Scorn not the sonnet; critic, you have frowned,
Mindless of its just honors; with this key
Shakespeare unlocked his heart; the melody
Of this small lute gave ease to Petrarch's wound;
A thousand times this pipe did Tasso sound;
With it Camoens soothed an exile's grief;
The sonnet glittered a gay myrtle leaf
Amid the cypress with which Dante crowned
His visionary brow: a glow-worm lamp,
It cheered mild Spenser, called from faeryland
To struggle through dark ways; and, when a damp
Fell round the path of Milton, in his hand
The thing became a trumpet; whence he blew
Soul-animating strains—alas, too few!

Wordsworth: "The Sonnet"

Thus did Wordsworth, himself a master of the form, defend the sonnet as a small
but highly sensitive instrument capable of soft, subtle, and even sublime music. Naturally,
Wordsworth concluded his apology with a tribute to his countryman for Milton was not
only one of the greatest writers of sonnet but Wordsworth's inspiring predecessor in this
form. The sonnet is easily one of the favorite, if not the favorite, forms of Western poets
for the concise expression of a single thought or sentiment that often, in the hand of
a master, rises to the sublime in spite of its limited space. In a poem of only fourteen
lines, the measures may be brief, the gamut narrow, but the melody is none the less
moving and memorable. A perfect sonnet is, in the words of D.G. Rossetti, "a moment's
monument—/Memorial from the Soul's eternity/To one dead deathless hour." Or it is
the palm of "the magic hand of chance" where we find it so easy to hold infinity. Under-
standably, it has remained a popular form of short lyric poetry from its introduction into English literature by Wyatt and Surrey in early sixteenth century, through its heyday in the Elizabethan age and its revival among the Romantics, to its modern variations well into the twentieth century.

THE INTRODUCTION AND EARLY DEVELOPMENTS

The word "sonnet", having the same root in Latin as the word "sonorous", traces its origin back through French and Italian to "sonet" in Provencal, which was further derived from "sonus", meaning "sound" in Latin. Thus the sonnet originated in medieval Provence in the thirteenth century and Petrarch (1304-74), who perfected the Italian sonnet, has been considered its great founder. Petrarch (in Italian, Francesco Petrarca), who ranked with Dante and Boccaccio as one of the forerunners of Italian Renaissance, wrote a total of 366 poems in the Italian vernacular, centering on the life and death of Laura, a married woman whom he loved. Of these the sonnets form the majority and best express the poet's inner struggle between the sensuous and the ascetic in tender and plaintive tones and with technical brilliance. Petrarch himself valued Latin above Italian and believed in the superiority of his writings in Latin to these poems in Italian which he often regarded as his juvenile trifles. Yet eventually it was his sonnets to Laura that swept Europe and immortalized their author. Courtly love, medieval code of love-making in the literature of chivalric society, a code that emphasized on the one hand a sensual, illicit, adulterous love of a man for a married woman and on the other his devotion to the ideal of womanhood and his abject humility, complete loyalty, and veneration for the beloved, was greatly modified, when it reached Italy, and was given spiritual and Platonic overtones (with adultery eliminated) by Dante and others. Through the sonnets of Petrarch courtly love became fashionable in lyric poetry in Renaissance England and France and Petrarch was widely imitated for his mood, imagery, and rhyme scheme for more than two centuries.

The sonnet was introduced into France and England at about the same time, though its adoption by the French poets seemed to have preceded that by the English by many years. It was Clement Marot (1495-1544) who first introduced the Petrarchan sonnet into French literature and whose influence on Ronsard (1524-85) and other members of the
Pleiade\textsuperscript{1} established this form in that country. Meantime, there appeared in England in 1557 a volume of poems entitled \textit{Songses and Sonettes}, written by the ryght honorable Lorde Henry Howard late Earle of Surrey, and other, commonly known, from the publisher's name, as \textit{Tottel's Miscellany}.

Two writers stood out among the contributors to \textit{Tottel's Miscellany}. Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503–42) and Henry Howard (1517?–47), Earl of Surrey, were responsible for the introduction and adoption of the sonnet in England, though it was Wyatt who wrote the first sonnet in English. Wyatt also translated Petrarch, but his own sonnets, however indebted to the model, did not strictly follow the Petrarchan scheme.

\begin{quote}
Farewell, Love, and all thy laws for ever!
Thy baited hooks shall tangle me no more:
Senec\textsuperscript{2} and Plato call me from thy lore
To perfect wealth my wit for the endeavor.
In blindest error when I did persever,
Thy sharp repulse, that pricketh aye so sore,
Hath taught me to set in trifles no store;
And 'scape forth, since liberty is lever.
Therefore, farewell! go trouble younger hearts,
And in me claim no more authority.
With idle youth go use thy property,
And thereon spend thy many brittle darts;
   For hitherto though I have lost my time,
   Me list no longer rotten boughs to climb.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textit{Wyatt: "The Lover Renounceth Love"}
\end{quote}

A strict Petrarchan sonnet has fourteen lines which form the octave (the first eight lines) and the sestet (the last six lines), the octave rhyming abba, abba, and the sestet using two alternate rhymes, cdcdcd. Variations occur in the number and order of the rhymes in the sestet, the more common ones being cdecde and cdedce. "The octave

\begin{itemize}
\item[1.] The Pleiade: the name given to a group of 16th-century French writers who joined under the leadership of Ronsard to create a new French poetry comparable to that of classical antiquity. The name was derived from a constellation of seven stars called the Pleiades. The seven poets of the Pleiade are, besides Ronsard himself, Du Bellay, de Baif, Jodelle, Pontus de Tyard, Belleau, and Dorat.
\item[2.] Senec: Seneca, Roman dramatist and essayist.
\end{itemize}
presents the theme in the first quatrain and develops it in the second; the sestet exemplifies or reflects upon it in the first tercet and brings it to a logical emphatic close in the second. But, whatever the variations, it is essential for the Petrarchan sonnet to be divided into the octave and the sestet, making it two closely-paired poems expressing two different aspects of the same idea or sentiment, and to avoid a strong concluding couplet which tends to divide the sonnet into three parts instead of two. Wyatt generally followed the Petrarchan scheme in the octave, but accidentally and even intentionally ended many of his sonnets with a couplet, as is shown in the sonnet quoted above. This helped to mold the new Elizabethan sonnet, which, in the hand of Surrey, a much younger successor, settled down as three quatrains of alternate rhymes followed by a concluding couplet.

Set me whereas the sun doth parch the green,
Or where his beams do not dissolve the ice,
In temperate heat where he is felt and seen;
In presence 'prest of people, mad or wise;
Set me in high or yet in low degree,
In longest night or in the shortest day,
In clearest sky or where clouds thickest be,
In lusty youth or when my hairs are gray.
Set me in heaven, in earth, or else in hell;
In hill, or dale, or in the foaming flood;
Thral or at large, alive, whereso I dwell,
Sick or in health, in evil fame or good;
Hers will I be, and only with this thought
Content myself although my chance be nought.

Surrey: "Vow to Love Faithfully"

Such an English sonnet, markedly deviating from the Petrarchan in its scheme of three quatrains and a couplet, anticipated the sonnets of Shakespeare who explored the possibilities of this new form with such perfect mastery that it is commonly known as the Shakespearean sonnet.

THE ELIZABETHAN SONNET

Wyatt and Surrey introduced and made the first attempts at the sonnet, but in their wake there followed no immediate successors. It was not until Edmund Spenser (1552-
99) that a master of the form appeared. Spenser was influenced by his French predecessors in his writing of sonnets. He rendered Du Bellay in such collections of sonnets as The Visions of Bellay and The Ruines of Rome by Bellay and translated The Visions of Petrarch from Marot. In addition to his sonnet sequence Amoretti, these show Spenser as a major sonneteer with sureness of craftsmanship and a sweet melodiousness of versification. Spenser shaped his personal version of the English sonnet in that, though there were three quatrains followed by a couplet, he arranged the rhyme scheme in such a way (ababbcbc cdcd ee) as to link the octave and the sestet in a closely knit pattern.

Like as a huntsman after weary chase,
Seeing the game from him escaped away,
Sits down to rest him in some shady place,
With panting hounds, beguiled of their prey:
So, after long pursuit and vain assay,
When I all weary had the chase forsook,
The gentle deer returned the self-same way,
Thinking to quench her thirst at the next brook.
There she, beholding me with milder look,
Sought not to fly, but fearless still did bide,
Till I in hand her yet half trembling took,
And with her own good-will her firmly tied.

Strange thing, me seemed, to see a beast so wild
So goodly won, with her own will beguiled.

Spenser: from Amoretti

This variation of the English sonnet is called Spenserian. In fact, Spenser is the founder of the Elizabethan sonnet, a new medium of free lyrical expression at which, in the last decade of the sixteenth century, every aspiring poet tried his hand. It is at this time that the sonnet sequence, a group of sonnets centering on a common theme of love, came in fashion. Active and talented practitioners of the trade in the Elizabethan age boast such names as, apart from Spenser, Sidney, Shakespeare, Samuel Daniel, Michael Drayton, Henry Constable, Barnabe Barnes, Thomas Lodge, and Giles Fletcher. The last six had occasional triumphs that keep their names remembered, but only the first three demonstrated substantial and sustained mastery in both mood and manner.

Technically, Sir Philip Sidney is interesting because he is the most inconsistent of the three Elizabethan masters in rhyme scheme. This becomes obvious when we look at
Astrophel and Stella, a sonnet sequence in which he lamented his hopeless love for Penelope Devereux. The rhyme scheme is highly irregular, neither strictly Petrarchan nor typically Shakespearean nor yet Spenserian. It varies from "abab/abab/cdcd/ee" to "abba/abba/cdcd/ee" and "abab/baba/bc/bc". Nor is the irregularity present in the rhyme scheme only. The introductory poem ("Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show"), for instance, is in the French Alexandrine instead of the more common iambic pentameter. It would seem that Sidney could not quite make up his mind whether he should follow Petrarch closely, for in the octave though he used only two rhymes, sometimes even in the regular Petrarchan order of "abba/abba", he seemed to be indecisive in the sestet where, according to the Italian form, the last two lines rhyme independently without forming a marked couplet. Yet, on the whole, I would describe most of the sonnets in Astrophel and Stella as more Petrarchan than Shakespearean.

With how sad steps, O Moon, thou climbst the skies,
How silently, and with how wan a face!
What, may it be that even in heav'nly place
That busy archer his sharp arrows tries?
Sure, if that long-with-love-acquainted eyes
Can judge of love, thou feel'st a lover's case;
I read it in thy looks: thy languisht grace,
To me, that feel the like, thy state describes.
Then, ev'n of fellowship, O Moon, tell me,
Is constant love deem'd there but want of wit?
Are beauties there as proud as here they be?
Do they above love to be loved, and yet
Those lovers scorn whom that love doth possess?
Do they call virtue there ungratefulness?

Sidney: from Astrophel and Stella

The host of sonneteers that made Elizabethan poetry so melodious tended to deviate more and more from the Petrarchan form until this adopted medium carried an English cadence, so memorable in Shakespeare's sonnets. Today, Shakespeare seems to overshadow all his fellow-practitioners, but, in his day, it was Thomas Watson (1557-92) who won popularity as a writer of sonnet. With the publication in 1582 of The Hekatompathia or Passionate Centurie of Love he was hailed as the successor of Petrarch and the English Ronsard. Most of the hundred "Passions" in this collection are, however, in

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4. Astrophel and Stella: meaning the Star-Lover and the Star, a disguise of Sir Philip Sidney's name.
three six-line verses. Later, in his *The Teares of Fancie, or, Love Disdained*, Watson published sixty sonnets in the typical Elizabethan form. Neither collection is valued today.

Of all the minor sonneteers only Michael Drayton (1563–1631) erected that monument of a moment in a unique poem often called *The Parting*:

> Since there's no help, come, let us kiss and part;
> Nay, I have done, you get no more of me;
> And I am glad, yea, glad with all my heart
> That thus so cleanly I myself can free,
> Shake hands for ever, cancel all our vows,
> And, when we meet at any time again,
> Be it not seen in either of our brows
> That we one jot of former love retain.

> Now at the last gasp of Love's latest breath,
> When, his pulse failing, Passion speechless lies,
> When Faith is kneeling by his bed of death,
> And Innocence is closing up his eyes—
> Now if thou wouldst, when all have given him over,
> From death to life thou might'st him yet recover.

Drayton: from *Idea*

Though there is a division into octave and sestet, the poem is English in its rhyme scheme and its division of three quatrains and a couplet. Yet, on rereading, we find the sestet to be independent of the octave and the couplet closely-knit into the general pattern. I find the couplet particularly powerful, even more so than most of the concluding couplets of Shakespearean sonnets, for it not only radically changes the meaning of the preceding lines but catches a most dramatic situation in the lovers' struggle between feigned indifference and passionate remorse. The weight of this couplet is felt the moment we compare it with Shakespeare's

> But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
> All losses are restored, and sorrows end.

or with his

> So long as men can breathe or eyes can see
> So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

It immediately becomes clear that, while Drayton's sole masterpiece is dramatic, Shakespeare's sonnets are generally meditative.

It is true meditation and sweet-sad contemplation instead of immediate passion
pervade the 154 sonnets of the Swan of Avon. Too much ink has been spilt over the controversies on these poems and too little space is available here for me to make any vain attempt at elucidation. Nor can I support Wordsworth with authority when he says in the sonnet quoted at the beginning of this treatise: "With this key Shakespeare unlocked his heart." Never can we be sure if these poems really came from Shakespeare's private experiences or were merely the result of masterly exercises of a sensitive soul, such practices being so fashionable among Renaissance poets that less sympathetic critics even doubted the existence of a woman in flesh whom Petrarch called Laura.

No, it is my modest effort here to try to point out one metrical characteristic of Shakespearean sonnets. In most cases, the lines are smooth, swift, and end-stopped, with few internal pauses. This, in addition to the regular division into three quatrains and a couplet, contributes to a general scheme of balance and straightforwardness.

When my love swears that she is made of truth,
I do believe her, though I know she lies,
That she might think me some untutored youth,
Unlearned in the world's false subtleties.
Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,
Although she knows my days are past the best,
Simply I credit her false-speaking tongue:
On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed.
But wherefore says she not she is unjust?
And wherefore say not I that I am old?
O, love's best habit is in seeming trust,
And age in love loves not to have years told.
Therefore I lie with her and she with me,
And in our faults by lies we flattered be.

Shakespeare: Sonnet 138

Of course there are exceptions, as seen in the following lines taken from Sonnet 116:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,

but they are few, particularly in comparison with the irregular meter of Donne and Hopkins:

Batter my heart, three-personed God; for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend.
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurped town, to another due,
Labor to admit you, but, oh, to no end;
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captivated and proves weak or untrue.

Yet dearly I love you and would be loved fain,
But am betrothed unto your enemy:
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

Donne: "Batter My Heart"

In comparison we find Donne's versification more rugged and his pace troublingly slow. Again, while Shakespeare is meditative, Donne is explorative, ambivalent, invocative, hence dramatic. Metrically, this is traceable in Donne's lines which are more run-on than Shakespeare's and which have more internal pauses, thus making the rhythm more staccato. Justly enough, sound and sense are so matched that, when a poem sounds smooth and suave, we naturally feel that the thought must also be sweet and universally acceptable. While this is applicable to sweet Shakespeare, the ruggedness of versification bespeaks Donne's unconventionality of thought.

With John Donne there came a change in theme. For more than one and a half centuries since Wyatt and Surrey, sonnets in English had mainly treated the amorous theme. The thematic dominance of love was manifest especially in the sonnet sequences. Scattered exceptions are found in such works as William Drummond of Hawthornend's "The Lessons of Nature," "Doth Then the World Go Thus," "To His Lute," and "Saint John Baptist." The last in particular heralded Donne's Divine Poems, many of which are sonnets. Donne is certainly among those seventeenth century poets who deviated from the Petrarchan tradition in sonnet. Yet it is not exactly correct to say that he is "anti-Petrarchan" for he turned it to good account by applying it to his relation to God. This is especially interesting when we realize Donne's reversal of the Petrarchan tradition is two fold: first, the poet addresses the other party as a woman would a man; secondly, what "she" expects of the lover is not tender devotion as in the Petrarchan tradition, but sexual violence. As a Chinese reader I am particularly fascinated by the erotic images in "Batter My Heart", where the ecstatic Christian is almost delirious in 'her' request that sudden revelation be forced upon her by God's overpowering presence. The closest parallel to this in Chinese literature, as far as I know, is perhaps where classic Chinese
poets compare the relation of themselves as courtiers to the monarch to that between fragrant flowers and the beautiful lady. A worthy courtier is happiest at the court of an enlightened ruler just as a fragrant flower looks its loveliest on the person of a beauty. By comparison the Chinese image is debonair and mundane.

While Drummond of Hawthornden shows an unsteady rhyme scheme (varying from "abba/baba..." and "abab/abba..." to "abba/baab..." and "abab/abab..."), Donne on the whole follows the Italian form, keeping the rhyme scheme of the octave strictly "abba/abba". But in the sestet Donne tends towards the English scheme and arranges the rhymes either "cddcee" or "cddcee". Either way, the last two lines form a couplet, a violation of the Italian form:

One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.

Donne: "Death, Be Not Proud"

Thy Grace may wing me to prevent his art,
And thou like Adamant draw mine iron heart.

Donne: "Thou Hast Made Me"

La Corona is a sequence of sonnets not only coherent in theme but also interlocking in structure, since the last line of each sonnet is repeated as the first of the next and the last line of the seventh sonnet repeats the first line of the first sonnet.

JOHN MILTON: A NEW MASTER

It is significant that two masters of the sonnet form in the seventeenth century should use it to deal with themes, whether political or religious, that are not amorous. While Donne enriched the sonnet with metaphysical contemplation and religious sophistication, Milton, great both as poet and statesman, turned the lute into a soul-animating trumpet and used it freely to voice his views on current events and private life. Yet such were his Puritan temperament and moral scope that he could not treat either theme without lifting it to a height of religious sentiment. This is true whether Milton ruminated on his own blindness or his wife, protested against the massacre at Piedmont, or appealed to Cromwell for the protection of free conscience. It was Milton who, with his moral concern and overpowering personality, broke away from the amorous conventions of the sonnet and gave the form not only thematic flexibility but also a sense of reality, a keen awareness of contemporary life. Naturally enough, when his great successor Wordsworth
lamented the moral degeneration of his age, it was to Milton and, significantly, in the form of a sonnet that he turned for a revival of the "ancient English dower of inward happiness."\(^5\)

It is lamentable that, while Wordsworth paid such unreserved tribute to Milton's sonnets, critics from Samuel Johnson to Cleanth Brooks\(^6\) should have failed to value them as they deserve. Johnson dismissed them in a most casual manner: "The Sonnets were written in different parts of Milton's life upon different occasions. They deserve not any particular criticism; for of the best it can only be said that they are not bad, and perhaps only the eighth and the twenty-first are truly entitled to this slender commendation. The fabric of a sonnet, however adapted to the Italian language, has never succeeded in ours, which, having great variety of termination, requires the rhymes to be often changed." In the same work again commented Johnson: "He complains of this neglect in two sonnets, of which the first is contemptible, and the second not excellent."\(^7\) By these remarks it is evident that the arbiter of literary taste of mid-eighteenth century was impatient not only with the sonnets of Milton but also with those of any of his great predecessors in this form, Shakespeare unexcluded. Johnson's dismissal of the sonnet in general also indicates the universal indifference of eighteenth century poets towards this lyrical expression as well as the renewed fervor with which the Romantics turned to the form.

The revolutionary spirit of Milton does not confine itself to thematic innovations, for often the surges of his torrential rhythm overbrim the octave and invade the sestet, thus making the whole sonnet one piece of verbal-marble work.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Avenge, O Lord, Thy slaughtered saints, whose bones} \\
\text{Lie scattered on the Alpine mountains cold;} \\
\text{Even them who kept Thy truth so pure of old} \\
\text{When all our fathers worshiped stocks and stones,} \\
\text{Forget not: in Thy book record their groans} \\
\text{Who were Thy sheep, and in their ancient fold} \\
\text{Slain by the bloody Piedmontese that rolled} \\
\text{Mother with infant down the rocks. Their moans} \\
\text{The vales redoubled to the hills, and they}
\end{align*}
\]

5. From Wordsworth's sonnet "To Milton". See page 19 for the entire sonnet.
To heaven. Their martyred blood and ashes sow
O'er all the Italian fields, where still doth sway
The triple Tyrant, that from these may grow
A hundredfold, who, having learnt Thy way,
Early may fly the Babylonian woe.

Milton: "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont"

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
Lodged 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-labor, 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."

Milton: "On His Blindness"

Cyriack, this three years' day these eyes, though clear
To outward view, of blemish or of spot,
Bereft of light, their seeing have forgot;
Nor to their idle orbs doth sight appear
Of sun or moon or star throughout the year,
Or man or woman. Yet I argue not
Against Heaven's hand or will, nor bate a jot
Of heart or hope, but still bear up and steer
Right onward. What supports me, dost thou ask?
The conscience, friend, to have them overplied
In liberty's defense, my noble task,
Of which all Europe talks from side to side.
This thought might lead me through the world's vain mask
Content, though blind, had I no better guide:

Milton: "To Cyriack Skinner"

Technically, these sonnets are unconventional, primarily because the eighth line, which usually concludes the octave, should be run-on instead of end-stopped. This seems all the more startling when we realize that as a rule Milton adopted the rhyme scheme of

8. "This three years' day", composed three years after Milton went totally blind. Milton became blind in both eyes in 1652; the sonnet "To Cyriack Skinner" was written in 1655.
Italian sonnet. The eighth line of "To Cyriack Skinner" is particularly interesting in its undaunted impetuosity which carries it "right onward" into the sestet. This leads us to another remarkable feature of the versification of a Miltonic sonnet: the great abundance of run-on lines. In comparison with the suave, mellifluous versification of a Shakespearean or Spenserian sonnet, this feature becomes so marked as to give the reader the illusion of blank verse, a verse form whose technical possibilities seemed to have been exhausted by Milton. It might very well be that Milton, himself a master of blank verse, unconsciously wrote "rhymed blank verse", so to speak, in his sonnets. Look again at the three Miltonic sonnets quoted above, and we will find that in each case most of the lines are run-on. There are as many as ten run-on lines in "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont"; eight in "On His Blindness", and seven in "To Cyriack Skinner". Two sentences come to a full stop in the middle of a line in both "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont" and "To Cyriack Skinner"; three in "On His Blindness". When lines and syntactical pattern correspond, smoothness and ease result. When they do not or even interrupt each other, the irregularity of form then eloquently suggests a scheme of mind that is disconcertingly explorative. Thematic elements apart, this formal irregularity resulting from disagreement between line and sentence largely accounts for stylistic differences of a Miltonic sonnet from a Shakespearean: a Shakespearean sonnet falls on the ear sweet and melancholy in its remote, timeless meditation; a Miltonic sonnet rises and expands till the deep-throated organ floods the ear with slow, solemn sonority. A Shakespearean sonnet sounds self-contained. A Miltonic sonnet seems to be on the verge of bursting out of its tightness. As a sonneteer Milton is unconventional in both theme and form, but his influence as such was not felt until early in the nineteenth century.

THE ROMANTIC REVIVAL OF THE SONNET

After the Elizabethans the sonnet began to manifest a decline that lasted for almost two centuries in which it attracted occasional attentions from the poets but presented no master. Restoration poetry is almost bare in this category with negligible exceptions such as Charles Cotton (1630-87) whose "Alice" and "Margaret" are witty and gently erotic but do not rise above light verse. If the seventeenth century can boast no rich harvest, the eighteenth is more meager. The sonnet is essentially a medium for lyrical expression; neither the predominance of satire nor the prevalence of the heroic couplet in the eighteenth century encouraged its growth. As a matter of fact, the sonnet was a for-
gotten art in the days of Samuel Johnson, when only such poets as Gray and Cowper turned to it for occasional expression of personal feelings towards their close friends.  
But Gray and Cowper added nothing new, nothing, that is, in comparison with the new life breathed into it by Wordsworth and Keats. The sterility of sonnet writing was in the eighteenth century a common phenomenon on both sides of the Channel. We have already mentioned Johnson's dissatisfaction with its adoption in the English language. The great French critic Boileau held the sonnet in high esteem, but it did not save the form from practical oblivion in eighteenth century French literature. On both sides of the Channel, again, the sonnet had to wait for the international Romantic movement for its resurrection.

The English Romantics, in defying the Noe–Classicists of the eighteenth century, turned to their more remote predecessors in the Elizabethan age and to Milton, a bridge between the Elizabethans and the Romantics. The sonnet, being in itself a handy medium for highly compressed expression of personal feelings and reflections and being historically one of the favorite lyrical verse forms of the Elizabethans, was naturally revived by the Romantics and very soon became one of the most popular forms with early nineteenth century poets, a popularity that seemed to grow among the Victorians.

One of the leading Romantic poets, Wordsworth as a sonneteer was profoundly influenced by Milton. This is obvious even in the sonnet with which I began this treatise, but it is in another poem that Wordsworth paid a full-throated, full-hearted homage to his great model, not as a sonneteer but as a sage.

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:  
England hath need of thee: she is a fen  
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,  
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,  
Have forfeited their ancient English dower  
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;  
Oh! raise us up, return to us again;  
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.  
Thy soul was like a star, and dwelt apart:  
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:  
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,

9. See Thomas Gray's sonnet "On the Death of Mr. Richard West" and William Cowper's sonnet "To Mary Unwin".
So didst thou travel on life's common way, 
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart 
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

Wordsworth: "To Milton"

Wordsworth and Milton are different in more ways than one, but the disciple also has so much in common with the master. Both are masters of a kind of blank verse sublime in its simplicity and abundance of monosyllabic words. Both are in possession of that magnanimity of mind, seriousness of moral purpose, and a sustained state of intellectual vigor, that are such sure indications of a major poet. Both, however, are impressive in their sonority of utterance, but more or less deficient in visual sensuousness. In either case, the poetry impresses the reader with its resounding metrical pattern and moves him with the pervasive sentiment and moral honesty, but he is not made to see, to feast his eyes on vivid images as he is in the poetry of such poets as Keats and Hopkins.

While the ploughman, near at hand, 
Whistles o'er the furrowed land, 
And the milkmaid singeth blithe, 
And the mower whets his scythe, 
And every shepherd tells his tale 
Under the hawthorn in the dale.

Milton: "L'Allegro"

Oh evil day! if I were sullen 
While Earth herself is adorning, 
This sweet May-morning, 
And the children are culling 
On every side, 
In a thousand valleys far and wide, 
Fresh flowers; while the sun shines warm,

Wordsworth: "Ode: Intimations of Immortality"

And the azurous hung hills are his world-wielding shoulder 
Majestic--as a stallion stalwart, very-violet-sweet!--

Hopkins: "Hurrahing in Harvest"

Though the three verses display in their order an increase in visual vividness, in comparison with Hopkins's lines Milton's seem a bit bloodless, and Wordsworth's vague and general.\(^{10}\)

\(^{10}\) See T.S. Eliot's critical essay "Milton I".
But nowhere does Wordsworth come closer to Milton than in the sonnet. Like Milton, Wordsworth has generally kept to the Italian form, though sometimes he takes liberty with the conventions of octave and arranges the rhymes in the order of "abba/acca". Like Milton, he tends to use many run-on lines and not infrequently ends a sentence right in the middle of a line. And, to trace the technical indebtedness to the last detail, the last line of a Wordsworthian octave is often a run-on. "The Sonnet" is such a typical example: the general scheme is Italian with the first eight lines rhyming "abba/acca" and the last two rhyming together; out of fourteen lines as many as eight (lines 2, 3, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13) are run-on and there are as many as six semicolons in the middle of the lines; line 8, characteristically, is a run-on and, as in a Miltonic sonnet, the sentence presses forward to weld the octave and the sestet. In addition to "To Sonnet", I want to reinforce my point by quoting yet another example:

Fair Star of evening, Splendor of the west,
Star of my Country! —on the horizon's brink
Thou hangest, stooping, as might seem, to sink
On England's bosom, yet well pleased to rest,
Meanwhile, and be to her a glorious crest
Conspicuous to the Nations. Thou, I think,
Shouldst be my Country's emblem; and shouldst wink,
Bright Star! with laughter on her banners, dressed
In thy fresh beauty. There! that dusky spot
Beneath thee, that is England; there she lies.
Blessings be on you both! one hope, one lot,
One life, one glory! —I, with many a fear
For my dear Country, many heartfelt sighs,
Among men who do not love her, linger here.

Wordsworth: "Composed by the Seaside, Near Calais"

Here, as in "To Sonnet", many lines (lines 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 12) are run-on, and one sentence, like a metrical Turkey, spans both octave and sestet. But Milton's tutorship as a sonneteer is not confined to mere technique. Wordsworth, of virtuous master virtuous disciple, also used the sonnet to unburden his conscience of heavy moral concern over the contemporary scene. In this he was joined by two younger Romantics, Byron and Shelley. Though they inherited the tradition from their Elizabethan precursors, the Romanticists enlarged the thematic scope of the sonnet by applying it to feelings and thoughts other than tender affections. Fired by the revolutionary spirit, Byron wrote a superb sonnet on the Swiss patriot François de Bonnivard, and Shelley launched an "unpatriotic" one against his own country. Titles such as "Thoughts of a Briton on the
Subjugation of Switzerland", "London, 1802" and "On the Extinction of the Venetian Republic" also indicate Wordsworth's keen consciousness of the human situation at home and abroad.

Two Voices are there; one is of the sea,  
One of the mountains; each a mighty Voice:  
In both from age to age thou didst rejoice,  
They were thy chosen music, Liberty!  
There came a Tyrant, and with holy glee  
Thou fought'st against him; but hast vainly striven:  
Thou from thy Alpine holds at length are driven,  
Where not a torrent murmurs heard by thee.  
Of one deep bliss thine ear hath been bereft:  
Then cleave, O cleave to that which still is left;  
For, high-souled Maid, what sorrow would it be  
That mountain floods should thunder as before,  
And Ocean bellow from his rocks shore,  
And neither awful Voice be heard by thee!  

Wordsworth: "Thought of a Briton on the Subjugation of Switzerland"

"Milton's sonnets are in several places incorrect," says the Lake Poet, "and sometimes uncouth in language, and, perhaps, in some, inharmonious; yet, upon the whole, I think the music exceedingly well suited to its end; that is, it has an energetic and varied flow of sound crowding into narrow room more of the combined effect of rhyme and blank verse than can be done by any other kind of verse I know of."\(^{11}\) Wordsworth has certainly grasped the unique quality of a Miltonic sonnet in his description of "the combined effect of rhyme and blank verse." (This is close to what I call "rhymed blank verse".) In like discrimination another Romantic poet evaluates Milton: "A few of Milton's sonnets are extremely bad; the rest are excellent."\(^{12}\) In comparison with Johnson, the Romantics are more sympathetic and just.

Wordsworth stated his "ars poetica" of the sonnet not only in "To Sonnet" but also in a second sonnet that best sums up the paradoxical nature of the sonnet with its "limited immensities":

Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room;

\(^{11}\) See Wordsworth's Memoirs, i, 287.  
\(^{12}\) See Imaginary Conversations, iv, 285.
And hermits are contented with their cells;
And students with their pensive citadels;
Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,
Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom,
High as the highest Peak of Furness-fells,
Will murmur by the hour in foxglove bells:
In truth the prison, into which we doom
Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,
In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound
Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground;
Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be)
Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,
Should find brief solace there, as I have found.

Wordsworth: "Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow Boom"

Wordworth seems to say that the sonnet, though a "scanty plot of ground", is capable of freedom and, on the other hand, a good way of self-discipline. Writing sonnets was to him a great help in overcoming his early discursive style. Generally speaking, it should be a highly effective way of overcoming sloppiness of versification and diffuseness of thought. However, it did not seem suitable for the wayward fancy that was Coleridge, who early in his career did try his hand at sonnet, but the few samples of his youthful attempts are, being dull and immature, negligible. Nor was Byron's rambling facility, which is at its best in ottava rima and the Spenserian stanza, especially fitted for such concentrated expressions as the sonnet. Yet in "Sonnet on Chillon" Byron did succeed in giving us a swift, compact Italian sonnet worthy even of Milton.

Eternal spirit of the chainless Mind!
Brightest in dungeons, Liberty! thou art,
For there thy habitation is the heart---
The heart which love of thee alone can bind;
And when thy sons to fetters are consigned---
To fetters, and the damp vault's dayless gloom,
Their country conquers with their martyrdom,
And Freedom's fame finds wings on every wind.
Chillon! thy prison is a holy place,
And thy sad floor an altar--for 'twas trod,
Until his very steps have left a trace
Worn, as if thy cold pavement were a sod,
By Bonivard! May none those marks efface!
For they appeal from tyranny to God.

Byron: "Sonnet on Chillon"
Shelley does not excel in the sonnet. He leaves us a couple of sonnets which are memorable as poems but clumsy, even uncouth, as sonnets. "England in 1819" has a rhyme scheme—"abababdcdeedd"—which is neither Italian, English, or Spenserian; its division is neither into octave and sestet nor into quatrains. "Ozymandias" is a better poem. As a sonnet its structure is essentially Italian, but the rhyme scheme, which goes "ababacdc/edefef", is no less irregular.

Of the sonnet Keats is a great master, not only among the Romanticists but also among all the major English poets. I cannot in good conscience say that as a sonneteer Keats is greater than even Wordsworth. One misses in Keats that magnanimity of mind and serenity of mood that characterize the older poet, but he is more than compensated by vivid imagination, immediate sensuousness, rich language, exquisite music, and an overpowering emotional intensity. Unlike Wordsworth, who is not at home in the English version, Keats demonstrates his versatility in both Italian and English forms. In both does he show masterly craftsmanship: with perfect ease he meets the technical requirements of the Italian sonnet; on the other hand, he handles the English form with its three quatrains and a concluding couplet with the assuring swiftness of a Shakespeare.

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 stared at the Pacific--and all his men
Loo'd at each other with a wild surmise--
   Silent, upon a peak in Darien,
Keats: "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer"

When I have fears that I may cease to be
   Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain,
Before high-piled books, in charactery,
   Hold like rich garners the full ripened grain;
When I behold, upon the night's starred 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 faery 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.

Keats: "When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be"

In the former sonnet the deep-throated rise and fall of cadence and the long-drawn roll of the rhymes, particularly in the octave, move with such racy yet unhurried stateliness, and there rings a note of finality. Part of the sense of perfect tonal fulfillment is derived, so I feel, from the exquisite concordance between syntax and meter. There is harmony of syntactic movements because the main clauses are all of reversed structure. And along this rhythmic swell, lines 3, 5, 7, though theoretically run-on, are more or less end-stopped in effect. But this swift flow is checked in the sestet, especially in lines 11 to 14 where line and sentence interrupt each other, so that eddies and whirls arise to enrich the metrical pattern. The first two lines of the sestet, being syntactically reversed, continue the flow of the octave with perfect ease, and, being repeated in their "like...when..." pattern, logically weld the context closely together. Another subtle contrast in texture between the octave and the sestet lies in the fact that, while there is practically no punctuation or even caesura midway in any line of the octave, the monotony is happily relieved in the sestet by three heavily marked caesurae occurring at different places of the line:

Or like stout Cortez/when with eagle eyes  
He stared at the Pacific/--and all his men  
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise--  
Silent,/upon a peak in Darien.

Balance by way of contrast is the key to Keats's art. Nor is this sense of balance confined to versification. In imagery is there also a sense of harmony: the wide expanse of sea and land in the octave is set off in the sestet by the vastness of heaven and echoed as well as reinforced by the sudden revelation, the overwhelming glimpse of the Pacific. Incidentally, the order of names in the poem, from the mythical Apollo through those of two poets and that of an adventurer to the Pacific and Darien, that is, mythological-historical-geographical, is also felicitous. The poem was written when Keats was scarcely twenty-one, but it is decidedly a much better sonnet than either "To the River Otter" or "Pantisocracy" which Coleridge composed at or around twenty-two. The dif-
ference becomes more remarkable when we realize that Coleridge began writing sonnets at sixteen and Keats wrote his first sonnet at nineteen. The precocity of Keats is really surprising when we find out that "England in 1819" was written when Shelley was twenty-seven and "Sonnet on Chillon", when Byron was twenty-eight.

This sense of balance by way of contrast is almost everywhere noticeable in Keats's poetry, but nowhere more so than in his sonnets, since it is inherent in the structure of a sonnet, whether metric or thematic, that a thought, sentiment, or image be presented and developed in the octave, to be modified, illustrated, echoed, enriched, contrasted to, or elaborated upon in the sestet. But mere contrast is no art. It is in the poet's insight to find certain analogies, where the counterparts have a chance to meet, that great art lies. A perfect example is the following:

The poetry of earth is never dead:
   When all the birds are faint with the hot sun,
   And hide in cooling trees, a voice will run
   From hedge to hedge about the new-mown mead;
   That is the grasshopper's--he takes the lead
   In summer luxury,--he has never done
   With his delights, for when tired out with fun
   He rests at ease beneath some pleasant weed.

The poetry of earth is ceasing never:
   On a lone winter evening, when the frost
   Has wrought a silence, from the stove there shrills
   The cricket's song, in warmth increasing ever,
   And seems to one, in drowsiness half-lost,
   The grasshopper's among some grassy hills.

Keats: "On the Grasshopper and Cricket"

Here the balance is perfect. Metrically, the Italian form is immaculate, the rhyme scheme in good order, the division into octave and sestet a neat one. The language is simple yet adequate. The description is done in happily selective details and with the sharp eye and good humor of a Dutch genre painter. Moreover, the thematic balance is achieved with the assuring precision of an acrobat. The grasshopper theme is fully treated in the octave, leaving the second theme to the sestet which, by a masterly stroke, concludes the poem in a fascinating analogy in which the two parallel themes merge into one. While everything is in sharp contrast with another--hot sun and cooling trees, luxury of a summer day and silence of a winter evening, hot sun and cold frost--the increasing warmth from the stove presents itself as a bridge across all the differences and thus provides a meeting ground for grasshopper and cricket. The return of the
grasshopper at the end, wrote Amy Lowell in her voluminous biography, "is not only beautiful as regards the technical pattern, it is so in regard to the mental pattern as well."

Painfully conscious of the short span of his life, Keats naturally found the contrast of mortality and immortality of profound significance. The mortal flesh and the immortal art which yet expresses itself in terms of the flesh, the transitory and the timeless, present such an enchanting contrast to the dying poet that the theme becomes an obsession in his odes as well as in his sonnets. Had the dying poet grown old enough to experience the bodily decay of age, he would have been preoccupied with the paradoxical situation of mental maturity at the expense of physical degeneration, as had been Yeats. Keen and intense is this awareness in the English sonnet "When I have Fears That I May Cease To Be". But, while the tone of this sonnet is melancholy and meditative in the Shakespearean tradition, that of the following is intensely tragic:

My spirit is too weak—mortality
Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,
And each imagined pinnacle and steep
Of godlike hardship tells me I must die
Like a sick eagle looking at the sky.
Yet 'tis a gentle luxury to weep
That I have not the cloudy winds to keep,
Fresh for the opening of the morning’s eye.
Such dim-conceived glories of the brain,
Bring round the heart an indescribable feud;
So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,
That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude
Wasting of old Time—With a billowy main—
A sun—a shadow of a magnitude.

Keats: "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles"

Here the contrast between mortality and immortality is particularly impressive because it takes the form of looking in despair and distress at the lofty and the heroic. The intricate pattern of sounds and images almost defies analysis. The octave begins in hopeless lamentation that has the finality of resignation. The quiet swiftness becomes more impassioned until towards the end of the poem it turns into a rapid succession of agonized, feverish utterances of dark nostalgia and infinite loneliness. The exuberant

sensations and the chain of rich images make this sonnet one of the most sensuous, most powerful as well as most compelling of lyrics in the English language, and decidedly the greatest of Keats's sonnets. The rhythmic variety of the lines accounts for the poem's wonderful resilience in tempo. Keats is a wizard at the trade of coining compound words, such as "dim-conceived", but it is the pentasyllabic "indescribable" that quickens the tempo. The rhythm of the last four lines is most unpredictable in its general staccato effect, greatly modified by the slow, sonorous "the rude/Wasting of old Time" and then vigorously accentuated by the succession of broken phrases:

---with a billowy main---
A sun--a shadow of a magnitude.

that suddenly gathers speed and concludes the poem percussively. That last line is sheer magic in that, instead of the conventional five-beat pentameter, there are in fact only three stresses, --"a sun--a shadow of a magnitude"--in their order one heavier than the other. On closer analysis, we find that "sun" is only stressed in the regular manner, that "shadow" is doubly stressed because it is disyllabic, and that "magnitude," in assonance with "shadow", is triply stressed and as proportionately sped up. Indeed, such subtlety of suggestiveness and superb thrust beyond the rational never lose their novelty and place Keats uniquely among the Post-Romanticists and Pre-Symbolists.

In all Keats wrote sixty-five sonnets, of which at least ten are excellent. This is indeed a rich harvest since his last sonnet was written within six years of his first. Sometimes he wrote four or five sonnets in one month. In November, 1816 he composed as many as seven. Yet the aesthetic personality of the poet is more complex than the Romantic tradition has represented him: a passionate lover of beauty, who lived in an ivory tower fabricated out of dreams, legends, myths. Quite unknown and, therefore, disenchanting to the reader, there is a humorous, even satiric side to Keats's personality, which we find in some of his sonnets, such as "Sonnet to a Cat" and "The House of Mourning".

Cat! who hast pass'd thy grand climacteric,
       How many mice and rats hast in thy days
Destroy'd?--How many tit bits stolen? Gaze
With those bright languid segments green, and prick
Those velvet ears--but pr'ythee do not stick
Thy latent talons in me--and upraise
Thy gentle mew--and tell me all thy frays
Of fish and mice, and rats and tender chick.
Nay, look not down, nor lick thy dainty wrists--
For all the wheezy asthma, --and for all
Thy tail's tip is nick'd off--and though the fists
Of many a maid have given thee many a maul,
Still is that fur as soft as when the lists
In youth thou enter'dst on glass bottled wall.
Keats: "Sonnet to a Cat"

The House of Mourning written by Mr. Scott, --
A sermon at the Magdalen, --a tear
Dropt on a greasy novel, --want of cheer
After a walk up hill to a friend's cot, --
Tea with a Maiden Lady--a curs'd lot
Of worthy poems with the Author near, --
A patron lord--a drunkenness from beer, --
Haydon's great picture, --a cold coffee pot
At midnight when the Muse is ripe for labour, --
The voice of Mr. Coleridge, --a French Bonnet
Before you in the pit, --a pipe and tabour, --
A damn'd inseparable flute and neighbour, --
All these are vile, --But viler Wordsworth's Sonnet
On Dover: --Dover! --who could write upon it?
Keats: "The House of Mourning"

These two poems well disclose the sportive, witty, and satiric moments of a mind obsessed with mortality. The former might very well be envied by Auden and T.S. Eliot. The latter anticipated E.E. Cummings. With Romanticism the sonnet entered a new period in its life when the thematic scope was so enlarged that the form was used not only for free yet serious comments on contemporary events and private affairs in subjects other than love, but also for the outlet of such passing sentiments and impressions traditionally considered "unpoetic" or unworthy of the sonnet.

ITS POPULARITY AMONG THE VICTORIANS

The Victorian age being essentially Post-Romantic in poetic taste, it was only natural a great multitude of mid-nineteenth century poets adopted the sonnet as their favorite form of brief, lyrical expression. Not only separate sonnets were written in great abundance, but sonnet sequences, which did not engage the Romantics, were revived and soon became a vogue.

The two major figures of Victorian poetry, however, sought elsewhere for forms for shorter lyrical composition. Tennyson as a man of long life wrote relatively few sonnets, many of which are immature, juvenile attempts excluded from the final edition
by the author, and none of which is comparable to the best of Wordsworth or Keats. It seems that Tennyson could not make up his mind whether he was to follow the Italian or English scheme: many of the sonnets, uninspired in language and wayward in rhyme, betray the author's incompetence in this form. Apparently, the young poet had turned to the Miltonic-Wordsworthian tradition for tutorship, and the masters' influences are discernible in even the titles—"Sonnet Written on Hearing of the Outbreak of the Polish Insurrection" and "Sonnet on the Result of the Late Russian Invasion of Poland". Likewise, Browning's genius seems to be articulate in other forms, though he himself inspired one of the best known of sonnet sequences.

Of the host of sonneteers of the Victorian Age, three have won distinction. Some of the others are certainly poets of the first order whose fame rest on other forms of verse. These include Arnold, Swinburne, Hardy, and Wilde. But it was Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and George Meredith who carried on the great tradition.

Mrs. Browning's sonnet sequence *Sonnets from the Portuguese* reverses the traditional Petrarchan situation in that, for the first time, as if the Muse decides to redress the unrequited love of poets, it is the woman who sings so tenderly and passionately of her devotion to a man. The sonnets had been written without her husband's knowledge or any thought of publication; even the title itself was a way of camouflage. But these poems were by no means translations, and the title was an intimate acknowledgement of Browning's sportive way of calling her, on account of her olive skin, "my little Portuguese". The sequence deserves the popularity it has long enjoyed for its eloquent yet quiet conviction, its pledge of timeless devotion, its finality of expression, and its variety of verbal as well as metrical pattern. As sonnets the poems show sureness of structure in the Italian form and seem to be indebted to the Miltonic-Wordsworthian tradition in their frequent use of run-on lines and not infrequent use of sentences that press forward to link the octave and sestet.

When our two souls stand up erect and strong,
Face to face, silent, drawing nigh and nigher,
Until the lengthening wings break into fire
At either curved point, --what bitter wrong
Can the earth do to us, that we should not long
Be here contented? Think. In mounting higher,
The angels would press on us and aspire
To drop some golden orb of perfect song
Into our deep, dear silence. Let us stay
Rather on earth, Beloved, --where the unfit,
Contrarious moods of men recoil away
And isolate pure spirits, and permit
A place to stand and love in for a day,
With darkness and the death-hour rounding it.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning: "Sonnet 22"

Another poet who clung faithfully to the Italian form, is Dante Gabriel Rossetti, himself of Italian descent and brought up in the tradition of medievalism and the Renaissance. Rossetti was a great admirer of Keats, whose poetry became a guiding influence. This, in addition to his Italian taste for the fleshly and his relish as a painter for the visual world, accounts for the rich language and sensuous imagery of his poetry. Yet such is the paradox of his art that, in spite of the vivid details, there shimmers a misty, mystical spirituality over the whole vision. This dualism is everywhere present in his poetry, in *The Blessed Damozel* as well as in *The House of Life*, a sonnet sequence on which his fame largely rests. The latter was composed between the years 1848-1881. The title indicates Rossetti's interest in astrology, which believes in the division of the heavens into "houses", the most important of which is the "house of human life". The sonnets, mainly autobiographical, were inspired by the poet's love for Elizabeth Siddall, whom Rossetti had courted for ten years before they married in 1860. Mrs. Rossetti, tubercular and suffering from failing health, died of an overdose of laudanum two years after the marriage. The sorrowful poet buried all his love poems along with his wife. It was not until 1871, when he had to prepare a collection of his poems, that the manuscript was disinterred.

Your hands lie open in the long fresh grass,
The finger-points look through like rosy blooms;
Your eyes smile peace. The pasture gleams and glooms
'Neath billowing skies that scatter and amass.
All round our nest, far as the eye can pass,
Are golden kingcup-fields with silver edge
Where the cow-parsley skirts the hawthorn-hedge.
'Tis visible silence, still as the hour-glass.

Deep in the sun-searched growths the dragon-fly
Hangs like a blue thread loosened from the sky:--
So this winged hour is dropt to us from above.
Oh! clasp we to our hearts, for deathless dower.
This close-companioned inarticulate hour
When two fold silence was the song of love.

D.G. Rossetti: "Silent Noon"
This is indeed a very beautiful poem, sumptuous in imagery and exuberant in sensations; yet its sensorial immediacy is mystified by a sense of dreaminess. Nor is the arrangement of sound patterns a careless one. The dexterous use of alliterations ("gleam", "gloom"); "sun-searched"; "deathless dower") and assonances ("eyes", "smile"; "blue", "loosened"); "scatter", "amass"), the succession of the "s" sounds in the line "'Tis visible silence, still as the hour-glass", and the suddenly quickening pace in the line "This close-companioned inarticulate hour" caused by polysyllabic words: all these have subtly accentuated the meaning and enriched the nuances. This, in addition to the polychromatic quality of the scene ("rosy", "golden", "silver", "blue", and grassy "green"), and the shifting play of light and shadow in the lines

... The pasture gleams and glooms
'Neath billowing skies that scatter and amass.

has to the reader an appeal not unlike that of a painting by Monet. But it is Monet made articulate. Rossetti's skillful use of sounds to accentuate meaning is further demonstrated in the following poem:

Of Adam's first wife, Lilith, it is told
(The witch he loved before the gift of Eve,)
That, ere the snake's, her sweet tongue could deceive,
And her enchanted hair was the first gold.
And still she sits, young while the earth is old,
And, subtly of herself contemplative,
Draws men to watch the bright net she can weave,
Till heart and body and life are in its hold.

The rose and poppy are her flowers; for where
Is he not found, O Lilith, whom shed scent
And soft-shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare?
Lo! as that youth's eyes burned at thine, so went
Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent,
And round his heart one strangling golden hair.

D.G. Rossetti: "Body's Beauty"

Apparently, Rossetti tries, with success, to suggest soft-spoken seduction by the use of successive hisses: "for where/Is he not found, O Lilith, whom shed scent/And soft-shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare?"

Influenced as he was by Keats, Rossetti, being Italian, strictly followed the Italian form in its distinct division into octave and sestet, though sometimes he took liberties with the rhyme scheme and let the last two lines rhyme together. His Southern sensuality
seems to surpass that of Keats in the luxuriance of imagery and sound, but one misses there Keats's tonal clarity and verbal straightforwardness. This is partly accountable by the fact that Keats has more syntactical coherence than Rossetti. "Silent Noon" contains as many as seven sentences as against the three in "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles", three in "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer", two in "On the Grasshopper and Cricket", and one only in "When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be". Both poets have written a sonnet on the sonnet. Keats dedicated the sonnet to the Muse as her garland, but Rossetti took it more seriously as a matter of life and death, comparing it to a coin in the mouth of a dead man, a passenger from this world to Hades, with which he pays the boatman Charon for ferrying his soul across the Styx, river of oblivion.

If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd,
And, like Andromeda, the Sonnet sweet
Fetter'd, in spite of pained loveliness;
Let us find out, if we must be constrain'd,
Sandals more interwoven and complete
To fit the naked foot of poesy;
Let us inspect the lyre, and weigh the stress
Of every chord, and see what may be gain'd
By ear industrious, and attention meet;
Misers of sound and syllable, no less
Than Midas of his coinage, let us be
Jealous of dead leaves in the bay-wreath crown;
So, if we may not let the Muse be freo,
She will be bound with garlands of her own.

Keats: "On the Sonnet"

A sonnet is a moment's monument—
Memorial from the Soul's eternity
To one dead deathless hour. Look that it be,
Whether for lustral rite or dire portent,
Of its own arduous fullness reverent.
Carve it in ivory or in ebony,
As Day or Night may rule; and let Time see
Its flowering crest impearled and orient.

A sonnet is a coin; its face reveals
The Soul—its converse, to what Power 'tis due:—
Whether for tribute to the august appeals
Of Life, or dower in Love's high retinue,
It serve; or 'mid the dark wharf's cavernous breath,
In Charon's palm it pay the toll to Death.

D. G. Rossetti: "The Sonnet"
If *The House of Life* sings of enchanting love, *Modern Love*, on the contrary, plays on the variations of its disenchantment. George Meredith is one of the few major novelists whose poetry surpassed their prose, but whose fame as novelists overshadowed their poetic distinction.¹⁴ At twenty-one Meredith married the daughter of another poet-novelist Thomas Love Peacock, the author of *The Four Ages of Poetry*, which occasioned Shelley's answer, *A Defense of Poetry*. His wife had been a widow before their marriage and was eight years older than he. She proved to be a difficult, temperamental woman and eventually deserted him and their young son. Ten years of unhappy matrimonial life ended in separation. It was not until he was thirty-six that Meredith married again and found his second wife a devoted companion until her death in 1855. Meredith's losing struggle to adjust himself to the first marriage was the theme of fifty "semi-sonnets" in a sequence which he ironically entitled *Modern Love*. What Meredith actually did was to link four quatrains together, or to write two linked octaves, thus enlarging the sonnet to a poem of sixteen lines.

The tortuous and involved style of Meredith's prose is a common complaint of the critics, but his poetry, having to meet the demands of concentration and brevity of a sonnet, becomes clear in spite of its intellectual vigor and imaginative exuberance. It was a wonder that the same hand should be capable of such clarity in verse, a freedom from the mannerisms of its productions in prose. The rhyme scheme of these expanded sonnets is "abba/cddc/effe/ghhg"; the sustained rise and fall of rhythm, with the help of run-on lines, impresses the reader as of an Italian sonnet renewing itself. The thematic scope is stretched in that, for the the first time, the poet looks at his love, not with blind passion or adoration, but in the light of wisdom won at the expense of disillusionment and painful experience. Yet the sonnets, in spite of their intellectual probings, are nostalgic with the agony and ecstasy of a haunting memory. Almost all the poems are obsessed with the merciless contrast of past happiness and present remorse. While the imagery is generally rich, the image that concludes the poem is particularly memorable.

Thus piteously Love closed what he begat:
The union of this ever-diverse pair!
These two were rapid falcons in a snare,

¹⁴. Thomas Hardy is another example.
Condemned to do the flitting of the bat.
Lovers beneath the singing skies of May,
They wandered once, clear as the dew on flowers,
But they fed not on the advancing hours:
Their hearts held cravings for the buried day.
Then each applied to each that fatal knife,
Deep questioning, which probes to endless dole.
Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul
When hot for certainties in this our life!
In tragic hints here see what evermore
Moves dark as yonder midnight ocean's force,
Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse,
To throw that faint thin line upon the shore!

Meredith: "No, 50, Modern Love"

We saw the swallows gathering in the sky,
And in the osier-isle we heard them noise.
We had not to look back on summer joys,
Or forward to a summer of bright dye;
By in the largeness of the evening earth
Our spirits grew as we went side by side.
The hour became her husband and my bride.
Love, that had robbed us so, thus blessed our dearth!
The pilgrims of the year waxed very loud
In multitudinous chatterings, as the flood
Full brown came from the West, and like pale blood
Expanded to the upper crimson cloud.
Love, that had robbed us of immortal things,
This little moment mercifully gave,
Where I have seen across the twilight wave
The swan sail with her young beneath her wings.

Meredith: "No. 48, Modern Love"

Both as a novelist and poet, Meredith won his reputation very slowly; his genius was not fully recognized until very late in his life. The fame of another Victorian poet, a greater one, who has been associated more with writers of the twentieth century than with those of the nineteenth, came only posthumously. The poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) was made known to the public almost thirty years after his death by his friend the poet laureate Robert Bridges (1844-1930), who published the manuscript entrusted to him in 1918.

Hopkins joined the Roman Catholic Church in 1866, sponsored by Newman, and two years later entered the Society of Jesus. In 1877 he was ordained. From then on he served as a priest in several parishes, one of which was in a working-class area in Liverpool where he was profoundly disturbed by the misery and squalor. In 1884 he was
appointed Professor of Classics at University College, Dublin, where he taught Rhetoric and Greek for the last five years of his life. For the latter half of his life, Hopkins was torn between his duties as a devoted Jesuit and his sensitiveness as a poet fascinated by language and intoxicated with the divine beauty of nature. He found it very difficult to reconcile his religious vocation and aesthetic drive. Before he entered the Society of Jesus, Hopkins burned his poems and refrained from pursuing the Muse until 1875. He was perhaps the first divine since John Donne to express religious agony and ecstasy in a kind of poetry at once sensuous and spiritual. Hopkins’s career as a priest and poet vividly reminds me of that of Van Gogh who was a contemporary (1853-1890), and who as an Evangelist preacher also worked with compassion among the miners in Belgium, and as an artist poured all his religious sentiment into his work. Van Gogh’s great landscape paintings in his Arles period are as "charged with the grandeur of God" as the great sonnets on nature by Hopkins. In his fondness of the sonnet form there lies another resemblance of Hopkins to Donne. Hopkins’s sonnets are of two widely different moods: ecstatic and agonized. The former are those in which the poet experienced intense rapture in the beauty of nature, which, he believed, was but the embodiment of God’s divine presence. Thus, in enjoying the earthly he was really catching awful glimpses of the unearthly. The latter are those which have been known as the so-called "terrible sonnets", written between 1885-1889. These record the author’s periods of profound dejection, of a listless sense of failure, and of that cavernous spiritual emptiness known to the mystics as "the dark night of the soul" and as an inevitable stage on the road to spiritual fulfillment.

Summer ends now; now, barbarous in beauty, the stooks arise
Around, up above, what wind-walks! what lovely behaviour
Of silk-sack clouds! has wilder, wilful-wavier
Meal-drift moulded ever and melted across skies?
I walk, I lift up, I lift up heart, eyes,
Down all that glory in the heavens to glean our Saviour;
And, eyes, heart, what looks, what lips yet gave you a
Rapturous love’s greeting of realer, of rounder replies?

And the azurous hung hills are his world-wielding shoulder
Majestic—as a stallion stalwart, very-violet-sweet!—
These things, these things were here and but the beholder
Wanting; which two when they once meet,
The heart rears wings bold and bolder
And hurls for him, O half hurls earth for him off under his feet.
Hopkins: "Hurrahing in Harvest"
I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.
What hours, O what black hours we have spent
This night! what sights you, heart, saw; ways you went!
And more must, in yet longer light's delay.
With witness I speak this. But where I say
Hours I mean years, mean life. And my lament
Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent
To dearest him that lives alas! away.

I am gall, I am heartburn. God's most deep decree
Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me;
Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the curse.
Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours. I see
The lost are like this, and their scourge to be
As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse.

Hopkins: "I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark"

Both Donne and Hopkins were unconventional as poets, but as sonneteers both followed the regular Italian form. The difference is that, while Donne reconciled the Italian and the English by ending his sonnets in couplet, Hopkins followed the Italian rhyme more regularly in the sestet and never let the last two lines rhyme in a pair. Hopkins's strict observation of the Italian scheme is surprising when we realize what an innovator he is in English versification. Hopkins was the first British poet to have freed himself from the mechanical monotony of the iambic line. He brought to English poetry a new frame of mind, a new sensibility and concentration of thinking that distinguished him from his Victorian contemporaries. And along with this new awareness he also brought a new rhythm which best expressed it. He coined the term "sprung rhythm" and practiced it with consistency. Sprung rhythm, as Hopkins used it, was founded on a theory which defied the conventional conception of verse rhythms as consisting of a number of metrical feet, each having a fixed number of syllables, one or more than one of which stressed at a certain place, with a few possible variations and substitutions. Instead, Hopkins insisted on making rhythm in verse more flexible, more like tempo in music, where rhythmic effects are controlled by the number of beats in the measure, rather than the number of notes, and the general pattern of rising or falling movement. Such rhythm is called "sprung" because its effect seems abruptly in contrast to the smooth flow of the "running" rhythm popular in English verse in his time. As Babette Deutsch says: "This abruptness is marked when stresses crowd upon one another, as a line by Hopkins illustrates:

The heart rears wings bold and bolder.
Running rhythm forbids such juxtaposition of stresses. Another difference between sprung and running rhythms is that, while a line of sprung rhythm is measured by the number of stresses, each falling in well with the stress of natural speech, a line of running rhythm often allows the speech stresses to run counter to those imposed upon it by a strict metrical pattern:

The gaiety of language is our seigneur.

To achieve the unique effect of sprung rhythm, Hopkins not only built his own metrical scheme, but, so that the scheme be readily perceived, used a personal system of scansion marks. The following are the opening lines of the superb "The Windhover":

```
I caught this morning morning's minion
    kingdom of daylight's dauphin, dappledawn-drawn Falcon,
    high there, how he ran upon the rein of a wimping wing
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Here the curved line beneath a syllable marks what he called a "hanger" or "outrider", which he described as "one, two, or three slack syllables added to a foot and not counted in the nominal scanning." He added elsewhere: "the strong syllable in an outriding foot has always a great stress and after the outrider follows a short pause." Thus a double stress-mark is used to indicate the first syllable in "dauphin" and in "Falcon". The result is wonderfully suggestive of the sprightly movement of the bird, which is further heightened by the splitting of "kingdom" between two lines, a practice common in Hopkins's poetry to create suspense and a curious echoing effect. Modern poets such as E.E. Cummings and Marianne Moore have turned this practice to good account in gaining textural variety for their verse. On the other hand, Hopkins also compressed two or more words into a hyphenated expression so that the meaning is enriched, with the component words coloring each other, at the expense of grammar. Unforgettable are the result of such combinations as "dapple-dawn-drawn", "fire-folk," "circle-citadel," "March-bloom," "May-mess," and (in description of Duns Scotus's Oxford) "cuckoo-echoing, bell-swarmed, lark-charmed, rook-racked, river-rounded." In some respects,

we may say, Hopkins is a Keats intensified and overcharged.

That the unbridled genius of Hopkins should have imposed upon itself such a restraining form as the sonnet, is, paradoxically, a happy choice. It is, after all, against the disciplinary limitations of such a verse form that the barbarous beauty and vigor of Hopkins's imagination is spurred as well as reined with equilibrium. His wild outbursts of imagery and cadence would have been sheer dissipation if, instead of the sonnet, he had indulged in free verse. Several sonnets by Hopkins are in this sprung rhythm which results in the great irregularity in the length of lines. One of these, "the longest sonnet ever made", has as many as eight stresses and sometimes twenty syllables to a line:

Earnest, earthless, equal, attuneable, / vaulty, voluminous, ... stupendous
Evening strains to be time's vast, / womb-of-all, home-of-all, hearse-of-all night.
Her fond yellow hornlight wound to the west, / her wild hollow hoarlight hung to the height
Waste; her earliest stars, earl-stars, / stars principal, overbend us,
Fire-featuring heaven. For earth/her being has unbound, her dapple is at an end, as-
Tray or aswarm, all throughther, in throngs; / self in self steeped and pushed--quite
Disremembers, dismembering/all now. Heart, you round me right
With: Our evening is over us; our night/ whelms, whelms, and will end us.

Only the beak-leaved boughs dragonish/damask the tool-smooth bleak light; black,
Ever so black on it. Our tale, O our oracle;/ Let life, waned, ah let life wind
Off her once skeined stained vained variety/ upon, all on two spools; part, pen, pack
Now her all in two flocks, two folds--black, white;/ right, wrong; reckon but, reck but, mind
But these two; ware of a world where but these/ two tell, each off the other; of a rack
Where, selfwrung, selfstrung, sheathe-and shelterless, / thoughts against thoughts in groans grind.

Hopkins: "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves"

Hopkins also created a "curtal sonnet", which consists of a sestet rhyming abcabc and a quatrain with tail rhyming dbcdc or dcdbc. The new version is best illustrated as follows:
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, follow, and plough;
And all trades, 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.

Hopkins: "Pied Beauty"

Not all of Hopkins's sonnets are so irregular. "God's Grandeur," one of the early sonnets (1877), is strictly Italian not only in rhyme scheme and the octave-sestet division, but in the regularity of the length of lines. Each of the fourteen lines has exactly ten syllables, but it is impossible to scan the poem in the traditional scheme of iambic meter because the metrical flow is frequently broken by crisp anapaests and pounding spondees and the number of beats to a line varies from three to six. Tension is thus achieved with swift-swinging rhythmic movements surging against the rein of form:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs--
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Hopkins: "God's Grandeur"

Hopkins, like Milton, Wordsworth, and Keats, breathed new life into the sonnet and charged it with grandeur and textural exuberance. To read a sonnet by Hopkins is to enjoy a verbal feast with nameless, new delicacies prepared in a unique cuisine. Hopkins's daring experiments with new rhythm and texture brought the poet closer to the moderns than to the Victorians. After Hopkins, we find it easier to accept Dylan Thomas.
THE SONNET EVER REJUVENATING ITSELF

Since the seventeenth century the Petrarchan theme of the sonnet has long gone out of fashion, but the sonnet as a form has continued to be written, on themes ranging from the lyrical to the satirical, in the twentieth century. In spite of the challenge of free verse to rhymed verse in the first two decades of the present century and the continued threats of the former to the latter in the decades that ensued, quite a few of the major poets still found in the sonnet a demand of concentration in both thought and expression. Scores of memorable sonnets have been written, so memorable that no anthology of modern English poetry can be forgiven if no sonnet at all is selected.

It is true many major poets felt that they could do without the sonnet. T. S. Eliot, to name a great one, did not seem interested at all and left us no sonnet in his complete poetry. "Old Deuteronomy" of Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats is, I suspect, a disguised attempt at the form, though Eliot was too sophisticated to betray himself and too prejudiced against Romanticism to avow any affinity. In fact, Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats was Eliot's excuse to satisfy his rhyming itch under the guise of light verse. To escape the omnipresent sentimentalism of Romanticism, the poet turned to the eccentricity and revelry in fancy of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll.

Yeats, recognized by many as the greatest of modern poets writing in English, has graced the form many times with his genius. A famous example is "Leda and the Swan":

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power.
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

Yeats: "Leda and the Swan"
The poem is interesting, apart from its dramatic contrast and dynamic movement, in that, as a sonnet, it opens with two quatrains rhyming alternately in the Shakespearean tradition, but concludes with an Italian sestet which is made unique by splitting the third line into two separate sentences.

Accomplished writers of the sonnet at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth were legion, but none, not even such fine poets as George Santayana, was great enough to rejuvenate its life where Wordsworth and Keats had left it. It was not until the First World War that the form was charged with a new meaning and its thematic scope further widened. Many of the war poets turned to this handy medium to voice their protest against the futility and brutality of war and to brand marks of their burning anguish and agony. Rupert Brooke and Siegfried Sassoon have both left us memorable poems, though different in mood, done in this category, but it was Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) who brought to the sonnet a new force, a new awareness of the human situation. Of all the war poets who were killed in the First World War, Owen was decidedly the most gifted. Early in his poetic career he experimented with new varieties of Keatsian sensuousness, but the shock of the war quickened his maturity and profoundly changed his course as a poet. He devoted his agonized sensibility to evoking what he called "the pity of war, the pity war distilled." Apart from this thematic contribution, Owen also added much to the variety of English versification by adopting "pararhymes" to substitute traditional rhymes, a practice which was to exert much influence on younger poets such as Auden and Dylan Thomas. His death in action a week before the Armistice Day was a tremendous loss to modern English poetry, which, had he survived, would have been more or less free from the dominant influence of Eliot's sophisticated intellectualism. The interesting thing is that, while he experimented with pararhymes in other forms, Owen refrained from them in the sonnet.

War's a joke for me and you,
While we know such dreams are true.
--Sassoon

Out there, we've talked quite friendly up to Death;
   Sat down and eaten with him, cool and bland, --
   Pardoned his spilling mess-tins in our hand.
We've sniffed the green thick odour of his breath, --
   Our eyes wept, but our courage didn't writhe.
   He's spat at us with bullets and he's coughed
   Shrapnel. We chorussed when he sang aloft;
   We whistled while he shaved us with his scythe.
Oh, Death was never an enemy of ours!
We laughed at him, we leagued with him, old chum.
No soldier's paid to kick against his powers.
We laughed, knowing that better men would come,
And greater wars; when each proud fighter brags
He wars on Death--for Life; not men--for flags.

Owen: "The Next Year"

Here the rhyme scheme is primarily English except that of the second quatrain. The language is simple, honest, straightforward; the idiom contemporary. The ironic tone of the poem and the moral seriousness so unforgettably epigrammatic in the last three lines indicates Owen's self-appointed discipleship to the great tradition of Milton and the Romantics. Had Owen survived the war, English poetry, under his healthy influence, would have been more committed to the contemporary political situation than it was under the authority of T.S. Eliot.

Most war poems are built upon the scheme of pathetic contrast--contrast between war and peace, reality and dream, modernity and antiquity. This is true also of sonnets that expressed the war theme. It is best exemplified in Sassoon's "Dreamers":

Soldiers are citizens of death's gray land,
    Drawing no dividend from time's tomorrows.
In the great hour of destiny they stand,
    Each with his feuds, and jealousies, and sorrows.
Soldiers are sworn to action; they must win
    Some flaming, fatal climax with their lives.
Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin
    They think of firelit homes, clean beds, and wives.

I see them in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats,
    And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,
Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats,
    And mocked by hopeless longing to regain
Bank-holidays, and picture shows, and spats,
    And going to the office in the train.

Sassoon: "Dreamers"

George Barker, hailed by some as a major poet whose eminence is yet to be recognized, wrote at an interval of the German air raids towards the end of World War II a sonnet dedicated to his country in the image of an indomitable mother. The sonnet is essentially Italian, rhyming abcdabcd/efgefg.
Most near, most dear, most loved and most far,
Under the window where I often found her
Sitting as huge as Asia, seismic with laughter,
Gin and chicken helpless in her Irish hand,
Irresistible as Rabelais but most tender for
The lame dogs and hurt birds that surround her, --
She is a procession no one can follow after
But be like a little dog following a brass band.
She will not glance up at the bomber or condescend
To drop her gin and scuttle to a cellar,
But lean on the mahogany table like a mountain
Whom only faith can move, and so I send
O all my faith and all my love to tell her
That she will move from mourning into morning.

Barker: "Sonnet to My Mother"

Auden and Spender, writers of free as well as rhymed verse, used the sonnet to write witty, even satirical poetry. Auden, in particular, demonstrated his brilliant virtuosity by designing interesting variations of the sonnet. For instance, the witty "Who's Who" mingles the English with the Italian. "The Diaspora", a religious sonnet on Jesus and the Crucifixion, is done in lines of loose iambic hexameter, rhyming abab, cdce, cfg, fgg. But the following one is mainly in the Italian form, with a rhyme scheme that falls on the ear with the freshness of pararhymes inherited from Owen:

Fleeing the short-haired mad executives,
The sad and useless faces round my home,
Upon the mountains of my fear I climb;
Above, the breakneck scorching rock, the caves,
No col, no water; with excuses concocted,
Soon on a lower alp I fall and pant,
Cooling my face there in the faults that flaunt
The life which they have stolen and perfected.

Climbing with you was easy as a vow:
We reached the top not hungry in the least,
But it was eyes we looked at, not the view,
Saw nothing but ourselves, left-handed, lost;
Returned to shore, the rich interior still
Unknown. Love gave the power, but took the will.

Auden: "The Climbers"

Dylan Thomas wrote a sequence of ten "sonnets" under the collective title of "Altarwise by Owl-Light". The poems are highly obscure; and their explication involves
not only astrology, Greek mythology, and Christian theology, but also Thomas's "private" symbolism. The so-called "sonnets" actually have no more claim on the form than the fact that they consist of fourteen lines, with roughly ten syllables to each line. There does not seem to be any recognizable rhyme scheme, and on the whole the rhythmic movements do not carry conviction because they are not accentuated with the much needed rhymes.

Meantime, the Americans have long adopted the sonnet form and greatly added to the treasure of memorable sonnets in English. While nineteenth century American poetry produced no masters of the form of the magnitude of Wordsworth, Keats, Rossetti, and Meredith, the American writers of the sonnet seem to have surpassed their British counterparts in vigor and resourcefulness in the twentieth. We only have to mention the names of such poets as E.A. Robinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Elinor Wylie, Robert Frost, J.C. Ransom, Allen Tate, and Merrill Moore to suggest the wide range of themes and manners.

E.E. Cummings, contrary to popular misrepresentation, loved the sonnet and left us some of the most remarkable poems in this form in the present century. The lyricism in such sonnets as "being to timelessness as it's to time" is so pure and candidly romantic that it is almost Elizabethan:

being to timelessness as it's to time,
love did no more begin than love will end;
where nothing is to breathe to stroll to swim
love is the air the ocean and the land

(do lovers suffer? all divinities
proudly descending put on deathful flesh:
are lovers glad? only their smallest joy's
a universe emerging from a wish)

love is the voice under all silences,
the hope which has no opposite in fear;
the strength so strong mere force seems feebleness:
the truth more first than sun more last than star

--do lovers love? why then to heaven with hell.
Whatever sages say and fools, all's well
Cummings: "being to timelessness as it's to time"

E.E. Cummings was a very resourceful experimenter of the sonnet form, who was
fascinated by its formal possibilities. But more often did he employ it to satirize the snobbish and hypocritical. This style is best exemplified in the following poem:

"next to of course god america i
love you land of the pilgrims' and so forth oh
say can you see by the dawn's early my
country 'tis of centuries come and go
and are no more what of it we should worry
in every language even deafanddumb
thy sons acclaim your glorious name by gorry
by jingo by gee by gosh by gum
why talk of beauty what could be more beaut-
ful than these heroic happy dead
who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter
they did not stop to think they died instead
then shall the voice of liberty be mute?"

He spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water
Cummings: "next to of course god"

Often Cummings used the form in free adaptations of rhyme scheme and meter. In the following example, the rhyme scheme is freely interwoven as "abcd/dcba/efggfe", thus producing an effect of tightening up and loosening out. The meter weaves in and out of iambus, but textural resilience is further enhanced by parenthesizing and interrupting sentences by run-on lines. Lines 1, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13 are run-on, and give the poem a feeling of, not blank verse, but free verse:

the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls
are un-beautiful and have comfortable minds
(also, with the church's protestant blessings
daughters, unscented shapeless spirited)
they believe in Christ and Longfellow, both dead,
are invariably interested in so many things--
at the present writing one still finds
delighted fingers knitting for the is it Poles?
perhaps. While permanent faces coyly bandy
scandal of Mrs. N and Professor D
...the Cambridge ladies do not care, above
Cambridge if sometimes in its box of
sky lavender and cornerless, the
moon rattles like a fragment of angry candy
Cummings: "the Cambridge ladies"

16. See R.P. Blackmur's critical essay on the sonnet in Form and Value in Modern
Frost is the author of several superb sonnets, immaculate in craftsmanship in both Italian and English forms. The Italian sonnets include the subtly philosophical "Design" and "Meeting and Passing", but it is the English sonnet "The Silken Tent" which the critic keeps marveling at for its intricate yet seemingly effortless artistry. The technical wonder lies in the fact that the poem consists of one sentence unimpeded in its flow except by a minimum of punctuation marks. The use of the crisp polysyllabic "capriciousness" is especially felicitous in its effective suggestion of the light flappings of the tent in a playful summer breeze.

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 everything 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.

Frost: "The Silken Tent"

Through free verse keeps to engage modern poets in their mature or immature experiments and once seemed to threat the continuity of traditional rhymed verse, some of the poets, who are convinced that discipline is not at all a bondage and that unlimited freedom in form gets the poet nowhere, will always turn to the challenging and demanding limitations of the sonnet as an effective way of self-discipline. But, whatever the future acceptance of the sonnet by the poets, its tremendous contribution to the treasure of English and American poetry, the brief yet unforgettable melody played by such a galaxy of masters as Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Keats, and Rossetti, will forever be honored with endless gratitude by the reader.