One made do with imperfection. A line may be abbreviated:

Across the fence, the neighbors were our chorus
The neighbors were our only chorus

A statement may be changed to a question:

No audience would ever know our story.
What audience would ever know our story?

Or a line may be more subtly changed:

We had our flaws, perhaps a few private virtues
We have our flaws, perhaps a few private virtues

to suggest how character traits learned during the Great Depression persisted into later life.

A pantoum usually ends by repeating the unrepeatable lines from the first quatrain in reverse order in the last quatrain. Instead, Justice repeats variants of the first and second lines from the first quatrain:

Our lives avoided tragedy
Simply by going on and on

become

People like us simply go on.
But it is by blind chance only that we escape tragedy

Justice remarks that in those years there was little cause for poetry, and ironically concludes his poem about the Great Depression by claiming that the time was "devoid of poetry."

The Unknown Citizen

TO JS/07/M/378

THIS MARBLE MONUMENT

IS ERECTED BY THE STATE

He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be
One against whom there was no official complaint,
And all the reports on his conduct agree
That, in the modern sense of an old-fashioned word, he was a saint,
For in everything he did he served the Greater Community.
Except for the War till the day he retired
He worked in a factory and never got fired,
But satisfied his employers, Fudge Motors Inc.
Yet he wasn't a scab or odd in his views,
For his Union reports that he paid his dues,
(Our report on his Union shows it was sound)
And our Social Psychology workers found
That he was popular with his mates and liked a drink.
The Press are convinced that he bought a paper every day
And that his reactions to advertisements were normal in every way.
Policies taken out in his name prove that he was fully insured,
And his Health-card shows he was once in hospital but left it cured.
Both Producers Research and High-Grade Living declare
He was fully sensible to the advantages of the Instalment Plan
And had everything necessary to the Modern Man,
A phonograph, a radio, a car and a frigidaire.
Our researchers into Public Opinion are content
That he held the proper opinions for the time of year;
When there was peace, he was for peace: when there was war, he went.
He was married and added five children to the population,
Which our Eugenist says was the right number for a parent of his generation.
And our teachers report that he never interfered with their education.
Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:
Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.

W. H. Auden, 1940

The Unknown Citizen

After World War I the United Kingdom and France both decided to symbolically bury the remains of an unidentified soldier in a Tomb of the Unknown Soldier which would then serve to recognize the sacrifice of all those who had died in the war. Although associated with much pomp and ceremony, many of the combatants considered these memorials to be the government's way of expunging its guilt for so much unnecessary loss of life.

The Menin Gate erected in 1927 in Ypres, Belgium, served a similar purpose. The inscription in the archway reads

Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam – Here are recorded names of officers and men who fell in Ypres Salient, but to whom the fortune of war denied the known and honoured burial given to their comrades in death.

In 1928 Siegfried Sassoon wrote a bitter sonnet *On Passing the Menin Gate* condemning the hypocrisy of these memorials. This concludes

Here was the world's worst wound. And here with pride
'Their name liveth for evermore' the Gateway claims.
Was ever an immolation so belied
As these intolerably nameless names?
Well might the Dead who struggled in the slime
Rise and deride this sepulchre of crime.

In a parody of the eulogies for the unknown soldier, Auden writes in praise of the unknown citizen. In so doing he critiques the inability of the modern state to recognize the individuality of each of its citizens. The citizen is as nameless as the soldiers of the Great War, buried in anonymous graves with the marker "known only to God."

On a first reading one might consider the poem to be a satire of a communist utopia, wherein the government controls every aspect of life.

For in everything he did he served the Greater Community.

However, one soon realizes that the poem is also taking aim at capitalist societies

He was fully sensible to the advantages of the Instalment Plan

The nature of the state matters little. All states would like their citizens to fulfill their roles in society without rocking the boat. And this can be their tragedy.

Long ago Hobbes proposed in his book *Leviathan* (1651) that man by his nature must always war "everyone against everyone" to attain a better life. Thus, human life is by necessity "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." The only way to escape this is to cede all individual power to the state, which will then maintain order and justice. Peace can only come with limitation of liberty. Unfortunately, those that enforce the limitations, do so in their own interest. And the competition between states can be more murderous than the competition within.

Perhaps one day we shall set up a more benign society wherein every subject can play out their own destiny. Then questions about freedom and happiness will be real and not absurd.

from **Childe Harold's Pilgrimage**
(Canto the Fourth)

I stood in Venice, on the Bridge of Sighs;
A palace and a prison on each hand:
I saw from out the wave he structures rise
As from the stroke of the enchanter's wand:
A thousand years their cloudy wings expand
Around me, and a dying Glory smiles
O'er the far times, when many a subject land
Look'd to the winged Lion's marble piles,
Where Venice sate in state, thron'd on her hundred isles!

She looks a sea Cybele, fresh from ocean,
Rising with her tiara of proud towers
At airy distance, with majestic motion,
A ruler of the waters and their powers:
And such she was; her daughters had their dowers
From spoils of nations, and the exhaustless East
Pour'd in her lap all gems in sparkling showers.
In purple was she rob'd, and of her feast
Monarchs partook, and deem'd their dignity increas'd.

In Venice Tasso's echoes are no more,
And silent rows the songless gondolier;
Her palaces are crumbling to the shore,
And music meets not always now the ear:
Those days are gone—but Beauty still is here.
States fall, arts fade—but Nature doth not die,
Nor yet forget how Venice once was dear,
The pleasant place of all festivity,
The revel of the earth, the masque of Italy!

But unto us she hath a spell beyond
Her name in story, and her long array
Of mighty shadows, whose dim forms despond
Above the dogeless city's vanish'd sway;
Ours is a trophy which will not decay
With the Rialto; Shylock and the Moor,
And Pierre, cannot be swept or worn away--
The keystones of the arch! though all were o'er,
For us repeopl'd were the solitary shore.

George Gordon (Lord Byron), 1818

Childe Harold's Pilgrimage

A “childe” is a young man of noble birth, a candidate for a knighthood. Childe Harold is the character invented by Byron to describe his impressions from a “Grand Tour” of Europe between 1809-1811. The goal of a grand tour was for young aristocrats from northern Europe to broaden their outlook on life through exposure to the culture and society of southern Europe. At the time of Byron's travels, Europe was in the throes of the Napoleonic wars and his tour was more depressing than edifying.

Venice was included in every grand tour. Its setting was magnificent, its art beautiful, its courtesans lovely. Venice was founded in the 8th Century CE on the larger islands – the Rialto (*rivo alto*, “high bank”) – of the Venetian lagoon. In the 9th Century, the relics of Saint Mark the Evangelist were stolen from Alexandria and reinterred in what was to become Venice's Basilica San Marco, and the winged lion, the symbol of Saint Mark, became the city's emblem. Venice was governed by a “doge” (leader) and a council representing the main families of the city. The Venetian Republic grew rich from its trade with the East, but began its slow decline in the 16th Century with the rise of the Ottoman Empire. The Republic ended when Napoleon invaded northern Italy in 1797.

The Bridge of Sighs (*Ponte dei Sospiri*), built in 1600, connects the Doge's Palace, where criminals were tried, to the Prison. The name suggests the sighs that occurred when a convict took his last view of freedom before imprisonment. Cybele is an Eastern goddess, a force of wild nature, often represented in a chariot pulled by lions. As such she fits easily with the lion of Saint Mark.

Torquato Tasso (1544-1595) was an accomplished poet who fell in love with Leonora d'Este. Alfonso II d'Este, the duke of Browning's *My Last Duchess* (p 35) was incensed that a commoner had dared to approach a princess of his family, and had the poet imprisoned in a madhouse. At least that was the story told, and repeated in Byron's *Lament of Tasso* (1817). Tasso remained faithful, and his unrequited love took over his mind and made him mad:

Successful love may sate itself away,
The wretched are the faithful: 'tis their fate
To have all feeling save the one decay
And every passion into one dilate
As rapid rivers into ocean pour.

Byron was disillusioned by the fallen grandeur of Venice, but found comfort in his imagination, which remembered Shakespeare's Shylock and Othello, and Pierre, the swashbuckling hero of Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved* (1682).

Byron's poem was written in Spenserian stanzas, first used in *The Faerie Queen* (1590): Eight iambic pentameter lines followed by an alexandrine (iambic hexameter) with a rhyme scheme of *ababacacc*.

Childe Harold's Pilgrimage initiated the idea of the “Byronic hero,” combined a world-weariness or “ennui” with a passionate rebellion against established norms of behavior. Macauley (1831), in a review of a biography of Byron, described the hero as having “defiance on his brow, and misery in his heart.”

Haecceity

Evil is any this or this
Pursued beyond hypothesis.

It is the scribbling of affection
On the blank pages of perfection.

Evil is presentness bereaved
Of all the futures it conceived.

Wilful and realized restriction
Of the insatiate forms of fiction.

It is this poem, or this act.
It is this absolute of fact.

J. V. Cunningham, 1943

from **An Essay on Man**
(Epistle I)

Awake, my St. John! leave all meaner things
To low ambition, and the pride of kings.
Let us (since life can little more supply
Than just to look about us and to die)
Expatiate free o'er all this scene of man;
A mighty maze! but not without a plan;
A wild, where weeds and flow'rs promiscuous shoot;
Or garden, tempting with forbidden fruit.
Together let us beat this ample field,
Try what the open, what the covert yield;
The latent tracts, the giddy heights explore
Of all who blindly creep, or sightless soar;
Eye Nature's walks, shoot folly as it flies,
And catch the manners living as they rise;
Laugh where we must, be candid where we can;
But vindicate the ways of God to man.

Alexander Pope, 1734

Haecceity

Duns Scotus (1265-1308), a Scottish philosopher and Franciscan friar, described *haecceitas* or haecceity as the “thisness” of a thing – the sum of the properties and qualities that make it a particular thing. It is distinguished from the *quidditas* or “whatness” of a thing – the ideal form from which it is derived. Scotus proposed that man could discover form through sensory experience, but still maintained that the knowledge of form is the only true knowledge. Gerard Manley Hopkins derived his concept of “inscape” from these ideas (p 95). He found that one could come to God through the intensity of experience.

Cunningham’s poem proposes an opposite view – that haecceity is

metaphysical evil, evil as a defect of being. Any realized particular, anything which is this and not that and that, is by the very fact evil ... Perfection is in possibility, in the idea, but that which is realised, specific, determined, has no possibilities. (*The Quest for Opal*, 1950).

These concepts are difficult to cope with. Human beings can only live and act as imperfect individuals in a finite present.

to live is at every moment to be and to do some particularity: in this respect what does not matter, only it must be something. The void must be specified.

Despite our necessary imperfection, we must act as best we can in the light of what we believe to be good.

An Essay on Man

Pope dedicated his long philosophical poem to Henry St John, 1st Viscount Bolingbroke, a friend of Voltaire and a politician who promoted the ideas of Republicanism and freedom “not from the law, but by the law.”

In his essay Pope expatiates on the state of man. To “expatiate” (Latin “walk beyond”) is to expound at length about something. Pope sees the universe in which we live as a “mighty maze but not without a plan.” We must try to understand its principles using all the techniques that we can muster, laugh at our failures, and be truthful about what we do not know.

Ultimately, we must “vindicate the ways of God to man.” This is a play on Milton’s “justify the ways of God to man” in the opening lines of *Paradise Lost* (p 258). There is an edge to the word “vindicate” which derives from the Latin *vindicare* (“avenge”) and adds a sense of defiance. Although the universe is complex, we can still overcome its apparent incomprehensibility. In the second epistle of the poem Pope expresses the exuberant optimism of the Enlightenment:

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
The proper study of Mankind is Man
Go, measure earth, weigh air, and state the tides;
Instruct the planets in what orbs to run,
Correct old Time, and regulate the Sun

Poem on His Birthday

In the mustardseed sun,
By full tilt river and switchback sea
Where the cormorants scud,
In his house on stilts high among beaks
And palavers of birds
This sandgrain day in the bent bay's grave
He celebrates and spurns
His driftwood thirty-fifth wind turned age;
Hérons spire and spear.

Under and round him go
Flounders, gulls, on their cold, dying trails,
Doing what they are told,
Curlews aloud in the congered waves
Work at their ways to death,
And the rhymer in the long tongued room,
Who tolls his birthday bell,
Toils towards the ambush of his wounds;
Hérons, steeple stemmed, bless.

In the thistledown fall,
He sings towards anguish; finches fly
In the claw tracks of hawks
On a seizing sky; small fishes glide
Through wynds and shells of drowned
Ship towns to pastures of otters. He
In his slant, racking house
And the hewn coils of his trade perceives
Hérons walk in their shroud,

The livelong river's robe
Of minnows wreathing around their prayer;
And far at sea he knows,
Who slaves to his crouched, eternal end
Under a serpent cloud,
Dolphins dive in their turnturtle dust,
The rippled seals streak down
To kill and their own tide daubing blood
Slides good in the sleek mouth.

In a cavernous, swung
Wave's silence, wept white angelus knells.
Thirty-five bells sing struck
On skull and scar where his loves lie wrecked,
Steered by the falling stars.

(ctd)

Poem on His Birthday

Thomas was born on 27 October, 1914. He was very sensitive to the passage of time and wrote four different birthday poems. The first and second – *Especially when the October wind* (1934) and *Twenty-Four Years* (1928) are more concerned with the inevitability of death than the celebration of life. In the latter poem, he imagines himself

In the groin of the natural doorway I crouched like a tailor
Sewing a shroud for a journey
By the light of the meat-eating sun.

The third poem entitled *Poem in October* (1944) begins in a far happier tone

A springful of larks in a rolling
Cloud and the roadside bushes brimming with whistling
Blackbirds and the sun of October
Summery
On the hill's shoulder

But then the weather turned round

It turned away from the blithe country
And down the other air and the blue altered sky
Streamed again a wonder of summer
With apples
Pears and red currants
And I saw in the turning so clearly a child's
Forgotten mornings when he walked with his mother
Through the parables
Of sun light
And the legends of the green chapels.

Thomas began *Poem on His Birthday* in 1949 on his 35th birthday, but did not finish it until 1951. The poem is one of the last few poems written before his premature death in 1953. Thomas had become reconciled to the passage of time and the inevitability of death. Instead of his more youthful despair, he now felt an enthusiasm for what might be possible within the limits of human life.

Thomas provided his own summary of the poem:

it was to be about a poet who realizes he has arrived at 'half his bible span.'
He means both to celebrate and spurn his birthday in a house high among trees, overlooking the sea. Birds and fishes move under and around him on their dying ways, and he, a craftsman in words, toils 'towards his own wounds which are waiting in ambush for him.' The poet 'sings in the direction of his pain.' Birds fly after the hawks that will kill them. Fishes swim toward the otters that will eat them. He sees herons walking in their shrouds, which is the water they fish in; and he, who is progressing, afraid, to his own fiery end in the cloud of an atomic explosion knows that, out at sea, animals who attack and eat other sea animals are tasting the flesh of their own death. Now exactly half of his three score and ten years has gone. He looks back at his times —

And to-morrow weeps in a blind cage
Terror will rage apart
Before chains break to a hammer flame
And love unbolts the dark

And freely he goes lost
In the unknown, famous light of great
And fabulous, dear God.
Dark is a way and light is a place,
Heaven that never was
Nor will be ever is always true,
And, in that brambled void,
Plenty as blackberries in the woods
The dead grow for His joy.

There he might wander bare
With the spirits of the horseshoe bay
Or the stars' seashore dead,
Marrow of eagles, the roots of whales
And wishbones of wild geese,
With blessed, unborn God and His Ghost,
And every soul His priest,
Gulled and chanter in young Heaven's fold
Be at cloud quaking peace,

But dark is a long way.
He, on the earth of the night, alone
With all the living, prays,
Who knows the rocketing wind will blow
The bones out of the hills,
And the scythed boulders bleed, and the last
Rage shattered waters kick
Masts and fishes to the still quick stars,
Faithlessly unto Him

Who is the light of old
And air shaped Heaven where souls grow wild
As horses in the foam:
Oh, let me midlife mourn by the shrined
And druid herons' vows
The voyage to ruin I must run,
Dawn ships clouted aground,
Yet, though I cry with tumbledown tongue,
Count my blessings aloud:

(ctd)

his loves, his hates, all he has seen — and sees the logical progress of death in everything he has been and done. His death lurks for him, and for all, in the next lunatic war. And, still singing, still praising the radiant earth, still loving, though remotely, the animal creation also gladly pursuing their inevitable and grievous ends, he goes toward his. Why should he praise God and the beauty of the world, as he moves to horrible death? He does not like the deep zero dark, and the nearer he gets to it, the louder he sings, the higher the salmon leaps, the shriller the birds carol. (quoted in *The Days of Dylan Thomas*, Read and McKenna, 1964)

Thomas's prose description of the poem's ending, being more concerned with the dying than with the singing, lacks the ecstatic feeling of the poetry.

The poem was written at the Boathouse in Laugharne, where Thomas had lived since 1949. This was his “house on stilts high upon beaks and palavers of birds.” The village of Laugharne, graced with an ancient castle and a fine pub, is on the west bank of the estuary of the River



Taf where it enters Carmarthen Bay. The river flows down and the tides come rolling up: “full tilt river and switchback sea.”

The poem falls into three main parts. The first four verses describe how all the different forms of life “work at their way to death.” Herons recur at the end of the first three verses: at the beginning they “spire and spear” as their beaks raise up to swallow or dive down to pierce a fish; in the second verse, they “steeple-stemmed, bless” as they appear to be like priests; finally, they “walk in their shroud” to represent the imminence of death. The last image recalls the earlier birthday poem *Twenty-Four Years* wherein the poet was “sewing a shroud for a journey.”

In the second set of four verses, a “cavernous, swung-wave’s silence” arrives, and we learn how religion interprets this pervasiveness of death. The main lesson is that “dark is a way, and light is a place.” Life is susceptible to time and leads to death, but death can lead to heaven where time has no effect. Yet the poet is not convinced: “dark is a long way.”

In the final four verses the poet insists that “the voyage to ruin I must run.” However, he decides to enjoy his blessings, and he moves toward death triumphantly rather than despondently. The poet feels the beauty of the world that God has created, and revels in all that he has himself created – “the man-souled fiery islands,” the poems to which he has granted life.

Four elements and five
Senses, and man a spirit in love
Tangling through this spun slime
To his nimbus bell cool kingdom come
And the lost, moonshine domes,
And the sea that hides his secret selves
Deep in its black, base bones,
Lulling of spheres in the seashell flesh,
And this last blessing most,

That the closer I move
To death, one man through his sundered hulks,
The louder the sun blooms
And the tusked, ramshackling sea exults;
And every wave of the way
And gale I tackle, the whole world then,
With more triumphant faith
That ever was since the world was said,
Spins its morning of praise,

I hear the bouncing hills
Grow larked and greener at berry brown
Fall and the dew larks sing
Taller this thunderclap spring, and how
More spanned with angels ride
The mansouled fiery islands! Oh,
Holier than their eyes,
And my shining men no more alone
As I sail out to die

Dylan Thomas, 1951

Triolet

I used to think all poets were Byronic –
Mad, bad and dangerous to know.
And then I met a few. Yes it's ironic –
I used to think all poets were Byronic.
They're mostly wicked as a ginless tonic
And wild as pension plans. Not long ago
I used to think all poets were Byronic –
Mad, bad and dangerous to know.

Wendy Cope, 1986

The poem alternates lines of 6 syllables and 3 stresses with lines of 9 syllables and 4 stresses. The poem has no regular rhythm. Instead, Thomas uses alliteration to propel the lines: “spire and spear,” “wept white angelus,” “tumbledown tongue.” Assonance rhyming (just the vowel sounds) is used for the end-words of the lines, with a general rhyme scheme of *ababcbdc*. Thus, in the tenth verse we have “five/love/slime/come/domes/selves/bones/flesh/most.”

Thomas uses highly compressed images. For example, in the first verse the “sandgrain day” denotes a day that passes like a grain of sand falling through an hourglass. In the second verse, the “rhymer in the long-tongued room” is the poet who uses the echoes of his sounds to keep his poems alive.

The poem shares themes with Yeats’s *Sailing to Byzantium* (p 7) and *Byzantium* (p 72). Both Yeats and Thomas were attempting to create something that would allow them to persist beyond their death. Yeats created a golden bird that will continue to sing even though the poet was no more; Thomas created “man-souled fiery islands.” Some of the images in the poems are similar: Thomas’s “tusked, ramshackling sea” recalls the “mackerel-crowded seas” of Yeats; and his “nimbus bell cool kingdom come and the lost, moonshine domes” recall the “great cathedral gong” and the “starlit or a moonlit dome” of Yeats.

Some of the feeling of Thomas’s poem derives from Lawrence’s *The Ship of Death* (p 235). Both poets died young (Thomas at 39 and Lawrence at 44), and both had some premonition of their death. Lawrence’s poem ends

Oh build your ship of death, oh build it!
for you will need it.
For the voyage of oblivion awaits you.

The *Prologue* to his *Collected Poems* (1952) also concludes with the idea of artistic achievement reaching beyond the limits of death, but Thomas uses the image of an ark defying the flood rather than the “man-souled fiery islands:”

My ark sings in the sun
At God speeded summer's end
And the flood flowers now.

On November 4, 1953, Thomas was admitted in coma to St. Vincent’s Hospital in New York. He had been drinking the night before but probably not as much as he boasted (“I’ve had 18 straight whiskies. I think that’s a record.”). He never regained consciousness and died on November 9.

Triplet

The triplet form uses the rhyme scheme *ABaAabAB* where capitals represent repeated lines and lower-case letters represent end-rhymes (cf p 86). Its simplicity is suited to witty pronouncements. In this classic triplet, Cope comments on the famous description of Lord Byron as “mad, bad and dangerous to know” by Lady Caroline Lamb in 1812. We are all fascinated by the famous, and tempted by the danger of coming close to them. Lady Caroline herself was just as notorious as Byron. Cope points out that Byron was unusual for a poet. Most poets are neither wicked nor wild, more likely to be librarians (Philip Larkin) or insurance executives (Wallace Stevens) than dashing young lords.

from **The Renaissance** (Conclusion)

To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits: for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world, and meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations, seem alike. While all melts under our feet, we may well catch at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours, or work of the artist's hands, or the face of one's friend. Not to discriminate every moment some passionate attitude in those about us, and in the brilliancy of their gifts some tragic dividing of forces on their ways, is, on this short day of frost and sun, to sleep before evening.

Walter Pater, 1868

from **A Masque of Reason**
(God's Speech to Job)

I've had you on my mind a thousand years
To thank you someday for the way you helped me
Establish once for all the principle
There's no connection man can reason out
Between his just deserts and what he gets.
Virtue may fail and wickedness succeed.
'Twas a great demonstration we put on.
I should have spoken sooner had I found
The word I wanted. You would have supposed
One who in the beginning was the Word
Would be in a position to command it.
I have to wait for words like anyone.
Too long I've owed you this apology
For the apparently unmeaning sorrow
You were afflicted with in those old days.
But it was of the essence of the trial
You shouldn't understand it at the time.
And it came out all right. I have no doubt
You realize by now the part you played
To stultify the Deuteronomist
And change the tenor of religious thought.
My thanks are to you for releasing me
From moral bondage to the human race.

(ctd)

Conclusion to The Renaissance

Walter Pater was a master prose stylist. In the 1936 *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, the editor W. B. Yeats included as its first poem Pater's prose description of Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa as the eternal feminine:

She is older than the rocks among which she sits

The conclusion to Pater's *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873, 1893), to my mind, a far more beautiful piece of writing, presents a philosophy of beauty. He urges his readers in this transient life – “on this short day of frost and sun” – to seek out beauty wherever it can be found. Later in the chapter he states

...we have an interval, and then our place knows us no more. Some spend this interval in listlessness, some in high passions, the wisest, at least among “the children of the world” in art and song. For our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time.

Although most critics praised the essays in the book – particularly those on Leonardo da Vinci and Sandro Botticelli – many took issue with the aesthetic philosophy of the Conclusion, claiming that Christian charity was a far loftier ideal. W.W. Capes, who had been Pater's tutor at Oxford, stated in a sermon:

That is a poor philosophy of life, which would concentrate all efforts upon self, and bid us to console ourselves amid our pleasures so they be only intense and multitudinous enough

Despite the critiques, Pater's teachings had lasting effect on many writers of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries: Hopkins, Wilde, Dowson, Symons, and Yeats.

A Masque of Reason

The 42 chapters of the book of Job present the unfortunate history of a righteous man. God allows Job to be tested by Satan: all that Job owns is taken away, all his children are killed, and Job himself is struck down by disease. His friends – “Job's comforters” – advise him to seek God's forgiveness since he must have somehow offended Him. However, Job insists on his own righteousness and does not repent. He demands that God explain why he is being unjustly punished. An angry God appears unto Job in a whirlwind. He proclaims His workings to be far beyond Job's understanding. He neither explains nor justifies what has happened.

Frost presented this poem as the 43rd chapter of the book of Job. Although called a “masque,” it is nothing like the spectacular courtly presentations of the 17th century. Job and his wife are seated somewhere in a deserted afterlife. God exits from a burning bush that looks like a Christmas tree, and sets up a plywood throne. He thanks Job for his help in changing our ideas of divine justice.

The original idea of human morality was that if we honored God and loved our neighbor we would thrive. This was clearly stated several times in *Deuteronomy*, wherein Moses restated the commandments (Greek, *deuteros nomos*, second law) and promised that God would bless all those that obey them:

Thou shalt keep therefore his statutes, and his commandments, which I command thee this day, that it may go well with thee, and with thy children after thee (*Deuteronomy* 4: 40).

The only free will there at first was man's,
Who could do good or evil as he chose.
I had no choice but I must follow him
With forfeits and rewards he understood—
Unless I liked to suffer loss of worship.
I had to prosper good and punish evil.
You changed all that. You set me free to reign.
You are the Emancipator of your God,
And as such I promote you to a saint.

Robert Frost, 1945

In Memoriam A. H. H.

CI

Unwatch'd, the garden bough shall sway,
The tender blossom flutter down,
Unloved, that beech will gather brown,
This maple burn itself away;

Unloved, the sun-flower, shining fair,
Ray round with flames her disk of seed,
And many a rose-carnation feed
With summer spice the humming air;

Unloved, by many a sandy bar,
The brook shall babble down the plain,
At noon or when the lesser wain
Is twisting round the polar star;

Uncared for, gird the windy grove,
And flood the haunts of hern and crake;
Or into silver arrows break
The sailing moon in creek and cove;

Till from the garden and the wild
A fresh association blow,
And year by year the landscape grow
Familiar to the stranger's child;

As year by year the labourer tills
His wonted glebe, or lops the glades;
And year by year our memory fades
From all the circle of the hills.

Alfred Tennyson, 1850

This idea recurred many times in the Old Testament:

A good man obtaineth favour of the LORD: but a man of wicked devices will he condemn. (*Psalms* 12:2)

As the years passed, however, people realized that doing good was not always rewarded.

All things have I seen in the days of my vanity: there is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man that prolongeth his life in his wickedness. (*Ecclesiastes* 7:15)

And so, God used the story of Job to show that

There's no connection man can reason out
Between his just deserts and what he gets.
Virtue may fail and wickedness succeed.

Later ideas of morality recognized this discrepancy, but promised that everything would be sorted out in the afterlife, where good would be rewarded and evil punished. This was the first question posed by Job when God appeared in Frost's play – whether all there is to heaven is an “escape from so great pains of life on earth.” God promised to talk about this later but He never did.

In Memoriam A. H. H.

In 1829 Tennyson became fast friends with Arthur Henry Hallam, a fellow student at Trinity College, Cambridge University. They wrote poetry together, and attended meetings of The Apostles, an elite intellectual discussion group that had been founded in 1820. They travelled together in Europe, and Hallam became engaged to Tennyson's sister, Emilia.

Hallam died suddenly of a cerebral hemorrhage on a trip to Vienna with his father in 1833. Tennyson went into a period of prolonged mourning. *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, a sequence of 133 lyric poems in memory of his lost friend, was finally published in 1850. Each poem is written in quatrains with a rhythm of iambic tetrameter and a rhyme scheme *abba*.

The main subject of the poems was Tennyson's grief at the loss of his friend. Tennyson treasured the love he had experienced

'Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all. (XXVII)

Though he realizes that everyone must die, he finds the process cruel:

Who trusted God was love indeed
And love Creation's final law
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed. (LVI)

In poem CI, Tennyson describes the many beautiful aspects of life that his dead friend is unable to experience. Year by year, these persist to be enjoyed by others, as year by year the memory of his friend fades.

Queen Victoria found great comfort in these poems, after the death of her husband, the Prince Consort Albert, in 1861.

why some people be mad at me sometimes

they ask me to remember
but they want me to remember
their memories
and i keep on remembering
mine.

Lucille Clifton, 1988

Hawk Roosting

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.
Inaction, no falsifying dream
Between my hooked head and hooked feet:
Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat.

The convenience of the high trees!
The air's buoyancy and the sun's ray
Are of advantage to me;
And the earth's face upward for my inspection.

My feet are locked upon the rough bark.
It took the whole of Creation
To produce my foot, my each feather:
Now I hold Creation in my foot

Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly -
I kill where I please because it is all mine.
There is no sophistry in my body:
My manners are tearing off heads -

The allotment of death.
For the one path of my flight is direct
Through the bones of the living.
No arguments assert my right:

The sun is behind me.
Nothing has changed since I began.
My eye has permitted no change.
I am going to keep things like this.

Ted Hughes, 1960

why some people be mad at me sometimes

Clifton reminds us that each person experiences things differently. We must not expect one person's memories of an event to be the same as another's. The more people come from different backgrounds the greater the differences. Some may remember that the goal of the Confederacy was to prevent the federal government from infringing on states' rights, others may remember that the goal was to preserve. Clifton's poem is engraved on a plaque at the New York Public Library, the repository of many different and sometimes contradictory memories. These must be sifted to obtain the truth.

Hawk Roosting

The genus *Accipiter* (from Latin, *accipere*, grasp) includes most of the birds commonly known as "hawks." In the old world, the most common is the sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*) shown on the right.

The hawk preys on smaller birds: finches, sparrows, thrushes, starlings and pigeons. Through evolution its "hooked head and hooked feet" have been perfected for grasping and tearing apart its prey. The feet with their long talons are also suited for hanging onto high branches so that it can survey the land. The eyes have evolved to make it easy to detect and follow its prey. The blunted wings allow it to fly at great speed and to turn quickly as it chases smaller birds.



In this poem the eyes are closed. A later poem, entitled *A Sparrow-Hawk* (1983), describes the glowing eyes that focus on a lark and

Laser the lark-shaped hole
In the lark's song.

Hughes is clear about the hawk's murderous activity as it tears off heads and serves out its "allotment of death." He criticizes the hawk for not ever questioning its right to kill:

There is no sophistry in my body:
... I am going to keep things like this

Hughes's poem is often compared to Tennyson's *The Eagle*:

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ring'd with the azure world, he stands.
The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

Tennyson views the eagle as majestic, almost godlike; Hughes views the hawk as murderous, almost manlike.

from **Clearances**

When all the others were away at Mass
I was all hers as we peeled potatoes.
They broke the silence, let fall one by one
Like solder weeping off the soldering iron:
Cold comforts set between us, things to share
Gleaming in a bucket of clean water.
And again let fall. Little pleasant splashes
From each other's work would bring us to our senses.

So while the parish priest at her bedside
Went hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying
And some were responding and some crying
I remembered her head bent towards my head,
Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives—
Never closer the whole rest of our lives.

Seamus Heaney, 1986

When I Have Fears

When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,
Before high piled books, in charactry,
Hold like rich garnerers the full ripen'd grain;
When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,
Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
And think that I may never live to trace
Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;
And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,
That I shall never look upon thee more,
Never have relish in the fairy power
Of unreflecting love;—then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

John Keats, 1818

When all the others were away at Mass

In memory of his mother Mary Kathleen Heaney (1911–1984), Heaney composed a sequence of eight sonnets, called *Clearances*. The title brings to mind the paying off of debts, and the open spaces when land is cleared for farming.

In this sonnet, Heaney recalls a Sunday morning during his childhood when he helped his mother peeling potatoes for Sunday dinner. Heaney notices the gentleness of the potatoes falling into the water like solder from a soldering iron. Most important was the closeness of mother and son

I remembered her head bent towards my head,
Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives—
Never closer the whole rest of our lives.

The poem uses imperfect rhymes (*aabbccdd*) – often only the last consonant – in the octave and more perfect rhymes in the sestet (*effegg*).

This sonnet was chosen as the “Poem for Ireland” in a contest organized by the Irish Broadcasting Company (RTE) in 2015.

The last sonnet of *Clearances* describes the emptiness that followed his mother’s death, likening it to the void left when a chestnut tree that had been grown from a nut planted during his infancy was cut down:

Deep-planted and long gone, my coeval
Chestnut from a jam jar in a hole,
Its heft and hush become a bright nowhere,
A soul ramifying and forever
Silent, beyond silence listened for.

When I Have Fears

Two years before he wrote this poem, Keats had given up his career as an apothecary-surgeon and decided to become a poet. Now his brother Tom was sick with consumption, and Keats was afraid that he might develop the disease.

The sonnet’s three quatrains, each voicing one aspect of his disquiet, all begin with the same wording (*anaphora*): “When I have fears. . . When I behold . . . And when I feel.” His first concern is that he will not be able to harvest all the poetry in his brain. His second worry is that there will be beautiful ideas – “huge cloudy symbols of a high romance” – that he will not have time to put into words. His third fear is that he shall not have time to experience “the fairy power of unreflecting love.”

Keats died of consumption in Rome in 1821. Despite the brevity of his life, his poetic output was prodigious, his poems captured the feelings of the age, and he experienced the love of Fanny Brawne, to whom he wrote

I have left no immortal work behind me – nothing to make my friends proud
of my memory – but I have lov’d the principle of beauty in all things, and if I
had had time I would have made myself remember’d.

Keats’s epitaph on his gravestone in Rome’s Protestant Cemetery reads

Here lies One Whose Name was writ in Water.

from **Bishop Blougram's Apology**

Now come, let's backward to the starting-place.
See my way: we're two college friends, suppose.
Prepare together for our voyage, then;
Each note and check the other in his work,—
Here's mine, a bishop's outfit; criticize!
What's wrong? why won't you be a bishop too?

Why first, you don't believe, you don't and can't,
(Not statedly, that is, and fixedly
And absolutely and exclusively)
In any revelation called divine.
No dogmas nail your faith—and what remains
But say so, like the honest man you are?
First, therefore, overhaul theology!
Nay, I too, not a fool, you please to think,
Must find believing every whit as hard:
And if I do not frankly say as much,
The ugly consequence is clear enough.

Now wait, my friend: well, I do not believe—
If you'll accept no faith that is not fixed,
Absolute and exclusive, as you say.
You're wrong—I mean to prove it in due time.
Meanwhile, I know where difficulties lie
I could not, cannot solve, nor ever shall,
So give up hope accordingly to solve—

(To you, and over the wine). Our dogmas then
With both of us, though in unlike degree,
Missing full credence—overboard with them!
I mean to meet you on your own premise:
Good, there go mine in company with yours!

And now what are we? unbelievers both,
Calm and complete, determinately fixed
To-day, to-morrow and for ever, pray?
You'll guarantee me that? Not so, I think!
In no wise! all we've gained is, that belief,
As unbelief before, shakes us by fits,
Confounds us like its predecessor. Where's
The gain? how can we guard our unbelief,
Make it bear fruit to us? —the problem here.
Just when we are safest, there's a sunset-touch,
A fancy from a flower-bell, some one's death,
A chorus-ending from Euripides, —

(*ctd*)

Bishop Blougram's Apology

This is the longest of Browning's dramatic monologues, if one excludes the many parts of *The Ring and the Book* (1869). An apologia (Greek *apo* away from + *logos* speech) is a defense of a belief or an action. In this poem the Catholic Bishop Blougram defends his lifestyle to the young journalist Gigadibs in a conversation after dinner. The setting is St Mary's College, Birmingham, designed by Augustus Pugin and built in 1838. The year is likely 1852.

The middle of the 19th Century was a time of religious ferment in Great Britain. On the one hand, the advances in science had led many to doubt any belief in God let alone in the tenets of Christianity. On the other, the Tractarian movement had proposed the Church of England return to the beliefs and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. When this movement failed, many of the Tractarians, most notably John Henry Newman, converted to Catholicism (1845).

The Vatican soon decided to re-establish the system of British Bishopsrics that had been taken over by the Church of England. To this end it appointed Cardinal Wiseman (1802-65) as Archbishop of Westminster in 1850. This was greeted by some outcry about "papal aggression," but over the years this indignation moderated. Browning's Bishop Blougram is modeled on Cardinal Wiseman.

A dramatic monologue is open to many interpretations. We are never sure whether the speaker is being ironic or deceitful, and we do not know when he is proposing ideas just for the purpose of argument. Over the years there has been great debate about Bishop Blougram. Some consider the bishop a sophisticated, sybaritic, and hypocritical priest, who tries to defend himself against the justified criticism of Gigadibs. Others appraise him as an insightful believer, who adjusts his arguments to the premises of the young journalist, and ultimately convinces Gigadibs to return to his faith in Christianity.

Blougram initially presents his interviewer with a simple allegory comparing human life to a voyage "cross the ocean of this world." The question is how to furnish one's cabin. Should the cabin be simply provided with the bare necessities, or can luxuries such as art and music be brought aboard? Blougram is pointing out that religious belief does not require ascetism, and that a love of beauty can complement the love of God. However, one easily falls to the view that Blougram is protesting too much, and that his self-indulgence does not easily fit with the teaching of Jesus:

If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me. (*Matthew* 19:21)

This is where this selection from the poem begins: Blougram now compares the position of faith to that of skepticism. He notes that just as believers are assailed by doubt, so unbelievers are often worried that there is something that they lack. This sense of something missing can be triggered by the glories of nature, from significant events, or from the beauties of art – "a chorus ending from Euripides." The latter might perhaps be something like the following from *The Bakkhai* (405 BCE, translated by Anne Carson, 2015):

And hopes are countless, they come on like waves, rising and falling.

And that's enough for fifty hopes and fears
As old and new at once as nature's self,
To rap and knock and enter in our soul,
Take hands and dance there, a fantastic ring,
Round the ancient idol, on his base again, —
The grand Perhaps! We look on helplessly.
There the old misgivings, crooked questions are—
This good God, —what he could do, if he would,

Would, if he could—then must have done long since:
If so, when, where and how? some way must be,—
Once feel about, and soon or late you hit
Some sense, in which it might be, after all.
Why not, “The Way, the Truth, the Life?”

—That way

Over the mountain, which who stands upon
Is apt to doubt if it be meant for a road;
While, if he views it from the waste itself,
Up goes the line there, plain from base to brow,
Not vague, mistakeable! what's a break or two
Seen from the unbroken desert either side?
And then (to bring in fresh philosophy)
What if the breaks themselves should prove at last
The most consummate of contrivances
To train a man's eye, teach him what is faith?
And so we stumble at truth's very test!
All we have gained then by our unbelief
Is a life of doubt diversified by faith,
For one of faith diversified by doubt:
We called the chess-board white,—we call it black.

Robert Browning, 1855

from **King Lear Act III: Scene 4**

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just.

William Shakespeare, 1606

The skeptic must always have misgivings about what might be true and yet cannot be proven – “the grand Perhaps.” The last words of the 15th-Century French writer Rabelais were “*Je m'en vais chercher un grand peut-être.*” [I am going to seek a grand perhaps].

Might it then be actually true when Christ claimed

I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. (*John 14:6*).

If one accepted this Christian belief, one might be assailed by doubts. Yet these could serve to make the faith stronger. Blougram concludes his argument

All we have gained then by our unbelief
Is a life of doubt diversified by faith,
For one of faith diversified by doubt:
We called the chess-board white,—we call it black.

Blougram continues with several more arguments concerning faith and miracles. Then, at the end of the bishop’s monologue, the poet takes over the narration and concludes the story. After his interaction with Blougram, Gigadibs decided not to write an article unmasking the bishop as a casuistic hypocrite. Rather he

bought, not cabin-furniture
But settler’s-implements (enough for three)
And started for Australia—there, I hope,
By this time he has tested his first plough,
And studied his last chapter of St. John.

In the last chapter the gospel of John, Christ appeared unto his disciples while they were fishing, and arranged for a miraculous draft of fishes. As they dine on the catch, he charges Peter to “Feed my sheep.”

Gigadibs decided to renounce his literary ambitions, and to go to Australia. Browning leaves it up to the reader to decide whether Gigadibs became a missionary, or simply set out to seek his fortune by farming. And whether he was converted to his new belief by Blougram, or still despised the bishop.

Poor Naked Wretches

Lear has just left the castle of Gloucester in anger at the cruelty of his daughters, Goneril and Regan, and is out on the heath in the midst of a dreadful storm. He realizes that he has until now neither experienced nor pitied the sufferings of his people. He finally understands that a king must “expose himself to feel as wretches feel” in order to rule with justice and compassion:

To have pity and compassion of people that are in misery and distress, is a Christian and a necessary virtue; but he that never felt temptation, adversity, or affliction himself, can have but little pity and compassion of others. (from Otto Wertmuller, *A Spiritual and Most Precious Pearl*, translated by Myles Coverdale, 1550; reference noted by Foakes, 1997).

“Superflux” means surplus. Lear is proposing charity: that the rich and powerful must use their excess wealth to help the poor and weak.

The Negro Speaks of Rivers

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

Langston Hughes, 1920

Inauguration Day: January 1953

The snow had buried Stuyvesant.
The subways drummed the vaults. I heard
the El's green girders charge on Third.
Manhattan's truss of adamant,
that groaned in ermine, slumped on want
Cyclonic zero of the Word,
God of our armies, who interred
Cold Harbor's blue immortals, Grant!
Horseman, your sword is in the groove!
Ice, ice. Our wheels no longer move:
Look the fixed stars, all just alike
as lack-land atoms, split apart,
and the Republic summons Ike,
the mausoleum in her heart.

Robert Lowell, 1953

The Negro Speaks of Rivers

In 1920, the 18-year-old Hughes travelled by train from Cleveland to visit his father in Toluca, Mexico. In his autobiography *The Big Sea* (1940), he recalled:

Now it was just sunset, and we crossed the Mississippi, slowly, over a long bridge. I looked out the window of the Pullman at the great muddy river flowing down toward the heart of the South, and I began to think what that river, the old Mississippi, had meant to Negroes in the past—how to be sold down the river was the worst fate that could overtake a slave in times of bondage. Then I remembered reading how Abraham Lincoln had made a trip down the Mississippi on a raft to New Orleans, and how he had seen slavery at its worst, and had decided within himself that it should be removed from American life. Then I began to think about other rivers in our past—the Congo, and the Niger, and the Nile in Africa—and the thought came to me: “I’ve known rivers”

Lincoln made his first voyage down the Mississippi in 1828 at the age of 19 on a flatboat carrying farm produce. Seeing the slave market in New Orleans left him with a lifelong hatred of the institution of slavery.

The world has many great rivers. They provide the land with water. They allow people to travel easily back and forth. They are also the means by which slaves are carried from their homes to work on the plantations and to build the cities of the great empires. Most of the slaves were dusky like the rivers.

Inauguration Day: January 1953

In November, 1952, the Republican candidate for US president, Dwight “Ike” Eisenhower won a landslide victory over Adlai Stevenson (55% of the popular vote and 442 of the 531 electoral votes). Eisenhower, the commander of the allied forces in World War II, was immensely popular, and won re-election in 1956 with even greater support.

In this sonnet, Lowell expresses his frustration with the election results and his dislike of Eisenhower and all he stood for, as he sits in his car in Manhattan in a snow storm with wheels that “no longer move.”

Stuyvesant Street, one of the oldest streets in Manhattan, is named after Peter Stuyvesant, the Dutch colonial governor, who had a farm in the lower region of Manhattan, now called the Bowery (Dutch *bouwerij*, farm). The El was the common name for the Third Avenue Elevated Railway Line that ran from South Ferry to Harlem from 1878 to 1955. Lowell likens it to a truss that prevents Manhattan from herniating into New York Harbor

Lowell was concerned about two issues. First the Republicans were the party of the rich and under their leadership the disparity between rich and poor would only increase. Manhattan “groaned in ermine, slumped on want.” Second, as a pacifist, he was upset that the country was to be led once again by a general. General Grant, who had led his soldiers into a terrible massacre at Cold Harbor, Virginia, in 1864, later became the 18th US President of the United. After his death he was buried in Grant’s Tomb in Riverside Park, the largest mausoleum in the US.

from **The Waste Land**

I. The Burial of the Dead

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
With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.
Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch.
And when we were children, staying at the arch-duke's,
My cousin's, he took me out on a sled,
And I was frightened. He said, Marie,
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.
In the mountains, there you feel free.
I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

Frisch weht der Wind

Der Heimat zu

Mein Irisch Kind,

Wo weilest du?

“You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
“They called me the hyacinth girl.”
—Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence. (ctd)

The Waste Land

In this poem Eliot extended the idea of the dramatic monologue so that he could present his ideas through a polyphony of different voices. At one time, he considered entitling the initial part of the work *He do the police in different voices*, but on the advice of Ezra Pound this section was dropped. Eliot acknowledged Pound's extensive editorial help by dedicating the poem to him as *il miglio fabbro* ("the better craftsman," Dante's description of Arnaut Daniel in *Purgatorio* 26)

The first part of the poem takes its title from the ceremony on Armistice Day in 1920 when an Unknown Warrior was buried in Westminster Abbey to commemorate all of the British soldiers who died in World War I. Eliot's poem is concerned in part with the death and devastation of the war, and in part with his unhappy marriage to Vivienne Haigh Wood in 1915. Both are considered through the Legend of the Holy Grail wherein the Fisher King was wounded and his lands made infertile, and through the ideas expressed in *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1890-1915) by James Frazer.

The opening lines likely allude to the prologue of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, another long poem giving voice to many different people:

Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote [sweet showers]
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich [such manner of] licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour [flower];

The first section then presents a collage of memories from Eliot's visit to Germany just prior to the onset of the war. The Starnbergersee is the lake wherein Ludwig II of Bavaria committed suicide (or was murdered) in 1886. The German statement ("I am not Russian, I come from Lithuania; I am genuinely German") appears to have come from an overheard conversation at the Hofgarten, a park in Munich. The childhood memory apparently comes from Countess Marie Larisch, whom Eliot had met during his visit. In her youth, she had served as the go-between for Crown Prince Rudolf (the "arch-duke") during his affair with Marie Vetsera, which ended in their murder-suicide pact at the imperial hunting lodge in Mayerling in 1889.

The second section of the poem presents visions of devastation and desolation. The initial lines allude to the apocalyptic visions of Ezekiel that seem a fitting description of the aftermath of the war:

In all your dwelling places the cities shall be laid waste, and the high places shall be desolate; that your altars may be laid waste and made desolate, and your idols may be broken and cease, and your images may be cut down, and your works may be abolished. (*Ezekiel* 6:6)

In his own notes on the poem, Eliot also refers to *Ecclesiastes* 12 (see p 4)

the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets

From the desolation of the land Eliot moves to the sadness of unrequited love.

Oed' und leer das Meer.

Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante,
Had a bad cold, nevertheless
Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,
With a wicked pack of cards. Here, said she,
Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,
(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)
Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,
The lady of situations.
Here is the man with three staves, and here the Wheel,
And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this card,
Which is blank, is something he carries on his back,
Which I am forbidden to see. I do not find
The Hanged Man. Fear death by water.
I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring.
Thank you. If you see dear Mrs. Equitone,
Tell her I bring the horoscope myself:
One must be so careful these days.

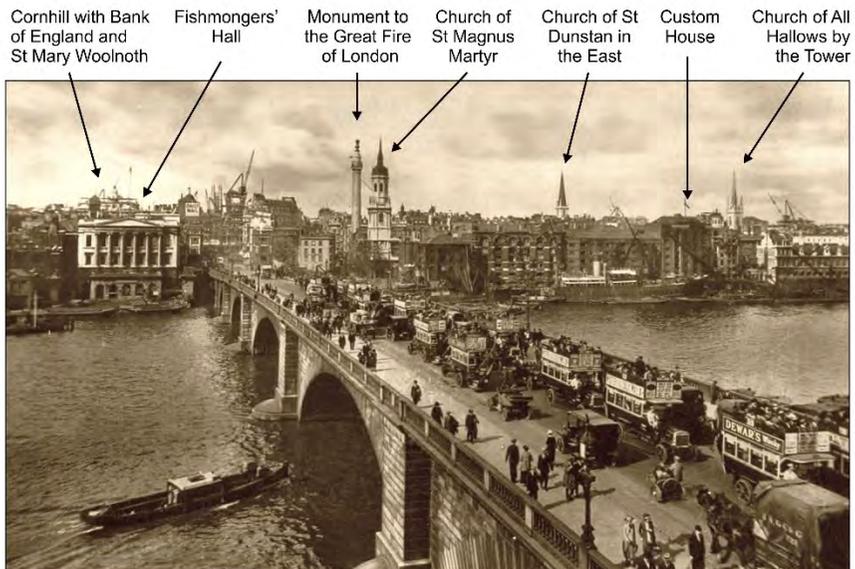
Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.
There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying: "Stetson!
"You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!
"That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
"Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?
"Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?
"Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,
"Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!
"You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!"

T. S. Eliot, 1922

Eliot quotes the opening of Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde* (1859): “Fresh blows the wind toward my homeland. My Irish child, why are you lingering?” He then remembers a romantic incident with hyacinths and a phrase from later in the opera when the lookout finds no sign of Isolde’s ship (“Empty and waste is the sea”).

The next section presents the results of a fortune telling. Eliot interprets The Hanged Man from the Tarot Cards as representing Marsyas, who was flayed alive for having challenged Apollo (see p 160).

The final section describes the crowds that came across London Bridge every morning to work in the city of London. King William Street leads from the bridge to Cornhill, the financial center of London. Eliot worked at an office of Lloyds Bank at 20 King William Street from 1917 until 1925.



Among the men crossing the bridge, Eliot recognizes Stetson from his past. Mylae was a great naval battle between the Romans and the Carthaginians in 216 BCE. For Eliot all wars were the same. The poem then changes abruptly to the ideas expressed in Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* that many religious ceremonies involve the burial of a god and his resurrection in the spring. This has been carried over into the Christian celebration of Easter.

The final line of this first part of *The Waste Land* comes from the preface to Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857, “Flowers of Evil”). This warns against *l’Ennui* (boredom, indifference), the monster that will destroy us all.

Tu le connais, lecteur, ce monstre délicat,
 —Hypocrite lecteur,—mon semblable,— mon frère!

Reader, you know this squeamish monster well
 —Hypocrite reader,—my alias,— my twin! (translation Richard Howard)

The world is dying. Love is passing. We must not be indifferent.

I, being born a woman and distressed
By all the needs and notions of my kind,
Am urged by your propinquity to find
Your person fair, and feel a certain zest
To bear your body's weight upon my breast:
So subtly is the fume of life designed,
To clarify the pulse and cloud the mind,
And leave me once again undone, possessed.
Think not for this, however, the poor treason
Of my stout blood against my staggering brain,
I shall remember you with love, or season
My scorn with pity, – let me make it plain:
I find this frenzy insufficient reason
For conversation when we meet again.

Edna St Vincent Millay, 1923

The Shield of Achilles

She looked over his shoulder
For vines and olive trees,
Marble well-governed cities
And ships upon untamed seas,
But there on the shining metal
His hands had put instead
An artificial wilderness
And a sky like lead.

A plain without a feature, bare and brown,
No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood,
Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down,
Yet, congregated on its blankness, stood
An unintelligible multitude,
A million eyes, a million boots in line,
Without expression, waiting for a sign.

Out of the air a voice without a face
Proved by statistics that some cause was just
In tones as dry and level as the place:
No one was cheered and nothing was discussed;
Column by column in a cloud of dust
They marched away enduring a belief
Whose logic brought them, somewhere else, to grief. (ctd)

I, being born a woman and distressed

In the early 20th Century, women decided that they need no longer be subordinate to men, and that chastity was far from a necessary virtue. Nevertheless, the feeling of being possessed still seemed an inevitable part of the female sexual experience. And, although the woman might think she could choose her lovers, sometimes lust clouded the mind, and one wound up in bed with a nobody.

During her years in Greenwich Village, Millay became a “sort of avenging angel of Eros, engaging lover after lover and dashing their hopes” (Epstein 2001). Her amorous adventures were described in beautifully fashioned sonnets. Another damning sonnet begins

I shall forget you presently, my dear,
So make the most of this your little day

and ends

Whether or not we find what we are seeking
Is idle, biologically speaking.

The Shield of Achilles

In Book 16 of the *Iliad*, when the Trojans are attacking the Greek ships, Achilles allows his friend Patroclus to wear his armor and to lead his Myrmidons against the Trojans (see also *Patroclus Putting on the Armour of Achilles*, p 217). Patroclus drives back the Trojans from the fleet, but then rashly leads an attack on the city of Troy which is rebuffed by the God Apollo. Dazed and wounded, Patroclus is slain by Hector, who takes from him the armor of Achilles.

Achilles was the son of the Nereid Thetis and King Peleus. Thetis now asks Hephaestus, the God of Fire, to make new armor for her son. Book 18 of the *Iliad* describes the shield that Hephaestus creates in the first recorded *ecphrasis* (a description of another piece of art) in literature (see also pp 73, 95, 147). The center of the shield contains the “inexhaustible blazing sun” and constellations. Around the center were scenes of “two noble cities filled with mortal men.” Among these scenes are wedding celebrations, courts of law, the walls of a city under siege, and various scenes from farms and vineyards. Around the edge flowed the great stream of the ocean. Many artists have attempted to recreate the shield. On the right is shown a version cast from a design of John Flaxman in 1822.



She looked over his shoulder
For ritual pieties,
White flower-garlanded heifers,
Libation and sacrifice,
But there on the shining metal
Where the altar should have been,
She saw by his flickering forge-light
Quite another scene.

Barbed wire enclosed an arbitrary spot
Where bored officials lounged (one cracked a joke)
And sentries sweated for the day was hot:
A crowd of ordinary decent folk
Watched from without and neither moved nor spoke
As three pale figures were led forth and bound
To three posts driven upright in the ground.

The mass and majesty of this world, all
That carries weight and always weighs the same
Lay in the hands of others; they were small
And could not hope for help and no help came:
What their foes like to do was done, their shame
Was all the worst could wish; they lost their pride
And died as men before their bodies died.

She looked over his shoulder
For athletes at their games,
Men and women in a dance
Moving their sweet limbs
Quick, quick, to music,
But there on the shining shield
His hands had set no dancing-floor
But a weed-choked field.

A ragged urchin, aimless and alone,
Loitered about that vacancy; a bird
Flew up to safety from his well-aimed stone:
That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,
Were axioms to him, who'd never heard
Of any world where promises were kept,
Or one could weep because another wept.

(ctd)

Auden uses two different verse-forms for this poem. The first is an 8-line verse with an *abcbdefe* rhyme scheme. Lines alternate between four stresses and three stresses. This is similar to the ballad form but the rhythm is not regular and the last line often ends on a spondee:

And a sky like lead (| - - / | / / |)

much as in Keats's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* (p 76)

These balladic verses tell the story of Thetis watching Hephaestus making the new shield. We do not know this for sure until the last verse when "she" and "he" are actually identified. Thetis hoped to see scenes such as on the shield described by Homer: vines and olive trees, ritual pieties, athletes at their games. However, there is none of this beauty on the new shield, and Thetis

Cried out in dismay
At what the god had wrought

Hephaestus had portrayed upon the shield not scenes from the times of Homer, but scenes from the wars of the 20th Century. These are described in verses that use the form "rhyme royal"—a 7-line verse with a rhyme scheme of *ababbcc* (p 9). The lines tend toward iambic pentameter but the rhythm is more often than not irregular. Auden had used this verse form in his *Letter to Lord Byron* (1937), where it had served to convey wit and satire:

There're things a good headmaster never knows.
There must be sober schoolmasters, of course,
But what a prep school really puts across
Is knowledge of the world we'll soon be lost in:
Today it's more like Dickens than Jane Austen.

Here, however, the form conveys despair. Three scenes are described. The first portrays an army of faceless soldiers massed upon a plain, ready to act without question upon the disembodied words of their leader:

No one was cheered and nothing was discussed;
Column by column in a cloud of dust
They marched away enduring a belief
Whose logic brought them, somewhere else, to grief.

The second describes the execution of three prisoners by soldiers who were just carrying out orders. No one resists, no one helps

A crowd of ordinary decent folk
Watched from without and neither moved nor spoke

The third scene shows a young orphan, growing up in a world wherein girls are raped and boys are knifed. He has no experience

Of any world where promises were kept,
Or one could weep because another wept.

Auden is likely referring to the last book of the *Iliad*, wherein Priam comes to Achilles to ransom the body of his son Hector. Achilles takes pity on the king agrees to the ransom, and promises to hold off the Greeks until Priam has had time to provide his son a proper burial.

The thin-lipped armorer,
Hephaestos, hobbled away,
Thetis of the shining breasts
Cried out in dismay
At what the god had wrought
To please her son, the strong
Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles
Who would not live long.

W. H. Auden, 1955

I Corinthians Chapter 13

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.

And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.

Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,

Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;

Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;

Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.

For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.

But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

King James Version, 1611

The poem concludes with descriptions of “thin-lipped” Hephaestus, Thetis “of the shining breasts,” and “iron-hearted” Achilles using the Homeric epithets (*epi* upon + *theton* place). Such epithets fulfilled the dactylic rhythm (/ - -) of the oral poetry, and made the lines more memorable. The most famous epithets are the “wine-dark sea” (*oinops pontos* – *oino*, wine + *ops*, eye, *pontos*, sea) and the “rosy-fingered dawn” (*rhododáktulos Ēōs* – *rhodon*, rose + *daktulos*, finger + *Eos*, goddess of dawn). Many of the gods and heroes had their own epithets. Achilles was often called “fleet-footed” or “lion-hearted.” Auden uses the darker epithets “iron-hearted” and “man-slaying.” The heroes of the modern age lack the glory of Homer’s time.

I Corinthians Chapter 13

This passage uses striking images to express the essence of Christianity. The “sounding brass and tinkling cymbal” clearly delineate the practice of religion without charity – sound without significance. The most famous image is “through a glass darkly.” An immediate interpretation is that we are looking through a dusty window. However, transparent glass windows did not occur until the Middle Ages. The Greek word *esoptron* means “mirror” (*eis*, in + *opsis*, view). The word is used one other time in the New Testament:

For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass:

For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. (*James 1: 23-24*)

Ancient mirrors were made of polished metal and produced an indistinct image. For an accurate perception one needed to view the image from several angles. The fact that we are seeing ourselves in the glass is important. Just like the mirror reflects our image, so must we reflect the love of God through us to others.

The word that the King James Version translates as “charity” is *agape*. Elsewhere it is translated as “love,” (*1 John 4:8* “God is love”). The commandments to love God and to love one’s neighbor (*Matthew 22:37-39*) use the verb *agapeseis*. C S. Lewis proposed four kinds of love: *agape*, unconditional love; *eros*, sexual or romantic love; *philia*, friendship; *storge*, empathy.

The passage uses many Greek rhetorical techniques. Most important is *anaphora*: the use of the same words at the start of a series of statements:

Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up

Another technique is to repeat the words at the end – *epistrophe*:

For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.

Parallelism is the repetition of syntactic structure (now, then)

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

Such techniques give the passage a nobility of rhythm commensurate with the significance of its subject.

from **Seven Pillars of Wisdom**

Some of the evil of my tale may have been inherent in our circumstances. For years we lived anyhow with one another in the naked desert, under the indifferent heaven. By day the hot sun fermented us; and we were dizzied by the beating wind. At night we were stained by dew, and shamed into pettiness by the innumerable silences of stars. We were a self-centred army without parade or gesture, devoted to freedom, the second of man's creeds, a purpose so ravenous that it devoured all our strength, a hope so transcendent that our earlier ambitions faded in its glare.

As time went by our need to fight for the ideal increased to an unquestioning possession, riding with spur and rein over our doubts. Willy-nilly it became a faith. We had sold ourselves into its slavery, manacled ourselves together in its chain-gang, bowed ourselves to serve its holiness with all our good and ill content. The mentality of ordinary human slaves is terrible – they have lost the world – and we had surrendered, not body alone, but soul to the overmastering greed of victory. By our own act we were drained of morality, of volition, of responsibility, like dead leaves in the wind.

T. E. Lawrence, 1926

Bright is the ring of words
When the right man rings them,
Fair the fall of songs
When the singer sings them.
Still they are carolled and said –
On wings they are carried –
After the singer is dead
And the maker is buried.

Low as the singer lies
In the field of heather,
Songs of his fashion bring
The swains together.
And when the west is red
With the sunset embers,
The lover lingers and sings
And the maid remembers.

Robert Louis Stevenson, 1896

Seven Pillars of Wisdom

From 1910, to 1914, Lawrence worked as an archeologist in Carchemish, Syria. At that time, he began writing a book entitled *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* about the major cities of the Middle East (Aleppo, Beirut, Cairo, Constantinople, Damascus, Smyrna, and Medina). The title comes from *Proverbs* 9:1:

Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars
“Seven” has no meaning other than that it is considered an auspicious number.

In 1916, Lawrence became a military advisor to Emir Feisal and led Arab forces in their successful revolt against Ottoman rule, becoming known as “Lawrence of Arabia.” His gave his autobiographical account of the Arab Revolt the title of his never-completed book on the Middle East.

The book is prefaced with a poem dedicated to S.A., likely Sehlim Ahmed, a young man whom Lawrence knew in Syria. The poem begins

I loved you, so I drew these tides of
Men into my hands
And wrote my will across the
Sky in stars

The excerpt on the facing page is the beginning of the book’s first chapter. The “evil of his tale” was all the killing that he was involved in. The “pettiness” was his homosexuality. The “second of man’s creeds” likely comes from Swedenborg:

The first law, that man from sense and perception shall have no other knowledge than that he is endowed with life, but shall still acknowledge that the goods and truths originating in love and faith, which he thinks, wills, speaks, and does, are not from himself but from the Lord, presupposes the second, that man has freedom, and that it is also to appear as his own (*The Athanasian Creed*, 1789, translated 1866, pp 59-60).

Lawrence’s description of how he and his fellows surrendered their collective wills to the goal of freedom is encapsulated in the phrase “willy-nilly,” which derives from the expression “Will I Nill I” – I am neither willing nor unwilling.

Bright is the ring of words

Stevenson praises the poet’s ability to craft poems that stay in the mind long after the death of the poet. His brief poem uses end-rhymes for every second line. In addition, he end-rhymes the fifth and seventh line (said/dead) and adds rhymes between the lines that are not end-rhymes (bright/right). Alliteration abounds: “fair the fall,” “lover lingers.” Each line has two or three main stresses. Although there is no regular rhythm, the lines often begin with trochaic feet (/ -).

| / - | - / | - / |
Bright is the ring of words

This facilitates setting the poem to music. Ralph Vaughan Williams (1904), Ivor Gurney (1911), and Peter Warlock(1918) have all provided musical versions.

This poem was used as the epigraph to *Mount Helicon: A School Anthology of Verse* used throughout the British Empire during the first half of the 20th Century.

MCMXIV

Those long uneven lines
Standing as patiently
As if they were stretched outside
The Oval or Villa Park,
The crowns of hats, the sun
On moustached archaic faces
Grinning as if it were all
An August Bank Holiday lark;

And the shut shops, the bleached
Established names on the sunblinds,
The farthings and sovereigns,
And dark-clothed children at play
Called after kings and queens,
The tin advertisements
For cocoa and twist, and the pubs
Wide open all day;

And the countryside not caring:
The place-names all hazed over
With flowering grasses, and fields
Shadowing Domesday lines
Under wheat's restless silence;
The differently-dressed servants
With tiny rooms in huge houses,
The dust behind limousines;

Never such innocence,
Never before or since,
As changed itself to past
Without a word – the men
Leaving the gardens tidy,
The thousands of marriages,
Lasting a little while longer:
Never such innocence again.

Phillip Larkin, 1964

MCMXIV

On June 28, 1914, Gavrilo Princip, a 19-year-old Serbian nationalist, shot and killed Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife in Sarajevo. This incident quickly tumbled Europe into war. On July 28, Austria declared war on Serbia and Russia mobilized in support of Serbia. Germany declared war on Russia on August 1, and on France, Russia's ally, on August 3. When Belgium refused to permit German troops to travel through its country, Germany invaded Belgium on August 4, and Britain declared war on Germany.

The declarations of war were greeted with great enthusiasm. On both sides, young men lined up to volunteer. Given the huge death toll that was to come, this eagerness for battle is hard to understand. The economy was stable and unemployment was low. Perhaps the idea of war was more glamorous than the boredom of industrial work. Youth needs a cause to fight for, and the young men had no way of understanding what was to happen.

The title of Larkin's poem gives "1914" in Roman numerals, the way dates are written on the war memorials. The crowds lined up as if for a sporting event – cricket at the Oval in Kennington, South London (the home of the Surrey Cricket Club) or soccer at Villa Park (the home of the Aston Villa football club in Birmingham, Britain's second largest city). The innocence of Edwardian England went back to medieval times when the country was surveyed for the Domesday Book of 1086. It was a land of simple pleasures, of hot cocoa steaming in a mug and pipe-tobacco sold in a "twist." It was a society wherein everyone from lord to maid knew their place, and wherein children were named after the royal family.

Over the next four years, everything in Britain changed. The pubs that had once been open all day became restricted in their hours so that workers did not become too inebriated to produce munitions. Servants fought alongside their betters and began to wonder about why they were different. In the years that followed the war, the British Empire began slowly to unravel.

The war also irrevocably changed the world: it precipitated the Russian Revolution and brought about Communism; the Treaty of Versailles paved the way for fascism and World War II, and set up regimes in the Middle East that are the basis for that region's present instability. Most importantly the war showed how little an individual human life was valued – this was the "pity of war" (p 87).

Larkin's poem contains four stanzas, each of eight lines. Only the fourth and eighth line of each stanza rhymes. This paucity of rhyme may reflect to the transition in poetry between formal rhymed verse and free verse. The poem is expressed in a single sentence. The rhythm is conversational

Larkin's

Never such innocence,
Never before or since

may allude to Ezra Pound's commentary on the war in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920)

Daring as never before, wastage as never before.

That Nature Is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection

Cloud-puffball, torn tufts, tossed pillows | flaunt forth, then chevy on an air-
Built thoroughfare: heaven-roysterers, in gay-gangs | they throng; they glitter in marches
Down roughcast, down dazzling whitewash, | wherever an elm arches,
Shivelights and shadowtackle ín long | lashes lace, lance, and pair.

Delightfully the bright wind boisterous | ropes, wrestles, beats earth bare
Of yestertempest's creases; | in pool and rut peel parches
Squandering ooze to squeezed | dough, crust, dust; stanches, starches
Squadroned masks and manmarks | treadmire toil there

Footfretted in it. Million-fuelèd, | nature's bonfire burns on.
But quench her bonniest, dearest | to her, her clearest-selvèd spark
Man, how fast his firedint, | his mark on mind, is gone!
Both are in an unfathomable, all is in an enormous dark
Drowned. O pity and indig | nation! Manshape, that shone
Sheer off, disseveral, a star, | death blots black out; nor mark
Is any of him at all so stark

But vastness blurs and time | beats level. Enough! the Resurrection,
A heart's-clarion! Away grief's gasping, | joyless days, dejection.
Across my foundering deck shone

A beacon, an eternal beam. | Flesh fade, and mortal trash
Fall to the residuary worm; | world's wildfire, leave but ash:
In a flash, at a trumpet crash,

I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, | patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,
Is immortal diamond.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, 1888

That Nature Is a Heraclitean Fire

This poem was written in the last year of Hopkins's life, when he was a professor of Greek and Latin at University College Dublin.

Heraclitus (circa 535-475 BCE) was a pre-Socratic Greek philosopher from Ephesus (in what is today Western Turkey). He lived two centuries before the poet Heraclitus who was mourned by Callimachus (p 14). The work of the philosopher Heraclitus is known only in fragments reported by later authors. Plato's *Cratylus* (from the early 4th Century BCE) quotes:

Heraclitus says somewhere that all things are in movement and nothing stays put, and likening the real to the flowing of a river says that one could not step twice in the same river.

Heraclitus suggested that the primary element in this ever-changing universe was fire. Although some Heraclitean fragments claim that the universe runs according to an underlying order or *logos*, others note its randomness:

This most beautiful universe is a heap of sweepings, piled up at random.

Because of his stress on the transience of the world Heraclitus was considered the "weeping philosopher," as opposed to the "laughing philosopher" Democritus.

Hopkins's poem compares the continual flux of the Heraclitean world to the immortality promised by God through Christ.

The first part of the poem is designed as a Petrarchan sonnet with an octave that rhymes *abbaabbba*, and a sestet that rhymes *cdcdcd*. However, Hopkins then adds a short line to the end of the sonnet, and provides three codas, each consisting of a rhyming triplet. One of the final rhymes – between "I am, and" and "diamond" – is imperfect but appealing. Most of the poem's lines are long; each is divided into two parts by a caesura ("cutting") indicated by a vertical line; each half-line contains three stresses. The extra line in the initial sonnet and the final lines in each of the three codas are limited to half-lines.

The sonnet section of the poem presents the Heraclitean world. The octave describes the clouds "roystering" (merrymaking) in the sky, the sun shining through the leaves in "shivelights" (from "shive," a small fragment of wood), the wind causing the puddles from a recent rainfall to evaporate and footprints to harden as "manmarks" in the drying mud.

The sestet describes how man's impression on this fiery world ("firedint") passes quickly. Hopkins is likely using "fast" in both its opposing meanings of quick and steady. His "firedint" does not hold fast but passes quickly. Man who might shine like a star is blotted out by death.

In the three codas Hopkins then presents the comfort promised by Christ. We do not die but rather become one with Christ, who became one with us in his incarnation, and who defeated death with his crucifixion. And thus, this "joke" of a being, this "poor potsherd," man, can become "immortal diamond."

Even if the belief in immortality through Christ is not true, the contrast between our transient life and our persistent hope for immortality remains as humanity's defining characteristic.

Lullaby

Lay your sleeping head, my love,
Human on my faithless arm;
Time and fevers burn away
Individual beauty from
Thoughtful children, and the grave
Proves the child ephemeral:
But in my arms till break of day
Let the living creature lie,
Mortal, guilty, but to me
The entirely beautiful.

Soul and body have no bounds:
To lovers as they lie upon
Her tolerant enchanted slope
In their ordinary swoon,
Grave the vision Venus sends
Of supernatural sympathy,
Universal love and hope;
While an abstract insight wakes
Among the glaciers and the rocks
The hermit's carnal ecstasy.

Certainty, fidelity
On the stroke of midnight pass
Like vibrations of a bell,
And fashionable madmen raise
Their pedantic boring cry:
Every farthing of the cost,
All the dreaded cards foretell,
Shall be paid, but from this night
Not a whisper, not a thought,
Not a kiss nor look be lost.

Beauty, midnight, vision dies:
Let the winds of dawn that blow
Softly round your dreaming head
Such a day of welcome show
Eye and knocking heart may bless,
Find the mortal world enough;
Noons of dryness find you fed
By the involuntary powers,
Nights of insult let you pass
Watched by every human love.

W. H. Auden, 1940

Lullaby

In the 1930s Auden was much concerned with the relationship between Eros and Agape – between sexual love and selfless love. He may have found the wildness of the gay life he had led in Berlin wanting, and he certainly longed for something more permanent. Nevertheless, erotic love provides moments of complete beauty. And who is to say that one precludes the other – “soul and body have no bounds.” Even abstract thought can lead to feelings not that different from carnal ecstasy.

In 1933 Auden wrote a series of sonnets about love. He was intrigued by how Shakespeare’s sonnets dealt with love without regard to the sex of the lover. Unlike Shakespeare who claimed that love and beauty would last forever in his verse, however, Auden’s sonnets concentrate on how soon love fades:

Love has one wish and that is, not to be:
Had you been never beautiful nor true,
He would not have been born, and I were free
From one whose visit will go on and on
Till you be false and all your beauties gone.

Eros always seeks the new (cf p 204). Yet the very transience of the erotic encounter can enhance its beauty.

These sonnets and the later poem entitled *Lullaby* were written for Michael Yates (1919-2001), whom Auden had first met in 1933 when Michael was a pupil and Auden a teacher at the Downs School. Yates transferred to another school but kept in touch with Auden, and travelled with him to Iceland in 1936, when Auden and MacNeice were writing their book *Letters from Iceland* (1937). The nature of the relationship between Yates and Auden is not known with certainty, but they were likely intimate by 1937. Yates later became a theater designer and married in 1955. He and his wife maintained a long friendship with Auden, who dedicated his last volume of poetry *Thank You Fog* (1974) to them. One might look askance at this relationship between master and pupil, but it did give rise to one of the most beautiful love lyrics of the 20th Century, which, like the sonnets of Shakespeare, is valid without regard to the sex (or age) of the loved one.

One of the main themes of the poem is the transience of love. Passion lasts not, and lovers are not forever faithful. In another of the 1933 sonnets:

Sleep on beside me though I wake for you:
Stretch not your hands towards your harm and me,
Lest, waking, you should feel the need I do
To offer love's preposterous guarantee
That the stars watch us

The rhythm of *Lullaby* is trochaic tetrameter catalectic (/ - | / - | / - | / |), the same as in Blake’s *The Tiger* (p 24). Auden also used this rhythm in the third section of his *In Memory of W. B Yeats* (p 133). Though the rhythm often tends toward the declamatory, in *Lullaby* it suggests the quiet ticking of the clock as innocence passes into experience. Auden uses only occasional rhymes: lines 3 and 7 strictly rhyme, and lines 6 and 10 sometimes strictly rhyme (cost/lost) and sometimes almost rhyme (sympathy/ecstasy).

from **The Prelude**
(Book XI)

Oh! pleasant exercise of hope and joy!
For great were the auxiliars which then stood
Upon our side, we who were strong in love!
Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very Heaven!—O times,
In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways
Of custom, law, and statute, took at once
The attraction of a country in romance!
When Reason seemed the most to assert her rights,
When most intent on making of herself
A prime enchanter—to assist the work
Which then was going forward in her name!
Not favoured spots alone, but the whole Earth,
The beauty wore of promise, that which sets
(To take an image which was felt no doubt
Among the bowers of Paradise itself)
The budding rose above the rose full blown.
What temper at the prospect did not wake
To happiness unthought of? The inert
Were roused, and lively natures rapt away!
They who had fed their childhood upon dreams,
The playfellows of fancy, who had made
All powers of swiftness, subtlety, and strength
Their ministers,—used to stir in lordly wise
Among the grandest objects of the sense,
And dealt with whatsoever they found there
As if they had within some lurking right
To wield it;—they, too, who, of gentle mood,
Had watched all gentle motions, and to these
Had fitted their own thoughts, schemers more mild,
And in the region of their peaceful selves;—
Did now find, helpers to their heart's desire,
And stuff at hand, plastic as they could wish;
Were called upon to exercise their skill,
Not in Utopia,—subterranean fields,—
Or some secreted island, Heaven knows where!
But in the very world, which is the world
Of all of us,—the place where in the end
We find our happiness, or not at all!

William Wordsworth, 1850

The Prelude

Wordsworth wrote this autobiographical poem in the early years of the 19th Century as a prelude to a larger more philosophical work entitled *The Rustic* which he never completed. He continued to tinker with its 13 books for many years but the poem was not published until after his death.

In 1791, at the age of 21 years, Wordsworth journeyed to France, then in the midst of the revolution which had begun with the storming of the Bastille on July 14, 1789. In Paris, he attended meetings of the Girondins as they tried to put together a new constitution for the country. Unable to afford the cost of Paris, Wordsworth then moved on to Orléans, where he was much influenced by Michel de Beaupuy, a soldier of aristocratic birth who nevertheless believed strongly in the ideals of the revolution:

Man he loved
As man; and, to the mean and the obscure,
And all the homely in their homely works
Transferred a courtesy which had no air
Of condescension.

Book XI of *The Prelude* portrays Wordsworth's enthusiasm for the Revolution. No longer did people have to imagine what Utopia might be like; now they could bring it about "in the very world."

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very Heaven!

In Orleans, Wordsworth also met and fell in love with Annette Vallon. She became pregnant with his child, but they were unable to marry because of Wordsworth's poverty. Her daughter Caroline was born in December 15, 1792.

By that time Wordsworth was back in Paris. The Revolution was proceeding apace. On September 22, 1792, France had been proclaimed a republic. Robespierre was now in the ascendant, and the ideals of the revolutions were slowly becoming lost in bloodshed. Since England and other countries in Europe were considering an invasion of France, Wordsworth returned to England. In January, 1793, Louis XVI was executed. In February, France declared war on Britain. Wordsworth was unable to see his daughter until 1804 (see p 89).

As he grew older, Wordsworth's radical thoughts faded, and he became a staunch conservative. He campaigned vociferously against the Reform Act of 1832, which abolished the tiny districts that granted inordinate representation to the aristocracy and expanded the franchise to small landowners, tenant farmers and shopkeepers. One of his poems at that time urged the downtrodden not to rise up against their oppressors but to forbear:

Woe to the purblind crew who fill
The heart with each day's care;
Nor gain, from past or future, skill
To bear, and to forbear!

Browning was dismayed by Wordsworth's conservatism, and denounced him in his 1845 poem *The Lost Leader*.

from **Little Gidding**

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from. And every phrase
And sentence that is right (where every word is at home,
Taking its place to support the others,
The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
An easy commerce of the old and the new,
The common word exact without vulgarity,
The formal word precise but not pedantic,
The complete consort dancing together)
Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
Every poem an epitaph. And any action
Is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea's throat
Or to an illegible stone: and that is where we start.
We die with the dying:
See, they depart, and we go with them.
We are born with the dead:
See, they return, and bring us with them.
The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew-tree
Are of equal duration. A people without history
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
Of timeless moments. So, while the light fails
On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel
History is now and England.

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, unremembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree

(ctd)

Little Gidding

This excerpt is the ending to the last poem in the sequence *Four Quartets* (see also p 116). In 1936 Eliot visited the Church of St John the Evangelist in Little Gidding, a village in



Cambridgeshire. In 1626 Nicholas Farrar had established a small community there. The tiny church, with only a single row of seats on each side of the aisle, was repaired, and it was arranged that someone would be praying in the church at all times. As Eliot states in the first movement of this last quartet:

If you came this way,
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,
At any time or at any season,
It would always be the same: you would have to put off
Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid.

In this last movement of *Four Quartets*, Eliot tries to bring together all the themes that he has been examining: that time is eternal, that history is irredeemable, that memory fails, that the world is at war. He initially comments on how he must find the words to put things right. And as “the light fails on a winter’s afternoon” in the chapel at Gidding he has a vision of divine love that comes from three separate sources.

The first is Dante’s experience of God through the intercession of the Virgin Mary – *la rosa in che il Verbo Divino carne si fece* (the Rose in which the Word of God became flesh, *Paradiso* 23) at the end of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (*Paradiso* 33). Barbara Reynolds (1962) summarizes the experience:

Dante perceives in the Divine Light the form, or exemplar, of all creation. All things that exist in themselves (“substance”), all aspects or properties of being (“accident”), all mutual relations (“mode”) are seen bound together in one single concept. The Universe is in God. Next, having glimpsed the whole of creation, Dante beholds the Creator. He sees three circles, of three colours, yet of one dimension. One seems to be reflected from the other, and the third, like flame, proceeds equally from both (the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost). Then, as he gazes, a reflected circle shows within itself the human form, coloured with the circle’s own hue. As Dante strives to comprehend how human nature is united with the Word, a ray of divine light so floods his mind that his desire is at rest. At this point the vision ceases, and the story ends with the poet’s will and desire moving in perfect co-ordination with the love of God:

L’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle.
(The love that moves the sun and all the stars)

Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.
Quick now, here, now, always—
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flames are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

T. S. Eliot, 1942

Eros

I had drawn my chair to the hotel window, to watch the rain.

I was in a kind of dream, or trance —
in love, and yet
I wanted nothing.

It seemed unnecessary to touch you, to see you again.
I wanted only this:
the room, the chair, the sound of the rain falling,
hour after hour, in the warmth of the spring night.

I needed nothing more; I was utterly sated.
My heart had become very small; it took very little to fill it.
I watched the rain falling in heavy sheets over the darkened city —

You were not concerned. I did the things
one does in daylight, I acquitted myself,
but I moved like a sleepwalker.

It was enough and it no longer involved you.
A few days in a strange city.
A conversation, the touch of a hand.
And afterward, I took off my wedding ring.

That was what I wanted: to be naked.

Louise Glück, 2001

The second is Julian of Norwich (1343-1416), an anchoress, who lived in a cell attached to the Church of St Julian in Norwich. Julian described her mystic visions in the book *Revelations of Divine Love*. She considered sin “behovely” in the sense that it was unable to be avoided. Nevertheless, she stressed the omnibenevolence of God which would allow all sin to be forgiven:

Sin is behovely, but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.

The third was the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (50 days after Easter):

And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting.

And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. (*Acts 2:2-3*)

Eros

Many poems are written at the beginning of a relationship; very few celebrate its ending. This poem describes the emotions that follow a divorce. Although Glück went through two divorces and understood the feelings associated with separation, we should not necessarily consider this as a confessional poem. A poet is always free to assume a persona.

Eros is the God of love, desire and sex. In some myths he is primordial; in others Eros is the son of Ares (war) and Aphrodite (love). The erotic is that which triggers desire. Eros is paradoxical: it combines freedom and submission.

Furthermore, as Anne Carson describes in *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986, p 10):

The lover wants what he does not have. It is by definition impossible for him to have what he wants if, as soon as it is had, it is no longer wanting.

In the poem *The Ruse* that follows *Eros* in the book *The Seven Ages*, Glück states

They understood
instinctively that erotic passion
thrives on distance

I believe that the poem describes the state of a woman who has just experienced the final steps in a divorce. Although this signals the loss of intimacy, she feels strangely fulfilled – “utterly sated.” Her “heart had become very small” and was easy to fill. She is now alone in a hotel room “in the warmth of a spring night” “in a strange city.” Outside it is raining.

Over the day she has done things automatically – perhaps signed the necessary papers for the divorce. Now she is free. Her life no longer involves “you.” The poem is a farewell to a husband, who is henceforth no longer part of her life.

This release from prior commitment brings with it a sense of emancipation and desire that is very erotic. The poet feels naked before the night. The rain has washed away the past, and left her feelings completely free.

On my first reading of the poem, I wondered whether this was actually about a fleeting affair that was the final straw in a failing marriage. The sense of release and freedom would be the same. Eros allows several interpretations.

from **The Old Vicarage, Grantchester**

Ah God! to see the branches stir
Across the moon at Grantchester!
To smell the thrilling-sweet and rotten
Unforgettable, unforgotten
River-smell, and hear the breeze
Sobbing in the little trees.
Say, do the elm-clumps greatly stand
Still guardians of that holy land?
The chestnuts shade, in reverend dream,
The yet unacademic stream?
Is dawn a secret shy and cold
Anadyomene, silver-gold?
And sunset still a golden sea
From Haslingfield to Madingley?
And after, ere the night is born,
Do hares come out about the corn?
Oh, is the water sweet and cool,
Gentle and brown, above the pool?
And laughs the immortal river still
Under the mill, under the mill?
Say, is there Beauty yet to find?
And Certainty? and Quiet kind?
Deep meadows yet, for to forget
The lies, and truths, and pain? ... oh! yet
Stands the Church clock at ten to three?
And is there honey still for tea?

Rupert Brooke, 1912

Zazen on Ching-t'ing Mountain

The birds have vanished down the sky.
Now the last cloud drains away.

We sit together, the mountain and me,
until only the mountain remains.

Li Bai (Li Po, 8th Century CE)
translated by Sam Hamill, 2000.

The Old Vicarage, Grantchester

These are the last lines of a poem written in the *Café des Westens*, a bohemian meeting place in Berlin-Charlottenburg. Brooke, upset by the crassness of the Germans, wished that he were in Grantchester, a village beside the River Cam about two miles south of Cambridge, containing the Church of St. Andrew and St Mary, with a church-clock stuck at ten to three, a vicarage where Brooke had lived for a few years, a moated medieval manor, a country tea-room, and a pool where Byron used to swim:



‘Du lieber Gott!’
Here am I, sweating, sick, and hot,
And there the shadowed waters fresh
Lean up to embrace the naked flesh.

The poem is imbued with the feeling of *eithe genoimen* (would I were). Early in the poem, Brooke quotes this phrase from an epigram in the *Greek Anthology* describing an old man’s love for a young boy:

Would that I were the heavens, so that I could gaze on you with many eyes.

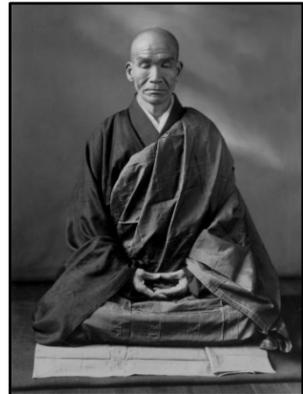
The poem makes gentle fun of the country folk of Cambridgeshire, and then ends in a rapturous description of the beauties of Grantchester. Although some of the imagery is a little twee (“the breeze, sobbing in the little trees”), Brooke occasionally reaches felicity:

To smell the thrilling-sweet and rotten
Unforgettable, unforgotten
River-smell,

One of his striking images is of the dawn as *Venus Anadyomene* (“emerging from the sea”). The last two lines of the poem have come to epitomize the feeling of nostalgia – the yearning for an innocent time when one sought for truth and beauty, a past that cannot come again.

Zazen on Ching-t’ing Mountain

Zazen is the Buddhist practice of seated meditation. The illustration on the right shows the Zen master Kodo Sawaki (1880-1965) in Zazen. The goal of the meditation is to suspend any individual involvement in the world, and ultimately to become one with the universe. In this brief poem, Li Bai describes meditating on a mountain in Anhui province in Eastern China, a location famous for the paintings and poetry that it inspired. In the poem, the birds and clouds represent the transience of worldly sensation, and the mountain remains as the stable source of true awareness.



Orgreave

Out of the dark came the miners. Their villages
were live coals and their bodies fed the flames
that burned their love affairs and marriages.

Black dust coated their tongues and blurred their dreams.
They licked their children into shape like bears
with sore heads. At night they heard the screams

of wheels on tracks or footsteps on the stairs.
They'd rise to the surface and gradually fade
into the morning. They covered their chairs

with rough shadows that left a faint grey tide.
They drank hard and played football with caps for goal-posts,
a few turned out for a professional side

in the nearby town. They prayed for the Lord of Hosts
to lead them into a world of light but woke
at midnight hearing their brothers' ghosts.

Wheels on tracks, collapses. They only needed to poke
the fire for the coals to cave in and bury them deep.
I still remember the day their power broke

At Ollerton, Bedworth, Orgreave. The earth could keep
its darkness. It was the end of the century right now,
the end of the war. A new kind of peace would creep

out of the atom with pale hands, its brow
unlined and vacant. There was something deadly
about its frivolity, which would allow

anything at all except fire and memory.

George Szirtes, 2001

Orgreave

The Industrial Revolution began in Great Britain in the late 18th Century. The steam engine was its driving force and coal was its fuel. In the Midlands and in Wales, men who had previously made their living on the land took to the dangerous and dirty work of mining coal. The first coal mine in Orgreave, Yorkshire, was opened in 1820. Other important British coal mines were opened in Ollerton, Northamptonshire, and Bedworth, Warwickshire.

The grime and poverty of British miners was vividly documented in Bill Brandt's 1937 series of photographs. The image on the right depicts a miner sitting down for supper after his shift. As Szirtes notes "they covered their chairs with rough shadows" of coal dust.



In 1984, the National Union of Mineworkers in England went on strike in protest against job cuts. Pickets were set up outside the colliery and coking plant in Orgreave. Although everything was peaceful at the beginning, the police decided to charge the strikers on horseback. Many were injured and one person was killed. The confrontation pitted Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher against Arthur Scargill, a fiery union leader. In the end the strike was broken, the British trade unions declined in power, and most British mines were closed.



This poem is part of a sequence of poems entitled *An English Apocalypse*. All the poems are in *terza rima: aba bcb*. Szirtes wrote extensively and fluently in this form. The poems describe the transitions undergone by England during the closing years of the 20th Century. The mines are no more – "The earth could keep its darkness." Atomic energy became one of the main sources of power: clean but also dangerous. And the memories of the old way of life – with families seated around the fireside – are no more.

The last poem in the sequence begins with the horsemen of the Apocalypse:

The Fire, Famine, Plague or what you will
(there was no energy left for War by then)
had drawn their horses up on a high hill
overlooking the city to observe the men
and women below them. The air hung like ice
The place had nothing to lose. They saw the pattern
of the everyday squeezed into one brilliant slice
of light.

Caged Bird

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

*The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.*

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn
and he names the sky his own

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

*The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.*

Maya Angelou, 1983

Caged Bird

Maya Angelou often used the image of a caged bird as a symbol for her life and the lives of other black people in the United States of America. She derived the title of her first autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), from the poem *Sympathy* (1899) by Paul Laurence Dunbar, a son of parents born in slavery and a prominent African-American writer at the turn of the 20th Century. The last verse of his poem reads:

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore, –
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings –
I know why the caged bird sings!!

The title for the last of Angelou's six autobiographical volumes, *A Song Flung up to Heaven* (2002), also stems from Dunbar's poem. Angelou's poem *Caged Bird* was published in her fourth volume of poetry, *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?*

The first two verses of Angelou's poem compares the life of a free bird to that of one in a cage. A free bird "leaps on the back of the wind" and "dares to claim the sky." The only freedom that a caged bird has is to "open his throat to sing." Then we have the repeating chorus of the poem that tells how the caged bird sings. The beauty of its song derives from the need for freedom.

The fourth and fifth verses consider the differences between the free and caged birds on the basis of what is on their minds rather than what affects their bodies. The free bird can hope for anything – "he names the sky his own." The caged bird "stands on the grave of dreams."

The chorus claims that the song of the caged bird will be heard "on the distant hill." And that somehow freedom will come in answer to the song. Because whatever rules the universe, be it a god or some simple force of justice, will not suffer long this loss of freedom (*Psalms* 121: 1-2):

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.
My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth

In the middle of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Angelou described the hymns sung in church and how her people, returning from church, heard the honky-tonk music coming from the good-time house across the pond.

A stranger to the music could not have made a distinction between the songs sung a few minutes before and those being danced to the gay house by the railroad tracks. All asked the same question. How long, oh God? How long?

The book is dedicated to her son

And all the strong black birds
of promise
Who defy the odds and gods
and sing their song

Just enough of snow
To make the back of each cow
Vivid in the dusk

Richard Wright, 1960

A perfect white wine
Is sharp, sweet and cold as this:
Birdsong in winter.

Wendy Cope, 2011

from **The Merchant of Venice Act IV: Scene 1**

The quality of mercy is not strained;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
'T is mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown:
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;
It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That, in the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much
To mitigate the justice of thy plea;
Which if thou follow, this strict court of Venice
Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant there.

William Shakespeare, 1598

Haikus

The haiku is a Japanese poetic form (see also pp 38, 142, 171). The usual requirements are three lines of 5, 7 and 5 syllables, a vivid image, a turning in the thought, and a mention of the season.

Richard Wright came to fame as the author of *Native Son* (1940), a novel about the black experience in the United States. In 1946 Wright moved to France where he spent the rest of his life. Eighteen months before he died in 1960, he began writing haikus. His daughter arranged for the publication of 817 of these in 1998. The selected haiku provides a stunning image of cows in a snowfall. Winter is the seasonal reference and the turn is from the indistinctness of the twilight to the vivid outline of the snow on the back of each cow.

Cope's haiku characterizes a wine as "birdsong in winter." Talking about wine indulges itself in similes, but most of these stay within the bounds of taste and smell. They seldom call upon the ear.

The quality of mercy is not strained

This speech comes in the middle of the trial of Shylock, who has brought suit before the Duke of Venice to enforce his contract ('bond'), and allow him to take a pound of flesh from the merchant Antonio, who has failed to repay his debt. Disguised as a learned male doctor of law, Portia, the wife of Antonio's friend Bassanio, attends the trial to argue the case. She acknowledges that the law allows Shylock to enforce his bond. However, she pleads with him to exercise mercy.

Her plea describes mercy as the "gentle rain from heaven." This simile may derive from to *Deuteronomy* 32:2

My doctrine shall drop as the rain, my speech shall distil as the dew, as the small rain upon the tender herb, and as the showers upon the grass:

or *Ecclesiasticus* (Book of Sirach) 35:20

Mercy is seasonable in the time of affliction, as clouds of rain in the time of drought.

Portia also refers to the Lord's prayer "that doth teach us all to render the deeds of mercy," the version reported in *Matthew* 6: 9-13 actually stating

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

Her plea is to no avail. Shylock insists upon the letter of the law. As he prepares to take his pound of flesh, Portia then provides the true literal interpretation of his bond, pointing out that, though he can take his pound of flesh, he may not take any blood. Shylock cannot do this. Antonio is saved. Tragedy is averted and harmony is regained. After all this is a comedy.

However, Shakespeare does not leave us happy. What follows is completely disquieting. Portia and the Duke condemn Shylock for his failed attempt to seek the life of a Venetian citizen. They exercise no mercy. All of Shylock's possessions are to be divided between Antonio and the state. Shylock's very life can only be saved if he commits to becoming a Christian. Portia's speech was nothing more than pretty words.

from **Paterson**
(beginning of Book I)

Paterson lies in the valley under the Passaic Falls
its spent waters forming the outline of his back. He
lies on his right side, head near the thunder
of the waters filling his dreams! Eternally asleep,
his dreams walk about the city where he persists
incognito. Butterflies settle on his stone ear.
Immortal he neither moves nor rouses and is seldom
seen, though he breathes and the subtleties of his
machinations
drawing their substance from the noise of the pouring
river
animate a thousand automatons. Who because they
neither know their sources nor the sills of their
disappointments walk outside their bodies aimlessly
for the most part,
locked and forgot in their desires — unroused.

— Say it, no ideas but in things—
nothing but the blank faces of the houses
and cylindrical trees
bent, forked by preconception and accident—
split, furrowed, creased, mottled, stained—
secret— into the body of the light!

From above, higher than the spires, higher
even than the office towers, from oozy fields
abandoned to grey beds of dead grass,
black sumac, withered weed-stalks,
mud and thickets cluttered with dead leaves—
the river comes pouring in above the city
and crashes from the edge of the gorge
in a recoil of spray and rainbow mists—

(What common language to unravel?
. . . combed into straight lines
from that rafter of a rock's
lip.)

(ctd)

Paterson

Paterson is a city in New Jersey that was founded in the late 18th Century to harness energy from the Great Falls of the Passaic River for textile mills. The city was named after William Paterson (1745-1806), one of the Founding Fathers of the United States. The illustration on the right shows the falls with the footbridge above the gorge, and the new hydroelectric power plant (1914) on the left. William Carlos Williams was born in nearby Rutherford, and lived most of his life there, practising medicine at the Passaic General Hospital.

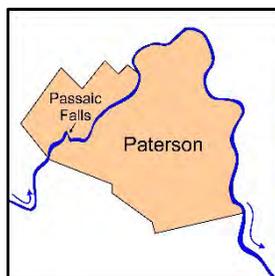


In 1926 Williams wrote an 85-line poem entitled *Paterson* which considered a man as though he were the city where he lived. Williams had been reading Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and was impressed with how the novel was as much about the city of Dublin as about its different residents. Williams's main idea was to understand people through the things they interact with.

the river comes pouring in above the city
and crashes from the edge of the gorge
in a recoil of spray and rainbow mists—
—Say it, no ideas but in things—
and factories crystallized from its force, like ice
from spray upon the chimney rocks

From 1946 to 1958 Williams expanded upon the ideas of this poem to produce his five-volume epic poem *Paterson*. In the preface, Williams wrote

a man in himself is a city, beginning, seeking, achieving and concluding his life in ways which the various aspects of a city may embody — if imaginatively conceived — any city, all the details of which may be made to voice his most intimate convictions.



The poem combines poetic sections with various other texts: letters from patients, colleagues and other poets; passages from local histories; newspaper clippings; a geological survey; and other documents. It differs from other long modernist poems such as Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Pound's *The Cantos* by making only a few literary allusions. Williams describes the real world as directly as he can: the poem is about things rather than abstractions. It describes the city of Paterson and its history, the poet-physician Williams and his patients, and the creative process that leads to poetry.

The beginning of the epic describes the river and the falls. The surging waters denote the irrepressible energy that leads us to fill the void.

A man like a city and a woman like a flower
— who are in love. Two women. Three women.
Innumerable women, each like a flower.

But

only one man— like a city.

. . .

Jostled as are the waters approaching
the brink, his thoughts
interlace, repel and cut under,
rise rock-thwarted and turn aside
but forever strain forward — or strike
an eddy and whirl, marked by a
leaf or curdy spume, seeming
to forget

Retake later the advance and
are replaced by succeeding hordes
pushing forward— they coalesce now
glass-smooth with their swiftness,
quiet or seem to quiet as at the close
they leap to the conclusion and
fall, fall in air! as if
floating, relieved of their weight,
split apart, ribbons; dazed, drunk
with the catastrophe of the descent
floating unsupported
to hit the rocks: to a thunder,
as if lightning had struck

All lightness lost, weight regained in
the repulse, a fury of
escape driving them to rebound
upon those coming after-
keeping nevertheless to the stream, they
retake their course, the air full
of the tumult and of spray
connotative of the equal air, coeval,
filling the void

William Carlos Williams, 1946

One of the recurring themes of the poem is the relationship between man and woman: a “man like a city and a woman like a flower.” This becomes acute when near the middle of the epic poem Williams presents the story of one of his patients, a young woman called “Beautiful Thing,” who was gang-raped

Beautiful Thing!
And the guys from Paterson
beat up
the guys from Newark and told
them to stay the hell out
of their territory and then
socked you one
across the nose
Beautiful Thing
for good luck and emphasis
cracking it
till I must believe that all
desired women have had each
in the end
a busted nose
and live afterward marked up
Beautiful Thing
for memory's sake
to be credible in their deeds

At the end of the epic, Williams tries to understand the way men think of women by considering *The Hunt of the Unicorn* tapestries (circa 1500) at The Cloisters in New York. No one is sure what the sequence of images represent. Some have speculated that it portrays the way Christ died for our sins. A more likely subject is the capture of a lover by a virgin. Williams considers one of the fragments of the tapestry *The Mystic Capture of the Unicorn* in terms of the dual nature of woman in the eyes of man.



The expression on her face
where she stands removed from the others
—the virgin and the whore

The epic of *Paterson* ends with the enigmatic lines

We know nothing and can know nothing
but
the dance, to dance to a measure
contrapuntally
satyrically the tragic foot

Williams is likely referring to the origin of human tragedy in the Dionysiac “Satyr Plays,” wherein half-man-half-monster satyrs cavort.

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

Move forward run my hand around the font.
From where I stand the roof looks almost new –
Cleaned or restored? Someone would know: I don't.
Mounting the lectern I peruse a few
Hectoring large-scale verses and pronounce
'Here endeth' much more loudly than I'd meant.
The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence
Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do
And always end much at a loss like this
Wondering what to look for; wondering too
When churches fall completely out of use
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep
A few cathedrals chronically on show
Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

Or after dark will dubious women come
To make their children touch a particular stone;
Pick simples for a cancer; or on some
Advised night see walking a dead one?
Power of some sort or other will go on
In games in riddles seemingly at random;
But superstition, like belief, must die
And what remains when disbelief has gone?
Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky.

(ctd)

Church Going

In this poem Larkin reflects on the declining importance of the Church in modern society. The title has various meanings: it can mean “attending” religious services in a church, “visiting” a church for its historical or esthetic importance, or the church itself “departing.”

In England, the percentage of the population attending church (at least once a month) has decreased dramatically from about 50% in 1850 to below 10% in 2000. Lacking parishioners, many English churches have fallen into disrepair. (As an aside, although church attendance has similarly declined in most of Europe, church attendance in the United States has been much more stable and remains even now at about 40% of the population.)

Larkin visits an empty church on a country bicycle-ride. Custom requires that one removes one’s hat in church: since he has no hat, the poet removes his cycle-clips (used to prevent trousers from getting caught by the bicycle chain). He wanders round the church, reads from the lectern, signs the visitors’ book and donates an Irish sixpence (of little value in Ireland and of no value in England).

Larkin is not an expert on ecclesiastical matters – he admits to being “bored uninformed.” However, he does mention “lectern” (a stand with a sloping top from which the bible may be read to the congregation), “parchment” (animal skin cleaned and dressed for writing, used by monks to preserve the holy scriptures), “plate” (used to present the communion wafers or to receive offerings from the congregation) “pyx” (a small box containing the consecrated wafers for the service of Holy Communion), “buttress” (an externally projecting support for a wall, common in medieval churches), “rood loft” (a gallery above the rood screen, which separates the choir from the nave, and which displays the “rood” or crucifix), and “gown-and-bands” (priestly vestments – the bands are clergyman’s collars). He is also familiar with the liturgy, and makes fun of the way the reading from the scripture is always followed by “Here endeth the lesson.”

The poem contains seven verses each with nine lines. The rhythm is a regular iambic pentameter with occasional trochaic or spondaic substitutions at the beginning:

/ / | - / | - / | - / | - /
Yet stop I did: in fact I often do

The rhyme scheme is *ababcdece*. Some of the rhymes are regular (shut/cut) and some are slant (on/stone). Like the mysteries of the church the sixth line does not rhyme.

Larkin’s choice of words varies between colloquial and archaic, and between dialect and arcane. “Sprawlings” describes things that are straggled or spread out. “Simples” is an archaic word for a medicinal preparation containing only one herbal ingredient. The most striking combination is “this accoutred frowsty barn” which joins the archaic “accoutred” (equipped, decorated, fashioned) to the dialectal “frowsty” (stuffy, musty). A “ruin bibber randy for antiques” is jocular for a devotee who imbibes too much and lusts after ancient buildings. In the final verse, “blent” is an archaic form of blended.

A shape less recognisable each week
A purpose more obscure. I wonder who
Will be the last the very last to seek
This place for what it was; one of the crew
That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?
Some ruin-bibber randy for antique
Or Christmas-addict counting on a whiff
Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?
Or will he be my representative

Bored uninformed knowing the ghostly silt
Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground
Through suburb scrub because it held unspoilt
So long and equably what since is found
Only in separation—marriage, and birth,
And death, and thoughts of these—for which was built
This special shell? For though I've no idea
What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth
It pleases me to stand in silence here;

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.

Philip Larkin, 1954

Unfortunate Coincidence

By the time you swear you're his,
Shivering and sighing,
And he vows his passion is
Infinite, undying -
Lady, make a note of this:
One of you is lying.

Dorothy Parker, 1926

In the last two verses of the poem, the tone changes from facetious and skeptical to “serious.” The poet tries to understand why he and others are drawn to these places. Believers find a sense of continuity with those who came before to worship at these sites. In the last of his *Four Quartets – Little Gidding* (1942, see p 203), T. S. Eliot describes a visit to St John’s Church, Little Gidding, the center of a religious community run by Nicolas Farrar in the 17th Century:

If you came by day not knowing what you came for,
It would be the same, when you leave the rough road
And turn behind the pig-sty to the dull facade
And the tombstone. And what you thought you came for
Is only a shell, a husk of meaning
From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled
If at all. Either you had no purpose
Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured
And is altered in fulfilment.

Larkin has none of Eliot’s belief. For him, any sense of Christian spirituality has vanished – the “ghostly silt dispersed.” Nevertheless, he does recognize that this place – “this cross of ground” – has meaning. It pleases him to stand in silence in a building that once celebrated the major stations of a life – “marriage, and birth and death.”

The final stanza changes its style from conversational to poetic. Larkin inverts the usual word order

A serious house on serious earth it is

and turns to the archaic “blent” to provide the poem’s most important main metaphor for how the church recognized our needs and gave them their appropriate clothing:

In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.

He realizes that this ground – where many once worshipped and are now buried – is a “serious” place, where it still is “proper to grow wise in.” The word “serious” occurs three times in the stanza. It derives from old Indo-European root meaning “heavy,” but has now assumed a meaning of “important” – something that one should not joke about, something that might perhaps be worth dying for.

Unfortunate Coincidence

In the Roaring Twenties, sexual mores became far more relaxed than before. Nevertheless, getting one’s companion into bed still required some claim to infinite and undying passion. Parker was cynical about this, but also realized that there were many broken hearts:

Once when I was young and true
Someone left me sad—
Broke my brittle heart in two;
And that is very bad.

Love is for unlucky folk
Love is but a curse
Once there was a heart I broke
And that, I think, is worse.

To Althea, from Prison

When love with unconfined wings
Hovers within my gates,
And my divine Althea brings
To whisper at the grates;
When I lie tangled in her hair
And fettered to her eye,
The birds that wanton in the air
Know no such liberty.

When flowing cups run swiftly round,
With no allaying Thames,
Our careless heads with roses bound,
Our hearts with loyal flames;
When thirsty grief in wine we steep,
When healths and draughts go free,
Fishes that tipple in the deep
Know no such liberty.

When like committed linnets I
With shriller throat shall sing
The sweetness, mercy, majesty,
And glories of my King:
When I shall voice aloud how good
He is, how great should be,
Enlarged winds, that curl the flood,
Know no such liberty.

Stone walls do not a prison make,
Nor iron bars a cage:
Minds innocent and quiet take
That for an hermitage.
If I have freedom in my love,
And in my soul am free,
Angels alone, that soar above,
Enjoy such liberty.

Richard Lovelace, 1642

To Althea, from Prison

Lovelace was a member of the court of Charles I, whose autocratic rule and arbitrary taxation policies led to the English Civil War (1642-1651). One of the actions by the Puritan-dominated Long Parliament to limit the power of the king was the Clergy Act of 1640 which expelled the bishops from the House of Lords. Lovelace campaigned against the act; for this he was briefly incarcerated in the Gatehouse Prison near Westminster Abbey.

The “Roundheads” (puritan followers of Oliver Cromwell) considered Lovelace a “Cavalier” – one of the wealthy royalist supporters of Charles I. Cavalier poets enjoyed the finer things in life, had long flowing hair, and wore plumed hats and brightly colored clothes of silk and other fine materials. The illustration at the right shows Van Dyck’s 1638 painting of the brothers John and Bernard Stuart. Other Cavalier poets were Robert Herrick (pp 10, 110) and Thomas Carew.



Lovelace’s poem is as finely fashioned as his Cavalier sensibilities. Each of the four verses is composed of 8 line of alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter with a rhyme scheme is *ababcdcd*. Occasionally the first foot of ae shorter line is inverted

| / - | - / | - / |
Hovers within my gates

or converted to a spondee

| / / | - / | - / |
Know no such liberty

The end of the poem describes not what prisons cannot do but what the imagination can. The natural world does not know the freedom of the human mind; only angels “enjoy such liberty.”

The identity of Althea is not known. She may be imagined. On leaving to fight for the Royalists in the Bishops’ Wars in Scotland in 1640, Lovelace had written to another unknown mistress the poem *To Lucasta, Going to the Wars* that begins

Tell me not (Sweet) I am unkind,
That from the nunnery
Of thy chaste breast and quiet mind
To war and arms I flee.

The Cinnamon Peeler

If I were a cinnamon peeler
I would ride your bed
And leave the yellow bark dust
On your pillow.

Your breasts and shoulders would reek
You could never walk through markets
without the profession of my fingers
floating over you. The blind would
stumble certain of whom they approached
though you might bathe
under rain gutters, monsoon.

Here on the upper thigh
at this smooth pasture
neighbour to you hair
or the crease
that cuts your back. This ankle.
You will be known among strangers
as the cinnamon peeler's wife.

I could hardly glance at you
before marriage
never touch you
--your keen nosed mother, your rough brothers.
I buried my hands
in saffron, disguised them
over smoking tar,
helped the honey gatherers...

When we swam once
I touched you in the water
and our bodies remained free,
you could hold me and be blind of smell.
you climbed the bank and said

this is how you touch other women
the grass cutter's wife, the lime burner's daughter.
And you searched your arms
for the missing perfume

and knew

(ctd)

The Cinnamon Peeler

The spice cinnamon comes from the bark of the tree *Cinnamomum vera* native to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. For thousands of years, it has been exported to the Middle East and Europe by boat across the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. Once the branches are harvested, the rough outer bark is scraped away, and then the inner bark is peeled off the wooden center.

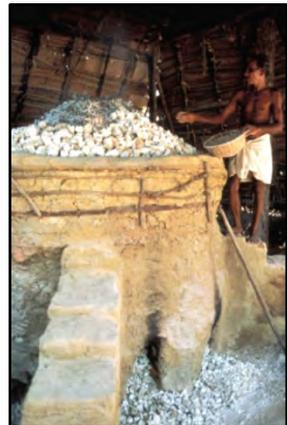
Preserving the complete cylinder of the peeled bark takes some dexterity. Several peels are wrapped together to form a quill and allowed to dry. The dried tubes can be directly inserted into cooking fluids or crushed to form a powder (see upper right). The illustration below shows a cinnamon peeler in Sri Lanka:



In this poem Ondaatje, a Canadian poet who was born in Sri Lanka, imagines the love life of a cinnamon peeler. His body would be covered in the pungent-sweet yellow-brown dust of cinnamon, which could never be totally removed by bathing. When he made love the dust would be left on the pillow, on his lover's breasts and shoulders, on her upper thigh, on the crease of her back and on her ankle.

The cinnamon peeler remembers before they were married how he could not touch his love for fear her family would recognize his scent upon her. He could not mask the scent with saffron, tar or honey. Only when they touched when swimming, was she as unmarked as other women by her lover's perfume.

In Sri-Lanka lime-burning was as ancient a profession as cinnamon peeling. The illustration on the right shows a traditional lime kiln. Limestone (calcium carbonate) was placed in a kiln and heated by burning wood or coal to produce quicklime (calcium oxide) which was mixed with water and sand to make mortar for binding bricks together.



what good is it
to be the lime burner's daughter
left with no trace
as if not spoken to in the act of love
as if wounded without the pleasure of a scar.

You touched
your belly to my hands
in the dry air and said

I am the cinnamon
Peeler's wife. Smell me.

Michael Ondaatje, 1989

What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why,
I have forgotten, and what arms have lain
Under my head till morning; but the rain
Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh
Upon the glass and listen for reply,
And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain
For unremembered lads that not again
Will turn to me at midnight with a cry.

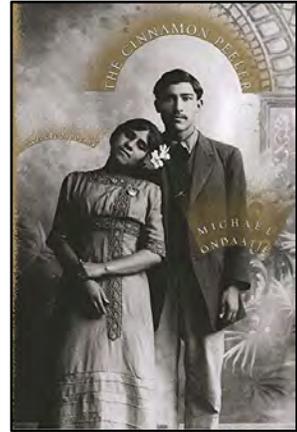
Thus in the winter stands the lonely tree,
Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one,
Yet knows its boughs more silent than before:
I cannot say what loves have come and gone,
I only know that summer sang in me
A little while, that in me sings no more.

Edna St. Vincent Millay, 1920

The main point of the poem is that lovers become marked by their love. The mark may be a trace, a scar or a smell. Without it there is no communication – it is as if one is not spoken to. The original meaning of communication (Latin *com* together and *munia* duties) was “sharing” Love is becoming part of someone else and acknowledging that they are part of you:

I am the cinnamon
Peeler's wife. Smell me.

The illustration shows the cover of the book for which this was the title poem: the cinnamon peeler and his wife: In actuality, the photograph by Romualdo Garcia shows a Mexican couple.



What lips my lips have kissed

After graduating from Vassar College, Millay moved to Greenwich Village in New York City, where she wrote poetry and plays, and seduced many of her fellow bohemians. She believed that she was as free as any man to have affairs:

My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—
It gives a lovely light!

Epstein's 2001 biography describes a typical evening:

Edna came to John's apartment to make love with him. They quickly got down to business. But either just before or after the act she casually mentioned that she had just been in the arms of another man, which is why she had been a bit late. And then before leaving him she announced she must not tarry because she had an appointment to make love with a different man altogether.

This particular sonnet imagines herself as a tree grown old, her branches now bereft of all the birds that once there sang. She becomes the female 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.

The Accompanist

Don't play too much, don't play
too loud, don't play the melody.
You have to anticipate her
and to subdue yourself.
She used to give me her smoky
eye when I got boisterous,
so I learned to play on tip-
toe and to play the better half
of what I might. I don't like
to complain, though I notice
that I get around to it somehow.
We made a living and good music,
both, night after night, the blue
curlicues of smoke rubbing their
staling and wispy backs
against the ceilings, the flat
drinks and scarce taxis, the jazz life
we bitch about the way Army pals
complain about the food and then
re-up. Some people like to say
with smut in their voices how playing
the way we did at our best is partly
sexual. OK, I could tell them
a tale or two, and I've heard
the records Lester cut with Lady Day
and all that rap, and it's partly
sexual but it's mostly practice
and music. As for partly sexual,
I'll take wholly sexual any day,
but that's a duet and we're talking
accompaniment. Remember "Reckless
Blues"? Bessie Smith sings out "Daddy"
and Louis Armstrong plays back "Daddy"
as clear through his horn as if he'd
spoken it. But it's her daddy and her
story. When you play it you become
your part in it, one of her beautiful
troubles, and then, however much music
can do this, part of her consolation,

(ctd)

The Accompanist

This dramatic monologue is by a jazz pianist who accompanies a female vocalist. His job is to make her sound good and not to steal the spotlight. Accompanists typically play the chords and maintain the rhythm – they do not play the melody and they do not get “boisterous.” The accompanist complains about his subservient role, but acknowledges that the music is good. He enjoys the life and wouldn’t give it up.

Her “smoky eye” is a look that expresses disapproval. This is usually associated with a lowered head, a furrowed brow, raised eyebrows, clenched jaw and a sideways or upward direction of gaze. Other names are “side-eye” and “stink-eye.” A more literary term is to “look askance.”

The musical and social relationships between jazz musicians vary greatly. The speaker is not explicit but we get the sense that he is not sexually involved with the vocalist, even though their musical interaction has many of the characteristics of sexual intimacy. Theirs is not the same as the 1937-41 relationship between the saxophonist Lester Young and Billie Holiday, whom he called “Lady Day” (see right).



Often members of a jazz group will play in a call-and-response format with the vocalist singing a phrase and one of the other soloists commenting on or repeating what has been sung. The most famous example of this is the interplay between Bessie Smith (see portrait on the right) and Louis Armstrong in her 1925 recording of *Reckless Blues*.



My mama says, I'm reckless, my daddy
says, I'm wild

My mama says, I'm reckless, my daddy
says, I'm wild

I ain't good looking but I'm somebody's angel child

Daddy, mama wants some loving

Daddy, mama wants some hugging

Damn it pretty papa, mama wants some lovin' I vow

Damn it pretty papa, mama wants some lovin' right now

the way pain and joy eat off each other's
plates, but mostly you play to drunks,
to the night, to the way you judge
and pardon yourself, to all that goes
not unsung, but unrecorded.

William Matthews, 1987

Patroclus Putting on the Armour of Achilles

How clumsy he is putting on the armour of another,
His friend's, perhaps remembering how they used to arm each other,
Fitting the metal tunics to one another's breast
And setting on each other's head the helmet's bristling crest.
Now for himself illicitly he foolishly performs
Secret ceremonial with that other's arms,
Borrowed, I say stolen, for they are not his own,
On the afternoon of battle, late, trembling, and alone.

Night terminal to fighting falls on the playing field
As to his arm he fastens the giant daedal shield.
Awhile the game continues, a little while the host
Lost on the obscure littoral, scattered and almost
Invisible, pursue the endless war with words
Jarring in the darkening air impassable to swords.

But when he steps forth from the tent where Achilles broods
Patroclus finds no foe at hand, surrounded by no gods,
Only the chill of evening strikes him to the bone
Like an arrow piercing where the armour fails to join,
And weakens his knees under the highly polished greaves,
Evening gentle elsewhere is loud on the shore,
It would seem for the deaths of heroes, their disobedient graves.

Daryl Hine, 1965

At the end of the poem, the accompanist makes some comments about music. He notes how playing sad songs – and listening to them – somehow serves to console us in our troubles. We do not know how this works but it does.

His final comment describes how most of music is completely transitory. The notes are played; they have their effect; and then they are no more. Most music is never recorded and can only be replayed in memory. Most of the audience for music (and for poetry) “pay no praise or wages nor heed” what is being created for them (Thomas, *In My Craft or Sullen Art*, p 5). And so you play “to the way you judge and pardon yourself” and for the music.

Patroclus Putting on the Armour of Achilles

Patroclus was the boyhood friend, companion and likely lover of Achilles, the great Greek hero. In *The Iliad*, after Achilles withdrew from the fighting, the Trojans drove the Greeks back and threatened to burn their ships. Achilles still refused to fight but allowed Patroclus to wear his armor and lead his soldiers – the Myrmidons – against the Trojans (see p 195).

Hine’s poem imagines an episode is not portrayed in *The Iliad*, when Patroclus tried on the armor in the afternoon before the battle, while the Myrmidons are practicing, and the warrior-chiefs are arguing.

Hine’s poem attempts to imitate the dactylic hexameter of Homer. The line is divided into six feet. Most of the feet are dactyls (/ - -) (see p 13) although there are also spondees (/ /) and trochees (/ -)

| / | / - - | / - - | / - | / - - | / - - |

How clumsy he is putting on the armour of another,

| / / | / - - | / - - | / - | / - - | / - - |

His friend’s, perhaps remembering how they used to arm each other

However, Greek rhythms are based on the length of a syllable rather than its stress, and the rhythm sounds uncomfortable in English. This fits with how Patroclus feels while trying on his friend’s armor.

The poem is written in rhyming couplets. Rhyme was not used in Greek poetry. In English poetry the rhyming couplet with iambic pentameter lines – the “heroic couplet” – has been used since Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tale*, though it has often been associated with the mock heroic, as in Pope’s 1714 *The Rape of the Lock* which deals with the consequences of cutting of a lock of hair:

What dire Offence from am’rous Causes springs,

What mighty Quarrels rise from trivial Things,

The poetic form thus well portrays the uneasiness of Patroclus. The words “fail to join.” The sound of the waves seems to call not for victory but “for the deaths of heroes, their disobedient graves.” On the morrow, Patroclus and the Myrmidons will drive the Trojans back from the ships. However, Patroclus will disobey Achilles’ order not to pursue the Trojans further. Hector will then kill him, and strip him of the great shield that Daedalus, the father of Icarus, had made for Achilles and the rest of the armor. Achilles, in a fury of grief, and in new armor made for him by Hephaestus (see p 195) will then kill Hector.

Jurisprudence, or the Woods in New Jersey

(for Justice William J. Brennan Jr.)

Where there was only grey, and brownish grey,
And greyish brown against the white
Of fallen snow at twilight in the winter woods,

Now an uncanny flame-like thing, black
and sulphur-yellow, as if it were dreamed by Audubon,
Is turned upside down in a delicate cascade
Of new green leaves, feeding on whatever mites

Or small white spiders haunt undersides at stem end.
A magnolia warbler, to give the thing a name.
The other name we give this overmuch of appetite,

And beauty unconscious of itself, is life.
And that that kept the mind becalmed all winter?—
The more austere and abstract rhythm of the trunks,

Vertical music the cold makes visible
That holds the whole thing up and gives it form,
Or strength—call that the law. It's made,

whatever we like to think, more of interests
than of reasons, trees reaching each their own way
for the light, to make a sort of order unawares.

And what of those deer threading through the woods
In a late snowfall and silent as the snow?
They are the mind, I think, in jurisprudence, or in art.

Look: they move among the winter trees, so much
the color of the trees, they hardly seem to move.

Robert Hass, 1996

Jurisprudence, or the Woods in New Jersey

William Brennan Jr. served on the US Supreme Court from 1956 to 1990. He was a liberal justice and strongly supported the rights of the individual. The American Civil Liberties Union asked Robert Hass, at that time the US Poet Laureate, to write a poem to go with a lifetime achievement award to Justice Brennan.

The poem describes the woods in New Jersey where Brennan was born. From this description the poet derives some principles of jurisprudence – the exercise of good judgment (*prudentia*) in the practice of the law (*iuris*).

The season is the transition between winter and spring. The leaves have some “new green leaves” but a “late snowfall” has occurred. A magnolia warbler (illustrated on the right) can be observed – “black and sulphur yellow” – feeding on the mites and spiders on the leaves. Through the trees, which stand in an “austere and abstract rhythm,” a herd of deer can just be just discerned “threading through the woods” as silently as the falling snow.



From his perception of this scene, Hass considers some thoughts about the nature of the law. Hass interprets the bird – “this overmuch of appetite, and beauty unconscious of itself” as “life.” Life lives for its desires. In *Leviathan* (1651), Thomas Hobbes pointed out that these desires, if unrestrained, lead to a state of war of all against all (*bellum omnium contra omnes*). The life of man becomes “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (see also p 180). Hobbes proposed a “social contract” whereby we cede power to the state, which can then set laws to regulate our lives so that each of us can fulfil at least some of our desires. We sacrifice some part of our liberty to be protected from ourselves.

The trees represent the law – that which maintains the peace – “that that kept the mind becalmed.” It is the means

That holds the whole thing up and gives it form,
Or strength

Hass points out that the law is made “more of interests than of reasons.” Each person wants the law to help and protect themselves. Nevertheless, the trees “reaching each their own way for the light” must somehow “make a sort of order.” This order is formed by the reasoning mind. Like the deer. The mind finds its quiet way to thread a logic through the trees of individual desire, tying things together and interpreting the law so that it can work.

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird

I

Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.

II

I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.

III

The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
It was a small part of the pantomime.

IV

A man and a woman
Are one.
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one.

V

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

VI

Icicles filled the long window
With barbaric glass.
The shadow of the blackbird
Crossed it, to and fro.
The mood
Traced in the shadow
An indecipherable cause.

VII

O thin men of Haddam,
Why do you imagine golden birds?
Do you not see how the blackbird
Walks around the feet
Of the women about you?

(ctd)

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird

This suite of poems about a blackbird has its origins in the cultural movements of the early 20th Century. Each poem is brief and cryptic like the Chinese poems translated by Ezra Pound (p 34); each uses a vivid visual picture to convey its meaning like the works of the Imagists (p 27); each presents the blackbird from one point of view in the same way that the Cubists attempted to see the whole by looking at its different parts at different times and from different directions. The interpretation of the poem is far from simple. In a 1947 poem *Man Carrying Thing*, Stevens remarked

The poem must resist the intelligence
Almost successfully.

The following paragraphs provide some suggestions about the meaning of some of the stanzas. In European folklore, the blackbird is often a harbinger of death. We must bear this in mind in any overarching interpretation of Stevens's poem.

The opening stanza introduces us to the blackbird in a background of snowy mountains. The eye of the blackbird is the only moving thing in two senses: the eye is not still, and it arouses our emotions. We are affected because the blackbird is perceiving the world and is thus like us.

In the second stanza, Stevens describes three blackbirds in one tree. He likely means that the mind can include several completely different species of bird in a one category. The name "blackbird" is used for many different small black birds. Larger black birds, such as raven, crow, and grackle, have their own specific names. In Europe "blackbird" usually refers to the Eurasian blackbird (upper right, *Turdus merula*) – this is the bird that sings in *Adlestrop* (p 55). Stevens was most likely thinking of a red-winged blackbird (middle right, *Agelaius phoeniceus*), the most common of the many small black birds in North America. Brewer's blackbird (lower right, *Euphagus cyanocephalus*) lives in the Western regions of North America. To me this stanza places three black birds on different branches of the phylogenetic tree.

The fourth stanza describes the unity of perception. The first part perhaps alludes to *Genesis 2:24*

Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.



VIII

I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know.

IX

When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.

X

At the sight of blackbirds
Flying in a green light,
Even the bawds of euphony
Would cry out sharply.

XI

He rode over Connecticut
In a glass coach.
Once, a fear pierced him,
In that he mistook
The shadow of his equipage
For blackbirds.

XII

The river is moving.
The blackbird must be flying.

XIII

It was evening all afternoon.
It was snowing
And it was going to snow.
The blackbird sat
In the cedar-limbs.

Wallace Stevens, 1917

But the ending is more akin to the Eastern concept that we all share in some universal perception of the world. As we have seen (p 93) Stevens was intrigued by the interactions between reality and perception. In his posthumously published *Adagia*, Stevens states

The mind that in heaven created the earth and the mind that on earth created the heaven were, as it happened, one

Reality is not what it is. It consists of the many realities which it can be made into.

In the fifth stanza Stevens is noting that the perception of an event occurs after the fact. First, it takes time for perception to come up with an interpretation of what happened. In his 1951 talk *A Collect of Philosophy*, Stevens pointed out that “we never see the world except the moment after.” Second, the perception is then later remembered in a context different from that in which it was originally perceived.

The sixth stanza refers to how our understanding of reality is imperfect, much like seeing through a glass darkly (1 *Corinthians* 13:12, see p 197)

In the seventh stanza Stevens upbraids the “thin men of Haddam” for missing the truth of the blackbird, and instead searching for some mythical golden bird that will solve all their problems. Haddam is a small town near Stevens’s home in Hartford, but the thin men are just those without any breadth of imagination.

Stanza IX makes us aware of the limitations of our perception. We cannot see everything. We know only in part. I am afraid I am at a loss to interpret the “bawds of euphony” of stanza X. Perhaps they represent the poets who are more concerned with how they sound than with what they understand.

The “glass carriage” of stanza XI is difficult to interpret. Ryf (1977) has suggested that it is a railway carriage on the New Haven Railroad. A passenger might have seen “the shadows of the electrical equipment on the roof of the car” racing along beside the train, interpreted these shadows as blackbirds, and worried about the death that they are supposed to portend.

In the last two stanzas the poet becomes reconciled to the transience of his life and the limitations of his art. The twelfth stanza brings together two modalities of the verb “be:” the indicative “is” and the obligatory “must be.” Some things in the world are seen – the river is moving – but others are inferred – the blackbird must be flying. The final stanza expresses the peacefulness of an afternoon snowfall, giving a sense that “all is right with the world” (p 252).

Having paid attention to the details, I have perhaps missed out on the complete picture. In his 1954 essay, Keast presents the following as possible summary of the poem’s underlying argument

a thoughtful man, a poet or artist, who has feared death in the ceaseless change of nature and who has sought, without success, stability and permanence in the constructions of the imagination, discovers that the change and motion of nature may be encompassed by the submission of the mind to nature, and, in being encompassed, may be fixed in forms more permanent and beautiful than anything of which the mind alone is capable; this intuition produces confidence and a new tranquility.

Arms and the Boy

Let the boy try along this bayonet-blade
How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood;
Blue with all malice, like a madman's flash;
And thinly drawn with famishing for flesh.

Lend him to stroke these blind, blunt bullet-leads,
Which long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads,
Or give him cartridges of fine zinc teeth
Sharp with the sharpness of grief and death.

For his teeth seem for laughing round an apple.
There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple;
And God will grow no talons at his heels,
Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls.

Wilfred Owen, 1918

blessing the boats

(at St. Mary's)

may the tide
that is entering even now
the lip of our understanding
carry you out
beyond the face of fear
may you kiss
the wind then turn from it
certain that it will
love your back may you
open your eyes to water
water waving forever
and may you in your innocence
sail through this to that

Lucille Clifton, 1991

Arms and the Boy

The title recalls the opening lines of Virgil's *Aeneid* (19 BCE): I sing of arms and the man (*Arma virumque cano*). Virgil's poem celebrated the foundation of the Roman Empire. World War I led to the dissolution of the German, Russian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires.

The poem is in three quatrains and uses slant rhymes according to an *aabb* scheme. Some of the rhymes keep both consonants of the final syllable and alter only the vowel (blade/blood) whereas others are based only on the last consonant (teeth/death). Some critics (cf p 87) have named these types of rhyme pararhyme (flash/flesh) and consonance (heels/curls).

The first two quatrains describe how a young recruit is introduced to the rifle and the bullets that he will use to kill. The last verse points out that the boy was not made for killing. He should rather be enjoying life.

During World War II, Henry Reed wrote a related poem called *The Naming of Parts* (1942). As the instructor describes the parts of the rifle, the poet interjects descriptions of blossoming nature. As the poem progresses sexual innuendos take over, and love of life overcomes the call of death:

And this you can see is the bolt. The purpose of this
Is to open the breech, as you see. We can slide it
Rapidly backwards and forwards: we call this
Easing the spring. And rapidly backwards and forwards
The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the flowers:
They call it easing the Spring.

blissing the boats

St Mary's County in Maryland is located on a peninsula in Chesapeake Bay between the outlets of the Potomac and Patuxent Rivers. St Clement's Island – a tiny island in the Potomac River was the site of the original settlement of Maryland in 1634. Maryland, named after Queen Mary, the wife of Charles I, was settled by both Protestant and Catholics and enshrines religious toleration in its Act Concerning Religion of 1649. The surrounding county, named after St Mary, mother of Christ, is home to St Mary's City with its museums celebrating the settlement, and St Mary's College, where Clifton taught.

Each spring there is a ceremony to bless the boats of the county. Originally this was for the many fishermen who earned their livings from the oysters and fish of the bay. More recently the ceremony has been continued for the pleasure-craft that sail out of the county.

The poem is a simple prayer asking for a blessing from the forces of nature – the tide, the wind, and the waves. Each part of the prayer is introduced through the gentleness of “may.” The virtue of the poem is its simplicity. The prayer requests that nature help us “sail through this to that” – from present concerns to future hopes. No one has ever found so much meaning in the simple demonstrative pronouns “this” and “that.”

from **Preludes for Memnon**

Winter for a moment takes the mind; the snow
Falls past the arlight; icicles guard a wall;
The wind moans through a crack in the window;
A keen sparkle of frost is on the sill.
Only for a moment; as spring too might engage it,
With a single crocus in the loam, or a pair of birds;
Or summer with hot grass; or autumn with a yellow leaf.

Winter is there, outside, is here in me:
Drapes the planets with snow, deepens the ice on the moon,
Darkens the darkness that was already darkness.
The mind too has its snows, its slippery paths,
Walls bayoneted with ice, leaves ice-encased.
Here is the in-drawn room, to which you return
When the wind blows from Arcturus: here is the fire
At which you warm your hands and glaze your eyes;
The piano, on which you touch the cold treble;
Five notes like breaking icicles; and then silence.

The alarm-clock ticks, the pulse keeps time with it,
Night and the mind are full of sounds. I walk
From the fire-place, with its imaginary fire,
To the window, with its imaginary view.
Darkness, and snow ticking the window: silence,
And the knocking of chains on a motor-car, the tolling
Of a bronze bell, dedicated to Christ.
And then the uprush of angelic wings, the beating
The darkness filled with a feathery whistling, wings
Numberless as the flakes of angelic snow,
The deep void swarming with wings and sound of wings,
The winnowing of chaos, the aliveness
Of depth and depth and depth dedicated to death.

Here are bickerings of the inconsequential,
The chatterings of the ridiculous, the iterations
Of the meaningless. Memory, like a juggler,
Tosses its colored balls into the light, and again
Receives them into darkness. Here is the absurd,
Grinning like an idiot, and the omnivorous quotidian,
Which will have its day. A handful of coins,

(ctd)

Preludes for Memnon

The Colossi of Memnon are two gigantic statues near Thebes (Luxor) in Egypt. The illustration shows an 1846 painting by Hubert Sattler. They once stood guard



over the memorial temple to Amenhotep III who ruled Egypt at the height of its splendour in the 14th Century BCE. Amenhotep was the father of Akhenaten who founded monotheism in Egypt. After one of the statues was damaged during an earthquake, visitors occasionally reported musical sounds emanating from the colossus at dawn, likely from the wind passing through the

cracked stone. Aiken's 63 preludes represent the music heard as the sun rises.

The first prelude begins with the narrator looking out of his window at night on the falling snow. For a moment, he is intensely aware of winter. Other images and sounds of winter – “walls bayoneted with ice,” “five notes like breaking icicles” – flock to his mind. The wind blows from Arcturus (Greek, “guardian of the bear”), a bright red star in the Northern sky. Then there is silence.

The narrator perceives the sensations, well aware that what he is perceiving is a combination of imagination and reality. Then suddenly his mind is overcome by the chaos underlying his perceptions:

And then the uprush of angelic wings, the beating
Of wings demonic from the abyss of the mind

This chaos must be winnowed. Winnowing (deriving from same ancient root as “wind”) is a way of separating grain from chaff. The wheat is first threshed to break up the grains. Then the mixture is thrown into the air and the wind blows the lighter chaff away. Somehow our minds must winnow the chaos of reality to find meaning in what we perceive. Ultimately, we come down to the foundational truth of our experience – that it must lead to death.

Various sensations and memories are derived from the chaos. Aiken presents a vivid personification of memory who

like a juggler
Tosses its colored balls into the light, and again
Receives them into darkness.

Aiken plays with words, describing the “omnivorous quotidian” (Latin, how many days) – the ordinary details of our everyday life – that eats away much of our time because these seem so necessary: the quotidian will have its day.

Tickets, items from the news, a soiled handkerchief,
A letter to be answered, notice of a telephone call,
The petal of a flower in a volume of Shakespeare,
The program of a concert. The photograph, too,
Propped on the mantel, and beneath it a dry rosebud;
The laundry bill, matches, and ash-tray, Utamaro's
Pearl-fishers. And the rug, on which are still the crumbs
Of yesterday's feast. These are the void, the night,
And the angelic wings that make it sound.

What is the flower? It is not a sigh of color,
Suspuration of purple, sibilation of saffron,
Nor aureate exhalation from the tomb.
Yet is these because you think of these,
An emanation of emanations, fragile
As light, or glisten, or gleam, or coruscation,
Creature of brightness, and as brightness brief.
What is the frost? It is not the sparkle of death,
The flash of time's wing, seeds of eternity;
Yet it is these because you think of these.
And you, because you think of these, are both
Frost and flower, the bright ambiguous syllable
Of which the meaning is both no and yes.

Here is the tragic, the distorting mirror
In which your gesture becomes grandiose;
Tears form and fall from your magnificent eyes,
The brow is noble, and the mouth is God's.
Here is the God who seeks his mother, Chaos,—
Confusion seeking solution, and life seeking death.
Here is the rose that woos the icicle; the icicle
That woos the rose. Here is the silence of silences
Which dreams of becoming a sound, and the sound
Which will perfect itself in silence. And all
These things are only the uprush from the void,
The wings angelic and demonic, the sound of the abyss
Dedicated to death. And this is you.

Conrad Aiken, 1931

Among his perceptions are some *ukiyo-e* (Japanese, “floating world”) prints of Utamaro representing the abalone divers (earlier interpretations had considered them pearl-fishers) of Enoshima, a small island in central Japan (1790):



These prints represent the women who dive to collect abalone, comparing their naked bodies to the richly clothed aristocratic ladies on their way to worship at the island’s shrine. The prints contrast the harshness of real life with the shimmering silks of the court.

In the fourth section of this poem, Aiken considers the nature of reality. A flower is all of the perceptions and memories that we associate with it: its color, its odour, its fragility, its transience. Like the frost, it is and is not all of these.

What is the frost? It is not the sparkle of death,
The flash of time's wing, seeds of eternity;
Yet it is these because you think of these.

The narrator looks at himself in the mirror. His face, created in the image of God, seeks to understand Chaos – that which existed before the universe began. Life is seeking to understand itself; it is seeking after death.

When he was 11 years old, Aiken’s father, a respected surgeon, shot his wife and then committed suicide. Aiken discovered his parents’ bodies and later remembered (using the third person to distance himself from the memory) that:

he had tiptoed into the dark room, where the two bodies lay motionless and apart, and, finding them dead, found himself possessed of them forever.

Aiken was acutely aware of the transience of human life. He nevertheless insisted that we enjoy what time we have: From *Prelude for Memnon LXII*:

Let us give thanks, to space
 for a little room
Space is our face and time our death
 two poles of doom
Come dance around the compass
 pointing north
Before, face downward, frozen,
 we go forth.

Plaint to Man

When you slowly emerged from the den of Time,
And gained percipience as you grew,
And fleshed you fair out of shapeless slime,

Wherefore, O Man, did there come to you
The unhappy need of creating me –
A form like your own for praying to?

My virtue, power, utility,
Within my maker must all abide,
Since none in myself can ever be,

One thin as a phasm on a lantern-slide
Shown forth in the dark upon some dim sheet,
And by none but its showman vivified.

"Such a forced device," you may say, "is meet
For easing a loaded heart at whiles:
Man needs to conceive of a mercy-seat

Somewhere above the gloomy aisles
Of this wailful world, or he could not bear
The irk no local hope beguiles."

– But since I was framed in your first despair
The doing without me has had no play
In the minds of men when shadows scare;

And now that I dwindle day by day
Beneath the deicide eyes of seers
In a light that will not let me stay,

And to-morrow the whole of me disappears,
The truth should be told, and the fact be faced
That had best been faced in earlier years:

The fact of life with dependence placed
On the human heart's resource alone,
In brotherhood bonded close and graced

With loving-kindness fully blown,
And visioned help unsought, unknown.

Thomas Hardy, 1914

Plaint to Man

Ludwig Feuerbach in his *Essence of Christianity* (1841, translated in 1854 by Mary Ann Evans, later known as George Eliot) proposed that human beings created the idea of God as a projection of all that they desired – immortality, goodness, understanding and power (Chapter 11, p 118):

Man first unconsciously and involuntarily creates God in his own image, and after this God consciously and voluntarily creates man in his own image.

In Hardy's poem God complains to his human creator about being unnecessary: He feels that he is simply a "forced device" to provide mercy to man in his suffering. And one that, being now no longer needed must "dwindle day by day" until he is finally killed off by his creator.

"God is dead" had become the mantra of the age. In *The Gay Science* (1882, III: 125). Nietzsche attributed the words to a madman:

God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?

Nietzsche was more poet than philosopher. He was not claiming that there is no god, but saying that we are not yet ready to take on the universe. Who gave us the right to dispense with God and who will control things once He is dead?

In another longer poem, Hardy imagined *God's Funeral*. Hardy regretted the comfort that religion once provided, and worried about what shall now provide us with the ideals that we should seek:

How sweet it was in years far hied
To start the wheels of day with trustful prayer
To lie down liegely at the eventide
And feel a blest assurance he was there.

And who or what shall fill his place?
Whither will wanderers turn distracted eyes
For some fixed star to stimulate their pace
Towards the goal of their enterprise?

("Far hied" means long gone; "liegely" means in the manner of a servant)

Plaint to Man has a different tone. The final three verses do not regret the past but propose that human beings can face the future on their own – provided that they do it together in brotherhood and with loving kindness.

Hardy's poem is in *terza rima*. The second line of one stanza rhymes with the first and third of the next: *aba bcb cdc*. The final verse is a simple couplet. *Terza rima* is the form of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which attempts to explain the nature of God. Hardy's poem attempts to explain the nature of man.

The Bright Field

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the
pearl of great price, the one field that had
treasure in it. I realise now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it. Life is not hurrying

on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

R. S. Thomas, 1975

At the Three Fountains

Here, where God lives among the trees,
Where birds and monks the whole day sing
His praises in a pleasant ease,

O heart, might we not find a home
Here, after all our wandering?
These gates are closed, even on Rome.

Souls of the twilight wander here;
Here, in the garden of that death
Which was for love's sake, need we fear

How sharp with bitter joy might be
Love's lingering, last, longed-for breath,
Shut in upon eternity?

Arthur Symons, 1917

The Bright Field

Christ tried to explain the Kingdom of Heaven using parables:

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls:

Who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it. (*Matthew* 14 44-46)

Despite the parables, the nature of the kingdom of heaven remains unclear. Christ perhaps means the union of the faithful with God.

In addition to writing poetry, R. S. Thomas was an Anglican priest in North Wales. In this poem he realizes that we must be acutely aware of our present experience so that we notice what is important – the treasure in the field, the pearl of great price. The present is continually changing; if we do not pay attention, we shall miss the possibility of a divine revelation, like the burning bush that appeared to Moses (*Exodus* 3).

Thomas delights in balances: “hurrying on to a receding future” is perfectly balanced with “hankering after an imagined past.” Two participles describe life’s possibilities: “hurrying” and “hankering.” Two others describe the future and the past: “receding” and “imagined.”

At the Three Fountains

Symons, whose book on the French Symbolists (see p 59) had helped initiate modernism in British literature, suffered a psychotic breakdown in 1909.

However, he survived his demons, and thereafter continued to write occasionally.

The Abbey of the Three Fountains (*Abbazia delle Tre Fontana*) is located in the southern reaches of Rome. Legend has it that when Paul was decapitated on the orders of Emperor Nero in ~67 CE, the apostle’s head bounced three times, and at each place a spring arose. The abbey is run by the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance (Trappists), monks who withdraw from the world into a life of contemplation and simple work. The monks at Tre Fontana produce the wool for the *pallia* – scarf-like vestments worn by popes and archbishops.

Symons’s poem expresses a need for a haven from the world (cf .Hopkins, p 166). Its form suggests the cloistering of the abbey: the first and third lines rhyme within the stanza, and surround a second line that rhymes across the stanzas.

John Betjeman recalled seeing the elderly Symons in 1940 in a poem that begins

I saw him in the Café Royal,
Very old and very grand.
Modernistic shone the lamplight
There in London’s fairyland

Symons was attempting unsuccessfully to relive the storied past. The Café Royal, was founded in 1865 on Regent Street, London, and became a meeting-place for the rich and famous during the late 19th and early 20th Centuries.

The Emperor of Ice-Cream

Call the roller of big cigars,
The muscular one, and bid him whip
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.
Let the wenches dawdle in such dress
As they are used to wear, and let the boys
Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.
Let be be finale of seem.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Take from the dresser of deal,
Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet
On which she embroidered fantails once
And spread it so as to cover her face.
If her horny feet protrude, they come
To show how cold she is, and dumb.
Let the lamp affix its beam.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Wallace Stevens, 1922

Piano

Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me;
Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see
A child sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings
And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as she sings.

In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song
Betrays me back, till the heart of me weeps to belong
To the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter outside
And hymns in the cosy parlour, the tinkling piano our guide.

So now it is vain for the singer to burst into clamour
With the great black piano appassionato. The glamour
Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast
Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the past.

D. H. Lawrence, 1913

The Emperor of Ice-Cream

When I first came upon this poem, I enjoyed its rollicking rhythm and its outrageous diction – “concupiscent curds” –without really understanding what the words meant. Stevens (1939) claimed that these verses captured some of “the essential gaudiness of poetry.”

“Concupiscence” usually means lust or sexual desire. In the Catholic church it also means the general tendency to sin: the force that drives one to seek sensual gratification rather than moral good. The poem is telling us that ice cream may have no redeeming virtue.

Ice cream requires the churning of cream, sugar, flavoring and air in a container that has been cooled by placing it in a mixture of ice and salt-water. Before electrical mixers this was a laborious task, requiring someone as “muscular” as the “roller of big cigars.”

The first verse describes the making of the ice cream as “wenches dawdle” and boys “bring flowers.” The pleasures of the world are real and not illusory – being is not seeming. In the second verse, we move to the back room. From a dresser of “deal” (unfinished wood), an embroidered sheet has been taken and spread over the dead body of an old lady. Suddenly we realize that the poem is describing a funeral reception in Cuba, where the guests are served ice cream. The body in the back room is cold and quiet. The steady light of a lamp reminds us that death comes to us all, and that ice cream inevitably melts.

The poem thus presents the duality of human life – its sensuous pleasure and its ultimate end, Eros and Thanatos. Should we refuse the pleasures and hope for eternal rewards, or should we enjoy them while we can in case there is nothing else?

Piano

Lawrence was born in 1885 in Eastwood near Nottingham, the fourth of five children. His mother, at one time a student-teacher, had aspired to gentility but wound up marrying a collier. The family lived in rented house with a parlor and kitchen on the ground floor, and two bedrooms above. The parlor contained a second-hand upright piano. In an early draft of the poem, Lawrence described the “keys with little hollows, that my mother’s fingers had worn”

Years later, while listening to a recital wherein a singer is “softly singing” to the accompaniment of a “great black piano,” Lawrence recalls listening to his mother playing in the parlor, and he weeps “like a child for the past.” The sense of hearing has ready access to both memory and emotion. How this works is not known: perhaps the music arouses an emotion, and this then brings back memories that shared similar feelings. Lawrence remembers himself as a child sitting under the piano “in the boom of the tingling strings.”

The poem is written in rhyming couplets that suggest the pairing of past and present. The sounds of the words fit the music; – the low notes “boom” and the high notes are “tinkling;” the singer bursts into “clamour;” the piano plays “appassionato.”

The Passionate Shepherd to His Love

Come live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove,
That hills and valleys, dales and fields,
Woods, or steepy mountain yields.

And we will sit upon the rocks,
Seeing the shepherds feed their flocks,
By shallow rivers to whose falls
Melodious birds sing madrigals.

And I will make thee beds of roses
And a thousand fragrant posies,
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle
Embroidered all with leaves of myrtle;

A gown made of the finest wool
Which from our pretty lambs we pull;
Fair lined slippers for the cold,
With buckles of the purest gold;

A belt of straw and ivy buds,
With coral clasps and amber studs:
And if these pleasures may thee move,
Come live with me, and be my love.

The shepherds-swains shall dance and sing
For thy delight each May-morning:
If these delights thy mind may move,
Then live with me, and be my love.

Christopher Marlowe, 1599

The Passionate Shepherd to His Love

Marlowe likely wrote this poem a few years before he died in 1593, stabbed to death in a brawl in Deptford in southeast London. The poem was first published in 1599 in *The Passionate Pilgrim*, a short anthology of poems attributed to Shakespeare. In 1600, *Englands Helicon*, a collection of pastoral poetry, included the poem (properly attributed) as well as *The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd*, a parody by an anonymous author, later determined to be Walter Raleigh.

Pastoral poetry (Latin *pastor* shepherd) began in the 3rd Century BCE when Theocritus wrote poems about the shepherds of Sicily. His poems were also called *bucolics* from the Greek for cowherd. Virgil first two books of poetry were pastoral: the *Eclogues* ("selected poems," 39 BCE) and the *Georgics* ("agricultural poems," 38 BCE). Pastoral poetry is set in idyllic nature – Arcadia – and considers the lives and loves of innocent peasants.

Pastoral poetry became very popular during the Renaissance. In England, Edmund Spenser published *The Shepheardes Calendar* in 1579, and Philip Sidney published *Arcadia* in 1593. At times of great change, we often feel nostalgic for earlier times when life was simpler and more peaceful. Such earlier times, however, never really occurred.

Marlowe's poem is in six verses. The rhythm is iambic tetrameter and the rhyme scheme is *aabb*. The words of the shepherd are simple. A "kirtle" is a long dress worn over a chemise. "Myrtle" is a shrub with small five-petaled white flowers and blue-black berries. A "swain" is a country youth, usually one in love. A "nymph" is a beautiful female spirit, to which a swain might compare his maiden.

Raleigh's *The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd* points out that even in Arcadia nothing lasts:

Thy gowns, thy shoes, thy beds of Roses,
Thy cap, thy kirtle, and thy posies
Soon break, soon wither, soon forgotten:
In folly ripe, in reason rotten.

As William Empson (1935) noted the pastoral often served to justified social hierarchies

to imply a beautiful relation between rich and poor, ... to make simple people express strong feelings (felt is the most universal subject, something fundamentally true about everybody) in learned and fashionable language (so that you wrote about the best subject in the best way).

Pastoral poetry can thus easily lapse into artificiality, even absurdity, like the *Hameau de La Reine* (the Queen's village) at Versailles, where Marie Antoinette pretended to be a peasant. The only way to prevent this is to maintain an innocent simplicity. Then Raleigh's nymph could allow:

But could youth last, and love still breed,
Had joys no date, nor age no need,
Then these delights my mind might move
To live with thee, and be thy love.

from **Lamia**
(last scene)

What wreath for Lamia? What for Lycius?
What for the sage, old Apollonius?
Upon her aching forehead be there hung
The leaves of willow and of adder's tongue;
And for the youth, quick, let us strip for him
The thyrsus, that his watching eyes may swim
Into forgetfulness; and, for the sage,
Let spear-grass and the spiteful thistle wage
War on his temples. Do not all charms fly
At the mere touch of cold philosophy?
There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
We know her woof, her texture; she is given
In the dull catalogue of common things.
Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine—
Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made
The tender-person'd Lamia melt into a shade.

By her glad Lycius sitting, in chief place,
Scarce saw in all the room another face,
Till, checking his love trance, a cup he took
Full brimm'd, and opposite sent forth a look
'Cross the broad table, to beseech a glance
From his old teacher's wrinkled countenance,
And pledge him. The bald-head philosopher
Had fix'd his eye, without a twinkle or stir
Full on the alarmed beauty of the bride,
Brow-beating her fair form, and troubling her sweet pride.
Lycius then press'd her hand, with devout touch,
As pale it lay upon the rosy couch:
'Twas icy, and the cold ran through his veins;
Then sudden it grew hot, and all the pains
Of an unnatural heat shot to his heart.
“Lamia, what means this? Wherefore dost thou start?
Know'st thou that man?” Poor Lamia answer'd not.
He gaz'd into her eyes, and not a jot
Own'd they the lovelorn piteous appeal:
More, more he gaz'd: his human senses reel:
Some hungry spell that loveliness absorbs;
There was no recognition in those orbs.

(ctd)

Lamia

Keats stated that he derived the story of Lamia from Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621, Part 3, Section 2):

One Menippus Lycius, a young man twenty-five years of age, that going betwixt Cenchreas and Corinth, met such a phantasm in the habit of a fair gentlewoman, which, taking him by the hand, carried him home to her house, in the suburbs of Corinth... The young man, a philosopher, otherwise staid and discreet, able to moderate his passions, though not this of love, tarried with her a while to his great content, and at last married her, to whose wedding, amongst other guests, came Apollonius; who, by some probable conjectures, found her out to be a serpent, a lamia; and that all her furniture was, like Tantalus's gold, described by Homer, no substance but mere illusions. When she saw herself descried, she wept, and desired Apollonius to be silent, but he would not be moved, and thereupon she, plate, house, and all that was in it, vanished in an instant:

Burton had himself found the story in the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* by Philostratus (3rd Century CE). Apollonius was a 1st Century CE Greek sage and miracle-worker. In the first part of his poem Keats provides a backstory to the legend. Hermes seeking a nymph comes upon a beautiful serpent with a woman's voice who tells him that the nymph has been rendered invisible but that she can make her appear if only the god could grant that she might once again attain her woman's form. Keats leaves it unclear whether Lamia's claim to be a woman imprisoned in a serpent's body is truth or deception. Hermes grants Lamia's wish; Lamia meets Lycius and they fall in love.

The second part of the poem describes their wedding. One of the honoured guests at the wedding is Apollonius. After a sensuous description of the setting, the music and the guests, Keats introduces the crucial idea of the poem that science destroys our sense of the beautiful: "There was an awful rainbow once in heaven" that has now been placed "in the dull catalogue of common things." Edgar Allan Poe made a similar claim in his 1829 *Sonnet to Science* which begins

Science! true daughter of Old Time thou art!
Who alterest all things with thy peering eyes.
Why preyest thou thus upon the poet's heart,
Vulture, whose wings are dull realities?

In his recent book *Unweaving the rainbow: Science, delusion and the appetite for wonder* (1998) Richard Dawkins argues against the idea that science (philosophy in the old terminology) removes the beauty from our experience:

Mysteries do not lose their poetry when solved. Quite the contrary; the solution often turns out more beautiful than the puzzle and, in any case, when you have solved one mystery you uncover others, perhaps to inspire greater poetry. (p 41)

Dawkins, himself quotes Richard Feynman, who replied to a friend's suggestion that a scientist could not see the beauty of a flower:

"Lamia!" he cried—and no soft-toned reply.
 The many heard, and the loud revelry
 Grew hush; the stately music no more breathes;
 The myrtle sicken'd in a thousand wreaths.
 By faint degrees, voice, lute, and pleasure ceased;
 A deadly silence step by step increased,
 Until it seem'd a horrid presence there,
 And not a man but felt the terror in his hair.
 "Lamia!" he shriek'd; and nothing but the shriek
 With its sad echo did the silence break.
 "Begone, foul dream!" he cried, gazing again
 In the bride's face, where now no azure vein
 Wander'd on fair-spaced temples; no soft bloom
 Misted the cheek; no passion to illumine
 The deep-recessed vision—all was blight;
 Lamia, no longer fair, there sat a deadly white.
 "Shut, shut those juggling eyes, thou ruthless man!
 Turn them aside, wretch! or the righteous ban
 Of all the Gods, whose dreadful images
 Here represent their shadowy presences,
 May pierce them on the sudden with the thorn
 Of painful blindness; leaving thee forlorn,
 In trembling dotage to the feeblest fright
 Of conscience, for their long offended might,
 For all thine impious proud-heart sophistries,
 Unlawful magic, and enticing lies.
 Corinthians! look upon that gray-beard wretch!
 Mark how, possess'd, his lashless eyelids stretch
 Around his demon eyes! Corinthians, see!
 My sweet bride withers at their potency."
 "Fool!" said the sophist, in an under-tone
 Gruff with contempt; which a death-nighing moan
 From Lycius answer'd, as heart-struck and lost,
 He sank supine beside the aching ghost.
 "Fool! Fool!" repeated he, while his eyes still
 Relented not, nor mov'd; "from every ill
 Of life have I preserv'd thee to this day,
 And shall I see thee made a serpent's prey?"
 Then Lamia breath'd death breath; the sophist's eye,
 Like a sharp spear, went through her utterly,
 Keen, cruel, perceant, stinging: she, as well
 As her weak hand could any meaning tell,
 Motion'd him to be silent; vainly so,

(ctd)

The beauty that is there for you is also available for me, too. But I see a deeper beauty that isn't so readily available to others. I can see the complicated interactions of the flower. The color of the flower is red. Does the fact that plant has color mean that it evolved to attract insects? This adds a further question. Can insects see color? Do they have an aesthetic sense? And so on. I don't see how studying a flower ever detracts from its beauty. It only adds.

Keats was definitely aware of the beauty and excitement of scientific discovery. His poem *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer* (p 11) lauds the wonder of Herschel's discovery of the planet Uranus. Artistic creations often attempt to portray the truth by looking at the world through different eyes. Even contradictory viewpoints can help us to understand reality. Science also uses various levels of meaning: light may be considered as a particle in some situations and as a wave in others.

At the beginning of this selection from the end of *Lamia*, the narrator describes the various favours that might be handed out at the wedding and thereby predicts what might happen. For Lamia, he proposes a wreath of willow-leaves and adders' tongues – some combination of pity and poison. For Lycius, he suggests the thyrsus, a staff made from the giant fennel topped with a pinecone, the symbol of Bacchus. The followers of Bacchus – the Bacchantes – through wine gave themselves over to their imagination. For Apollonius he suggests a wreath of spear-grass and thistle: truth will be painful.

After this brief introduction the tragedy plays itself out. Apollonius sees that Lamia is not as she appears, calls out her name, and thus dissolves her disguise. Lamia vanishes, Lycius dies, Truth prevails.

Keats may both believe and not believe idea that science unweaves the mystery of the rainbow, thereby destroying its beauty and rendering it into cold fact. In his late poems, especially in *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (p 189) Keats often questions the very foundations of his poetic art. Is something beautiful necessarily truthful?

In *Lamia*, Keats's quarrel with the desires of his own imagination takes on a near tragic and yet coolly ironic power. The hapless Lycius is caught between the reductive rationalism of Apollonius and the bewitching illusoriness of Lamia; if the poem's heart sides with the latter, its head reinforces the judgment of the former. (O'Neill, 2004).

In one of his letters, Keats described the uncertainty that occurs in poetry as “negative capability:”

at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

Negative capability allows the poet to better understand the viewpoints of different people. As Keats stated in another letter

A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity – he is continually in for – and filling some other Body.

He look'd and look'd again a level—No!
“A Serpent!” echoed he; no sooner said,
Than with a frightful scream she vanished:
And Lycius' arms were empty of delight,
As were his limbs of life, from that same night.
On the high couch he lay!—his friends came round
Supported him—no pulse, or breath they found,
And, in its marriage robe, the heavy body wound.

John Keats, 1819

Down by the Salley Gardens

Down by the salley gardens
my love and I did meet;
She passed the salley gardens
with little snow-white feet.
She bid me take love easy,
as the leaves grow on the tree;
But I, being young and foolish,
with her would not agree.

In a field by the river
my love and I did stand,
And on my leaning shoulder
she laid her snow-white hand.
She bid me take life easy,
as the grass grows on the weirs;
But I was young and foolish,
and now am full of tears.

William Butler Yeats, 1889

Lamia is written in “heroic couplets” – iambic pentameter lines using pairwise rhymes. During the last two years of his life, Keats was enormously productive. The sheer number of magnificent poems is impressive, but the fact these used so many different forms is just as amazing. He wrote *Hyperion* in Miltonic blank verse, each of the odes have their own specific stanza form (pp 76, 146 and 189), *The Eve of Saint Agnes* uses the Spenserian stanza (cf p 181), *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* is a ballad, and *Lamia* and *Endymion* are in rhyming couplets.

Keats was the master of sensuous description. The effect of Apollonius on *Lamia* is vividly portrayed with the increasing intensity of his gaze and the detail of her weakly trying to wave him away:

Then *Lamia* breath'd death breath; the sophist's eye,
Like a sharp spear, went through her utterly,
Keen, cruel,erceant, stinging: she, as well
As her weak hand could any meaning tell,
Motion'd him to be silent; vainly so

Down by the Salley Gardens

This poem was published in *Crossroads* (1889) Yeats's first book of poetry. He noted that

This is an attempt to reconstruct an old song from three lines imperfectly remembered by an old peasant woman in the village of Ballysodare, Sligo, who often sings them to herself.

The poem, originally published as two quatrains with hexameter lines, is printed here using trimeter lines, which seem far more appropriate to a song.

The main idea of the poem is that one should “take life easy.” One should not become so deeply involved with someone or something that there might be suffering when the involvement ceases. A similar idea is considered in Milan Kundera's 1984 novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. The song treats the idea through two similes: the leaves of the willow, and the grass on the weirs.

The hypothetical Indo-European word for the willow tree was “sal.” This evolved to *salix* in Latin, *saulé* in French, and *sallow* in some British dialects. Willow trees were often cultivated for their wood by pollarding – cutting the tree at a height of several feet. This forced the tree to grow multiple new branches which were then harvested and used for making baskets or fences. The technique, similar to coppicing (see p 54), results in a tree that makes wood at the rapid rate of its youth – a tree that is forever young.

A weir, a low dam of rocks or wood built across a river to raise the level of the upstream water, is used to make small reservoirs of water that can be used for irrigation, livestock, or spawning fish. The water typically flows over the top of the weir. Settling and other irregularities can cause portions of the weir to rise above the water level, and grass can grow in these regions. The grass on the weirs thus suggests an islet of rest in the turbulent waters flowing around it.

Yeats spent much of his childhood near Ballysodare, and would have been familiar with both the salley gardens and the weirs in that countryside.

Riddles

Once I was water, full of scaly fish,
But now am something else, by Fortune's wish.
Through fiery torment I was made to grow
As white as ashes, or as glinting snow.

Bishop Aldhelm (8th Century CE)
translated by Richard Wilbur, 1976

Even now I cannot help thinking of them
as historical. The noise they make drowns
out the radio static of the street. Grey gowns
of rain flutter or run away in a million gem
spectacular but these dark suns expand
and guard us from the present danger which
is simply a drench of brilliants, rich
as the flood. Look, children, I hold out my hand
beyond its perimeter fence. The fine
spray gathers in my palm then dies away.
I close the black sun and hobble off with it.
It sighs as it closes, approximates to a line
or a stick, like the day before yesterday,
or the meetings of a wartime cabinet.

George Szirtes, 1999

Though giving pleasure to many
I am no more than a passing fancy,
A bagatelle. Am looked down upon
by my peers for my sense of fun.
Jealous introverts, they think me flippant.
Silver-tongued I may be, but not irreverent.
I glisten, am all show, all style.
Here is the key, come inside: I'll make you smile.

Roger McGough, 1999

Riddles

Riddles have been around since words were recorded. At his wedding, Samson asked the Philistines to tell him what was

Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet. (*Judges* 14: 14, *New International Version*)

They did not know that Samson had killed a lion and later found that bees had created a hive in the carcass and produced honey.

In the legend of Oedipus, the Sphinx asked, "What is the creature that walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three in the evening?" Oedipus, answered, "man, who crawls on all fours as an infant; walks upright in maturity; and leans on a stick in old age."

Bishop Aldhelm in England produced a book of Latin riddles in the 8th Century CE. Richard Wilbur translated one of these riddles using rhyming couplets. The answer to this particular riddle is "salt."

Aldhelm's collection served as the model for the Anglo-Saxon riddles in the book of the Bishop of Exeter, published in 1070 CE. Riddle 51 in the Exeter Book translated by Kevin Crossley-Holland (1978) reads:

I watched four fair creatures
travelling together; they left black tracks
behind them. The support of the bird
moved swiftly; it flew in the sky,
dived under the waves. The struggling warrior
continuously toiled, pointing out the paths
to all four over the fine gold.

The four creatures are a quill-pen and three fingers. The black tracks are the writing on the fine gold of the parchment. The quill moves quickly, gathers more ink by diving under the waves and points out the paths for the fingers to follow.

A millennium after the Exeter Book, Kevin Crossley-Holland and Lawrence Sail edited a book of modern riddles entitled *The New Exeter Book of Riddles* (1999).

Riddles are closely related to metaphors. Stephen Spender (quoted in the forward to *The New Exeter Book of Riddles*) wrote

In most poetry which has as subject a concrete or animal thing ... one begins with the object, the title, the thing, in mind, and then reads the poetry as referring back to this already-conceived idea. The Riddle is back to front. One gets the poetry emanating from the subject — thing — first — and arrives — if one does ever arrive at it — at the title last. The effect is something like pure poetry — a peculiar concentration on imagery — before one arrives at the actual image.

The riddles of Szirtes and McGough are from *The New Exeter Book of Riddles*. Szirtes uses a sonnet form and vivid imagery to describe an "umbrella." McGough's rhyming couplets are initially slant but at the end are true. The answer to his riddle is "a riddle."

Drummer Hodge

They throw in Drummer Hodge, to rest
Uncoffined—just as found:
His landmark is a kopje-crest
That breaks the veldt around;
And foreign constellations west
Each night above his mound.

Young Hodge the Drummer never knew—
Fresh from his Wessex home—
The meaning of the broad Karoo,
The Bush, the dusty loam,
And why uprose to nightly view
Strange stars amid the gloam.

Yet portion of that unknown plain
Will Hodge for ever be;
His homely Northern breast and brain
Grow up a Southern tree,
And strange-eyed constellations reign
His stars eternally.

Thomas Hardy, 1899

*Justus quidem tu es, Domine, si disputem tecum; verumtamen
justa loquar ad te: Quare via impiorum prosperatur? &c.*

Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend
With thee; but, sir, so what I plead is just.
Why do sinners' ways prosper? and why must
Disappointment all I endeavour end?
Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend,
How wouldst thou worse, I wonder, than thou dost
Defeat, thwart me? Oh, the sots and thralls of lust
Do in spare hours more thrive than I that spend,
Sir, life upon thy cause. See, banks and brakes
Now, leavèd how thick! lacèd they are again
With fretty chervil, look, and fresh wind shakes
Them; birds build – but not I build; no, but strain,
Time's eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes.
Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, 1889

Drummer Hodge

Hardy wrote this poem to commemorate a fictional young man who had died while serving in the British army in South Africa, in the Zulu War of 1879, the First Boer War of 1881 or the Second Boer War of 1899-1902. The maintenance of the British Empire required a constant loss of life.

In Alan Bennett's 2004 play *The History Boys*, Hector, the teacher of "general studies," talks to one of his students about the name "Hodge:"

... the important thing is that he has a name. Say Hardy is writing about the Zulu Wars or later the Boer War possibly, these were the first campaigns when soldiers . . . or common soldiers . . . were commemorated, the names of the dead recorded and inscribed on war memorials. Before this, soldiers . . . private soldiers anyway, were all unknown soldiers, and so far from being revered there was a firm in the nineteenth century, in Yorkshire of course, which swept up their bones from the battlefields of Europe in order to grind them into fertiliser. So, thrown into a common grave though he may be, he is still Hodge the drummer. Lost boy though he is on the other side of the world, he still has a name.

Wellington considered the soldiers who fought for him the "scum of the earth." After the battles, not only were their bones ground up for fertilizer, but their teeth were extracted from the skulls for dentures.

The poem contains several words in Afrikaans: *kopje*, a small isolated hill (Dutch, head); *veldt* is grassland (Dutch, field); *karoo* is a barren plateau. Hardy liked to make nouns into verbs: "uncoffined," without being put in a coffin; "west" to move toward the West (the constellations rise in the East and set in the West).

Thou art indeed just, Lord

This is the last of Hopkins "terrible sonnets" (cf p 125). Alone and sick in Dublin, Hopkins died of typhoid fever just over two months after writing this poem. The epigraph comes from *Jeremiah* 12:1 in the Latin Vulgate, which Hopkins translates in the first 3 lines of the sonnet. The King James Version is:

Righteous art thou, O LORD, when I plead with thee: yet let me talk with thee of thy judgments: Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? wherefore are all they happy that deal very treacherously?

There is no justice in this world. The good are often punished and the wicked often prosper. Similar thoughts are voiced in *Ecclesiastes* 9:11

the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

This is the great unsolved problem of theology: man has an abiding need for justice but the universe pays no attention to what is right or wrong.

Hopkins agonizes over his inability to write anything worthwhile, even though he spends his life in God's cause. He asks to be made fruitful like the plants and animals in the natural world. "Brakes" are thickets, usually of ferns.

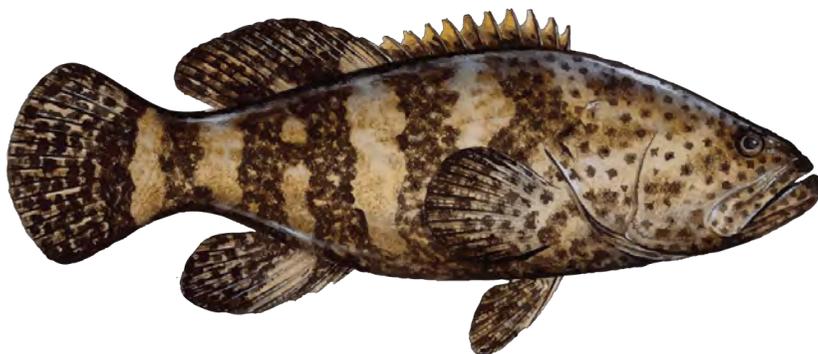
The Fish

I caught a tremendous fish
and held him beside the boat
half out of water, with my hook
fast in a corner of its mouth.
He didn't fight.
He hadn't fought at all.
He hung a grunting weight,
battered and venerable
and homely. Here and there
his brown skin hung in strips
like ancient wallpaper,
and its pattern of darker brown
was like wallpaper:
shapes like full-blown roses
stained and lost through age.
He was speckled with barnacles,
fine rosettes of lime,
and infested
with tiny white sea-lice,
and underneath two or three
rags of green weed hung down.
While his gills were breathing in
the terrible oxygen
— the frightening gills,
fresh and crisp with blood,
that can cut so badly —
I thought of the coarse white flesh
packed in like feathers,
the big bones and the little bones,
the dramatic reds and blacks
of his shiny entrails,
and the pink swim-bladder
like a big peony.
I looked into his eyes
which were far larger than mine
but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass.
They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare.

(ctd)

The Fish

This poem describes how Bishop caught a “tremendous fish” while she was living in Key West, the most westerly island (*cayo* is a small low island) of the Florida Keys. She had moved there from New York in 1937 and stayed until 1946. Many writers have found the climate and quiet of the island congenial: Hemingway had lived there from 1931-1939; Tennessee Williams from 1941-1983. Wallace Stevens (see *The Idea of Order at Key West*, p 90) and Robert Frost visited often. The Atlantic goliath grouper (*Epinephelus itajara*), also known as the jewfish (probably from the size of its “jaw”), is a very large saltwater fish typically reaching about 1.5 meters in length and about 180 kg in weight at maturity. They are found in shallow tropical waters of the Caribbean Sea and the coasts of Florida and Brazil. They can live for more than 30 years.



In the first part of the poem, Bishop provides a detailed description of the fish. The skin coloring is like wallpaper with

shapes like full-blown roses
stained and lost through age

She then vividly imagines the internal organs: the flesh “packed like feathers,” the dramatic reds and blacks of his shiny entrails” and the swim bladder “like a big peony.” Her description of the glazed eyes is beautifully precise:

the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass

Isinglass originally meant the thin semitransparent gelatin made from the swim bladder of a sturgeon. Sheets of mica (a silicate that cleaves into very thin leaves) used in lanterns or microscopic preparations are also called isinglass, probably because they look like isinglass. These are what Bishop means.

The poem has no regular rhythm or rhyme but internal rhymes (“speckled with barnacles,” “shallower and yellowed,” “backed and packed”) and alliteration (“tarnished tinfoil”) provide a subtle music.

— It was more like the tipping
of an object toward the light.
I admired his sullen face,
the mechanism of his jaw,
and then I saw
that from his lower lip
— if you could call it a lip —
grim, wet, and weaponlike,
hung five old pieces of fish-line,
or four and a wire leader
with the swivel still attached,
with all their five big hooks
grown firmly in his mouth.
A green line, frayed at the end
where he broke it, two heavier lines,
and a fine black thread
still crimped from the strain and snap
when it broke and he got away.
Like medals with their ribbons
frayed and wavering,
a five-haired beard of wisdom
trailing from his aching jaw.
I stared and stared
and victory filled up
the little rented boat,
from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels — until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.

Elizabeth Bishop, 1946

Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on thee
And I'll forgive Thy great big one on me.

Robert Frost, 1959

The poet then notices the five fishing lines still attached to the grouper's lower jaw. The fish had been hooked before but had somehow broken the lines and escaped. These five lines might be some allusion to the five piercing wounds that Christ suffered during the crucifixion. These were later used to allay the doubts of Thomas and other disbelievers. Here, the poet is forced to believe in the life force of her tremendous fish.

Bishop turns away from the fish and considers her boat, an old vessel with a rusted engine. The "thwarts" are the cross pieces of the boat used for seats or strength. The "gunnels" are the upper edges of the boat's sides. The boat has some water on its floor.

And "victory filled up the little boat" in the form of the rainbow colors of the gasoline on this bilge water. Thin-film iridescence (from Greek, *iris*, rainbow) is caused by the reflection of light from the upper and lower boundaries of a thin translucent film, such as gasoline on water or the surface of soap bubbles. When the thickness of the film is of the same order as the wavelength of the light, the reflections may interfere with each other for certain colors and cause enhancement for other colors. A rainbow of colors is then seen at the surface.

The poet finally realizes that the fish has fought off death many previous times. He (or she – groupers are hermaphroditic) is a tenacious survivor. Such a venerable warrior deserves to live. The poem reaches an epiphany (from Greek *epi* upon + *phaino* shine) – a moment when some great truth is realized. The word is often used to describe a manifestation of the divine, and in the Christian religion it denotes the appearance of Christ to the Magi (see p 1). For the poet, the epiphany is that, whenever possible, mercy should prevail and life have victory over death. The poem ends with its only end-line rhyme

— until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.

The progression of the poem can be traced in its first-person verbs:

I caught a tremendous fish
I thought of the coarse white flesh
I looked into his eyes
I admired his sullen face
I stared and stared
And I let the fish go.

Forgive, O Lord

In this brief epigram Frost describes the human condition. We understand what is good but the universe that God created makes it impossible not to sin. We know about eternity but realize that we are mortal. We have free will and yet we are subject to overwhelming external forces. Our failures are our little sins. God's big joke is a universe wherein good and evil are inextricably mixed.

from **The Ship of Death**

VII

We are dying, we are dying, so all we can do
is now to be willing to die, and to build the ship
of death to carry the soul on the longest journey.

A little ship, with oars and food
and little dishes, and all accoutrements
fitting and ready for the departing soul.

Now launch the small ship, now as the body dies
and life departs, launch out, the fragile soul
in the fragile ship of courage, the ark of faith
with its store of food and little cooking pans
and change of clothes,
upon the flood's black waste
upon the waters of the end
upon the sea of death, where still we sail
darkly, for we cannot steer, and have no port.

There is no port, there is nowhere to go
only the deepening black darkening still
blackier upon the soundless, ungurging flood
darkness at one with darkness, up and down
and sideways utterly dark, so there is no direction any more
and the little ship is there; yet she is gone.
She is not seen, for there is nothing to see her by.
She is gone! gone! and yet
somewhere she is there.
Nowhere!

X

The flood subsides, and the body, like a worn sea-shell
emerges strange and lovely.
And the little ship wings home, faltering and lapsing
on the pink flood,
and the frail soul steps out, into the house again
filling the heart with peace.

Swings the heart renewed with peace
even of oblivion.

Oh build your ship of death, oh build it!
for you will need it.
For the voyage of oblivion awaits you.

D. H. Lawrence, 1930

The Ship of Death

The Etruscans thrived between 900 and 100 BCE in the land north of the Tiber River, south of the Po River and west of the Apennine Mountains. They were conquered by and assimilated into the expanding Roman Empire. Most of what remains of their civilization is in their graves.

In the last years of his life Lawrence became very ill with tuberculosis. Nevertheless, he travelled through the land of the Etruscans with his friend Earl Brewster and wrote a set of essays, collected posthumously as *Etruscan Places* (1932). He felt attuned to the Etruscans' love of life, and comforted by their acceptance of death. He described the tomb of one of the Etruscan chieftains (called a *Lucomo*) in Cerveteri:

Through the inner doorway is the last chamber, small and dark and culminative. Facing the door goes the stone bed on which was laid, presumably, the *Lucomo* and the sacred treasures of the dead, the little bronze ship of death that should bear him over to the other world, the vases of jewels for his arraying, the vases of small dishes, the little bronze statuettes and tools, the, weapons, the armour: all the amazing impedimenta of the important dead. Or sometimes in this inner room lay the woman, the great lady, in all her robes, with the mirror in her hand, and her treasures, her jewels and combs and silver boxes of cosmetics, in urns or vases ranged alongside. Splendid was the array they went with, into death.

Among the “amazing impedimenta of the important dead” Lawrence was quite taken with the “little bronze ship” that would carry him into the afterlife, and wrote the ten-part poem *The Ship of Death*, first published posthumously in 1932 in *Last Poems*. The poem begins:

Now it is autumn and the falling fruit
and the long journey towards oblivion.
The apples falling like great drops of dew
to bruise themselves an exit from themselves.
And it is time to go, to bid farewell
to one's own self, and find an exit
from the fallen self.

Then the poem focuses on the ship that must carry one through oblivion and into another life, when

A flush of rose, and the whole thing starts again.

Lawrence's thoughts about death were more akin to the ancient ideas of reincarnation, than to the concepts of judgment and resurrection that are the mainstay of Christianity. Lawrence died in Venice in the south of France in 1930. His tombstone bore a simple mosaic image of the phoenix. His remains were later transferred to Taos in New Mexico, and the tombstone is now in the D.H. Lawrence Birthplace Museum in Nottingham.



Lost in Translation

for Richard Howard

*Diese Tage, die leer dir scheinen
und wertlos für das All,
haben Wurzeln zwischen den Steinen
und trinken dort überall.*

A card table in the library stands ready
To receive the puzzle which keeps never coming.
Daylight shines in or lamplight down
Upon the tense oasis of green felt.
Full of unfulfillment, life goes on,
Mirage arisen from time's trickling sands
Or fallen piecemeal into place:
German lesson, picnic, see-saw, walk
With the collie who "did everything but talk" —
Sour windfalls of the orchard back of us.
A summer without parents is the puzzle,
Or should be. But the boy, day after day,
Writes in his Line-a-Day *No puzzle*.

He's in love, at least. His French Mademoiselle,
In real life a widow since Verdun,
Is stout, plain, carrot-haired, devout.
She prays for him, as does a curé in Alsace,
Sews costumes for his marionettes,
Helps him to keep behind the scene
Whose sidelit goosgirl, speaking with his voice,
Plays Guinevere as well as Gunmoll Jean.
Or else at bedtime in his tight embrace
Tells him her own French hopes, her German fears,
Her — but what more is there to tell?
Having known grief and hardship, Mademoiselle
Knows little more. Her languages. Her place.
Noon coffee. Mail. The watch that also waited
Pinned to her heart, poor gold, throws up its hands —
No puzzle! Steaming bitterness
Her sugars draw pops back into his mouth, translated:
"*Patience, chéri. Geduld, mein Schatz.*"
(Thus, reading Valéry the other evening
And seeming to recall a Rilke version of "Palme,"
That sunlit paradigm whereby the tree
Taps a sweet wellspring of authority,
The hour came back. *Patience dans l'azur.*
Geduld im ... Himmelblau? Mademoiselle.)

(ctd)

Lost in Translation

The poem's title derives from Robert Frost's comment in *Conversations on the Craft of Poetry* (1959):

I could define poetry this way: it is that which is lost out of both prose and verse in translation.

This is often quoted as "Poetry is what gets lost in translation."

The poem is dedicated to Richard Howard (1929-), an American poet and a prolific translator of French literature.

The subject of the poem is translation in all its many senses. The word derives from the Latin past participle *translatus* from *transferre* (to move from one place or person to another). It most commonly means to convert a speech or text from one language to another. Sometimes it is between languages other than human, such as between different computer languages, or from a DNA code to an RNA code. At other times the conversion is between other modalities, e.g. from one type of art to another (a novel may or may not translate well to the screen).

Translation can also mean to move something from one place to another. This is often used in religious discourse to describe the entry of the blessed into heaven after death, or some miraculous movement of objects. A famous translation of the latter kind was the abduction of the relics of St Mark from Alexandria and their transportation to Venice in 828 CE. Translation could also be possible in time as well as space. In physics, translation means direct linear movement without rotation. The poem touches on most meanings of the word but deals mainly with the translation of experience into memory and memory into understanding.

At its beginning it mentions a German translation by Rainer Marie Rilke (1875–1926) of the French poem *Palme* from the 1922 book *Charmes* by Paul Valéry (1871–1945). The quoted lines talk about days which seem empty but wherein a palm tree nevertheless translates the nutrients from the ground to leaves and fruit. The following are an original French excerpt (from the middle of Valéry's poem), and Merrill's English translation:

Ces jours qui te semblent vides	These days which, like yourself,
Et perdus pour l'univers	Seem empty and effaced,
Ont des racines avides	Have avid roots that delve
Qui travaillent les déserts.	To work deep in the waste

Valéry's poem begins with an angel recommending patience. The following is the original and my translation:

De sa grâce redoutable	His daunting grace
Voilant à peine l'éclat,	Barely veiling his radiance,
Un ange met sur ma table	An angel lays on my table,
Le pain tendre, le lait plat;	Soft bread and plain milk
Il me fait de la paupière	With his eyes he conveys
Le signe d'une prière	To me a prayer
Qui parle à ma vision:	To open my understanding

Out of the blue, as promised, of a New York
Puzzle-rental shop the puzzle comes —
A superior one, containing a thousand hand-sawn,
Sandal-scented pieces. Many take
shapes known already — the craftsman's repertoire
nice in its limitation — from other puzzles:
Witch on broomstick, ostrich, hourglass,
Even (not surely just in retrospect)
An inchling, innocently branching palm.
These can be put aside, made stories of
While Mademoiselle spreads out the rest face-up,
Herself excited as a child; or questioned
Like incoherent faces in a crowd,
Each with its scrap of highly colored
Evidence the Law must piece together.
Sky-blue ostrich? Likely story.
Mauve of the witch's cloak white, severed fingers
Pluck? Detain her. The plot thickens
As all at once two pieces interlock.

Mademoiselle does borders — (Not so fast.
A London dusk, December last.
Chatter silenced in the library
This grown man re-enters, wearing gray.
A medium. All except him have seen
Panel slid back, recess explored,
An object at once unique and common
Displayed, planted in a plain tole
Casket the subject now considers
Through shut eyes, saying in effect:
“Even as voices reach me vaguely
A dry saw-shriek drowns them out,
Some loud machinery — a lumber mill?
Far uphill in the fir forest
Trees tower, tense with shock,
Groaning and cracking as they crash groundward.
But hidden here is a freak fragment
Of a pattern complex in appearance only.
What it seems to show is superficial
Next to that long-term lamination
Of hazard and craft, the karma that has
Made it matter in the first place.
Plywood. Piece of a puzzle.” Applause
Acknowledged by an opening of lids
Upon the thing itself. A sudden dread —
But to go back. All this lay years ahead.)

(ctd)

– Calme, calme, reste calme!
Connais le poids d’une palme
Portant sa profusion!

– Calm, calm, stay calm
Consider the steadiness of a palm-tree
As it brings forth its abundance

Later in the poem, the angel recommends

Patience, patience,
Patience dans l’azur!
Chaque atome de silence
Est la chance d’un fruit mûr!

Patience, patience
Patience as deep as the blue sky
Each moment of silence provides
The chance for fruit to grow.

Merrill’s poem begins with his memory of a summer of 1937, when he was 11 years old. His father – Charles Merrill (1885-1956) of the Merrill-Lynch investment firm – and his mother were estranged, heading for a divorce that came to pass in 1939. James lived with his mother and a governess in “The Orchard,” a large mansion in Southampton (part of “The Hamptons” on Long Island). His father, known as “good-time Charlie,” was then engaged in other affairs, and he continued these until he died at age 70 years. As Merrill wrote in *The Broken Home* (1966):

Each thirteenth year he married. When he died
There were already several chilled wives
In sable orbit – rings, cars, permanent waves.
We’d felt him warming up for a green bride.
He could afford it. He was “in his prime”
At three score ten. But money was not time.

With little else to do the governess has arranged for a jigsaw puzzle to be sent out from a puzzle rental shop. Puzzles were very popular in the 1930s as inexpensive entertainment. Even the rich enjoyed them. The most famous puzzle-rental shop in New York was Par Puzzles on 18 East 53rd St in Manhattan (Merrill later mentions a “shop in the mid-Sixties” – memory is never certain). They were renowned for their intricately cut wooden puzzles, each with several idiosyncratic pieces, called “whimsies,” shaped to represent objects thematically related to the puzzle’s image.

At the opening of the poem young James is anxiously awaiting the arrival of the puzzle. The governess counsels patience. Her words later bring to the poet’s mind the lines from Valéry’s poem *Palme (Patience dans l’azur)* that he once had read in Rilke’s translation (*Geduld ... im Himmelblau?* – Rilke’s actual translation was *Gedulden unter dem Blau*). And so we find the epigram explained.

As James and the governess begin the puzzle, the poet remembers another time years later in another library in London, when he witnessed a demonstration by a medium, who was able to identify a small object hidden in a plain tole (“enamelled tin”) casket. This change in the poem is associated (like a scene in Shakespeare) with a rhyming couplet

Mademoiselle does borders — (Not so fast.
A London dusk, December last

Mademoiselle does borders. Straight-edge pieces
 Align themselves with earth or sky
 In twos and threes, naïve cosmogonists
 Whose views clash. Nomad inlanders meanwhile
 Begin to cluster where the totem
 Of a certain vibrant egg yolk yellow
 Or pelt of what emerging animal
 Acts on the straggler like a trumpet call
 To form a more sophisticated unit.
 By supertime two ragged wooden clouds
 Have formed. In one, a Sheik with beard
 And flashing sword hilt (he is all but finished)
 Steps forward on a tiger skin. A piece
 Snaps shut, and fangs gnash out at us!
 In the second cloud — they gaze from cloud to cloud
 With marked if undecipherable feeling —
 Most of a dark-eyed woman veiled in mauve
 Is being helped down from her camel (kneeling)
 By a small backward-looking slave or page-boy
 (Her son, thinks Mademoiselle, mistakenly)
 Whose feet have not been found. But lucky finds
 In the last minutes before bed
 Anchor both factions to the scene's limits
 And, by so doing, orient
 Them eye to eye across the green abyss.
 The yellow promises, oh bliss,
 To be in time a sumptuous tent.

Puzzle begun I write in the day's space,
 Then while she bathes, peek at Mademoiselle's
 Letter to the curé: "...*cetter innocente mère,*
Ce pauvre enfant, que deviendront-ils?"
 Her azure script is curlicued like pieces
 Of the puzzle she will be telling him about.
 (Fearful incuriosity of childhood!
 "Tu as l'accent allemand," said Dominique.
 Indeed, Mademoiselle was only French by marriage.
 Child of an English mother, a remote
 Descendant of the great explorer Speke,
 And Prussian father. No one knew. I heard it
 Long afterwards from her nephew, a UN
 Interpreter. His matter-of-fact account
 Touched old strings. My poor Mademoiselle

(ctd)

As the medium tries to identify the object, the form of the poem changes from simple blank verse to alliterative verse (cf Auden's *Age of Anxiety*, p 14):

Even as **v**oices reach me **v**aguely
A **d**ry saw-shriek **d**rowns them out,
Some **l**oud machinery — a **l**umber mill?
Far uphill in the **f**ir forest
Trees **t**ower, **t**ense with shock,
Groaning and **c**racking as they **c**rash **g**roundward.

One of the keys to Merrill's poem is that he "kept back" from his puzzle one of its whimsies – an "inchling" piece of the puzzle in the shape of a palm tree. This was the small object that the medium identifies.

Like other poets such as Yeats (p 3), Merrill was fascinated by the occult, which provides a steady stream of imaginary possibilities. Merrill's great epic poem, *The Changing Light of Sandover* (1976-82), was composed with the aid of a Ouija board. These sessions occurred with his long-term partner David Jackson in their apartment in Stonington, Connecticut, and during their winter sojourns in Athens. The Ouija messages were then expanded by Merrill to compose his epic. The first section of the epic, *The Book of Ephraim* (1976), describes the beginning of these seances as Merrill and Jackson held their fingers on a blue-and-white tea cup:

Was anybody there? As when a pike
Strikes, and the line singing writes in lakeflesh
High strung runes, and reel spins and mind reels
YES a new and urgent power YES
Seized the cup. It swerved, clung, hesitated,
Darted off, a devil's darning needle
Gyroscope our fingers rode bareback
(But stopping dead the instant one lost touch) –
Here, there, swift handle pointing, letter upon
Letter taken down blind by my free hand

Just like the boy who kept the puzzle-piece, everyone keeps something back. Mademoiselle kept back the fact that French was not her mother tongue. "Mademoiselle does borders." She was the daughter of an English mother and a German father, and was raised in Alsace. She had not told of her Prussian father when she was hired, Germans being out of favor during the lead up to World War II. Though the governess was fluent in English, German and French. Merrill's friend Dominique later told him that his French had a German accent.

Mademoiselle's ancestor, John Hanning Speke (1827-1864), was the first European to reach Lake Victoria, one of the sources of the White Nile. This could help in figuring out the puzzle which has an Egyptian theme.

The poem very accurately describes the process of putting the puzzle together. The sensible governess does borders, and then they piece together various clumps characterized by particular colors or content. Satisfaction comes from finding the particular piece that joins together two areas.

With 1939 about to shake
This world where “each was the enemy, each the friend”
To its foundations, kept, though signed in blood,
Her peace a shameful secret to the end.)
“*Schlaf wohl, chéri.*” Her kiss. Her thumb
Crossing my brow against the dreams to come.

This World that shifts like sand, its unforeseen
Consolidations and elate routine,
Whose Potentate had lacked a retinue?
Lo! It assembles on the shrinking Green.

Gunmetal-skinned or pale, all plumes and scars
Of Vassalage the noblest avatars —
The very coffee-bearer in his vair
Vest is a swart Highness, next to ours.

Kef easing Boredom, and iced syrups, thirst,
In guessed-at glooms old wives who know the worst
Outsweat that virile fiction of the New:
“Insh’Allah, he will tire—” “—or kill her first!”

(Hardly a proper subject for the Home,
Work of — dear Richard, I shall let you comb
Archives and learned journals for his name —
A minor lion attending on Gérôme.)

While, thick as Thebes whose presently complete
Gates close behind them, Houri and Afreet
Both claim the Page. He wonders whom to serve,
And what his duties are, and where his feet,

And if we’ll find, as some before us did
That piece of Distance deep in which lies hid
Your tiny apex sugary with sun,
Eternal Triangle, Great Pyramid!

Then Sky alone is left, a hundred blue
Fragments in revolution, with no clue
To where a Niche will open. Quite a task,
Putting together Heaven, yet we do.

It’s done. Here under the table all along
Were those missing feet. It’s done.

The dog’s tail thumping. Mademoiselle sketching
Costumes for a harem drama
To star the goosegirl. All too soon the swift
Dismantling. Lifted by two corners,
The puzzle hung together — and did not.

(*ctd*)

The image represented on the puzzle is not known. Merrill tells Richard Howard that it is a painting by a follower (“a minor lion”) of Jean Léon Gérôme (1824-1904), one of the most prolific painters of the Orientalist movement. After Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798, all Europe became fascinated by the Orient. The bright colors and the intricate patterns drew artists to explore and paint the people, landscapes and social life of the Middle East.

The initial description of the painting includes a Sheik with a “flashing sword hilt” and a is “a dark-eyed woman veiled in mauve” descending from a camel with the aid of a young page. In a series of quatrains using the format of Fitzgerald’s *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (p 28), Merrill describes further details about the image. The potentate and his entourage are being served ices, kefir (a yogurt drink) and coffee. They appear to be watching a *Houri* (one of the beautiful maidens promised to the faithful in Muslim paradise) and an *Afreet* (or *afrit*, a powerful Muslim demon) fighting over a young page boy before the gates of Thebes. Merrill is playing games: he uses puns (“thick as Thebes”), and moves quickly between the content of the image and the incompleteness of the puzzle on the green baize table.

While, thick as Thebes whose presently complete
Gates close behind them, Houri and Afreet
Both claim the Page. He wonders whom to serve,
And what his duties are, and where his feet.

We later find that the puzzle’s missing feet are where they should be – under the table, just like James’s feet.

The description of the Houri and Afreet suggests a tale similar to that of the fairies in Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1596) wherein Oberon and Titania fight over a young Indian changeling. Both the puzzle and its allusions relate to the status of young Merrill now that his parents are estranged. *Insh’Allah* (if God wills it) his father will tire of his affairs. God knows what will happen.

The details in the poem do not allow the puzzle to be identified. The picture may be an amalgam of several Orientalist paintings. The “tiny apex sugary with sun” of the Great Pyramid and the extensive blue sky recall Jean-Léon Gérôme’s *Pyramids at Sunset* (1895). illustrated on the right



Merrill uses some unusual words in the description of the puzzle: “vair” is a type of blue-grey fur, originally obtained from squirrels, often used to make a pattern by alternating it with white fur; “mousseline” is a hollandaise sauce (egg yolk, butter, lemon) into which whipped cream has been folded.

Irresistibly a populace
Unstitched of its attachments, rattled down.
Power went to pieces as the witch
Slithered easily from Virtue's gown.
The blue held out for a time, but crumbled, too.
The city had long fallen, and the tent,
A separating sauce mousseline,
Been swept away. Remained the green
On which the grown-ups gambled. A green dusk.
First lightning bugs. Last glow of west
Green in the false eyes of (coincidence)
Our mangy tiger safe on his bared hearth.

Before the puzzle was boxed and readdressed
To the puzzle shop in the mid-Sixties,
Something tells me that one piece contrived
To stay in the boy's pocket. How do I know?
I know because so many later puzzles
Had missing pieces — Maggie Teyte's high notes
Gone at the war's end, end of the vogue for collies,
A house torn down; and hadn't Mademoiselle
Kept back her pitiful bit of truth as well?
I've spent the last days, furthermore,
Ransacking Athens for that translation of "Palme."
Neither the Goethehaus nor the National Library
Seems able to unearth it. Yet I can't
Just be imagining. I've seen it. Know
How much of the sun-ripe original
Felicity Rilke made himself forego
(Who loved French words — *verger, mûr, parfumer*)
In order to render its underlying sense.
Know already in that tongue of his
What Pains, what monolithic Truths
Shadow stanza to stanza's symmetrical
Rhyme-rutted pavement. Know that ground plan left
Sublime and barren, where the warm Romance
Stone by stone faded, cooled; the fluted nouns
Made taller, lonelier than life
By leaf-carved capitals in the afterglow.
The owlet umlaut peeps and hoots
Above the open vowel. And after rain
A deep reverberation fills with stars.

Lost, is it, buried? One more missing piece?

(*ctd*)

After it took so long to complete the puzzle, assembling the world “on the shrinking green” and finally “putting together Heaven,” breaking it up is almost apocalyptic in its speed. A “populace unstitched of its attachments” collapses. The puzzle is sent back to the rental store with one piece missing – the tiny palm that stays in young James’s pocket. Things are lost just like the high notes of Maggie Teyte, the English soprano who retired from singing in 1921. However, since she did to return to singing in the 1930s, perhaps not forever lost.

Merrill now returns to the poem by Valéry that began his own poem. He knows that it was translated by Rilke but the translation was long lost to him, and he cannot find it in Athens where he is now living (though clearly it was ultimately found so that he could quote it in the epigraph). He remembers how Rilke had kept the rhyme scheme of the original (“the rhyme-rutted pavement”) and maintained the “underlying sense,” but had, of necessity, foregone some of the “warm Romance” of the original. The translator of poetry has to decide how much to imitate the sound and how much to render the sense. Rilke was sufficiently fluent in French to write poetry in that language. The following is from the beginning of his long poem *Verger* (Orchard) written in the last years of his life:

Pauvre poète qui doit élire	The poor poet must choose
pour dire tout ce que ce nom comprend,	to express all that a word implies
un à peu près trop vague, qui chavire	with something vaguely approximate
ou pire: la clôture qui défend.	that capsizes without closure.

How much Rilke succeeded with his translation of Valéry can be evaluated in the lines that end the poem – in Valéry’s original version and in Rilke’s translation, both translated into English (for sense rather than for sound)

Tu n’as pas perdu ces heures	You have not lost this time
Si légère tu demeures	Provided you remain light
Après ces beaux abandons;	After these periods of abandon;
Pareille à celui qui pense	Like one who thinks deeply
Et dont l’âme se dépense	Whose soul consumes itself
À s’accroître de ses dons!	To grow from what it gives away.

Dich mindert nicht das Verreichte	Your achievement is not diminished
wie heiter and schön deine leichte	when cheerfully and beautifully your
Gestalt nach dem Geben verweilt	lightness lingers with what is given
ählich wie der, der im Denken	similar to one whose mind expands
wächst, wenn er weithin das Schenken	when he generously shares out
seiner Seele verteilt	the gift of his soul.

Merrill also considers the difference in the typography of the two versions, how in the German the nouns are isolated by the capital letters that begin them, and how the umlaut peeps like a tiny owl above the vowels.

Merrill’s “deep reverberation” filled with stars describes the translation as an echo with its own special lights. There is also a possible relation between reverberation and translation though the former derives from *verber* (a rod or whip) and *verberare* (to beat or lash) and not from *verbum* (word).

In the final verse of the poem Merrill considers how time passes and how nothing is really lost but simply changed. He mentions S, which appears to mean the mansion in Southampton, in disrepair at the time that Merrill was writing this poem. He returns to the palm of Valéry's poem, and finds in it an image of how human culture continues through the changes, making memories and providing sustenance. The phrase "rustling with its angel" is a punning reference to Jacob's wrestling with the angel (*Genesis 32:22-32*). Wounded in the thigh, Jacob refuses to let go until he is blessed and identified as Israel, i.e. named for what will occur in the future. Jakob Epstein's monumental alabaster sculpture of *Jacob and the Angel* (1940) is illustrated on the right.



August on Sourdough

While studying Asian languages and culture at the University of Berkeley, Snyder spent the summer of 1953 at a fire lookout on Sourdough Mountain in the North Cascades. The name of the mountain comes from its broad round top. A small cabin, built on the summit in 1933 (replacing an earlier lookout from 1917) is about 20 km from the Canadian Border and looks out over Diablo Lake. The trail to the lookout is 18 km long and rises over 1500 m. Summer on Sourdough allowed Snyder much time for poetry and meditation.

In August by Dick Brewer, an old friend from his days at Reed College, hiked north from San Francisco to visit him on Sourdough before traveling back east to New York. Snyder, himself, was soon to go to Japan to study Zen Buddhism. The two friends talked long into the night and then said goodbye. In a note on the poem, Rob Rich remarked how the poem relates to the haiku *Two Autumns* (1870), long attributed to Buson, but apparently by Shiki

You go,
I stay;
Two autumns.



Spring is like a perhaps hand
(which comes carefully
out of Nowhere)arranging
a window,into which people look(while
people stare
arranging and changing placing
carefully there a strange
thing and a known thing here)and

changing everything carefully

spring is like a perhaps
Hand in a window
(carefully to
and fro moving New and
Old things,while
people stare carefully
moving a perhaps
fraction of flower here placing
an inch of air there)and

without breaking anything.

e e cummings, 1925

I am

I am: yet what I am none cares or knows,
My friends forsake me like a memory lost;
I am the self-consumer of my woes,
They rise and vanish in oblivious host,
Like shades in love and death's oblivion lost;
And yet I am! and live like shadows tossed

Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,
Into the living sea of waking dreams,
Where there is neither sense of life nor joys,
But the vast shipwreck of my life's esteems;
And e'en the dearest--that I loved the best--
Are strange--nay, rather stranger than the rest.

(ctd)

Spring is like a perhaps hand

This poem compares the coming of spring to arranging objects in a window for the visual delight of those that watch. There are two mysteries – how things are arranged and how they are perceived.

Although the poem is written without formal rhyme or regular rhythm, repetition give the poem an intense musicality and accentuates how the poet perceives spring – as gentle (“carefully” occurs five times) and tentative (“perhaps” occurs three times). The phrase “while people stare” occurs twice to stress the fact that spring acts for the wonder of the perceiver.

The main part of the poem describes what Spring does using three participles: “arranging a window,” “changing everything,” and “without breaking anything.”. The two isolated lines in the poem highlight how spring is creative without being destructive – “changing everything carefully...without breaking anything”

The three sets of parentheses add additional information The hand “comes carefully out of Nowhere;” the window is arranged “while people stare;” and spring acts “carefully, to and fro moving...”

Cummings capitalizes the active forces. Spring, a loving intelligence that changes the world, comes from Nowhere, some general life force that pervades everything and is therefore in no single place. Spring acts through the Hand, the most subtle and precise of instruments, at particular places rather than everywhere. New and Old things are the forces of time – spring combines what was with what will be.

I am

John Clare (1793-1864) was born in poverty in the village of Helpston, Northamptonshire. As a young man he worked as a farm laborer, pot-boy, groom, and lime-burner. In 1806 Clare became entranced by *The Seasons* (1730), a book of poems by James Thomson, and soon began to publish his own poems.

These poems recorded the beauty and innocence of an English countryside that was being rapidly changed by the enclosure laws. Between 1760 and 1832, much of the “common” land of England was deeded to landowners by parliament. This land had been used by everyone for grazing livestock, mowing hay, and hunting. Although the poor received some of the land, they were usually unable to maintain their plots because of their small size. Enclosure thus resulted in the rich buying up the tiny portions of the poor to form large estates. The poor then either worked on the estates or provided labor for the new factories. An anonymous poem from the 17th century described the process:

They hang the man and flog the woman,
That steals the goose from off the common;
But let the greater villain loose
That steals the common from the goose.

Though he was briefly famous, by the 1830s Clare had lapsed into melancholy and madness. In 1841, he was admitted to the Northampton General Lunatic Asylum, where he stayed until his death. This poem and a sonnet with the same title were transcribed by William Knight, a steward at the asylum.

I long for scenes where man has never trod;
A place where woman never smil'd or wept;
There to abide with my creator, God,
And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept:
Untroubling and untroubled where I lie;
The grass below--above the vaulted sky.

John Clare, 1845

Emerging

Not as in the old days I pray,
God. My life is not what it was.
Yours, too, accepts the presence of
the machine? Once I would have asked
healing. I go now to be doctored,
to drink sinlessly of the blood
of my brother, to lend my flesh
as manuscripts of the great poem
of the scalpel. I would have knelt
long, wrestling with you, wearing
you down. Hear my prayers, Lord, hear
my prayer. As though you were deaf, myriads
of mortals have kept up their shrill
cry, explaining your silence by
their unfitness.

It begins to appear
this is not what prayer is about.
It is the annihilation of difference,
the consciousness of myself in you,
of you in me; the emerging
from the adolescence of nature
into the adult geometry
of the mind. I begin to recognise
you anew, God of form and number.
There are questions we are the solution
to, others whose echoes we must expand
to contain. Circular as our way
is, it leads not back to that snake-haunted
garden, but onward to the tall city
of glass that is the laboratory of the spirit.

R. S. Thomas, 1975

Clare's sonnet "I am" insists even more strongly on his right to be despite losing all the freedom of the countryside that he celebrated in his early poems – "the grass below – above the vaulted sky."

I was a being created in the race
Of men, disdainful bounds of place and time:
A spirit that could travel o'er the space
Of earth and heaven like a thought sublime;
Tracing creation, like my Maker free,
A soul unshackled like eternity:
Spurning earth's vain and soul-debasing thrall ---
But now I only know I am, that's all.

Emerging

R. S. Thomas was a poet and Anglican priest in Wales. His theology was austere:
... there is nothing more important than the relationship between man and God.
Nor anything more difficult than establishing that relationship. Who is it that
ever saw God? Who ever heard Him speak? We have to live virtually the
whole of our lives in the presence of an invisible and mute God. But that was
never a bar to anyone seeking to come into contact with Him. That is what
prayer is. (*Autobiographies*, 1997).

In this poem, Thomas is concerned with the nature of prayer. In the old days,
people prayed for healing, but now this comes from doctors rather than from God.
Nevertheless, people have continued to pray to God despite the absence of any
response. In another poem, *The Answer* (1978), Thomas reconciles the absence of
any reply to his prayers to the absence of the body the tomb of the risen Christ:

There have been times
when, after long on my knees
in a cold chancel, a stone has rolled
from my mind, and I have looked
in and seen the old questions lie
folded and in a place
by themselves, like the piled
graveclothes of love's risen body.

What we have not properly realized is that prayer is not asking for something.
Rather it is an "annihilation of difference" between the divine and the human – an
experience of the numinous. During this communion we must figure out how we
can solve our own problems and how we must change

There are questions we are the solution
to, others whose echoes we must expand
to contain.

We must make our way back to God – not back in time, but forward toward
the tall city
of glass that is the laboratory of the spirit

Bartok and the Geranium

She lifts her green umbrella
Towards the pane
Seeking her fill of sunlight
Or of rain;
Whatever falls
She has no commentary
Accepts, extends,
Blows out her furbelows,
Her bustling boughs;

And all the while he whirls
Explodes in space,
Never content with this small room:
Not even can he be
Confined to sky
But must speed high and higher still
From galaxy to galaxy,
Wrench from the stars their momentary notes
Steal music from the moon.

She's daylight
He is dark
She's heaven-held breath
He storms and crackles
Spits with hell's own spark.

Yet in this room, this moment now
These together breathe and be:
She, essence of serenity,
He in a mad intensity
Soars beyond sight
Then hurls, lost Lucifer,
From heaven's height.

And when he's done, he's out:
She leans a lip against the glass
And preens herself in light.

Dorothy Livesay, 1952

Bartok and the Geranium

Livesay wrote this poem after asking her students to “find two objects, utterly different and disparate, and just see if they could link these objects in a tension which would create a poem.” Listening on the radio to Bartok’s Violin Concerto 2 (the earlier first violin concerto had not yet been published), she was struck by the difference between the music and a potted red geranium on her windowsill, and decided to follow her own instructions.

The resultant poem contrasts the striving of the music with the serenity of the flower. These are taken to represent two approaches to life, one forever trying to surpass what has gone before, and one content with the beauty of the present. Many people have attributed these two approaches to the characteristics of male and female, and Livesay calls the music “he” and the plant “she.”

At the end of Goethe’s *Faust Part II*, Faust, who had sold his soul to the devil in order to achieve knowledge and power comes to realize the need for love, and he is saved from damnation by female heavenly powers. The final chorus of the play celebrates the power of the “eternal feminine.”

Alles Vergängliche	All that has happened
Ist nur ein Gleichnis;	Is only a parable
Das Unzulängliche,	The insufficient
Hier wird's Ereignis;	Is now fulfilled
Das Unbeschreibliche,	The indescribable
Hier ist's getan;	Is now realized
Das Ewig-Weibliche	The Eternal Feminine
Zieht uns hinan.	Leads us onward.

The differences between accepting and striving should not necessarily be attributed to gender. Indeed, even in mythology the female is often more rebellious than the male. Eve’s curiosity defied God’s edict not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge. Antigone demanded that we should follow the moral law rather than man-made rules. Both were punished, and it is in this punishment that the idea of female passivity arises. In the words of Judith Bergoffen (2019):

By confining women to the roles of subservient wife, loving mother, and docile daughter, the idea of the eternal feminine marked sexual difference as the sign of an unbridgeable, irreconcilable otherness. Though most women accepted the idea that the mandates of the eternal feminine were inscribed in their nature and therefore obeyed them, others, the biblical Eve of (not after) the garden of Eden and the Greek Antigone, for example, finding their nature at odds with these mandates, breached them. Despite the fact that the inquisitive biblical woman was exiled and sentenced to a life of obedience to her husband punctuated with difficult childbirth, and the deviant Greek sister was condemned to death, the very fact of their existence suggests that the eternal feminine might be a disciplinary device rather than a description of women’s inherent nature. The stories of Eve and Antigone trigger the suspicion that the “ought” of the norm might repress the “is” of women.

Facing It

My black face fades,
hiding inside the black granite.
I said I wouldn't,
dammit: No tears.
I'm stone. I'm flesh.
My clouded reflection eyes me
like a bird of prey, the profile of night
slanted against morning. I turn
this way—the stone lets me go.
I turn that way—I'm inside
the Vietnam Veterans Memorial
again, depending on the light
to make a difference.
I go down the 58,022 names,
half-expecting to find
my own in letters like smoke.
I touch the name Andrew Johnson;
I see the booby trap's white flash.
Names shimmer on a woman's blouse
but when she walks away
the names stay on the wall.
Brushstrokes flash, a red bird's
wings cutting across my stare.
The sky. A plane in the sky.
A white vet's image floats
closer to me, then his pale eyes
look through mine. I'm a window.
He's lost his right arm
inside the stone. In the black mirror
a woman's trying to erase names:
No, she's brushing a boy's hair.

Yusef Komunyakaa, 1988

Facing It

Born as James William Brown in Louisiana, Komunyakaa later took the name of his grandfather who had come to the U. S. as a stowaway from Trinidad. Komunyakaa served in Vietnam as a combat reporter from 1969-70.

The Vietnam War evolved out of the French Indo-China War that resulted in the country being divided into North and South Vietnam. The war became a proxy war for the Cold War hostilities between the USSR/China and the United States. It was a war that began in 1955 with military advisers and progressed through lies and deceit until the final ignominious fall of Saigon in 1975.

The poem describes Komunyakaa's experience at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. The memorial, designed by Maya Lin and constructed in 1982, consists of a long low wall of polished black granite upon which are listed the names of the over 58,000 US service men and women who died in the Vietnam War. The first official death occurred in June 1956 and the last in May 1975.

Although it was opposed by some who wanted a more realistic depiction of the soldiers, the monument has been exceptionally popular with the families and friends of those who died. And a realistic sculpture of three soldiers is also part of the memorial. The polished surface of the granite wall allows the visitor to see themselves as well as the listed names. Many visitors trace the name of their lost one from the wall onto a small piece of paper. Several traveling replicas of the wall have been set up in various centers of the United States to allow those who cannot travel far to visit.



Komunyakaa recounts several brief occurrences in his visit. He tears up when he finds the name of a colleague Andrew Johnson who had died in the explosion of a booby trap. He sees himself reflected in the polished granite surface – the poem is a reflection in both the physical and mental meanings of the word. He then sees the reflection of another veteran looking for a name as well. Finally, he notices the reflection of a woman who appears to be trying to erase one of the names, but is actually just brushing the hair of a child whose father had been killed in the war.

Last Meeting

Shadows grazing eastward melt
from their vast sun-driven flocks
into consubstantial dusk.

A snow wind flosses the bleak rocks,

strips from the gums their rags of bark,
and spins the coil of winter tight
round our last meeting as we walk
the littoral zone of day and night,

light's turncoat margin: rocks and trees
dissolve in nightfall-eddy waters;
tumbling whorls of cloud disclose
the cold eyes of the sea-god's daughters.

We tread the wrack of grass that once
a silver-bearded congregation
whispered about our foolish love.
Your voice in calm annunciation

from the dry eminence of thought
rings with astringent melancholy:
'Could hope recall, or wish prolong
the vanished violence of folly?

Minute by minute summer died;
time's horny skeletons have built
this reef on which our love lies wrecked.
Our hearts drown in their cardinal guilt.'

The world, said Ludwig Wittgenstein,
is everything that is the case.
– The warmth of human lips and thighs;
the lifeless cold of outer space;

this windy darkness; Scorpio
above, a watercourse of light;
the piercing absence of one face
withdrawn for ever from my sight.

Gwen Harwood, 1957

Last Meeting

It is tempting to speculate whether this brilliant poem describes an actual last meeting, but that would be dangerous with Gwen Harwood. Early in her career she found that her poems were more successful when submitted under the masculine names: Walter Lehmann, Francis Geyer, or W. W. Hagendoor (an anagram of her actual name). The first letters of the lines in one of Walter Lehmann's sonnets – *Abelard to Eloisa* – spell out “Fuck all editors.” Poetic hoaxes were common in Australia (cf p 120). Harwood also wrote extensively in the personae of imagined characters: Eisenbart the professor of physics and Kröte, the music teacher.

Harwood was an accomplished musician. At one time she wished to become a composer, but turned to poetry instead. Her poems have an intense musicality. This poem uses regular rhymes between the second and fourth lines of each stanza. Across the lines other assonantal rhymes occur: “eminence/astringent,” and most gloriously “Wittgenstein/lips and thighs” – I am indebted to Carol Rumens (2010) for pointing out the latter.

The imagery is vividly compressed. In the first stanza, Harwood describes how the twilight melts the clouds, once clearly defined, into a “consubstantial dusk.” The next image tells how the wind “flosses the bleak rocks,” and “strips from the gums their rags of bark.” The poet is playing with us. The gums are not those in the mouth, but Eucalyptus trees, called gum trees in Australia, many variants of which annually discard their bark in ribbons (see illustration on right).



In 1945 the poet married William Harwood, a professor of linguistics, and was introduced to Wittgenstein, probably the most poetic of all the philosophers. In an interview with Stephen Edgar (1986) she remarked about her first reading of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921):

I was enchanted. I didn't understand it at all. When I came to the end I felt like someone who'd come upon a new religion . . . when I read in Wittgenstein ‘Not how the world is, is the mystical, but that it is’ I took my first step towards being a poet.

In this particular poem she quotes the opening proposition of Wittgenstein's book – *Die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist*. The last proposition of the book sets limits to philosophy *Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen* (Whereof one cannot speak, thereof must one be silent). Harwood suggested that poetry might possibly transcend these limits: “We have our language and our laughter to set against existential chaos” (1980).

In the last two stanzas, Harwood describes the nature of the world that extends from “the warmth of human lips and thighs” to “the lifeless world of outer space.” In this world, there is a “piercing absence of one face.” The poet can describe the scene of their parting in minute detail but she cannot describe her lover. He is “withdrawn forever from my sight.” Real or imagined, he is gone.

Waiting for the Barbarians

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?

The barbarians are due here today.

Why isn't anything going on in the senate?

Why are the senators sitting there without legislating?

Because the barbarians are coming today.

What's the point of senators making laws now?

Once the barbarians are here, they'll do the legislating.

Why did our emperor get up so early,
and why is he sitting enthroned at the city's main gate,
in state, wearing the crown?

Because the barbarians are coming today
and the emperor's waiting to receive their leader.

He's even got a scroll to give him,
loaded with titles, with imposing names.

Why have our two consuls and praetors come out today
wearing their embroidered, their scarlet togas?
Why have they put on bracelets with so many amethysts,
rings sparkling with magnificent emeralds?
Why are they carrying elegant canes
beautifully worked in silver and gold?

Because the barbarians are coming today
and things like that dazzle the barbarians.

Why don't our distinguished orators turn up as usual
to make their speeches, say what they have to say?

Because the barbarians are coming today
and they're bored by rhetoric and public speaking.

Why this sudden bewilderment, this confusion?
(How serious people's faces have become.)

Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,
everyone going home lost in thought?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians haven't come.
And some of our men just in from the border say
there are no barbarians any longer.

Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
Those people were a kind of solution.

Constantine Peter Cavafy (1904)
translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sharrard (1975)

Waiting for the Barbarians

Cavafy (1863-1933) was a Greek poet who was born in Alexandria, Egypt. His poem about the barbarians is set in an undefined time and place. It brings to mind the sacks of Rome by the Gauls in 390, the Visigoths in 410 and the Vandals in 455. However, the situation may also refer to the times when the Byzantine Empire was invaded during the Fourth Crusade in 1204, or ultimately conquered by the Ottomans in 1453. The poem can just as easily refer to the state of mind at the borders of the Colonial Empires of more modern times: Cavafy's Egypt was a Protectorate of the British Empire from 1882 to 1952.

The term "barbarians" derives from a Greek word imitating the sounds ("bar bar") of those who did not speak Greek. (The idea that it derives from the Latin *barba*, beard, is only a folk etymology.) Barbarians are basically the "other" – those that are not like us. As such they serve to define us – we are what they are not. The barbarians are therefore are "a kind of solution" to the problem of our identity.

Cavafy's poem is structured as a dialogue. One of the speakers asks questions and the other answers. Their conversation is rife with contradictions. The government officials have put on all their jewels and finery because "things like that dazzle the barbarians," but they do not recognize that it is themselves who are bewitched by such luxuries. If no one is prepared to talk to the barbarians because "they're bored by public speaking," how will anything be negotiated. Although the barbarians are due today, some have said that "there are no barbarians any longer." One possible reason might be that we have become the barbarians.

Empires are created for many reasons. One is to improve the life of those who govern the empire by exploiting those who are governed. Another is to maintain the center of the empire secure from outside threat. This peace can foster art and science, but ultimately the center of the empire slides into decadence.

Cavafy's poem has been the inspiration for two important novels: Dino Buzzati's *The Tartar Steppe* (1940, translated 1952) and J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980). The latter novel tells the story of a magistrate on the frontier regions of the empire who comes to understand that the system of justice he follows serves only to perpetuate the Empire:

Empire has created the time of history. Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history. One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era.

The magistrate becomes ashamed of the justice that he metes out:

When some men suffer unjustly, it is the fate of those who witness their suffering to suffer the shame of it

But he finds no comfort in the "specious consolation" of this thought. And we are left at the end of the novel in the same uncertainty as the speakers in Cavafy's poem.

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.

And down by the brimming river
I heard a lover sing
Under an arch of the railway:
'Love has no ending.

'I'll love you, dear, I'll love you
Till China and Africa meet,
And the river jumps over the mountain
And the salmon sing in the street,

'I'll love you till the ocean
Is folded and hung up to dry
And the seven stars go squawking
Like geese about the sky.

'The years shall run like rabbits,
For in my arms I hold
The Flower of the Ages,
And the first love of the world.'

But all the clocks in the city
Began to whirr and chime:
'O let not Time deceive you,
You cannot conquer Time.

'In the burrows of the Nightmare
Where Justice naked is,
Time watches from the shadow
And coughs when you would kiss.

'In headaches and in worry
Vaguely life leaks away,
And Time will have his fancy
To-morrow or to-day.

'Into many a green valley
Drifts the appalling snow;
Time breaks the threaded dances
And the diver's brilliant bow.

(ctd)

As I walked out one evening

In this poem Auden considers our hope that love might be the antidote for time. He recognizes that “you cannot conquer time,” but that does not detract from the necessity of love.

The poem has a deeply personal undercurrent. Auden was 30 when he wrote it and had not yet experienced what might be considered true love. After leaving Oxford in 1928, he had engaged in multiple homosexual affairs. His relationship with Christopher Isherwood persisted intermittently over several years but this was more sexual than devotional, with both continuing their affairs with younger lovers. As the 30s came to an end Auden was beginning to realize that he needed a more faithful relationship. This poem is about that need.

The poem is in the form of a traditional ballad. Auden called it “a pastiche of folksong.” One old song it clearly recalls is *The Banks of Sweet Primroses*, which was first recorded by Phil Tanner and played on the BBC in 1937. It begins with a young man meeting a beautiful maiden.

As I walked out one summer's morning,
To view the fields and take the air,
Down by the banks of the sweet primroses
There I beheld a most lovely fair.

She rejects his advances, accusing him of deceit, and says that she will live alone in a desolate valley. Nothing daunted, the optimistic young man continues his courtship, but the ballad ends without telling us whether he changes her mind:

Come all you maidens who go a-courting,
Pray give attention to what I say,
For there's many a dark and cloudy morning,
Turns out to be a sun-shining day.

Auden's ballad follows the form of traditional ballads (see p. 17), but it is a little unusual in that the first and third lines have feminine endings – they are tetrameters but the last foot is single and unaccented.

Auden begins his poem with a lover walking down Bristol Street, a main thoroughfare in Birmingham where Auden lived as a child. Although the love has no love, everything else is coming to fruition: the wheat is ready for harvest and the river is brimming. He hears a lover's song that indulges in the typical hyperbole of young love. Auden's surrealistic imagery of China and Africa meeting and the ocean being hung up to dry tries to outdo his predecessors, such as Burns in his *A Red, Red Rose*, who insists that his love will last

Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,
And the rocks melt wi' the sun;

But Time quickly intercedes and points out the foolishness of such talk. Whatever we might claim, our lives will leak away. More definite than our courtship of a loved one is Time's seduction of ourselves:

And Time will have his fancy
To-morrow or to-day.

'O plunge your hands in water,
Plunge them in up to the wrist;
Stare, stare in the basin
And wonder what you've missed.

'The glacier knocks in the cupboard,
The desert sighs in the bed,
And the crack in the tea-cup opens
A lane to the land of the dead.

'Where the beggars raffle the banknotes
And the Giant is enchanting to Jack,
And the Lily-white Boy is a Roarer,
And Jill goes down on her back.

'O look, look in the mirror,
O look in your distress:
Life remains a blessing
Although you cannot bless.

'O stand, stand at the window
As the tears scald and start;
You shall love your crooked neighbour
With your crooked heart.'

It was late, late in the evening,
The lovers they were gone;
The clocks had ceased their chiming,
And the deep river ran on.

W. H. Auden, 1938

The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

Randall Jarrell, 1945

Auden uses several striking images for the inevitability of death. The adjective “appalling” combines its etymological origin – “making white” – with its current meaning of horrifying. Time destroys our lives just as it breaks the cord on which we string the beads of our life.

In the land of the dead, nothing is as it was in our nursery rhymes: Jack of *Jack and the Beanstalk* is seduced by the Giant, and the Jill of *Jack and Jill* makes herself sexually available. The “lily-white boys” come from the counting song *Green Grow the Rushes O*:

Two, two, the lily-white boys,
Clothe them all in green, O

The lily-white boy who once was clearly innocent has now become a Roarer, or “roaring boy” – one given to noisy, riotous and drunken behavior.

These images force the poet to look in the mirror and realize his distress. He lacks the blessing of a truly loving relationship. The poem climaxes with the commandment

You shall love your crooked neighbour
With your crooked heart.

This has three levels. On one level it related to the nursery rhyme that begins

There was a crooked man, and he walked a crooked mile

and ends with him living together with his cat in his crooked house. On a second level it adds to the golden rule the idea that love should not care if either the lover or the loved one be not perfect. This recalls Shakespeare’s *Sonnet 116*

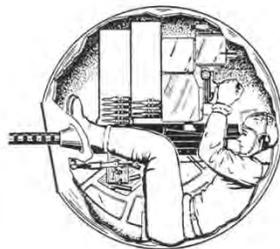
Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds

The third level is based on the use of the term “crooked” (cf “bent”) to mean “homosexual.” Auden is telling himself to find his true and homosexual love. In 1939 he met Chester Kallman, with whom he was to spend the rest of his life.

The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner

Jarrell provided his own notes for the poem:

A ball turret was a Plexiglas sphere set into the belly of a B-17 or B-24, and inhabited by two .50 caliber machine guns and one man, a short small man. When this gunner tracked with his machine guns a fighter attacking his bomber from below, he revolved with the turret; hunched upside-down in his little sphere, he looked like the fetus in the womb. The fighters which attacked him were armed with cannon firing explosive shells. The hose was a steam hose.



During World War II somewhere between 20 and 40% of those who flew in the Allied bombers wound up dead. The most dangerous positions were the ball turret gunner and the tail gunner. Jarrell’s poem is a telling indictment of the state that wages war and sends its young men to their death.

The Seafarer

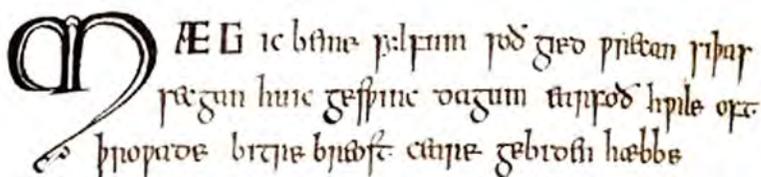
I can sing a true song about myself,
tell of my travels, how in days of tribulation
I often endured a time of hardship,
how I have harboured bitter sorrow in my heart
and often learned that ships are homes of sadness.
Wild were the waves when I often took my turn,
the arduous night-watch, standing at the prow
while the boat tossed near the rocks. My feet
were afflicted by cold, fettered in frost,
frozen chains; there I sighed out the sorrows
seething round my heart; a hunger within tore
at the mind of the sea-weary man. He who lives
most prosperously on land does not understand
how I, careworn and cut off from my kinsmen,
have as an exile endured a winter
on the icy sea . . .
hung round with icicles; hail showers flew.
I heard nothing there but the sea booming —
the ice-cold wave, at times the song of the swan.
The cry of the gannet was all my gladness,
the call of the curlew, not the laughter of men,
the mewling gull, not the sweetness of mead.
There, storms beat the rocky cliffs; the icy-feathered
tern answered them; and often the eagle,
dewy-winged, screeched overhead. No protector
could console the cheerless heart.

Wherefore he who is used to the comforts of life
and, proud and flushed with wine, suffers
little hardship living in the city,
will scarcely believe how I, weary,
have had to make the ocean paths my home.
The night-shadow grew long, it snowed from the north,
frost fettered the earth; hail fell on the ground,
coldest of grain. But now my blood
is stirred that I should make trial
of the mountainous streams, the tossing salt waves;
my heart's longings always urge me
to undertake a journey, to visit the country
of a foreign people far across the sea.
On earth there is no man so self-assured,
so generous with his gifts or so bold in his youth,
so daring in his deeds or with such a gracious lord,
that he harbours no fears about his seafaring

(ctd)

The Seafarer

In the middle of the 10th Century CE, Benedictine monks in England compiled a book of Anglo-Saxon (Old English) poems and riddles. This book was donated to the library of Exeter Cathedral in 1072, and has is known as *The Exeter Book*. Among the poems are several that have been considered “elegies,” using the word’s more general meaning of a “mournful meditation” rather than a “lament for the dead” (cf p 134). One of the most notable of these elegies has been entitled *The Seafarer*. No one knows who made this poem or when, though it was likely composed after Saint Augustine’s mission to the Anglo-Saxons around 600 CE. In *The Exeter Book*, the poem is written out without versification:



The rules of Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse have allowed later scholars to parse the poem into lines containing two halves, each with two stresses. Alliteration occurs between at least one stressed syllable in the first half and one in the second. Alliteration may also occur between the two stressed syllables in the first half. Some modern English poetry has been written using this Anglo-Saxon form (e.g., Auden’s *The Age of Anxiety*, p 19). In the following, the initial lines of the poem have been versified, and alliterating consonants have been indicated in red:

Mæg ic be me syl fum	s oðgied wrecan
s iþas s ecgan	hu ic ges w incdagum
earfoðhwile	oft þrowade
b itre b reostceare	g eþiden hæbbe

A word-for-word translation of these lines is

Can I about me myself	truth-song utter
travels tell	how I day-of-toil
hardship-time	often endured
bitter breast-care (sorrow)	suffered have

The poem has been translated many times. Ezra Pound’s 1911 translation emphasized the alliteration, but did not follow the strict rules of Anglo-Saxon versification. This anthology uses a translation by Kevin Crossley-Holland that is both accurate and fluent. Alliteration persists since many Anglo-Saxon words have similar English derivatives, e.g. *sylf*, self; *soð*, sooth or truth. Like most translators he omits the last 12 lines which are corrupt in the manuscript.

The poem has been interpreted extensively and variously. Some have suggested that the poem is a dialogue between an old seaman and a young. Others have proposed that the poem is an allegory of Christian salvation. Still others have considered the final section as the opinion of a transcribing monk rather than the belief of the seafarer. I believe what the poet states in his first line – that he is telling his own true story.

as to what the Lord will ordain for him.
He thinks not of the harp nor of receiving rings,
nor of rapture in a woman nor of worldly joy,
nor of anything but the rolling of the waves;
the seafarer will always feel longings.
The groves burst with blossom, towns become fair,
meadows grow green, the world revives;
all these things urge the heart of the eager man
to set out on a journey, he who means
to travel far over the ocean paths.
And the cuckoo, too, harbinger of summer,
sings in a mournful voice, boding bitter sorrow
to the heart. The prosperous man knows not
what some men endure who tread
the paths of exile to the end of the world.

Wherefore my heart leaps within me,
my mind roams with the waves
over the whale's domain, it wanders far and wide
across the face of the earth, returns again to me
eager and unsatisfied; the solitary bird screams,
irresistible, urges the heart to the whale's way
over the stretch of the seas.

So it is that the joys
of the Lord inspire me more than this dead life,
ephemeral on earth. I have no faith
that the splendours of this earth will survive for ever.
There are three things that, until one
occurs, are always uncertain:
illness or old age or the sword's edge
can deprive a doomed man of his life.
Wherefore each man should strive, before he leaves
this world, to win the praise of those living
after him, the greatest fame after death,
with daring deeds on earth against the malice
of the fiends, against the devil, so that
the children of men may later honour him
and his fame live afterwards with the angels
for ever and ever, in the joy of life eternal,
amongst the heavenly host.

Days of great glory
in the kingdom of earth are gone forever;
kings and kaisers and gold-giving lords
are no longer as they were
when they wrought deeds of greatest glory
and lived in the most lordly splendour;
this host has perished, joys have passed away, (ctd)

The poem can be considered in four parts. The first section up to the “cheerless heart” portrays the hard life of the sea farer. It is a bravura description of the cold (“fettered in frost”), and a marvelous description of the birds that have accompanied his boat.

The cry of the gannet was all my gladness,
the call of the curlew, not the laughter of men,
the mewling gull, not the sweetness of mead.

There have been several interpretations about the nature of the seafarer’s life. Some have suggested that he is one who has forsaken the comforts of the land for the hardships of the sea much as other believers became hermits in the desert. Some historical reports have described monks who set out for sea in a rudderless boat to be at the complete mercy of the will of God. Another interpretation is that the seafarer is a pilgrim journeying away from home in search of God. However, these possibilities do not fit the voyaging that he describes as repeated (“often” recurs throughout the section) and controlled (he has taken his turn on the “arduous nightwatch”). A reasonable interpretation is therefore that he was a fisherman who spent his life in weeks-long voyages on the open sea in search of herring and mackerel (cf Sobecki, 2008). Another possibility is that the seafarer may have served in the Anglo-Saxon navy that defended England against the Vikings in the 9th and 10th Centuries.

The second section contrasts the hardness of life at sea to the comfort and joy of life on land. And yet, his heart still leaps at the thought of a new voyage in spring

The groves burst with blossom, towns become fair,
meadows grow green, the world revives;
all these things urge the heart of the eager man
to set out on a journey.

Those who interpret the poem allegorically suggest that this new voyage may refer to death and heaven, but there is no clear evidence for this. The “end of the world” is more likely to be the furthest reaches of the known world than the final days of a single life. The “country of a foreign people far across the sea” is more likely some land in Europe than a metaphor for heaven.

The poem contains occasional “kennings” – vivid circumlocutions used instead of a simple noun, such as “whale’s domain” for sea – but not as frequently as in other Anglo-Saxon verse.

The final section of the poem continues the thoughts of the upcoming voyage, and produces a magnificent peroration on the transience of life and the human need to achieve something more lasting. The seafarer’s goal is to acquire fame so that he will be long remembered. This is a recurring theme in early Germanic literature. Yet he notes that those who have preceded him

are no longer as they were
when they wrought deeds of greatest glory

The great lords who lived before us are “gone for ever.” There is some similarity in this talk of “kings and kaisers and gold-giving lords” to Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (p 134):

weaklings thrive and hold sway in the world,
enjoy it through their labours; dignity is laid low;
the earth's flower ages and withers
as now does every man throughout this middle-world:
old age comes visiting, his face grows pale,
grey-haired he mourns; he knows his former friends,
the sons of princes, have been placed in the earth.
Then, when life leaves him, his body
cannot taste sweetness or feel the sharpness of pain,
lift a hand or ponder in its mind.
Though a man may strew a grave with gold,
bury his brother amongst the dead
with the many treasures he wished to take with him,
the gold a man amasses while still alive
on earth is no use at all to his soul,
full of sins, in the face of God's wrath.
Great is the fear of God; through Him the world turns.
He established the mighty plains, the face
of the earth and the sky above. Foolish is he
who fears not his Lord: death catches him unprepared.
Blessed is the humble man: mercy comes to him from heaven.
God gave man a soul because he trusts in His strength.

Anonymous 9th Century CE,
translated by Kevin Crossley-Holland, 1965

Pippa's Song

The year's at the spring
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hill-side's dew-pearled;
The lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the thorn—
God's in his heaven—
All's right with the world!

Robert Browning, 1841

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.

The poet then describes his fear of death:

Then, when life leaves him, his body
cannot taste sweetness or feel the sharpness of pain,
lift a hand or ponder in its mind.

This foreshadows Larkin's *Aubade* (1977, p 48)

That this is what we fear—no sight, no sound,
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
Nothing to love or link with,
The anaesthetic from which none come round.

The seafarer can do nothing to prevent his being forgotten. Though he may be buried with all his gold, this will be to no avail when he comes face to face with God. All that one can do is trust in God's mercy. These final lines contain no mention of Christ, nor hint of salvation. They fit more easily with the Old Testament than with the New. The *Psalms* had been translated into Anglo-Saxon:

They that trust in their wealth, and boast themselves in the multitude of their riches;
None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him (*Psalms* 49: 6-7)

Key to Anglo-Saxon understanding was the concept of *wyrd* usually translated as "fate" or "doom." In the untranslated corrupt ending of this poem is the statement: "fate is stronger and its measure mightier than any man can conceive" We are doomed to die but, if we display strength, fate might let us be remembered.

Pippa's Song

In 1841 Browning published a play entitled *Pippa Passes*, which describes what happens to four sets of people, as Felippa, a young girl who works in the silk-mill of Asolo, a town just north of Venice, passes by and sings a song. It is New Year's Day and "Pippa" is enjoying her one and only holiday from work. Although the play is set in the early 1800s, the new year was possibly still celebrated on the first day of spring as it was before the advent of the Gregorian calendar. Orr (1891) reported that Browning wanted to portray

one apparently too obscure to leave a trace of his or her passage, yet exercising a lasting though unconscious influence at every step of it

In the play's final act, a holy Monsignor is discussing how to redeem his family's centuries of wickedness by donating his late brother's estate to the church. His intendant tells him that Pippa is actually his brother's daughter and the legal inheritor of the estate. He adds that he can easily arrange for Pippa to be seduced and sold into prostitution in Rome "where the courtesans perish off every three years." The Monsignor hears Pippa singing and orders the intendant's arrest. He will not proceed with the plan. Or will he? All may not be right with the world.

Easter Wings

My tender age in sorrow did begin
And still with sicknesses and shame.
Thou didst so punish sin,
That I became
Most thin.
With thee
Let me combine,
And feel thy victory:
For, if I imp my wing on thine,
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

George Herbert, 1633

Sonnet 116

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. 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.
Love's not Time'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 even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me prov'd,
I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd.

William Shakespeare, 1609

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,
Though foolishly he lost the same,
Decaying more and more,
Till he became
Most poor:
With thee
O let me rise
As larks, harmoniously,
And sing this day thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

Easter Wings

This is likely the most famous example of English “pattern poetry,” in which the shape of the printed poem reflects its subject matter. Such poetry has occurred in most cultures: in ancient Greek *technopaignia* (*techné* create, *paignia*, play), in Latin *carmina figurata* and in German *Bilderreime*. The two verses of *Easter Wings* were printed vertically on facing pages in Herbert’s *The Temple*, a posthumous collection of devotional verse. The shape of each verse denotes a pair of wings. It might also suggest the flight of the lark in the first verse or the thinness of the sinner in the second.

The poem presents the Christian doctrine of salvation. God created Adam and Eve and endowed them with free will. Their sin of disobedience, and the subsequent sins of all their descendants, entailed that all human beings must die. The sacrifice of God’s son Jesus Christ redeemed human beings from the consequences of sin, and allowed them to be resurrected with Christ into eternal life. Christian theology does not explain what system of justice requires that those who sin must die, or how such a requirement can be waived by divine sacrifice. Nevertheless, human beings are often acutely aware of their own wrongdoings, and redemption from sin is devoutly sought.

In the first (left) verse we have man created “in wealth and store” decaying to a state “most poor” who then rises as the larks together with the resurrected Christ. The second verse repeats the doctrine in different terms – the sinner becomes “most thin” from shame but then flies upward to heaven on the wings of Christ. The term “imp,” meaning “engraft” or “implant,” was used in falconry to describe how to replace a damaged feather. As a noun it later came to mean “scion” or “descendant” and, in the sense of the imp of the devil, a mischievous sprite.

Sonnet 116: Let me not to the marriage of true minds

This sonnet is concerned with the ideal love between two people. Its beginning uses the words of the marriage ceremony in the *Book of Common Prayer* originally published by Thomas Cranmer in 1549, a few years before his martyrdom in 1556:

I require and charge you both, as ye will answer at the dreadful day of judgment when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, if either of you know any impediment, why ye may not be lawfully joined together in Matrimony, ye do now confess it.

The first quatrain states that love lasts forever, regardless of any change or alteration in the person loved. This is what makes it so valuable. The second proposes shows that this stability can be depended on, like the “ever-fixed mark” of a lighthouse that gives warning during tempests, or the pole star that guides the “wand’ring bark.” A bark (from the Latin *barca*) is a small sailing ship. The third quatrain claims that love persists despite the ravages of time, even to the dreadful day of judgment – “the edge of doom.”

After such grand and beautiful claims, it is perhaps inevitable that the concluding couplet comes as a letdown.

To His Mistress Going to Bed

Come, Madam, come, all rest my powers defy,
Until I labour, I in labour lie.
The foe oft-times, having the foe in sight,
Is tired with standing, though they never fight.
Off with that girdle, like heaven's zone glistening
But a far fairer world encompassing.
Unpin that spangled breast-plate, which you wear
That th'eyes of busy fools may be stopped there:
Unlace yourself, for that harmonious chime
Tells me from you that now it is bed time.
Off with that happy busk, whom I envy
That still can be, and still can stand so nigh.
Your gown's going off such beauteous state reveals
As when from flowery meads th'hill's shadow steals.
Off with your wiry coronet and show
The hairy diadem which on you doth grow.
Off with those shoes: and then safely tread
In this love's hallowed temple, this soft bed.
In such white robes heaven's angels used to be
Received by men; thou Angel bring'st with thee
A heaven like Mahomet's Paradise; and though
Ill spirits walk in white, we easily know
By this these Angels from an evil sprite:
Those set out hairs, but these the flesh upright.

License my roving hands, and let them go
Before, behind, between, above, below.
Oh my America, my new found land,
My kingdom, safeliest when with one man manned,
My mine of precious stones, my Empire,
How blessed am I in this discovering thee.
To enter in these bonds is to be free,
Then where my hand is set my seal shall be.

Full nakedness, all joys are due to thee.
As souls unbodied, bodies unclothed must be
To taste whole joys. Gems which you women use
Are as Atalanta's balls, cast in men's views,
That when a fool's eye lighteth on a gem
His earthly soul may covet theirs not them.
Like pictures, or like books' gay coverings made
For laymen, are all women thus arrayed;

(ctd)

To His Mistress Going to Bed

This poem describes the night before the morning after of *The Sun Rising* (p 44). Donne entices his mistress to take off all her clothes and come to bed, so that he can enjoy her just as a king delights in his newfound empire.

The formal structure of rhyming couplets in iambic pentameter contrasts with the freedom of the poem's content. The poem was considered far too licentious to include when Donne's poems were posthumously published in 1633.

The poem uses conventions of the Roman erotic poetry. Hadfield (2006) remarks on its similarity to Ovid's *Amores I: 5*, wherein Ovid undresses his mistress Corinna, though Donne is a more gentle seducer:

I tore the dress off her – not that it really hid much
But all the same she struggled to keep it on:
Yet her efforts were unconvincing, she seemed half-hearted –
Inner self betrayal made her give up,
When at last she stood naked before me, not a stitch of clothing
I couldn't fault her body at any point. (translation, Peter Green, 1982)

Donne's poem uses the Renaissance technique of the "blazon," wherein the poet lists the charms of his mistress and likens them to the most beautiful things in the universe. The word comes from the French word meaning "shield" or the heraldic description of its ornamentation. A typical example from Spencer's *Epithalamion*, a poem written for his bride on their wedding day in 1594:

Her goodly eyes like Sapphires shining bright,
Her forehead ivory white,
Her cheeks like apples which the sun hath rudded,
Her lips like cherries charming men to bite,
Her breast like to a bowl of cream uncrudded,
Her paps like lilies budded,

The technique was parodied in Shakespeare's Sonnet 130

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

Initially Donne is more concerned with describing his mistress's clothing than her charms for this is what he sees, and what he wishes her to remove so that he can see her without impediment.

Off with that girdle, like heaven's zone glistening
But a far fairer world encompassing

Nevertheless, the poem's most striking image is that of the body revealed as the meadows are at dawn:

Your gown's going off such beauteous state reveals
As when from flowery meads th'hill's shadow steals

The poem alludes to the politics of the 17th Century, an age of imperial expansion ("my new found land"), and of absolute monarchy

Themselves are mystic books, which only we
Whom their imputed grace will dignify
Must see revealed. Then since I may know,
As liberally as to a midwife show
Thyself; cast all, yea this white linen hence.
There is no penance due to innocence.

To teach thee, I am naked first: why then
What need'st thou have more covering than a man.

John Donne, 1633

The Wild Iris

At the end of my suffering
there was a door.

Hear me out: that which you call death
I remember.

Overhead, noises, branches of the pine shifting.
Then nothing. The weak sun
flickered over the dry surface.

It is terrible to survive
as consciousness
buried in the dark earth.

Then it was over: that which you fear, being
a soul and unable
to speak, ending abruptly, the stiff earth
bending a little. And what I took to be
birds darting in low shrubs.

You who do not remember
passage from the other world
I tell you I could speak again: whatever
returns from oblivion returns
to find a voice:

from the center of my life came
a great fountain, deep blue
shadows on azure sea water.

Louise Glück, 1993

My kingdom, safest when with one man manned

Donne provides a witty description of the jewels that a woman wears to distract the lover from her body, comparing them to the golden balls that Hippomenes dropped in his race against Atalanta. Another striking image is of the body as the pages of a mystic book that are only visible once the covers are opened.

The focus of the poem is the couplet with its five adverbs

License my roving hands, and let them go
Before, behind, between, above, below.

The Wild Iris

The wild iris (*Iris versicolor*, blue flag) grows along lake shores, on stream banks, and in sedge meadows.

This poem is the first in a book with which it shares the title. In the book, poems about different flowers, told by the flowers themselves as though they were conscious and remembered their previous lives, are interspersed with prayers and meditations on nature.

The myth of Persephone runs through much of our religious thinking. Hades, the lord of the Death, fell in love with Persephone, the beautiful daughter of Zeus and Demeter, and took her to live as his consort in the underworld. The Eleusinian Mysteries were based on Demeter's search for her daughter and the final negotiation with the gods to allow her annual release from the underworld to bring about the rebirth of the crops in spring. Many religions propose that we shall be reborn after death. In the Indian religions, this continual rebirth is called *Samsara*. Typically, however, there is no memory of prior lives – “you who do not remember.”

The Wild Iris has another level beyond the myth of the seasons. Sometimes we need to withdraw unto ourselves, stay dark for a while, before we can re-emerge.

whatever
returns from oblivion
returns to find a voice

This level also has religious associations. In *The Dark Night of the Soul* of St John of the Cross describes the privations that must be experienced before a mystic can reach union with God. Perhaps there are similar requirements for a poet before she can find her voice

In *The White Lilies* (*Lilium candidum*, Madonna lily) the final poem of the book, Glück accepts the transience of life:

Hush, beloved. It doesn't matter to me
how many summers I live to return:
this one summer we have entered eternity.

Our present life is what is important. For the wild iris the very act of living brings forth an ecstatic fountain of color – “deep blue shadows on azure seawater.”



Their Lonely Betters

As I listened from a beach-chair in the shade
To all the noises that my garden made,
It seemed to me only proper that words
Should be withheld from vegetables and birds.

A robin with no Christian name ran through
The Robin-Anthem which was all it knew,
And rustling flowers for some third party waited
To say which pairs, if any, should get mated.

Not one of them was capable of lying,
There was not one which knew that it was dying
Or could have with a rhythm or a rhyme
Assumed responsibility for time.

Let them leave language to their lonely betters
Who count some days and long for certain letters;
We, too, make noises when we laugh or weep:
Words are for those with promises to keep.

W. H. Auden, 1951

Reunion

Fifty years have passed since we first met,
And forty-seven since we said goodbye,
Embarking on our adult lives – and yet
You are the same, it seems to me. Am I?
Five decades of life, of ups and downs,
Of love and marriage, work and motherhood
And here we are, back in the world of gowns
And college food and essays – and it's good,
It's very good, my lovely, clever friends,
To travel to the past and find you here,
To share just one more evening meal that ends
In someone's room – before we disappear
Into a future, where I'm sad to know
It's over. It was over long ago.

Wendy Cope, 2013

Their Lonely Betters

Human beings are distinct from other forms of life. Other animals likely share with us the ability to be conscious in the sense of being aware, and some primates may have a rudimentary sense of self. However, although they can remember, other animals may not be able to recall the past as if it were present, or to consider the future without actually having to experience it. And human beings are the only known forms of life that use language. Other primates may use signs but they have no syntax. They cannot invent new sentences.

Though these gifts make us in some way “better,” they bring their own problems. Our ability to consider the future allows us to become acutely aware that we are dying; and our language allows us to deceive as well as to inform.

The poem includes two lines that balance out Auden’s earlier claim that “poetry makes nothing happen” (p 133):

Or could have with a rhythm or a rhyme
Assumed responsibility for time.

The essence of poetry – both in its form and in its content – is that it lets us address the passage of time. We will inevitably die but we can record the days, we can long for things to happen, and we can make promises for the future. The last line of the poem echoes Frost’s *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* (p 39)

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Reunion

This poem describes the Fiftieth Anniversary Gaudy at St Hilda’s College in Oxford on September 29, 2013. Cope had read history there from 1963-66.

The poem is a regular Shakespearean sonnet with iambic pentameter lines and a rhyme scheme *ababcdcdefefgg*. What is impressive is the poem’s conversational ease. The rhymes accentuate the thought and the sense is immediately understandable. Like the participants at the gaudy (a celebratory dinner), we are transported into the past, when we were young and everything was possible.

The volta (‘turn’) into the final couplet is intense. From happy memories of youthful ideals, we quickly fall into a future that has nowhere to go. The real despair in the final line

It’s over. It was over long ago.

brings to mind Larkin’s poem about his view of the future at the age of fifty:

Instead of fields and snowcaps
And flowered lanes that twist,
The track breaks at my toe-caps
And drops away in mist.
The view does not exist.

Larkin came to his despair at an earlier age than Cope.

Final Instructions

For sacrifice, there are certain principles –
Few, but essential.

I do not mean your ritual. This you have learnt –
The garland, the salt, a correct use of the knife,
And what to do with the blood:
Though it is worth reminding you that no two
Sacrifices ever turn out alike –
Not where this god is concerned.

The celebrant's approach may be summed up
In three words –patience, joy,
Disinterestedness. Remember, you do not sacrifice
For your own glory or peace of mind:
You are there to assist the clients and please the god.

It goes without saying
That only the best is good enough for the god.
But the best – I must emphasize it – even your best
Will by no means always be found acceptable.
Do not be discouraged:
Some lizard or passing cat may taste your sacrifice
And bless the god: it will not be entirely wasted.

But the crucial point is this:
You are called only to make the sacrifice:
Whether or no he enters into it
Is the god's affair; and whatever the handbooks say,
You can neither command his presence nor explain it –
All you can do is to make it possible.

If the sacrifice catches fire of its own accord
On the altar, well and good. But do not
Flatter yourself that discipline and devotion
Have wrought the miracle: they have only allowed it.
So luck is all I can wish you, or need wish you.

And every time you prepare to lay yourself
On the altar and offer again what you have to offer,
Remember, my son,
Those words – patience, joy, disinterestedness.

C. Day Lewis, 1957

Final Instructions

The burning of food on an altar as a sacrifice to the gods is an essential part of most ancient religions. The word “sacrifice” originally denoted the performance of any sacred rituals, and only later came to mean the ceremonial killing of an animal in the worship of a god. The purpose of sacrifice was manifold: to propitiate an angry deity, to repent of wrongdoing, to request that some wish be granted, to thank the lord for his beneficence, or simply to express reverence. The first seven chapters of the book of *Leviticus* deal with the rituals of sacrifice in the ancient Hebrew religion. The following verses deal with the sacrifice of a bullock and “what to do with the blood:”

And he shall kill the bullock before the LORD: and the priests, Aaron's sons, shall bring the blood, and sprinkle the blood round about upon the altar that is by the door of the tabernacle of the congregation. (*Leviticus* 1: 5)

Modern religions for the most part no longer countenance animal sacrifice:

To do justice and judgment is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice. (*Proverbs* 20:3)

Christianity made the idea of sacrifice an essential part of its theology: God's son was crucified to atone for humanity's original sin. This divine sacrifice is remembered in the celebration of the Eucharist. Modern Hinduism maintains a ritual of *Yajna*, wherein foods, such as rice, grains, milk and cakes, are sacrificed in the holy fire (*Agni*).

This poem is a dramatic monologue spoken by an aging priest to a younger priest who has just completed his training. Although set in ancient times, the language is modern and colloquial: “it goes without saying,” “whatever the handbooks say,” and “do not flatter yourself.” The speaker sounds more like a contemporary college professor than an ancient priest.

The meaning of the poem is far more general than its religious setting. The advice applies to any work of creation, or indeed to any human achievement. One must exercise one's craft as best one can, but one must realize that all the “discipline and devotion” in the world may not necessarily cause God to breathe life into the creation. Nevertheless, a celebration performed with patience, joy and disinterestedness, may allow inspiration to come. Disinterestedness requires that the ceremony be performed without thought for personal gain. Inspiration comes not as a reward for service but as a gift by the grace of God. It can be neither be commanded nor explained.

The three virtues recommended in this poem maybe compared with the three theological virtues – faith, hope, and charity – of Saint Paul (p 197), the three jewels of the *Tao te Ching* (described in its Chapter 67) – simplicity, patience, and compassion, or the three cardinal virtues of Buddhism – restraint (*araga*, against striving), compassion (*advesa*, against hatred) and understanding (*amoha*, against delusion).

Archaic Torso of Apollo

We cannot know his legendary head
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,
gleams in all its power. Otherwise
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs
to that dark center where procreation flared.
Otherwise this stone would seem defaced
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders
and would not glisten like a wild beast's fur:
would not, from all the borders of itself,
burst like a star: for here there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.

Rainer Maria Rilke, 1908
translated by Stephen Mitchell, 1995

Mercies

She might have had months left of her dog-years,
but to be who? She'd grown light as a nest a
and spent the whole day under her long ears
listening to the bad radio in her breast.
On the steel bench, knowing what was taking shape
she tried and tried to stand, as if to sign
that she was still of use, and should escape
our selection. So I turned her face to mine, a
and seeing only love there — which, for all
the wolf in her, she knew as well as we did —
she lay back down and let the needle enter.
And love was surely what her eyes conceded
as her stare grew hard, and one bright aerial
quit making its report back to the centre.

Don Paterson, 2015

Archaic Torso of Apollo

Rilke wrote this poem after viewing in the Louvre a sculpted male torso from Miletus, a Greek settlement on the west coast of Turkey. The sculpture dates to about 490 BCE. At the beginning of the 7th Century BCE, Greek art had changed from geometric to naturalistic. Figures were still frontally oriented but they were physically more accurate and the face showed a characteristic smile. The most common sculpture was of a *kouros* (young man), long thought to represent Apollo, though now this association is unclear. At the beginning of the 5th century BCE, when this torso was sculpted, the figures began to assume natural rather than frontal postures – and the Archaic (660-480 BCE) ceded to the Classical (480-323 BCE). It was a time of change.



Rilke was impressed by the power of the sculpture. Much of this derived from his imagination, as he envisioned the absent head “with eyes like ripening fruit,” and felt as if the torso gleamed like a lamp “now turned to low.” Across the 2500 years between its creation and the present, the statue insists that we must make something of our life: *Du mußt dein Leben ändern*. (In German, *ändern* means to alter the nature of something, while *wechseln* means to exchange it for another.)

Translation means moving across – from one language to another or from one place or time to another. A good translation is as accurate as possible and as free as necessary. Mitchell cannot maintain the rhyme scheme *ababcdcdeefgfg* of the original German sonnet. However, he keeps some rhymes (“torso/low”) and substitutes others with end-consonant rhymes like “head/inside.” Rilke translates from sculpture into poetry and from ancient Greece into the present; Mitchell translates from German into English and from *fin de siècle* into *fin de millénaire*.

Mercies

This poem describes the euthanasia – “mercy killing” – of an elderly dog. In old age, many dogs suffer from congestive heart failure, and fluid accumulates in the lungs. The breathing becomes labored and noisy – like the sound of “a bad radio.” It is often considered merciful to let them to die peacefully from the intravenous injection of an anesthetic like pentobarbital rather than continue to suffer.

The poem is a sonnet. The octave has a regular *ababcdcd* rhyme scheme. However, the sestet is completely unrhymed. The dog’s death did not follow the way it was initially planned.

The dog was aware of “what was taking shape,” and initially resisted. Then dog and master looked at each other and both understood the love that existed between them. The dog conceded to her master and did not cause him pain by resisting any further. She was the one granting mercy.

The striking final image is of a radio station sending out its final message to some distant center before signing off. The nature of the center remains unknown – it is whatever in the universe listens to the love we experience in our life.

Three Japanese Edo Period Pots

Bowl 1

Witness to old fire,
you beg to be picked up
and returned
to human hands.
And turned . . .
my controlled combustion
pressing warm life
into your creamy glaze
which, once viscously boiling
in 1629
congealed
into pocked perfection.

Bowl 2

Lead-glazed raku,
black, not just dark
but no less comely.
And the sheen of the
night kiln's fire is
in your smooth parts,
in your rough.
Then . . . a cleft
through which the unglazed
clay, your solid soul
emerges.

Bowl 3

Three bands – mauve, gray, mauve.
In balanced contention the caught
but rising matte gray conspires
with the pot's rough rim
to ride me over the edge, where
I see the green froth of
ceremonial tea.

(ctd)

Three Japanese Edo Period Pots

Hon'ami Kōetsu (1558–1637) was a Japanese potter, painter and calligrapher of the Edo period (1603-1867). Though initially trained as a sword-polisher, he became interested in the Way of Tea (*chado*) that had been developed by Sen no Rikyū (1522-1591). This emphasized *wabi* – the transient beauty of simple things. Rikyū's tea ceremony (*chanoyu*) was conducted in a tea house of rustic simplicity using *raku* tea bowls (*chawan*), which were hand shaped and fired at relatively low temperatures, resulting in a rough and crackled finish. Recognizing that things are imperfect and impermanent is one of the first steps on the way to Buddhist enlightenment.

Roald Hoffmann (1937-), a Polish-American scientist, won the 1981 Nobel Prize in Chemistry for his work on the molecular transitions that occur during chemical reactions. He was well trained to appreciate the complex chemistry behind the tea bowls of Koetsu. His poem describes three pots and then comments on their effect.

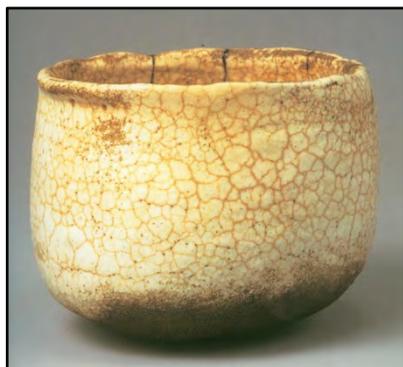
The first bowl is called *Biyakko* (“White Fox”). This white raku bowl has a white glaze that “congealed into pocked perfection.”

The second bowl, called *Shichiri* (“Seven Leagues”), is dark “but comely” like the woman in the Song of Solomon. Its soul emerges through an unglazed break in the surface.

The third bowl – a mauve, gray, mauve pot with a rough rim – is called *Amagumo* (“Rain Clouds”).

The tea master pours boiling water onto powdered green tea in the bowl, whisks the mixture into a bright green foam, and places the bowl in front of the guest, who lifts the bowl with both hands, the left below and the right around. The very simplicity of the ceremony triggers the imagination. One of Rikyū's poems considers how we envision the future:

A person waiting for flowers
can see the spring in the grass
that emerges from the snow
in a mountain village.



All three

You are not a circle, but its end,
the genteel force that makes us turn, turn, turn
in echo of your creation.

In flows of glaze, crackles ceramic,
dimples, burrs, ridges and scratches,
the way ash fell,

textural evidence to chance.

Cultivated – I see heaps of shards –
imperfection, to reveal to refractory
man the perfection sought
in the potter's mind.

And now placed into my hands.
So few things in this world
were really meant to be held...

Before ever again I
call a rough object imperfect
I will remember Koetsu's bowls.

Roald Hoffmann, 1987

The Old Age of Nostalgia

Those hours given over to basking in the glow of an imagined future, of being carried away in streams of promise by a love or a passion so strong that one felt altered forever and convinced that even the smallest particle of the surrounding world was charged with a purpose of impossible grandeur; ah, yes, and one would look up into the trees and be thrilled by the wind-loosened river of pale, gold foliage cascading down and by the high, melodious singing of countless birds; those moments, so many and so long ago, still come back, but briefly, like fireflies in the perfumed heat of a summer night.

Mark Strand, 2012

The final section of Hoffmann's poem deals with the effect of the tea ceremony on the poet. He considers the rough roundness of the bowl, how it turns so gently in the hands, how the beauty of the glaze was more a result of chance than a consequence of design, how more than any other art form the bowl is appreciated by the sense of touch.

The main point of the imperfect bowl is
to reveal to refractory
man the perfection sought
in the potter's mind.

We may never be able to attain what we seek, but what we seek remains in our mind. We will never hold one of Koetsu's bowls but we may imagine the magic of its touch.

Tea master Sen no Sotan, a grandson of Rikyu suggested:

If asked
the nature of chanoyu,
say it's the sound
of windblown pines
in a painting

The Old Age of Nostalgia

Nostalgia is a sense of longing for the past, particularly for those times when one was happy. The word was invented by combining the Greek words *nostos* (homecoming) and *algos* (pain) to describe the homesickness (German, *Heimweh*) felt by mercenary soldiers fighting in the European wars of the 17th Century. The word has expanded from its original yearning for home to any longing for the past, real or imagined.

Strand's brief prose-poem points out those times in the past that we long for were the times when we were full of thoughts about the future. William Wordsworth looked back to the days of his youth in France during the time of the French Revolution:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven (p 202)

This sense of the future made more intense everything perceived in the present. Strand describes, as an example, the "wind-loosened river of pale, gold foliage cascading down." In Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* (IV:3) Berowne describes how the prospect of love:

gives to every power a double power
Above their functions and their offices.
It adds a precious seeing to the eye:
A lover's eyes will gaze an eagle blind.

In our old age we remember how in the past we saw the future clear, and we long for those wonderful moments when we felt "charged with a purpose of impossible grandeur."

Atlantis—A Lost Sonnet

How on earth did it happen, I used to wonder
that a whole city—arches, pillars, colonnades,
not to mention vehicles and animals—had all
one fine day gone under?

I mean, I said to myself, the world was small then.
Surely a great city must have been missed?
I miss our old city —

white pepper, white pudding, you and I meeting
under fanlights and low skies to go home in it. Maybe
what really happened is

this: the old fable-makers searched hard for a word
to convey that what is gone is gone forever and
never found it. And so, in the best traditions of

where we come from, they gave their sorrow a name
and drowned it.

Eavan Boland, 2007

Abishag

1.

At God's word David's kinsmen cast
through Canaan:
It was understood
the king was dying
as they said
outright
so that my father turned to me saying
How much have I ever asked of you
to which I answered
Nothing
as I remembered

So the sun rose from his shoulders:
blue air, the desert, the small
yellowing village

(ctd)

Atlantis—A Lost Sonnet

In two of his minor dialogues Plato tells the mythical story of Atlantis, a great imperial power that besieged Ancient Athens, a state that followed the principles of Plato's ideal republic. Athens defeated Atlantis, which fell out of favor with the gods and sank into the ocean. The fate of Atlantis was thus similar to the end of Helike, a Greek city that was submerged by a tsunami in 373 BCE. Plato's fictional story was meant to illustrate the hubris of nations. However, in the centuries that followed Plato, Atlantis was reconceived as a beautiful lost civilization, perhaps still existing beneath the waves.

Boland likens the idea of the lost Atlantis to the way in which we handle our memories of the happy times that cannot come again – like her memories of Dublin, where the doors are characteristically topped with fanlight windows. And where breakfast was white pudding, a dish made of oats, onions and pork and seasoned with white pepper.

We submerge “what is gone forever” into the sea of the past. We imitate our ancestors who told stories to cope with what has happened:

they gave their sorrow a name
and drowned it.

The poem, written in a conversational rhythm and without rhyme, tries to fit itself into a sonnet. However, some of the lines end before they should, and the poem extends to fifteen rather than fourteen lines. The poet searched hard for the proper form in which to tell the story of her loss but “never found it”

Abishag

Abishag was King David's last concubine. Near the end of his life, his courtiers found that the dying king was growing cold and impotent (“he gat no heat”).

So they sought for a fair damsel throughout all the coasts of Israel, and found Abishag a Shunammite, and brought her to the king.

And the damsel was very fair, and cherished the king, and ministered to him: but the king knew her not. (*1 Kings*: 3-4)

For the ancients, growing old was a process of becoming cold and dry. The practice of restoring heat and moisture to old men by close contact with young women – “shunamitism” – was an accepted medical treatment from ancient times until the 19th century.

Abishag recurs in one other episode in the bible. After the death of David, Adonijah, one of his several sons, wished to be king, and requested Abishag as his wife. Solomon rightly realized that this was simply a ploy to gain the throne, and had Adonijah murdered (*1 Kings* 2: 24-25).

Nothing more is known about Abishag in the bible – she is one of many characters mentioned and then discarded. However, her life has been the subject of rabbinic midrash and poetic exegesis. One possibility is that Abishag, rather than the Queen of Sheba, was the female protagonist of *The Song of Solomon*. Is that book the erotic imaginings of a virgin sleeping with an impotent king?

When I see myself
it is still as I was then,
beside the well, staring
into the hollowed gourd half filled
with water, where the dark braid
grazing the left shoulder was recorded
though the face
was featureless
of which they did not say
*She has the look of one who seeks
some greater and destroying passion:*

They took me as I was.
Not one among the kinsmen touched me,
not one among the slaves.
No one will touch me now.

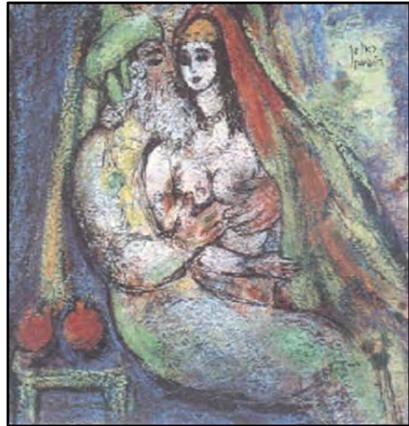
2.

In the recurring dream my father
stands at the doorway in his black cassock
telling me to choose
among my suitors, each of whom
will speak my name once
until I lift my hand in signal.
On my father's arm I listen
for not three sounds: *Abishag*,
but two: *my love*—

I tell you if it is my own will
binding me I cannot be saved.
And yet in the dream, in the half-light
of the stone house, they looked
so much alike. Sometimes I think
the voices were themselves
identical, and that I raised my hand
chiefly in weariness. I hear my father saying
Choose, choose. But they were not alike
and to select death, O yes I can
believe that of my body.

Louis Glück, 1975

Artists have imagined Abishag in many ways: as a voluptuous concubine, as an innocent virgin, and as a solicitous nurse. The illustration on the right (a pastel by the Israeli artist Reuven Rubin, 1893-1974) shows her as a concubine. One must assume that Abishag did not wish herself in any of these roles



Glück imagines Abishag at two times. In the first part of the poem, David's kinsmen select her to be the king's concubine. Her father requests that she acquiesce, saying "*How much have I ever asked of you?*" Abishag's answer is

ambiguous – did she agree that her father had until then made no previous demands of her (asked her nothing) and therefore had a right to this request, or did she just refuse to reply?

Abishag vividly remembers the last moments in her village. Her memory focuses on her reflection in some water that she had just drawn up from the well. She sees her braided hair over her left shoulder but cannot discern the features of her face. She is no longer a person with a right to her own passions – "No one will touch me now."

Such was the fate of women for countless centuries. They were given away by their fathers to men who married for power and not for love, or to temples where they might intercede with the divinity for the benefit of their families. They had no control over their lives. They were not subjects but only the objects of male manipulation.

In the second part of the poem Glück reports a recurring dream of Abishag. One wonders whether she is dreaming about her future – what might happen to her after the death of David and following the murder of Adonijah. Will Abishag be allowed then to marry? In the dream she is asked to choose one of three suitors. She knows nothing about them, and she can base her choice only on how they speak her name. She wishes to hear them say that they love her, but that is not the way the system works. She cannot tell any difference between the suitors. She raises her hand but it does not reflect her will. The only way that she can exert any choice in this world of men is to select death.

In the introduction to *The Second Sex* (1949) Simone de Beauvoir quotes Julien Benda "Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man." De Beauvoir continues

And she is simply what man decrees; thus she is called "the sex," by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex—absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other.

First Meditation on Time

As animals, we think we know what space is. We don't just occupy it: we move through it, back and forth and around, and we stake it out as territory and memorize and defend it. Konrad Lorenz, you remember, says that the experience of navigating space is the biological origin of mind. If he is right, then there's a reason we should think we know what space is. It is our first and maybe only metaphysics.

The birds and bats and dragonflies and fish who fly and swim through space appear to understand it better still. We just walk and crawl and climb around the surfaces of things. Yet we can watch, and even sometimes catch, those flying, swimming creatures, and that has helped us learn to think about spaces we ourselves can only navigate by artificial means.

So we move through space as best we can, and we dream about doing it better, by dancing or flying. But time appears to *move through us* and not the other way around. If time isn't something we can navigate, how could it be something we can really understand.

Perhaps we are actually rooted in time, as plants are rooted in space. If so, we may never know more about time than a spear of asparagus knows about space. And yet we try. We try to move around in time by telling stories, writing histories and novels, composing sonatas and fugues and motets. But how far do we get? All we really seem able to do is grow through a little time the way a stalk of grass or sedge grows through its own height and depth and breadth. We're connected to the past through our grandparents and parents—intellectual and physical—and to the future through our offspring, and that's the way a sedge or a red cedar is connected to different locations in space. If meaning is coming up to someone, thinking is strolling around. And in time, it seems, we can only pretend to go strolling.

Space, the astronomers say, is growing at breakneck speed and has been doing so since the beginning of space and time. Time, it seems, is growing too. But we experience space as something we are somewhere in the middle of. Our relationship to time appears quite different, as if we (and everything else) could never be anywhere except on its frontier, the advancing edge, the crest of the wave. In space you can go home again, and back again; in time it seems you can't. That makes *timelessness* a value, whereas *spacelessness* is not.

Musicians and mythtellers can, in their way, make spaces from pieces of time, and choreographers and playwrights can also make time of pieces of space. The results are sometimes rich and lovely works – the motets of Josquin or Shakespeare's plays—but surely these are maps, portraits, models, not the real thing. And it is precisely because they are models that we can replay them, which we cannot do with history itself. Space is a seemingly endless succession of places which we can in fact revisit, while time is a sequence of places we have lost or not yet found, separated by the one and only, always changing, place where we seem to exist.

In other words, it seems to be like this: space is the unfolding of Being out of itself, while time is the slippage of Being along itself.

Robert Bringham, 2008

First Meditation on Time

This meditation begins with our perception of space. The use of spatial representations is basic to any problem solving. In his essay on *Psychology and Phylogeny* (1954), Lorenz described how an orangutan used an “imagined space” in his mind to figure out how to obtain a banana that was beyond his reach but accessible by standing on a box:

It is more than likely that the entirety of man's thought processes originated from these operations emancipated from actual motor activity in ‘imagined’ space.

Lorenz points out that we generally think about things in spatial terms even when these things are not pictorial – we feel within the “depths” of our soul, and our desires are “behind” our actions.

However, although we think that we understand space, we actually have only a limited experience of its three dimensions. Unlike birds which move freely through space, human beings are generally limited to moving about on the two-dimensional surfaces of things. One of the great achievements of our science has been to provide us with artificial means for flying.

Following Einstein’s work on the *Theory of Relativity* (1905), it has become customary to link the three spatial dimensions to time and to consider things as existing in four dimensions. However, time is different. We can move through space, but time “appears to move through us.”

In a striking image, Bringhamst wonders whether our relation to time may be like the relationship of a plant to space. Just like the plant occupies only one location in space so we occupy only a limited part of time. We might imagine other times, but we cannot actually “go strolling” in time.

The universe has been continuously expanding since its origin in the Big Bang some 13.8 billion years ago. Nevertheless, our own particular location in space appears not to move. Time is perhaps expanding also, but we experience it as continually moving forward. “In space you can go home again, and back again; in time it seems you can't.”

Human beings attempt to overcome the limitations of time through art. This allows us to replay events, something “which we cannot do with history itself.”

In the 1920’s Max Ehrman wrote a prose poem entitled *Desiderata* (things desired), in which he states

You are a child of the universe no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.

Bringhamst links the idea of the universe unfolding to the existentialist and panentheistic concepts of the evolution of Being. Paul’s sermon in Athens urges us to become a part of this divine evolution

For in Him we live and move and have our being. (*Acts* 17:28).

But time remains as a “slippage” in this smooth unfolding of the universe. We are part of an infinite process but we last only for a moment.

Funeral Blues

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message 'He is Dead'.
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now; put out every one,
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun,
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

W. H. Auden, 1938

Anthem for Doomed Youth

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
— Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

Wilfred Owen, 1917

Funeral Blues

This song was first included in Auden and Isherwood's 1936 play *The Ascent of F6*, a commentary on the tragic effects of fame and nationalism. In the play the song is an overwrought response to the death of the leader of a group of British climbers, who all died climbing the mountain named F6. The song parodies the public displays of mourning for those who gave their lives for the nation. Auden later revised the song and republished it in 1938 as one of *Four Cabaret Songs for Miss Hedli Anderson*, with musical setting by Benjamin Britten. Years later, the poem was read by Matthew (John Hannah) as a eulogy for his partner Gareth (Simon Callow) in the 1994 film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. The emotional effect of a song or poem depends as much on its context as on its words. In the film, the poem remains over-the-top but its recitation is profoundly moving.

The poem is written in rhyming couplets. The lines follow no consistent rhythm, but many lines break easily into two halves, each with three main stresses:

/ / - / || - / / - /
Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,

These fit easily within the slow presentation of blues singing (p 105). One can almost hear the audience repeating the singer's words. Other lines are longer and more conversational (and iambic) as though the singer pauses the song to speak:

| - / | - / | - / || - / | - / |
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.

The imagery of grief begins simply but slowly ascends to hyperbolic levels

The stars are not wanted now; put out every one,
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun

Anthem for Doomed Youth

In 1917, after enduring several days of severe bombardment in the trenches of Northern France, Wilfred Owen was sent back to Britain with a diagnosis of neurasthenia ("shell shock"). He was treated by W. H. R. Rivers at Craiglockhart Hospital in Edinburgh, where he met Siegfried Sassoon (pp 78, 171), sent there to escape court martial for writing a pamphlet criticizing Britain's war effort. Sassoon took the younger poet under his wing, and advised him on his poetry. It is to Sassoon that we owe this poem's title and the phrase "patient minds."

The poem is an irregular sonnet. Owen indicated a division between octave and sestet as in a Petrarchan sonnet, but the rhyme scheme, particularly in the sestet – *effegg* – with its concluding couplet, is more like a Shakespearean sonnet.

"Passing bells" are rung for those who have just died as a call to prayer for their departed souls. The octave of the poem describes the terrible sounds of trench warfare that drown out any passing bells.

The sestet describes the effects of the war-deaths on the home front. The "drawing-down of blinds" alludes to the custom whereby the newly dead were kept in their coffins in the family house with the blinds drawn, before being taken to the church for the funeral services.

The Whitsun Weddings

That Whitsun, I was late getting away:

Not till about

One-twenty on the sunlit Saturday

Did my three-quarters-empty train pull out,
All windows down, all cushions hot, all sense

Of being in a hurry gone. We ran

Behind the backs of houses, crossed a street

Of blinding windscreens, smelt the fish-dock; thence

The river's level drifting breadth began,

Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet.

All afternoon, through the tall heat that slept

For miles inland,

A slow and stopping curve southwards we kept.

Wide farms went by, short-shadowed cattle, and

Canals with floatings of industrial froth;

A hothouse flashed uniquely: hedges dipped

And rose: and now and then a smell of grass

Displaced the reek of buttoned carriage-cloth

Until the next town, new and nondescript,

Approached with acres of dismantled cars.

At first, I didn't notice what a noise

The weddings made

Each station that we stopped at: sun destroys

The interest of what's happening in the shade,

And down the long cool platforms whoops and skirls

I took for porters larking with the mails,

And went on reading. Once we started, though,

We passed them, grinning and pomaded, girls

In parodies of fashion, heels and veils,

All posed irresolutely, watching us go,

As if out on the end of an event

Waving goodbye

To something that survived it. Struck, I leant

More promptly out next time, more curiously,

And saw it all again in different terms:

The fathers with broad belts under their suits

And seamy foreheads; mothers loud and fat;

An uncle shouting smut; and then the perms,

The nylon gloves and jewellery-substitutes,

The lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres that

(ctd)

The Whitsun Weddings

Whitsun is the 7th Sunday after Easter, occurring sometime between late May and early June. This holy day celebrates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Christ's disciples on the Jewish feast of Pentecost ("50 days" after the first day of Passover), as described in *Acts 2* (1-4):

And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.

And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting.

And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them.

And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

The name of the day derives either from the "white" color of the vestments worn by the celebrants on that day or on the idea that this was the day that Christ's disciples were infused with wisdom ("wit").

At the time that Larkin wrote this poem, Whit Monday was a public holiday. In addition, at the time of the train trip, a man who married before Whitsun was allowed to claim a married person's tax deduction for the whole year (Osborne, 2008). These two reasons made the Saturday before Whitsun popular as a wedding day, especially among the poorer segments of society. The ceremony would occur on Saturday morning and the newly weds would then take the train to London for their honeymoon.

Larkin worked for much of his life as a librarian at the University of Hull. He travelled so often on the train from Kingston-upon-Hull to London that his commemorative statue was erected in Hull's Paragon Station. This poem describes one of his trips to London.

The poem is set up in 8 stanzas, each containing ten lines. The rhyme scheme – *ababcdecde* – is the same as that used by Keats in his *Ode on a Nightingale* (p 21) and *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (p 106). Larkin uses iambic pentameter lines (with some varied feet) except for the second line which contains only two feet. It is the regular rhythm of a train that has to stop occasionally at the intervening towns.

The first two stanzas describe the beginning of the journey. The weather was very warm and the train left the station in the early afternoon crossing the River Hull – "where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet" – before beginning its winding route to London. The "short-shadowed cattle" indicate that the sun is high in the sky. Acres of wrecked cars are seen just before the "nondescript" towns.

After a while, the poet notices that, at each station, a newly wed couple gets on the train and the wedding guests celebrate their departure with "whoops and shrieks." The latter term originally described the high shrill sounds of a bagpipe but here denotes the shrieks of happy humans. Larkin snobbishly notices that the wedding parties were from the lower classes. The dresses were "parodies of fashion;" the gloves were nylon rather than silk; the jewellery was fake; the belts were the broad belts of working men.

Marked off the girls unreally from the rest.
 Yes, from cafés
And banquet-halls up yards, and bunting-dressed
Coach-party annexes, the wedding-days
Were coming to an end. All down the line
Fresh couples climbed aboard: the rest stood round;
The last confetti and advice were thrown,
And, as we moved, each face seemed to define
Just what it saw departing: children frowned
At something dull; fathers had never known

Success so huge and wholly farcical;
 The women shared
The secret like a happy funeral;
While girls, gripping their handbags tighter, stared
At a religious wounding. Free at last,
And loaded with the sum of all they saw,
We hurried towards London, shuffling gout of steam.
Now fields were building-plots, and poplars cast
Long shadows over major roads, and for
Some fifty minutes, that in time would seem

Just long enough to settle hats and say
 I nearly died,
A dozen marriages got under way.
They watched the landscape, sitting side by side
—An Odeon went past, a cooling tower,
And someone running up to bowl—and none
Thought of the others they would never meet
Or how their lives would all contain this hour.
I thought of London spread out in the sun,
Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat:

There we were aimed. And as we raced across
 Bright knots of rail
Past standing Pullmans, walls of blackened moss
Came close, and it was nearly done, this frail
Travelling coincidence; and what it held
Stood ready to be loosed with all the power
That being changed can give. We slowed again,
And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled
A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.

Philip Larkin, 1964

Larkin also belittles the wedding celebrations held in cafés, banquet-halls, and coach-party annexes. He imagines the many different emotions aroused as the wedding couples leave: the children bored, the fathers proud of their success, the women content as at a “happy funeral,” and the girls struck by the sacredness of what they had just witnessed. Larkin himself never got married. One wonders about his cynicism. He is making fun of those who set out on paths he would never travel.

The train receives the newly weds and heads off to London. As it gathers speed, various scenes flash by the window. A cricket player runs up to bowl but one never sees the ball released nor the batsman’s stroke. The train will take the couples into their new lives “with all the power that being changed can give.” But we cannot know how the married lives of the newly weds will turn out.

The poem ends with the image of

an arrow shower
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.

Larkin later mentioned that he had been impressed by the volleys of arrows sent by the English bowmen at Agincourt in Lawrence Olivier’s 1944 movie of *Henry V* (right).

Arrows have long been associated with Eros and with love. They are the weapons that wound those who fall in love, and make them suffer with desire. They are mentioned in Blake’s 1804 poem *And did those feet in ancient times* from his epic *Milton*:



Bring me my Bow of burning gold:
Bring me my Arrows of desire:
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold:
Bring me my Chariot of fire!

Larkin’s image suggests the passions of the newly wed on their way to London, where they will spend their first night of their honeymoon. One may not know where the arrows will fall back to earth, as in the Longfellow poem:

I shot an arrow into the air,
It fell to earth, I knew not where;
For, so swiftly it flew, the sight
Could not follow it in its flight.

Perhaps the grand hopes of those in love may not always reach their goal. However, in the end of Longfellow’s poem, the poet finds the arrow. And in the Larkin poem, the “sense of falling” is tempered by the image of the arrows “becoming rain.” The rain will fall on the fertile earth and bring forth life.

from **Seeing Things**

Claritas. The dry-eyed Latin word
Is perfect for the carved stone of the water
Where Jesus stands up to his unwet knees
And John the Baptist pours out more water
Over his head: all this in bright sunlight
On the façade of a cathedral. Lines
Hard and thin and sinuous represent
The flowing river. Down between the lines
Little antic fish are all go. Nothing else.
And yet in that utter visibility
The stone's alive with what's invisible:
Waterweed, stirred sand-grains hurrying off,
The shadowy, unshadowed stream itself.
All afternoon, heat wavered on the steps
And the air we stood up to our eyes in wavered
Like the zig-zag hieroglyph for life itself.

Seamus Heaney, 1991

Catch

Two boys uncoached are tossing a poem together,
Overhand, underhand, backhand, sleight of hand, every hand,
Teasing with attitudes, latitudes, interludes, altitudes,
High, make him fly off the ground for it, low, make him stoop,
Make him scoop it up, make him as-almost-as-possible miss it,
Fast, let him sting from it, now, now fool him slowly,
Anything, everything tricky, risky, nonchalant,
Anything under the sun to outwit the prosy,
Over the tree and the long sweet cadence down,
Over his head, make him scramble to pick up the meaning,
And now, like a posy, a pretty one plump in his hands.

Robert Francis, 1960

Seeing Things

This 16-line poem is the second of three poems in the sequence *Seeing Things*. In this triptych, Heaney reports three experiences when he saw clearly beyond the appearances of reality. In the first poem he remembers being frightened as a child on a boat trip to Inishboffin, one of the tiny islands off the western coast of Ireland, the site of one of the early Irish monasteries. He sees how the passengers in the overloaded boat were under divine protection. The third poem recounts how he saw his father returning from an accident wherein he had almost drowned. Heaney sees him “face to face” and realizes the love between them.



The middle poem describes one of the panels on the façade of Orvieto Cathedral, sculpted by Lorenzo Maitani and his colleagues in the 14th Century CE. The panel, illustrated on the right, shows the baptism of Christ as he stands knee deep in the waters of the River Jordan. Above is the dove of the Holy Spirit:

and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God
descending like a dove, and lighting upon him (*Matthew 3: 16*)

Heaney is impressed by how well the sculptor represented the clarity of the water. and realizes how art allows us to see truths that are otherwise invisible

The stone’s alive with what’s invisible.

The zig-zag is an Egyptian hieroglyph for water.

The Latin word *claritas*, usually translated simply as “clarity,” also has meanings of brightness (for light), loudness (for sound) and celebrity (for person). In Heaney’s poem the meaning is close to “splendor” or “radiance,” though it is “dry-eyed,” lacking the emotional connotations of those words.

Catch

In this poem Francis compares the composition and reading of a poem to a game of catch. Each passage of the ball from one boy to the other represents a line of the poem. These must vary or the game and the poem will become boring. Some lines will require dexterity to understand. Some lines will make the catcher “almost-as-possible-miss” them, whereas others will have “a long sweet cadence.” Some lines will be easy whereas others will make the catcher “scramble to pick up the meaning.”

Though it has no regular rhyme or rhythm, the poem is rife with poetic music: rhymes across the lines (“stoop/scoop” “prosy/prosy”); alliteration (“posy, a pretty one plump”). Anaphora (repetition at the beginning – “Anything,” and “Over”) and epistrophe (repetition at the end – “-hand” and “-udes”) provide their own simple rhythms.

Death Fugue

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown
we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night
we drink it and drink it
we dig a grave in the breezes there one lies unconfined
A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes
he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair Margarete
he writes it and steps out of doors and the stars are flashing he
whistles his pack out
he whistles his Jews out in earth has them dig for a grave
he commands us strike up for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you in the morning at noon we drink you at sundown
we drink and we drink you
A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes
he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith we dig a grave in the breezes there
one lies unconfined

He calls out jab deeper into the earth you lot you others sing now and play
he grabs at the iron in his belt he waves it his eyes are blue
jab deeper you lot with your spades you others play on for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at at noon in the morning we drink you at sundown
we drink and we drink you
a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith he plays with the serpents

He calls out more sweetly play death death is a master from Germany
he calls out more darkly now stroke your strings then
as smoke you will rise into air
then a grave you will have in the clouds there one lies unconfined

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at noon death is a master from Germany
we drink you at sundown and in the morning we drink and we drink you
death is a master from Germany his eyes are blue
he strikes you with leaden bullets his aim is true
a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete
he sets his pack on to us he grants us a grave in the air
He plays with the serpents and daydreams death is
a master from Germany

your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith

Paul Celan, 1948, translated by Michael Hamburger, 1989

Death Fugue

In 1949, Theodor Adorno claimed “*Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch*” (After Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric), though in 1966 he recanted this idea and admitted that “Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream”

Celan’s poem is the most famous poem about the Holocaust. His description of what happened in the death camps is as moving as it is surreal. Following the rhythms of a Klezmer band, the poem describes how the commandant of the camp orders the deaths of its inmates and the incineration of their bodies.

Jewish prisoners were often asked play music and to dance as they prepared to be murdered. The idea recalls the medieval *Totentanz* (dance of death) but this was completely different: in the camps the music was supplied by the victims rather than by Death, and death came by human hands and not by natural causes.

In keeping with the idea of a dance, the poem repeats a refrain about the black milk. The refrain varies slightly with the time of day. As the poem proceeds, the music of the refrain runs together with other themes such as Death being “the master from Germany” to form a fugue:

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at noon death is a master from Germany
we drink you at sundown and in the morning we drink and we drink you
death is a master from Germany his eyes are blue

A third theme is sounded in the middle of the poem and provides its coda

your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith

The names may refer to a woman whom the commandant loves and writes to, and to one of the Jewish inmates of the camp. More likely they allude to the character of Gretchen in Goethe’s *Faust*, a paragon of innocence and beauty, seduced by Faust and Mephistopheles, and to the female lover of the *Song of Solomon*, also known as the Shulamite. Gretchen has golden hair whereas the Shulamite is “black, but comely” (*Song of Solomon* 1: 5). However, in the camps Shulamith’s body and her hair are reduced to ashes. Words from the *Song of Solomon* (6:13) are read during in the celebration of Passover to invoke God’s love for his people

Return, return, O Shulamite; return, return, that we may look upon thee.

Celan’s poem uses “audacious metaphors,” a term (*kühne Metapher*) suggested by Weinrich (1996) to describe metaphorical combinations that are physically impossible. These convey the terror of what should have never been thought possible. The first of these is “black milk” – milk can only be thought of as white. The black milk may represent the swill given to the inmates as their only nourishment. In its metaphorical sense, however, it shows how the camps completely inverted all our ideas – what once was pure and life-giving now has become evil and death-bringing. Another striking metaphor is the “grave in the clouds.” A normal grave is dug in the earth. After the holocaust one is forced to conceive of the ashes of the incinerated corpses floating up to a grave in the sky.

Wild nights – Wild nights!
Were I with thee
Wild nights should be
Our luxury!

Futile – the winds –
To a Heart in port –
Done with the Compass -
Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden –
Ah – the Sea!
Might I but moor – tonight –
In thee!

Emily Dickinson, 1861

from **Howard's End**

...she might yet be able to help him to the building of the rainbow bridge that should connect the prose in us with the passion. Without it we are meaningless fragments, half monks, half beasts, unconnected arches that have never joined into a man. With it love is born, and alights on the highest curve, glowing against the grey, sober against the fire. Happy the man who sees from either aspect the glory of these outspread wings. The roads of his soul lie clear, and he and his friends shall find easy-going. ...

Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die.

E. M. Forster, 1910

Wild nights

This is Dickinson's most passionate poem. Her life is stormy and she asks to moor her boat in the port of her lover. The poem presents the ambiguity of desire. The reader is not sure how much Dickinson desires the storm or wishes the port. Erotic love has two sides – the lust of intercourse and the serenity that follows after. The diction is similarly ambiguous: “luxury” can mean either sensual pleasure or lust. In the words of Judith Farr (1992) the poem is “ironic, paradoxical, voluptuous, and terse all at once

Erotic love is beyond the limits of normal society:

Done with the Compass -
Done with the Chart!

Except for the last verse, the poem uses short lines of 4 or 5 syllables. There is no time for the niceties of longer lines. The first line uses two spondees (//|//). Most other line have two stresses. In the last two lines “tonight” has been moved to the preceding line so that the poem ends focused “in thee.” The second and fourth lines rhyme, either regularly or slant (port/Chart).

No one is sure to whom the poem was written. At about the same time that she composed this poem, Dickinson drafted some-letters to a “Master,” but this person, whether real or imagined, does not appear to be the addressee of the poem. *Wild nights* was almost certainly written for her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert Dickinson, with whom Dickinson conducted a lifelong love-affair.

Howard's End

The expression “Only connect!” is frequently the first thing that comes to mind when one considers E. M. Forster. Most people interpret the instruction as urging us to communicate with one another despite differences of race, class, gender, wealth, politics or nationality. However, as Prufrock said (p 47)

That is not what I meant at all;
That is not it, at all.

As well as serving as the epigraph to the novel *Howard's End*, “Only connect!” occurs about half way through the book, just after Margaret Schlegel has surprisingly accepted the marriage proposal of Henry Wilcox. Their relationship has so far not shown any evidence that it will involve much physical intimacy.

Margaret's idea was that they should build the “rainbow bridge” that will “connect the prose in us with the passion.” This was the only way to transcend the beast and the monk that reside in conflict within us all. The connection was actually not to be. Henry was too far set in his ways to change.

The advice to balance the physical and the spiritual aspects of love is as important now as it was then. Today we often forget the higher claims of love in the enjoyment of its physical aspects. In the days of Forster's youth, the physical was repressed. He did not realize how man and woman were joined in physical love until he was 31 years old, and his own homosexuality was considered a heinous sin in the society of his day.

The Conversation of Prayers

The conversation of prayers about to be said
By the child going to bed and the man on the stairs
Who climbs to his dying love in her high room,
The one not caring to whom in his sleep he will move
And the other full of tears that she will be dead,

Turns in the dark on the sound they know will arise
Into the answering skies from the green ground,
From the man on the stairs and the child by his bed.
The sound about to be said in the two prayers
For the sleep in a safe land and the love who dies

Will be the same grief flying. Whom shall they calm?
Shall the child sleep unharmed or the man be crying?
The conversation of prayers about to be said
Turns on the quick and the dead, and the man on the stairs
To-night shall find no dying but alive and warm

In the fire of his care his love in the high room.
And the child not caring to whom he climbs his prayer
Shall drown in a grief as deep as his true grave,
And mark the dark eyed wave, through the eyes of sleep,
Dragging him up the stairs to one who lies dead.

Dylan Thomas, 1946

from **Paradise Lost**

(beginning of Book I)

Of Man's first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
Brought death into the World, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
Sing, Heavenly Muse,

....

That, to the height of this great argument,
I may assert Eternal Providence,
And justify the ways of God to men.

(ctd)

The Conversation of Prayers

Since the beginning of time, we have prayed to the gods to give us what we wish. This poem describes two prayers, one from a man who hopes his love will not die and the other from a child who asks “for sleep in a safe land.” The two prayers are similar: they both request that death not occur: they are the “same grief flying.” The man’s prayer is granted; the child’s is not. The man finds his love “alive and warm in the fir of his care.” The child “drowns in his grief” as he grows up and realizes that that someday he is going to die.

A conversation involves an exchange. Its etymology comes from *con*, together and *versus*, turning. This particular conversation “turns on the quick and the dead,” an expression used in the *Nicene Creed* in Cranmer’s *Book of Common Prayer* (1549) to describe the final judgment when God decides who shall live forever, and who shall remain dead. “Quick” initially meant “alive” before it assumed a second meaning related to speed. Just like God will then decide that one may live and another die, so does he answer the two prayers in this particular conversation.

The rhyme scheme of the poem is complicated. The end of the first line rhymes with the middle of the second (said/bed) and the middle of the first line rhymes with the end of the second (prayers/stairs). This cross-over rhyming repeats in the third and fourth lines (room/whom; move/love) and the fifth line end-rhymes with the first (dead/bed) and middle-rhymes (tears/stairs) with the second line. The other verses follow the same *ab/ba/cd/dc/ba* schema except that the last line of the poem rhymes with its first.

The universe carries on without much regard for human beings. We try to understand why things turn out the way they do. We assume an underlying justice. But this may be like the poet’s rhyme scheme which imposes an order but does not change the meaning of the words. Human beings die. No prayer can prevent this from happening.

Paradise Lost

In 1667 Milton first published his great epic of how Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s commandment not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge, and were therefore expelled from the Garden of Eden. At that time, the country was painfully recovering from the English Civil War (1642-1651) and the Great Plague of 1665. Although Charles II had been acclaimed king in 1660, politics remained uneasy. The world was in need of Providence.

Milton based the style of his epic on the *Aeneid* of Virgil (19 BCE). His opening is similar to Virgil’s *Arma virumque cano* (Of arms and the man I sing). Both poets invoke the aid of the muse: Milton’s “Sing, Heavenly Muse” recalls Virgil’s *Musa mihi causas memora* (Recount, O Muse, the causes).

Virgil’s epic dealt with the Fall of Troy and the foundation of Rome. Milton’s epic considers the Fall of Man and the Providence of God. Milton wrote the sequel *Paradise Regained* in 1671 and revised *Paradise Lost* in 1674 just before his death.

(end of Book XII)

. High in front advanced,
The brandished sword of God before them blazed,
Fierce as a comet; which with torrid heat,
And vapour as the Libyan air adust,
Began to parch that temperate clime; whereat
In either hand the hastening Angel caught
Our lingering parents, and to the eastern gate
Led them direct, and down the cliff as fast
To the subjected plain; then disappeared.
They, looking back, all the eastern side beheld
Of Paradise, so late their happy seat,
Waved over by that flaming brand; the gate
With dreadful faces thronged, and fiery arms:
Some natural tears they dropt, but wiped them soon;
The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
They, hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way.

John Milton, 1674

Fire and Ice

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

Robert Frost, 1923

After Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, God was concerned that they might also eat from the Tree of Life and thus become equal to the gods – both knowing the difference between good and evil and living forever. And so God drove Adam out of Paradise:

Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken.

So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life. (*Genesis* 3: 23-24)

The Cherubim are the highest rank of angels, those responsible for carrying out divine will in the world. The final phrase means to block the path back to the Tree of Life. Milton expands this brief report in *Genesis*, providing more details about the Cherubim and the sword, and considering the response of Adam and Eve.

The Judeo-Christian interpretation of this narrative is that Adam and Eve committed their original sin by disobeying God and eating the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. For this they were exiled from paradise and made subject to death. At another level of interpretation, we can consider humankind as both blessed and cursed with a sense of morality. Although we know what is right and wrong, we still do not always choose correctly.

In *Paradise Lost*, Milton combined the account in *Genesis* with the story of Lucifer's fall from Heaven, as suggested by the words of *Isaiah* (14:12):

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!

Both stories tell of a fall from grace.

Milton found it difficult not to admire the pride and defiance of Lucifer, and in the concluding lines to *Paradise Lost* he sympathized more with Adam and Eve than with their God. There is a sense of hope and determination in

The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:

The last lines have the rhythm of their slow and resolute footsteps

They, hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way.

Fire and Ice

Astronomers predict that many billion years from now our sun will evolve into a red giant. It might then expand sufficiently that the Earth will be absorbed into its flames. However, the red giant might perhaps collapse into a white dwarf before the Earth is absorbed, in which case the Earth will become a cold and lifeless planet. Humanity will be long gone before either of these possible futures

Frost uses these ideas not to predict the end of the world but to consider what might lead to the demise of humanity. Will we kill ourselves off through our unrestrained desires or through our irrational hatreds? The astronomical hypotheses are but metaphors for the problems of the human heart.

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