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**THE MODERNIST AMERICAN SONNET**

by

**Edward Zuk**

**B.A., The University of British Columbia, 1993**

**M.A., The University of Toronto, 1994**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF**

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

in

**THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES**

**Department of English**

**THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA**

**February 2001**

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0-612-61215-5

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**Abstract**

The sonnet is the oldest prescribed form in English poetry, and it has enjoyed an almost uninterrupted popularity from the sixteenth century to the present. In the first half of the twentieth century, the sonnet came under attack from a number of influential poets and critics. Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, and, to a lesser extent, Wallace Stevens all declared that the sonnet was an outmoded, “baneful” form that was unable to meet the poetical demands of the modern age. In spite of these criticisms, the sonnet flourished in the hands of American poets of the period. E. A. Robinson, Robert Frost, Edna St. Vincent Millay, E. E. Cummings, among others, all wrote important sonnets, meeting these criticisms of the form by introducing radical new innovations into the sonnet even as they managed to retain many familiar conceits and stylistic features that date back to the English Renaissance. Robinson adapted the sonnet to express narrative rather than lyric conventions, while Frost employed the sonnet to express non-Platonic views of poetic structure and order. Millay combined traditional and modern imagery and diction in her sonnets, while Cummings organized his efforts in the form by techniques that were originally developed for free verse. This thesis explores these and other contributions to the sonnet and the new standards that were set for its subject matter, imagery, language, and structure. By demonstrating the importance of these developments, this study illuminates the formal inventiveness that was so prominent in American poetry during the Modernist era.

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**Introduction:  
The Sonnet in Early Twentieth-Century America**

The following essay will explore the history, themes, and development of the sonnet in America from approximately the turn of the century to the beginning of World War II. Neither the chronological nor geographical boundaries will be strictly observed. The four poets who will receive the majority of attention had established their careers by the 1920s, but since they continued to produce important works well into the post-war era, the years 1939 or 1945 do not limit this inquiry. British poets of the period also receive more than a passing mention, in part because their achievements and influence are too great to ignore, and in part because the nationality of two key writers, T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden, is subject to some debate. On the whole, however, the discussion will focus on four of the most significant and prolific writers of sonnets during the period - E. A. Robinson, Robert Frost, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and E. E. Cummings<sup>1</sup> - all of whom undeniably fall into the category of early twentieth-century American poets.

The rationale for this study is simple. It may be said, without any exaggeration, that the early twentieth century represents one of the greatest periods of sonnet writing, what Paul Friedrich has called "the unheralded revolution in the sonnet" in an essay by that name (199), which was remarkable for the quality, quantity, and originality of its sonnets. In addition to the four authors who will be studied in detail in the succeeding chapters, a number of important sonnet writers were active during the first decades of the century. Thomas Hardy, the oldest of these poets, wrote sonnets up to the beginning of World War I, when he was succeeded by Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and Rupert Brooke, all of whom memorialized their war experiences in the form. W. B. Yeats,

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<sup>1</sup> Following the practice of many critics, Cummings's name will appear with capital letters throughout this dissertation. The irregular punctuation, spacing, and capitalization of his poems will appear as originally printed.

whose reputation was well established before 1900, composed "Leda and the Swan" in 1923 at the height of the modernist era, and important individual sonnets and sonnet sequences by W. H. Auden appeared throughout the 1930s and during the Second World War. In America, the sonnet was not only appearing in the works of the leading poets of New England, Robinson and Frost, but also in the work of the most famous female poets, Millay, Elinor Wylie, and Sarah Teasdale, and by the most popular experimental poet, E. E. Cummings. The sonnet was also written by Louise Bogan, the long-time poetry editor of The New Yorker, by Yvor Winters, the influential critic, and by a trio of the "Fugitive" poets who were closely associated with the New Criticism, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and R. P. Blackmur. Among the lesser-known poets writing sonnets were Conrad Aiken and Merrill Moore,<sup>2</sup> both of whom produced large numbers of poems in the form, and several sonnets may be found in the collected works of Hart Crane<sup>3</sup> and the juvenilia of Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot. If the many sonnets of Gerard Manley Hopkins, first published in 1918, are included in this list, the early twentieth century rivals even the Renaissance in the number of its distinguished poets writing sonnets.

This dissertation began as a desire to explore the similarities, influences, and variety of this body of sonnets to see what subjects and technical innovations, if any, were typical of the period. It soon became apparent, however, that the subject had to be narrowed by geographical boundaries in addition to temporal ones. The chief reason for this added restriction was the different critical climate in America and Britain. Poets in

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<sup>2</sup> Merrill Moore (1903-1957) was one of the most interesting sonnet writers of the period. He wrote hundreds of sonnets during his lifetime, many of which were divided on the page into smaller one to three line stanzas in a manner reminiscent of the poems of E. E. Cummings.

<sup>3</sup> Only two sonnets "To Emily Dickinson" and "To Shakespeare," were among the poems published in his lifetime. One additional sonnet, simply titled "Sonnet," appears in the Complete Poems of Hart Crane, edited by Marc Simon.



America are exposed to a variety of influences and pressures unknown to their British counterparts, producing noticeable differences in their works, even when both groups of poets are included under a broad movement such as "modernism." Applied to the sonnet, this difference translated into a suspicion towards the form that was not felt by the British poets of the period. The sources and effects of this suspicion will be recounted in the various sections which make up the remainder of this introductory chapter; for now, it suffices to observe that this difference affected the sonnets being written in a noticeable but subtle fashion.

In spite of their early experimentation with the sonnet, four American poets - T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams - believed in their maturity that the sonnet was no longer a serious vehicle of expression in the modern period. Since these poets tend to shape any discussion of the modernist period, the fact that they did not write any mature sonnets may be taken as a silent denunciation of the form. Pound, Eliot, and Williams, arguably the three most influential critics of the period, went even further by openly denouncing the sonnet in their essays. Pound, for example, declared that the sonnet to be a "devil" (*ABC of Reading*, 157) and the legacy left by Francis Petrarch to be so much "bric-a-brac" ("Cavalcanti," 199). Eliot wondered whether the sonnet could be successfully revived during the modern age, a reflection that assumed that the form was already "dead" to his contemporaries ("Reflections on *Vers Libre*," 189). Williams, meanwhile, derided "the baneful sonnet" ("Mid-Century American Poets (1950)," 179), and later in his career he would declare that "for years I have been stating that the sonnet form is impossible to us" ("Forward to Merrill Moore's *Sonnets*," 92). This scorn for the sonnet appears throughout the essays of these three writers, producing a climate of opinion which could not help but discourage younger poets from writing in the form or force poets who were writing sonnets to justify their choice in a way that sonnet writers from earlier periods did not.

This level of hostility towards the sonnet is not unique in literary history, as there exists a notable precedent in the opinions of the eighteenth century. Samuel Johnson, for example, dismissed the form in a short paragraph from his Life of Milton:

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 fabrick of a sonnet, however adapted to the Italian language, has never succeeded in ours, which, having greater variety of termination, requires the rhymes to be often changed. (117, original italics)

John Berryman noted "the eighteenth century's antipathy to the sonnet form" by quoting George Stevens's remark that "I am one of those who should have wished it to have expired in the country where it was born" ("The Sonnets," 285). Yet there is a significant difference between the eighteenth- and twentieth-century evaluations of the sonnet. Samuel Johnson was writing at a time when the sonnet had all but disappeared from the English language, so that his denunciation can be seen to reflect the popular attitude of his times towards the form. The critiques of Pound, Eliot, and Williams, however, occurred during a golden age of sonnet writing, when important sonnets were appearing simultaneously with their criticisms. While their denunciations of the form may have influenced certain poets, a belief in the "impossibility" of the sonnet in the modern era was clearly at odds with the spirit of the age.

This discrepancy is striking, and it appears even more so when it is realized that there was no division into opposing camps of those writers who composed sonnets and those who scorned the form. Pound formed early friendships with both Yeats and Frost, arguably the poets who produced the greatest sonnets of the period, and openly praised their work, while Eliot befriended the young Allen Tate and William Carlos Williams momentarily halted his quarrel with the form to praise the sonnets of Merrill Moore in his "Forward to Merrill Moore's Sonnets." Thus the sonnet was objected to on principle and not because of personal antipathies, and evaluations of individual sonnet writers by

Pound, Eliot, and Williams were then formed on other grounds. But the criticism of the sonnet during the period was not fleeting or superficial; rather, it was inseparable from several of the most cherished notions of the modernist poets. The sonnet was frequently denounced because it was seen to represent solutions to fundamental aesthetic problems that were antithetical to these poets' works. In the remainder of this introduction, the reasons for the critical disdain surrounding the sonnet will be examined, leading to discussions of such important topics as diction, poetic form, the relation between poetic structure and music, the role of formal poetry in a democracy, and the process of maturation of a poet.

But before turning to the specific criticisms of Pound, Eliot, and Williams, the immense influence which these opinions exerted must be noted. The modernist antipathy towards the sonnet was to produce a suspicion of the form which lingers to the present day, although its effects were felt most acutely by the poets of the succeeding generation. For example, in 1953 Louise Bogan wrote that:

One cannot deny, however, that certain set forms in the verse of all European languages now seem to the modern poet either pedantic or trivial. Certain formal verse patterns, therefore, seem to be exhausted. Certain modern poets cannot function, for example, in the sonnet form. Others cannot function in any form which has regular stress, or which is pointed up by any sort of rhyme. It is interesting in what way, and for what reasons, this exhaustion came about. For the dislike for form, in many young writers, amounts to actual fear and revulsion. ("The Pleasures of Formal Poetry," 149)

These thoughts were written during Bogan's tenure as poetry editor for The New Yorker, when she was in closest contact with the poetry of her times. Significantly, the sonnet is the only poetic form mentioned by name in her discussion of the wide-spread "revulsion" against prescribed forms. This distrust of the sonnet also appears in the following comment by Richard Wilbur who, in spite of writing several notable sonnets himself, expressed a suspicion of the sonnet with surprising vehemence:

The main danger of formalism, as both Dr. Williams and Miss Bogan observe,

is that the choice of a much used meter and form is likely to evoke in the poet's mind a swarm of past uses. The sonnet, I suppose, is the riskiest form of all for an English or American poet to try, if he is troubled by a good memory. There are so many good sonnets in our language - or languages - that it is particularly easy in writing one to bear "the second burthen of a former child." Poems made out of poetry; utterance without real reference; self-cuckoldry; lines which smell of sanction - there is the risk, and there are few who have not sometime or other failed in this regard. ("The Bottles Become New Too," 216-217)

The fact that one of the ablest writers of formal poetry could speak of the "risk" of writing in a sonnet provides ample evidence of the influence that the anti-sonnet arguments held and continue to hold over American poets.<sup>4</sup>

### The Origin of the Sonnet

In several of his early essays, Ezra Pound advanced the argument that the sonnet symbolized a disastrous limitation of poetic resources, in particular the beginning of a divorce of poetry from music. As with most of the arguments made against the sonnet during this period, Pound's thesis may seem odd when stated so baldly. It will also seem to contradict the facts. The sonnet most likely evolved from earlier musical forms,<sup>5</sup> while early sonnets were set to music during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>6</sup> The word "sonnet," according to the *OED*, derived either from a diminutive of the Italian word "suono" ("sound") or "sonare" ("to sound, to ring"), indicating the early importance of music to the form. Individual sonnets by Spenser, Shakespeare, or Milton may strike

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<sup>4</sup> Dana Gioia's declaration that in the early 1980s "magazines like [the] *Paris Review*, which hadn't published a rhyming poem in anyone's memory, suddenly began featuring sonnets, villanelles, and syllabics" provides further anecdotal evidence of the sonnet's decline during the middle part of the century ("Notes on the New Formalism," 31).

<sup>5</sup> Ernest Hatch Wilkins argues that either the Italian musical forms of the *canzone* or the *strambotto* inspired the first sonnets: "There are two traditional and still current theories as to the source of the sonnet. The first is that the sonnet is simply a *canzone* stanza used as a separate composition. The second relates the sonnet to the *strambotto*. . ." ("The Invention of the Sonnet," 26).

<sup>6</sup> Paul Oppenheimer alludes to this fact in the following sentence: "Most of the music we possess for the sonnet dates from well over 200 years subsequent to the first sonnets of Giacomo da Lentino [i.e. during the 15th and 16th centuries]" ("The Origin of the Sonnet," 301).

the casual reader as being "musical," in that they make free use of alliteration, repetition, metre, and rhyme, all of which bring poetry closer to music by emphasizing the sounds of the words. Therefore the connection between music and the sonnet may appear to be strong and unassailable, but it was precisely these types of arguments that Pound was at pains to refute.

Pound's reasons for arguing that the sonnet divorced poetry from music will be presented shortly, but first it will be important to note a key feature of his criticism, the great burden which it places on the sonnet. In Pound's criticisms, the sonnet is thought to inaugurate a major change in thinking about poetic structure and the role of poetry. All of the criticisms against the sonnet surveyed in this introduction will view the sonnet as the culmination of larger trends, so much so that, in this section and those following, it will often be necessary to pause in order to remember what real sonnets look like, as opposed to the historical shifts or trends that they are asserted to represent. Yet the sustained abuse which the sonnet received from a Pound or Williams may also be taken as an acknowledgement of the form's importance, even if it was seen to represent only those trends which (they believed) were detrimental to poetry in general.

Pound's criticism was unique during the early twentieth century for offering an argument based on the form's origins and early history.<sup>7</sup> The basis for his critique is the seemingly innocent observation that the sonnet likely evolved from the longer musical form of the canzone, a type of Italian song which consists of three parts. The first of these parts was subdivided into two unequal sections, the *fronte* and *sirima*, a division which is suggestive of the octave-sestet structure of the Italian sonnet. A further parallel

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<sup>7</sup> Pound's arguments have still not been overturned by modern scholarship. See Wilkins's definitive essay "The Invention of the Sonnet" for a discussion of the sonnet's origins. Paul Oppenheimer's recent book on the origins of the sonnet, The Birth of the Modern Mind, discusses the implications of Wilkins's essay but does not overturn any of its findings.

between the two forms arises from the rhymes. Since the canzone had no fixed rhyme scheme, its poets were free to experiment with various patterns, one of which, as Pound suggests, may have been the prototype for the sonnet:

Nor is there much gap from *Lancan vei fueill'* or *D'austra guiza* to the form of the sonnet, or to the receipt for the Italian strophes of canzoni, for we have both the repetition and the unrepeating sound in the verset. And in two versets the rhymes run *abab cde abab cde*; in one, and in the other *abba cde abba cde*; while in sonnets the rhymes run *abab abab cde cde*; or *abba abba cde cde*. And this is no very great difference. A sonetto would be the third of a *son*. ("Anaut Daniel," 110)

For Pound, the fact that the shorter, limited sonnet was to overtake the longer, complex canzone in popularity represented a diminishment of poetic resources:

At this point we divagate for fuller ultimate reference. The prestige of the sonnet in English is a relic of insular ignorance. The sonnet was not a great poetic *invention*. The sonnet occurred automatically when some chap got stuck in the effort to make a canzone. His 'genius' consisted in the recognition of the fact that he had come to the end of his subject matter. ("Cavalcanti," 168, original italics)

According to Pound, the popularity of the sonnet arose only from an ignorance of the longer canzone and its possibilities. The sonnet's development was thus held to be the result of a deficient subject matter which could not be expanded into a proper canzone, rather than as a refinement or a process of discovering a poetic form suited to a particular subject matter.

Pound's main charge against the sonnet resulted from its growing independence from the canzone and that form's connection with music. The canzone was primarily a type of song intended for a musical arrangement. By contrast, it is not certain that the first sonnets were composed with musical scores in mind. Paul Oppenheimer has recently noted that the earliest musical settings of sonnets to have survived date from some two hundred years after the form's origin in Italy (*The Birth of the Modern Mind*, 192). This fact may not have been known to Pound, but he did assert that the sonnet marked a loss of musical effects in poetry in general:

Historically the sonnet, the 'little tune', had already in Guido's day become a danger to composition. It marks an ending or at least a decline of metric invention. It marks the beginning of the divorce of words and music. Sonnets with good musical setting are rare. The spur to the musician is slight. The monotony of the 14 even lines as compared to the constantly varying strophes of Ventadour or of Arnaut; the vocal heaviness of the hendecasyllable unrelieved by a shorter turn are all blanketing impediments for the music. ("Cavalcanti," 170)

Several of the formal aspects of the canzone are being referred to here: the freedom to vary the total number of a canzone's lines, the lengths of individual lines (in the canzone shorter lines were interposed between hendecasyllabics), and the rhyme scheme to fit a particular musical score. By contrast, the sonnet is incapable of providing this type of flexibility to emphasize a musical setting which might be composed specifically for it:

In all this matter the sonnet is the *devil*. Already by 1300 the Italian sonnet was becoming, indeed had become, declamatory, first because of its having all its lines the same length, which was itself a result of divorce from song. (*ABC of Reading*, 157, original italics)

The result of the sonnet's rigid form, Pound argues, is that the sonnet is only rarely given a worthy musical setting, in spite of the vogue for composing musical accompaniment for sonnets from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries onwards.

Pound's belief that the sonnet was not a true musical form was repeated in the criticism of his contemporaries. T. S. Eliot echoed it at several points in his essay "The Music of Poetry," where the "simple" form of the sonnet was contrasted with a musical structure:

A play of Shakespeare is a very complex musical structure; the more easily grasped structure is that of forms such as the sonnet, the formal ode, the ballade, the villanelle, rondeau or sestina. ("The Music of Poetry," 36)

Eliot's definition of a "musical structure" differs from Pound's, however, in that Eliot uses the term metaphorically, while Pound believed that the term implied an actual musical score. But the true legacy of Pound's insistence that a poem's form should be flexible enough to inspire a musical score occurs in his credo to the Imagist movement, which

grew out of his attempts to banish sonnets from modern poetry, even though it does not mention the sonnet explicitly. For example, Pound denounced a regular meter, one of the most recognizable characteristics of the sonnet, when he warned poets "to compose in the sequence of a musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome ("A Retrospect," 3).<sup>8</sup> An antipathy towards a regular rhyme scheme, meanwhile, was revealed in his derision of poems where "words are shovelled in to fill a metric pattern or to complete the noise of a rhyme-sound" so that "whether or no the phrases followed by the followers are musical must be left to the reader's decision" ("A Retrospect," 3). In both of these declarations, Pound attempted to re-establish a connection between poetic and musical structure which he believed was first severed in the prescribed form of the sonnet.

Pound extended this critique of the sonnet through his interpretation of other early developments in the form. On several occasions, he criticized the sonnet for its ability to give birth to new modes of expression unsuited to the canzone, which was asserted to be further evidence of the sonnet's divorce from music:

The art of song, the Provençal art, sublimated by Sordello, stiffens when you get an habitual form. The sonnet was next used for letter writing, used for anything not needing a new tune perforce for every new poem. (ABC of Reading, 157)

This remark constitutes one of the most interesting criticisms of the sonnet of the period, since a variety of subject matter and rhetorical modes might easily be taken as a sign of the vitality of a poetic form, rather than as a sign of degeneration. Yet Pound's attitude towards these new modes of expression was unequivocal:

The sonnet was first the 'little tune,' the first strophe of a canzone, the form found when some chap got so far and couldn't proceed. Steadily in the wake of the sonneteers came the dull poets. (ABC of Reading, 157)

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<sup>8</sup> The rejection of metre by Pound and others is the subject of Timothy Steele's book Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt Against Meter, the definitive work on the subject.



Once again, it is strange to find that the sonnet was responsible for "dull" poetry after the thirteenth century, a view which becomes comprehensible only in light of the importance that a flexible structure linked to a musical score held in Pound's aesthetics.

### **The Sonnet as Ornament**

Although the sonnet's inability to aspire to a musical form provoked a detailed criticism from Pound, there was a subsequent development in its history which was equally antithetical to his sensibility. The greatest innovator in the history of the sonnet was Petrarch (1304-1374), whose *Rime* helped to inspire the great sonnet vogue of the 1590s in England. His influence led to the development of the "Petrarchan conceit," which M. H. Abrams has defined as "a type of figure used in love poems which had been novel and effective in the Italian poet Petrarch, but became hackneyed in some of his imitators among the Elizabethan sonneteers" (*A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 32). Renaissance poets repeated these conceits again and again in their sonnets at the expense of originality in thought or expression. A typical sonnet conceit involves the assertion that poetry in general, and the writing of a sonnet in particular, will lend immortality to the beloved. This theme finds expression in the following lines by Edmund Spenser, Samuel Daniel, and Michael Drayton, respectively:

My verse your virtues rare shall eternize,  
And in the heavens wryte your glorious name.  
Where whenas death shall all the world subdew,  
Our love shall live, and later life renew. (*Amoretti*, 75)

Goe you my verse, go tell her what she was;  
For what she was, she best shall find in you.  
Your firy heate lets not her glory passe,  
But (Phoenix-like) shall make her live anew. (*Delia*, 30)

How many paltry, foolish, painted things  
That now in coaches trouble every street,  
Shall be forgotten, whom on poet sings,  
Ere they be well wrapped in their winding sheet?  
Where I to thee eternity shall give. . . (*Idea*, 6)

While the individual style of each poet is recognizable in the above excerpts, the general sentiment remains the same in each poem. Not to be outdone, Shakespeare was to make this argument a central one in his sonnets, most famously in the following lines:

Nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,  
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st,  
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. (sonnet 18)

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments  
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme,  
But you shall shine more bright in these contents  
Than unswept stone, besmeared with sluttish time. . . (sonnet 55)

Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth. . .  
And yet to times in hope, my verse shall stand  
Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand. (sonnet 60)<sup>9</sup>

Coupled with this repetition of themes came a refinement in rhetoric, where great pains were taken to repeat a similar argument in a variety of ways. Thus, while all of the passages quoted here state essentially the same idea, each uses different images or rhetorical flourishes to adorn the common sentiment.<sup>10</sup>

The shared conceits of Renaissance sonnet writers provided the basis for one of the most popular criticisms of the form in the modern era, which argued that the sonnet inevitably produces an ornamental style which is incapable of expressing original themes or arguments. Ezra Pound formulated this argument in his essay "Cavalcanti," where a

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<sup>9</sup> See also Shakespeare's sonnets 19, 63, 64, 65, and 81. The anthology *Petrarch in England*, compiled by Jack D'Amico, collects various Renaissance sonnets that openly adapt conceits from the sonnets of Petrarch, providing a precise catalogue of one set of adaptations and repetitions. This particular conceit is also discussed briefly in chapter 5 in the section "E. E. Cummings and the Elizabethan Sonnet" below, pp. 212-214.

<sup>10</sup> See also the sections below on the lyric sonnets of E. A. Robinson, pp. 52-59, the chapter on Edna St. Vincent Millay's sonnets, and the section on E. E. Cummings's love sonnets, pp. 206-226, for a discussion of modern echoes of Elizabethan sonnets.

perceived realism and accuracy of earlier sonnet writers was contrasted with the ornamental language of Petrarch and, by implication, his British followers:

In that art the gulf between Petrarch's capacity and Guido's is the great gulf, not of degree, but of kind. In Guido the 'figure', the strong metamorphic or 'picturesque' expression is there with purpose to convey or to interpret a definite meaning. In Petrarch it is ornament, the prettiest ornament he could find, but not an irreplaceable ornament, or one that he couldn't have used just about as well somewhere else. In fact he very often does use it, and them, somewhere, and nearly everywhere else, all over the place. (154-155)

Pound felt that this distinction was important enough to repeat it later in the same essay in an anecdote that reveals the influence that it exerted on other poets of the Imagist movement:

When the late T.E. Hulme was trying to be a philosopher in that milieu, and fussing about Sorel and Bergson and getting them translated into English, I spoke to him one day of the difference between Guido's precise interpretive metaphor, and the Petrarchan fustian and ornament, pointing out that Guido thought in accurate terms; that the phrases correspond to definite sensations undergone; in fact very much what I said in my early preface to the Sonnets and Ballate.

Hulme took some time over it in silence, and then finally said: 'That is very interesting'; and after a pause: 'That is more interesting than anything I ever read in a book.' ("Cavalcanti," 162)

If these comments left any doubt in the reader's mind as to the value of an ornamental, Petrarchan rhetoric, Pound was to state his attitude plainly towards the end of the essay:

The Italian of Petrarch and his successors is of no interest to the practicing writer or to the student of comparative dynamics in language, the collectors of bric-a-brac are outside our domain. ("Cavalcanti," 199)

In Pound's writings, the evocation of Petrarch's name becomes a shorthand for an obsolete, prettified rhetoric, and through this association the sonnet was implicated as a form incapable of carrying an original or precise meaning. Thus, even while he was praising a sonnet by Mark Alexander Boyd as the most beautiful in the language, Pound felt compelled to write that "Boyd is 'saying it in a beautiful way,'" the quotation marks

indicating his impatience with a Petrarchan-influenced style wherever it might appear (ABC of Reading, 134).

This argument that the sonnet produced a special type of language and copied Petrarch by being ornamental without conveying any significant meaning found many adherents in the modernist era, even if its historical justification was often left unnoted. George Santayana, for example, was to praise Shakespeare's sonnet 29 by declaring "how much old finery there is in our literary baggage" while showing how impossible this style was for a modern poet ("Shakespeare: Made in America," 146). The "finery" of the sonnet was an artificial language divorced from modern speech, a feature which provoked William Carlos Williams to the following comment:

Some things in the book are of indifferent worth or at times downright bad: sloppy rhymes, inversion of phrase, distortions otherwise of the natural sequence of speech, fixed habits of versification that brings a line up flush against the wainscotting - for what reason? We still get the baneful sonnet which says always the same thing, quite beyond control. ("Mid-Century American Poets (1950)," 179)

Although Williams refined this argument by identifying the "sonnet style" as an archaic poetic diction, his invective against the "fixed habits of versification" echoes Pound's critique. T. S. Eliot also criticized this ornamental, imitative approach to writing when he argued that poetic forms:

become discredited when employed solely by those writers who, having no impulse to form within them, have recourse to pouring their liquid sentiment into a ready-made mould in hopes that it will set. In a perfect sonnet, what you admire is not so much the author's skill in adapting himself to the pattern as the skill and power with which he makes the pattern comply with what he has to say. ("Music and Poetry," 37)

This passage reads like a variation on Pound's an attack on the Petrarchan "bric-a-brac" which uses a set mode of speech "somewhere, and nearly everywhere else, all over the place" ("Cavalcanti," 155).

The weakness in Pound's argument is that the Petrarchan style and conceit were important features of the Renaissance sonnet, but they had largely disappeared by the beginning of the seventeenth century. The association of the sonnet with an ornamental rhetoric will seem odd to readers of Metaphysical sonnets, Romantic sonnets, or the sonnets of Thomas Hardy, Wilfred Owen, Robert Frost, and E. A. Robinson, none of whom may be accused of a purely ornamental use of language. Yet, in the same manner as the sonnet was accused of divorcing poetry from music, the sonnet is here transformed into a scapegoat for a type of writing which the various modernist movements set out to attack. Pound's insistence on distinguishing between the precision of Guido Cavalcanti's imagery and the stock rhetoric of Petrarch, for example, became the basis for several of the central tenants of Imagism and a belief that poetry should employ a direct and clear diction to communicate its subject:

1. Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.  
("A Retrospect," 3)

By emphasizing an unadorned poetic diction, Pound warns modern poets away from a stock phrasing and imagery in the manner of a Renaissance sonnet. The central concerns of the early Imagist manifestos, a fidelity of language to a subject and the establishment of a musical structure for poetry, are remarkably similar to several of Pound's charges against the sonnet so that, without any exaggeration, it may be said that Pound's critique of the sonnet form gave rise to the credo of the Imagist poets.

Independently of the Imagists, T. S. Eliot and Williams also denounced a purely ornamental rhetoric by arguing that poetical language was to reflect its subject through a clear and direct poetic diction. Eliot's praise of the Metaphysical poets, for example, is in effect an attack on any language chosen for beauty in and of itself:

It is to be observed that the language of these poets is as a rule simple and pure; in the verse of George Herbert this simplicity is carried as far as it can go - a simplicity emulated without success by numerous modern poets.

The *structure* of the sentences, on the other hand, is sometimes far from simple, but this is not a vice; it is a fidelity to thought and feeling. The effect, at its best, is far less artificial than that of an ode by Gray. And as this fidelity induces variety of thought and feeling, so it induces variety of music. ("The Metaphysical Poets," 62, original italics)<sup>11</sup>

Like Pound, Eliot praised a fidelity of poetic language to a thought or image, a precision which was thought to have been destroyed by Petrarch. William Carlos Williams also instructed the new writer to let technique be determined by subject matter so as to avoid playing "tiddlywinks with the syllables":

On the poet devolves the most vital function of society: to recreate it - the collective world - in time of stress, in a new mode, fresh in every part, and so set the world working or dancing or murdering each other again, as it may be. . . . If you like Gertrude Stein, study her for her substance; she has it, no matter what the idle may say. The same for Ezra Pound, for James Joyce. It is substance that makes their work important. Technique is part of it - new technique; technique is itself substance, as all artists must know; but it is the substance under that, forming that, giving it its reason for existence which must be the final answer and source of reliance. ("Caviar and Bread Again: A Warning to the New Writer," 103-4)

The insistence that a poem's language precisely reflect the subject matter was reiterated throughout the early twentieth century until it became axiomatic, while the perception of the sonnet as a form invoking a ready-made or stock rhetoric was equally prevalent. This pair of beliefs may help to explain Williams's remarkable claim that a sonnet "says always the same thing" ("Author's Introduction to The Wedge," 5). If the style of a poem must be adapted to the subject, and if all sonnets were seen to invoke an ornamental style, then Williams's conclusion takes on the force of a logical syllogism.

Viewed in this light, the sonnet was identified with a single phase of its history to provide a contrast to the new emphasis on an unadorned poetic language. Yet there is another sense in which Pound's critique is valid, making his critique applicable to sonnets

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<sup>11</sup> Eliot's reference to "music" shows that, of course, these criticisms of the sonnet often overlapped or blended with one another; they are separated in this introduction in order to highlight specific trends or recurring themes.

written during the modernist era to the present. In the works of minor poets, there is often a misguided wish to rewrite the great sonnets of Spenser or Sidney. Pound's declarations found an interesting parallel in a review by Randall Jarrell entitled "The Rhetoricians," in which Jarrell denounces this backward-looking sonnet writing, in this case from the collection of sonnets And in the Human Heart by Conrad Aiken:

Chaos, infinity, eternity, the sea, the snow, fire, ice, leaves, birds, dreams, angels, heaven and hell, the heart, the soul - such favourites as these are more emotional and meaningful for Mr. Aiken, more essential to the poems, than the "subject" that serves as their pretext. He could write fairly pleasing and interesting poetry about any subject whatsoever; deprive him of the use of his favourite words and he would be simply unable to write poetry at all. (52-53)

Jarrell's argument here is virtually identical to Pound's criticism of Petrarch's ornamental language which failed to adapt itself to the subject at hand. Later in the same review, Jarrell had complained of a book of sonnets by Raymond Holden as follows:

. . . in The Arrow at the Heel the rhetoric, instead, is what ruins the poem. Mr. Holden's way of saying anything is so painstakingly, conventionally, and determinedly rhetorical that even his most emotional or farfetched statement sounds positively legal. . . Mr. Holden's forms are traditional in the deadest sense of the word; often one can hardly pay attention to the poem for staring at the terrible I AM A SONNET writ large on every feature. The poems are competent, sincere, thoroughly respectable productions; many of the phrases are effective, some of the ideas interesting; but phrases and ideas survive only as random notes, barely heard over the terrible din of the machinery. The subject is picked and the mills begin to grind; Mr. Holden's mills grind slowly and oh! so small. (53)

Once again, it is the automatic feature of sonnet rhetoric and imagery that tested Jarrell's patience, although he resisted the temptation to generalize his comments into a criticism of all sonnets written in the English language.

### **The Sonnet versus Modernism**

One of the most prevalent criticisms of the sonnet in the early twentieth century declared the form to be archaic in its orientation and subject matter, so that it remained incapable of expressing the concerns of a twentieth-century poet. This argument was

first expressed by a young Wallace Stevens, who on July 4, 1900, remarked in his journal:

Perish all sonnets! I have been working until 4 am this morning recently & have plenty of time, therefore, to look over Stedman's 'Victorian Anthology.' There's little in the sonnet line there that's worth a laurel leaf. Sonnets have their place, without mentioning names; but they can also be found tremendously out of place: in real life where things are quick, unaccountable, responsive. (Letters of Wallace Stevens, 42)

The contrast drawn here between the sonnet as an anthology piece and "real life" later appeared in many of the public criticisms of the sonnet of the period. In the passage above, it is difficult not to equate "real life" with the demands of the present, so that the elaborate form of the sonnet is unable to reflect the chaos and unpredictability of the modern age. In his essay "Reflections on *Vers Libre*," T. S. Eliot made this argument explicit by declaring that:

We only need the coming of a Satirist - no man of genius is rarer - to prove that the heroic couplet has lost none of its edge since Dryden and Pope laid it down. As for the sonnet I am not so sure. But the decay of intricate formal patterns has nothing to do with the advent of *vers libre*. It had set in long before. Only in a closely-knit and homogeneous society, where many men are at work on the same problems, such a society as those which produced the Greek chorus, the Elizabethan lyric, and the Troubadour canzone, will the development of such forms ever be carried to perfection. (189)

This passage echoes Stevens's comments by arguing that the form of a poem must reflect the general "spirit of the age" or the nature of "real life" as seen by those in the present. A chaotic period such as the twentieth century, Eliot believed, required poetic forms to reflect its chaos, as the irregular rhythms of free verse poems appear to do. A prescribed form such as the sonnet, on the other hand, inevitably reflects a belief in a deeper order in the cosmos or society with its regular rhythm and rhyme schemes. By this standard a sonnet becomes inadequate for expressing the concerns of the modern age by its very regularity and intricate structure.



This argument was quite popular among modernist critics of the sonnet, who viewed the form as the culmination of values or modes of expression which were no longer held by modern poets. Williams argued this point in several essays, most notably in "On Measure - Statement for Cid Corman," his final statement on poetic form and metrics:

Our lives also have lost all that in the past we had to measure them by, except outmoded standards that are meaningless to us. In the same way our verses, of which our poems are made, are left without any metrical construction of which you can speak, any recognizable, any new measure by which they can be pulled together. We get sonnets, etc., but no one alive today, or half alive, seems to see anything incongruous in that. (337)

The sonnet's measure, presumably its fixed number of lines and feet, is here declared to be a set of "outmoded standards" which are "meaningless" to the present, and whatever order of reality they were once meant to express has irrevocably passed away. Pound, too, was critical of the sonnet on these grounds. In the ABC of Reading he warned young poets that "in all this matter [bad writing] the sonnet is the *devil*," in large part because it had already become outdated by the year 1300 (157, original italics). This argument appears again in his comments on the sonnet that Pound calls "Exhibit" by the Scottish poet Mark Alexander Boyd:

The apple is excellent for a few days or a week before it is ripe, then it is ripe; it is still excellent for a few days after it has passed the point of maturity.

I suppose this is the most beautiful sonnet in the language, at any rate it has one nomination. (ABC of Reading, 134)

In this account, the sonnet was thus "ripe" only for "a few days" during the Renaissance. By the nineteenth or twentieth centuries, Pound's argument implies, the form has already ceased to be of any interest to aspiring poets.

Pound's belief in the decay of poetic forms found their theoretical justification in the essays and lectures of T. S. Eliot, who argued that formal structures are not chosen wholly by the poet. Instead, poetic forms are largely determined by an author's historical

moment, so that they become obsolete as a society changes. A refusal to write sonnets in the early twentieth century could thus be defended as a sensitivity to the poetic needs of the present. In the passage from "Reflections on *Vers Libre*" quoted above, the "decay of intricate formal patterns" is the result of the loss of common standards in society, rather than of any conscious effort by the poets themselves. Eliot expanded these notions in his lecture "Music and Poetry," where a gradual obsolescence is seen to be the end product of any poetic form, independent of the efforts of any single author or poetic school. Part of this argument was quoted above; the full passage runs:

At one stage the stanza is a right and natural formalization of speech into pattern. But the stanza - and the more elaborate it is, the more rules to be observed in its proper execution, the more surely this happens - tends to become fixed to the idiom of the moment of its perfection. It quickly loses contact with the changing colloquial speech, being possessed by the mental outlook of a past generation; it becomes discredited when employed solely by those writers who, having no impulse to form within them, have recourse to pouring their liquid sentiment into a ready-made mould in hopes that it will set. In a perfect sonnet, what you admire is not so much the author's skill in adapting himself to the pattern as the skill and power with which he makes the pattern comply with what he has to say. Without this fitness, which is contingent upon period as well as individual genius, the rest is at best virtuosity: and where the musical element is the only element, that also vanishes. Elaborate forms return: but there have to be periods during which they are laid aside. (37)

Inevitably, Eliot's arguments become damaging as soon as they are applied to sonnet writing. While a sonnet expresses its "moment of its perfection," presumably in the Italian Renaissance, it inevitably loses contact with a given present until it becomes nothing but an empty pattern. This reliance on "the mental outlook of a past generation" makes it unavailable to poets of a later era. The sonnet has reached this latter stage long ago, Eliot argues, so that it would be best to abandon it until it is ready to be revived at some future date, since no individual genius could hope to resuscitate it in the modern age beyond a mere technical virtuosity.

This denunciation of the sonnet became so prevalent in the modern period that we should pause to offer several counter-arguments. The greatest objection to any perceived decline in the form lies in the quality of the sonnets written by Yeats, Owen, Frost, and other poets of the early twentieth century who will be the subjects of the succeeding chapters. It is simply not true that the sonnet could not adapt to the needs of modern poets. The charge of anachronism could be met on theoretical grounds as well. The sonnet saw one of its greatest revivals at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the dawn of the modern industrial age, when it was then used to express both a metaphysical dissolution in Wordsworth's "Mutability" and a vision of a chaotic society in Shelley's "England 1819." Thus there is nothing in the later history of the sonnet to suggest that it must be written in what Eliot calls a "homogeneous" (i.e. feudal) society above. Yet, even if true, the argument that the sonnet stands apart from the chaos of "real life" could just as well be turned to an advantage. It may have been this perception of the sonnet that attracted the attention of Robert Frost, who believed that a poem should represent "a momentary stay against confusion" ("The Figure a Poem Makes," 18). By allowing the poet a vantage point from which to evaluate the present, a prescribed form such as the sonnet might produce a clear-sighted view of a society's dissolution which would be unavailable to a free verse poet.<sup>12</sup>

The objections of Eliot, Pound, and Williams to the sonnet may become more comprehensible when it is realized that they stem from one of the deepest beliefs of what is now called "modernism." Modernist writers were obsessed with appearing "modern," as the subsequent title of the movement and the comments quoted above imply, and with the authenticity that this modernity condition lent their art. Jurgen Habermas, who has drawn attention to this aspect of the period, has given an excellent characterization of the

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<sup>12</sup> See the section below titled "Sonnets of Darkness" in chapter 3, pp. 122-127, for a more detailed discussion of Frost's arguments.

new relationship that was assumed between the timely work and the timeless in the early twentieth century:

The most recent modernism simply makes an abstract opposition between tradition and the present; and we are, in a way, still the contemporaries of that kind of aesthetic modernity which first appeared in the midst of the 19th century. Since then, the distinguishing mark of works, which count as modern, is the "new." The characteristic of such works is "the new" which will be overcome and made obsolete through the novelty of the next style. But, while that which is merely "stylish" will soon become out-moded, that which is modern preserves a secret tie to the classical. Of course, whatever can survive time has always been considered to be a classic. But the emphatically modern document no longer borrows this power of being a classic from the authority of a past epoch; instead, a modern work becomes a classic because it has once been authentically modern. Our sense of modernity creates its own self-enclosed canons of being classic. ("Modernity versus Postmodernity," 4)

The notion of a "modern classic" helps to place the various criticisms of the sonnet by Eliot, Williams, and Pound into a philosophical context. The belief in the "modernity" of a work of art, a nineteenth and twentieth century notion, was applied without any self-consciousness to the older form of the sonnet. The sonnet, having arisen during a feudal era, was thought to be valuable for being an authentically modern document of that age, although it would become anachronistic (no longer "modern") when written by poets of succeeding generations. The importance of the sonnet was thus seen to be linked to its period of origin, and any intrusion of the form into the modern era needed to be guarded against to make way for new forms which were thought to be the only true expression of the present.

### **The Sonnet in America**

To this point, the critiques of the sonnet that have been examined arose from the form's antiquity and incompatibility with modern canons of taste. However, it would be remiss to neglect the fact that all of the major critics of the sonnet were born in America, and that they at times repeated a line of criticism that originated with the New England transcendentalist tradition beginning with Emerson. This influence seems to have been

felt only in America, for British poets of the period do not show a similar pressure to avoid the sonnet or prescribed forms in general. Yeats, for example, needed no apology for writing "Leda and the Swan," while Wilfred Owen's sonnet "Anthem for Doomed Youth" was featured in his influential collection of war poems without hinting at any apology or justification for its choice of poetical structure.

The transcendentalist critique of the sonnet rests on a sharp distinction between a poem's structure and conventions on the one hand and the creative vision of the author on the other. In Emerson's essays, where this distinction finds its first and strongest expression, the opposition becomes that of a poem's form and power. These two elements always exist in opposition, so that the central problem of any work of art becomes their reconciliation:

Human life is made up of two elements, power and form, and the proportion must be invariably kept if we would have it sweet and sound. Each of these elements in excess makes a mischief as hurtful as its defect. Everything runs to excess; every good quality is noxious if unmixed, and, to carry the danger to the end of ruin, nature causes each man's peculiarity to superabound.  
("Experience," 481-2)

Throughout Emerson's essays, the conflict between power and form will be resolved in a number of ways, not all of them consistent or even compatible with one another. In the passage quoted above, power and form are said to be held in balance, although the reader is not told how to recognize or achieve this balance. In other passages, however, it is form which is valued most highly, especially in a work of art. "The condition of true naming, on the poet's part," Emerson writes in "The Poet," "is his resigning himself to the divine *aura* which breathes through forms, and accompanying that" (459, original italics). When form is held to be a necessary vehicle for a poem's "divine aura," the sonnet becomes a poetic type by which other poems can be measured:

And herein is the legitimation of criticism, in the mind's faith that the poems are a corrupt version of some text in nature which they ought to be made to tally. A rhyme in one of our sonnets should not be less pleasing than the iterated

nodes of a seashell, or the resembling difference of a group of flowers.  
("The Poet," 459)

In praising the sonnet's rhymes for being (potentially) as pleasing as "the iterated nodes of a seashell," poetry is equated with its form or surface structure. Although other aspects of Emerson's thought will later be used as a rationale for denigrating prescribed forms, it is important to remember that formal poetry, and the sonnet in particular, finds its place within his philosophy.

In other passages in Emerson's essays, the requirements of power are viewed as superior to those of form, a belief which gives rise to the uneasiness that many American poets have felt towards the sonnet. At these times power is then equated with something like "genius" or "creative vision," as Emerson himself appears to argue in the following passage:

Our age yields no great and perfect persons. We want men and women who shall renovate life and our social state, but we see that most natures are insolvent, cannot satisfy their own wants, have an ambition out of all proportion to their practical force and do lean and beg day and night continually. Our housekeeping is mendicant, our arts, our occupations, our religion we have not chosen, but society has chosen for us.  
("Self-Reliance," 274-5)

This argument presupposes that prescribed forms frustrate our "own wants" or ambitions, although the "great" person may renovate the arts by deviating from inherited norms. At times Emerson argues that a renovation may be accomplished from within a given form, as in the following lines from "Experience":

Under the oldest, moldiest conventions a man of native force prospers just as well as in the newest world, and that by skill of handling and treatment. He can take hold anywhere. Life itself is a mixture of power and form, and will not bear the least excess of either. (478)

Although life is viewed as "a mixture of power and form," it is only the "force" or vision of the artist which receives Emerson's approbation in this passage. Form has been reduced to "the oldest, moldiest conventions," though these conventions may still be serviceable in a work of genius.

More important to the sonnet are those passages in which Emerson's dichotomy is reconciled solely according to the requirements of power. According to this argument, the great artist is seen as the creator of his own forms, so that the new form becomes expressive of creative power. In "Art," Emerson argues that "it is in vain that we look for genius to reiterate its miracles in the old arts; it is its instinct to find beauty and holiness in new and necessary facts" (440), while in "Self-Reliance" he declares that "the arts and inventions of each period are only its costume and do not invigorate men" (280), for it is only the reliance on one's own creative power which is indicative of genius:

Familiar as the voice of the mind is to each, the highest merit we ascribe to Moses, Plato and Milton is that they set at naught books and traditions, and spoke not what men, but what *they* thought. A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages. . . Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. ("Self-Reliance," 259)

Emerson will elsewhere apply the importance of a "spontaneous impression" and the individual's creative genius to the arts:

Because the soul is progressive, it never quite repeats itself, but in every act attempts the production of a new and fairer whole. This appears in works both of the useful and fine arts, if we employ the popular distinction of works according to their aim either at use or beauty. Thus in our fine arts, not imitation but creation is the aim. ("Art," 431)

This argument achieves its culmination in the figure of the poet, for whom the creation of new forms is the evidence of a great vision:

For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem - a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal that it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing. ("The Poet," 450)

The implication for the sonnet of this line of argument, if pushed to its logical extreme, is clear: because a poet does not create the sonnet anew every time one is written, the form

becomes a moldy convention which is unable to express the new vision of the true creative artist.

This view of the artist as an inventor of new poetic forms was adapted by two other influential American poets, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman. Writing in the conclusion to Walden, Thoreau states:

I fear chiefly lest my expression may not be *extra-vagant* enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced. *Extra-vagance!* It all depends on how you are yarded. The migrating buffalo, which seeks new pastures in another latitude, is not extravagant like the cow which kicks over the pail, leaps the cow-yard fence, and runs after her calf, in milking time. I desire to speak somewhere without bounds; like a man in a waking moment, to men in their waking moments; for I am convinced that I cannot exaggerate enough even to lay the foundation of a true expression. (324, original italics)

This wish to move beyond all previous boundaries, whether large or small, is reminiscent of Emerson's dissatisfaction with moldy conventions in the arts, although the assertion that truth can only be found by standing outside of established conventions runs counter to Emerson's beliefs. However, as the images of the water-buffalo and cow imply, Thoreau's revolt against convention is two-fold and allows for both an internal and a radical critique. Applied to sonnet writing, this passage could be applied in one of two ways: a wish to deviate from features such as the meter or a given set of rhymes to create a new type of sonnet without straying from the form completely (the cow jumping over the fence), or to move beyond the form altogether (the migrating buffalo). Both ideas are prevalent among American poets of the modern period. Robinson, Frost, Millay, and Cummings, the great innovators of the sonnet during this period, may be included in the former category, as all three of these poets played with the conventions of the sonnet to create new variations of the form. The latter category would include not only Eliot and Pound, but also such poets as Marianne Moore who rejected the sonnet in their mature work in the pursuit of new and novel poetic structures.



In sharp contrast to Thoreau's two-fold vision of extravagance, Walt Whitman was to call for a rejection of all existing poetic forms. In Whitman's critical writings, he argues repeatedly that the invention of new forms is a necessary component of great poetry. In the 1855 preface to "Leaves of Grass," for example, he asserts:

The power to destroy or remould is freely used by the greatest poet, but seldom the power of attack. What is past is past. If he does not expose superior models, and prove himself by every step he takes, he is not wanted. (438)

The milder form of Thoreau's extravagance is abandoned in favour of a reworking (or even destruction) of "what is past." Whitman's own verse, which is not modelled upon established English accentual-syllabic metrics or rhyme schemes, is thus held up as an example of this new type of poetry:

For grounds of 'Leaves of Grass,' as a poem, I abandon'd the conventional themes, which do not appear in it: none of the stock ornamentation, or choice plots of love or war, or high, exceptional personages of Old-World song; nothing, as I may say, for beauty's sake - no legend, or myth, or romance, nor euphemism, nor rhyme. ("A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads, 715)

Under such an attack, the sonnet cannot help but suffer. Although it is not mentioned explicitly, Whitman may very well have had the sonnet in mind as the most famous example of a type of poetry that is dependent on "choice plots of love," "stock ornamentation," and an insistence on rhyme.

To support his critique of all inherited forms, Whitman more than any other poet before or since attempted to justify his beliefs as preeminently American ones. Thoreau, in his defence of extravagance as a literary principle, recalls American expansionism and frontier imagery, but in Whitman's prose these appeals to American ideals become overt. His insistence on new poetic forms arises from his belief that the poet of the new world must express the ideals of science and democracy which are valued in his society:

Modern science and democracy seem'd to be throwing out their challenge to poetry to put them in its statements in contradistinction to the songs and

myths of the past. ("A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," 715)

In other passages, his critique of established forms is tied to a celebration of individual liberty:

The old red blood and stainless gentility of great poets will be proved by their unconstraint. A heroic person walks at his ease through or out of that custom or precedent or authority that suits him not. Of the traits of the brotherhood of first-class writers, savants, musicians, inventors and artists, nothing is finer than silent defiance advancing from new free forms. ("Preface, 1855, to the first issue of 'Leaves of Grass,' 445)

In these passages Whitman argues that these very American ideals must be embodied within a poem's form - and only in forms that are "new" or made in "contradistinction" to established poetical structures - and cannot be adequately expressed within poetry that, like the sonnet, has its origin in feudal Europe.

Viewed in historical perspective, Whitman's insistence on the creation of "new free forms" as the hallmark of literary genius is something of an anomaly, an extreme vision which was tempered in different ways by his two influential contemporaries, Emerson and Thoreau. However, Whitman's views find an unexpected corroboration in the great work Democracy in America by Alexis de Tocqueville and its predictions concerning the general trends of American poetry. In his section on American literature, de Tocqueville argues that the political and social conditions of the new world make the importation of any aesthetic theories derived from England problematical:

Not only do the Americans constantly draw upon the treasures of English literature, but it may be said with truth that they find the literature of England growing on their own soil. The larger part of that small number of men in the United States who are engaged in the composition of literary works are English in substance *and still more so in form*. Thus they transport into the midst of democracy the ideas and literary fashions that are current among the aristocratic nation they have taken for their model. They paint with colors borrowed from foreign manners; and as they hardly ever represent the country they were born in as it really is, they are seldom popular there. (Vol. II, 55-6, my italics)

By contrast, a truly American literature, when it eventually emerges, will be founded on principles which are fundamentally different from the order, structure, and attention to detail characteristic of the sonnet and other "aristocratic" works:

Taken as a whole, literature in democratic ages can never present, as it does in the periods of aristocracy, an aspect of order, regularity, science, and art; *its form, on the contrary, will ordinarily be slighted, sometimes despised.* Style will frequently be fantastic, incorrect, overburdened, and loose, almost always vehement and bold. Authors will aim at rapidity of execution more than at perfection of detail. Small productions will be more common than bulky books; there will be more wit than erudition, more imagination than profundity; and literary performances will bear marks of an untutored and rude vigor of thought, frequently of great variety and singular fecundity. The object of authors will be to astonish rather than to please, and to stir the passions more than to charm the taste. (II, 59, my italics)

With the possible exception of its length, there is nothing particular to the sonnet, according to this description, which would make it attractive to an American poet.

Instead, de Tocqueville argues that democracy and its constant replacement of its ruling elite will remain suspicious of any structure which is accorded an inherent value, and the new society will shape its literary productions accordingly.

The influence of the transcendentalist critique of established forms in general and of the sonnet in particular, which was reinforced by de Tocqueville's remarks cannot be over-emphasized. Many of the arguments summarized above anticipate Pound's commandment to "make it new." Whitman's insistence on the creation of new poetic forms, meanwhile, was more or less repeated in T. E. Hulme's introduction to Some Imagist Poets, which in turn summarized Pound's early aesthetic theories:

To create new rhythms - as the expression of new moods - and not to copy old rhythms, which merely echo old moods. We do not insist upon "free-verse" as the only method of writing poetry. We fight for it as for a principle of liberty. We believe that the individuality of a poet may often be better expressed in free-verse than in conventional forms. In poetry, a new cadence means a new idea. ("Preface," vi-vii)

William Carlos Williams also repeated Whitman's belief in the necessity of creating new poetic forms with little change to its substance:<sup>13</sup>

Formal patterns of all sorts represent arrests of the truth in some particular phase of its mutations, and immediately thereafter, unless they change, become mutilations. ("Against the Weather," 205-206)

Another common theme in Williams's criticism, his appeal to a "native" element of poetry, echoes Whitman's belief in the importance of using American ideals when establishing a theory of poetic structure:

Your attention is called now and then to some beautiful line or sonnet-sequence because of what is said there. So be it. To me all sonnets say the same thing of no importance. What does it matter what the line 'says'?

There is no poetry of distinction without formal invention, for it is in the intimate form that works of art achieve their exact meaning, in which they most resemble the machine, to give language the highest dignity, its illumination in the environment to which it is native. ("Author's Introduction to The Wedge," 5)

There is also a compatibility between transcendentalist ideas and the broadest ideals of literary modernism. Both movements insist on the creation of new poetic forms, one as the revelation of "genius" or as the truest expression of a new society, the other as a sign of being "new" or "modern." In each case, the creation of new forms is believed to accord a level of authenticity to a work, while a command of traditional forms is not believed to hold any value in and of itself.

Taken together, the combined critiques of the sonnet by Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and Tocqueville might appear to be unassailable, so that the authors discussed in this study may appear to be mere aberrations in the evolution of American poetry. Allen Tate, a writer of complex formal poems, noted the hold that such arguments held over American poets:

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<sup>13</sup> The discussion of Williams's early sonnets below, pp. 32-34, includes the poet's own statement on the importance of Whitman's poetics in his artistic development.

In his introduction to The Faber Book of Modern Verse (1936), [Michael] Roberts pointed out that American poets are less firmly rooted in a settled poetic tradition than the British; they are thus able to seize and digest traditions from many languages and periods. ("Modern Poetry," 218)

To reveal the weakness of this theory, we have only to recite the names of Longfellow, Frost, and Robinson, poets who have created some of the most "American" writing without accepting any of these arguments regarding their choice of forms. There also remains a lingering admiration of English and European forms among American poets, as revealed by the following comments by Elizabeth Bishop:

We have a wealth of forms of our own that are suitable to our language. I mean English forms, not American. We're still more English than anything else, and this 'American language' which William Carlos Williams was always talking about is nonsense. We're writing better English poetry than the English are at present, so why not be proud of it? (Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop, 34)

Yet, in spite of these objections, the transcendentalist critique of the sonnet has often been accepted as the truth by later critics and writers, creating an indifferent or even hostile environment for the American poet who chooses to write poems in the sonnet form.

### **The Sonnet as Juvenilia**

The uneasiness and even occasional contempt towards the sonnet that arise in the writings of Williams, Pound, Eliot, and Stevens at the beginning of the twentieth century often masks the interesting fact that all four of these poets wrote sonnets early in their career. Most of these efforts are consigned to their juvenilia, but the sonnet did play an important role in each poet's development. Wallace Stevens first began to compose sonnets while a student in Harvard, where he shared his efforts with his then professor of philosophy, George Santayana, who responded to these poems by writing sonnets of his own.<sup>14</sup> In the work of Williams, Pound, and Eliot, sonnets number among their earliest

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Battle notes that Stevens's sonnet "Cathedrals are not built along the sea," which was published in the Harvard Monthly in May, 1899, inspired Santayana's sonnet "Cathedrals by the Sea (Reply to the sonnet beginning 'Cathedrals Are Not Built Along

publications. For Pound, the sonnet provided the basis for his first book, a translation of poems by Guido Cavalcanti, while one of Eliot's sonnets was among the poems he published in the Harvard Advocate. Williams's early debt to the sonnet may have been the greatest of any poet of the period, with the possible exception of Pound. In various interviews with Edith Heal, he claimed that among the first poems that he wrote were a number of sonnets heavily influenced by Keats (I Wanted to Write a Poem, 4-5), while his first collection of original verse, his privately printed Poems of 1909, "should be classified as sonnets, not the Shakespearian sonnet, but the sonnets of Keats and other romantic poets" (10).

An interesting question arises at this point. Why would these poets, who wrote sonnets early in their careers, wish to dissociate themselves so thoroughly from the form? Part of this answer, a perceived conflict between the sonnet and their mature ideals of poetry, has been discussed above. A second part of the answer lies in the fact that their sonnets tended to show them at their worst. Poetic archaisms, inversions, clichés, exaggerations, and sentimentality saturate their efforts in the form, and these faults were then attributed to the sonnet itself, rather than the youth and inexperience of the authors. Paradoxically, an early debt to the sonnet seems to have intensified, rather than tempered, their later criticism of the form.

This process of an early struggle with the sonnet form which precipitated their later criticisms may be found in the work of all four poets. The following sonnet by William Carlos Williams appeared in his Poems of 1909. Although the subject matter, a proposed trip to the south, is common enough to be the subject of a later lyric, the treatment and diction will seem puzzling to anyone acquainted only with Williams's mature poetry:

On a Proposed Trip South

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the Sea)" (The Making of Harmonium, 117-119).

They tell me on the morrow I must leave  
 This winter eyrie for a southern flight  
 And truth to tell I tremble with delight  
 At thought of such unheralded reprieve.

E'er have I known December in a weave  
 Of blanched crystal, when, thrice one short night  
 Packed full of magic, and O blissful sight!  
 N'er May so warmly doth for April grieve.

To in a breath's space wish the winter through  
 And lo, to see it fading! Where, oh where  
 Is caract could endow this princely boon?

Yet I have found it and shall shortly view  
 The lush high grasses, shortly see in air  
 Gay birds and hear the bees make heavy droon.

It is surprising, to say the least, to find the author of "The Red Wheelbarrow" writing phrases such as "O blissful sight," "And lo," or "princely boon." In contrast to his later precision of imagery, his trip is transformed into a "southern flight," while line eight lists the personified grievances of the months. It is also interesting to observe the proponent of the variable foot having to accent a final "-ed" in line six to fill out a regular iambic line, and one of the greatest proponents of plain speech in poetry reverting to poetic inversions in line eight, partly in imitation of previous sonnets and partly for the sake of the rhyme.

Rather than being serious faults, all of these features are precisely those which one might expect to find in the efforts of a young poet who is trying to emulate the work of the great sonnet writers of the past. Williams later recalled that "this was my Keats period. . . everything I wrote was bad Keats" (I Wanted to Write a Poem, 4). In the same series of interviews, he carefully distinguished between this influence and another, more fruitful one to which he credited his mature style:

The copybook poems, my secret life, the poems I was writing before I met Pound, were what I can only describe as free verse, formless, after Whitman.

It is curious that I was so preoccupied with the studied elegance of Keats on one hand and the raw vigor of Whitman on the other. (8)

This distinction cannot be taken as an absolute, with the vigor of Williams's mature verse being the result of the influence of Whitman and the rejected early style to the influence of Keats, since Williams's most famous poems often rely on an accumulation of sensuous details that he likely learned from the Romantic poet. Instead, this statement reveals Williams's wish to dissociate himself from those early poems which were the result of the "studied elegance," including (presumably) "On a Proposed Trip South." As this quality was most consciously pursued in his Poems of 1909 which he later called a collection of sonnets, it is probable that the sonnet became associated in his mind with an archaic, elegant diction unsuited to a vigorous modern poetry.

A similar pattern of association likely affected Pound, who began his long list of publications with The Sonnets and Ballates of Guido Cavalcanti. Interestingly, both Williams and Pound were students together at Penn State, and Williams would later recall that Pound was infatuated with the sonnet during his college years:

That was the time, apart from other things, when Ezra Pound was writing a daily sonnet. He destroyed them all at the end of the year; I never saw any of them. (The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams, 53)

Although none of these early efforts survive, Pound nevertheless allowed three sonnets to be printed in his early A Lume Spento (1908), the following poem being among them:

#### Masks

These tales of old disguisings, are they not  
 Strange myths of souls that found themselves among  
 Unwonted folk that spake an hostile tongue,  
 Some soul from all the rest who'd not forgot  
 The star-span acres of a former lot  
 Where boundless mid the clouds his course he swung,  
 Or carnate with his elder brothers sung  
 Ere ballad-makers lisped of Camelot?

Old singers half-forgetful of their tunes,  
 Old painters color-blind come back once more,



Old poets skill-less in the wind-heart runes,  
 Old wizards lacking in their wonder-lore:

All they that with strange sadness in their eyes  
 Ponder in silence o'er earth's queynt devyse?

This variant of a Petrarchan sonnet reveals that Pound was already adept at working within established forms. The lines of the octave are allowed to run across the line breaks without any sign of strain with the possible exception of the inversion in line six, while the beginning of the sestet shows a mastery of anaphora, a demanding device when coupled with the demands of a set meter and rhyme. Pound's sonnet demonstrates a technical felicity in the form, although the poem does lack the playful virtuosity which characterizes the greatest sonnets in the English language.

What is atypical of this sonnet is not its deliberately archaic vocabulary, which is often employed in Pound's early lyrics; rather, it is the longing for an idealized past as the source of art, a longing which borders on the sentimental. One wonders how seriously Pound himself, who in a few years was to coin the slogan "make it new," could believe in his sympathetic reference to the "wonder-lore" of "old wizards," or whether he could envision himself as a poet doomed to live in the past. A similar nostalgia infects the remaining sonnets of the volume. "Plotinus" imagines art and thought to be the product of a childish loneliness ("but I was lonely as a lonely child. . . for utter loneliness made I new thoughts"), while "Redivivus" unsuccessfully invokes the spirit of Dante to rescue the poet from a death-like torpor. In all of these poems, artistic creation is seen to be the product of an idealized past which cannot be brought into a fruitful relationship with the present.

Sonnets continued to appear in the early collections of the lyric poetry through *Ripostes* (1912). As he matured, Pound's sonnets began to reveal a wider range of tone and subjects, from the self-consciousness of "Silet" ("why should we stop at all for what I think?") to a complicated avowal of love in "A Virginal" ("I have picked up magic in her nearness"). The major development of these poems, however, was Pound's ability to use

the sonnet to express his increasing unease with the form itself. In "To the Raphaelite Latinists," for example, he employed the sonnet to satirize poets who merely reworked the themes and phrases of older verses ("one wreath from ashes of your songs we twine!"), so that his own choice of a poetic form also becomes the object of suspicion or even self-criticism. His strongest disavowal of the sonnet occurs in "L'Art," where he declares that the "noblest arts are shown mechanical," and whose sestet runs:

Horace, that thing of thine is overhauled,  
 And 'Wood notes wild' weaves a concocted sonnet.  
 Here aery Shelley on the text hath called,  
 And here, Great Scott, the Murex, Keats comes on it.  
 And all the lot howl, "Sweet Simplicity!"  
 'Tis Art to hide our theft exquisitely.

Here the sonnet is associated with a mechanical reproduction of past effects, a mere technical facility. The nostalgic longing found in the sonnets of A Lume Spento has been transferred to the great sonnets of the past, with the result that an entire period of sonnet writing, rather than Pound's own excursions into the form, is believed to be merely a "concoction." When Pound was to later attribute a fruitless ornamentation to the sonnet, he may have been influenced by this dismissal of his own efforts in the form.

In contrast to Pound's technical facility, the following sonnet published by T. S. Eliot in The Harvard Advocate reveals its author to be at the very beginning of his poetical career:

#### Nocturne

Romeo, *grand serieux*, to importune  
 Guitar in hand, beside the gate  
 With Juliet, in the usual debate  
 Of love, beneath a bored but courteous moon,  
 The conversation failing, strikes some tune  
 Banal, and out of pity for their fate  
 Behind the wall I have some servant wait,  
 Stab, and the lady sinks into a swoon.

Blood looks effective on the moonlit ground -

The hero smiles; in my best mode oblique  
 Rolls toward the moon a frenzied eye profound,  
 (No need of 'Love forever?' - 'Love next week')  
 While female readers all in tears are drowned: -  
 'The perfect climax all true lovers seek!'

Despite the poem's youthful faults, Eliot's willingness to mix tetrameter, pentameter, and hexameter lines and his incorporation of a French phrase may be more daring than any of Pound's technical achievements in the form. In terms of its subject matter, "Nocturne" already evinces an ironic stance towards the traditional love sonnet, although it fails to move beyond this subject matter to propose anything to replace it. Although this argument is admittedly rather tenuous, it may have been this failure to envision a new subject for the sonnet, later believed to be an inevitable one for the modern poet, which helped to inspire Eliot's belief that he could not be sure that it could be successfully revived in the twentieth century.

Wallace Stevens also confined his sonnet writing to the first part of his career. Many of his early sonnets have been lost, but fortunately some of his thoughts about the sonnet, together with three complete poems, have been collected by his daughter Holly in the Letters of Wallace Stevens. Judging from these excerpts, the sonnet held a special significance for Stevens during his college years. A journal entry dated August 1st, 1899, for example, lists rough outlines for four sonnets, two of which are quoted here:

Thought for a Sonnet: No lark doth sing in yon foreboding cloud etc. but it is growing dark and nothing can be heard but the last low notes of sleepless sleeping birds. . .

Thought for a Sonnet: Oh, what soft wings will close above this place, etc. (In the Garden) picture angels, roses, fair world etc. on last day. . . (31-2)

The second of these thoughts, as Holly Stevens notes (32), would be expanded into a sonnet ten years later:

In a Garden

Oh, what soft wings shall rise above this place,

This little garden of spiced bergamot,  
 Poppy and iris and forget-me-not,  
 On Doomsday, to the ghostly Throne of space!

The haunting wings, must like the visible trace  
 Of passing azure in a shadowy spot -  
 The wings of spirits, native to this plot  
 Returning to their intermitted Grace!

And one shall mingle in her cloudy hair  
 Blossoms of twilight, dark as her dark eyes;  
 And one to Heaven upon her arm shall bear  
 Colors of what she was in her first birth;  
 And all shall carry upward through the skies  
 Odor and dew of the familiar earth.

In many ways, "In a Garden" is the most accomplished of the early sonnets quoted in this section. Its command of rhythm and accomplished phrasing (in "dark as her dark eyes" or the final line with its surprising adjective "familiar," for example) are considerable achievements which help to justify the many hours which Stevens appears to have spent studying the form. However, many aspects of "In a Garden" appear to run counter to Stevens's sensibility when read against his mature work. Among these oddities are the poem's overt spirituality, its frequent use of inversions, and its failure to establish a definite setting. The journal entries, with their delight in making delicate observations of nature, also seem to run counter to Stevens's later sensibility, which would tend towards extreme states and grand, even surreal, effects. Thus the sonnet, which traditionally has employed these subjects and devices, could eventually be seen as manifesting a false view of reality, as Stevens himself was to express in a journal entry that was quoted earlier: "Sonnets have their place, without mentioning names; but they can also be found tremendously out of place: in real life where things are quick, unaccountable, responsive" (42).

For all four of these great poets - Williams, Pound, Eliot, and Stevens - then, the criticisms of the sonnet they espoused apply to their own early sonnets better than to famous examples of the sonnet written by Shakespeare or Wordsworth. It is unfortunate

that their early debts to the sonnet should have helped turn these four poets against the form, causing them to regard the limitations of poems written early in their careers as problems inherent to the sonnet itself, but such appears to be the case as their early sonnets display the faults that they later criticized at length.

### **Conclusion**

The preceding discussion does not exhaust the criticisms made against the sonnet at the beginning of the twentieth century, although it surveys the major arguments produced against the form by the most prominent of its critics. It would be a mistake to underestimate their influence on specific sonnet writers of their age, especially on the four most significant American writers of sonnets in the period. The chapters that follow will argue that Edna St. Vincent Millay's poetic diction was a direct challenge to Pound's dislike of a purely ornamental language, for example, and that Cummings's experiments in the form were written in part to revise Whitman's belief that one can only create a new form by destroying what is past or the common charge that the sonnet had somehow exhausted its possibilities. Robert Frost's remarks on poetic form and his belief that a poetic form (especially an established form such as the sonnet) constituted a "momentary stay against confusion" may have arisen in part from his disagreement with the belief, first expressed by Wallace Stevens, the sonnet is outdated because it cannot depict the chaos of "real life." And Williams's assertion that the "baneful" sonnet always says the "same old thing" finds a notable refutation in the work of E. A. Robinson, who turned his Italian sonnets to third-person portraits and narratives of small-town and urban life, a shift that was unprecedented in the history of the sonnet. Further disagreements and replies will be discussed in the pages that follow.

At this point, however, it may be helpful to speculate on what general effects a hostile critical climate may have produced for the sonnets written in the early twentieth century. Of course, any conclusions will be tentative, since it is impossible to identify and explain completely the broad shifts or trends in the poetry of an age. However, it

would be surprising if the criticisms of a Pound or Williams did not have some effect on the sonnets of the early twentieth century. In particular, the attacks on the sonnet quoted above assert that the creation of new poetic forms guarantees the presence of genius, a sensitivity to the conditions of the modern age, a fidelity to subject matter, or an attempt to recapture a musical form in the poetry. The emphasis of these arguments lies in their insistence that new forms must be provided to express modern sensibilities or themes. But this spirit of "making it new," ironically, may also be found during this period in the sonnet, the oldest prescribed form in English poetry. The sonnets of the early twentieth century pioneered new rhyme schemes in the work of Robert Frost and E. E. Cummings, experimented with new meters in the heptameter lines of Millay's *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree*, the forays into passages of free verse in Cummings's sonnets, or the loose iambics of Frost's "Mowing," and they occasionally abandoned key requirements of the sonnet as in Millay's two thirteen-line sonnets<sup>15</sup> or the necessity of having some sort of rhyme scheme present, as in Robert Frost's "Old Man's Winter Night." Even the most fundamental assumption about sonnets, that they are lyric poems, was challenged by a large number of narrative sonnets written by E. A. Robinson.

On the whole, this spirit of freedom and experimentation was most prevalent in the works of American poets, and in particular in the work of the four poets who are the subject of the chapters that follow. This tendency may be traced to the influence of Emerson's transcendentalist poetics and its stress on original creation or to the fact that the criticism of the sonnet was more prevalent in America. British poets, of course, made substantial innovations to the form, although their contributions often require a greater knowledge of the history of the sonnet to be understood; they are more apt to rely on the

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<sup>15</sup> The sonnets in question are "Grief that is grief and properly so high" and "Felicity of Grief! - even Death being kind." They were first identified as sonnets by Norma Millay in her introduction to Millay's *Collected Sonnets* (xxiii-xxiv).

tradition of the sonnet in their work.<sup>16</sup> It is the work of a Frost or Cummings that appear to be new or experimental at first glance. This theory is lent support from the works of W. H. Auden, who falls within the latter stages of this period, and whose career divides more or less into British and American phases. Auden's most elaborate formal experiments in *Sonnets from China* or *The Quest* came only after he emigrated to America, and his earlier version of the former sequence, *In Time of War*, written shortly after he left Britain, is far more conventional in its use of a traditional sonnet form. It is as if Auden required an American environment for inspiration to vary the structure of the sonnet of his works to any significant extent.

The question arises: why did these poets not abandon the sonnet completely, since they were often transforming it beyond immediate recognition? Once again the answers are various, ranging from Cummings's delight with playing with an established form to Frost's famous dictum, which he repeated on numerous occasions, that writing free verse was like playing tennis without a net. There are also, as Cummings, Frost, and many other poets realized, tremendous advantages to experimenting within a form, as opposed to envisioning a completely new poetic structure. Working within a traditional form allows for the ability to recall a particular sonnet trope or theme through a poem's structure; the actual argument of the poem may then affirm or revise the traditional argument without needing to restate it explicitly. The sonnets of E. E. Cummings, for example, often repeat themes from Renaissance sonnets which become recognizable through the poems' shared structure in order to affirm a vision of timeless love, while the sonnets of Edna St. Vincent Millay recall their Renaissance predecessors while reversing gender roles in a manner foreign to that period. Through this process, Millay invites aspects of the Elizabethan sonnets into her poems and then refutes or balances them by

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<sup>16</sup> See the discussion of "Leda and the Swan" in the chapter on Cummings below, pp. 221-226, for an example to support this generalization.

her juxtaposition of a modern language or sensibility. Similarly, Robert Frost used the sonnet to quarrel with the views of Platonic love that so infused early poems in the form, so that many of his images and arguments are best understood when read against this tradition.

The persistence of the sonnet thus serves two important functions in the period: as a subtle means of reaffirming traditional aspects of the sonnet, whether explicitly or implicitly, and as a tactic to make the departures of various writers appear "new" by inviting comparisons between a particular sonnet and its predecessors stretching back to the English Renaissance. The sonnets of the early twentieth century demonstrate a wish to both revise and incorporate aspects of the sonnet's traditional themes and structures, producing a highly complex relationship with the sonnets of the past. Of all the poets of the period, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and E. E. Cummings best represent this tension with regards to the sonnet tradition, as their works both quarrel with and extend the long line of sonnets in English.



### E. A. Robinson and the Genre of the Sonnet

One of the most interesting appraisals of the poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson appeared on December 21, 1919, when The New York Times published a series of sixteen tributes on the eve of the poet's fiftieth birthday. These tributes were introduced by an anonymous editorial with the title of "A Poet's Birthday," which established the tone of what was to follow. The editorial announced Robinson's "place of honour and distinction" in American literature, even if he was "hard to read" at times, and went on to argue that Robinson was "a master of form, as well as a profound thinker, a not unkindly ironist." Interested readers were then pointed towards The New York Times Review of Books section, where they could find an essay on Robinson's work by Professor Bliss Perry, followed by the sixteen tributes contributed by Robinson's fellow poets. These tributes, the editorial was careful to point out, represented a wide range of contemporary styles and opinions. Among the contributors were the "famous figures of the newer schools, like Miss [Amy] Lowell and Vachel Lindsay and Edgar Lee Masters of Spoon River. . . the elder, like Mr. Edwin Markham. . . [and] the younger but still conservative generation of verse makers, such as Mr. Percy MacKaye and Mr. Hermann Hagedorn," all of whom showed "a sincere capacity of admiration for what they find admirable" (Sec. III, page 1).

Taken together, these sixteen tributes offer a unique glimpse into the reception of Robinson's poetry by his contemporaries. For the most part, they repeat the preceding editorial in lavishing praise on the poetry for being "strong," "noble," and even "virile" (Amy Lowell's term), among other vague yet worthy qualities. But the tributes are interesting from a critical perspective as well, since they almost unanimously credit Robinson with helping to create a distinctively modern type of poetry, one which had then acted as an inspiration to the succeeding generation of poets. For example, Edgar Lee Masters wrote that:

Mr. Robinson was producing poetry of importance in one of the most sterile periods of American poetry. It was at a time when the Victorian era had spent itself as a creative impulse, but when its manner and its outlook controlled production without vitalizing it. . . the poets of America look to him, now that he is at the meridian of his career.

Arthur Davison Ficke maintained that Robinson's "insight into the labyrinths of the mind and his scrupulous artistic integrity have always been a delight and an inspiration to the rest of us," while Anna Hempstead Branch declared that "Edwin Robinson pioneered his way into new regions of observation and expression." Hermann Hagedorn revealed that "I turn to his poetry as I turn to the other everlasting things in literature for sustenance and revitalization. . . out of a sheer need that he alone of the moderns seems to me able to satisfy," and Vachel Lindsay, the popular free verse poet, made the odd claim that "the hundred poets of America await his twinkling and edifying account of how the human race is behaving itself." In the longest of the sixteen tributes, Amy Lowell employed a general "we" in speaking for the younger generation of poets in her declaration that "now, looking back, we see him as a leader, an inspirer" (Sec. VII, 2).

It is difficult, if not impossible, to identify precisely which feature or features of Robinson's poetry inspired praise from such a diverse group of poets, but the belief that Robinson had created a distinctively "modern" type of poetry continued to be believed throughout his lifetime. In 1920, for example, Amy Lowell devoted the first chapter of her influential book Tendencies in Modern American Poetry to a study of Robinson, noting that:

If we take the poetic currents in evidence in America today, we shall find certain distinct streams which, although commingling, keep on the whole very much to themselves. The strange thing about Mr. Robinson's work is that it seems to belong to none of these streams. And yet no one reading these poems would feel justified in calling him not modern. (52)

In 1933, Allen Tate declared Robinson to be the "most famous of living American poets" and hence indispensable for a knowledge of contemporary poetry ("Edwin Arlington

Robinson," 359). Yvor Winters, meanwhile, summarized the reception of Robinson's work by observing that he "was established as a great living classic" during his lifetime and was widely admired in contemporary poetic circles (Edwin Arlington Robinson, 11). To a large number of influential critics of the early twentieth century, then, Robinson appeared an influential "modern" poet whose reputation, as Arthur Davison Ficke claimed in his tribute published in The New York Times, seemed "beyond the reach of fad or fashion" (VII, 2).

This recognition of Robinson's work as pioneering or modern appears strange today, when Robinson is no longer regarded by most critics as a co-creator of modern poetry alongside such figures as Williams, Eliot, and Pound. Accompanying this shift in opinion was a sharp reversal in the general regard for Robinson after the poet's death in 1935. Fifty years after The New York Times ran its series of tributes, Irving Howe commented on this reversal in a passage that reads like a direct reply to Ficke's comment:

The centenary of Edwin Arlington Robinson passed several years ago - he was born on Dec. 22, 1869 - with barely a murmur of public notice. There were a few academic volumes of varying merit, but no recognition in our larger journals and reviews, for Robinson seems the kind of poet who is likely to remain permanently out of fashion. ("A Grave and Solitary Voice," 115)

John Lucas repeated this observation in an essay published at roughly the same time that Howe's comment appeared:

When Edwin Arlington Robinson died in 1935, his loss was mourned not only by America's writers but by statesmen and citizens whom one would not readily accuse of an interest in literature. Robinson was a famous man. Now, some thirty years later, the fame has shrunk, and it is my guess that the works are very little read. (137)

The general regard for Robinson's poetry has dwindled to the point where Anna Blumenthal, a sympathetic critic, could note the poet's "modest reputation" as a truism at the beginning of an essay on his work ("E. A. Robinson and William James," 411).

These comments reveal more than a loss of interest in Robinson's poetry. They also

imply that his work is no longer regarded as quintessentially pioneering or "modern," either in the sense of having been the inspiration of the defining poetry of the early part of the century or of forming a body of work which, by exemplifying a widely held modern sensibility or canon of taste, is believed to be vital in its own right.

This contrast between contemporary and more recent evaluations of Robinson's work provides a valuable context for the sonnets. As Mark van Doren has observed, Robinson "first became famous for his series of portraits, frequently done on the small canvas of a single sonnet, of striking - usually tragic - men" (Edwin Arlington Robinson, 35), so that the reception of Robinson's poetry in general tended to be linked to the reception of the sonnets. When Robinson's reputation was at its height, the popularity of the sonnets led to the Macmillan Company's publication of them as a separate volume in 1928. Two of the earliest book-length studies, those of Mark van Doren and Yvor Winters, both called special attention to the sonnets, and Winters's list of Robinson's "greatest [short] poems" included four sonnets among the eleven poems cited, a proportion which is far greater than the relative number of sonnets in the work as a whole (65-66).<sup>17</sup>

If the various comments on Robinson's work quoted above are examined with an eye towards the sonnets, an interesting incongruity soon comes to light. One difficulty faced by the modern reader of The New York Times tributes consists in how to reconcile the praise of Robinson as "modern" by both the new and conservative poets, two groups who were often openly at odds with one another in matters of aesthetic taste. Of the two, the praise of the conservatives (conservative in terms of aesthetics without any reference to politics) is perhaps easier to understand. In the contemporary debate between the relative merits of traditional metrics and the new *vers libre*, Robinson's poetry belonged

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<sup>17</sup> The four sonnets praised by Winters are "The Clerks," "Lost Anchors," "Many Are Called," and "The Sheaves."

firmly to the traditional school. Corinne Roosevelt Robinson called attention to this facet of the work in her New York Times tribute in her claim that Robinson wrote "poetry in the true sense of the word," verse which "possesses the 'haunting' quality in metre, metaphor, and similes" (VII, 2). The argument that Robinson was a highly traditional poet receives ample support from the sonnets, since all of the sonnets included in the 1928 volume are regular in their metre and rhyme schemes, with the older Italian form, usually with a strict separation of octave and sestet, predominating. The sole exception to this preference is "The Evangelist's Wife," a regular Shakespearian sonnet.<sup>18</sup> The mere presence of an iambic meter and full rhymes does not explain the appeal of Robinson's poetry to a conservative audience, of course, although it does render this preference somewhat more comprehensible. But it is the "new" or modern elements of Robinson's poetry, the features that attracted commentators such as Amy Lowell or Allen Tate, that remain harder to define. Why should these poets, who also championed the aesthetics of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, be attracted to the work of a writer who appears to have conceived of poetry in highly traditional terms? The avoidance of this question has helped to obscure Robinson's importance to the poetics of the early twentieth century.

This chapter may be read as an attempt to recover the "modern" element of Robinson's sonnets, those features which represent a distinct break from traditional sonnet writing. In this consideration notions of genre will prove crucial. Throughout its long history in English, the sonnet has been discussed almost exclusively as a lyric poem, a view that continues to influence most definitions of the form. M. H. Abrams, for example, lists the sonnet as "a subclass of the lyric" in his A Glossary of Literary Terms, where the lyric is defined as "any fairly short, nonnarrative poem presenting a speaker who expresses a state of mind or a process of thought and feeling" (97-8). Helen Vendler

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<sup>18</sup> It could be argued that Robinson tried to experiment with the sonnet form in his series of eight line "octaves," although these poems can no longer be considered sonnets. Even here, however, Robinson does not depart from traditional metrics or rhyme schemes.

continues this line of argument in The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets by including a long discussion of the theory that a lyric speaker provides a type of "script" for the reader's own emotions, thereby separating the sonnets from the dramatic works (2-4). Paul Oppenheimer has even argued that the sonnet was specifically created to extend the possibilities of lyric poetry in order to establish "the first lyric of self-consciousness, or of the self in conflict" (The Birth of the Modern Mind, 3). Any other classification of the sonnet's genre would constrict the impetus behind its creation.

The recognition that the sonnet has been primarily a lyric form does not, of course, imply any limitation in the range of its rhetoric or subject matter. Throughout its history, the sonnet has been composed on virtually every lyric subject. After its initial popularity in the English Renaissance as a love poem, the sonnet was then written as a verse epistle, devotional poem, political and philosophical document, dream vision, portrait of prominent figures, and nature lyric, to list only some of the more recognizable types.<sup>19</sup> Robinson wrote sonnets which fall into all of these categories, so that his 1928 collection of sonnets may be read as a virtual taxonomy of established sonnet types. This feature likely accounts for the appeal of Robinson's work for the conservative poets of his day, who may have recognized his attempt to preserve the full range of lyric possibilities available to the form. In this respect, Robinson's sonnets rival those of Wordsworth and Milton, the other poets in English who held a comparably broad view of the sonnet as a vehicle for the full range of lyric themes and subjects. The spectacular variety in the subject matter in the sonnets produced of the early twentieth century is also indebted to Robinson's preservation of this wide range of lyric sonnet types.

However, sonnets composed as lyrics account for less than half of the poems collected in the 1928 volume. The remainder of the sonnets extend the traditional notion

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<sup>19</sup> Two notable exceptions are the sonnet elegy and the anacreontic, or allegorical story involving the figures of Venus and Cupid. Even with these omissions, however, the range of subjects shown by Robinson easily surpasses those of any other modernist poet.

of sonnet genre by replacing the first-person lyric speaker who reveals "a state of mind or process of thought or feeling" with brief scenes in which narrative action, point of view, and the exterior portrayal of character emerge as primary concerns. This shift was first noticed by Anna Hempstead Branch in her tribute published by The New York Times, where she wrote that Robinson's poetry often "leaves the impression of an epitomized drama" (VII, 2), a point which was later expanded by Allen Tate, who "hoped that Mr. Robinson will again exercise his dramatic genius where it has a chance for success: in lyrics" ("Edwin Arlington Robinson," 364). The various ambiguities in this phrase and the paradoxes contained in the term "dramatic lyric," will be discussed at length in the final section of this chapter. At this point, the confusion of genre initiated by Tate's term "dramatic lyric," which conflates the two classical genres of the dramatic and the lyric, needs to be observed. The term "dramatic" here seems to refer to narrative and, by extension, to questions of point of view and external action. These concerns lie outside the realm of the lyric, which is "nonnarrative" by definition. Following Tate's usage, the term "dramatic sonnet" will be used to describe those sonnets in which an emphasis on narrative elements replaces traditional lyric concerns, even though the term "narrative sonnet" would be more accurate.

Through this shift of the sonnet from the lyric to the narrative or "dramatic," Robinson produced a distinctly modern body of work that stands apart from the long tradition of sonnets written in English. However, we should note that there exist several important precedents for the dramatic sonnet, even if none of them quite manage to free themselves from the lyric genre. Most Renaissance sonnet sequences contain a strong narrative element but the progress of this narrative is established through the reflections of a lyric speaker, and the individual sonnets fail to replace this speaker with narrative exposition.<sup>20</sup> One notable exception to this generalization exists in sonnets such as

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<sup>20</sup> It is significant that in Sidney's sequence *Astrophil and Stella*, the sonnets are all lyric

Spenser's *Amoretti* 67 or various anacreontics, in which brief mythological narratives are created to symbolize emotions. The emphasis of these sonnets on allegorizing interior states, however, binds them closely to the lyric. A second important precedent lies in sonnets such as Milton's "Methought I Saw," Wordsworth's "It is a Beauteous Evening," "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge," or "Surprised by Joy," and Keats's "Why Did I Laugh Tonight?," which provide their lyric speakers with specific contexts, making it possible to imagine the situations and events which led to their lyric reflections. Once again, these sonnets remain lyrics through their emphasis on depicting interior states, although their use of settings, personal history, and events could later be adapted to Robinson's dramatic sonnets. Other precedents include Wordsworth's *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, a sequence which attempts a historical narrative of the evolution of the English church through personal reflections on important figures or events, and the opening of George Meredith's *Modern Love*, in which the lyric speaker fails to identify himself until the third sonnet, raising questions about point of view and narrative stance temporarily, although in neither of these examples does the narrative element dominate.

It was Robinson's genius to seize upon the narrative elements inherent in these and other precedents and develop them into the primary concern of individual sonnets.<sup>21</sup> In such important poems as "Karma," "Song at Shannon's," or "The Pity of the Leaves," the lyric speaker disappears completely, to be replaced by an omniscient narrator. In others, such as "Amaryllis," the ruminations of the narrator rely on specific events and interactions with other characters in a manner reminiscent of first-person narratives. The break with the lyric tradition revealed by these sonnets was to prove at least as important to twentieth-century poetry as his preservation of a wide range of lyric types. After

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poems, while third-person descriptions of the lovers are consigned to the songs, a different form of poetry.

<sup>21</sup> See the various sections below for a discussion of important precedents for individual sonnets by Robinson.



Robinson's work, sonnets that are non-lyrical or which tend towards narrative with only a dim presence of a lyrical speaker become increasingly common, and such seminal works as Yeats's "Leda and the Swan," Frost's "Meeting and Passing," and Millay's sequence "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" may be numbered among the sonnets or sonnet sequences that reveal the influence of Robinson's innovation.

These twin concerns, the preservation of traditional lyric types and the creation of the dramatic sonnet, will form the basis for the following examination. But before undertaking a discussion of individual poems and sonnet types, a widespread theory which argues that Robinson's art is closer to that of a novelist than a lyric poet should be acknowledged. These arguments explain the sonnets' use of narrative by looking outside the poetic tradition and any notion of poetic genres. Vachel Lindsay, in his New York Times tribute, was among the first to argue that Robinson was "a novelist distilled into a poet" (VII, 2), a claim that has often been repeated since. Roy Harvey Pearce has claimed that:

Like a novelist, he wonders at, and so celebrates, the simple perdurability of life lived through; its meaning for man lies in the fact that it can be endured. It is enough to confront life as a fact - or would have been, had Robinson eventually found his proper (as I think) *metier* as a novelist. (259)

Similarly, Louis O. Coxe has maintained that:

This poet wears no masks; he is simply at a distance from his poem, unfolding the 'plot,' letting us see and letting us make what applications we will. This directness, this prose element, in Robinson's verse is easy enough to find; less so to define or characterize. One can say this, however: just as Pope was at his best in a poetry that had morality and man in society as its subject matter and its criterion, so Robinson is happiest as a poet when he starts with a specific human situation or relationship, with a 'story.' ("E. A. Robinson: The Lost Tradition," 61)

These characterizations of Robinson as a prose writer who happened to write poetry, important as they are in alluding to the fact that Robinson often worked outside of lyric

conventions,<sup>22</sup> have the drawback of calling attention away from tensions inherent in the poetry itself. As Irving Howe has argued:

His dramatic miniatures in verse - spiritual dossiers of American experience, as someone has nicely called them - remind one a little of Hawthorne, in their ironic undercurrents and cool explorations of vanity, and a little of James, in their peeling away of psychic pretense and their bias that human relationships are inherently a trap. Yet it would be unjust to say that Robinson was a short-story writer who happened to write verse, for it is precisely through the traditional forms he employed - precisely through his disciplined stanzas, regular meters, and obligatos of rhyme - that he released his vision. ("A Grave and Solitary Voice," 122)

Howe emphasizes the fact that referring to Robinson as a prose writer neglects the fact that his works are, first of all, poems. The tension noted by Howe between a lyric form and techniques and a narrative subject matter, between the lyric and dramatic elements, is crucial to an understanding of the sonnets. To appreciate this facet of Robinson's work, his sonnets will be discussed here with reference to their distinct types, beginning with various traditional lyric and proceeding by degrees toward the more innovative dramatic sonnets. There are two motivations lying behind this arrangement. First, this division will recognize both the traditional (lyric) and modern (dramatic) elements in the sonnets as a whole by isolating the two extremes within the works. Second, it will reveal the continuity between the lyric and dramatic sonnets by showing that the lyric sonnets served as precedents to the "dramatic" narratives that would prove to be his most original contribution to the form.

### **Miscellaneous Lyrical Sonnets**

Under the heading of "miscellaneous lyrical sonnets" are gathered those sonnets that conform to traditional lyrical types but which do not seem to anticipate the dramatic sonnets in any meaningful way. This group includes his love sonnets, nature sonnets,

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<sup>22</sup> Both these comments by Pearce and Coxe regard poetry solely as lyrical poetry, since their appeal to a "story" or "situation" as a "prose element" fails to account for any type of narrative verse.

devotional sonnets, self-reflective poems on sonnet writing, abstract moral exhortations, and occasional verses. Other categories, such as the verse epistle or portrait sonnets, which can be considered as prefiguring the dramatic sonnets are discussed in separate sections below.

At their best, these lyrical sonnets represent some of Robinson's most notable work in the form, justifying the admiration of those attracted to the traditional qualities of his work. Two of these poems - "Credo," a statement of religious doubt, and "The Sheaves," a nature sonnet - were cited as being among Robinson's finest shorter poems by Yvor Winters (Edwin Arlington Robinson, 65-66). However, these lyrical sonnets also present a critical problem since, in opposition to every other sonnet writer who came before him, Robinson composed the majority of his sonnets outside the lyric genre. At some level, Robinson's conception of the sonnet as a lyric poem might have induced him to look beyond the lyric, even as certain sonnets managed to overcome them.

Perhaps the most striking feature of these sonnets is how derivative many of them are. More than any of the other sub-genres of sonnets that Robinson composed, the lyrical sonnets echo famous sonnets in the tradition, borrowing images or repeating key themes from the Romantic period or the English Renaissance. In one of several poems entitled "Sonnet," Robinson was to call attention to this feature by arguing that "the poet is a slave" (in fact, a "sonnet-slave") who "must understand the mission of his bondage" to prevent being consigned to a "grave":

. . . shapes and echoes that are never done  
Will haunt the workshop, as regret sometimes  
Will bring the human yearning to sad thrones  
The crash of battles that are never won.

A surprisingly large number of these "echoes that are never done" appear in Robinson's lyric sonnets. This "Sonnet," for example, recalls Wordsworth's "Nuns Fret Not at their Convent's Narrow Room," which at one point compares the sonnet to a prison, even if it is "no prison" to those who like Wordsworth or Robinson have found solace in its "scanty

plot of ground." Another of Robinson's lyrical sonnets, "On the Night of a Friend's Wedding," speaks of "the sheaves that [he will have] sown," an echo of Keats's famous image of a poet's life in "When I Have Fears," in which "high-piled books, in charactry, / Hold like rich garnerers the full-ripened grain." Another poem entitled "Sonnet" wishes "for a poet - for a beacon bright / To rift this changeless glimmer of dead gray," repeating Wordsworth's invocation of Milton, whose "soul was like a star," in his sonnet addressed to the poet. "Many Are Called" speaks of Apollo who "holds alone. . . in an impregnable domain," adapting the image of the island which "bards in fealty to Apollo hold" in Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." Robinson's "For Arvia" invokes a Renaissance image of the beloved's eyes:

You Eyes, you large and all-inquiring Eyes,  
That look so dubiously into me,  
And are not satisfied with what you see,  
Tell me the worst and let us have no lies. . .

These lines recall Shakespeare's sonnet 132, which begins "Thine eyes I love, and they as pitying me, / Knowing thy heart torment me with disdain." "Another Dark Lady" invokes Shakespeare's "dark mistress" through its title, even while it compares its subject to Lilith and even "the devil," following the sonnets of abuse found in Michael Drayton's *Idea*.<sup>23</sup> Yet other sonnets, including "Modernities" and "The Laggards," repeat not a specific image but a rhetorical mode, in this case a general condemnation of a moral failing, as may be found in Shakespeare's sonnets 121 ("'Tis better to be vile than vile esteemed") or 129 ("Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame").<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, sonnet 8 of *Idea* ("There's nothing grieves me, but that age should haste"), which expresses a vision of the time when "Thy Pearly teeth out of thy head so cleane, / That when thou feed'st, thy Nose shall touch thy Chinne" and that "These Lines that now thou scorn'st, which should delight thee, / Then would I make thee read, but to despight thee." Sonnet 40 in the earlier version of the sequence *Amour* ("By natures Lawes we thee a bastard finde"), and sonnet 22 of the 1599 version titled *Ideas Mirrour* ("An evill spirit your beauty haunts me still") provide further examples.

<sup>24</sup> These sonnets may be compared to various later sonnets by Millay and Cummings

These echoes do not in themselves constitute a criticism of these sonnets, since the sonnet in English, which began with Wyatt's and Sidney's adaptations of Petrarch's sonnets and the stock conceits of the Renaissance, was in its origins a highly imitative type of poem,<sup>25</sup> and later Edna St. Vincent Millay and E. E. Cummings were to be even more open in their borrowings. What is disappointing in the poems cited above is that nothing is added to the echoed images or arguments, since the borrowed image means something very similar to the original usage. Where Robinson adopts a common theme or rhetorical mode, the basic themes or moral judgements advanced are remarkably similar to ones that appear in sonnets from the English Renaissance or Romantic period. There is, on the whole, no element of wit to save these works from becoming derivative and strangely anachronistic. Poets are still spoken of in terms of "Lord Apollo" or "slaves" serving "thrones," a poem becomes a "beacon bright" (the inversion making the phrase even more archaic), a friend's accomplishments become a binding of "sheaves," laziness is a moral fault that requires a formal rebuttal, and a "dark mistress's" eyes still trouble the lover - a series of borrowings which has likely led to the critical silence surrounding these poems.<sup>26</sup>

This limitation of the lyrics remains troubling, although the list of echoes cited above, though hardly complete, does imply an interesting set of stylistic influences. It has usually been assumed that Robinson's major influences have been those poets who have exemplified a type of "plain style" shorn of poetical ornament. Yvor Winters, for example, offers Robert Browning, Rudyard Kipling, and William Praed as the major

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(see p. 179 and pp. 214-215 below). The abstract philosophical disquisitions in the sonnet form were surprisingly popular during the first part of the twentieth century.

<sup>25</sup> The volume *Petrarch in England* provides an anthology of these borrowings.

<sup>26</sup> Yvor Winters has named "Many are Called" as one of Robinson's "greatest," although his discussion of the poem consists mainly of a discussion of the grammatical function of the phrase "in vain" and a claim that the poem demonstrates "seriousness" and "irony" without any discussion of the poem's meaning or its central image (*Edwin Arlington Robinson*, 42-45).

influences on Robinson's style, while Thomas Hardy and George Crabbe also provided important precedents through their "prosaic honesty" (19) and "crisp meter of didactic poetry" (19), respectively. But the echoes listed above, which include allusions to the work of Shakespeare, Drayton, Wordsworth, and Keats, show that it was the major Romantic and Renaissance poets who provided many of the specific images or themes contained in the sonnets, implying that Robinson attempted to place himself within the sonnet tradition of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and early nineteenth centuries, at times even breaking into what J. V. Cunningham has called "the full diapason of Romantic rhetoric" (377).

This sonnet tradition also lies behind Robinson's two best lyric sonnets, "Credo" and "The Sheaves," and it is interesting to see how the reworking of traditional elements in these works results in a richness of allusion rather than of anachronism, differentiating them from the majority of Robinson's lyrical sonnets. By its title, "Credo" would seem to be a type of poetic manifesto, although this impression is deceptive. The poem runs:

I cannot find my way: there is no star  
 In all the shrouded heavens anywhere;  
 And there is not a whisper in the air  
 Of any living voice but one so far  
 That I can hear it only as a bar  
 Of lost, imperial music, played when fair  
 And angel fingers wove, and unaware,  
 Dead leaves to garlands where no roses are.

No, there is not a glimmer, nor a call,  
 For one that welcomes, welcomes when he fears,  
 The black and awful chaos of the night;  
 For through it all - above, beyond it all -  
 I know the far-sent message of the years,  
 I feel the coming glory of the Light.

Unlike the majority of the lyrical sonnets, "Credo" develops a complex argument which is not merely derivative of the sonnet tradition. Until its final lines, the claim that the poem is a credo appears to be ironic. The words "no" and "nor" occur eight times in the

sonnet, and every concrete image that the poem evokes - the star, voice, music, angels, or Light - refers to something that is felt by the speaker only through its absence. It is only the hope in a future glimpse of the "Light" (presumably the second coming of Christ or a mystical experience of God) that provides any consolation to the speaker, although this assertion also implies the present absence of any divine presence, since a voice which can only be heard as a "bar" of music like that of angels weaving dead flowers would seem to provide little comfort. The introduction of the motivation of fear in line 10 may also taint "the coming glory" as growing from an emotional need (thus questioning the reality of the "knowledge" asserted in the penultimate line) enough to cast doubts as to the motivations behind the poem's one positive assertion of belief. The poem remains surprisingly vague for a credo, and these suggestions of radical doubt become even more problematic by being atypical of Robinson's statements of faith. Robinson's "Credo" thus becomes ironic or, at the very least, obscure in its final intentions in a manner that is foreign to both his other devotional sonnets such as his "Christmas Sonnet" or the great expressions of spiritual doubt in the "terrible" sonnets of Hopkins or Donne.

In terms of its style, the poem also represents something of an oddity, in that it embodies an approach to imagery which is not at all typical of Robinson's sonnets. The imagery of "Credo" has numerous sources and implications in contrast to the simple echoes in his other lyrical sonnets. The opening of the image of the star, for example, has an almost innumerable number of precedents within the sonnet tradition, echoing not only Wyatt's "My Galley," which invokes "the stars [that] be hid," but later adaptations including the "lodestar of my life" in *Amoretti* 34, which provides direction for the ship representing the despairing lover, or "the star to every wandering bark" in Shakespeare's sonnet 116, which provides an identical image of stability and guidance.<sup>27</sup> There may

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<sup>27</sup> In *Petrarch in England*, Jack D'Amico traces these last three examples to Petrarch's *Rima* 189, which Wyatt sonnet translates.

also be a veiled allusion to Wordsworth's image of Milton's soul as "a star," which would imply a lack of any historical or literary figure to help shape the speaker's beliefs. A reference to Keats's sonnet "Bright star! Would I Were as Stedfast as Thou Art," in which the star is envied for its "unchangeable" nature which would allow it to "live ever" on his "fair love's ripening breast" may also be intended. Like the speakers described by Wyatt or Keats, it is the separation from the ideal that is emphasized, since in Robinson's poem the star is noted only by its absence. The heavenly light of "Credo" exists only as a potential entity which may or may not arrive in time to guide the speaker, so that its web of allusion is so tangled and difficult as to avoid any possible charge of imitateness.

The echo of "Bright star" in "Credo" is especially pertinent, since the influence of Keats pervades the sonnet as a whole. There is an echo of the "unheard melodies" from "Ode on a Grecian Urn" near the end of the octave, for example, and the recurring invocation of presence through absence may also have been derived from Keats's ode. There is also a richness of imagery in "Credo" that recalls the Romantic poet. The final image of the octave is allowed to unfold across six lines, accumulating sensory details far beyond what is necessary to establish its meaning or significance. The "whisper in the air" of line 3 becomes part of a "living voice" in line 4, which is then compared to music played by "angel fingers," which in turn weave "garlands" of dead leaves through a process of synaesthesia. The final phrase of the octave, "where no roses are," completes this line of imagery by invoking yet another concrete detail characterized by its absence. Taken together, these images provide superfluous sensory images in contrast to bleakness of the actual scene being invoked and find Robinson borrowing a complex mode of presenting images rather than imitating a well-known image from the sonnet tradition.

This type of extended metaphor is unusual in Robinson's work, and the amount of space that it requires to develop makes it especially striking in a sonnet. "The Sheaves" is the other lyric sonnet by Robinson to aspire to such richness in language and imagery, although its sources and methods are different. In its personified description of an



autumn scene and celebration of seasonal change in and of itself, "The Sheaves" invites comparison with Keats's "To Autumn," especially in its final lines:

A thousand golden sheaves were lying there,  
Shining and still, but not for long to stay -  
As if a thousand girls with golden hair  
Might raise from where they slept and go away.

Technically, "The Sheaves" provides no single feature as striking as the rapid sequence of images in the octave of "Credo," but depends instead on an accumulation of subtler effects: a persistent assonance ("*green wheat. . . yielding*"), alliteration ("*mighty meaning*"), repetition (the words "day," "more," "thousand," or the near repetition of "mighty" and "might" or "gold" and "golden") and an insistent personification which allows the harvest to be compared to a "body and a mind" and which culminates in the final comparison of a field of ripened wheat to "a thousand girls with golden hair." The persistence of these various effects provides a strong sense of unity to "The Sheaves," helping to imply the process of a gradual change. The extent of this change, meanwhile, is conveyed in part through the diction ("long," "vast," "mighty," "more," "thousand") and in part through the use of long vowels in the rhyme words (the four full rhymes of the sonnet are introduced by the words "rolled," "assigned," "fair," and "there,") to convey an exalted tone.

Both "Credo" and "The Sheaves" reveal how powerful Robinson could be when writing traditional lyrical sonnets about themes such as religious doubt and nature that may be found in the sonnets of the Renaissance or Romantic period. In these examples, his use of sophisticated techniques and allusions prevents the poems from becoming derivative. It is disappointing that Robinson should have produced so few lyrical sonnets that are more than imitations, although several sonnets discussed in the sections below will add to the number of lyric sonnets that avoid this fate. Yet it is likely that the self-imposed limitations found in so many of his minor lyric sonnets helped lead to the creation of the dramatic sonnets that were his greatest contribution to the sonnet.

### **The Sonnet as Ode and Classical Lyric**

The two translations that Robinson made of classical lyrics into the sonnet form show a restlessness within lyric categories and attempt to expand the boundaries of the sonnet while remaining within the lyric genre. "Horace to Leuconoe," which translates Horace's eleventh poem from Book I of his odes, and "Doricha," which translates a Greek epigram by Posidippus, both allow the sonnet to subsume or replace other types of lyric which had hitherto remained distinct from it. In the later "Doricha," Robinson's choice to use the sonnet structure may be explained by the similarity between the original's theme and that of famous sonnets from the English Renaissance. In the poem, Lapidus portrays the Greek lyric poet Sappho as mourning her beloved who is now "dust and ashes" and "fair no more," but then promises her deceased lover that she "will make your name a word for all to learn" through "the white leaves of her song." The promise of immortality to the beloved through poetry is a familiar theme in the sonnet, and this classical epigram surprisingly turns out to resemble famous sonnets by Shakespeare, Drayton, and Spenser.<sup>28</sup> Robinson's translation of this work into a regular Italian sonnet calls attention to this feature at the cost of concealing Posidippus's originality and primacy.

More interesting is the sonnet "Horace to Leuconoe," which employs the sonnet form to add a layer of meaning absent in the original. Perhaps the most startling aspect of the poem is the fact that it should be written as a sonnet at all, since there is nothing in Horace's unrhymed major asclepiads meter to suggest the form. It is somewhat surprising to find a classical ode translated as a sonnet, a later Italian form, since the two forms have traditionally remained distinct. Although classical subjects have a long history in the English sonnet dating from the anacreontics of the Renaissance and at least one

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<sup>28</sup> See the section above on "The Sonnet as Ornament" in chapter 1, pp. 11-12, in the introduction for several examples of sonnets with these themes.

famous sonnet, Shakespeare's sonnet 55 ("Not marble, nor the gilded monuments"), borrows from Horatian images and themes, Robinson's choice of the sonnet form still appears to be rather arbitrary, a decision which readers are expected simply to accept.

The fact that it was a sonnet which occurred to Robinson appears to confirm his rather ambitious notions concerning the form, which is allowed to replace the stanzas traditionally associated with the ode in English. Yet there is a deeper sense in which the sonnet was a logical choice for the translation. The poem itself argues for the inherent uncertainty of life with its exhortations not to "pore. . . on what may be" or "on Chaldean figures any more" before it concludes with the famous exhortation to "seize the day." The themes of chance and randomness are reinforced through Robinson's seemingly arbitrary choice of the poem's structure. Once the reader accepts the fact that the ode has now become a sonnet, there comes the realization that the expectations of the sonnet form both are and are not met, again providing a feeling of arbitrariness about the work. The first sentence of the poem, for example, forms a complete enclosed quatrain as expected, but the next syntactical unit runs from lines 4 to 9 across the break between octave and sestet. Similarly, the sestet, which rhymes *cde ecd*, is regular in the sense that sestet rhymes are often permitted to vary freely and irregular in the sense that this particular variation is rarely found. The choice of the sonnet form is justified by both its well-defined internal structure and its seeming incongruity with the Horatian ode since both of these features emphasize the feeling of arbitrariness invoked by the argument.

This level of erudition is common in Robinson's sonnets, which often reveal their subtleties only after repeated readings or detailed comparisons to the sonnet tradition. And while Robinson's choice of the sonnet may diminish Sappho's poem by making it appear more conventional than it actually is, the structure of "Horace to Leuconoe" provides an important, additional layer of meaning. It is a tribute to Robinson's technical sophistication that he should find a way to emphasize Horace's belief in uncertainty and

chance through a poetical structure that was unavailable to the Roman poet, at the same time expanding the possibilities of the lyric sonnet from within its customary genre.

### **The Epistolary Sonnet**

One of the earliest variations on the sonnet's subject matter was the use of the form as a verse epistle, in which a sonnet was written simultaneously as a response to private debates or events of the day and as an open letter which made it suitable as a public statement. As Ezra Pound has remarked:

Note that by A.D. 1290 the sonnet is already ceasing to be lyric, it is already the epistle without a tune, it is in a state of becoming, and tends already to oratorical *pronunciamento*. ("Cavalcanti," 170)

In English, the epistolary sonnet has not enjoyed any great popularity, although Milton's sonnet to Cromwell may be read as a type of open letter meant to influence both Cromwell himself and the public at large, and "When the Assault Was Intended to the City" maintains the fiction that it was to be posted on the poet's door to dissuade Royalist soldiers from harming him. Perhaps the clearest examples of this sub-genre available in English exist in the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who translated several epistolary sonnets written by Guido Cavalcanti and Dante to one another.<sup>29</sup> In terms of the dramatic sonnet, verse epistles are suggestive of narratives, in that they are usually responses to a particular situation or comment, and encourage the creation of a public persona for the speaking voice.

Robinson produced only two true examples of this type of sonnet, "Dear Friends" and "A Christmas Sonnet," both of which may be read as public letters which also appear to be addressed specifically to an unknown friend or friends. In the former poem, the title addresses those who denigrate poetry as "bubble-work that only fools pursue" and

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<sup>29</sup> See the translation of Dante's sonnet "Guido, I wish that Lapo, thou, and I" addressed to Guido and the reply "If I were still that man, worthy to love," whose argument Rossetti describes in a headnote as follows: "Guido answers the foregoing sonnet, speaking with shame of his changed Love" (*Rossetti's Poems and Translations*, 126).

provides the rebuttal that poems are "good glasses. . . to read the spirit through" since they provide an opportunity for "dreaming" which is absent in the world of the doubters; in the latter poem, a subtitle addresses the poem to "one in doubt" over the practical result of Christ's crucifixion, who is then told that "something is here that was not here before" because of His sacrifice. In both works, Robinson did not venture from the conventions of this sub-genre. The beliefs expressed in the sonnets are indistinguishable from his own Christianity while the diction, which is plain compared to other sonnets, helps to reinforce the illusion that we are privy to something like the poet's natural speaking voice.

However, it may be the very elements that establish these works as verse epistles which define their limitations. In a manner similar to the majority of his lyrical sonnets, "Dear Friends" and "A Christmas Sonnet" present a virtually anonymous first-person speaker, so that they appear to be little more than arguments which happen to be written in verse. Their importance within Robinson's corpus arises from their anticipation of one of Robinson's better dramatic sonnets, the second sonnet of "The Growth of 'Lorraine,'" which continues the story of a woman who commits suicide for mysterious reasons. This sonnet "quotes" a letter from "Lorraine," whose name, presumably, has been placed in quotation marks to create the impression that the speaker is concealing her real identity:

"Dear friend, when you find this, I shall be dead.  
 You are too far away to make me stop.  
 They say that one drop - think of it, one drop! -  
 Will be enough, - but I'll take five instead. . ."

Beyond their narrative function, these lines manage to reveal Lorraine's state of mind just before her death, which fluctuates from a calm resolution in the first of these lines to a nervous excitement in the broken meter of the third, which then disappears in a renewed absorption in details in the fourth. This characterization adds a layer of meaning which is lacking in the traditional epistles, and the tension generated between the tight sonnet form and an unsettled state of mind also highlights another facet that is missing in the

rather cautious replies of "Dear Friend" and "A Christmas Sonnet."<sup>30</sup> It would seem that the attempt to speak in something like his own voice in his epistolary sonnets provoked only conventional verses by a poet who in other works went to great lengths to apply his technical mastery to the portrayal of voice or character.

### **The Sonnet as Literary Portrait**

In one sense, the love sonnets of the English Renaissance could be considered as portraits in verse which present an idealized picture of the beloved or, with widely ranging degrees of self-consciousness, portraits of the lyrical speakers themselves. It was not until the seventeenth century and the sonnets of Milton, however, that this aspect of the sonnet was broadened to provide literary portraits of figures who held a more general interest, such as Oliver Cromwell, Lord General Fairfax, or Sir Henry Vane. After Milton, the sonnet devoted to historical portraits was largely abandoned until Coleridge revived it in his sequence *Sonnets on Eminent Characters* of 1795-6, which described famous authors (William Bowles and Robert Southey), political figures (La Fayette, Edmund Burke, and Lord Stanhope), and contemporary thinkers (William Godwin). These poems established the portrait sonnet as a viable sub-genre, and afterwards it appeared prominently in the *Miscellaneous Sonnets* of Wordsworth and the work of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (who wrote sonnets to George Sand) and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (who wrote sonnets on Dante and Chaucer), to name just three of its practitioners.

From its beginnings, the sonnet written as a historical or literary portrait has produced an interesting mixture of rhetorical modes. On the surface, this type of poem would seem to tend towards what we have termed the dramatic sonnet by its choice of a

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<sup>30</sup> An explanation of Robinson's guarded expression in "Dear Friend" in light of the hostility towards poetry shown by his neighbours appears in Anna Blumenthal's "The Ambivalence of Stance in Edwin Arlington Robinson's Early Poems and Letters," pp. 98-99.

subject matter outside of the lyrical emotions of the speaker, and in fact this type of sonnet does at times draw from novelistic techniques in its depictions of character. Its origins in the Renaissance, however, kept the portrait sonnet firmly in the tradition of the lyric by encouraging the creation of a first-person speaker to intersperse facts about the subject's life with effusions of praise, metaphors, or general observations on life. The result is a tension between competing genres, in which lyrical techniques and images could be used to present non-lyrical historical facts, literary criticism, or contemporary events, which may help to explain Robinson's attraction to this sonnet type.

Robinson wrote five portrait sonnets, which present his impressions of Zola, Thomas Hood, George Crabbe, Verlaine, and Erasmus. This list is interesting in itself, for it presents only literary personages. Absent are political, military, philosophical, or religious figures, although there were notable precedents for Robinson to provide such portraits. In these sonnets, only Erasmus is described as having a broader impact on society, a fact which is reduced to some "good fathers" rolling "their inward eyes in anguish and affright." Robinson thus viewed the historical portrait sonnet as a vehicle for literary opinions. Also interesting is the fact that, of these highly disparate writers, only one, George Crabbe, has been cited by critics as having had an influence on Robinson's style or subject matter (Lucas, 142). In fact, the work of three of these writers - Thomas Hood, Erasmus, and Zola - appear to be antithetical to Robinson's own approach. In the cases of Hood and Erasmus, their forms of wit are almost wholly absent in Robinson's poetry, as was Zola's attempt to chronicle modern industrial life, so that, as Yvor Winters has noted, Robinson's portrait sonnets shed little light on his own literary sources (Edwin Arlington Robinson, 19).

Even with these self-imposed limitations, however, Robinson was to produce two important sonnets, "Thomas Hood" and "George Crabbe," in this sub-genre, with the former inspiring Frost's observation that "the style is the man" or, rather, that "the style is the way the man takes himself" ("Introduction to King Jasper," 65-6). Its octave runs:

The man who cloaked his bitterness within  
 This winding-sheet of puns and pleasantries,  
 God never gave to look with common eyes  
 Upon a world of anguish and of sin:  
 His brother was the branded man of Lynn;  
 And there are woven with his jollities  
 The nameless and eternal tragedies  
 That render hope and hoplessness akin.

Like his other portrait sonnets, "Thomas Hood" is impressionistic, invoking a lyrical speaker who freely mixes details of his subject's life with a large number of different rhetorical modes. The sonnet contains a mixture of metaphors ("winding-sheet of puns and pleasantries"), biographical details ("his brother was the branded man of Lynn") and, in its sestet, vague praise ("we crown him"), descriptions of interior states ("anon we feel"), imagined scenes ("thin dim shadows"), allusions to Hood's own work ("sailed away with Ines to the West," which recalls Hood's lyric "Fair Ines"), and general observations on life ("render hope and hoplessness akin"). The remainder of Robinson's historical portrait sonnets also show a willingness to experiment with different styles, rhetorical modes, and imagery, although not quite to the same extent. "Verlaine" begins by asking, "Why do you dig like long-clawed scavengers to touch the covered corpse of him?" The conceit of a desecrated grave is maintained throughout the octave, but in the sestet it gives way to images of laurels and "the Muse's finger," and the poem ends with images of "hell's fulfillment" and "the star that shines on Paris now," moving in three lines from the classical and biblical to the modern world. "Erasmus" and "Zola" are somewhat less varied in technique, although both of them consistently mix images usually held to be distinct (religious controversies and the physical reactions of churchmen in "Erasmus," or the human and divine in "Zola") to present their subjects.

One of the most notable features of Robinson's portrait sonnets is the disparity between Robinson's mode of presentation and his subject. "Thomas Hood," "Erasmus," "Verlaine," and "Zola" do not attempt to echo their subjects' literary styles or techniques



in any way, so that "George Crabbe" has been viewed as standing apart from the other historical portrait sonnets in the critical literature. It begins:

Give him the darkest inch your shelf allows,  
 Hide him in lonely garrets, if you will,  
 But his hard, human pulse is throbbing still  
 With the sure strength that fearless truth endows.  
 In spite of all fine science disavows,  
 Of his plain excellence and stubborn skill  
 There yet remains what fashion cannot kill,  
 Though years have thinned the laurel from his brows.

John Lucas has argued that the "plain excellence" of line 6 is also a description of Robinson's own style (142), while Winters has remarked that "it has frequently been assumed that Crabbe may have influenced" Robinson (Edwin Arlington Robinson, 18). But however much this observation may pertain to Robinson's poetry as a whole, it seems out of place as a description of this particular sonnet. Like "Thomas Hood," "George Crabbe" is allowed to vary its rhetoric modes freely. There is a great gulf between the opening address to the reader with its domestic imagery and the final image of "books that are altars," and between these two extremes there are the use of personification ("hard, human pulse"), the language of rebuttal ("in spite of all fine science disavows"), a prosaic style (lines 6 and 7), and a classical allusion ("laurels"). Rather than attempt any generalization of this sonnet into an example of Robinson's own style, it may be safer to classify it with the rest of his portrait sonnets, which reproduce the rhetorical shifts and tensions which may be traced to the earlier sonnets in the tradition.

When read with an eye to the dramatic sonnets, the portrait sonnets present an interesting development in Robinson's style. Without diminishing the importance of a first-person lyric speaker characterized by a free mixture of rhetorical approaches, they attempt to dramatize the argument through the brief invocation of specific scenes and settings. In "Thomas Hood," this element surfaces in the line "And thin dim shadows home to midnight steal," which begins to evoke a specific setting which is not further

developed. In "George Crabbe," the opening invocation of a study again pushes the sonnet towards a definite setting which is quickly abandoned. This gesture towards dramatizing the sonnet is developed at greater length in "Verlaine" with its description of a desecrated graveyard and reaches its climax in "Erasmus" in the imagined reaction of various churchmen to Erasmus's works. In each of these examples a brief narrative is suggested without fully emerging, so that these portraits seem to anticipate, however slightly, the fictional narratives devoted to developing character which permeate the dramatic sonnets.

### **The Sonnet as Allegory**

Initially, the sonnet may seem like a form which is antithetical to allegory, which tends towards longer forms and sustained expression. Yet there exists a distinguished line of allegorical sonnets in English, beginning with "Whoso list to hunt" by Sir Thomas Wyatt, in which the lover and beloved are imagined as a hunter and hind, and continuing in such works as Spenser's *Amoretti* 67 (which is adapted from Wyatt's "Whoso list")<sup>31</sup> and the sestet of Michael Drayton's famous *Idea* 61. In each of these works, there is an attempt to introduce characters or situations that might at first glance appear to be short narratives: the hunting of a deer in the works of Wyatt and Spenser, or a deathbed scene at the end of Drayton's poem. In Robinson's work two famous sonnets, "The Garden of Nations" and "New England," draw on the tradition of sonnet allegories, although it is another feature of these poems, their fundamental obscurity, that will anticipate a key feature of Robinson's dramatic sonnets.

Ambiguity dominates Robinson's allegorical and dramatic sonnets for reasons that would seem to be related to the brevity of the sonnet form. Fourteen lines do not provide

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<sup>31</sup> See Anne Lake Prescott's discussion of this influence in "The Thirsty Deer and the Lord of Life: Some Contexts for *Amoretti* 67-70," which also discusses other possible sources from Petrarch, Tasso, and Horace. Wyatt's poem is an adaptation of Petrarch's *Rime* 190.

much room for a poet to develop complex relationships, motivations, or an extended comparison, so that a recourse to suggestion and brief hints seem inevitable. In the case of the allegories, Coleridge's famous definition from The Statesman's Manual may help to clarify this point. Coleridge argued that "an allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses," or that "which the fancy arbitrarily associates with apparitions of matter" (494). The identification of allegories as a product of the fancy is a key point, for in the Biographia Literaria the fancy was believed to have "no other counters to play with but fixities and definites" (202). Thus allegory, as a mode of representation, is an expression of known quantities that remain "fixed" or "definite." Robinson's allegorical sonnets, by contrast, use the conventions of the allegory by creating a "picture-language" to represent some abstract notion or general situation, but the specific referents of many of the images are ambiguous. As a result, the concepts represented by the allegories remain fundamentally obscure and ambiguous.

"The Garden of Nations," one of the first of Robinson's allegorical sonnets, will help to illustrate this point. Composed in 1923, its title may be taken not only to define the nature of the allegory (that the nations of the world form a garden), but it also calls to mind the League of Nations, which was founded three years earlier in 1920. The sonnet would thus appear to comment on politics in general and contemporary international politics in particular. The octave begins by stating that "we. . . are the bitten flower and fruit," with the adjective "bitten" referring to the fall caused by the eating of the tree of knowledge and, by implication, the experience of World War I. This imagery continues in the "blight" of modern politics, which again may be applied to the world in general or to the war that led to the formation of the League of Nations in particular. In the sestet, the poem shifts to the future and what will happen when "we shall be dead":

And when we are all gone, shall mightier seeds  
And scions of a warmer spring put forth

A bloom and fruitage of a larger worth  
 Than ours? God save the garden, if by chance,  
 Or by approved short sight, more numerous weeds  
 And weevils be the next inheritance!

If these lines are interpreted with reference to the League of Nations, they could be read as a hope that an international body ("warmer spring") could herald a "bloom and fruitage of a larger worth" than national politics. However, "The Garden of Nations" could also be read as a general comment on the future as possibly good or evil depending on the politics of the day, with the garden echoing Hamlet's comparison of Denmark to "an unweeded garden" since "things rank and gross in nature possess it merely" (I.ii.135-7) in a more general context.

Whether "The Garden of Nations" is taken as a comment on politics in general or the League of Nations in particular, however, there arises a deep ambiguity surrounding the interpretation of particular images. The sonnet's first quatrain distinguishes between "the blight above, where blight has always been," and the "evil at the root." It is unclear what each of these diseases is meant to represent, since the "blight above" may be taken to refer to ideals that were shattered by World War I, a perceived failure of religion or spirituality in the modern world, or a comment on the political elite. Similarly, the "evil at the root" may refer either to a conception of original sin, a secular interpretation of man's evil, or the compliancy of the lower and middle classes in the war. The specific allegories that have been suggested thus become rather strained, and it is quite possible that no clear reference exists for many of the images, other than a general sense of evil and desolation following the war. Robinson likely intended these lines to be suggestive of a wide range of modern or even timeless political problems, although the directness of the title would seem to require a narrower interpretation consistent with an allegory.

In contrast to the "fixities and definites" that Coleridge associated with allegory, "The Garden and Nation" presents images that are somewhat comprehensible in a general sense but which cannot be interpreted precisely. This vagueness continues in "New

England," a sonnet which, as Anna Blumenthal has noted, leaves "the reader uncertain of both the targets as well as the sources of the poet's irony" ("The Ambivalence of Stance in Edwin Arlington Robinson's Early Poems and Letters," 91). The poem begins with a series of outlandish characterizations of New England, where "children learn to walk on frozen toes" and the people harbour "an envy of all those / Who boil elsewhere with such a lyric yeast / Of love." The imagined freedoms of those outside New England are so great that "demons would appeal for some repose." The sestet breaks into an allegory of various emotions that echoes the imagery of Michael Drayton's *Idea* 61, "Since there's no help, come let us kiss and part":

Passion is here a soilure of the wits,  
 We're told, and Love a cross for them to bear;  
 Joy shivers in the corner where she knits  
 And Conscience always has the rocking chair,  
 Cheerful as when she tortured into fits  
 The first cat that was ever killed by Care.

Drayton's sestet runs:

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 mightst him yet recover.

The sudden shift in the sestet to an allegorical scene which personifies various emotions is similar in both works, and they also share the personification of love. What is different in these works is the tone. In Drayton's sonnet, the evocation of the personified ideals invokes a feeling of regret which leads to an offer to renew the love affair, while in "New England" the tone is satirical, with the allegory seeming to provide a *reductio ad absurdum* of New England Puritanism.

One of the first problems that arises in any reading of "New England," as Blumenthal suggests, is to determine exactly who or what is the target of the satire (91).

The title appears to point to New England itself of the subject of the poem, and the allegorical figures of the sestet, with the condemnation of Passion, Love, and Joy by Conscience and Care would seem to be an attack on New England Puritanism. As Donald E. Stanford has noted, when the poem was first published in The Gardiner Review in 1924, it was read in this light by the local poet David H. Darling, who wrote an angry letter to the editor berating Robinson for his stereotypical view of New England (158-9). This attack prompted a reply by Robinson, in which he urged Mr. Darling to reread the poem so that "he will see that the whole thing is a satirical attack not upon New England, but on the same patronizing pagans whom he flays with such vehemence in his own poem" (as quoted in Stanford, 159). Later in the same letter, Robinson declared that "I cannot quite see how the first eight lines of my sonnet are to be regarded as even intelligible if read in any other way than as an oblique attack upon all those who are forever throwing dead cats at New England for its alleged emotional and moral frigidity" (Stanford, 159). Still, the confusion occasioned by the poem was great enough to prompt Robinson to rewrite it slightly into the form quoted above in an attempt to clarify the nature of the allegory.

This incident is worth recalling, since it reveals that the ambiguity which occurs in "The Garden of Nations" was also felt by Robinson's contemporaries. In "New England," this ambiguity is encouraged by the title, which gives no indication that the poem should be read as an exaggeration of stereotypes of New England, rather than as a satire on the place itself. Since the narrator does not identify himself until line 10 with the phrase "we're told," the majority of the sonnet gives no formal indication that the views presented are not those of the narrator which are to be accepted by the reader. Instead, the sonnet relies almost solely on its tone to convey its satire. But even here the tone is often hard to discern, and it is only with the "demons" in lines 5-8 that the sonnet becomes so exaggerated that the caricature becomes unmistakable. In the sestet, after the imagery becomes a clear caricature of certain stereotypes of New England, the satire

becomes somewhat clearer. The phrase "we're told" shows that the views presented are at one remove from the narrator's,<sup>32</sup> while the language slips into clichés ("a cross for them to bear," "tortured into fits," a "cat. . . killed by Care [Curiosity?]"). revealing that the views presented are stereotypical and thus suspect. Here the shift to allegory in the sestet takes on a further significance, since it suggests how stereotypes of New England leave behind any concrete reality to create an unreal world of their own.

Even after these formal elements of exaggeration, tone, and cliché are identified, however, the confusion of Darling and others remains understandable, since Robinson's belief that he was using an "oblique attack" shows that the reading of these elements is uncertain and open to interpretation. But there is an even deeper source for the ambiguity that surrounds these allegories - the absence of a larger context. "The Garden of Nations" may be read as an allegory of the League of Nations, the general political situation after World War I, or even a timeless comment on politics in general, since the specific images do not suggest that any single context is necessary for their interpretation. Similarly, in his "oblique attack" on "all those who are forever throwing dead cats at New England," Robinson does not respond to any single attack to provide a context for his satire. Instead, "New England" responds to a set of general stereotypes which are prevalent enough for many readers, including Darling, to believe them to be the views of the poet himself. In terms of Coleridge's definition, these poems remain allegories which translate a view of New England into a domestic scene or politics into a garden, even while the "abstract notions" that are intended remain obscure.

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<sup>32</sup> Anna Blumenthal has noted that a switch in pronouns (from the "we" of "we're told" to the "them" later in the line) makes the narrator somewhat ambiguous, since he is then both a New Englander (one of the "we") and not a New Englander (or why would he use the pronoun "them"?) ("The Ambivalence in Stance in Edwin Arlington Robinson's Early Poems and Letters," 91). However, if the sonnet describes only a stereotyped, unreal New Englander, then the use of the pronoun "them" to identify someone other than the actual New Englanders reading the poem is easily explained.

### **The Sonnet as Dream Vision**

The sonnet written as a dream vision provides one of the rare examples of a type of dramatic sonnet that is sanctioned by tradition. Raleigh's first dedicatory sonnet to The Faerie Queene and Milton's "Methought I Saw My Late Espoused Saint" provided important precedents for Robinson, not only for their aesthetic quality, but also for being sonnets which rely on narrative action, setting, and character to convey their meanings. Dream visions, being by nature confusing and ambiguous, also explore the theme of obscurity that were so prominent in his other allegories. Thus it seems fitting that Robinson should have been attracted to the dream vision for these reasons, but there are reasons for finding this influence rather surprising. Robinson is not normally associated with an interest in dreams or visions, and sonnet dream visions appear only rarely after the seventeenth century in spite of occasional efforts of revival by the Romantic poets,<sup>33</sup> so that these efforts represent a daring but ultimately failed attempt to revive a neglected sonnet type. Here we discover the extent of Robinson's desire to develop the sonnet's full range of narrative possibilities to the extent of venturing outside of his usual subject matter, even at the risk of appearing antiquated.

Robinson's first dream vision sonnet was "The Altar," in which the first-person speaker imagines "an altar builded in a dream" which emits a "gleam. . . of upward promise" and "love's mumur." A "human stream" is attracted to the light, and the speaker feels himself being "thrilled" by their "quenchless fever of unrest." At the end of the sonnet, however, he awakes and sees himself as a "bewildered insect." Robinson took great pains to establish this poem as a dream vision since he not only specifies that the altar is "builded in a dream" and that the speaker has awakened, but also employs an antiquated diction near the beginning of the octave ("witting" and "whereof"). These

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<sup>33</sup> See William Wordsworth's *Ecclesiastical Sonnet 23*, or his sonnets "Methought I saw the footsteps of a throne" or "I heard (alas! 'twas only in a dream)," both collected under the heading of *Miscellaneous Sonnets*.



archaisms invite an identification with Raleigh's famous dedicatory sonnet to The Faerie Queene, which employs similar themes and imagery. In Raleigh's poem, the speaker imagines himself to be walking through "that Temple, where the vestall flame / Was wont to burn." Once inside, the speaker views the shades of the great poets, noting that "the soule of *Petrarke* wept" and "*Homers* spright did tremble all for grieffe" because of the greatness of Spenser's poem. The setting of a temple, the image of the flame, and the tone of regret and mourning are shared by both works (even if Robinson does not share Raleigh's self-conscious exaggeration) which help to encourage interpretations of "The Altar" which might otherwise be overlooked.

On the surface, Robinson's poem appears to be an allegory of love, since the flames are identified as "love's murmur" in the octave. The flames would then represent the fires of passion, and the "martyred throng" a procession of unhappy lovers who are ruinously attracted to their beloveds, as is the speaker. However, if the flames are equated with those of Raleigh's sonnet, they may be viewed as symbols of the loves immortalized through literature or, more generally, as a symbol of literature itself. In this reading, the "eloquent" flames represent a desire to become a great poet, and the "martyred throng" may be a procession of minor or failed poets.<sup>34</sup> But once this duality of interpretation is admitted, there arise a possible identification of the flames with fame and its exacting demands (a reading which is also encouraged by Raleigh's poem) or with the "upward movement" of a religious love which is then countered with an image of human beings as "insects" whose original sin prevents any attainment of divine glory.

In "The Altar" there is thus an abiding ambiguity in the imagery, references, and setting which is consistent with Robinson's other allegorical sonnets. No one reading is favoured over any others by the context or specific nature of the imagery or language.

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<sup>34</sup> The penultimate line of "George Crabbe," which uses a similar image of "books that are as altars," infusing the literary life with a spiritual significance, helps to reinforce this reading.

An element of uncertainty surrounds all of Robinson's dream visions. "Supremacy," for example, presents a vision of a Dantesque "lonely tract of hell" filled with men whom the speaker "had slandered on life's little star," only to discover that they were actually "singing in the sun," presumably having found God's grace. However, it remains unclear why the speaker would have slandered those who receive this grace or whether he himself is thus condemned to hell. In "Maya," whose title refers to a Buddhist term meaning "illusion," the Soul of a man leaves the body in order to speak to the Will, placing the poem in a Christian rather than a Buddhist cosmology. Descending, the Soul tells the Mind that it "may still be the bellows and the spark" in a worldly sense, although it is unable to ascend to a higher, spiritual realm. The image of a "spark," which is often an image of something spiritual, is here associated with the world, while the meaning of this image and the "bellows" is not clarified by any other image in the poem.

Robinson's dream-vision sonnets thus appear to be allegories which remain vague in their allusions and meanings, a feature which culminates in the sonnet "Alma Mater." In this sonnet, an unidentified person knocks at the door, and the speaker wonders "when, if ever, did we meet before," with the only clue of this meeting coming from the title. As he is wondering, the man, who has arrived "in time to die," "staggered, and lay shapeless on the floor," leading to a series of bewildered questions:

When had I known him? And what brought him here?  
 Love, warning, malediction, hunger, fear?  
 Surely I never thwarted such as he? -  
 Again, what soiled obscurity was this:  
 Out of what scum, and up from what abyss,  
 Had they arrived - these rags of memory?

The uncertainty aroused by the vision is the central theme of the poem. Unlike Milton's speaker, whose vision in "Methought I saw. . ." consists of a person known to the speaker (likely one of the poet's wives) who represents known quantities ("Love, sweetness, goodness"), Robinson's vision is of an unknown person whose ultimate meaning ("Love,

warning, malediction, hunger, fear") is contradictory and indecipherable. Although the gods may "verify" the vision, the speaker is unable to do so. The resulting confusion of the speaker even crosses over into farce, since his series of questions represent a hopelessly inadequate response to a vision of an old acquaintance who has just died. In "Alma Mater," Robinson repeats the ambiguity found throughout his dream visions, which as a whole imply that dreams are essentially ambiguous and unknowable despite their seemingly allegorical intent. More generally, the dream vision sonnets extend the ambiguity common to all of Robinson's allegories, which allude to larger concerns while failing to clarify what events or contexts lend them this claim to meaning.

### **The Sonnet as Recorder of History**

In his sonnets describing historical or biblical events, which are accorded a quasi-historical status, Robinson's once again attempted to revive a type of sonnet which approaches what Tate called the dramatic lyric. A treatment of famous historical events in the sonnet form would seem, by its very nature, to bring questions of narrative, point of view, and external action to the fore in anticipation of the dramatic sonnets. Yet Robinson did not treat the two genres equally, composing only a handful of sonnets based on historical events while devoting almost half of his sonnets to fictional characters and situations set in small-town America. There would thus appear to be a fundamental difference in his vision of these roles for the sonnet, which raises the problem of why the historical sonnet failed to enjoy the same status which was given to his miniature dramas composed in the form.

One possible explanation for Robinson's rejection of the historical sonnet may lie in the lack of precedents for them in the sonnet tradition. The best-known sonnets on historical events, which would include Milton's "On the Late Massacre at Piedmont," Shelley's "England 1819," or Wordsworth's "To Toussaint l'Ouverture," are partisan poems composed in response to recent social conditions or events. Surprisingly, there are few sonnets in English that depict distant history, as was attempted by Robinson. The

great exception to this generalization is Wordsworth's sequence *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, which attempts to tell the history of the English church. Yet this work, too, provides only an indirect influence for Robinson's historical sonnets, which remain isolated from one another and do not aspire to any systematic portrayal of history. However, since a lack of precedents did not prevent Robinson from composing his dramatic sonnets, a more compelling reason must be sought in the view of history expressed in these works.

In the handful of sonnets about historical or biblical events, Robinson consistently presents the argument that history does not enact any fundamental changes, and that no permanent shifts in outlook or humanity arise from great events. His sonnet "Calvary," for example, reflects on the crucifixion that "was nineteen hundred years ago" in the octave, the passing of time taking on a renewed emphasis in the sestet:

But after nineteen hundred years the shame  
 Still clings, and we have not made good the loss  
 That outraged faith has entered in his name.  
 Ah, when shall come love's courage to be strong!

If Christ's sacrifice is seen as being largely ineffectual in producing any improvement of individual faith, it should not be surprising that other events are considered as failures as well. "Monadnock Through the Trees," for example, employs the unusual conceit of addressing Mount Monadnock in New Hampshire to comment on human vanity:

Before there was in Egypt any sound  
 Of those who reared a more prodigious means  
 For the self-heavy sleep of kings and queens  
 Than hitherto had mocked the most renowned, -  
 Unvisioned here and waiting to be found,  
 Alone, amid remote and older scenes,  
 You loomed above ancestral evergreens. . .

The sonnet proceeds to declare that "your calm will be the same as when the first / Assyrians went howling south to war." The mountain's "remoteness," "calm," and placid survival are unaffected by the "self-heavy sleep of kings and queens" or "howling. . . war," the implication being that the "best and worst" of human affairs are merely passing

events in comparison. The pair of sonnets that comprise "Demos," meanwhile, extend Robinson's skepticism as to the effect of great events to the political realm by having the founder of democracy warn that there will always be those "to lead you, and be led," so that democracy itself stands on the brink of "failure." Yet other sonnets question the capacity of kings or biblical figures to make any lasting changes in history. "The Sunken Crown," for example, imagines a king who drowns when he chases his fallen crown overboard while remaining unaware that "the call is on him for his overthrow," thus mocking the ambition for power as futile. "Job the Rejected," meanwhile, casts its title character as an unsuccessful lover, while "If the Lord Would Make Windows in Heaven" imagines that the prophet Elijah has become estranged from an unidentified woman, so that "his high lights. . . were not as shining."

In all of Robinson's sonnets on historical or biblical events, potentially great figures, actions, or empires are thus diminished to a point where they are rendered vain and futile. It is tempting to speculate that Robinson's skepticism over the importance of large-scale historical events may have led him to justify his favourite subjects in the sonnets: the depiction of characters inhabiting the fictional and seemingly unimportant Tilbury Town. If events of historical importance fail to produce any effectual change, then the actions of an inhabitant of a small town could be seen as equally significant. And if the grand march of history was thought to fail in providing any final significance, then other sources of meaning such as fictional characters and personal events which do not make any obvious contribution to history could be viewed as a greater potential source of truth. These assumptions underlie the dramatic sonnets, with their emphasis on small, often ambiguous events that make no claim to having any historical significance.

### **Dramatic Sonnets**

The phrase "dramatic sonnet," as was stated in the introduction to this chapter, has been adapted from a comment by Allen Tate, who believed that Robinson's greatest short poems were his narratives or "dramatic lyrics," as opposed to his traditional lyrics

or longer narrative poems. The term itself is an oxymoron, since the drama (which here refers to some presentation of external action) and the lyric are usually contrasted with one another, but no other phrase seems to call attention to the unusual practice of including narrative elements within what are traditionally lyric forms. Tate argued that:

With the disappearance of general patterns of conduct, the power to depict action that is both single and complete also disappears. The dramatic genius of the poet is held to short flights, and the dramatic lyric is a fragment of a total action which the poet lacks the means to sustain.

It is to be hoped that Mr. Robinson will again exercise his dramatic genius where it has a chance for success: in lyrics. ("Edwin Arlington Robinson," 364)

Roughly one half of Robinson's sonnets are dramatic sonnets, if this term is interpreted to encompass those sonnets containing some form of narrative and action, a specific setting, and fictional characters. Within this collection, of course, the sonnets reveal a wide variety, from dramatic monologues to short character sketches centred on a single action to brief scenes which are suggestive of larger histories, but the common concern with narrative unites these various types and marks them as a new departure in the sonnet.

It is not clear precisely what Tate himself meant by his phrase "dramatic lyric," and the term may appear to introduce more problems than it solves. Tate's explanation, that it "is a fragment of a total action which the poet lacks the means to sustain" avoids deciding to what extent a dramatic lyric is a narrative, for example, since an unsustained narrative might not be considered a narrative at all. The belief that Robinson "lacks the means to sustain" his narratives is also misleading, since it implies some sort of failure on Robinson's part, although many of the sonnets written as narratives, including "Karma," "Lost Anchors," and "The Pity of the Leaves," are among Robinson's most famous poems. The word "dramatic" is also problematic, since it may imply something melodramatic or exciting, a suggestion which is contradicted by its definition as an unsustained or failed depiction. Furthermore, the term "dramatic lyric" contains a mixture of genres, and in Tate's discussion it is unclear how a poem which is defined in terms of a "total action"

can also be lyrical, or why the invocation of lyrical structures and techniques should be relevant at all. In spite of these apparent problems in this terminology, however, the isolation of the dramatic element in Robinson's lyrics is an important contribution to the discussion of the sonnets. On a basic level, Tate's meaning is clear. The word "dramatic" indicates those sonnets that are distinguished by a concern with narrative, action, setting, and the external portrayal of character, as opposed to the direct expression of a speaker's lyric emotions. And it is precisely the ambiguities inherent in the term "dramatic lyric" and the questions of narrative, melodrama, and the relation of these sonnets to traditional lyrics that best describe these poems. A consideration of these features will occupy the remainder of this chapter.

Of these concerns, questions of narrative have received the largest amount of critical notice. Louis O. Coxe observed that "Robinson is happiest as a poet when he starts with a specific human situation or relationship, with a 'story'" (61), a comment that may help to explain Tate's use of the adjective "dramatic." A narrative or "story," often hidden or obscure, can be found in all of Robinson's dramatic sonnets. Its persistence may be seen in the early sonnet "The Clerks," in which a first-person narrator begins by declaring that "I did not think that I should find them there / When I came back again." The "them" refers to a group of clerks who were once "fair" and who greet the narrator with a "shopworn brotherhood." The narrator finds that the clerks are "just as good" as he remembers them, and then breaks into a number of first-person generalizations typical of those found in lyrics:

And you that ache so much to be sublime,  
 And you that feed yourselves with your descent,  
 What comes of all your visions and your fears?  
 Poets and kings are but the clerks of Time,  
 Tiering the same dull webs of discontent,  
 Clipping the same sad alnage of the years.

"The Clerks" becomes important through its confusion of genre, which freely mixes lyric and dramatic elements of the sonnet. Its octave and sestet are sharply contrasted. The poem shifts from the first to second person in line 9, and the enjambed subordinate clauses of its first section give way to the parallel clauses of the second, which span their respective lines. These rhetorical shifts emphasize the change in genre between the two parts of the poem. The octave presents an external scene and action, a meeting in a shop, and a first-person narrator who, by the fragment of personal history ("when I came back again") and attempt to describe the scene somewhat objectively, appears to be preparing the first part of a narrative. The sestet frustrates this expectation through its recourse to the general reflections characteristic of a lyric, making this poem extremely difficult to categorize in terms of genre. What is surprising is the fact that the narrative element should appear at all, since the weight of the poem's meaning appears to rest in the generalizations towards its end. The octave thus reveals Robinson's habit of casting his material in the form of a story, as was the case in several of his portrait sonnets, even in a poem in which narrative gives way to lyric addresses and generalizations.

"The Clerks" does, however, introduce several features common to Robinson's narratives. Typical are the large number of specific details which are introduced in a relatively short space. The octave presents the first-person narrator, who is given a brief personal history; the setting, some type of shop connected to the narrator's past; a general description of the secondary characters, the clerks; and a contrast between past and present which promises to lead to some sort of revelation or reflection in the narrator. The specifics of the scene are clearly sketched; what is less clear is the larger context that gives these details their significance. For example, we are not told who the narrator is, why he had left the town previously, what his former relationship with the clerks was like, or why he has returned at this time. Similarly, several key phrases of the octave remain indecipherable without a knowledge beyond what the sonnet offers. The fact that the clerks were "just as good" or "just as human as they ever were" may be interpreted as



praiseworthy or ironic, depending on the narrator's view of them, which is never really clarified. These questions are avoided in the sestet, which resolves the poem through its lyric reflections. However, these questions remain highly relevant to any reading of the poem, since a deeper knowledge of the narrator would help to explain whether the declarations of the sestet are a sudden epiphany or reproach, among other possible readings. The tone of the poem thus remains unclear, and the result is a sonnet that, in spite of its declarations of general truths, remains problematic in the degree to which they should be trusted.

In raising questions within the narrative which it refuses to elaborate, "The Clerks" is fairly typical of Robinson's dramatic sonnets, which Tate characterized as being "fragmentary" and "unsustained" in the passage cited above. The prevalence of a narrative ambiguity occurs in another sonnet, "Lost Anchors," which on the whole is more typical of Robinson's narrative technique. The poem is quoted in full to highlight the absence of any context through which to interpret its various details:

Like a dry fish flung inland far from shore,  
 There lived a sailor, warped and ocean-browned,  
 Who told of an old vessel, harbor-drowned  
 And out of mind a century before,  
 Where divers, on descending to explore  
 A legend that had lived its way around  
 The world of ships, in the dark hulk had found  
 Anchors, which had been seized and seen no more.

Improving a dry leisure to invest,  
 Their misadventure with a manifest  
 Analogy that he may read who runs,  
 The sailor made it old as ocean grass -  
 Telling of much that once had come to pass  
 With him, whose mother should have had no sons.

Unlike the function of the narrative in "The Clerks," the story of "Lost Anchors" is relatively clear and builds to a surprising revelation of the sailor's character, a type of development that is impossible in a strictly lyrical poem. However, there are two

important parallels in the sonnets' narrative technique. Like "The Clerks," the narrative of "Lost Anchors" is slight and fragmentary, consisting of the tale of the "lost anchors" and the final revelation that the story is an "analogy" to the sailor's life. The specific relation of the story of the anchors to the sailor is unclear, although in this case some suggestions are provided. The lost anchors may parallel the sailor's life in that they are both: (1) old, out of sight, and forgotten; (2) as useless as anchors on a sunken ship; (3) the object of wasted energy and hopes on the part of the divers or sailors' mother; (4) raised to the status of a legend among the sailors. Any or all of these conclusions may be read in the poem,<sup>35</sup> and it is the triumph of the poem that it can encourage so many interpretations, even if it does not explicitly support any of them.

The parallels between the two sonnets may be carried even further. In both "The Clerks" and "Lost Anchors," a type of dual narrative is created in which a brief action that is described explicitly (the narrator's musings about the clerks or the belated discovery of the anchors) gains its significance by a larger story which is only glancingly alluded to (the narrator's departure and return to the town of the clerks or what "once had come to pass" with the sailor). The larger story is invoked but is not given enough detail to interpret the various phrases or actions that appear in the poem. Tate may have been attempting to describe this structure in his assertion that Robinson often created "a fragment of a total action which the poet lacks the means to sustain." This dual structure runs throughout the dramatic sonnets and is evident in "The Pity of the Leaves," which is again quoted in full to emphasize the absence of any context for its descriptions:

Vengeful across the cold November moors,  
 Loud with ancestral shame there came the bleak  
 Sad wind that shrieked, and answered with a shriek,  
 Reverberant through lonely corridors.

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<sup>35</sup> Winters argues that the sailor "is made a symbol of the immeasurable sea and of its ruins" and that "the sailor's illegitimate birth. . . is made to imply the amoral and anarchic nature of the sea," a reading which I fail to see (Edwin Arlington Robinson, 42-43).

The old man heard it; and he heard, perforce,  
 Words out of lips that were no more to speak -  
 Words of the past that shook the old man's cheek  
 Like dead, remembered footsteps on old floors.

And then there were the leaves that plagued him so!  
 The brown, thin leaves that on the stones outside  
 Skipped with a freezing whisper. Now and then  
 They stopped, and stayed there - just to let him know  
 How dead they were; but if the old man cried,  
 They fluttered off like withered souls of men.

The explicitly described actions of the old man are slight, consisting of little more than hearing a "sad wind" and the sound of some "brown, thin leaves" while he utters an occasional cry. However, this trivial surface narrative hints at a larger story that lies behind these events, the old man's consciousness of an "ancestral shame" and a paranoia which makes him believe that the sounds of nature have transformed themselves into the words of his accusers. The diction of "The Pity of the Leaves" constantly hints at the larger narrative of an accusation from the past through its adjectives - "vengeful," "reverberant," and "dead" - and verbs - "shrieked," "plagued," and "cried" - which point beyond the trivial events of the old man's present. Here, as in "The Clerks" and "Lost Anchors," the actions described in the poem's fictional present are the result of the larger narrative which lies in the past, a narrative which determines the old man's actions but which is not actually described.

"The Pity of the Leaves" demonstrates the problems raised by Robinson's dual narrative structure to a greater extent than either "The Clerks" or "Lost Anchors." In "The Clerks," the lyric convention of uttering generalizations that represent the views of the author tends to obscure the difficulties raised in the narrative portion of the poem, while in "Lost Anchors" none of the interpretations offered of the imagery of the poem are mutually exclusive, so that they all may be possible readings of the sonnet. In "The Pity of the Leaves," however, the ambiguity surrounding the larger narrative makes even a first reading difficult. The phrase "ancestral shame," for example, permits a dual

reading: either (1) the old man has shamed his ancestors by his actions, or (2) he has perpetuated some crime begun by his family in the past. But however this phrase is read, only the double repetition of the word "dead" gives any hint of the extent of the old man's culpability, although again it is unclear whether he is directly or indirectly responsible for any deaths, or whether he innocently wronged whoever is represented by the wind and leaves while they were alive. The source of the old man's guilt thus remains omnipresent yet ambiguous, and the fact that its extent cannot be determined makes the poem difficult to interpret, since its meaning changes drastically according to whether the old man is being justly or unjustly punished, a criminal trapped by regret, or a repentant man who is being tortured out of all proportion to his crimes.

Lying behind the action depicted in "The Pity of the Leaves," then, there is an unspecified yet all-encompassing atmosphere of crime and guilt that is invoked by the fundamentally ambiguous larger narrative. This atmosphere is difficult to interpret since its source and extent remains unknown, yet it is crucial to a large number of Robinson's dramatic sonnets. "The Pity of the Leaves" is only one of many poems which involve wrongful deaths, an unspecified crime or, at the very least, the hint of some shameful revelation from the past that remains barely suppressed or hidden. These concerns, which push the dramatic sonnets towards the melodramatic, arise in three unrelated sonnets written at various points of Robinson's career that give accounts of a visit to a house somehow connected with death.<sup>36</sup> "The Tavern" evokes "old Ham Amory, the murdered host," but does not explain the motivations for the murder, since the "Tavern has a story, but no man / Can tell us what it is"; "Haunted House" hints at an axe murder of a woman, though the narrator states only that it was "long before / Our time"; and "Souvenir" recounts the narrator's memory of "a vanished house" that contained "one

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<sup>36</sup> "The Tavern" was published in the volume The Children of the Night (1897), "Haunted House" in Dionysus in Doubt (1925), and "Souvenir" in Three Taverns (1920).

whose occupation was to die," presumably either a suicide or one who had given up on life. In all of these sonnets, a return to a house recalls a connection with a mysterious death, evoking an atmosphere of guilt and death which becomes all-encompassing and unchallenged. Similarly, "En Passant," an obscure narrative for which Yvor Winters was "unable to offer an explanation" in his book on Robinson (51), recounts the confusing story of "one who shot a stranger" and escapes, much to the amazement of the narrator. The pair of sonnets entitled "The Growth of 'Lorraine,'" meanwhile, describes the odd relationship between the narrator and a woman who commits suicide for unexplained reasons. The second poem reproduces a suicide note that hints at a failed love affair:

"You do not frown because I call you friend,  
For I would have you glad that I still keep  
Your memory, and even at the end -  
Impenitent, sick, shattered - cannot curse  
The love that flings, for better or for worse,  
This worn-out, cast-out flesh of mine to sleep."

The affair is never described in any detail, however, and it is unclear why it ended so suddenly or if it involved the narrator. "How Annandale Went Out" gives the speech of a doctor who attends "a wreck" of a friend" who has died and challenges his audience by declaring "so put the two together, if you can," concluding that "you wouldn't hang me" for what seems to be a mercy killing, while "The Dead Village" describes the death of a town when "God frowned, and shut the village from His sight," invoking the destructions of Sodom, though the crime committed by these townsfolk is unknown.

This collection of poems provides the most dramatic accounts of death or crime in Robinson's sonnets, and in each of them the motivations behind these deaths or their specific details are carefully suppressed. Taken together, they present a world of guilt located in the past which, because of its ambiguity, is allowed to become all-pervasive. These sonnets suggest one of the most persuasive explanations for the ambiguity that surrounds nearly all of the dramatic sonnets. The "total actions" of the sonnets are not so

much "unsustained" in these examples, as Tate suggests, as they are suppressed. Throughout the sonnets Robinson depicts a world in which present places and actions are determined by past events which cannot be spoken of openly since they are connected with an "ancestral shame" that is inseparable from crime, death, and guilt. Even in sonnets where no crime is mentioned, a background of painful memories which contain frightening revelations is present. "Cliff Klingenhagen," for example, describes a visit by a first-person narrator with the title character, who fills one glass with wormwood and another with wine and then "took the draught / Of bitterness himself." This action prompts the narrator to wonder if he will be "as happy as Cliff Klingenhagen is," the implication being that one must accept the bitterness of life, whose actuality is assumed to be inescapable and self-evident, in order to be happy. The name of the title character appears to be constructed as an elaborate pun ("clinging to or hanging from a cliff"), which further hints at an inevitable danger or bitterness lurking below the surface of life in the poem, although, as is typical of Robinson's sonnets, the experiences that led to this belief in both Cliff Klingenhagen and the narrator are not elaborated in any way.

At this point, we must be cautious about reading any definite interpretation into the various ambiguities encountered in these sonnets. The obscurity of specific phrases or actions is prevalent enough in the sonnets to be considered as a theme in itself. There is thus a parallel between the larger, past narratives of the sonnets and the ambiguity prevalent in Robinson's allegories, for example, which also fail to provide the context needed to interpret their specific images. Linking the dramatic sonnets to these poems allows a speculation concerning Robinson's epistemology, in which the refusal to provide the larger context comments either on the inability to place an event in any suitable context or on the plurality of meanings that arise in the absence of any overriding interpretation. Another of Robinson's sonnets, "A Song at Shannon's," which describes the reactions of two men who listen to "some unhappy night-bird" outside of a pub, seems to speak directly to this belief in a variability of interpretation in its sestet:

Slowly away they went, leaving behind  
 More light than was before them. Neither met  
 The other's eyes again or said a word.  
 Each to his loneliness or to his kind,  
 Went his own way, and with his own regret,  
 Not knowing what the other may have heard.

The emphasis in this sonnet rests equally on the word "own" as "loneliness" or "regret," a word which is embedded in two of the rhymes of the octave, "known" and "flown." The theme of the sonnet, that the song of the bird speaks to each man differently, seems to be a symbol for Robinson's method in the sonnets as a whole, in which the characters' own histories, which are obliquely revealed to the reader, determine their actions in individual works. The resulting ambiguity ("each to his loneliness or to his kind") is similar to that of the allegorical or dream vision sonnets, where the lack of any definite interpretation obscured many of the details. The uncertainty surrounding the sonnets seems to allow for a variety of interpretations for any specific phrase or image in them, so that the sailor in "Lost Anchors," who "tells of much" through the invocation of a single suggestive image becomes a symbol of Robinson's sonnet writing as a whole.

Robinson's famous sonnet "Karma" provides both an illustration of the ambiguity of the sonnets and of the need to allow for a number of equally persuasive interpretations of any individual work:

Christmas was in the air and all was well  
 With him, but for a few confusing flaws  
 In divers of God's images. Because  
 A friend of his would neither buy nor sell,  
 Was he to answer for the axe that fell?  
 He pondered; and the reason for it was,  
 Partly, a slowly freezing Santa Claus  
 Upon the corner, with his beard and bell.

Acknowledging an improvident surprise,  
 He magnified a fancy that he wished  
 The friend whom he had wrecked were here again.  
 Not sure of that, he found a compromise;

And from the fulness of his heart he fished  
A dime for Jesus who had died for men.

Like the other dramatic sonnets discussed thus far, "Karma" presents an atmosphere of past guilt which determines the action of the poem. The title of this sonnet refers to Eastern notions of a cycle of retribution whose origins lie in the mysteries of a forgotten past. Here the guilt felt by the protagonist over his responsibility towards his "friend" provides the conflict of the poem, although the degree and nature of this guilt shift throughout the poem and remain ambiguous. In the octave, the friend is held accountable for his own fall since he "would neither buy nor sell," but in the sestet the character's culpability is "magnified" (to its proper proportions or beyond it?) so that the protagonist believes that "he had wrecked," or is responsible for, his friend's ruin. The protagonist's guilt is seen only through these shifting musings, and it remains obscure as to whether he admits to it in the sestet or feels an irrational need for atonement which magnifies his culpability.<sup>37</sup> The "improvident surprise" is also obscure, since it seems to rule out the workings of Providence in compelling a recognition of guilt, and even if some religious cause were at work, the symbolic act of donating a "dime to Jesus" may or may not be enough to atone for the wrecking of his friend. Some degree of guilt and atonement is undoubtedly present, but as Janice P. Stout has suggested in calling the poem "ironic"

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<sup>37</sup> It is important to avoid readings such as Donald E. Stanford's:

Karma is justice, and justice is *fated* to occur. The protagonist of the poem has done considerable harm to another man. He thinks he can square the debt by an appeal to Jesus, who according to Christian belief had squared the debt incurred by Original Sin for all mankind. But of course the ironic implication is that his gesture is hardly enough to satisfy Karmic justice. (Revolution and Convention in Modern Poetry, 152)

There is nothing in the poem to suggest that the narrator is guilty of anything more than a failure to convince his friend to follow some financial advice, which does not imply that any "considerable harm" has been inflicted.



(25), Robinson's attitude to these fundamental problems remain highly ambiguous, making "Karma" especially difficult to interpret.

Taken as a whole, the narratives in the dramatic sonnets argue for a radical skepticism about the ability to interpret individual actions. Yet it is one of the paradoxes of the sonnets that the corresponding ambiguity of character and situation is revealed through a technical mastery of language and form which remains clear and accessible. The diction and syntax of a Robinson sonnet appear to be clear and precise on a first reading, and the form of the poems is nearly always that of a regular Italian sonnet with full rhymes and a clear division between octave and sestet, emphasized by the stanza break that Robinson inserts between the two. Individual phrases, such as the "ancestral shame" of "The Pity of the Leaves," may open themselves to a multiplicity of readings and the form of the poem may subtly reinforce or refine a given interpretation, but for the most part Robinson's sonnets do not seem to pose any great problems in discovering what is being said on a basic level in the same manner as a sonnet by Cummings, say, or the dense symbolism of the sonnet sequence "Altarwise by Owlright" by Dylan Thomas.

Below this apparent surface simplicity, however, lies a significant technical innovation: the adaptation of lyrical techniques and structures present a narrative or a dramatic scene. Here the confusion of genre in the term "dramatic lyric" comes to the fore, as the ambiguity in the narrative context of these sonnets is mirrored by that of their genre. The importance of this point cannot be overemphasized. Throughout his sonnets, Robinson employs traditionally lyrical structures and language in the service of narrative, in itself a notable achievement. The Italian sonnet form which Robinson employed, for example, would seem to be a unsuited to the presentation of narratives because of its relative brevity and division of parts through its rhyme scheme *abba abba cde cde*, which encourages a large amount of repetition and circularity. The traditional sonnet language, filled with euphony and ornamentation, would also seem to work against the presentation of a narrative through its emphasis on the non-denotative aspects of the language. It was

Robinson's innovation to retain all of the sonnet structures and features of language while stripping them of any lyric associations or functions. In this respect, his sonnets become modern in their break with tradition, even while they seem to retain the Italian sonnet's traditional structure. The praise of Robinson by both contemporary *vers libre* and conservative poets described at the beginning of this chapter is thereby justified on a technical level, which underscores the importance that this tension between the new and the traditional holds throughout the sonnets.

Robinson's use of rhyme, alliteration, and repetition will help to emphasize this point. The rhymes of an Italian sonnet serve two main functions, to highlight certain key terms by placing them in the rhyme positions and to divide the argument into two minor repetitions (the second quatrain of the octave and second tercet of the sestet) and the major shift or turn between the octave and the sestet. Both of these functions help to present the lyric argument, which tended to elaborate a key idea or emotional state in a circular fashion which divides into two major parts, often conceived as a problem and resolution. In Robinson's dramatic sonnets, however, the rhymes reinforce the progress of the (linear) narrative by highlighting key moments in the story, while the action itself tends to split into two parts between the octave and sestet.

The use of alliteration and repetition in the sonnet are only slightly less important to the traditional sonnet. Their function has recently been delineated in Helen Vendler's book The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets. In her discussion of alliteration, Vendler noted that Shakespeare's sonnets often contain a series of key terms that are linked through alliteration to emphasize key ideas or themes, a technique that will be referred to here as the formation of an "alliterative chain" of meaning. In a lyric sonnet, an alliterative chain would reveal the central themes or terms, but in Robinson's narratives alliterative chains tend to highlight key moments in the narrative. Similarly, the traditional English sonnet often repeats an important term in its major parts, which Vendler calls a "couplet tie," a feature that may easily be extended into an "octave-sestet tie" in an Italian sonnet. Like

an alliterative chain, this tie emphasizes an important idea in a traditional lyric sonnet. In Robinson's dramatic sonnets, however, the octave-sestet tie is used to indicate progress by changing or deepening the meaning of the repeated word, thereby emphasizing progress rather than a static repetition.

These rather technical points may be illustrated through one of Robinson's earliest yet most accomplished sonnets, "Amaryllis":

Once, when I wandered in the woods alone,  
 An old man tottered up to me and said,  
 "Come, friend, and see the grave that I have made  
 For Amaryllis." There was in the tone  
 Of his complaint such quaver and such moan  
 That I took pity on him and obeyed,  
 And long stood looking where his hands had laid  
 An ancient woman, shrunk to skin and bone.

Far out beyond the forest I could hear  
 The calling of loud progress, and the bold  
 Incessant scream of commerce ringing clear;  
 But though the trumpets of the world were glad  
 It made me lonely and it made me sad  
 To think that Amaryllis had grown old.

In terms of its action and the emotions that are invoked, this sonnet, as in the majority of the dramatic sonnets, appears slight, since all that happens is that the narrator is led to a grave and feels "sad" over the death of Amaryllis,<sup>38</sup> whose death is given significance through the contrast between her passing and the progress of the world at large. This contrast is deepened through the poem's structure, which helps to explain the sadness that is felt by the narrator. The shift from octave to sestet marks a movement from the

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<sup>38</sup> The name Amaryllis, commonly used as a generic name in Renaissance sonnets, is likely an allusion to line 68 of Milton's "Lycidas," "to sport with Amaryllis in the shade," where the word "shade" is transformed into the darkness of the grave. "Amaryllis" may thus be read as the symbolic death of a classical or pastoral poetry, which has been replaced by a progression to a "modern" or "realistic" literature that is forced to recognize both the commercial world and a realistic emphasis on aging and death.

description of the woman in the forest to the narrator's recognition of the "scream of commerce," the separation between Amaryllis and the world being revealed by their restriction to different parts of the sonnet. The rhymes also emphasize contrast and difference, either by linking words of different parts of speech ("alone" - "bone" or "hear" - "clear"), or else by emphasizing the contradictory emotions of the narrator ("bold" - "old" or "glad" - "sad"). The alliterative chains, which are created through the key words that begin with a hard "c" sound, reveal the contrast between the timid "complaint" and "quaver" of the old man and the louder "calling" and "ringing clear" of the commercial world. The repetition of the word "old," meanwhile, indicates a shift in the narrator from a shallow pity to a deeper sadness at the sonnet's end. In its first appearance, the word provides an inconspicuous description of Amaryllis's husband, but its meaning deepens in the final line, where it is allowed to carry the weight of the contrast between the "ancient woman" and the "loud [modern] progress" of the world.

To provide close readings of the technical aspects of the other sonnets quoted in this section would take another long section in itself, since almost all of them evince a similar mastery of the sonnet techniques adapted to new purposes. "Amaryllis" reveals that Robinson realized his technical innovations very early in his career. Another sonnet quoted above, "Karma," reveals the persistence of Robinson's technical mastery. The two parts of "Karma" reveal the changing nature of the protagonist's guilt, which moves from a denial of any personal responsibility in the octave ("was he to answer for the axe that fell?") to an assumption of responsibility ("the friend whom he had wrecked"). The key word "acknowledging" appears prominently as the first word of the sestet. Meanwhile, a persistent "f"-alliteration joins the key words "few," "flaws," "friend," "fell," "freezing," "fancy," "fulness," and "fished." The first three terms in this series - "flaws," "friend," and "fell" - emphasize the guilty conscience of the protagonist, while the final two, "fulness [of his heart]" and "fished [a dime for Jesus]," show his attempt to make amends. The octave-sestet tie of the sonnet lies in the repetition of the word "friend," the main

focus of the protagonist's thoughts. In both cases the friend is invoked only in relation to the possible guilt of the protagonist, in the octave as the agent of his own fall, and in the sestet as the victim of the protagonist's actions, the crucial shift in the sonnet as a whole.

At this point the argument may seem to have strayed from Tate's passage on the dramatic lyric, although it is the technical aspects of Robinson's art that justifies Tate's claim that these poems remain lyrics. More generally, the adaptation of lyric structures for narrative purposes helps to uncover a tension that runs through the sonnets as a whole, since the use of poetic forms and techniques in a way that appears to be both traditional and revolutionary, his preservation of a wide range of lyric types and his creation of a new "dramatic" or narrative sonnet. This tension between the old and new constitutes Robinson's most lasting legacy for the sonnet, since he pioneered a new-found freedom for succeeding poets. After Robinson, sonnet writers continued to adapt a variety of themes, images, and subjects from the sonnet tradition, even while they combined them with novel structures and innovations. By working within this seeming paradox of a simultaneous freedom from the restriction of sonnets to a lyric genre and allegiance to various traditional sonnet types and technical means, Robinson established himself as a leading figure for the long and distinguished line of sonnet writers that were to follow.

### Robert Frost and the Platonism of the Sonnet

In recent years, there has been an increased recognition of the importance of Frost's sonnets as a body of work, over and above the appreciation of any individual poem, as the roughly three dozen sonnets scattered throughout Frost's volumes of poetry have come to be viewed as some of his greatest lyrics. While Robert Doyle, Jr. could declare that "Frost has not acquired his fame through his sonnets" in 1962 (155), this opinion is no longer common. Instead, Frost's sonnets have garnered a growing list of admirers. Seamus Heaney, for example, has claimed that "Frost is, among other things, one of the most irresistible masters of the sonnet in the English language" ("Above the Brim," 84), while in his book On the Sonnets of Robert Frost H. A. Maxson has asserted that "Frost's sonnets are among the finest written in this century, or any century for that matter" (3). These judgements would have pleased Frost himself, who opened his first published book of poetry, A Boy's Will, with the sonnet "Into My Own" and who once wrote that he was "one who cares most for Shakespearian and Wordsworthian sonnets" (Selected Letters, 75).

However, Frost's admiration for the sonnets of Shakespeare and Wordsworth does not imply that his own sonnets are in any way mere echoes of famous sonnets from the tradition. The title of "Into My Own," a poem written in couplets but arranged on the page as an English sonnet, is in one sense a declaration of his independence as a sonnet writer. As Frost himself proclaimed in a letter to Louis Untermeyer:

I accept school just as I accept the sonnet form or any other social convention; only it seems to be in me to want to make the school as un-schoollike as possible. (Letters to Louis Untermeyer, 180)

This sentiment reappears in a later letter to Louis Untermeyer in which Frost stated that "the sonnet is the strictest form I have behaved in, and that mainly by pretending that it wasn't a sonnet" (Letters to Louis Untermeyer, 381). This wish to make the sonnet as "un-sonnetlike as possible" describes one of the most conspicuous features of the sonnets,

the unorthodoxy of their outward structure. Frost, to an extent rivaled only by E. E. Cummings and Merrill Moore in the period, alters or disregards the conventional rhyme schemes and meters associated with the sonnet. Scattered throughout the Collected Poems are sonnets written in couplets, such as "Into My Own" or "Once by the Pacific," or that approximate the *terza rima*, as does "Acquainted with the Night." Another sonnet, "Design," reduces the total number of rhymes of the Italian sonnet to three, the early "Mowing" substantially avoids the sonnet's iambics, while "The Oven Bird" invents a new rhyme scheme altogether. These sonnets are interwoven with conventional English or Italian sonnets such as "The Silken Tent" and "Range Finding," respectively, and other sonnets that playfully combine Italian octaves with an English concluding couplet, a group which includes "Putting in the Seed" and several others. Taken as a whole, these experiments establish Frost as being among the most distinctive and resourceful sonnet writers in the language.

The freedom and variety in the structure of Frost's sonnets have received only occasional notice from his critics. Janice P. Stout, one of the few commentators who has written extensively on the structure of Frost's sonnets, provides the following observation on this variety in her article "Fretting Not: Multiple Traditions of the Sonnet in the Twentieth Century":

Structurally, Frost's characteristic variant of sonnet convention was to merge the Shakespearian with the Petrarchan form, a practice that may echo Keats' wish for a more organic sonnet form (expressed in the sonnet beginning 'If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd' and in comments on the sonnet's 'pounding rhymes') or may simply reflect a disregard of the distinct merits of both forms. (26)

Stout proceeds to explore the thesis that Frost wished to develop an "organic sonnet form," in which the rhyme scheme could be varied between poems to emphasize specific images or themes. These connections between structure and argument are pursued at greater length in Stout's "Convention and Variation in Frost's Sonnets" and throughout H.

A. Maxson's book-length study *On the Sonnets of Robert Frost*. But there is also another, deeper implication of Frost's experiments beyond the specific relation of a given rhyme scheme to a sonnet's argument. The unorthodox structure of these sonnets, taken as a whole, also reinforces the radical difference between Frost's world view and important themes that have been closely associated with the sonnet from the English Renaissance onward.

The key difference that arises between the themes of Frost's sonnets and those from the Renaissance is the respective writers' connection to Platonism. This linking of the sonnet with Platonic themes has been hotly contested in the critical literature surrounding the sonnet, and the arguments on both sides will be discussed throughout this chapter. The belief that the sonnet is a particularly "Platonic" form dates back at least to the early nineteenth century, when Byron complained in his journals that sonnets "are the most puling, petrifying, stupidly platonic compositions" (*Journals*, 17-18 December 1813). This comment was made by Byron after he had read through the sonnets of Petrarch.<sup>39</sup> More recent critics have dated this connection to the first known sonnets, those of Giacomo da Lentino. Paul Oppenheimer has gone so far as to suggest that the initial impulse for creating the sonnet came from a desire to encapsulate Platonic theories of number into a poetic form:

Third, it may therefore be the case that Giacomo's training as a lawyer, plus his desire to write a type of lyric which would differ markedly from what had come before it - that would be, in a real sense, a lyric sung by the soul to the soul, in the silent music of the soul - led him, perhaps unconsciously at first, to create a structure in his sonnet that would echo those celestial and silent proportions and ratios described by Plato. In making the first European lyric intended for silent, personal performance, Giacomo constructed it according to

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<sup>39</sup> For a summary of recent connections between Platonic thought filtered through neo-Platonic sources and the sonnets of Petrarch, see Michael G. Spiller's *The Development of the Sonnet*. An argument for the importance of Platonic themes in Michelangelo's sonnets has been advanced by Leishman, a critic who is otherwise apprehensive about this connection, pp. 121-124.



the architecture of the soul and of heaven, and set it to the music of the spheres.  
("The Origin of the Sonnet," 304)

The early influence of Plato's thought on Italian sonneteers, it has been argued in the growing critical literature that addresses this topic, reappeared in the various sonnets of Shakespeare, Sidney, and Spenser (among others) and thus became entrenched in the tradition of sonnet writing in English.<sup>40</sup> A fuller discussion of the specific nature of this influence will be given in the discussion below. Here it will suffice to observe that the large number of such studies indicates that there has been a long and complex reading of the sonnet as a vehicle for exploring Platonic themes, one which existed almost a century before Frost began to write his sonnets and which continues unabated to this day.

Frost himself would likely have been sensitive to this influence on the sonnet, since he remained highly aware of the importance of Platonic themes throughout his career. His critics have long argued for an "anti-Platonic" strain in Frost's thought, with Robert Penn Warren noting that the term "anti-Platonic" is a common one when speaking of the broad trends of Frost's poetry (285). Lawrance Thompson has summarized this argument as follows:

[Frost] has frequently suggested that he is particularly wary of hydra-headed Platonic idealism and of all those glorious risks taken by any who boldly arrive at transcendental definitions. (Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost 28)

This identification of "Platonic idealism" was not made lightly. In his biography of Frost, Thompson notes that Frost had a considerable background in classical language and thought, having studied Plato in the original Greek at Dartmouth College (I, 138) and becoming acquainted with the philosophy of Plato very early in his career. The label of

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<sup>40</sup> In the highly contentious debate over Platonic influences in the sonnet, J. B. Leishman, for example, argues at length for a fundamental difference between the treatment of love in Shakespeare's sonnets and Michelangelo's (121-124). This argument is criticized by Jean Fuzier, who exclaims that "on en reste pantois" ("one is left stunned") at points of the argument (3).

'anti-Platonic' or 'non-Platonic' was also used by Frost himself in a letter written to Louis Untermeyer:

My philosophy, a non-Platonic but none-the-less a tenable one, I hold more or less unbroken from youth to age. (Selected Letters, 482)

In speaking of Frost's themes, the invocation of Plato is justified by Frost's own use of this terminology, which he made after what appears to be a substantial knowledge of Plato's work.

However, once this and other references to Frost's "non-Platonic" ideas are noted, it must be admitted that they contain a fundamental ambiguity. Although Plato's name is evoked several times in the letters, Frost never specifies what he understands Plato's doctrines to be, nor does he refer to any particular argument or dialogue. Moreover, Frost's comments on Plato are always brief and general, which opens them to a wide range of interpretations. Although Frost refers to himself as being a "non-Platonist" in the quotation above and elsewhere, it remains unclear what, precisely, he means by this term. As a result of this ambiguity, the term "non-Platonist" becomes highly contentious, since any definite meaning that is attached to Plato's doctrines in order to argue for Frost's "non-Platonism" quickly turns into pure speculation.

In spite of this important reservation, Frost's declaration of his "non-Platonism" will prove useful in reading his sonnets. Traditionally, the term "Platonism" has tended to refer either to a doctrine of Platonic love that is expressed in early sonnet sequences or to a belief that the specific structure of the sonnet is somehow related to one of the various mathematical proportions or ratios that are described in the dialogues. In both these aspects, Frost's use of the sonnet differs significantly from those that were common in the Renaissance. In his love sonnets, Frost describes a view of love that rewrites the Platonic notion of love's "ascent" towards an ideal, while his view of poetic structure in general dissents from the Platonic notion that certain ratios or structures in a poem could reflect a greater order in the cosmos at large. These key differences will be elucidated

and defended in the sections that follow by both a theoretical discussion of the Platonic themes invoked and a close reading of the major sonnets. This discussion will overlook the handful of sonnets that Frost wrote towards the end of his career on political or occasional topics, but the majority of his sonnets do advance themes of love or uses of poetic form that may be read profitably against these aspects of Platonism.

Given the frequency with which these Platonic notions of love and order are invoked in the early sonnet, it is hard to believe that Frost would not have recognized them and used them as a foundation from which to advance his own themes. Several of his references to Plato quoted below suggest that he did in fact recognize these aspects of the early sonnet. But even if he did not, these differences do help to delineate several key themes of his work. This is the fact that ultimately gives authority to the exploration of Frost's "non-Platonism." Whether or not Frost would have understood this term to refer to his view of love or poetic structure, or whether he believed that it applied to his sonnets at all, his work in the sonnet form does quarrel with various aspects of Platonism as it has been commonly understood. The label of "non-Platonic" may act more as an inspiration or clue than as a reliable guide in the discussion that follows, but nevertheless it is a term that will lead us directly to the themes and poetic theories that underlie his work.

The invocation of the Platonism associated with the sonnet also helps to suggest one of the reasons why Frost was so attracted to the sonnet. The roughly thirty sonnets that appear in Frost's The Poetry of Robert Frost contain a surprisingly large number of Frost's important lyrics, as H. A. Maxson has suggested (5). As Robert Faggens argues in Robert Frost and the Challenge of Darwin, Frost tended to reserve the sonnet form "to make some of his largest cosmological suggestions" (46). In choosing to express himself through the sonnet, Frost employed a poetical form that would invoke a multitude of famous poems from the tradition that could then act as convenient foils to his own views. A sonnet about love that quarrels with the declarations made in one of Shakespeare's

sonnets can more sharply define its own theme through this contrast. Frost's sonnets often allude to the familiar conceits of their Renaissance counterparts in this manner. Richard Wilbur, at the end of a discussion of the poem "Birches," describes this poetical method as Frost's facility with "conversing timelessly with a great poem out of the English tradition" and his "contending with [a previous] poem in favor of another version" of reality ("Poetry and Happiness," 114). The sonnet form, Wilbur suggests, allowed Frost to play his own themes on love and poetic form against a recognizable tradition, thereby granting them a clarity and depth that they might not otherwise have attained.

### **Frost and the Platonic Love Sonnet**

The sonnet, as Anthony Hecht has noted, "is still firmly associated with love" even today ("The Sonnet: Ruminations on Form, Sex, and History," 141), a result, in part, of the predominance of this subject in the early sonnet sequences of Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare, among others. The view of love that emerges in many of these sonnets may be broadly described as "Platonic," although a long line of criticism that questions the role of Platonism in the sonnet reveals that great care must be used when applying this label. For example, Thomas P. Roche, in his study Petrarch and the English Sonnet Sequence, has argued that the term "Platonic" may be misleading, since there have been no detailed examinations of the relative influence of Platonic and neo-Platonic ideas in the sonnet (72), while J. B. Leishman has declared that any use of the term "Platonism" must be placed in quotation marks whenever it is used with regard to the sonnet because, in his view, there are fundamental differences between the beliefs of Plato and the sonneteers (149-177). C. S. Lewis, meanwhile, has flatly denied the influence of Platonic ideas of love during the sonnet's early history (Allegory of Love, 5). Despite these qualifications and denials, however, there have been persistent attempts to link the sonnet to Platonism, lines of argument that will be sketched out here in order to provide a counterpoint to the major themes that appear throughout Frost's sonnets.

In his 1981 essay "Le Banquet de Shakespeare: Les Sonnets et le Platonisme Authentique" ("The Symposium of Shakespeare: The Sonnets and an Authentic Platonism"),<sup>41</sup> the French critic Jean Fuzier has provided a relatively recent attempt to establish the link between Plato's view of love and the common themes of the love sonnet. Fuzier locates "[les] traits caractéristiques du platonisme authentique" ("the characteristic traits of an authentic Platonism," 4) in passages such as the following from The Symposium:

This is the right way of approaching or being initiated into the mysteries of love, to begin with examples of beauty in this world, and using them as steps to ascend continually with that absolute beauty as one's aim, from one instance of physical beauty to two and from two to all, then from physical beauty to moral beauty, and from moral beauty to the beauty of knowledge, until from knowledge of various kinds one arrives at the supreme knowledge whose sole object is that absolute beauty, and knows at last what absolute beauty is. (94, translated by Walter Hamilton)

It is "l'ascension platonicienne vers l'apex où se confondront le Bien et le Beau suprêmes" ("the Platonic ascension towards the apex where the supreme Good and Beautiful will merge," 6), which for Fuzier constitutes the key element of Platonic love. And, while this ascension looks upward towards these and other ideas, the initial physical passion of the lover remains "brulant ainsi dans l'étape du désir physique et de sa satisfaction qui n'est pas excluë, même s'il n'en est guère fait de cas" ("thus burning in the stage of physical desire and its satisfaction, which is nevertheless not excluded, even if it is hardly valued," 6). The Platonic love which finds expression in the sonnet may thus be characterized by its ascension towards ultimate ideals which are seen to be "hors de la sphère charnelle" ("outside the carnal sphere," 6), although the initial physical passion of the lover remains present in some form or other.

This last point, that the lower physical desires are not excluded in the Platonic view of love, needs to be emphasized, since it undermines several of the denials that

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<sup>41</sup> All translations from the French in this section are, unless otherwise noted, my own.

Platonic love plays a role in the history of the sonnet. This apparent ambiguity is in fact fundamental to Plato's views of love and his world-view as a whole, since in general no Platonic idea (*eidōs*) exists wholly in a realm separated from its manifestations in this world. This ambiguity, ignored in many readings of Platonism by literary scholars, has been a common observation in philosophical interpretations of the dialogues. It first appears in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, where the Platonists are distinguished by their belief that "there is an entity [*eidōs*] corresponding to every substance with a common name, and existing apart from it both in this transient world and in the eternal world of heavenly bodies" (75). Similar readings may be found by modern interpreters such as Leo Strauss, who observes that in the dialogues "ideas are presented as 'separated' from the things which are what they are by participating in an idea" (120). The way in which an *eidōs* and thing are "separated," however, remains complex and unclear because:

the connection between 'idea' and 'nature' appears in *The Republic* from the facts that 'the idea of justice' is called 'that which is just by nature' (501b2) and the ideas in contradistinction to the things which are not ideas are said to be 'in nature' (597b5-e4). (120).

Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his summary of readings of Plato's *eidōs*, has criticized the simplified line of interpretation that would separate the world and *eidōs* as follows:

With a persistence bordering on the absurd, the prevailing form of interpretation in which Plato's philosophy has been passed on to us has advocated the two-world theory, that is, the complete separation of the paradigmatic world of ideas from the ebb and flow of change in our experience of the sense-perceived world. Idea and reality are made to look like two worlds separated by a chasm, and the interrelationship of the two remains obscure. (156)<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> For Gadamer's full discussion of the status of Plato's *eidōs*, see pp. 158-160 of his essay. In light of these comments, it is interesting to read C. S. Lewis's argument that Plato's view of love "is a ladder in the strictest sense; you reach the higher rungs by leaving the lower ones behind. The original object of human love - who, incidentally, is not a woman - has simply fallen out of sight before the soul arrives at the spiritual object" (*Allegory of Love*, 5), and hence could not have influenced Renaissance love sonnets.

In opposition to this "absurd" persistence, Gadamer proposes an abolition of this chasm by arguing for the "participation"<sup>43</sup> of an object in its idea (191), a theme which is taken up by Michael Schofield in his entry on Plato in the Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

Unlike other manifestations of beauty the Form of the Beautiful is something eternal, whose beauty is not qualified in place or time or relation or respect. It is just the one sort of thing it is, all on its own, whereas other things that are subject to change and decay are beautiful by *participation* in the Form. (412, my italics).

Once again, the "Form of the Beautiful" is ambiguous in its position because it exists both not "in place or time," and yet it manifests itself in timely objects - that is, it is in some way located both in and outside of the familiar world of objects.

The ambiguous setting of the Platonic *eidos*, which exists both in the world and outside it, is important, since it may be seen to be analogous to a perceived division between the beauties of this world and the "absolute beauty" which crowns the Platonic view of love. In the passage from The Symposium quoted above, it is only through the examples of worldly beauty that one may ascend to the highest "absolute" beauty, even if this ideal in some fashion lies beyond any specific manifestation. This ambiguity is often presented within the sonnets themselves. It sometimes<sup>44</sup> reveals itself in a willingness to

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<sup>43</sup> Gadamer's use of this term is vague, in part because his essay, "Idea and Reality in Plato's Timaeus," moves from a direct criticism of the "two-world theory" in its opening paragraphs into a close reading of key passages from the Timaeus, and then into the epistemological question of how one can know of an object through its idea. His insistence on the term "participation" and the general thrust of his essay, however, show that he is at pains to avoid any easy separation of *eidos* and object.

<sup>44</sup> Most of the citations regarding the importance in Platonic love in this argument, both for and against, were written with respect to Shakespeare's sonnets. However, it is important to realize that the other major Renaissance sonneteers had greater access to Plato's dialogues than did Shakespeare. Sidney, as S. K. Heninger, Jr., has argued, almost assuredly read Plato in the Latin translation of Serranus ("Sidney and Serranus' Plato," 148), while Spenser, according to Donna Gibbs, likely read Plato in the original Greek (Spenser's Amoretti: A Critical Study, 141). Mohinimohan Bhattacharje has found evidence of "direct borrowing from Plato" in the Amoretti (Platonic Ideas in Spenser,

use real men or women ("real" at least within the fiction of the sequence) as a vehicle for the ascent towards an "absolute" beauty, or in the refusal to view the beloved separately from the ideals which he or she seems to exemplify. This obscurity in Plato's doctrine may also lead to interesting choices in imagery or diction, as in Shakespeare's famous Sonnet 29:

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

In the first eight lines, the lamentations of the speaker are directed towards worldly ends: appearances, social status and contacts, and talents which would hide other defects. In the third quatrain, however, the invocation of the beloved allows the speaker to ascend metaphorically from the "sullen earth" to the higher realm of "heaven's gate," bringing consolations which exceed any worldly goods, even the "state of kings." Yet it is significant that these heavenly consolations are described in the couplet as "wealth," a term which denotes a purely worldly value without transcendental implications. Even though love brings a "wealth" which is greater than any mundane worth, the terms of valuation are still those of the lower world which was only seemingly left behind. The

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195). Fuzier, meanwhile, argues that Shakespeare also borrowed directly from Plato in his sonnets, citing as evidence several parallel images from *The Symposium* and Ben Jonson's comment that Shakespeare had a "little Latin, and less Greek" ("*Le Banquet de Shakespeare*," 8-11).



speaker's love in this poem thus includes an ascent to and a celebration of a greater "state" as is demanded by the Platonic view of love, but this "arising" speaks to the demands of the "sullen earth," making the comparison in the couplet possible.

This outline of Platonic love, even though cursory, is important to the sonnet in a number of ways. First, it defines the doctrine in a manner that is more philosophically accurate and helps to establish the presence of the doctrine within early sonnets. It also formulates Plato's views in a way that will reveal the complexity of the view of love that emerges in Frost's poetry. Frost dissents from this Platonic theory of love time and again in his love sonnets. The Platonic view of love, as interpreted here, calls for the use of beautiful objects of this world to inspire an "arising" from the physical world to the realm of the *eidos*. Following this model, Frost will continually employ concrete images to evoke both an "actual" world of experience and that of less tangible abstractions and ideals. However, in a reversal of the established hierarchy, he will argue that the world of experience is the more valuable of the two realms. Unlike Shakespeare, whose beloved may lead him to ascend metaphorically to a "heaven's gate" which is believed to be greater than "the sullen earth," Frost in his sonnets affirms the value of the world of fact and experience. As Frost himself asserted in a letter to Louis Untermeyer:

Then again I was not the Platonist Robinson was. By Platonist I mean one who believes what we have here is an imperfect copy of what is in heaven. The woman you have is an imperfect copy of some woman in heaven or in someone else's bed. Many of the world's greatest - maybe all of them - have been ranged on that romantic side. I am philosophically opposed to having one Iseult for my vocation and another for my avocation. (Selected Letters, 462)

Phrased in Platonic terms, a Frostian lover will not strive to ascend towards an "absolute beauty" or "heaven" as his ideal, but will choose to remain among the "lower" things in the belief that they are more worthy of his attentions.

This preference will be familiar to readers of Frost from a variety of poems outside of the sonnets. One of his most famous works, "Birches," tells of a boy who

climbs trees only to have them bend back down to earth, thus implicitly arguing for his brand of non-Platonism:

May no fate willfully misunderstand me  
 And half grant what I wish and snatch me away  
 Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:  
 I don't know where it's likely to go better.  
 I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,  
 And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk  
*Toward* heaven, till the tree could bear no more,  
 But dipped its top and set me down again. (ll. 50-57, original italics)<sup>45</sup>

When Frost advances this theme in his sonnets, however, his non-Platonism gains in significance through an implicit comparison to the doctrine of love found in the Platonic Renaissance sonnet. Frost will frequently call attention to this distinction throughout his sonnets by transforming images familiar from the English Renaissance to support his own views rather than the original Platonism for which they were developed. In fact, there are any number of choices in diction, imagery, turn in the argument, or structure that may be read in light of his denial of Platonism, so that the devices familiar from English Renaissance sonnets act as a type of standard which lend Frost's deviations their meaning.

"Mowing," one of four sonnets from Frost's first book *A Boy's Will*, provides an excellent example of a sonnet which derives much of its meaning, both in its form and imagery, from the larger context of Frost's anti-Platonism. The structure of the poem is highly irregular. "Mowing" is written in a loose iambic pentameter line which freely adds unstressed syllables to many of the poetic feet. The rhyme scheme, which runs *abcabdec dfegfg*, also deviates from convention by containing the same number of rhymes as an English sonnet without forming any obvious patterns. The "turn" in the

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<sup>45</sup> See Richard Wilbur's essay "Poetry and Happiness," p. 13, for a discussion of these lines as being "in fact an answer to Shelley's kind of unbounded neo-Platonic aspiration" in his elegy "Adonais."

sonnet's argument is also problematic. The colon at the end of line 8 seems to divide the poem into a conventional octave and the sestet, an impression that is reinforced by the introduction of the important concepts of "truth" and "fact" in the poem's final six lines. However, this turn is extremely subtle and is offset by a second syntactical break, in which a period seems to announce a turn between lines six and seven.<sup>46</sup> Taken together, these variations seem to argue for some affinity with the traditional sonnet, although the exact nature of this relationship appears to be rather obscure.<sup>47</sup> The ambiguity of the poem's form is mirrored in its genre, as "Mowing" begins as a pastoral, which is not usually associated with the sonnet. It is only with an image in line ten ("the earnest love that laid the swale in rows") that "Mowing" begins to hint that it is a love poem, a suggestion that is reinforced in the poem's final phrase, "left the hay to make," with its play on the colloquialism "making hay," meaning courtship.

Once it is realized that "Mowing" is an irregular love sonnet, however, the deep anti-Platonic imagery of the poem can be seen throughout its imagery and structure. In contrast to a Platonic idealization of an "absolute beauty," for example, Frost will argue for the importance of the "fact," a concept that exists only with reference to the physical world, through his central image of a "long scythe whispering to the ground" (as opposed to an ascension toward heaven). Thus "Mowing" opens with a sound "beside" (alongside, not above) "the wood," that of the scythe which may then whisper of "the heat of the sun" - that is, not about the sun, but solely about its effect on the earth. In the final six lines, this imagery continues with the laying of "the swale in rows" (horizontally), the "feeble-pointed spikes of flowers / Pale orchises" ("feeble" orchises cannot act as a symbol of a transcendent reality, as a rose or lotus flower might), and a lowly "bright green snake." A

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<sup>46</sup> This fact was first noticed by Janice P. Stout ("Convention and Variation in Frost's Sonnets," 35).

<sup>47</sup> These deviations were great enough for Maxson to declare that "Mowing," while "sonnet-like," is in fact "an early attempt at a sonnet that failed" (8).

distrust of anything beyond the physical realm is also implied in Frost's characterization of a dream separated from fact in lines seven and eight:

It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,  
Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf. . .

A fanciful "fay or elf" cannot conform to a "truth" or "fact" and so it must be rejected. The irregularities in the meter, rhyme scheme, and the subtlety of the turn may thus be seen to signal the poem's deviation from a conventional assumption of a Platonic love in the sonnet. Just as the structure of "Mowing" differs from that of a typical sonnet, so its themes deviate from the familiar, broadly Platonic view of love associated with the form.

However, it would be wrong to conclude that Frost's vision here rejects anything other than material facts or physical objects, much in the same way that it is simplistic to conclude that a Platonic ideal leaves behind any relationship to the lower, natural world. Instead, the penultimate line of "Mowing" argues for a complex synthesis of dream and fact, the metaphysical and physical: "the fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows." Robert Penn Warren has provided an excellent gloss on this line in his essay "The Themes of Robert Frost":

That is, the action and the reward cannot be defined separately, man must fulfill himself, in action, and the dream must not violate the real. . . the interpenetration of the two worlds, in varying ranges of significance, is itself the theme of these poems. (291, 300-1)

In this reading, Frost may be said to agree with a Platonic view of reality insofar as he posits both a world of "dream" and a world of "fact" roughly analogous to the ideal and natural realms in Plato which interpenetrate one another. But though Frost remains sensitive to the demands of both worlds throughout his love sonnets, here and elsewhere he will demonstrate a definite preference for the latter. It is the "fact" that tends to dominate the imagery of his love sonnets, including "Mowing," and which steadfastly denies any abstraction that would separate itself from the physical world, however tentatively, or that would even demand to be seen as "higher" or more worthy in itself.

Frost's preference for the world of "fact" over the world of "dream" is shown in "A Dream Pang," the second love sonnet included in A Boy's Will. The poem begins as a dream in which the speaker spies his beloved from behind "low boughs" after an apparent argument, since the beloved believes that "he [the speaker] must seek me would he undo the wrong." The speaker then suffers a "sweet pang" in refraining from interrupting the beloved, a common declaration from the English Renaissance sonnet that usually denotes the beloved's cruelty and power,<sup>48</sup> but which here describes the pain resulting from the inability to effect a reconciliation. The speaker's account ends with the declaration that the two lovers will remain separate, a remarkably realistic and prosaic conclusion to what is, in effect, a dream vision. As in "Mowing," the dream is entirely conditioned by real situations and events. Yet even this questioning of the "dream" is not enough, as Frost is not content to let it remain as such. The final couplet of the sonnet revises the vision as follows:

But 'tis not true that thus I dwelt aloof,  
For the wood wakes, and you are here for proof.

"A Dream Pang" is thus interesting for providing a "dream" that is indistinguishable from a realistic scene<sup>49</sup> and for believing that it must balance even this vision with a more accurate version of the events, an indication of the depth of his preference for the real or physical realm.

"Meeting and Passing" continues Frost's preference for the world of "fact" in a subtler fashion. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the poem is its prosaic quality, in

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<sup>48</sup> See, for example, the line "sweet is the death that taketh end by love" at the end of Surrey's "Love that doth raine and live within my thought." Petrarch in England lists *Astrophil and Stella* 38 (with its "new assault" conducted "in sweeteth strength, so sweetly skilled withal") and Spenser's *Amoretti* 57 ("Sweet warrior when shall I have peace with you") as other prominent examples of a "sweet pang" of love.

<sup>49</sup> There is a play throughout the poem on the definition of "dream" as a "wish" or "ideal." It is ironic that a reconciliation is effected not in the speaker's dream, but only in the waking world.

which one of Frost's greatest love sonnets is produced out of what is seemingly an event almost too slight to mention. Against a transcendent vision of an "absolute beauty" that is the "sole aim" of Platonic love, Frost presents a brief meeting between two lovers who stare at their footprints and then walk in the direction from which the other had arrived.<sup>50</sup> The implicit anti-Platonism of this action, which remains tied to the real world without any hint of transcendence, is further argued by Frost's image of a descent (the speaker had just went "down the hill along the wall," they are joined through their "footprints," and as the conversation proceeds the beloved smiles at "something down there" in the dust), which may be read against Plato's emphasis on the ascending notion of love, and in the connection between the two lovers, which is ultimately solidified through their passing through the space that the other had occupied, a purely physical act with no pretensions to being transcendent or idealized.

The celebration of the physical world in the poem is so complete that there is no mention of a "dream" to balance the "earthly" details of the encounter, though the evocation of mathematics and the patterns do introduce a level of abstraction into the poem, establishing a level of reality that is not purely physical. The mathematical imagery begins in the speaker's comment that the lovers are "less than two / But more than one as yet," an allusion to the institution of marriage that will eventually unite them. The mathematical references also occur in the word "figure," which, as H. A. Maxson has noted, "could be either a numerical figure or a linguistic one" (38), and in the "decimal" that the "you" of the poem points off in the dust. Added to these references is a play of number in the diction, in which key words ("down," "hill," "met," "dust," and "passed") are repeated twice, and in which terms are balanced by their opposites ("down" - "up"; "great" - "small"; "more" - "less"; "I" - "you";<sup>51</sup> "meeting" - "passing."). The emphasis on

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<sup>50</sup> This seeming triviality led Randall Jarrell to refer to the sonnet as an "understatement beyond statement" ("To the Laodiceans," 60).

<sup>51</sup> It is significant that the pronouns "I" and "you" each occur five times in the poem.

pairs may also be found in the sonnet's form. Frost begins "Meeting and Passing" with an Italian-style octave *abba abba* with its two rhymes, yet ends it with an English-style couplet which emphasizes the importance of the concept of pairing:

Afterward I went past what you had passed  
Before we met, and you what I had passed.

Significantly, this couplet, as Randall Jarrell noticed, "does not rhyme, but only repeats" ("To the Laodicians," 60). It also contains a pair of homonyms ("past" and "passed") in its penultimate line and has each of the lovers repeat the other's actions, making them into reflections of one another, a linked pair rather than two individuals. As important as is this abstract principle of introducing actions, words, and rhymes in pairs, however, Frost's judgement of its ultimate worth is implied in the action of the beloved, who "pointed the decimal off with one deep thrust." Within the terms of the poem, the mathematical abstractions are rejected in favour of the lovers' more tangible physical union, and the plays with language and structure are, ultimately, seen to be secondary to the physical actions and emotions described.

"Putting in the Seed" may be the clearest example of Frost's wish to shift the love sonnet from a Platonic ideal to an earthly realm, as well as an admission of his debt to previous openly Platonic love sonnets to provide a counterpoint to his declarations and images. The octave of "Putting in the Seed" contains many of Frost's favourite "earthly" images within a rural setting against which are played commonplace events. The fallen petals, the act of burial (presumably composting), and the mixture of conventionally beautiful images ("apple blossoms") with less beautiful ones ("smooth bean and wrinkled pea") mitigate against any attempt to associate the poem with an ascension towards an "ideal" or "absolute" beauty. Instead, the sonnet looks downward, both in the sense of celebrating a variety of particular objects and actions (Plato's "many") and in its physical act of burial of the apple blossoms.

It is in its sestet that "Putting in the Seed" grows to a complexity equal to that of Frost's greatest sonnets. The first word of line nine is "slave," which evokes one of the favourite images of Renaissance sonneteers to describe their relation to their beloved,<sup>52</sup> who was seen to stand above through their ideal beauty. Just as the Renaissance lover is a "slave" to his passion for his beloved, so Frost's speaker is a "slave to the springtime passion of the earth." A correspondence is thus established between the subservience of the courtly lover, which is offered as a proof of his devotion, and the absorption of Frost's speaker, which also threatens to absorb the "you" of the poem.<sup>53</sup> Line nine marks a radical shift in language, which suddenly shifts again in line ten. Here the capitalization of the key terms "Love" and "Putting in the Seed," in itself very unusual in a Frost poem, turns the sonnet towards allegory, in which these terms of procreation are extended beyond the merely human or vegetative to both and, by implication, to any type of generation. The word "burns," which conjoins these two phrases, introduces yet another common image from the Renaissance love sonnet, which suggests the desperate lover "burning" in passion<sup>54</sup>, drawing yet another parallel between the emotions of Frost's speaker and his Renaissance predecessors.

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<sup>52</sup> Anthony Hecht, following a suggestion first made by C. S. Lewis, has provided an interesting history of this imagery. This image was derived from the Italian sonnet, in which "the lover, [as] Lewis goes on to explain, addresses his beloved as *midons*, 'which etymologically represents not 'my lady' but 'my lord,'" so that "the posture of a lover toward his lady was meant to be identical with that of a vassal toward his lord" ("The Sonnet: Ruminations on Form, Sex, and History," 140). Hecht cites the opening of Shakespeare's sonnet 57 as a clear example of this image: "Being your slave, what should I do but tend / Upon the hours and times of your desire?"

<sup>53</sup> C. S. Lewis gives an etymological explanation for this common image of the courtly lover as a slave: "The characteristics of the Troubadour poetry have been repeatedly described. . . There is a service of love closely modelled on the service which a feudal vassal owes to his lord. The lover is the lady's 'man.' He addresses her as *midons*, which etymologically represents not 'my lady' but 'my lord.' The whole attitude has been rightly described as 'a feudalisation of love'" (*Allegory of Love*, 2).

<sup>54</sup> *Petrarch in England* lists Wyatt's "Go, burning sighs," Spenser's *Amoretti* 30, and Alabaster's sonnet 69 as prominent examples of this image (111-115). See also *Amoretti*



Taken together, these allusions to the plight of the Renaissance sonnet lover and the brief invocation of allegory push "Putting in the Seed" towards the universal, in which the abstracted and idealized love felt by the speaker transcend time by being akin to the Platonic lovers of the English Renaissance, even if this love is playfully applied across species and genera to both vegetative and human procreation.<sup>55</sup> In the sonnet's final four lines, however, the images again become specific and concrete. While the "birth" of the seedling that concludes the poem may be charged with more meaning than any of the preceding images, it is nevertheless closer to them in kind than to the abstractions or familiar sonnet imagery of lines nine and ten. In this swerve away from allegory, Frost is able to mingle the specific and the abstract, the worlds of "fact" and "dream," in a way that appears to privilege the concrete fact or event over its universal and less tangible implications, to celebrate a capitalized "Love" not because it exists as an abstraction existing apart from nature, but because its effects may be seen in a myriad of real actions and natural births.

Frost's statements about the "earthly" nature of love culminate in "The Silken Tent," which contains both the most complete and subtle declaration of his anti-Platonic stance. Before discussing this sonnet, however, there are two other notable love sonnets that need to be considered, "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same" and "The Master Speed." Although the themes of each of these poems are consistent with Frost's other love sonnets, each varies significantly from the other love sonnets in imagery or subject matter, thus helping to establish the range and imaginative freedom with which Frost approached the love sonnet.

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32 ("force of fervent heat" and "all these flames in which I fry") for a further example.  
<sup>55</sup> It is strange that Elaine Barry, in her otherwise illuminating discussion of this poem (perhaps the best in the critical literature), should view the capitalization as "fix[ing] the theme of human sexuality clearly," since capitals in poetry tend to push terms towards their most general meanings and implications.

Of the two poems, "The Master Speed" seems to differ most from the sonnets discussed to this point. The poem was composed to celebrate the marriage of Irma, Frost's daughter, and its public function may have led to the flattering imagery of the opening lines, where love is praised as a type of cosmic force with imagery that rivals the grandest images of the Renaissance. Just as Shakespeare's "sweet love remembered" allows him to ascend to "heaven's gate," so love in these lines is seen as cosmic in its scope, having a "speed far greater" than "wind or water," one which can "climb / Back up a stream of radiance to the sky" and even "up the stream of time." These statements contain Frost's only praise of love as a completely transcendent motion, which overcomes both space and time in an upward motion that recalls Plato's great image from The Symposium. Yet, as is typical in Frost's poem, the subsequent advice given is to enjoy "the power of standing still," a very human and modest response to the cosmic potential accorded to love in the sonnet, one that almost seems to negate the power that is being extolled.

This elaborate praise of the power of love does not seem in keeping with the turn in the argument, and a glance at the poem's sources only complicates this incongruity. Frost likely intended these first eight lines to echo Milton's sonnet written on his blindness, which ends:

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."

Frost's rephrasing of Milton's sonnet may have been an attempt to lend weight and authority to his advice to the newlyweds or to give an example of how a sonnet may run "up the stream of time," although it raises an important interpretive problem, since the advice dictated to a blind and despairing Milton may not be quite so appropriate at a

wedding. However, this attempt to mediate the seemingly unbounded power of love does point to a conflict between this and Frost's other sonnets, in particular the difficulty he had in praising love in unbounded, Platonic terms while trying to exhort the lovers to actions more consistent with a less exalted view of love. The remaining lines of the sonnet fail to resolve this difficulty, as the theme shifts to a celebration of the union accorded by marriage. The final image of "The Master Speed" expresses a hope that the lovers will live "forevermore / Together wing to wing and oar to oar" and is derived not from Milton's sonnets but from Spenser's "Prothalamion," with its central image "two Swannes of goodly hewe" that resemble those "which through the Skie draw Venus silver Teeme" (63) while swimming down the Thames. Hence the sonnet ends with an appropriate image of love and faithfulness, although it avoids addressing the problem of the extent to which its opening imagery may be reconciled with the view of love that is elaborated in Frost's other sonnets.

"Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same," meanwhile, stands out among Frost's love sonnets in its refusal to declare itself openly as a poem about love. Even "Mowing" contained puns and references to love, but only the intimate tone and the admiration of the "he" of the sonnet (who is almost certainly Adam<sup>56</sup>) for Eve mark the later poem as being among Frost's love sonnets. The explicit theme of the poem would seem to be a metaphysical one shared with "The Aim Was Song": the ability of human speech to add an "oversound," or overtone, to a non-human sound that would otherwise remain alien to it, what "The Aim Was Song" describes as turning an "untaught" nature into something that "man came to blow. . . right." Instead, "Never Again Would Birds' Song" becomes what Judith Oster has called "one of the finest love poems we have"

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<sup>56</sup> A. H. Maxson has suggested that the "he" could also be God or the poet (107-8). The first suggestion, however, would seem to be contradicted by the refusal to capitalize the word "himself" later in the line, the second by the fact that no poet could claim the first-hand knowledge of birds' song in the garden of Eden that occurs in the poem.

(246) primarily through its consistency with Frost's other love sonnets in its emphasis on the earthly over the transcendent.

"Never Again Would Birds' Song" begins in the Garden of Eden, with Adam's admiration that the "daylong voice of Eve" has added "an oversound, / Her tone of meaning but without the words" to the songs of the birds. The influence of Eve on the birds is believed to be final, and Adam speculates that "probably it never would be lost." What is surprising about these statements is that, in spite of the initial setting in "all the garden round" (Eden), there is no mention at all of any divine presence in either the birds' song or Eve's speech. Instead, the influence of Eve is such that it can survive unchanged into the "woods" (post-lapsarian world),<sup>57</sup> implying that it is an entirely human influence that is unaffected by the fall into what Richard Poirer has called "a habitable world and a human history" (*Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, 170). This point becomes clearer when the sonnet is compared to the morning hymn in Book V of *Paradise Lost*, a possible source of inspiration, part of which runs:

. . . ye Birds  
 That singing up to Heaven Gate ascend,  
 Bear on your wings and in your notes his praise;  
 Yee that in Waters glide, and yee that walk  
 The Earth, and stately tread, or lowly creep;  
 Witness if I be silent, Morn or Even,  
 To Hill, or Valley, Fountain, or fresh shade  
 Made vocal by my Song, and taught his praise. (ll. 197-204)

The description of Eve's "daylong voice" and her ability to influence birds' song, as well as the belief of Eve's influence on the birds (which were in some way "made vocal by [her] song") in "Never Again Would Birds' Song" may have been first suggested by these

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<sup>57</sup> As Judith Oster has noted: "Did we not know the short term of [Adam and Eve's] stay in the garden, we might be tempted to say this is an older Adam telling us that, after so long, the voices still remained 'crossed.' But we know how little time was spent in the garden, and we notice that not only has time extended beyond the time of Adam in Eden but so has [the] setting changed from garden to woods" (246). See also the comments of Seamus Heaney below.

lines, making the secular nature of Frost's sonnet even more pronounced. Whereas Milton's Eve tries to exhort the birds to "praise him," Frost suggests that Eve's influence on the birds is accidental, occurring only "when call or laughter carried [her voice] aloft." And while Eve's hymn in Paradise Lost is inseparable from the devotion appropriate to her unfallen state, her influence in Frost's poem is such that it survives the loss of Eden and continues unabated, and is thus an entirely human or fallen one.

Adam's admiration of Eve's influence, which he "would declare" in the sonnet's opening line, may thus be read in light of the other love sonnets as a praise of the "fact" of Eve's eloquence and persistence over the ideals that were lost in the fall, or of the tone of the human voice of Eve over the presumed divine matter of her speech. Seamus Heaney seems to allude to this distinction when he writes that:

The poem's argument, as I read it, ought to lead to the conclusion that the changed note of the birds' song should be an occasion of joy, since it happened in Paradise and was effected by the paradisaical voice of Eve. But that logic is complicated by the actual note of repining that we hear in the line 'Never again would birds' song be the same,' a note that comes from the fact that we are now beyond Eden, at a great distance from time and space. ("Above the Brim," 79-80)

The "repining" that Heaney has detected may be the result of the persistent emphasis in the sonnet on the "earthly" nature of this influence which excludes the godly, paradisaical notes of Eve's voice that must have once been present. Phrased in the terms presented by Frost's other love poetry, "Never Again Would Birds' Song" thus exalts the world of "fact" over anything that may exist above it, strikingly pointing the reader towards the earthly and human rather than the heavenly or divine.

While "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same" introduces a note of repining in its bridging of Paradise and the post-lapsarian world, "The Silken Tent" is much more hopeful in discovering a relationship between earth and heaven. This sonnet, the acme of Frost's achievement in the love sonnet, is remarkable for what Elaine Barry has called its "Elizabethan sense of formal beauty" (95), its balance between the

originality of its central image and its borrowings from the tradition, its effortless joining of the common and transcendent, and its resolution of the tension between the "fact" and "dream" which runs throughout Frost's love sonnets. The sonnet runs:

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.

Its theme may be said to lie in its attempt to unify these balances and pairs. "The Silken Tent," as has been noticed by Lawrance Thompson (390) and others, is written as a single sentence which expounds a single extended simile, the comparison between a lowly tent and a spiritual view of the beloved. The poem's unity also arises in its use of the form of the English sonnet, in which the three quatrains and couplet are allowed to run into one another syntactically, making a sharp division between parts impossible, and in the "s" alliteration, which appears in every line. Similarly, there is the repetition of the key terms "summer" and "silken," as well as the near-repetitions of "bound" - "bondage" and "slightly" - "slightest" which weave throughout the sonnet, what Helen Vendler has called "ties" that bring the various parts of the sonnet together to a remarkable degree.<sup>58</sup>

The strongest statements of unity, however, occur in the image of the tent itself, with its "cedar pole" or "sureness of the soul" that "is its pinnacle to heavenward" and its "countless silken ties of love and thought" that tie it "to everything on earth the compass

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<sup>58</sup> For an explanation of this term, see the end of the chapter on E. A. Robinson.

round." The tent is thus made to symbolize both the soul and body, the vertical and horizontal, the spiritual and worldly, though it should be noted that it is also consistent with the view of love promulgated throughout his sonnets. Love in "The Silken Tent" binds the soul to the world. The complexity of the imagery lies in the fact that this "bondage" is what allows the soul to point "heavenward" without actually being a part of the sky, just as the climbing of the birch trees points the speaker of "Birches" "towards" heaven (the word "toward" being emphasized by Frost) even as he is being lowered to the earth. The heavenly, according to Frost, is not the sole aim of love, but rather it is the result, paradoxically, of love's ability to tie the lover to the things of this world, without which it would collapse. In Frost's view, love does not strive for a higher "absolute beauty" as its final aim, but rather a renewed engagement with the world of "fact," the physical world.

Subtler is the poem's rewriting of earlier love sonnets, its "antique appurtenances" that Anthony Hecht noted ("The Sonnet: Ruminations on Form, Sex, and History," 141) to emphasize Frost's views of love, although it is this aspect which reveals the originality of his stance. The setting of summer, for example, may be an allusion to Shakespeare's famous Sonnet 18, in which a comparison between the beloved and a "summer's day" is rejected because the beloved is seen to be categorically greater than the mortal world, to belong to an "eternal summer" rather than one in which "rough winds" can shake "the darling buds of May." Frost's tent, in contrast to Shakespeare's declarations, is part of the natural scene, and the "capriciousness of summer air" helps only to remind the speaker of the role of the "slightest bondage" to the world that love requires. Similarly, the opening phrase that introduces the comparison, "she is as in a field a silken tent," appears to be a modern version of introducing the protracted simile of sonnets such as Spenser's famous adaptation of Petrarch's *Rime* 189 in his *Amoretti* 34, which opens:

Lyke as a ship that through the Ocean wyde,  
By conduct of some star doth make her way. . .

Spenser's sonnet elaborates this comparison of his Elizabeth, seemingly unattainable at this point of the sequence, with the star who watches over a storm-tossed ship, which symbolizes the lowly poet. By contrast, Frost's sonnet evinces nothing of the despair or division between the beloved and the speaker, and the unpretentious image of the tent would seem to mitigate against such an abyss between the high and the low through its introduction of a seemingly ordinary figure in place of an extended, elaborate imagery. Equally important is Frost's concept of "bondage" in his sonnet, a word which he uses positively to denote the proper ties of the soul to the world, and which is qualified by the adjectives "slightest" or "loosely." During the English Renaissance, this image was used in complaints of the beloved's tyranny in manipulating the lover's feelings. Spenser, for example, could write:

Unrighteous Lord love, what law is this,  
That me thou makest thus tormented be?  
The whiles she lordeth in licentious blisse  
Of her freewill, scorning both thee and me. . . (*Amoretti* 10)

This type of rhetorical despair is at the furthest remove from "The Silken Tent," with its gentle assurance and summary of Frost's belief in the ability of love to bring one to the things of this world even as it gestures toward the transcendent. Taken together, these rewritings of Renaissance sonnets reveal Frost's attempts to forge a workable synthesis between the "fact" and "dream," the earthly and heavenly, in a way in which "fact" or physical world is consistently held to be the more important of the two realms.

### **Sonnets of Darkness**

Throughout its history, the sonnet has been related to themes of harmony and order. The tendency to link the form to some type of metaphysical design has been justified by poets and critics on several levels: as a natural consequence of the sonnet's tendency to satisfy one of several recognized rhyme schemes and metrical requirements, since this pattern could then be seen to symbolize a greater order in the world at large, for example, or as a consequence of the sonnet's division (in its original Italian form) into



two parts, the octave and sestet, which could be used to raise a problem and provide a resolution. In this section, attempts to justify this link between sonnet structure and a greater order through Platonic themes will be explored in order to illuminate both Frost's own theories of poetic form in general and his anti-Platonic use of the sonnet form in particular.

Attempts to link the structure of the sonnet to Platonic themes of order and harmony tend to center on the numerical ratios inherent in the sonnet. The sonnet, in its original Italian form, breaks into an eight-line octave and six-line sestet; moreover, an octave and sestet may then be divided into two quatrains and two tercets, respectively, forming the sonnet equation " $(4+4) + (3+3)$ " that Hopkins invoked in a letter to Richard Watson (71). The two parts of the sonnet thus form a 4:3 ratio. To certain poets these numbers assume symbolic values, with the "4" of the ratio (the octave) being related to the mundane world through associations with the four corners of the world or the four elements, and the "3" (the sestet) being related to a spiritual or metaphysical realm through associations with the Trinity. The possible division of a sonnet into a mundane octave and metaphysical sestet may lie behind Shakespeare's Sonnet 29 quoted above. In spite of its English rhyme scheme, this poem shows a shift from mundane earthly cares to the spiritual world of "heaven's gate" between lines 8 and 9, the point corresponding to the division between octave and sestet in the Italian form.

The 4:3 ratio of the sonnet becomes related to Platonic thought through the following passage of the *Timaeus*, which describes the creation of the universe by the Demi-urge:

He began the divisions as follows. He first marked off a section of the whole, and then another twice the size of the first; next a third, half as much again as the second and three times the first, a fourth twice the size of the second, a fifth three times the third, a sixth eight times the first, a seventh twenty-seven times the first. Next he filled in the double and treble intervals by cutting off further sections and inserting them in the gaps, so that there were two mean terms in each interval, one exceeding one extreme and being exceeded by the other by

the same fraction of the extremes, the other exceeding and being exceeded by the same numerical amount. These links produced intervals of  $3/2$  and  $4/3$  and  $9/8$  within the previous intervals. . . (48, translated by Desmond Lee)

The central ratio in the Demi-urge's division is 4:3, which in the Renaissance assumed importance as an "ideal" proportion which could be used to organize a work of art.

Accordingly, the poet Anthony Hecht has argued for its importance in the sonnet via Renaissance architecture:

By a sort of Vitruvian analogy, W. H. Auden once conjectured that the extraordinary survival, the sheer persistence of the Italian form - from Dante's time to our own - might well be based on our unconscious recognition of the happy, or even ideal, proportions, one to another, of its two parts: the eight-line octave and and six-line sestet . . . I believe I can confirm Auden's shrewd supposition in terms of architecture. . .

My illustration comes from a masterpiece of one of Italy's purest exemplars of the mathematical ideal in architecture: Andrea Palladio, and specifically his Villa Foscari - known as the Malcontenta - on the bank of the Brenta Canal. Consider the ground plan of the villa, as well as the same plan in diagrammatic form, representing the proportional relationships of the interior spaces . . . To arrive, finally, at a sense of the general proportions of the whole building, we may express it numerically by the comparison of the total length to the total width, or 8:6 - which is precisely the numerical design of the Italian sonnet. (On the Laws of Poetic Art, 53)<sup>59</sup>

More recently, Paul Oppenheimer has argued for another application of the passage quoted from the *Timaeus* above through the concept of a "harmonic" ratio, which he has found in the works of the originator of the sonnet, Giacomo da Lentino:

The 'within' and 'without' - the external, internal - oppositions (the distance of the lady, the nearness of the 'spirit'), which are also oppositions of images that contrast, draw the [final two] lines away from all the others, and precisely toward that finality which the poem so pleasurably provides. The numbers to be considered, therefore, are not simply eight and six, or six : eight, but six: eight : twelve.

And these numbers do possess the importance that we have been looking for. The proportions 6:8 and 6:8:12 did play exceedingly interesting roles in the history of ideas, not merely in Giacomo's time but in the Renaissance, and most particularly in Renaissance architecture, where they describe the 'harmonic'

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<sup>59</sup> The influence of Plato's ratios on Renaissance architecture is made by Rudolph Wittkower in his *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*, pp. 109-10.

proportions of rooms. But the notion of the 6:8:12 relation as 'harmonic,' and therefore as reflecting what Giorgi in his *Harmonia Mundi* calls the 'fabric of the soul,' according to which 'the whole world was arranged and perfected,' may be found much earlier, in the Pythagorean-Platonic theory of numbers. ("The Origin of the Sonnet," 303)

Once again, the numerical ratios inherent in the sonnet have been related to a cosmic order that may ultimately be traced back to Plato's *Timaeus*.

Whatever the flaws of theories such as Hecht's or Oppenheimer's, they do show the great effort that has been made to relate the sonnet's internal divisions to a greater sense of order or harmony, where the internal divisions and proportions of the sonnet recreate the proportions to be found in Plato's description of the cosmos at large. As was the case with the love sonnet, however, Frost dissented strongly from this tradition. His own aesthetics argue for a different justification of poetic structure. In Frost's view, form was not a reflection of a greater harmony that could be derived from an insight into its proportions. Instead, as he argued in a letter to the *Amherst Student*:

The background is hugeness and confusion shading away from where we stand into black and utter chaos; and against the background any small man-made figure of order and concentration. (*Selected Letters*, 419)

In place of a Platonic assumption of an ordered cosmos, Frost posits a disordered one of "black and utter chaos," so that the inherent structure of the sonnet could stand "against" a background of disorder. Frost was to repeat this theory in his famous declaration from "The Figure a Poem Makes," that a poem "ends in a clarification of life - not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion" (18). Once again, the order created in a poem is opposed to an inherent disorder in the universe. The justification for reading this view of poetic form against a Platonic one derives from Frost himself:

To me any little form I assert upon it is velvet, as the saying is, and to be considered for how much more it is than nothing. If I were a Platonist I should have to consider it, I suppose, for how much less it is than everything. (*Selected Letters*, 419)

Against a "Platonic" view of sonnet structure, then, in which the proportions of the sonnet are meant to reflect the greater order of the cosmos ("everything," in Frost's words), the structure of the sonnet for Frost will be a human assertion against a prevailing chaos.

By the very fact that the sonnet contains a high degree of internal order, in Frost's poetics it helps to balance all that is not ordered. Inherent in this view of the sonnet form, then, is a seeming paradox, since the manifest order of the sonnet ("the strictest form I have behaved in," as he wrote to Louis Untermeyer ) gains its meaning from its contrast with a greater sense of disorder. For Frost's view of poetic order to become apparent within a given poem, the order of a sonnet must somehow indicate the greater disorder outside of the poem itself. Frost's growing reputation as a sonneteer may be justified by the success with which he managed to express this tension. His more metaphysical sonnets will often invoke a disordered, chaotic world directly through their argument or imagery, so that the order in a sonnet's structure becomes conspicuous through its opposition to its subject matter. The various strategies through which Frost managed to imply the disorder of the cosmos in his sonnets and his shifting attitudes towards this sense of balance will be discussed in the specific readings of the sonnets themselves. Here it may be useful to note that this conception of the sonnet form may have helped to inspire a long line of Frost criticism, beginning with Randall Jarrell's "To the Laodiceans" and continuing in Joseph Brodsky's lecture "Robert Frost, Yankee Virgil," which has emphasized the themes of darkness in the poems. The "black and utter chaos" that Frost postulates above in these readings becomes a central facet of his work. The most famous statement of this line of criticism derives from a speech made by Lionel Trilling:

I think of Robert Frost as a terrifying poet. Call him, if it makes things any easier, a tragic poet, but it might be useful every now and then to come out from under the shelter of that literary word. The universe that he conceives is a terrifying universe. Read the poem called 'Design' and see if you sleep the better for it. ("A Speech on Robert Frost," 156-57)

It is significant that Trilling's assertion of the "terrifying" nature of Frost's vision should invoke one of the most intricately-structured sonnets as evidence. In fact, this strain of Frost's thought may have been destined to find its expression in the sonnet. If, as Frost argued, a poetic structure acts as a "momentary stay" against the world's disorder, so that form and chaos always co-exist in the production of a poem, then the "strictest form that [he] behaved in" may have been necessary for his deepest explorations of that darkness and chaos. In other words, to establish a suitable tension between the order of the poem and chaos of the world, the strictest poetic form and most explicit invocations of disorder needed to coexist.

"Into My Own," a sonnet written in couplets (although it is divided on the page and syntactically into a Shakespearian sonnet) will help to clarify the above discussion by providing a clear contrast between the order inherent in its structure and the dark disorder that the poem invokes in the world at large. The poem begins with the speaker's "wish" that the gloom of the forest is stretched to "the edge of doom." The speaker then states his intent to "steal away" into their "vastness." The darkness of the forest is thus allowed to expand to cosmic dimensions similar to the "black and utter chaos" that Frost believed to operate in the universe. But this darkness is not enough to defeat or even change the speaker, as the concluding couplet demonstrates. When he returns, he claims, those he left behind:

. . . would not find me changed from him they knew -  
Only more sure of all I thought was true.

Here the "truths" held by the speaker, the ideas by which he understands the operations of the cosmos, are unchanged by the darkness into which he journeys. The assurance of the speaker is reinforced by the use of couplets and sentences that divide exactly into quatrains. The sonnet is metrically regular as well, since iambs are replaced by trochees only in the initial feet of lines one and fourteen, the most usual place in an iambic line for such substitutions. The dark "gloom" of the forest cannot distort or

introduce any significant disorder into the speaker's declarations, lending his speech an air of conviction and authority through which it confronts the pervasive "dark gloom" of the forest.

However, a closer reading of "Into My Own" reveals that the assurance offered by this final couplet may be less assured than it first appears. As Richard Poirer has noted, this sonnet alludes to Shakespeare's famous Sonnet 116 (Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing, 81). In Shakespeare's poem "the marriage of true minds" survives "even to the edge of doom," just as the beliefs of Frost's speaker are said to survive his own journey to "the edge of doom." However, as Poirer proceeds to argue, Frost's claim is "full of hedgings" (81). The speaker does not actually journey to "the edge of doom," but only expresses a wish to do so. The phrase "all I thought was true" is also highly ambiguous, since it fails to state what will survive his confrontation with the darkness of the larger world. What emerges from "Into My Own," then, is not an affirmation of order and truths held by the speaker but an unsupported declaration that there may be some quality that can survive such a journey into the unknown. The only object within the poem to stand against the dark trees and gloom of the forest is the order lent by the speaker's words shaped into a sonnet. The poem thus opposes an ordered speech against the darkness in a manner prescient of Frost's later statements which argue that the only a man-made order exists to stand against the black chaos of the universe.

Although "Into My Own" echoes Frost's view of the role of poetic structure as a counterbalance to chaos, it cannot be assumed that its confident assertion of continuity is typical of the sonnets. Unlike his love sonnets, which show a consistent preference for the "fact" over the "dream" or the "earthly" over the ideal, Frost's sonnets reveal shifting attitudes towards the balance of order and chaos that coexist in them. Some sonnets despair at the inevitable triumph of chaos or darkness (the two images are almost always linked) over the poet's "momentary" stay against them. "Into My Own" has a companion poem, "Vantage Point," in A Boy's Will that reveals Frost's shifting views on this subject.

This sonnet begins "if tired of trees I seek again mankind," which may be taken as a turn away from the contemplation of the "dark trees" in the earlier sonnet to a return to his familiar surroundings. Rather surprisingly, however, the speaker does not return to "all that [he] thought was true," but rather to a bewildering variety of experiences: the sights of flora or cattle, the "far off. . . homes of men" or a "graveyard," and the "living or dead, whichever are to mind." The sestet shows the speaker returning to a contemplation of the violence of nature ("the sunburned hillside"), and the final images contrast this sublime scene with one that is deliberately small and trivial:

I smell the earth, I smell the bruised plant,  
I look into the crater of the ant.

These different experiences swerve sharply from an anthill to a town, from the vegetable to the animal and human, and from the visual to the olfactory, destroying any notion of a fixed frame of references. Unlike the speaker of "Into My Own," who asserts the continuity of "all I know is true," the speaker of "Vantage Point" experiences a joy in finding different, "momentary" perspectives with which to view the familiar, each one quickly giving way to the next.

These two early sonnets tend to keep the images of darkness at bay. By contrast, the later sonnet "Acquainted with the Night" explores the limits of any man-made order in the face of a greater darkness. This remarkable sonnet, published in the volume West-Running Brook in 1928, looks back to "Into My Own," which was published fifteen years earlier. Against the earlier speaker who wished to "steal away" into a forest of "dark trees" that "stretched away unto the edge of doom," the later poem reveals a narrator who has in fact wandered into the darkness and become "acquainted with the night," though in an urban rather than in a rural setting. He thus fulfills the seemingly impossible wish to wander to "the edge of doom," at least symbolically, by claiming to have travelled to the limits of human experience. He has "outwalked the furthest city light," "looked down the

saddest city lane," and "passed by" a watchman who may be supposed to be patrolling the edge of the city.

The emphasis on superlatives here seems vital to any reading of the poem, since the reality confronted when the speaker wanders beyond these sights is a realm that is completely alien to him. The "interrupted cry" that the speaker hears is "not to call [him] back or say good-bye"; instead, it has nothing to say to him at all. Similarly, the "luminary clock" stands "at an unearthly height" and "proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right." Here the speaker has passed beyond the realistic descriptions at the beginning of the poem into a world akin to a dream vision which can only be described through negations of what is familiar. The time is especially confusing - the clock does not announce a time, but pronounces on it in such a way as to avoid the human categories of "wrong or right." When the sonnet comes full circle by repeating its opening line at its end, the implication is that the speaker is acquainted not only with the realistic night from the beginning of the poem, but also with a metaphorical night somewhat akin to the "hugeness and confusion shading away from where we stand into black and utter chaos" that Frost saw as standing outside of any "man-made figure of order and concentration," be it a poem or city.

This rather metaphysical reading of "Acquainted with the Night" may seem more reasonable when the form of the poem is brought into consideration. As Randall Jarrell has observed, the interlocking rhymes of the poem are modelled on Dante's *terza rima*, the form used by the Tuscan poet in his poetic journey into the hitherto unknown realms of the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* ("To the Laodiceans," 59). It seems likely that Frost chose this poetic structure to depict a similar journey beyond the confines of the familiar to a confrontation with the unknown, as urged by the diction, which emphasizes movement and distance: "walked out," "outwalked," "furthest," "passed by," "far away," "further still." Keeping these points in mind, it is possible to offer a refinement of a



comment made by John Robert Doyle, Jr., who has provided what is perhaps the most important extended reading of the poem:

One line of the poem indicates that 'night' represents the sadness that life has to offer, but much more important are the lines pointing to the fact that 'night' symbolizes the basic isolation of man from other men and from nature. (171)<sup>60</sup>

In addition to this isolation is the suggestion that the speaker here confronts phenomena that express themselves in terms that are outside the limits of human comprehension. While the speaker does hear the cry and the proclamation of the clock, their meanings remain unknown to him, as shown by his constant recourse to the negatives. The journey in the poem thus becomes akin to a realization of the position of the artist and limits of order and the man-made, and may be contrasted with the most famous use of a 14-line *terza rima* scheme: Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind." Shelley's poem acts as an invocation of the non-human "spirit" of the autumn wind that is essentially a reflection of the poet, who is "one too like thee" (l. 56), culminating in the hopeful exclamation "Be thou me" (l. 62). For Frost, however, the greater forces of nature were identified with chaos and thus all but indescribable, and it is a credit to his artistry that he could so convincingly invoke what he believed to be inhuman, "unearthly," and unknowable.

Three related sonnets that Frost wrote using the central image of a bird may help to clarify further Frost's shifting attitudes towards the formation of a type of order against the background of chaos that underlies so many of his sonnets. "On a Bird Singing in its Sleep" and "Acceptance" use the central image of a bird singing in the darkness, which may represent the poet writing "against" the background of an unknown and chaotic world. In the former poem, a bird sings once "in the lunar noon," but ceases "almost

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<sup>60</sup> See also Irving Howe's suggestion that the poem indicates "an ultimate dissociation between the natural world and human desire" ("Robert Frost: A Momentary Stay," 143).

before the prick of hostile ears." This brief invocation of a dark and "hostile" world surrounding the bird is expanded towards the end of the poem in the lines:

Through the interstices of things ajar  
On the long bead chain of repeated birth. . .

Only Frost could have used such a slight occurrence to produce declarations of this importance. The cosmos invoked in the poem is one of things "ajar" (here meaning "out of harmony," as in the oxymoron invoked by the opening image of "the lunar noon") and the suggestion of a random evolution has replaced a belief in an ordered chain of being in the second of these lines. Yet, counteracting the "hostile" world which is "ajar" are the comforting full rhymes and regular iambic meter, which contain and balance the more terrifying implications of the imagery, so that the pleasing "little inborn tune" of the bird is matched against "the lunar noon," or darkness, of the sonnet. The ultimate message of "On a Bird Singing in Its Sleep" is hopeful, as Frost assures his readers in three asides in the poem's first eight lines: the song does not make the bird "much more easily a prey" because it sings only once, from within a bush, and it soon desists. Thus "it ventured less in peril than it appears," and "it could not have come down to us" if such singing were dangerous. But these repeated reassurances, which are significant in being offered one after another, are made necessary because the larger world surrounding the bird is a dark one of implied hostility and disorder.

This dark background may also be found in the earlier "Acceptance," in which darkness arrives suddenly and violently as "the spent sun throws up its rays on cloud / And goes down burning into the gulf below." The coming of night inspires two different reactions by the birds. The first, "murmuring something quiet in her breast," simply goes to sleep, but the second, whose plight occupies the sestet, "swoops just in time" to his perch and then mutters the closing soliloquy:

"Safe!  
Now let the night be dark for all of me.

Let the night be too dark for me to see  
 Into the future. Let what will be, be."

The exclamation "safe!" implies both a relief and an escape from danger and a hostile world. Frost may have wished this escape to be contrasted with William Cullen Bryant's poem "To a Waterfowl," one of Frost's favourite works,<sup>61</sup> in which a bird flies through "the heavens" in "the last steps of day." The final stanza of Bryant's work celebrates:

He who, from zone to zone,  
 Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight,  
 In the long way that I must tread alone,  
 Will lead my steps aright. (ll. 29-32)

No similar assurance or greater power appears in "Acceptance," and Frost's bird (whose flight is anything but "certain") in its moment of safety accepts only a "darkness" and unknown future, however random or unjust the coming days may appear.<sup>62</sup> Once again an apparently slight act is meant to imply a larger, hostile world associated with images of darkness. A parallel may be drawn in these two sonnets between the singing birds and the poet himself, since Frost's poetics advances a "momentary stay against confusion" that is produced by the literary work, even if the confusion remains doubtful after the clarification of the poem, just as each of the birds are able to escape the inherent danger of their environments through their momentary safety and exclamations.

It is in a third sonnet using the image of a bird, the momentous "The Oven Bird," that Frost is able to make one of his most complete summaries of his poetical aims, even

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<sup>61</sup> Frost's early admiration for this poem is recounted in Thompson's and Winnick's one-volume biography, p. 38.

<sup>62</sup> Thompson and Winnick have argued in their one-volume biography of Frost that: "And at the close of part one [of *West-Running Brook*] he placed a sonnet built around contrary responses to darkness, a sonnet that gave metaphorical expression to the poet's firmly stoical-puritan belief in the Christian doctrine of submission, 'Acceptance'" (*Robert Frost: A Biography*, 312). There is no evidence in the sonnet of a "Christian doctrine" of acceptance in the poem, however.

though Frost himself does not appear to have thought highly of the poem.<sup>63</sup> The sonnet runs:

There is a singer everyone has heard,  
 Loud, a mid-summer and a mid-wood bird,  
 Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again.  
 He says the leaves are old and that for flowers  
 Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten.  
 He says the early petal-fall is past,  
 When pear and cherry bloom went down in showers  
 On sunny days a moment overcast;  
 And comes that other fall we name the fall.  
 He says the highway dust is over all.  
 The bird would cease and be as other birds  
 But that he knows in singing not to sing.  
 The question that he frames in all but words  
 Is what to make of a diminished thing.

The theme of "The Oven Bird," as its final line declares, is "diminishment" in a variety of contexts: from mid-summer to fall, from "sunny days" to "a moment overcast," from the petals to "old leaves," from the passing of spring and summer into a barren autumn, and, as is suggested in the poem's emphasis on the word "fall," in the great fall from Eden into the post-lapsarian world inhabited by the oven bird. This theme is reinforced in the division of parts in the sonnet, which is especially pronounced from the use of couplets that mark, as Janice P. Stout has noted, the beginning of both the octave and the sestet ("Convention and Variation in Frost's Sonnets," 34). The first eight lines emphasize the oven bird, who sings loudly enough to make "the solid tree trunks sound again," and who then speaks (or "says") of the lack of mid-summer flowers (one tenth of those in spring), of "old" leaves, of the "petal-fall" of spring, and of "sunny days a moment overcast." Each of these images offered by the bird suggests a loss or decrease in some form, and thus foreshadows the coming of "that other fall we name the fall" that is introduced in

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<sup>63</sup> As Frost stated in a letter: "The large things in the book - well I won't name them - you know better than to think the Oven Bird is of them" (*Selected Letters*, 208).

line nine - an autumn in which the abundance of sights and changes invoked earlier in the poem is replaced by a barren monotony: "he says the highway dust is over all."

"The Oven Bird" is remarkable for the consistency with which it invokes the "diminished things" that run throughout the imagery. This theme is highly suggestive, and the importance of the sonnet may be seen in the persistent attempts to identify the oven bird with Frost himself. Irving Howe, for example, has argued that "the bird is assigned. . . something of the poet's stoical resilience" and that the final two lines "can be regarded as an epitaph of his whole career" ("Robert Frost: A Momentary Stay," 140).<sup>64</sup> On a smaller scale, "The Oven Bird" is also self-reflective, in that it demonstrates Frost's own vision of the sonnet, which may be seen as a diminishment of the grand rhetoric and the reflections of cosmic order that have sometimes been associated with the form, which he exploited in several other sonnets, including "Design" and "The Silken Tent." Against the elevated lyricism of Renaissance sonnets, for example, Frost employs a plain diction, loose syntax (the placement of the word "loud" at the beginning of the second line), and colloquialisms ("Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten"), in which the sonnet's formal rhetorical or lyric voice is replaced by a more familiar, spoken one. It is significant that "The Oven Bird" descends in its level of lyricism, from the "singer" in line 1 to that of a speaking bird ("he says") and his final "question," and that the poem employs awkward repetitions of key words or phrases ("mid-summer," "he says," "fall," "bird," and forms of the verb "to sing"), as if to suggest that the language of the poem cannot rise above a certain set of common words or phrases.

More subtle is Frost's use of the sonnet form to emphasize a diminishment in the claims made by the poem. As stated above in the section on the love sonnet, traditional sonnets will often move from a worldly octave to a heavenly sestet as in Shakespeare's sonnet 29, but here the "turn" in line 9 emphasizes the fact of a "fall" or descent, leading

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<sup>64</sup> This belief is also shared by H.A. Maxson, pp. 40-41.

to the poem's inevitable conclusion of "what to make of a diminished thing" (in fact, the oven bird may be read as a rewriting of Sonnet 29, replacing Shakespeare's ascending, singing lark with a more prosaic descending, speaking oven bird)<sup>65</sup>. Against the common use of the sestet to provide a resolution to the problems raised in the octave, "The Oven Bird" moves from confident statements of fact towards a rhetorical question that is too complex ever to be answered. Here the "diminishment" urged by the sonnet can be read against the order and resolution that normally accrue to the sonnet form. Also interesting in this respect is Frost's use of the rhymed couplet which, as has been noted, opens both the octave and sestet. The placement of the second couplet negates the possibility of providing a formal conclusion to the preceding lines, leaving the poem in some sense unresolved. Together these choices in diction and structure move "The Oven Bird" away from the metaphysical closure and assurance that have been attributed to the sonnet form and towards the transient "momentary stay" of a poem, a far more modest vision of the role of a sonnet, with its suggestion of a greater disorder which can never quite be overcome by any particular work.

The theme of a "fall" appears in the later sonnet "Unharvested," which H. A. Maxson has suggested may be viewed as a "companion piece" to "The Oven Bird" (98). Here the fall refers to some apples that have fallen from their tree whose "scent of ripeness over a wall" has caught the speaker's attention. Once again there is an emphasis on the "fall" (as in "The Oven Bird," this word appears in a key position, this time at the end of line eight, the traditional end of the octave), suggesting the fall from Eden and the

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<sup>65</sup> Although Shakespeare's sonnet 29 is written with an English rhyme scheme, the division of its argument is highly reminiscent of the Italian form's octave-sestet division. Stephen Booth has noted that "in nearly two-thirds of Shakespeare's sonnets [sonnet 29 being named in this group] there are vestigial remains of the octave of the continental sonnet" (*An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 36). And "outside of 154 among the sonnets that have octaves, Shakespeare probably comes closest to a sestet in 29 and 44" (47).

resulting diminishment of human godliness and happiness. As the poem declares, "there had been an apple fall / as complete as the apple had given man." In "Unharvested," however, the fall becomes a reason for celebration in what is perhaps a playful allusion to the concept of the "fortunate fall":

May something go always unharvested!  
 May much stay out of our stated plan.  
 Apples or something forgotten and left,  
 So smelling their sweetness would be no theft.

The playfulness in these lines is reinforced by the use of tetrameter, in which the poetic foot that is missing from the sonnet adds to the sense that something has been omitted from a "stated plan." Here the question of "what to make of a diminished thing" is given a tentative answer in the poem's exuberance. "Unharvested" marks the only point in Frost's sonnets where the dissolution of form is actually welcomed. As Maxson notes, "this celebration of randomness starkly contrasts with the previous sonnets," although the poem does seem to contain "behind the scene presented, an intricate, known, and frictionless system against which we can only occasionally hope for the extraordinary" (98). Yet there may also be a sense in which this celebration is somewhat forced, since the reference to the fall from Eden in line nine is fraught with too much weight to be dismissed so lightly. It is difficult to believe that, against the current of his other sonnets, Frost intended "Unharvested" to be his final vision on the relation between order and chaos, rather than a suggestion of yet another shifting attitude that may be brought to bear on it.

While the exploration of diminishment in "The Oven Bird" has great implications for Frost's views of his own art and his use of the sonnet structure, it is another of his sonnets, "Once by the Pacific," that provides the clearest symbol of his views on poetical form. "Once by the Pacific" describes an almost apocalyptic storm that may have been

inspired by a storm remembered from Frost's childhood, when he was still living in California, as Jay Parini and others have suggested (*Robert Frost: A Life*, 14).<sup>66</sup> Yet the poem's inspiration is also literary, playing on the meaning of the word "pacific" and, more subtly, on the apocalyptic imagery from the second section of Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind":

. . . there are spread  
 On the blue surface of thine aery surge,  
 Like the bright hair uplifted from the head  
  
 Of some fierce Maenad, even from the dim verge  
 Of the horizon to the zenith's height,  
 The locks of the approaching storm. Thou dirge  
  
 Of the dying year, to which this closing night  
 Will be the dome of a vast sepulchre,  
 Vaulted with all thy congregated might  
  
 Of vapours, from whose solid atmosphere  
 Black rain, and fire, and hail will burst: oh, hear!

Similar to those in Shelley's storm, the clouds in Frost's sonnet are described as being "low and hairy in the skies, / Like locks blown forward in the gleam of eyes." The real parallel between the two works, however, lies in the final implications of the storm. In Shelley's ode, the storm is compared to one of the destructive Maenads and transforms the sky into a "vast sepulchre" or "vault" which calls down "black rain, and fire, and hail" in an image of apocalyptic destruction. Frost's storm, meanwhile, has created "shattered water" and will lead to "more than ocean-water [being] broken," to quote the two images that encircle the poem. The argument of "Once by the Pacific" leads almost inevitably towards an invocation of "rage" and "God's last *Put out the Light*" (italics in the original) and the destruction inherent in the image of a final deluge (the italicized phrase is quoted from Shakespeare's *Othello* in Act V, shortly before the murder of Desdemona).

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<sup>66</sup> See also *Robert Frost: A Biography* by Thompson and Winnick, pp. 20-21.



In the poem destruction, darkness ("night"), and chaos brought on by the storm, which is said to have "shattered" and "broken" the water, may be seen to represent the "black and utter chaos" that Frost believed to exist in the cosmos at large. Standing against this force is the continent of the poem, which at present is able to resist being "shattered" by the coming storm, although the final line looks forward to a time when it, too, will be destroyed, even "before" the apocalypse. Frost is at some pains to establish the forces ranged against the coming storm, which he does, as John Robert Doyle, Jr. has argued, by a series of logical increments: the shore is "backed by cliff," which in turn is "backed by continent" (The Poetry of Robert Frost: An Analysis, 171). Despite this array, however, the continent is destined to be "broken." The scene pictured in the sonnet thus reframes Frost's view of the act of poetic creation in larger terms: even the continent provides only a "momentary stay against confusion," or the storm, since the poem implies that any order, even the progression from shore to cliff to continent, is destined to be shattered. Even the sonnet's couplets are unable to contain this destruction, as the rhymed pairs "din - in," "age - rage," and "broken - spoken" emphasize the "night of dark intent" rather than the counterbalancing order provided by the land, while the meter becomes difficult to scan in the sonnet's final line ("Before God's last *Put out the Light* was spoken"), as though the approaching chaos comes to affect the formal elements of sonnet-writing as well.

The transience of any constructed order against an impending chaos finds its expression in two sonnets, "Range-Finding" and "Design," that employ the common image of a spider. In the former, the uncertainty of a battle tears "a cobweb diamond-strung" in the opening line before going on to "cut a flower," an action which disturbs a butterfly. These miniature dramas are chosen to emphasize how temporary any form of order ("the cobweb") or "stay against confusion" (the butterfly resting on the flower) are in light of events that are beyond these creatures' control. The cobweb is revisited in the sestet, where another web is shaken by the battle:

On the bare upland pasture there had spread  
 O'ernight 'twixt mullein stalks a wheel of thread  
 And straining cables wet with silver dew.  
 A sudden passing bullet shook it dry.  
 The indwelling spider ran to greet the fly,  
 But finding nothing, sullenly withdrew.

The imagery here invokes the "straining cables" that barely resist being completely "rent" as the cobweb, although its survival is doubtful. The sonnet form, which with some exceptions, is that of a regular Italian sonnet, also strains to maintain its order. As in "The Oven Bird," the couplet is moved to the beginning of the sestet, thereby preventing any final vision of order to triumph on these random disturbances of nature. Moreover, the meter requires several archaic elisions to maintain its regularity ("O'ernight 'twixt"), indicating a further taxing of the sonnet structure in describing the poem's scene.

Compared to "Once by the Pacific," "Range-Finding" is a somewhat slight and humorous poem in which the actual chaos of the battle is only slightly alluded to. In the other sonnet where a spider appears, "Design," there is a reprise of the terror that has been associated with "Once by the Pacific" because of Frost's willingness to question in these works the ability of any type of order, no matter how seemingly stolid, to resist being shattered by an oncoming darkness. Even the solidity of a continent is insufficient to guard against an eventual return to darkness and chaos, which in turn is seen to be part of God's ultimate plan. This final twist in the poem's argument, the equation of darkness with God's will, is not explored in any depth, although this connection does raise several problems with regard to Frost's poetics. In the declarations quoted above, Frost views man-made order and form favourably, as "velvet" or as a clarification which is the same in kind, if not in degree, as that which inspires great religious sects. Yet the final image of "Once by the Pacific" seems to imply that chaos and darkness, rather than a temporary order, are the qualities most properly associated with God. This possibility, which would seem to repudiate the value given to order in Frost's statements of his poetics, is explored

in "Design," where Frost asks whether order itself may be an indication of evil, and hence of dubious value.

"Design" confronts this possibility directly by presenting a deceptively simple scene composed of three figures: a white spider, a white heal-all (a New England flower that is usually blue), and a white moth. But these figures are highly suggestive, mixing as they do "characters of death and blight" that lead to the evocation of "a witches' broth," but also invoking traditional symbols of goodness and purity through the colour white, the ironic name of the "heal-all," and the reminder that the death of the moth will help keep the spider "fat" and very much alive. This ambivalence is a key element of the sonnet, which carefully balances suggestions of good and evil in the details accorded to the scene. The word "design" is derived from the Latin *designare*, "to mark out," and almost inevitably the description of the octave leads to a series of questions in the sestet about the implications of having "marked out" this scene in the poem:

What had the flower to do with being white,  
 The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?  
 What brought the kindred spider to that height,  
 Then steered the white moth thither in the night?  
 What but design of darkness to appall? -  
 If design govern in a thing so small.

The argument of these lines has been summarized by Randall Jarrell as follows:

This is the Argument from Design with a vengeance; is the terrible negative from which the eighteenth century's Kodak picture (with its *Having wonderful time. Wish you were here* on the margin) had to be printed. If a watch, then a watch-maker; if a diabolical machine, then a diabolical mechanic - Frost uses exactly the logic that has always been used. And this little albino catastrophe is too whitely catastrophic to be accidental, too impossibly unlikely ever to be a coincidence: accident, chance, statistics, natural selection are helpless to account for such designed terror and heartbreak, such an awful symbolic perversion of the innocent being of the world. ("To the Laodiceans," 46)

Or, as George Montiero has described it:

In paradigm, 'Design' expresses those perplexing fears spawned and scattered by evidence which indicates that (1) human existence continues without

supportive design and ultimate purpose, or (2) human existence is subject to a design of unmitigated natural evil. ("Robert Frost's Metaphysical Sonnet," 333)

These interpretations fail to take into account the final line of the poem, however. Any reading of "Design" would seem to turn on the final two lines, each of which gives a possible reaction to the tableau depicted in the octave. Is this particular scene evidence for a "design of darkness" (a seeming paradox within the terms of Frost's poetics) that "appalls" the viewer, as Jarrell suggests, or does the possible retraction of the final line and its implication that this scene is the result of nothing more than random chance represent the final view of the poem?

The problem raised by "Design," then, is not only the role of the Creator in having created scenes of darkness, but rather the possibility that any creation of order, including one made by Frost himself, may be related to an expression of evil intent or disorder. In approaching these themes, Frost was almost certainly influenced by the arguments made by William James in his great work Pragmatism and elsewhere, which ask whether or not the particulars of design (in this case the universe) imply anything about the designer (in this case God). The following passage from his essay "Is Life Worth Living," a work that seems to have been overlooked in the ample criticism surrounding "Design," seems especially pertinent to the sonnet:

Every phenomenon that we would praise there exists cheek by jowl with some contrary phenomenon that cancels all its religious effect upon the mind. Beauty and hideousness, love and cruelty, life and death keep house together in indissoluble partnership; and there gradually steals over us, instead of the old warm notion of a man-loving Deity, that of an awful power that neither hates nor loves, but rolls all things together meaninglessly to a common doom. This is an uncanny, a sinister, a night-mare view of life, and its peculiar *unheimlichkeit*, or poisonousness, lies expressly in our holding two things together which cannot possibly agree - in our clinging, on the one hand, to the demand that there shall be a living spirit of the whole; and, on the other, to the belief that the course of nature must be such a spirit's adequate manifestation and expression. ("Is Life Worth Living?," 41)

"Design" also invokes the "indissoluble partnership" of life and death in the image of the spider feeding on the white moth in such a way to invite readings along the lines of

Jarrell's, which interpret this scene as an "adequate manifestation and expression" of a creator. But in a famous passage from Pragmatism, which has been discussed at length by Richard Poirer, James argued against this line of reasoning:

The designer is no longer the old man-like deity. His designs have grown so vast as to be incomprehensible to us humans. The *what* of them so overwhelms us that to establish the mere *that* of a designer for them becomes of very little consequence in comparison. We can with difficulty comprehend the *character* of a cosmic mind whose purposes are fully revealed by the strange mixture of goods and evils that we find in this actual world's particulars. Or rather we cannot by any possibility comprehend it. The mere word 'design' by itself has no consequences and explains nothing. (112-113)

This passage appears to explicate the final line of the poem. According to James, no design that we can "by any possibility comprehend" can be read into "a thing so small," so that the sonnet's final question becomes moot. Instead, as Poirer argues, the sonnet "Design" is allied to "the charmingly confident willingness in James to allow for alternate or conflicting possibilities," in which the action of the spider cannot be read as indicating any definite, final order or "darkness of design" in the cosmos at large (250). In this way, the sonnet vindicates Frost's perception of the cosmos as a "black and utter chaos" whose design, if it even exists, is perceived as random because it cannot be comprehended.

These arguments of the ambiguity of the design of the cosmos do not quite apply to the design of the sonnet itself, however. The sonnet's perception of a possibly evil design is first and foremost a product of Frost's art, which invents the connections and implications of an evil designer through its language far beyond those which are inherent in the actual scene. For example, the speaker notices the irony of the "innocent" name of the heal-all, but it is extremely doubtful whether this name has any connection to the argument by design, although it is offered as a key component of the sonnet. Elizabeth Isaacs has also argued that the verbs "do," "brought," and "steered" in the sestet of "Design" deliberately create the impression of a designer that the final line cannot quite retract (116). But "Design" also creates the impression of a malevolent designer through

the play on the motif of the number three, setting the spider, moth, and heal-all in an almost mystical relation with one another. The number of rhymes in the poem is reduced to three, and lines 1-3 and 4-6 are separated from the remainder of the poem by dashes, creating two tercets. Moreover, there is a triple appearance of the word "white" in the first three lines, with a formal repetition of the three key elements of the poem ("a snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth, and dead wings carried like a paper kite") at the end of the octave. Together, these elements show that the order that Frost imposes on his material is implicated with the creation of a sense of the "design of darkness" that the sonnet invokes.

This "design of darkness" invoked in the sonnet is thus also a reference to the poet's art itself. "The strict formal design which characterizes the sonnet" would then not only "ape and mime the internal argument of the poem," as George Monterio suggests in his essay on "Design" (338), but rather it would be an active agent that creates it. Some of the "existential terror" that Isaacs discovers in the poem (115) or the "terror" asserted by Lionel Trilling is thus the result of the questioning of the significance of poetic design. This possibility is left unresolved by the final line of the poem, since the retraction does mollify the implications of a "dark" designer of the universe but not the poet himself. Here the radical element of Frost's thought needs to be emphasized. In both his statements of aesthetics and in his earlier sonnets, invocations of order were seen as positive human constructions that were set against the "black and utter chaos" of the larger universe. In "Design," however, Frost suggests that certain forms of order in themselves can create a terrifying vision of darkness or emptiness, so that human creation does not lead to any "momentary stay," but rather to the "chaos" or "confusion" that it is supposed to combat. The act of writing the sonnet, by this logic, may in the end be implicated in the creation of a "chaos" or "confusion." This vision provides yet another repudiation of Platonic harmony in the sonnet form, although it is in a manner that questions Frost's own poetics in the process.

"Design" has come to be recognized as Frost's greatest sonnet, and along with Yeats's "Leda and the Swan," it is among the greatest sonnet written in the early twentieth century. In the work of no other poet does the sonnet raise such important philosophical and even cosmological questions, with the sonnet form itself, through its association with order, being implicated in the charge that the act of producing a design may be a "dark" and terrifying deed in itself. Yet it is not surprising that Frost should have discovered a new philosophical role for the sonnet structure, given his preoccupation throughout his sonnets in defining his broadly non-Platonic stance. In this sense his sonnets may be read in light of William Carlos Williams's arguments against the form which were quoted in the introduction:

Some things in the book are of indifferent worth or at times downright bad: sloppy rhymes, inversion of phrase, distortions otherwise of the natural sequence of speech, fixed habits of versification that brings a line up flush against the wainscotting - for what reason? We still get the baneful sonnet which says always the same thing, quite beyond control. ("Mid-Century American Poets (1950)," 179)

By infusing his sonnets with a deeper philosophical argument which argued against the common assumptions of the Renaissance sonnet, Frost was able to avoid committing his work in the form to saying "the same thing, quite beyond control."

### **Edna St. Vincent Millay and the Voices of the Sonnet**

As early as 1912, Ezra Pound was attempting to define a precise, modern style to replace what he believed to be the dated legacy of Victorian poetry. The language of modern poetry, he argued, should be adapted to the object being described, eschewing any traditional associations or archaisms which had lost their original meaning. In arguing for this shift in poetic expression, Pound would often resort to recalling the sonnet, in particular the sonnet as influenced by Petrarch, as a famous example of the inaccurate, clichéd writing that must be avoided:

In that art the gulf between Petrarch's capacity and Guido's is the great gulf, not of degree, but of kind. In Guido the 'figure', the strong metamorphic or 'picturesque' expression is there with purpose to convey or to interpret a definite meaning. In Petrarch it is ornament, the prettiest ornament he could find, but not an irreplaceable ornament, or one that he couldn't have used just about as well somewhere else. In fact he very often does use it, and them, somewhere, and nearly everywhere else, all over the place. ("Cavalcanti," 154-155)

The reference to "figure" in this passage makes it clear that Pound is referring to imagery, the Petrarchan conceit which was popular during the English Renaissance. Yet the more general term "expression" also allows for a broader interpretation which would include alliteration and personification when not used to create a precise effect, for example, or the automatic assumption of a traditional rhyme scheme or metre. Later in the same essay, Pound drew the natural conclusion of this attack on the "ornamental" style of Petrarch by attempting to banish its influence from modern poetry. "The Italian of Petrarch and his successors is of no interest to the practicing writer," he argued, since "the collectors of bric-a-brac are outside our domain" ("Cavalcanti," 199).

Pound's attack on the "ornamental" style of the sonnet, those features which were used to create an automatic euphony or stock associations, was maintained throughout his early career. Helen Vendler, for example, has recounted the story of how Pound would instruct younger poets such as Basil Bunting to edit Shakespeare's sonnets by removing any lines or phrases that were merely ornamental, an exercise that would often



leave less than half of the original poem standing (The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets, 9). The result was a series of "sonnets" stripped to their bare arguments. In Bunting's hands, the final six lines of sonnet 30 could become:

I can tell o'er  
The sad account  
As if not paid before.  
But if I think on thee,  
All losses are restor'd. (9)<sup>67</sup>

These lines are successful in avoiding any stock associations or poetical devices that are unnecessary to the presentation of the argument, and in these respects they avoid any hint of the ornamental sonnet style. Pound's suspicion of the traditional sonnet style soon became widespread. Randall Jarrell, as was noted briefly in the introduction,<sup>68</sup> repeated Pound's criticisms in a review entitled "The Rhetoricians," in which he criticized Conrad Aikens's book of sonnets And in the Human Heart as being a mere exercise in stale poetical associations:

Chaos, infinity, eternity, the sea, the snow, fire, ice, leaves, birds, dreams, angels, heaven and hell, the heart, the soul - such favourites as these are more emotional and meaningful for Mr. Aiken, more essential to the poems, than the "subject" that serves as their pretext. He could write fairly pleasing and interesting poetry about any subject whatsoever; deprive him of the use of his favourite words and he would be simply unable to write poetry at all. (52-53)

Later in the same review, Jarrell criticized the poet Richard Holden on the same grounds:

Mr. Holden's forms are traditional in the deadest sense of the word; often one can hardly pay attention to the poem for staring at the terrible I AM A SONNET writ

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<sup>67</sup> Vendler refers to this version of sonnet 30 as "a somewhat less mutilated sonnet" (9). Shakespeare's sonnet 87, by contrast, was reduced to two lines after Bunting's editing. Shakespeare's lines in sonnet 30 run: "Then can I grieve at grievances foregone, / And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er / The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan, / Which I new pay as if not paid before. / But if the while I think on thee (dear friend) / All losses are restored, and sorrows end." The most conspicuous difference between the two versions lies in Shakespeare's use of phrases to introduce repetitions, alliteration, and imagery which are not strictly necessary to the argument.

<sup>68</sup> See the section on "The Sonnet as Ornament" in chapter 1 above, pp. 11-17.

large on every feature. (53)

Following Pound, Jarrell implies that a sonnet should either disguise or avoid the features that are commonly associated with the form.

Together with similar criticisms by T. S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams,<sup>69</sup> this rejection of any automatic employment of typical sonnet themes and language influenced the very modern-sounding sonnets of Robinson, Frost and Yeats, among others. Yet there also existed a traditional approach to sonnet writing in the early twentieth century that defied Pound's dictates. Opening Edna St. Vincent Millay's first volume Renascence and Other Poems (1917), for example, one finds sonnets that seem to be written in the style that Pound and Jarrell were attempting to banish from twentieth-century verse:

Thou art not lovelier than lilacs, - no,  
Nor honeysuckle; thou art not more fair  
Than small white single poppies, - I can bear  
Thy beauty; though I bend before thee, though  
From left to right, now knowing where to go,  
I turn my troubled eyes. . .

At first, it may be difficult to believe that this poem was published in the same year as Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Its diction is archaic ("thou art," "fair") and its imagery (the comparison of a beloved to flowers and the "troubled eyes") is no different from that which may be found in sonnets from the Renaissance. Furthermore, the use of three floral images when only one is needed to establish the comparison, the parallel constructions, and the heavy use of alliteration to create euphony in spite of the rejection of beauty of the argument, all call to mind Pound's characterization of sonnet language as "ornament, the prettiest ornament [the poet] could find," a style that would appear increasingly problematic to critics and poets alike as the century progressed.

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<sup>69</sup> See the introduction's section on "The Sonnet as Ornament" in chapter 1 above, pp. 13-17, for an extended discussion of this critique.

This "ornamental" style - the archaic diction, involved syntax, euphony, and familiar images - runs throughout Millay's work in the sonnet. Predictably, it has been attacked by several critics, including Janice P. Stout, who argued that "at times [Millay] so smothers her work in stale poeticisms and sentiment that it seems tritely sentimental and outmoded" ("Fretting Not," 30).<sup>70</sup> Any detailed consideration of her sonnets must at some point account for its persistence. Millay's critics have provided two general defenses of the ornamental style. Among her contemporaries, it was defended as a natural expression of certain emotional states, as when Louis Untermeyer argued that:

Hers is a triumph not only of expression but above all of idiom; she is one of the few living poets who can employ inversions, who can use the antiquated *forsooth*, *alack!* *prithee*, and *la*, and not seem an absurd anachronism. Possibly it is because Miss Millay is at heart a belated Elizabethan that she can use locutions which in the work of any other American would be affected and false. (*American Poetry Since 1900*, 219)

The defense of Millay's language as the sincere expression of "a belated Elizabethan," however, is circular and rather curious. More plausibly, Millay's traditional sonnet style has been discussed by later critics as "an alternative to the 'new' poetry, and whose work could serve as a rallying point for the rejection of free verse, imagism, and Prufrockian ennui" (Frank, 129). In writing sonnets such as "Thou art not lovelier than lilacs," Millay has been read as participating in a strain of modern poetry that defined itself against the values of high Modernism.<sup>71</sup> Millay's friend Elinor Wylie, for example, ended her poetic career with *Air and Angels*, a sonnet sequence which relied heavily on allusions to the English Renaissance, and even Yvor Winters adopted a deliberately ornamental style filled with inversions, repetitions, and apostrophes in the sestet of "Sonnet to the Moon":

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<sup>70</sup> See also John Ciardi's criticism of Millay's "archaic embellishment, and her sonnets in the grand manner" ("Edna St. Vincent Millay: A Figure of Passionate Living," 157).

<sup>71</sup> Among the most prominent of these essays are Cheryl Walker's "Antimodern, Modern, and Postmodern Millay: Contexts of Reevaluation" and John Timberman Newcomb's "The Woman as Political Poet: Edna St. Vincent Millay and the Mid-Century Canon."

O triple goddess! Contemplate my plight!  
 Opacity, my fate! Change, my delight!  
 The yellow tom-cat, sunk in shifting fur,  
 Change and dreams, a phosphorescent blur.

Sullen I wait, but still the vision shun.  
 Bodiless thoughts and thoughtless bodies run.

Millay's style has thus been read as evidence of one of several "modernisms" that played an important role in the early twentieth century, despite their lack of adherence to the aims or values dictated by Pound and others.

As interesting as these historical arguments are, there is a more precise use of the ornamental style in "Thou art not lovelier than lilacs"<sup>72</sup> that will lend an additional insight into Millay's poetics. The sonnet in full reads:

Thou art not lovelier than lilacs, - no,  
 Nor honeysuckle; thou art not more fair  
 Than small white poppies, - I can bear  
 Thy beauty; though I bend before thee, though  
 From left to right, now knowing where to go,  
 I turn my troubled eyes, nor here nor there  
 Find any refuge from thee, yet I swear  
 So has it been with mist, - with moonlight so.  
 Like him who day by day unto his draught  
 Of delicate poison adds him one drop more  
 Till he may drink unharmed the death of ten,  
 Even so, inured to beauty, who have quaffed  
 Each hour more deeply than the hour before,  
 I drink - and live - what has destroyed some men.

The beloved is here compared to "mist" or "moonlight," other commonplace images of beauty, before calling the speaker's love, predictably, a "poison" that has been "quaffed." In its final line, however, the poem changes suddenly to a more direct and assertive voice to give its rejection of the beloved: "I drink - and live - what has destroyed some men." "Thou art not lovelier than lilacs" can thus be read as an expression of two voices, one

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<sup>72</sup> The majority of Millay's sonnets are untitled and so will be referred to by their opening line or clause here and elsewhere.

archaic and one modern, which interact to produce the meaning of the poem . The rejection of the beloved's beauty as something conventional depends on a sonnet style which is itself conventional, while the speaker's newfound assertion of independence is given an added depth by being expressed in a direct, modern language which depends on its contrast to the archaisms of the preceding thirteen for its full effect.

This dual voice in Millay's sonnets was first noted by John Crowe Ransom in his much-criticized essay "The Woman as Poet,"<sup>73</sup> in which he argued that "it is in the other division of her verse, where she is entirely or nearly original and contemporary, and less pretentious, that she is decidedly the more considerable as a poet" (87). However, as the preceding analysis suggests, the effect of the "modern" and "ornamental" voices of the sonnets often depend on the presence of one another, and at times the two voices are not easy to separate. "Thou art not lovelier than lilacs" is an exception to Millay's usual method in the sonnets, in which the archaic and modern voices are intertwined and the poem moves freely from one to the other. In imitation of Wordsworth's famous criticism of Gray's sonnet to Richard West in the "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems (1802)" in which the later poet separated those lines consisting of "poetic diction" from those that "in no respect differ from that of prose" (438-439), one can choose an early Millay sonnet and italicize those sections which draw upon phrases or turns of imagery which appear to be deliberately archaic, leaving those phrases composed in a modern voice in regular type:

*I shall forget you presently, my dear,  
So make the most of this, your little day,  
Your little month, your little half a year,  
Ere I forget, or die, or move away.*

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<sup>73</sup> See, for example, John Timberman Newcomb's "The Woman as Political Poet: Edna St. Vincent Millay and the Mid-Century Canon," which analyzes Ransom's sexist biases at some length (271-75). While this analysis remains quite valuable, his argument fails to acknowledge that Ransom is often complimentary of Millay's verse, and that his essay shows considerable insight into her rhetorical strategies.

*And we are done forever; by and by  
 I shall forget you, as I said, but now,  
 If you entreat me with your loveliest lie  
 I will protest you with my favourite vow.  
 I would indeed that love were longer-lived,  
 And oaths were not as brittle as they are,  
 But so it is, and nature has contrived  
 To struggle on without a break thus far, -  
 Whether or not we find what we are seeking  
 Is idle, biologically speaking.*

Of course, in making such distinctions it is possible to debate whether or not a particular phrase is more or less archaic or modern, yet it is undeniable that the language of this sonnet fluctuates between the two. Several choices in the diction ("presently," "ere," "protest," the lover's "vow," using the word "done" to mean "dead")<sup>74</sup> invoke a language which is conventionally "poetic," and the conceit of lines 2-3, the personification of nature in line 11, and the syntax of lines 7-8 seem more appropriate to a Renaissance sonnet than to a poem written in the early twentieth century. Against these archaisms, Millay provides an unadorned statement of indifference ("I shall forget you, as I said") and the final couplet, which turns the sonnet from a statement of the stock conceit on the brevity of love to an assertion of female independence expressed in the language of modern science. What emerges from this mixture of styles is a new variation on a familiar theme, in which the speaker alternates between regret for the end of the love, expressed in the language of traditional love sonnets, and statements of indifference, expressed in a modern idiom. It is this blend of voices, the use of different types of language to express varying emotions or arguments, that characterizes Millay's work in the sonnet, and her attraction to the form can be understood not only in terms of the sonnet's traditional status as a love poem or its historical inclusion of female authors,<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> This pun was a favourite of John Donne's and was used to great effect in his "Hymn to God the Father."

<sup>75</sup> There has been a strange argument made by various feminist critics (Debra Fried in her essay "Andromeda Unbound: Gender and Genre in Millay's Sonnets" among them) that the sonnet is somehow a "male" poetic form which has traditionally been hostile to

but also as a form that recalls a set of conventions that act as a contrast to other voices within the poem.

Before proceeding further, the term "voice" must be explained. To this point, a "modern" and a "traditional sonnet" voice have been distinguished, with the word "voice" referring to a myriad of features which include diction, syntax, imagery, prosody, poetic devices, and stock themes, making the word into a catch-all phrase meant to distinguish between different forms of expression in the broadest sense. Beyond this general use, however, the term "voice" may be misleading, since it does not refer to a multiplicity of characters or personae within a Millay sonnet, since all of her work in the form includes a single, lyric speaker or consistent point of view.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, the word "voice" is not meant to invoke any precise literary allusions, in which the "voices" of the sonnets may be attributed to an echo of a particular sonnet by Shakespeare, say, or Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Millay's traditional sonnet style has resisted any precise identification, and attempts by critics to identify specific sources for her sonnets tend to be somewhat vague and contradictory. Elizabeth Frank, for example, has attempted to characterize the sources for her style as follows:

That is, starting with her earliest verses, Millay's style was a resplendent pastiche of Sapphic simplicity, Catullan urbanity, homeless Chaucerian

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female poets, so that Millay's use of the form becomes a radical or "subversive" gesture. However, throughout its history, the sonnet has frequently been employed by female poets, beginning with Anne Lock (who is now believed to have composed the first sonnet sequence in English, *The Meditation of a Penitent Sinner*) and continuing with Lady Mary Wroth, Charlotte Smith, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Christina Rossetti to Millay's own time. In fact, every major period of sonnet writing contained at least one prominent female sonnet writer, so that it could be argued that, more than any other, the sonnet has been the poetical form in English that is the most accommodating of women.<sup>76</sup> A useful comparison may be made with Mikhail Bakhtin's influential notions of the dialogic and monologic work. Millay's sonnets are not dialogic because they include only a single speaking voice, but seem to be monologic, resolving the various styles into a single, overarching effect within the poem, even though they do so by contrast. See Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*, pp. 296-297.

idiom, uprooted Shakespearian grammar, Cavalier sparkle, Wordsworthian maganimity, Keatsian sensuousness, and Housmanian melancholy, not of course compounded all at once in a single lethal draught, but lightly dispersed here and there throughout her songs and sonnets. ("A Doll's Heart," 129)

Judith Farr, however, has composed a completely different list in her attempt to note Millay's sources, arguing that:

Though Millay and Wylie were accomplished sonneteers when they began these sequences [*Fatal Interview* and *Air and Angels*, respectively], they had never written deliberately in an Elizabethan mode. Millay's books, like Second April or A Few Figs from the Thistles, contained many sonnets, many influenced by Tennyson, Rosetti, or Keats. A few had a vague Elizabethan flavor. . . many combined a lushness of tone with a wry modern nuance suited to her feminism and Bohemianism. ("Elinor Wylie, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and the Elizabethan Sonnet Tradition," 288-9)

These lists, while suggestive, ultimately say very little about the sources of any specific sonnet. Instead, Millay's voices may best be described as the presentation of different states or points of view through styles belonging to different broad traditions or literary periods, what Judith Farr has described as "different settings and accents express[ing] different aspects of the speaker's nature" (295).

As Farr's observation implies, the identification of the voices in Millay's sonnets may be refined beyond the modern and ornamental ones that have been described thus far, although this contrast will prove to be a central one in a large number of the sonnets. To this contrast will be added distinctions between an urban and rural voice, a scientific and romantic one, and so on. Two points must be kept in mind when distinguishing these voices. First, each voice exists in opposition to others in the same work, and in the cases where a single voice tends to dominate, the emotions tend to be rather extreme and one-sided. Second, there is no consistent viewpoint or function assigned to any given voice throughout Millay's work. These shifts in meaning are often sudden, occurring within



sonnets published in the same volume, making Millay's contrasts between these voices extremely subtle, complex, and difficult to categorize.<sup>77</sup>

The remainder of this chapter will attempt to distinguish between the voices of Millay's sonnets in order to explore their connotations, functions, and meanings. Before doing so, however, it may be useful to note the importance of Millay's techniques, both in her retainment of a traditional sonnet voice and in her mixing of different voices within a single poem. Viewed in retrospect, Millay's use of a traditional sonnet voice, even in the limited role as a contrast to other voices within a poem, marks the end of the serious use of this style. After Millay, attempts to retain those images and rhetoric that had survived from the Renaissance to the Victorian period were to become increasingly rare.<sup>78</sup> Sonnet sequences devoted to a love affair were to largely disappear after *Fatal Interview*, for example. Traditional sonnet themes and diction had already disappeared in the sonnets of her most influential contemporaries, such as Frost, Yeats, and Auden, and their sporadic revival in the sonnets of John Berryman or Aikens failed to spark any widespread interest or imitation.

However, Millay's second contribution to the sonnet, the pioneering<sup>79</sup> of the technique of using a polyphony of styles within a single sonnet, was to provide an important model throughout the twentieth century, appearing in later sonnets by poets who seem to have little sympathy for her work in particular. Seamus Heaney, for example, was to combine different periods of language in his *Glanmore Sonnets* to

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<sup>77</sup> An instance of this fact may be seen in the role of an archaic voice in the first two sonnets of *Renascence*, discussed in p. 157 below.

<sup>78</sup> See the epilogue to this thesis, pp. 255-256, for a consideration of this shift.

<sup>79</sup> Millay does not seem to have invented this technique, which appears in the sonnet by Thomas Gray cited above (it is arguable that the artificial passages that Wordsworth identified are meant to represent a public, conventional show of grief). However, Millay remains unparalleled in the subtlety with which she uses this technique and the consistency with which she employed it.

illustrate themes on the nature of language.<sup>80</sup> The poet Marilyn Nelson has recently provided the natural extension of this technique by combining various dialects within a sonnet to suggest differing backgrounds of her speakers.<sup>81</sup> In helping to popularize the use of different voices within a single sonnet, then, Millay must be considered alongside E. A. Robinson, Robert Frost, and E. E. Cummings as one of the writers who not only produced a large body of notable sonnets, but who introduced an important innovation into the sonnet form to help foster the spirit of innovation that defines the sonnet during this period of its evolution.

### Miscellaneous Early Sonnets

On a casual reading, Millay's use of the sonnet from her first volume *Renascence* through her long sequence *Fatal Interview* would seem to reveal little consistency, since her work in the form reveals an astonishing variety of voices. The sonnets range from invocations of ornamental language and Petrarchan conceits ("Thou art not lovelier than lilacs") to those which are self-consciously contemporary and topical ("Only until this cigarette is ended"), from those that are personal and passionate ("Oh, think not I am faithful to a vow!") to those that present the intellectual and universal ("Euclid alone has looked on Beauty bare"). Yet, when viewed in light of her first sonnet sequence, *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree*, or those sonnets that appeared in her final volumes, these early sonnets reveal a distinct, if complex, phase of her career. Millay's early use of the sonnet represents a lyrical period in her work, in which she used the sonnet to investigate the emotional responses of her speakers, whether these emotions are the result of love,

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<sup>80</sup> In the seventh sonnet of the sequence, for example, contemporary names ("Irish Sea"), Anglo-Saxon kennings ("eel-road, seal-road, keel-road, whale-road"), the names of French ships ("*L'Etoile, Le Guillemot, La Belle Helene*"), and Scottish and Danish place names ("Minches, Cromarty, The Faroes") all combine to describe the importance of the sea.

<sup>81</sup> Her sonnet "Balance," for example, opens with a line in dialect ("He watch her like a coonhound watch a tree") before switching to a literary, standard English ("What might explain the metamorphosis").

momentary infatuation, or spontaneous response to a piece of music or even the edifice of mathematics.

This unifying preoccupation of the sonnet as a lyric form can be seen through the very different sonnets of her first volume Renascence, which introduced many of the important voices and themes that occupied Millay during this first phase of her career. Renascence begins with the archaic language of "Thou art not lovelier than lilacs," introducing conceits from the Renaissance which, as has been noted, are rejected by the speaker's modern indifference in the sonnet's final line. In the second sonnet the speaker openly mourns the loss of her lover in a modern, colloquial voice ("Time does not bring relief; you all have lied") mixed with an ornamental one to express her grief ("harped on my heart," "so stand stricken"). In the third sonnet of the book the subject turns to death, where all of nature is believed to mourn the departed:

Mindful of you the sodden earth in spring,  
And all the flowers that in the springtime grow;  
And dusty roads, and thistles, and the slow  
Rising of the round moon; all throats that sing. . .

This catalogue continues for the next eight lines, but in the final couplet the inadequacy of this romantic collection of details is revealed in a less formal language ("But you were something more than young and sweet / And fair"). Millay continues with another sonnet of mourning in which symbolic rural details ("that cold hearth") are mixed with open statements of grief expressed in an archaic, adjective-laden diction ("alien grief and mirth," "vain desire"). The sonnets in Renascence conclude with the indifference of "If I should learn" and the dramatic monologue "Bluebeard," in which the pirate admonishes the wife who has opened the forbidden door in a formal, archaic voice ("sought-for Truth," "profane me") before concluding in a matter-of-fact tone that he is leaving her ("I seek another place").

Together, these poems introduced the technique of the mixing of different voices, here used to represent a strong yet simple emotions such as defiance, love, grief, and

anger. This lyricism runs throughout the fifty or more sonnets that Millay published prior to her sequence *Fatal Interview*, which brought this first phase of sonnet writing to its close. It would be tedious to unravel the different voices in each of them; instead, several general developments in her use of sonnet voices may be noted. The sonnets that follow Renaissance show an increasing range and subtlety in Millay's distinction between different voices. As early as her third volume, Second April, Millay shows an ability in the sonnet "Not with libations" to make a distinction between a personified, general "Love" in the octave ("We drenched the altars of Love's sacred groves") and the precise allusion to Pan in the sestet, which questions the validity of the previous images:

. . . but I fear  
 Though we should break our bodies in his flame,  
 And pour our blood upon his altar, here  
 Henceforward is a grove without a name,  
 A pasture to the shaggy goats of Pan,  
 Whence flee forever a woman and a man.

More generally, Millay begins to openly employ the most outdated conventions of the Renaissance, opening her sonnets with addresses to Cupid ("Love, though for this you riddle me with darts"), poetic inversions ("Cherish you then the hope"), personified abstractions ("Lord Archer, Death"), and the incorporation of various clichés ("Love is not blind") and Petrarchan conceits ("Here is the wound [love] that never will heal")<sup>82</sup>. Simultaneously, Millay was to look beyond the Renaissance for her archaisms, and several sonnets are set in the classical world ("tis with the love of Lesbia and Lucrece" in the sonnet "No rose than in a garden ever grew," for example). These sonnets show their conventional language and imagery openly to an extent that had not been seen for

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<sup>82</sup> The anthology Petrarch in England traces this popular conceit to Wyatt's "The longe love" and Surrey's "Love that doth raine and live within my thought," both of which are loose translations of Petrarch's *Canzoniere* 140. The invocation of Cupid draws on the tradition of the anacreontic, also popular throughout the Renaissance. A longer discussion of these and other Petrarchan conceits appears in chapter 5 in the section "Cummings and the Elizabethan Sonnet" below, pp. 206-226.

centuries, the feature which undoubtedly led to Louis Untermeyer's statement that Millay was "at heart a belated Elizabethan."

This interest in sonnet conventions at times dominates entire poems, and the whole of "Not with libations" is written in an archaic diction and complex syntax that are reminiscent of Renaissance sonnets. These poems may seem to provide a counter-argument to the importance of different voices in the sonnets, although they in fact show a close affinity to her usual technique. Millay's sonnets written in a single voice tend to include a self-critique which shows the argument to be one-sided or exaggerated. In "Not with libations," the belief that the sacrifice to "the altars of Love's sacred grove" is futile, and the lovers worship "a grove without a name" that, at best, is dedicated to the lechery symbolized by Pan. The lack of a balancing, modern voice heightens the feeling that the lovers have been too absorbed and single-minded in their devotions. Millay provides a similar admonition in "Let you not say of me," where the use of a single, archaic voice warns the lover not to waste his time "In pretty worship of my withered hands," thereby carrying on "a curious superstition." In "Life, were thy pains as are the pains are hell," the opening line suggests the extreme emotions that the speaker is experiencing, which will culminate in the line "Yet must I cry." The end of the sonnet recalls not a Petrarchan conceit but Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" and his melodramatic declaration that "I fall upon the thorns of life; I bleed!" (l. 54):

So bright this earthly blossom spiked with care,  
This harvest hung behind the boughs of pain,  
Needs must I gather, guessing by the stain  
I bleed, but know not wherefore, know not where.

These statements of extreme emotion will resurface in Millay's one sequence of love sonnets, *Fatal Interview*; here, the lack of a contrasting voice once again suggests an extreme and one-sided speaker who feeds on her own sorrow, a sorrow which needs to be critiqued and balanced by another point of view.

Millay's archaisms, which range from the classical through the Petrarchan conceit and Romantic period writers, were developed simultaneously with a modern voice that systematically rejects all of the features listed above. This trend was actually begun in "If I should learn," a sonnet in Renascence:

If I should learn, in some quite casual way,  
 That you were gone, not to return again -  
 Read from the back-page of a paper, say,  
 Held by a neighbor in a subway train,  
 How at the corner of this avenue  
 And such a street (so are the papers filled)  
 A hurrying man, who happened to be you,  
 At noon today had happened to be killed,  
 I should not cry aloud - I could not cry  
 Aloud, or wring my hands in such a place -  
 I should but watch the station lights rush by  
 With a more careful interest on my face;  
 Or raise my eyes and read with greater care  
 Where to store furs and how to treat the hair.

Millay's success in maintaining a completely modern style is remarkable for a poet who could begin another sonnet in the same volume with the line "Thou art not lovelier than lilacs." But not only does the sonnet employ a thoroughly modern style, it is also filled with images of subways, newspapers, station lights and advertisements, objects that highlight the separation between the speaker and the Petrarchan sonnet tradition. The emotions expressed in this sonnet, a type of *ennui* and worldliness ("so are the papers filled"), and the absorption in the trivialities of daily life make it difficult to imagine a sonnet that marked more of a break with the sonnet of Petrarch in its language, imagery, and themes. Later, Millay would continue this exploration by conjuring a dance floor filled with "jazzing music" to state that her speaker will remember her lover "Only until this cigarette is ended" or creating a speaker in "I shall forget you presently" who could casually allude to modern biology.

Throughout the early sonnets, this modern idiom would become associated with a lyric speaker who has been read as a projection of Millay herself in the role of a modern

female poet and early feminist. Elizabeth Frank, for example has argued that Millay's early poems featured a persona characterized by "the insouciant manner with which she turned grief to cynicism, often achieving a novel prestige by being the agent of the sexual rejection" ("A Doll's Heart," 132). Phyllis M. Jones has made a similar argument, thus placing Millay in a long line of female sonnet writers:

The 'lady' we meet in the sonnet sequences by Wylie and Millay, as well as in earlier sequences such as *Sonnets from the Portugese* and 'Monna Innominata' revises male romantic explanations by emphasis upon her passion, equality, and independence; insists upon realistic self-portraiture; uses female imagery; and employs frequently a pragmatic tone and conversational style. ("Amatory Sonnet Sequences," 44)

This "pragmatic tone and conversational style" is certainly present in a sonnet such as "If I should learn," where the imagined death of the lover produces no more than an increased attention to what she finds on the subway. The first line of "Only until this cigarette is ended," another sonnet written in a completely modern style, refers to the amount of time that the speaker will "permit [her] memory to recall" a lover, a theme that is repeated in "I shall forget you presently, my dear" and at the end of the often-quoted sonnet "I, being born a woman":

. . . let me make it plain:  
I find this frenzy insufficient reason  
For conversation when we meet again.

However, just as Millay's archaic idiom can often be seen to exaggerate her lovers' passions, an attention to the use of a single, modern idiom also reveals elements of exaggeration. The declaration that the death of a lover will only lead to a reading of advertisements or that a love affair deserves consideration for only as long as the speaker smokes a cigarette are deliberate overstatements of indifference. In those sonnets such as "I, being born a woman" which use a mixture of the modern and archaic language ("the poor treason / Of my stout blood against my staggering brain"), however, the statement of independence gains force by acknowledging those passions that are so completely

suppressed in her sonnets which use only a single voice. The point here is not to deny these statements of "independence" and "equality" by Millay's modern speakers, but to point out that her declarations of a complete absence of emotion are at times taken to an extreme if they remain unbalanced by other, admittedly florid, voices.

As these examples suggest, the overwhelming majority of Millay's early sonnets explore the theme of love through an increasing range of images, styles, and perspectives. These works may be viewed as early drafts for the major sonnet sequences that represent Millay's greatest achievement of the form, with the modern idiom and rejection of the lovers foreshadowing *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree*, and the mixture of voices being a preview for *Fatal Interview*. But in her volumes *The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems* (1923) and *The Buck in the Snow* (1928), Millay began to anticipate the philosophical and social themes that would culminate in *Epitaph for the Race of Man*, an early draft of which appeared in the same year as the latter volume. Here, Millay began to compose sonnets on subjects as diverse as Beethoven's symphonies ("Sweet sounds, oh, beautiful music") and the "Country of hunchbacks!" which is addressed in "Sonnet to Gath." Perhaps the most significant of this group of sonnets is "To Inez Milholland," which an epigraph reveals to have been "read in Washington, November eighteenth, 1923, at the unveiling of a statue of three leaders in the cause of Equal Rights for Women" (*Collected Sonnets*, 67). The sonnet begins with a formal, archaic diction and inverted syntax suitable for an inscription to a monument ("Upon this marble bust that is not I") spoken by Inez Milholland herself, but the sonnet ends with a line in a modern voice meant to speak directly to future generations: "Take up the song; forget the epitaph." However, it was an earlier poem in praise of Euclid that most fully anticipated the style of her later sonnets:

Euclid alone has looked on Beauty bare.  
 Let all who prate of Beauty hold their peace,  
 And lay them prone upon the earth and cease  
 To ponder on themselves, the while they stare



At nothing, intricately drawn nowhere  
 In shapes of shifting lineage; let geese  
 Gabble and hiss, but heroes seek release  
 From dusty bondage into luminous air.  
 O blinding hour, O holy, terrible day,  
 When first the shaft into his vision shone  
 Of light anatomized! Euclid alone  
 Has looked on Beauty bare. Fortunate they  
 Who, though once only and then but far away,  
 Have heard her massive sandal set on stone.

The archaic diction ("prate") and syntax ("the while they stare"), the personifications and apostrophes, are all familiar from Millay's earlier love sonnets. What marks this sonnet as different from the love lyrics is not only the subject matter, but the complete separation of the rhetorical devices from the subject matter of the poem itself. The conceits and classical imagery that Millay employs had been developed to express lyric emotion, and it may be argued that the development of the modern style was driven by the need to express themes (especially feminist statements of strength or indifference) that are absent from the traditional Petrarchan sonnet.<sup>83</sup> In "Euclid alone," however, the imagery and diction make no attempt to portray the work of the Greek mathematician, and his profession is barely alluded to in line six. Based on the description given in the sonnet, Euclid could just as well be a painter or physicist interested in optics as a mathematician. Instead, the language of this sonnet develops its theme in a highly stylized, slightly archaic language that is independent of its subject, a style that will grow in importance in the examination of her later sonnets.

### **Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree**

*Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* (1923) was the first sonnet sequence of Millay's to be published,<sup>84</sup> and in many respects it stands as an exception to the remainder of her

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<sup>83</sup> See the analysis of the imagery and theme of "If I should learn" above, p. 160, for example.

<sup>84</sup> Norman Britten notes that *Epitaph for the Race of Man* was first conceived as early as 1920 as a single poem written in blank verse. It is not known precisely when Millay decided to recast this poem as a sonnet sequence (91).

work in the sonnet form. For example, this sequence is Millay's only attempt at writing what has been called the "dramatic sonnet" in the chapter on E. A. Robinson, her only effort in a type of sonnet where the lyrical speaker is abandoned in favour of narrative, resulting in a shift in emphasis to the external portrayal of character and events or what John Fuller has called "less the poetic equivalent of a novel than a short story" (*The Sonnet*, 46). *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* also represents Millay's one completely original structural innovation in the sonnet, the introduction of a heptameter final line. Her greatest departure in these sonnets, however, lies in their language, where any conventional poeticisms in diction and imagery - those features which mark her typical ornamental approach to the sonnet - are rejected in favour of the thoroughly modern idiom which she explored in several early sonnets, a style more suitable to the sequence's setting and themes.

It is this relatively modern and unadorned language of *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* that is all-important, since it dominates the other features of the sequence, including plot and character. The narrative element of *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* is rather slight, describing an unnamed, estranged wife who returns to her former home to nurse her dying husband. In the first eight sonnets, the wife performs various chores around the farm and house. Sonnets 9 through 11 offer a series of brief flashbacks to her courtship and the early days of the marriage, while the final six sonnets return the sequence to its fictional present by depicting the wife's acts of nursing and her reaction to the death of her husband, who passes away quietly in sonnet 15. As in her other sonnet sequences, Millay's plotting avoids subplots or detailed descriptions of key events, so that the burden of conveying her themes is shifted to the particulars of language and imagery. Similarly, the major vehicle for depicting the character of the wife is the language. This sequence provides an extended example of the indirect monologue, a technique drawn from prose

fiction in which the thoughts and emotions of a protagonist are interwoven with more or less objective descriptions of settings and events.<sup>85</sup> The language of the sequence is thus adapted to the inner world of the wife, a rural woman who in the course of the sequence emerges as timid, unworldly, and free of any semblance of an intellectual life, a character for whom the unadorned style of the sequence, dominated by concrete descriptions mixed with immediate impressions, is the only mode of thought.

Throughout the sequence, the wife's character and expression are interwoven to an unusually high degree. *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* begins with a simple plot summary:

So she came back into his house again  
And watched beside his bed until he died,  
Loving him not at all. . .

Contained within these lines is the central mystery surrounding the wife's motivations, her emotional state in returning to nurse her husband despite "loving him not at all." The remainder of this sonnet switches from these concerns to turn to a description of the wife's neglected garden as "she went out for wood." It is only in the sonnet's final lines that the reader is permitted to enter into the wife's thoughts:

. . . there, from the sodden eaves  
Blown back and forth on ragged ends of twine,  
Saw the dejected creeping-jinny vine,  
(And one, big-aproned, blithe, with stiff blue sleeves  
Rolled to the shoulder that warm day in spring,  
Who planted seeds, musing ahead to their far blossoming).

Here, for the first time in the sequence, the wife's memories of herself and former life in this house guide the description. At this point, when the wife still feels detached from her surroundings shortly after her return to the farm, her thoughts remain separated

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<sup>85</sup> James Woods has provided a recent account of Jane Austen's invention of this technique through her "dispensing with quotation marks and blending the heroine's soliloquy with her own third-person narration, so that she is able to move in and out of a character as she pleases" ("Jane Austen's Heroic Consciousness," 23).

formally by parentheses. As the sequence progresses, the wife's reflections begin to blend more thoroughly with the narrator's descriptions, as in sonnet 3:

She filled her arms with wood, and set her chin  
Forward, to hold the highest stick in place,  
No less afraid than she had always been  
Of spiders up her arms and on her face. . .

Here the description shifts in mid-sentence from the wife's thoughts to the particulars of her surroundings, from the objective descriptions of gathering wood to the wife's fears and memories. These depictions of the wife's thoughts eventually expand to the point where almost all of the details may be read as being filtered through her consciousness or coloured by her emotional state. By the end of the sequence, there are even brief passages that act as a stream of consciousness:

And the mute clock, maintaining ever the same  
Dead moment, blank and vacant of itself,  
Was a pink shepherdess, a picture frame,  
A shell marked Souvenir, there on the shelf. (sonnet 15)

In general, the point of view of *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* represents a gradual diminishing of the distance between the omniscient narrator and the consciousness of the wife, which become interchangeable through the modern, direct style that characterizes both of them.

Two major themes emerge through the opening group of eight sonnets. The first may be described as a process of acclimatization, in which the wife begins to slip into the habits and memories that she had abandoned when she left her husband, as when she observes the failure of her garden in sonnet 1 or remembers her old fear of spiders in sonnet 3. The frequency with which she turns to these associations (and the seamlessness with which the language of her thoughts blend with the narrator's descriptions) suggests a continuing psychological dependence on her married life in spite of the estrangement. The second theme involves the disjunction between the wife's memories and the reality around her. Millay is careful to plant slight disparities throughout the early part of the

sequence, including the difference between the wife's hopes for her garden and the "sodden eaves" that she finds in sonnet 1, her strange belief that "upon this roof the rain would drum as it was drumming now" when there were "no sagging springs of shower" in the "bright sky" in sonnet 2, and the cleaning of the kitchen in sonnet 7 that results in "an advertisement, far too fine to cook a supper in." Taken together, these gaps between the wife's thoughts and reality help to point to the futility of her actions as she tries to resume her role as a housewife now that her husband is dying.

Through the use of the indirect monologue, the first eight sonnets present the spectacle of a false acclimatization which the wife will have to reject or overcome if she is to have any hope of adjusting to the reality around her. Combined with the indirect monologue is a second narrative technique, the portrayal of character through the use of a landscape which is at once realistic and symbolic, a mode of representation which was likely inspired by Tennyson's lyric "Mariana," as Norman Brittin has observed (53). At times the two works appear to be remarkably similar. Here the image of an untended garden symbolizes neglect and emptiness:

. . . The winter rain  
Splashed in the painted butter-tub outside,  
Where once her red geraniums had stood,  
Where still their rotted stalks were to be seen;  
The thin log snapped; and she went out for wood  
Bareheaded, running the few steps between  
The house and shed. . . (sonnet 1)

With blackest moss the flower pots  
Were thickly crusted, one and all;  
The rusted nails fell from the knots  
That held the pear to the gable-wall.  
The broken sheds look'd sad and strange. . . ("Mariana," lines 1-5)

In the following passages, the use of sounds helps to convey an atmosphere of loneliness, isolation, and helplessness:

. . . the sudden heavy fall

And roll of a charred log, and the roused shower  
 Of snapping sparks; then sharply from the wall  
 The unforgivable crowing of the hour.  
 One instant set ajar, her quiet ear  
 Was stormed and forced by the full rout of day. . . (sonnet 8)

The sparrow's chirrup on the roof,  
 The slow clock ticking, and the sound  
 Which to the wooing wind aloof  
 The poplar made, did all confound  
 Her sense. . . ("Mariana," 73-77)

Through these and other similar passages, the rain-soaked farmhouse of *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* may be read as a modern equivalent of Mariana's "moated grange," a domestic and symbolic landscape evoking an atmosphere of isolation and loneliness.

Equally important are the strong sexual undertones which are carried by the imagery of both poems. Just as the "thickly crusted" pots of Tennyson's lyric imply the lack of erotic fulfillment of the heroine, Millay's imagery contains a myriad of sexual implications, although they tend to suggest male rather than female impotence. For example, at the beginning of the sequence presents the phrases "rotted stalks," "the thin log snapped," and the "dejected creeping-jinny vine" (sonnet 1), as well as "the axe. . . nodding in the block" and the "long incredible sudden silver tongue" that "had just flashed (and yet maybe not!)" (sonnet 2). These images provide a contrast to the open invocation of female desire in sonnets 4 and 10, serving as one of the few hints as to the reasons behind the wife's estrangement.<sup>86</sup> A second hint occurs in sonnet 5, one of the most powerful in the sequence, where it is suggested that even the slightest invocation of male sexuality has become sinister and frightening to the wife:

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<sup>86</sup> Phyllis M. Jones has reached a similar conclusion by arguing that some sort of failure is implied in the husband's absence in the sequence: "When a woman writer presents the traditional and expected situation of intimate entanglement with a man, she frequently conveys his inadequacy from her perspective by incompletely or vaguely characterizing him" ("Amatory Sonnet Sequences and the Female Perspective," 54). Her comments, though written in connection with *Fatal Interview*, apply equally to this sequence.

A wagon stopped before the house; she heard  
 The heavy oilskins of the grocer's man  
 Slapping against his legs. Of a sudden whirred  
 Her heart like a frightened partridge, and she ran  
 And slid the bolt, leaving his entrance free;  
 Then in the cellar way till he was gone  
 Hid, breathless, praying that he might not see. . .  
 She saw the narrow wooden stairway still  
 Plunging into the earth, and the thin salt  
 Crusting the crocks; until she knew him far,  
 So stood, with listening eyes upon the empty doughnut jar.

Here the image of the "oilskin. . . slapping against his legs" and the wife's fear which leads to her need to focus her "eyes upon the empty doughnut jar" and the dramatic "plunging" of the stairway hint that some form of sexual violence existed in the marriage, although Millay's refusal to provide the reasons for her estrangement makes any argument along these lines highly conjectural at best.

The first eight sonnets may be read as presenting a series of evasions on the part of the wife as she simultaneously shuns all contact with the outside world and attempts to resume her identity as a wife at the moment when this role has become impossible to her. Having established this predicament, the sequence shifts its perspective in sonnets 9 through 11 to provide three brief glimpses into the wife's past. Sonnet 9 describes her courtship, beginning with the husband's "flash[ing] a mirror in her eyes at school," an act which "distinguished" him, revealing that their love began, literally, in blindness. Sonnet 10 reveals the wife's confusion of physical and spiritual love:

And if the man were not her spirit's mate,  
 Why was her body sluggish with desire?

Sonnet 12, meanwhile, provides a symbol of the marriage through the image of a lost apron:

Blown down and buried in the deepening drift,  
 To lie till April thawed it back to sight,  
 Forgotten, quaint and novel as a gift -  
 It struck her, as she pulled and pried and tore,  
 That here was spring, and the whole year to be lived through once more.

Like the apron the wife has presumably been "forgotten" and "buried" in the marriage, and the passing of time is revealed to her only through feelings of loss and absence.

These three sonnets represent the turning point of the sequence, the first stirrings of self-awareness on the part of the wife. At last she begins to evaluate herself and her position, discovering that her courtship "was not so wonderful a thing" (sonnet 9) or that a change in the seasons during her marriage only signified "the whole year to be lived through once more" (sonnet 11). The bluntness of these sonnets provides a sharp contrast to the evasions and subtle imagery of the first eight sonnets, where the wife's memories failed to include any explicit criticism of her relationship.

The final six sonnets mark a return to the fictional present. At this point the sequence turns from the wife's attempts to re-establish herself in the house through nursing of her husband and, strengthened by her growing self-awareness, the process of psychologically distancing herself from her husband. In these sonnets Millay achieves some of her subtlest characterization as she portrays both the feelings of strength and fear that the wife's duties lend her. The first result of the flashbacks is to give her an air of superiority over her husband who, she has realized, was "Not over-kind nor over-quick in study / Nor skilled in sports nor beautiful" (sonnet 9):

Tenderly, in those times, as though she fed  
An ailing child - with sturdy propping up  
Of its small, feverish body in the bed,  
And steadying of its hands about the cup -  
She gave her husband of her body's strength,  
Thinking of men, what helpless things they were. . . (sonnet 12)

Here the husband's physical weakness allows the wife to think of him as "an ailing child" and to believe momentarily that all men are equally as "helpless." These thoughts lead her to imagine a "magic World. . . remote from where she lay" which is separated from her only by "something asleep beside her" and "the window screen" (sonnet 12). These promises of the future are accompanied by a diminishing of the husband as a person, so



that his hands are referred to as "its hands" in the lines quoted above, and he becomes a "something" in the sonnet's final line. In its quiet confidence and optimism, sonnet 12 asks to be read against sonnet 5 to reveal the wife's progress from complete terror to an ability to look forward to a vision of the future, even if this vision is seen in hopelessly vague and idealistic terms.

Sonnet 12 is the by far the most optimistic of the sequence, and the remaining five sonnets temper the wife's feelings of superiority and confidence. Sonnet 13 begins with a distanced description of the wife's role as a nurse, depicting her as living in a "wan dream" in which she cannot quite accept the death of her husband, the word "wan" recalling the language of dream visions, the sequence's one lapse into a deliberately archaic diction. Instead, the wife dreams that she is another woman:

Regarding him, the wide and empty scream  
Of a strange sleeper on a malignant bed,  
And all the time not certain if it were  
Herself so doing or some one like to her,  
From this wan dream that was her daily bread. . .

The "empty scream," the only hint of how the husband faces his death, turns the wife's waking life into a type of existential nightmare that serves as a contrast to her vision of a "magic World" in the previous sonnet. Sonnet 14 continues this theme of "horror" at her husband's death, and even returns briefly to the presentation of the wife's fears through the charged imagery of "Mariana" that was prominent at the beginning of the sequence:

She could not keep from noticing how white  
The birches looked, and then she would be afraid,  
Even with a lamp, to go about the house  
And lock the windows; and as night wore on  
Toward morning, if a dog howled or a mouse  
Squeaked in the floor, long after it was gone  
Her flesh would sit awry on her. . .<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> These lines recall Tennyson's "the mouse / Behind the mouldering wainscot shriek'd" (63-64) and "The shadow of the poplar fell / Upon her bed, across her brow" (56-57).

The wife's fears are vanquished only with the death of her husband in sonnet 15, but the optimism and confidence of her brief vision in sonnet 12 fails to return. Instead, the sequence ends ambiguously with the wife's preparations for the funeral (sonnet 16) and the image of "the sheet" covering the husband's body (sonnet 17), with only slight hints as to her eventual fate.

The question that arises towards the end of the sequence lies in whether or not the woman achieves any form of independence within the sequence or remains a prisoner in a psychological sense to the marriage. In her long and sensitive analysis of the sequence, Irene R. Fairley has argued that "it is essential recognize . . . that Millay is portraying the woman as a survivor with dreams of escape intact" ("Edna St. Vincent Millay's Gendered Language and Form," 71). This evaluation seems rather optimistic, however, since the wife's "dreams of escape" appear only in sonnet 12, and are quickly replaced by the "nightmare" vision of sonnet 13, and because the structure of the poems tends to undercut any notions of certainty. Each sonnet ends with an iambic heptameter line, which has enjoyed only a sporadic popularity in English poetry because of its tendency to sound rather forced and awkward. *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* emphasizes this feature by presenting admissions of weakness in the sonnets' final lines:

A child, blowing bubbles that the chairs and carpet did not break! (sonnet 13)

*She had kept that kettle boiling all night long, for company.* (sonnet 14)

"I don't know what you do exactly when a person dies." (sonnet 16)

Small, and absurd, and hers: for once, not hers, unclassified. (sonnet 17)

By ending every sonnet with what amounts to a form of awkwardness, Millay casts doubt on her progress in the sequence and suggests that any reading of the wife's future remains clouded and uncertain.

Yet the wife's character does alter through the course of the seventeen sonnets, even if this change does not allow anything definite about her future to be decided. The

most that can be said is that the wife achieves a measure of independence from her husband, whom she finally recognizes to be someone who is completely other from herself, a process that unravels the idea of her marriage as a type of union. The wife's tie to her husband is stated explicitly in sonnet 9, where she reflects that "It's pretty nice to know / You've got a friend to keep you company everywhere you go," while the first hint at the unraveling of this union occurs in sonnet 12, where the husband becomes an "it" and "something" as the wife begins to contemplate her future. The dissociation continues in sonnet 15, where the dead are seen to exist separately from the living, "that things in death were neither clocks nor people, but only dead." The wife's psychological independence is accomplished at the end of the sequence when she views her husband's body, "severe and dead," which appears to her like "a man she never saw before" (sonnet 17). The final word of the sequence thus becomes "unclassified" (sonnet 17). The wife has done no more than to regard herself as being separate from her husband, a state which contributes to the feelings of uncertainty surrounding her fate. Millay does not hint whether the remainder of the wife's existence will be happy or unhappy, although the extreme timidity with which she arranges the funeral suggests that her life after these events will be difficult, at the very least. Instead, by the end of the sequence the wife has achieved a state where she is free to pursue another identity or way of life, even if the specific results of this choice remain, at this time, vague or undecided.

In several important respects, *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* stands as Millay's most important contribution to the sonnet form. In abandoning her usual lyric speaker and complicated relationship to the traditional lyrical sonnet, Millay was able to produce a sonnet sequence whose variety of narrative techniques, accuracy of expression, and careful balancing of realistic and symbolic elements remain unparalleled not only within the corpus of her own work, but within the body of sonnets and sonnet sequences written in English. These qualities led to extravagant praise by several of her contemporaries, including Allen Tate:

'Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree' discover the beautiful in a loveless marriage - the tragic beauty of desolation and dead illusion, like that of which Mr. Robinson writes in his 'The Unforgiven,' only Miss Millay offers the natural solution of death. Here, Miss Millay makes complete use of her sharp awareness of the significant in the superficially trivial incidents of human intercourse, and it is the sustained austerity, in her attitude of sympathy and irony, which places these sonnets, along with certain others in previous books, among the best in the language. ("Edna St. Vincent Millay, Edith Sitwell, Wallace Stevens," 9)

Having achieved this high level of sonnet-writing in what was essentially the new mode of pioneered by E. A. Robinson, Millay was to abandon it to resume the writing of her particular type of lyric sonnets in her second and longest sequence, *Fatal Interview*.

Despite its uniqueness within Millay's collection of sonnets, however, *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* stand with several individual sonnets of Robinson as one of the most distinguished examples of experimental sonnet narratives written during the early part of the twentieth century.

### **Fatal Interview**

*Fatal Interview* (1931) is the longest of Millay's major sonnet sequences. It consists of fifty-two sonnets, or almost one third of the total number in the Collected Sonnets. It is the only sequence of love sonnets that Millay produced, which is surprising given the importance of the love sonnet in her early use of the sonnet form. Norman Brittin has speculated that the sequence represents a fictionalized account of the poet's love affair with George Dillon (85), but there were also at least two important literary inspirations for these poems: the publication of the poems in John Donne's tercentenary year (which caused the title to be changed from *Twice Required* to the present one, a quotation from Donne's sixteenth elegy, helping to link these sonnets to the English Renaissance in general and their sonnet sequences in particular), and the recent death of Millay's friend Elinor Wylie, who had died in 1928, shortly after completing her own sequence of love sonnets inspired by the work of Elizabethan sonnets, *Air and Angels*.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> For a discussion of these two sequences, see Phyllis M. Jones's essay "Amatory

The sequence thus sprang from a variety of sources both personal and literary - a love affair, the death of a friend, the inspiration of Renaissance poetry, and contemporary literary events - sources that will help to explain the bewildering variety of themes and voices within the sequence itself.

*Fatal Interview* depicts a year in a love affair (the fifty-two sonnets correspond to the weeks of a year), in which the female speaker wins over a bookish lover but then is abandoned by him. *Fatal Interview* resembles a Renaissance sonnet sequence in its emphasis on lyric emotions and a free incorporation of seemingly unrelated conceits, and the familiarity of this type of sonnet writing may help to account for the sequence's cohesion in spite of its sudden shifts between poems. In the course of the sequence, the reader is required to believe that the narrator is a goddess, mythical figure, queen, and rural housewife, and that she is both immortal and dying, all-powerful and powerless, with appropriate shifts in the diction, prosody, imagery, and syntax to mark these changes. Judith Farr has summarized the critical problem that these shifts pose as follows:

She speaks to him in a language whose cadences are both Elizabethan and modern. Similarly, the setting of *Fatal Interview* shifts between an Elizabethan castle with 'steamy' dungeons (18) fitted with 'rack and wheel' (22), the Maine countryside and seascape off Matinicus, and a surreal Art Nouveau "pavilion" in which "slow dancers dance in foam" and the speaker finds a "pink camellia-bud / On the wide step, beside a silver comb" (21). The different settings and accents express different aspects of the speaker's nature. (294-5)

Several of Farr's identifications are suspect (there is no reason to assume that the castle imagery is "Elizabethan," for example, and sonnet 21 presents a dream vision rather than

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Sonnet Sequences and the Female Perspective of Elinor Wylie and Edna St. Vincent Millay" and Judith Farr's essay "Elinor Wylie, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and the Elizabethan Sonnet Tradition."

an "Art Nouveau" pavilion), but the task of separating the various images and voices remains a central task in understanding the sequence.

The dominant image of *Fatal Interview* is that of Selene, the Greek goddess of the moon who falls in love with the mortal Endymion. In the first sonnet the speaker asks what mortal "has power upon me that do daily climb / The dustless air" to tempt the speaker / goddess into experiencing the "mortal joy" of love. This image exaggerates the initial separation of the lovers, and throughout the sequence classical images are used to represent extreme, uncontrolled emotional states. The consummation of the love affair, for example, is imagined as a love affair with Zeus, complete with "meteoric splendours" and "sudden thunder" (sonnet 12). Its immediate effect is to transport the speaker to the afterlife, where she converses with other former lovers of the god, including Danaë, Europa, and Leda:

I dreamed I moved among the Elysian fields,  
In converse with sweet women long since dead. . .  
Freely I walked beside them and at ease,  
Addressing them, by them again addressed,  
And marvelled nothing, for remembering you,  
Wherefore I was among them well I knew. (sonnet 13)

Working in contrast to this ecstasy is the realization that the original myth ends with the separation of Selene and Endymion, implying that love between a mortal and goddess is impossible. The classical imagery thus portrays extreme suffering as well as joy, and a number of tragic love affairs from Greek mythology, including Helen and Paris and Troilus and Cressid (sonnet 6), Aeneas and Dido (sonnet 15), Jove and Danae, Europa, and Leda (sonnet 16), are invoked. The final sonnet returns to the Endymion myth to represent the grief of the speaker:

Whom earthen you, by deathless lips adored,  
Wild-eyed and stammering to the grasses thrust,  
And deep into her crystal body poured  
The hot and sorrowful sweetness of the dust:  
Whereof she wanders mad, being all unfit

For mortal love, that might not die of it. (sonnet 52)

The final references to madness and death bring this line of imagery to a suitable close by portraying the speaker's sorrow in its most extreme and unabashed form.

Throughout *Fatal Interview*, various lines of imagery are used to express different ideals of love, and the sequence may be read as an attempt to judge or mediate between them. The classical imagery is often associated with the theme of *carpe diem*, which appears in Millay's rendition of what she calls the "vulgar" Latin in sonnet 29:

*All that delightful youth forbears to spend  
Molestful age inherits, and the ground  
Will have us; therefore, while we're young, my friend. . .* (original italics)

The intensity of emotion associated with the invocation of classical legends may thus be read as the speaker's attempt to "seize the day" or realize the full intensity of her passions, and the tragic love affairs act both as a foreshadowing of the final parting of the lovers and as a persistent reminder of the reason behind the speaker's abandonment. But the recollection of past loves and lovers also has another, explicit reason which is given in sonnet 26 of the sequence, which begins with images of "Trojan waters" and "a Spartan mast":

I think however that of all alive  
I only in such utter, ancient way  
Do suffer love; in me alone survive  
The unregenerate passions of a day  
When treacherous queens, with death upon the tread,  
Heedless and wilful, took their knights to bed.

This declaration needs to be read with sonnet 6, in which the speaker tries to persuade the beloved away from his books and "pale preoccupation with the dead." The use of classical imagery, then, reveals itself to be a ploy to woo the beloved by raising the speaker herself to the level of celebrated love affairs of the past which hold his interest through books. The bravado of sonnet 26 reveals itself as a type of desperation, a deliberate exaggeration of the speaker's passion meant to attract her lover's attention.

The allusion to "queens" and "knights" at the end of sonnet 26 recalls a second important strain of imagery, that of the aristocratic or courtly lover, which runs parallel to the classical imagery. It is through this second thread of conceits that the themes of the English Renaissance sonnet are introduced in a vaguely Elizabethan syntax and diction. The act of falling in love is compared to a "sick disorder" that cannot be cured by "fine leeches" or the prayers of a "good friar" (sonnet 4), for example, and the extreme suffering of the unsuccessful lover is figured in references to Love's "dungeons" (sonnet 5) and "rack and wheel" (sonnet 22), images that may be found in the opening sonnet of Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*, among other famous sonnets from the period.<sup>89</sup> The old conceit of love as a type of imprisonment is also invoked, and Love becomes a "gaoler" (sonnet 5) with a "noisy chain" (sonnet 17), and in sonnet 24, one of the strongest of the sequence, Millay re-imagines the common conceit of love as a type of war, in this case an invasion of a castle, complete with "men quick- / Buckling their sword-belts" and a "rattling bridge-chain." The late medieval imagery is thus associated with the excesses of courtly love that play such an important role in the early history of the sonnet in English, and it is fitting that these images tend to appear near the beginning of the sequence, when the love affair is at its most passionate. As the sequence progresses, however, this line of imagery and its accompanying ornamental style are abandoned. As Brittin notes, "the bulk of the medievalism is in the first half of the sequence" (89). The end of this line of imagery occurs in sonnet 47, which introduces the surprising image of "kings in a tumbrel" travelling to their "deaths," invoking the French Revolution and the end of the aristocracy. This image occurs after the announced parting of the lovers, when the persona of the dying yet hopeful lover which the speaker has assumed is no longer available.

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<sup>89</sup> See the section "Cummings and the Elizabethan Sonnet" of chapter 5 below, pp. 206-226, for a discussion of the sources of these common images.



The sufferings of the courtly lover are similar to the invocations of Helen of Troy or Queen Dido, or even to the commandments to "seize the day" in that these conceits are traditional ideals of love that are assumed by the speaker as a method of impressing her bookish lover. Their extremes of emotion tend to sound somewhat forced, and the speaker's assertion in sonnet 26 that she alone can feel the love by a "Cornish prow" (recalling Iseult) or "Trojan waters" (recalling Helen) are more an attempt to gain her lover's attention than any accurate report of her emotions. Throughout *Fatal Interview*, there is a resistance by the speaker to the all-consuming passion that these roles have thrust upon her, one which appears in the two sonnets devoted to moral exhortation. The first of these poems, sonnet 23, begins with the declaration "I know the face of Falsehood and her tongue," a statement that becomes ironic in light of the speaker's hyperbolic reports of her emotions, while sonnet 30 attempts, in Millay's best ornamental style, to establish boundaries for a passion which elsewhere is depicted as all-consuming:

Love is not all: it is not meat nor drink  
Nor slumber nor a roof against the rain;  
Nor yet a floating spar to men that sink  
And rise and sink and rise and sink again. . .

The archaic diction and syntax of both sonnets, and their imitation of a type of sonnet from the Renaissance<sup>90</sup> suggest that they are not complete recantations of a world view which is elsewhere associated with the conventions of the courtly love sonnet. Towards the end of both sonnets, the speaker shies away from any self-criticism. In sonnet 23 the speaker states that "I'd liefer lack her [Falsehood's] aid," the word "liefer" (an archaic form of "rather") suggesting, however, that she is not above resorting to some form of falsehood if the need arises, while in sonnet 30 she ends by declaring that, despite the

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<sup>90</sup> The sonnet of moral exhortation appeared frequently in Renaissance sonnet sequences. The two most famous examples are Shakespeare's sonnet 116 and 129. See the section on "Cummings and the Elizabethan Sonnet" in chapter 5, pp. 214-216, for a discussion of this type of sonnet.

limitations of love she does "not think" that she would trade her love for other comforts, a second admission to the power that the love affair has over her.

It is a third important line of imagery, the imagery connected with nature and rural life, that reveals the speaker's distrust of classical and Renaissance models of love. The rural imagery questions the sequence's literary conceits by offering a simpler version of love that omits any self-aggrandizing imagery and tragic ends. The first offering of this simpler, rural love occurs in sonnet 11:

Love in the open hand, no thing but that,  
 Ungemmed, unhidden, wishing not to hurt,  
 As one should bring you cowslips in a hat  
 Swung from the hand, or apples in her skirt,  
 I bring you, calling out as children do:  
 "Look what I have! - And these are all for you."

This offer of an innocent, natural love is apparently rejected, and sonnet 12 begins with an invocation of the "Olympian gods" and the consummation of the affair. However, this alternative of an innocent love reappears in the latter part of the sequence, when the speaker sees that the affair is ending. Sonnet 36, which has been praised by Judith Farr for "envision[ing] conflict and loss in homely American images" (301), compares the speaker's regret to "island women" who watch their fisherman-husbands "go forth," while sonnet 48 imagines that the end of the affair is a "journey back" to pastoral "grassy pastures." Together, these rural images act as a critique of the excesses of the images of the tragic or courtly ideals of love with their numerous sufferings and ultimate defeat.

Significantly, the parting of the lovers is accompanied by the speaker's retreat from the intellectual and literary roles that the affair required. The realization by the speaker that she has lost her lover is often stated in plain language, as in the declaration of sonnet 47 that "I have lost you; and I lost you fairly." Later in the same poem, the speaker rejects any attempts to prolong the affair through deceit or an attempt to revive her former roles, preferring the honesty of her newfound voice:

If I had loved you less or played you slyly  
 I might have held you for a summer more,  
 But at the cost of words I value highly,  
 And no such summer as the one before.  
 Should I outlive this anguish - and men do -  
 I shall have only good to say of you.

As the final couplet of this sonnet reveals, the end of the love affair does not occasion any regret. In the pivotal sonnet 48, the speaker justifies the end of the affair by informing her lover that she carries an awareness of "your memory and your lack." This "lack" is never clearly identified, although the fact that in this sonnet the speaker imagines herself descending a "steeper" and "stonier" slope suggests that the affair suffered from its isolation from everyday life, both in its apparent secrecy and adherence to various literary ideals. However, this representation of the love affair by a "mountain peak" also lends the affair a certain intensity and importance, and at no point does the speaker ever regret that the affair has taken place. Instead, their love is viewed as a climactic experience, even if it involved false ideals and was ultimately doomed to end.

As is typical of Millay's sonnets, the three major lines of imagery that have been identified here are expressed through their own diction and style. The classical images are conveyed through a formal rhetoric without any archaisms in the diction, in a manner similar to Millay's translation from the Latin in sonnet 29 quoted above. These sonnets do employ such poetic conventions such as the apostrophe (sonnet 12) or dream vision (sonnet 16), however. The images of courtiers and ideals of courtly love invoke a large number of archaisms associated with Millay's ornamental sonnet style, including forays outdated diction such as "nay" (sonnet 4) and "leifer" (sonnet 26), personifications of Love (sonnet 5), Time (sonnet 14), and Death (sonnet 19), and moral exhortations on themes of "falsehood" (sonnet 22) and the limitations of "love" (sonnet 30). The rural images associated with a natural, unliterary view of love receive their expression through a modern, relatively unadorned voice which tends to avoid any inversions or poeticisms. Distinguishing between these various modes is crucial, since the major concepts of the

sequence are extremely fluid, taking on different connotations or roles according to their relation to each of the lines of imagery. Death, for example, exists as the impetus behind the exhortations to "seize the day" (sonnet 29), an inherent feature of the tragic nature of love as evidenced by allusions to classical or medieval lovers (sonnet 6), a stock image for the suffering of the courtly lover (sonnet 17), or as a real possibility acknowledged in rural life which is meant to show the falsity of the preceding images (sonnet 36). At times, these shifts in meaning may be attached to a single detail. In sonnet 17, for example, the speaker claims to be "slain" by love, and she imagines her dead body lying on the ground: "I lie disheveled in the grass apart / A sodden thing bedrenched by tears and rain." Here the image of the rain forms part of the pathetic fallacy, but in the next quatrain the rain becomes part of a natural scene which remains indifferent to the speaker:

While rainy evening drips to misty night,  
And misty night to cloudy morning clears,  
And clouds disperse across the gathering light,  
And birds grow noisy, and the sun appears - . . .

As the speaker realizes that nature has abandoned her, the language gradually sheds its inversions and poeticisms, thus providing a contrast to the sentimentalism and archaic language that dominates the earlier parts of the sonnet. In its skillful interweaving of its distinct themes and voices across the fifty-two sonnets, *Fatal Interview* represents the acme of Millay's art in handling of different voices in the sonnet.

Of Millay's three long sonnet sequences, *Fatal Interview* has attracted the most praise and attention among critics. Edmund Wilson declared the sequence to be "one of [Millay's] most successful works and one of the great poems of our day" ("Edna St. Vincent Millay," 95), and it has occupied a special place within the body of Millay's corpus ever since. *Fatal Interview* may also be read as the culmination of Millay's early vision of the sonnet. The images of tragic lovers and classical myths, the Petrarchan conceits, the archaic voice proclaiming a great passion, and the modern voice grappling

with independence had formed the subject and rhetoric of dozens of early sonnets. Several of her earlier works, including the following, may be read as early drafts for the sequence:<sup>91</sup>

Yet shall be told no meagre passion here;  
 With lovers such as we forevermore  
 Isolde drinks the draught, and Guinevere  
 Receives the Table's ruin through her door,  
 Francesca, with the loud surf at her ear,  
 Lets fall the coloured book upon the floor. ("We talk of taxes")

After this culmination of the early themes and technical features, it is, perhaps, not surprising that *Fatal Interview* marks the end of Millay's love sonnets as she began to explore other themes and techniques that were first introduced in her earlier work.

#### **Miscellaneous Later Sonnets**

After the success of *Fatal Interview*, Millay's work as a whole began to show signs of "becoming increasingly objective and philosophical," as Norman Brittin has observed (91), although a movement away from love lyrics had already begun to surface in the sonnets of The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems and The Buck in the Snow. The earlier lyrical sonnets continue to define Millay's contribution to the sonnet for most readers and critics of her work, but it is important to realize that towards the end of her career Millay began to distance herself from her love lyrics. Wine from These Grapes (1934) confirmed this shift in her sonnets in its "Two Sonnets in Memory," which were written in 1927 to express Millay's anger over the deaths of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti.<sup>92</sup> The sonnet begins by invoking the image of "Justice" as a queen before declaring that the recent executions have killed any notion of "Justice" as well. Those

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<sup>91</sup> The sonnet "Not with libations," discussed above, p. 159, may also have acted as a model for the speaker's rejection of extreme classical imagery.

<sup>92</sup> For a detailed discussion of this case, see John Timberman Newcomb's "The Woman as Political Poet: Edna St. Vincent Millay and the Mid-Century Canon."

who remain, like Millay, are left to defend their own attempts to defend their ideals in any way they can:

Many have praised her, we alone remain  
To break a fist against the lying mouth  
Of any man who says this was not so:  
Though she be dead now, as indeed we know.

The second sonnet continues the mourning for the death of "Justice" in a formal language broken by explicit images of violence. Here "Justice" is believed to be "gone from this world indeed," since society is now characterized by having its "blood. . . spurt upon the oppressor's hand."

"Two Sonnets in Memory" employ a predominantly archaic, ornamental voice to express themes with a broad public interest. In the later sonnets this voice is used with increasing frequency, and the modern idiom that was so prominent in early sonnets such as "If I should learn" or "Only until this cigarette has ended" appears only sporadically. For the first time in her sonnets, Millay began to prefer one voice above any other in the majority of her poems, reducing all of her themes to roughly similar terms of expression. Although it may be described as vaguely Elizabethan ("Two Sonnets in Memory" evokes those who have "sung their wit" and "her [Justice's] courtiers," for example),<sup>93</sup> this voice tends to develop certain devices to the exclusion of others, the chief among them being the personification of abstractions. "Two Sonnets in Memory" introduces a personified "Justice," and to this abstraction may be added "Time" ("Time, that renews the tissues," "How innocent of me"), "almighty Sex" ("I too beneath your moon"), "Will" ("Now from a stout and more imperious day"), "Life" ("Be sure my coming."), "the Gone" ("Now let the mouth"), "pure Science" ("Upon this age"), "Pure Art" ("To hold secure"), "Beauty" ("And is indeed truth beauty?"), "Chaos" and "Order" ("I will put Chaos"), "Cosmos"

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<sup>93</sup> The one specific allusion in this sonnet, the line of those who "stare on beauty till his senses drown" evokes Keats's "Ode on Melancholy," Keats being the Romantic poet whose language most closely resembles that of the Elizabethans.

("Read History"), "Pain" ("And must I then"), "Constant Care" and "Love Triumphant" ("Grief that is grief"), and "Grief" and "Death" ("Felicity of Grief!") from the later sonnets. Many of these entities are apostrophized, and all are described through poetic inversions, euphony, and an archaic syntax and diction. By contrast, personal themes become general cases, as in the following consideration of the speaker's desires:

Such as I am, however, I have brought  
 To what it is, this tower; it is my own;  
 Though it was reared To Beauty, it was wrought  
 From what I had build with: honest bone  
 Is there, and anguish; pride; and burning thought;  
 And lust is there, and nights not spent alone. ("I too beneath your moon")

The late sonnets thus present a seeming paradox in their stance: a passionate engagement with abstractions as if they were persons to be addressed, combined with an increasingly abstract treatment of themes that would seem to be immediate and personal.

The closest precedent for Millay's style and authoritative stance here are those English Renaissance sonnets that deal with abstractions, often to advance a moral argument, especially in Shakespeare's sonnets 116 ("Let me not to the marriage of true minds," which attempts to define "love") or 129 ("Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame / Is lust in action," a consideration of lust) or Donne's *Holy Sonnet* 10 ("Death, be not proud," which addresses a personified "Death"). The constant appeal to this sonnet tradition represents Millay's second departure from the Petrarchan love sonnet. The early sonnets written in a modern idiom and *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* also depart from the Petrarchan love sonnet, although in her later career Millay rejected this modern style as well, perhaps as an attempt to achieve a vantage point outside of the contemporary world from which to comment on social and philosophical issues. The language of "Two Sonnets in Memory," for example, derides the present in favour of an allegiance to an idealized past in which "Justice" not only was alive, but held court.

Several of Millay's later sonnets address the larger questions of writing poetry and a defense of her evolving style in particular which will help to clarify this shift in her style. "It is the fashion now to wave aside," for example, is an open attack on the allusiveness and irony of Modernist poetry. Here Millay observes that the "fashion" in poetry is now for "subversion," "verbiage," or "evasion," an allusion to Eliot's famous pronouncement on modern poetry in "The Metaphysical Poets" arguing that "the poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning" (65). In defiance of this norm, Millay declares an allegiance to "straightforwardness" in poetry against the "fummy wits" of "modern wags" for their poetic theories. In another of the late sonnets, Millay considers questions of poetic form, asserting that "I will put Chaos into fourteen lines" in the opening line. She then associates the sonnet form with a "sweet Order" and clarity that stands against disorder and anything "amorphous":

I have him. He is nothing more nor less  
Than something simple not yet understood;  
I shall not even force him to confess;  
Or answer. I will make him good.

A third sonnet, "If I die solvent," imagines the poet's own death and ends with a type of self-epitaph which imagines her own final act as holding:

An earthen grail, a humble vessel filled  
To its low brim with water from that brink  
Where Shakespeare, Keats and Chaucer learned to drink.

To these pronouncements might be added those from a fourth sonnet, "To hold secure the province of Pure Art," in which Millay rejects "Pure Art" for "the crude and weighty task" of providing "the Writing on the Wall," or public warnings to society. Each of these sonnets expresses a slightly different view of sonnet writing, and together they act as an excellent summary of Millay's voice in her later works, which, through their various archaisms, attempted to address a broad public directly on social themes. Her language



remained familiar to its audience through its frequent archaisms while paying homage to the great writers of the past. The sonnet form, meanwhile, provided a guarantee of clarity and "goodness" of the subject matter, whether in the consideration of themes such as "Order," "Love," or "Beauty" or in her exhortations to a public conscience.

Although the themes and rejection of certain aspects of her earlier styles (most notably classical allusions, Petrarchan conceits, and a modern idiom) represent a new phase of sonnet writing for Millay, her technique of mixing sonnet voices was retained, albeit in a slightly modified form. In the first of "Two Sonnets in Memory," for example, the references to the violence characteristic of modern society in unadorned language ("to break a fist against the lying mouth") opposes the ideal of a "love" for "sweet Justice," expressed through the personifications and conceit of her "courtiers." In "I will put Chaos into fourteen lines," the statements of poetical intention in a straightforward idiom ("I will only make him good") are mixed with archaisms expressing a theological world view to suggest the importance and ultimate meaning of this struggle:

. . . his adroit designs  
Will strain to nothing in the strict confines  
Of this sweet Order, where, in pious rape,  
I hold his essence and amorphous shape. . .

The pun on the word "Order" (both the opposite of "Chaos" and suggesting a religious order) leads to the phrase "pious rape," which suggests the older meaning of the word "ravishment," which the third definition in the QED gives as "to carry away or remove from earth (esp. to heaven) or from sight" - that is, a kind of transport caused by being filled with a divine spirit.<sup>94</sup> Earlier in the sonnet, Chaos is said to "ape / Flood, fire, and demon," associating him with the devil. The sophistication in mixing these voices and the importance of recognizing them remains unchanged from the early love sonnets, and

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<sup>94</sup> This use of the word "ravishment" occurs at the end of Donne's *Holy Sonnet* 14: "for I / Except you enthral me, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me."

it is only in the comparatively little space given to any voice other than the didactic, archaic one which represents any new development.

The impersonal, poetical style that Millay favoured in these sonnets exists apart from the subject matter, which leads to a number of weaknesses in these works. There is something problematical in Millay's assumption of an archaic, didactic voice in her sonnets in order to focus on contemporary problems, resulting in a representation of the modern world in terms that are almost unrecognizable:

Upon this age, that never speaks its mind,  
This furtive age, this age endowed with power  
To wake the moon with footsteps, fit an oar  
Into the rowlocks of the wind. . . ("Upon this age")

It is curious to see predictions of a lunar landing as being an "awakening" of the moon, or modern air travel being described as "rowlocks of the wind." A second discontinuity arises in the development of poetic techniques such as the personification of abstractions to present generalizations in order to discuss specific issues, as in her condemnation of the atomic bombing of Japan in the third of the "Sonnets in Tetrameter." It may be true that the bombing of Japan is the result of "all love laid by," as Millay states, but one does not feel that this statement gets to the root of the political problem. More troubling are the passages where the level of generality hides the contradictions in the argument, as in the first of the "Two Sonnets in Memory," when those who "loved sweet Justice" respond to the government by wishing "to break a fist against the lying mouth." These problems are largely avoided by those sonnets which deal only with general principles, such as "I will put Chaos into fourteen lines," but they were to recur prominently in her final sonnet sequence, *Epitaph for the Race of Man*.

### **Epitaph for the Race of Man**

*Epitaph for the Race of Man*, a series of eighteen sonnets that was published in part in 1928 but which appeared in its final form only in 1936 (Brittin, 91), was the final sonnet sequence that Millay published. It stands apart from her other sonnet sequences

by its impersonality, by its refusal to limit itself to the depiction of any single person or consciousness. Just as *Fatal Interview* represents the culmination of her early work in the love sonnet, *Epitaph of the Race of Man* may be read as the culmination of her late philosophical sonnets. The subject of the sequence is no less than the entire history of the "Race of Man," although even this characterization is inadequate, since sonnets 2 and 3 invoke the era of the dinosaurs and the opening sonnet foresees a time after the demise of the human race. The ambitions of the sequence may be described as cosmological in scope, a point of view which, oddly enough, indicates a natural progression in Millay's sequences. *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* depicts a single character from a limited omniscient point of view, while *Fatal Interview* uses established lyric conventions to depict the emotions of a first-person speaker from within. In writing a sonnet sequence that aspires to a universality beyond any strictly personal concerns, Millay can be seen as exploring the one point of view which had previously escaped her notice.

In *Epitaph for the Race of Man*, Millay foretells the death of the human race and sketches the broad causes and origins of this demise. As is the case in *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree*, the general development of the argument is fairly simple and direct. In the opening sonnet, the disappearance of "Man" is stated to occur before the scientifically predicted death of the earth ("before this cooling planet shall be cold"). Sonnets 2 and 3 justify this prediction by describing the dinosaurs, who felt instinctually that their race would last forever even while the mammals that would replace them were beginning to evolve. Sonnets 4 and 5 begin the consideration of the human race, whose one constant trait is its wish to survive. Sonnets 7 through 11 depict a series of natural disasters - predators, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, and fires, respectively - and after each one human civilization rebuilds itself. Sonnet 14 proceeds to envision "sunken cities, tier on tier" that result from the death of the human race, an event which occurs because of Man's inability to see "the unkindness in his brother's eye," a claim which is repeated in sonnets 15 through 17. The sequence ends with the epitaph promised by the title, which

begins "Here lies, and none to mourn him but the sea. . . Most various Man" and ends with a series of rhetorical questions:

Man, doughty Man, what power has brought you low,  
 That heaven itself in arms could not persuade  
 To lay aside the lever and the spade  
 And be as dust among the dusts that blow?  
 Whence, whence the broadside? whose heavy blade? . . .  
 Strive not to speak, poor scattered mouth; I know.

The commandment to "strive not to speak" and the climactic phrase "I know" repeat the assertion of man's demise at the opening of the sequence and in the preceding three sonnets.

In its scope, *Epitaph for the Race of Man*, attempts an intellectual synthesis that far surpasses that of any previous work in the sonnet form that Millay attempted. The vast sweep of history in the "Race of Man," however cursory, has only W. H. Auden's *In Time of War* (1938, later rewritten as *Sonnets from China*), which Edward Mendelson has called "perhaps the greatest English poem of the decade" (*Early Auden*, 348), as a rival among contemporary sonnet sequences. A comparison between the two works will help to highlight the problems raised by Millay's sequence. *In Time of War* was inspired by a trip to war-torn China shortly before the outbreak of World War II and traces the origins and development of modern war, beginning with a biblical account of the Fall:

They wondered why the fruit had been forbidden;  
 It taught them nothing new. They hid their pride,  
 But did not listen much when they were chidden;  
 They knew exactly what to do outside. . . (sonnet 2)

As the sequence progresses, the innate corruption of Adam and Eve evolves into various cruelties involving bureaucracy and faceless destruction, expressed with a straightforward and frightening directness:

Here war is simple like a monument:  
 A telephone is speaking to a man;  
 Flags on a map assert that troops were sent;

A boy brings milk in bowls. There is a plan

For living men in terror of their lives,  
 Who thirst at nine who were to thirst at noon,  
 And can be lost and are, and miss their wives,  
 And, unlike an idea, can die too soon. (sonnet 16)

The aim of *In Time of War*, then, is to trace the origins of war-time corruption from the Creation to the present, where the imperfections of man are seen to be the cause of all suffering. The directness of these causes and effects, what Mendelson has praised as "emotional clarity" and "the rigor and inclusiveness of its moral logic" (348), lends the sequence a lucid perspective from which to judge history.<sup>95</sup> *In Time of War* ends with the following summary of the innate fallibility of human nature:

We envy streams and houses that are sure:  
 But we are articed to error; we  
 Were never nude and calm like a great door,

And never will be perfect like the fountains;  
 We live in freedom by necessity,  
 A mountain people dwelling among mountains. (sonnet 27)

The word "articed" (here meaning "bound" or "tied," as by a contract) is Auden's final pronouncement of the sequence. "Error" and the freedom to err, even cruelly and fatally as was occurring at the time in China, are the inevitable lot of being human, from prelapsarian times to the present.

Along with their willingness to treat all of human history, both sequences are similar in their sensitivity to their historical and political context. Although it looks back to both a time before human beings were present and forward to their eventual demise, Millay's sequence is rooted in contemporary concerns. Its prediction of a war that would kill off the human race is a readily understandable response to the First World War,

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<sup>95</sup> Anthony Hecht has described this theme as follows: "though man can be like the lion or like its quarry, can be either predator or victim, he has the gift of reason, conferred by a gift of love (and is therefore, it may be inferred, capable of salvation)" (*The Hidden Law*, 58). Of course, it may also be inferred that man is capable of great errors.

which ended only two years before the sequence's first conception in 1920, and it even anticipates fears of a nuclear holocaust that were to arise less than ten years after its publication in book form. For this reason *Epitaph for the Race of Man* has drawn considerable praise from recent critics, with Norman Brittin calling attention to both "the panoramic breadth of imagination these sonnets exhibit" and "their technique, which is generally excellent" (93), and John Timberman Newcomb alluding to this "important sonnet sequence" which forced its readers "to face. . . the necessities and responsibilities of humanity" (268). Read beside her other sonnets about social themes written later in her career, however, one wonders whether her abstract, traditional rhetoric is equal to the portrayal of such a great and timely political theme.

Where the sequence falls short of Auden's work is in its language and lack of unity. The unity of *In Time of War* derives in large part from its consistent voice, which joins short declarative sentences with commas, semi-colons, colons, and the ubiquitous conjunction "and." The result is a flat style that produces the illusion that the particulars of modern war are being described objectively in a sparse modern voice, without adornment or elaboration. Millay's attempt to describe the "race of man," however, employs the same abstractions, antiquated rhetoric, and universal symbols of her later sonnets to invoke various images, emotions, or figures that are meant to be representative of all human ambitions and conceptions. As a result, *Epitaph for the Race of Man* invokes a large number of different systems or world views which would seem to be incompatible with one another, resolving them only through its extreme generality without the clear perspective that Auden provides. For example, Millay's sequence refers to astronomy (the descriptions of stars and constellations in sonnets 1 and 6), modern theories of evolution (the "dinosaurs" of sonnet 2 and "Cretaceous bird" of sonnet 3), and ancient history (the pyramids of sonnet 6) to invoke scales of time sufficient to present the history of the "Race of Man." Each of these time scales are drawn from a different science or study, and to complicate the argument Millay also invokes a mythological era

when "only gods remain / To stride the world" with their "golden shields" (sonnet 5) - a return to the golden age - as well as a biblical "race of Adam" (sonnet 15). Rather surprisingly, none of these systems or disciplines is given its own distinctive expression beyond a few specialized terms that are thrown into the sweep of the rhetoric, in contrast to the early sonnets that employ a distinctively modern or archaic voice, and none provide an overriding viewpoint from which to judge the failures of the human race.

Yet, in one sense, this jumble of world views represents the final development in Millay's use of different sonnet voices. As in the early sonnets, each of these systems is invoked to offer one specific viewpoint or world-view that is meant to be read against the others. Yet no one view is allowed to dominate, nor is any developed at length through a distinctive set of diction or imagery. Instead, to a far greater extent than ever before, the images are allowed to follow one upon the other with only the generally abstract and archaic language binding them together, as in the following passage:

Before this cooling planet shall be cold,  
 Long, long before the music of the Lyre,  
 Like the faint roar of distant breakers rolled  
 On reefs unseen, when wind and flood conspire  
 To drive the ship inshore - long, long, I say,  
 Before this ominous humming hits the ear,  
 Earth will have come upon a stiller day,  
 Man and his engines be no longer here. (sonnet 1)

Within this single sentence, Millay links stock poeticisms ("music of the Lyre") and personifications ("wind and flood conspire") to a scientific prediction of the cooling of the earth in the opening line and an open prophecy ("Man and his engines be no longer here"). The success of the sequence depends on whether its readers accept the rapid succession of distinct types of truths - lyric, mythological, scientific, and prophetic - and on whether an archaic rhetoric is seen to be equal to her invocation of modern world views. The strongest passages in the sequence abandon the deliberate archaisms and the

yoking together of disparate systems, as in sonnet 6, which describes the Egyptian pyramids:

Safe in their linen and their constellations lie  
 The kings of Egypt; even as long ago  
 Under these constellations, with long eye  
 And scented limbs they slept, and feared no foe.  
 Their will was law; their will was not to die;  
 And so they had their way; or nearly so.

In this passage, in spite of the odd adjective "long," there is no confusion or jumble of terms and expression, and Millay's considerable lyric gift asserts itself.

In other sections, however, the refusal of *Epitaph for the Race of Man* to mediate between its various world-views leads to a number of outright contradictions. Humans are proclaimed as both the product of evolution ("man, out of ooze / But lately crawled, and climbing up the shore," sonnet 3) and creationism ("Race of Adam," sonnet 15), the death of the human race is stated as being both the product of heaven ("Man, by all the wheels of heaven unscored," sonnet 17) and not the product of heaven ("heaven itself in arms could not persuade. . . [Man to] be as dust," sonnet 18), and the earth belongs to both a plurality of Greek deities (sonnet 5) and a Christian Creator (sonnet 15), to name three notable instances. Presumably, the sheer number of references is a brave attempt to evoke the diversity of the "Race of Man," but Millay's failure to avoid combining images from different fields or systems results in apparent confusions that, despite her declared allegiance to "Order" later in her career, remain unresolved. Here the contrast with Auden's sequence, which maintains a high degree of consistency throughout by insisting on human fallibility that derives from man's original fall, becomes evident.

In many ways, the weaknesses of the voice of *The Epitaph of the Race of Man* correspond to the weaknesses of the voice in the later sonnets in general. Its vaguely archaic language acts in conjunction with the prophetic strain of the sequence to lend authority to the sequence's various pronouncements, but it is almost too easy to criticize



its curious apostrophes ("O Earth," sonnet 4, or "Cretaceous bird, your giant claw," sonnet 3) and odd personifications ("the great heel / Of headless Force," sonnet 14). More than any of the individual sonnets, however, the abstraction inherent in the narrative stance is used to repeat various banalities at great length or to wonder why certain impossibilities never occur. For example, sonnet 12 depicts a human farmer who "meets the black ant hurrying from his mound," and the entire second quatrain of the sonnet marvels at the fact that they do not speak to one another:

But no good-morrow, as you might suppose,  
No nod of greeting, no perfunctory sound  
Passes between them; no occasion's found  
For gossip as to how the fodder grows.

Similarly, sonnet 3 declares that "no lime" could have "held" a cretaceous bird "through fifty million years of jostling times," and no less than five sonnets (7 through 11) are used to establish the fact that cities are rebuilt after major disasters. Even the climactic line of the sequence, "Strive not to speak, poor scattered mouth; I know" (sonnet 18), contains a redundancy: why does a "scattered mouth" have to be told not to speak? In these and other passages, Millay's general abstractions have left behind the specific meaning of her images in the grand sweep of her rhetoric, which nevertheless calls attention to such important themes as the separation of man and nature, the resiliency of people in the face of disasters, or a sadness over a vision of the death of humanity. In the second sonnet, Millay even lapses into farce in her description of the daily existence of a dinosaur:

When Death was young and bleaching bones were few,  
A moving hill against the risen day  
The dinosaur at morning made his way,  
And dropped his dung upon the blazing dew. . .

There is a lack of decorum in linking a personified "Death" to the phrase "dropped his dung" in the same subordinate clause. Yet the sonnet continues with no hint of irony or self-consciousness in its description of the dinosaur's "consort" who "held aside her heavy tail, / And took the seed" (surely the only depiction of dinosaurs coupling in the long

history of the sonnet), but which fails to ensure the species' survival. The absurdities of the sequence in this and other sonnets are the result of using an elevated rhetoric without any thought as to its appropriateness, and in a failure to realize that the polished language of the English Renaissance may be inadequate to describe certain low actions or modern, scientific achievements. Here the comments of Randall Jarrell, quoted at the beginning of the chapter, that occasionally certain images or turns or phrase may become "more emotional and meaningful. . . more essential to the poems, than the 'subject' that serves as their pretext" (52-53), appear apt. What is surprising about these inconsistencies and bathos resulting from the use of archaic expressions is that they are the product of an important poet at the end of her career, rather than the product of a minor poet who has faded from notice.

Ultimately, *Epitaph for the Race of Man* and the later sonnets present a variety of problems for Millay's critics, in which a recognition of their ambition, what Elizabeth Atkins called their "high philosophical simplicity" (246), must be balanced against the excesses of the rhetoric, which attempts to discuss problems at a level of abstraction and often remains at one remove from the subject matter. In their attempts to give a definitive pronouncement on various important issues, they often tend towards various simplifications, as in the reduction of the bombing of Japan to "love laid by," or towards statements of the obvious, as in the sonnet on the farmer and the ant. Millay's highly poeticized, archaic style in this later style may also be questioned for its suitability for exploring contemporary politics.<sup>96</sup> These problems were avoided in the early sonnets, which have continued to define her work in the form. What has been lost is a sensitivity in coordinating language, themes, and imagery which can intelligently balance one set of views or recognitions against another. In their intelligent inclusion of two or more fully

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<sup>96</sup> Interestingly, Robert Frost once called her work "a gospel of carelessness" (*Selected Letters*, 550), presumably in criticism of Millay's stylistic features.

realized voices to represent different states of consciousness or points of view, the early sonnets and first two sequences will likely continue to be regarded as Millay's greatest contributions to the sonnet form.

### **E. E. Cummings and the Experimental Sonnet**

During the first decades of the twentieth century, poets and critics alike tended to avoid making any public statements about what form and directions the sonnet should take. While Robinson, Frost, Millay, and other poets were experimenting with such crucial aspects of the sonnet as genre, meter, and rhyme scheme, there were no serious attempts to establish a set definition of the sonnet or any restrictions on the types of possible innovations. Instead, a large number of sonnets with new or novel rhyme schemes, meters, or turns in their arguments were immediately accepted as sonnets by both critics and other poets. Privately, the major sonnet writers defended their freedom to experiment freely with the form. Robert Frost, for example, justified his innovations by remarking in a letter to his friend Louis Untermeyer that "the sonnet is the strictest form I have behaved in, and that mainly by pretending that it wasn't a sonnet" (Letters to Louis Untermeyer, 381). In a similar vein, Edna St. Vincent Millay defended her major structural innovation in the form, the introduction of a heptameter line at the end of each sonnet of "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree," in a letter to Edith Wynne Matthison as follows:

I know very well the sonnets of the incomplete sequence are not perfect sonnets, - I made the fourteenth line an alexandrine [sic] purposely, - somehow they had to be ended in that way. Remind [your husband] also, if he refuses to read them open-mindedly. . . that Meredith made some rather nice poems of sixteen lines each which we permit to be called sonnets. (as quoted in "Introduction," Collected Poems, xxi-xxii.)

When the sequence was published, Allen Tate immediately accepted this innovation as "a new technical device," although he thought it "impossible to say whether this innovation is a permanent contribution to the sonnet-form" ("Edna St. Vincent Millay, Edith Sitwell, Wallace Stevens," 9). No justification or defense of the introduction of a heptameter line

was thought necessary, since Tate seems to have believed that poets possess the right to make such innovations without censure.

Oddly enough, the sole attempt to redefine the sonnet during this period of great experimentation derives from one of the severest critics of the sonnet, William Carlos Williams. In a forward to the sonnets of his friend Merrill Moore, Williams claimed that the sonnet was not in fact a set fourteen-line structure with fixed rhymes:

For years I have been stating that the sonnet form is impossible to us, but Moore, by destroying the rigidities of the old form and rescuing the old form in fact - an achievement of far-reaching implications - has succeeded in completely altering my opinion. The sonnet, I see now, is not and has never been a form at all in any fixed sense other than that incident upon a certain turn of mind. It is the extremely familiar dialogue unit upon which all dramatic writing is founded: a statement, then a rejoinder of a sort, perhaps a direct reply, perhaps a variant of the original - but a comeback of one sort or another - which Dante and his contemporaries had formalized for their day and language. ("Forward to Merrill Moore's Sonnets," 92)

This belief that any two-part poem is in effect a sonnet did not find any other adherents during Williams's lifetime, perhaps because this definition ignores any structural aspects of the form. It is significant, however, that the one attempt to redefine the sonnet during this period advanced the notion that "destroying the rigidities of the old form" was an important part of its re-emergence as a freer and more encompassing structure.

This spirit of freedom and experimentation is crucial to understanding the sonnets of the form's most famous innovator, E. E. Cummings. More so than the sonnets of Robert Frost with their novel rhyme schemes, Cummings's sonnets are immediately recognizable as experimental by their unusual plays with rhyme, layout, and typography. Harriet Monroe, in an early review of Cummings's first book, *Tulips and Chimneys*, was the first to praise of his innovations with the comment that he "will be in the fashion, or a leap or two ahead of it" ("Flare and Blare," 30). John Dos Passos, meanwhile, praised his work with the comment that "here at last is an opportunity to taste without overmuch prejudice a form, an individual's focus on existence, a gesture unforeseen in American

writing" ("Off the Shoals," 10), and in a later review he repeated this opinion by proclaiming that:

This conception of poetry is different from that which we were led to expect by college courses on English literature. It is different from anything that has happened in English before 'in de good ole dayz.' ("The Spring Poetry Crop," 57)

Even later, Randall Jarrell, perhaps the most important book reviewer of his generation, summarized Cummings's career with the declaration that:

No one else has ever made avant-garde, experimental poems so attractive both to the general and the special reader; since the early twenties, Cummings has been more widely imitated and more easily appreciated than any other modernist poet. ("Fifty Years of American Poetry," 319-20)

The opinion that Cummings's verse was experimental and innovative, as these and many other comments suggest, was all but unanimous among contemporary poets and critics from the time of his first publications. This fact is notable, since he made this reputation, at least in part, by writing well over a hundred poems in the oldest prescribed form in English poetry at a time when Williams was declaring that "the sonnet form [was] impossible for us."

This context of the importance of innovation in both Cummings's work and the various uses of the sonnet during the first decades of the twentieth century may help to explain Cummings's attraction to what is often perceived to be a staid and traditional form. The sonnet, as the previous chapters have argued, was the subject of a great number of experiments during the period, and so it is fitting that the form stands at the centre of Cummings's achievement. Several of his most famous poems, including "the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls" and "next of course to america god i" were written in the sonnet form, and Cummings himself acknowledged the importance of the sonnet throughout his career. In the third of his biographical Harvard lectures, which were later published under the playful title of i: six nonlectures, Cummings explained the source of this debt:

One ever-memorable day, our ex-substantialist (deep in structural meditation) met head-on professor Royce; who was rolling peacefully home from a lecture. 'Estlin' his courteous and gentle voice hazarded 'I understand that you write poetry.' I blushed. 'Are you perhaps' he inquired, regarding a particular leaf of a particular tree 'acquainted with the sonnets of Dante Gabriel Rossetti?' I blushed a different blush and shook an ignorant head. 'Have you a moment?' he shyly suggested, less than half looking at me; and just perceptibly appended 'I rather imagine that you might enjoy them.' Shortly thereafter sage and ignoramus were sitting opposite each other in a diminutive study (marvellously smelling of tobacco and cluttered with student notebooks of a menacing bluish shade) - ignoramus listening, enthralled; the sage intoning, lovingly and beautifully, his favorite poems. And very possibly (although I don't, as usual, know) that is the reason - or more likely the unreason - I've been writing sonnets ever since. (29-30)<sup>97</sup>

This passage actually downplays the early influence of the sonnet on his work, since, as Richard S. Kennedy reveals in his biography of the poet, Cummings was writing sonnets during high school and his first years at Harvard (61, 68). However, the comment that he wrote in the form "ever since" is accurate. As Norman Friedman has observed, sonnets make up almost half of the total number of his formal poems (E. E. Cummings: The Art of His Poetry, 100), and in his first four books of poetry, Tulips and Chimneys, And,<sup>98</sup> XLI Poems, and L x l, the sonnets are granted their own separate sections at the end of the volume. Only two of his books of poetry, No Thanks and L x l, fail to end with poems that are in some sense sonnets, and in two important collections that were published during his lifetime, Poems: 1923-1954 and his 100 Selected Poems, the irregular sonnet "luminous tendril of celestial wish" stands as his final poetical statement.

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<sup>97</sup> The Royce in this passage was Josiah Royce, a professor at Harvard. The possible influence of Rossetti's sonnets on Cummings's early poetry, especially on their tendency towards a highly formal, stylized poetical language, is discussed by Kennedy at some length in his biography, pp. 68-9.

<sup>98</sup> To avoid confusion, the title of this book will be given as the word "and" rather than as the symbol "&," as it appears on the original title page. The significance of Cummings's use of the symbol was described by Marianne Moore as follows: "We have, not a replica of the title, but a more potent thing, a replica of the rhythm - a kind of second tempo, uninterfering like a shadow, in the manner of the author's beautiful if somewhat self-centred, gigantic filiform ampersand" ("People State Carefully," 47).

The great use that Cummings made of the sonnet does suggest an element of tension in his work. It is undeniable that Cummings brought a number of innovations to the sonnet, as the praise by his contemporaries quoted above suggests, but the sonnet itself is a poetic form with a long history that is impossible to suppress completely. Even while Cummings's older contemporary Robert Frost was experimenting with themes that quarrelled with Renaissance themes of Platonic love, for example, his sonnets recalled their precedents, if only to establish their differences. Edna St. Vincent Millay, the poet who introduced a modern, assertive female voice into the sonnet, also employed traditional sonnet imagery and rhetoric at great length to underscore her innovations. Similarly, the sonnet placed several important limitations on Cummings's experiments, as the poem "pity this busy monster" from l x l<sup>99</sup> will help to demonstrate:

pity this busy monster,manunkind,

not. Progress is a comfortable disease:  
your victim(death and life safely beyond)

plays with the bigness of his littleness  
-electrons deify one razorblade  
into a mountainrange;lenses extend

unwish through curving wherewhen till unwish  
returns on its unself.

A world of made  
is not a world of born - pity poor flesh

and trees,poor stars and stones,but never this  
fine specimen of hypermagical

ultraomnipotence. We doctors know

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<sup>99</sup> Cummings's sonnets are all untitled, and they are identified in his various collections of poetry by roman numerals. However, many of Cummings's books are subdivided into different sections, each with its own enumeration, making these numbers impractical for citation. For ease of reference, each sonnet will be identified by part or all of its opening line, with the volume in which it first appeared being named in the text.



a hopeless case if - listen:there's a hell  
of a good universe next door;let's go

This sonnet, more than most, demonstrates the spirit of innovation with which Cummings approached the form. Its appearance on the page, with its divisions into one to three line units; the unexpected line break in the middle of line seven; its eccentric punctuation and coinages; its daring combination of seeming nonsense words ("wherewhen"), scientific terms, and modern slang ("there's a hell / of a good universe next door"); and its use of slant rhymes and unusual rhyming patterns are all either unprecedented in the history of the sonnet or to be found only sparingly. These experiments are so extreme that many readers may wish to deny that "pity this busy monster" is a sonnet at all, since the spirit of innovation has seemingly led the poem so far from the familiar Elizabethan or Romantic sonnet.

Once these experimental features of "pity this busy monster" are noted, however, the poem reveals itself to be rather conventional in certain respects. M. H. Abrams defines a sonnet as "a lyric poem consisting of a single stanza of [1] fourteen [2] iambic pentameter lines linked by [3] an intricate rhyme scheme" (A Glossary of Literary Terms, 197)<sup>100</sup>. "Pity this busy monster" meets these three criteria, but only if certain allowances are made. For example, it contains fourteen lines only if "returns on itself. / A world of made" is counted as a single line in spite of its division on the page. An intricate (though highly irregular) rhyme scheme of *a ba bca d cd be fef* is present, but only if Cummings's slant rhymes ("hypermagical"- "hell," "manunkind"- "beyond"- "extend," and "disease"- "littleness"- "this") are accepted. The iambic meter is the most regular feature of the poem, since frequent substitutions of trochees are allowed even in conventional sonnets. But there are grounds for dispute here, too, since at least one of

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<sup>100</sup> The bracketed numbers have been added to Abrams's text to identify the three basic criteria of a sonnet. See the opening section of the epilogue below, pp. 254-255, for an extended discussion of this and other definitions of the sonnet.

Cummings's phrases, "wherewhen till unwish," is difficult to scan and may not even be metrical at all. On the whole, however, there seems to be no reason not to accept the poem as a sonnet, and in fact "pity this busy monster" is more regular than several other contemporary sonnets, as Cummings refuses to vary the total number of lines as did Millay in her two thirteen-line sonnets, nor does he attempt to abandon rhyme altogether as did R. P. Blackmur in "Mirage."<sup>101</sup> The poem also remains a lyric, unlike Millay's sequence *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* or Robinson's dramatic sonnets, and the meter appears highly regular when compared to Frost's "Mowing" or Millay's introduction of a concluding heptameter line in the aforementioned sequence.

Yet there is another reason to regard "pity this busy monster" as a conventional sonnet. On a first reading the poem appears to be on a very modern theme, the worth of scientific discoveries such as the electron microscope which can enlarge and "deify one razorblade" and the implications of Einstein's theories about the curvature of space and time, the "curving wherewhen" which was verified through observations with telescopic "lenses."<sup>102</sup> Cummings's verdict on these developments and scientific progress in general is revealed by his term "unwish," implying that science operates against human desires and expectations and thus is "hopeless," or devoid of any human hope. The result is a completely pessimistic view of science, which is opposed to any "wish" and, through the coinage "hypermagical," against (or more accurately, beyond) magic. This stance brings "pity this busy monster" remarkably close to Edgar Allen Poe's "Sonnet - To Science," which also opposes science through its mourning for a lost, mythological world:

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<sup>101</sup> See the epilogue's section on sonnet rhymes below, pp. 264-265, for a discussion of Blackmur's "Mirage" and its discussion of sonnet length below, pp. 267-268, for a discussion of Millay's thirteen-line sonnets.

<sup>102</sup> The reference here may be to the famous experiment conducted by Sir Frank Dyson on May 29th, 1919, to measure the "red shift" of light by photographing an eclipse.

Science! true daughter of Old Time thou art!  
 Who alterest all things with thy piercing eyes. . .

Hast thou not dragged Diana from her car?  
 And driven the Hamadryad from the wood  
 To seek a shelter in some happier star?  
 Hast thou not torn the Naiad from her flood,  
 The Elfin from the green grass, and from me  
 The summer dream beneath the tamarind tree?

The opposition of science to a "summer dream" is strikingly similar to Cummings's belief that science represents an "unwish." Poe's belief that science "alterest all things with [its] piercing eyes" also suggests that Cummings is deliberately adapting this sonnet to his own purpose, since science in "pity this busy monster" is based on two examples of this alteration, the magnification of a razor blade and the positing of a "curving wherewhen" in Einstein's physics. To a degree that is surprising in what seems to be a clear example of an experimental sonnet, "pity this busy monster" reads as an adaptation of Poe's work into a modern idiom without any fundamental change in its imagery or argument.

The traditional or even derivative nature of the main theme and imagery of "pity this busy monster," in spite of its specifically modern references, complicates any notion of Cummings's experimentalism. While the structure, diction, and typography are highly innovative, the poem fails to vary the basic features of the sonnet, as does the work of Robinson, Frost, and Millay. This strange mixture of the new and the old, the adherence to certain sonnet conventions even while others are made the subject of an intricate play, is quite typical of Cummings's sonnets. This dual quality will guide the investigation of his sonnets throughout this chapter, which will attempt to distinguish the conventional and experimental features in order to discuss each of them at some length. In the first section that follows, the conventional themes and imagery of Cummings's early love sonnets, which are in some ways even more derivative than "pity this busy monster," will be explored. This discussion will lead to an extended consideration of Cummings's great debt to the Elizabethan love sonnet. In the second section another group of sonnets, the

satires, will be examined to emphasize the more original aspects of Cummings's sonnet themes. After this investigation of sonnet themes and genre, the new or experimental features of the sonnet - the unique diction, structure, and layout on the page that were largely passed over in the above reading of "pity this busy monster" - will be investigated at length in order to explore the extent and direction of his structural innovations in the form.

### **Cummings and the Elizabethan Love Sonnet**

While "pity this busy monster" harkens back to Poe's "Sonnet - To Science," many of Cummings's early sonnets adapt older themes and outlooks from the Petrarchan conceits common in the English Renaissance. The influence of Elizabethan love sonnets on Cummings's work may be seen in the large number of love sonnets that he included in his first four volumes of poetry, and though they appear less frequently in later books, throughout his career. These sonnets, as Allen Tate noted in an early review, reveal a constant "preoccupation with sensuous Beauty and its destroyer, Time or Death" ("E. E. Cummings: Tulips and Chimneys," 13), or, as Norman Friedman has phrased it, Cummings's "lover is not affrighted by the skull beneath his skin when he kisses his lady" (E.E. Cummings: The Art of His Poetry, 15). These themes, of course, were also the concerns of the major Elizabethan sonnet writers. To cite just one notable precedent, Shakespeare's sequence of sonnets begins with a series of seventeen poems which urge an unknown friend to have children in order to prevent his "loveliness" and "beauty's legacy" from being "tomed" upon his death (sonnet 4). Other parallels between Cummings and the sonnets of Sidney, Spenser, Daniel, Drayton, and others will be drawn throughout this section.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> The volume Petrarch in England collects many of the sonnets that were influenced by specific translations of Petrarch's poems by Wyatt and Surrey, establishing the derivative themes and imagery of some of the best sonnets of the period. The fact that a sonnet is "derivative" in the sense that it borrows from previous works for its imagery and

Cummings himself openly acknowledged the importance of Renaissance sonnets to his own work, as he did the influence of Rossetti in the passage from the "nonlectures" quoted above. The third of his "nonlectures" ended with his reading of Dante's sonnet beginning "*Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare*" and Shakespeare's sonnet 116. Implicit in these readings is his recognition of the influence of sonnets from the tradition, as well as an invitation to compare the works in terms of their themes and imagery. Several of Cummings's critics have also indicated these borrowings in a general way. Norman Friedman, for examples, writes:

Cummings is certainly not akin to the metaphysical spirit (with its 'unified sensibility' and 'reconciliation of opposites') of seventeenth- and twentieth-century poetry; he is rather more like the Elizabethan lyricists with their tuneful proclivity for praise, persuasion, and doctrine. (E.E. Cummings: The Art of His Poetry, 39)

Similarly, Barry A. Marks has remarked that:

Repeatedly, Cummings celebrated the lusty and the uninhibited in terms which echo earlier English poetry. He frequently used the traditional *carpe diem* (seize the day) situation: a man attempting to persuade his lady to bed with him because life is short and death, final. And, in the manner of Herrick or Waller, he used the diction of an aristocratic courtier. (68)

Mark Van Doren, in an early review of Cummings's work, included two of the major sonneteers of the English Renaissance among the poet's influences:

For all his surface radicalism, for all his insistence that his mind is 'a big hunk of irrevocable nothing' which performs 'squirms of chrome' and executes 'strides of cobalt,' for all his warning to the timid reader that he will 'utter lilac shrieks and scarlet bellowings,' he is saturated with Chaucer, Spenser, and Shakespeare - to name only three of the great poets with whom he obvious has gone to school. ("First Glance," 43)

By focusing on the sonnets, Cummings's echoes of Elizabethan works can become more sharply defined, moving beyond the general descriptions quoted above. The extent and depth of Cummings's borrowings from these sonnets will prove to be striking in both

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major themes, of course, does not necessarily argue against its worth.

their persistence and number, as roughly half of his sonnets are love lyrics that adapt the conceits, rhetorical devices and, occasionally, even the language of the English Renaissance.

Cummings's devotion to the Elizabethan sonnet tradition is most clearly shown in his early works. The majority of the sonnets from the first four volumes are first-person lyrics addressed to a beloved (though not to a single woman)<sup>104</sup> which celebrate beauty, sensual pleasures, and a pressing need to reconcile love with time and death. The language is often openly archaic, and the beloved is on occasion addressed by the courtly title "my lady." The imagery and conceits are freely adapted from well-known sonnets. The sonnet "when unto nights of autumn" from Xli Poems, demonstrates the extent of these borrowings:

when unto nights of autumn do complain  
 earth's ghastrier trees by whom Time measured is  
 when frost to dance maketh the sagest pane  
 of littler huts with peerless fantasies  
 or the unlovely longness of the year. . .

. . . i do excuse me, love, to Death and Time

storms and rough cold, wind's menace and leaf's grieving. . .

The language here is archaic to an extent that rivals Millay's late sonnets. Time and Death are personified as they are in Shakespeare, the poet's love is addressed directly, and archaic verb forms ("maketh") and prepositions ("unto") appear as well. The subject matter and imagery are also reminiscent of Elizabethan sonnets, as the poem measures the passing of time in a manner similar to Shakespeare's famous sonnet 73:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold

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<sup>104</sup> Although they cannot always be identified, the women portrayed in these sonnets range from the semi-anonymous prostitutes of "when you rang at Dick Mid's Place" to Elaine Orr, Cummings's first wife, whom Robert S. Kennedy identifies as the "you" of "i like my body" (194).

When yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang  
 Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,  
 Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang. . .

In both poems, the deathly autumnal scene conjures a renewed appreciation of love. In "when unto the nights of autumn," the speaker is inspired to remember his "fair" beloved with renewed passion:

from the impressed fingers of sublime  
 Memory, of that loveliness receiving  
 the image my proud heart cherished as fair.

In Shakespeare's couplet, the awareness of the passage of time causes the speaker to reflect on the strength of the love in the face of time, "which makes thy love more strong / To love that well which thou must leave ere long." In both sonnets, therefore, a similar image leads to a reaffirmation of love in the face of time by the respective speakers, making the overall theme and movement of both poems seem remarkably alike.

A brief catalogue of the more familiar Elizabethan images that pervade the early sonnets will help to underscore this aspect of his sonnets and the extent to which they borrowed familiar sonnet conceits. The passage from "when unto nights of autumn" is actually further from its sources than many other of his borrowings. In the poem that follows it in Xli Poems, "this is the garden," the line "Time shall surely reap / and on Death's blade lie many a flower curled" appears. The image of Time as a reaper of flowers repeats an image from Shakespeare's sonnet 116: "Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks / Within his bending sickle's compass come." In his first volume Tulips and Chimneys, Cummings wrote a number of sonnets that depict love in terms of pain or torture. In "when citted day," the poet's love is compared to a "torture [of] my spirit with the exquisite forms / and whithers of existence," so that the poet becomes "chained" by his emotions. The sonnet "god gloats upon Her stunning flesh" imagines the beloved as Venus and finds that even the gods of the sea "quake before this its hideous

Work," since "chaste stars writhe captured in brightening fright." In "my love is building a building," love becomes a prison:

. . . a skilful uncouth  
 prison, a precise clumsy  
 prison (building that and this into Thus,  
 Around the reckless magic of your mouth). . .

These and other similar images were a commonplace in the English Renaissance sonnet, where the disappointments of love were often compared to physical pain, fear, and imprisonment. In his *Amoretti* 52, Spenser combines these images by writing that:

So oft as homeward I from her depart,  
 I goe lyke one that having lost the field,  
 Is prisoner led away with heavy hart,  
 Despoild of warlike armes and knowen shield.  
 So doe I now my selfe a prisoner yeeld,  
 To sorrow and to solitary paine. . .<sup>105</sup>

In Cummings's second volume *And*, the equally familiar equation of love and fire makes an appearance in the sonnet "whereas by dark":

whereas by dark really released, the modern  
 flame of her indomitable body  
 uses a careful fierceness. Her lips study  
 my head gripping for a decision: burn  
 the terrific fingers which grapple and joke  
 on my passionate anatomy  
 oh yes! . . .

Once again, Spenser provides a well-known precedent for Cummings's imagery:

The paynefull smith with force of fervent heat,  
 The hardest yron soone doth mollify,  
 That with his heavy sledge he can it beat,

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<sup>105</sup> *Petrarch in England* lists Wyatt's "The long love that in my thought," Surrey's "Love that doth raine and live within my thought," *Astrophil and Stella* 8 and 36, *Amoretti* 11 and 57, and *Idea* 29 and 63 as containing a similar conceit. Robert Frost also echoes this conceit in his reference to the "sweet pang" of love in "Putting in the Seed." What distinguishes Frost and Cummings's borrowings is the fact that Frost echoes these sonnets in order to highlight a very different view of love.



And fashion to what he it list apply.  
 Yet cannot all these flames in which I fry,  
 Her hart more more harde then yron soft awhit. . .<sup>106</sup>

Given the hackneyed nature of this image, Cummings's "modern / flame" appears as a playful attempt to acknowledge his echo. To note just one final example of Cummings's echoes of Renaissance imagery, the comparison of the beloved to a flower appears in several sonnets. In "yours is the music" from *Tulips and Chimneys*, the speaker declares to his beloved that "our flesh merely shall be excelled / by speaking flower," while the speaker of the sonnet "when citted day" from the same volume addresses the beloved as "O tremendous flower." The greatest sonnet using this image is undoubtedly *Amoretti* 64, where the various features of the beloved are compared to gillyflowers, roses, bellamoures, pinks, a "strawberry bed," columbines, lilies, and jasmines, respectively, though this conceit was widespread throughout the works of the English Renaissance.<sup>107</sup>

It may seem rather surprising that the most widely-acclaimed experimentalist of the early twentieth century freely employed images that were already common three hundred years before. Yet Cummings borrowed more than specific images, as entire sonnets devote themselves to repetitions of themes from the English Renaissance. A surprisingly large number of early sonnets are extended praises of a woman's physical beauty, including "it is at moments after i have dreamed" from *Tulips and Chimneys*:

it is at moments after i have dreamed  
 of the rare entertainment of your eyes,  
 when (being fool to fancy) i have deemed

with your peculiar mouth my heart made wise;  
 at moments when the glassy darkness holds

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<sup>106</sup> See also Wyatt's "I fynde no peace," *Hecatompithia* 40, *Parthenophil and Parthenophe* 30, and Drummond's "Faire is my yoke," all of which are listed in *Petrarch in England*. Spenser's *Amoretti* 30 and Shakespeare's sonnet 115 provide yet further examples.

<sup>107</sup> In the catalogue of common similes in Shakespeare's Sonnet 130, for example, the mistress's cheeks are compared to "roses damasked, red and white."

the genuine apparition of your smile. . .

moments when my once more illustrious arms  
are filled with fascination, when my breast  
wears the intolerant brightness of your charms:

one pierced moment whiter than the rest. . .

The objects of praise - the beloved's eyes, mouth, smile, breasts, and "brightness" - are those that one would expect in an Elizabethan sonnet, and will be familiar from dozens of Renaissance sonnets. The first quatrain of Shakespeare's sonnet 130, which attempts to reproduce the most common elements of praise, lists all but the smile:

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;  
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;  
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.<sup>108</sup>

Cummings injects a new element into his description through the use of abstractions: all of the features of the beloved are compared to abstract qualities, with the eyes becoming a "rare entertainment," the mouth "peculiar," and the woman's body a "fascination" and "brightness." Yet the point of the sonnet, the praise of the beloved's beauty through her most conspicuous features to justify the speaker's attraction, remains unchanged from lyrics in the English Renaissance.<sup>109</sup>

One of Cummings's most distinguished sonnets, "if i have made,my lady,intricate" from *Is 5*, adapts the common theme of the immortalizing quality of poetry:

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<sup>108</sup> Robert S. Kennedy claims that this anti-Petrarchan sonnet also lies behind various sonnets that praise a woman's beauty with mixed admiration (169). Although Kennedy does not mention the poem explicitly, see the sonnet "Kitty" quoted in part on pp. 215-216 below.

<sup>109</sup> Shakespeare's sonnet, of course, ends with the declaration that the beloved's beauty is enough to inspire a "rare" love in the speaker which is stronger for not being "belied with false compare. Interestingly, Cummings's sonnet ends with another echo. The final line, "i watch the roses of the day grow deep," alludes to Pierre de Ronsard's famous *Sonnet Pour Hélène*, Book II number 42, which commands the beloved to "gather the roses of life today" ("*Cueillez dès aujourd'hui les roses de la vie*").

if i have made,my lady,intricate  
 imperfect various things chiefly which wrong  
 your eyes(frailer than most deep dreams are frail)  
 songs less firm than your body's whitest song  
 upon my mind - if i have failed to snare  
 the glance too shy - if through my singing slips  
 the very skillful strangeness of your smile  
 the keen primeval silence of your hair

- let the world say "his most wise music stole  
 nothing from death" . . .

Once again, the particulars of the praise - the focus on the beloved's eyes, whiteness, glance, smile, and hair - have numerous precedents from the sonnets of the English Renaissance, although the abstract imagery does distinguish the praise somewhat from the concrete Petrarchan conceits. But the speaker's envisioning of a time after the beloved's death when only the poem remains as a record of the past beauty is a familiar one and may be found in Samuel Daniel's *Delia* 35:

Thou canst not dye whilst any zeale abounde  
 In feeling harts, that can conceive these lines:  
 Though thou a *Laura*, hast no *Petrarch* founde;  
 In base attire, yet cleerly Beautie shines.  
 And I, though borne within a colder clime,  
 Doe feele mine inward heate as greate, I knowe it:  
 He never had more faith, although more rime,  
 I love as well, though he could better shew it. . .  
 But though that *Laura* better limned bee,  
 Suffice, thou shalt be lov'd as well as shee.<sup>110</sup>

In both poems, the speaker declares the great impression that the beloved's beauty has made on him and bewails his inability to accurately portray that beauty through his imperfect verse. The major difference between the two sonnets lies in their endings. Daniel's verse ends with a consolation, that *Delia* was loved no less than was Petrarch's *Laura*, but the couplet of "if i have made" is more allusive: "the sweet and clumsy feet of

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<sup>110</sup> The section "The Sonnet as Ornament," pp. 11-12, in chapter 1 above, lists another six Elizabethan sonnets expressing a similar theme.

April came / into the ragged meadow of my soul." This spectacular image, which Rudolph Von Albe has described as "the shock of the unexpected metaphor" (927), plays on the notion of Cummings's own clumsy metrical "feet" and the suggestion that the speaker's soul is a "ragged meadow" without the "April" of the lover, injecting a note of melancholy or even of desperation into the poem. The effect of this image leads the sonnet away from Daniel's assurances, lending it a unique tone in spite of its derivative frettings about its quality and power to describe the beloved.

Cummings continued to write love sonnets that echo the lyrics of the English Renaissance throughout his career, although the later sonnets tend to be more abstract and general than the early poems. Rather than praise for a specific woman or encounter, these sonnets reflect an interest in the general properties of love. In this respect, they resemble Shakespeare's sonnet 116, which Helen Vendler has described as an "almost 'impersonal' sonnet" in its consideration of a general, rhetorical approach to love (The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets, 488):<sup>111</sup>

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

The language of this and similar sonnets<sup>112</sup> - abstract, convoluted, and paradoxical - recalls a number of the later love sonnets. The first line of a sonnet from no thanks, for example, states that "love's function is to fabricate unknownness," a generalization that rivals Shakespeare's declaration of the timelessness of love, while "nothing false and possible is love" from 1x1 begins as an imitation of the quatrain quoted above, complete with repetitions of key terms in its third and fourth lines:

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<sup>111</sup> Vendler, interestingly, reads this sonnet not as a "definition of true love" in the "genre of definition," but as a "dramatic refutation or rebuttal," although she recognizes that the first reading is the more common one (The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets, 488).

<sup>112</sup> See, for example, Shakespeare's sonnets 118 or 129.

nothing false and possible is love  
 (who's imagined, therefore limitless)  
 love's to giving as to keeping's give;  
 as yes is to if, love is to yes

Other sonnets begin with negative declarations, just as Shakespeare's sonnet 129 states that "Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame / Is lust in action," implicitly contrasting lust and true love: in "hate blows a bubble of despair" from 50 poems, Cummings contrasts love with various opposites, which include hate, the surface emotions of pleasure and pain, and "madame death" before the speaker says to his "darling" that "if i sing you are my voice," an avowal of his (true) love.

The sonnets quoted above show Cummings at his most derivative in his themes and imagery, employing the conceits of the English Renaissance sonnet within a modern language and idiom. Other love sonnets, however, show Cummings exploring new variations to familiar conceits, even though he continued to work within recognizable traditions. Aside from several satires that appeared in Cummings's first volume, Tulips and Chimneys, the most original sonnets in the collection occur in the section titled "sonnets - realities." These poems carry on the traditions of the Elizabethan sonnet in asking "Betty" to seize the day and "proving to Death that Love is so and so" in "goodby Betty," or in offering various portraits of eroticized women. Yet in contrast to the courtly love sonnet of the Renaissance, all of the women whom Cumming depicts are either dancers or prostitutes. The most startling portrait occurs in the fifth sonnet in this section:

"kitty". sixteen, 5'1", white, prostitute.

ducking always the touch of must and shall,  
 whose slippery body is Death's littlest pal,

skilled in quick softness. Unspontaneous. cute.

the signal perfume of whose unrepute  
 focusses in the sweet slow animal  
 bottomless eyes importantly banal,

Kitty. a whore. Sixteen. . .

The novelty of the portrait comes from its unsparing look at such an ambiguous subject. Robert S. Kennedy has compared these lines to a "police description" (168), and the combination of details attributed to Kitty is a mixture of the abstractions that appear in many of the love sonnets ("touch of must and shall," "quick softness," "signal perfume," "bottomless eyes") and others that are either factual and brutally direct (her exact height, the emphasis on her being a "prostitute" or "whore") or negative ("unspontaneous," "unrepute," "importantly banal"). At the end of the sonnet, Kitty's "least amazing smile" becomes the "common divisor of unequal souls," a suggestive phrase referring both to the fact that she is "common" and cavorts with many men, as well as to her common humanity. The portrait that emerges is a mixed one, in which the poet tries to recognize the sordidness of her life while affirming its worth. The shock of this description is similar in kind to that of Manet's portrait of the young prostitute in *Olympia*, in which Kitty or "Bet, an Leelee, an dee beeg wun" from "when you rang at Dick Mid's Place" replace the idealized courtly ladies of the Elizabethan sonnet as both depend on the implicit contrast between a former idealized portrait and the sordid reality of the present.

As Helen Vendler has observed, these portraits of lower-class Paris were largely abandoned in later volumes ("Ammons, Berryman, Cummings," 329), to be replaced by a new and equally innovative emphasis on a frank eroticism.<sup>113</sup> The sonnets of the volume *And* are amazingly direct in their descriptions of sex, giving rise to what Von Albe has described as "the strenuously physical and the satirically erotic" (928). The sonnet "when you went away," for example, ends with the lines:

isn't it odd of you really to lie  
a sharp agreeable flower between my

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<sup>113</sup> Cummings did return to sonnet portraits of unidealized women in the sequence "Five Americans" from *is 5*, however.

amused legs  
 kissing with little dints

of april, making the obscene shy  
 breasts tickle, laughing when i wilt and wince

The final sonnet in the volume, "i like my body when it is with your / body," summarizes this new frankness with its reference to the "what-is-it comes / over parting flesh" and "the thrill / of under me you so quite new." These descriptions have few precedents among the sonnets of the English Renaissance, when poets were forced into indirect descriptions through elaborate comparisons of openly sexual objects or themes, as in Spenser's description of his beloved's "brest like lillyes" and her "nipples lyke yong blossomd Jessemynes" (*Amoretti* 64)<sup>114</sup> or Barnaby Barnes's notorious wish in *Parthenophil and Parthenophe* 63 to become:

... that cheane of pearle, her neckes vaine pride,  
 Made proude with her neckes vaines, that I might folde  
 About that lovely necke, and her pappes tickle,  
 Or her to compasse like a belt of golde,  
 Or that sweet wine, which downe her throate doth trickle,  
 To kisse her lippes, and lye next at her hart,  
 Runne through her vaynes, and passe by pleasures part.

This newfound openness in Cummings's sonnets quickly approached the grotesque. One of the strangest sonnets that he wrote is "if i should sleep," which also appeared in *And*. The poem begins with the fantasy "if i should sleep with a lady called death," with the verb "sleep" alluding to the comparison of death to sleep but also including a play on the erotic meaning of the word. The first quatrain asks that the beloved "get another man" with "firmer lips" than the dead speaker, again mixing death with eroticism by forcing the

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<sup>114</sup> Spenser's reticence in his sonnets may be contrasted with several explicit passages from *The Faerie Queene*, including these lines from the description of the Bower of Bliss in Book II: "The wanton Maidens him espying, stood / Gazing a while at his unwonted guise. . . But th'other rather higher did arise, / And her two lilly paps aloft displayd, / And all, that might his melting hart entise / To her delights, she unto him bewrayed: / The rest hid underneath, him more desirous made" (II.XII.66).

beloved to compare living lips with those of the deceased. The second quatrain again combines death and love in explicit imagery:

Seeing how the limp huddling string  
of your smile over his body squirms  
kissingly, i will bring you every spring  
handfuls of little normal worms.

The equation of the beloved's smile with "worms" completes the grotesque imagery of the sonnet. This conceit may have been suggested by Shakespeare's sonnet 81, which speaks of a time when the speaker will be "rotten" while "in earth" "with vildest worms to dwell," but nothing in Shakespeare's sonnet approaches horrific imagery of Cummings's equation of the squirming of lovers with worms. Within a single volume, then, Cummings was able to introduce a new level of frankness into his erotic sonnets and to combine his favourite subjects of love and death in a way that exploits this explicitness for horrifying effects.

Neither the sonnet on "Kitty" nor these openly erotic sonnets represent Cummings at his best, even though Cummings wrote a considerable amount of erotic poetry. Rather, these works exist as interesting new variations on the descriptions of the beloved and the more or less concealed sexual tensions of the Elizabethan sonnet. In at least one sonnet, however, Cummings achieved a level of psychological insight that rivals or perhaps even surpasses that of the sonnets that he elsewhere imitated. In "it may not always be so," the final sonnet from Tulips and Chimneys, he created a speaker who, in his extreme paranoia, is unparalleled in the sonnet tradition:

it may not always be so; and i say  
that if your lips, which i have loved, should touch  
another's and your dear strong fingers clutch  
his heart, as mine in time not far away;  
if on another's face your sweet hair lay  
in such a silence as i know, or such  
great writhing words, as uttering overmuch,  
stand helplessly before the spirit at bay;



if this should be, i say if this should be -  
 you of my heart, send me a little word;  
 that i may go unto him, and take his hands,  
 saying, Accept all happiness from me.  
 Then shall i turn my face, and hear one bird  
 sing terribly afar in the lost lands.

The sonnet turns on three words which appear at the beginning of the octave or sestet: "may," "if," and "say." The first two words emphasize the fact that everything stated in the sonnet is hypothetical or conditional upon events that have not occurred. There is no reason to suspect, from anything that appears in the sonnet, that the beloved will leave the speaker, and the intimacy revealed by the various details suggests the contrary. The third of these words, "say," reveals that the imagined affair exists only in the speaker's utterance, and that the scene becomes plausible only through the amassing of details accorded by the speaker himself. At the beginning of the description, there is only the vague detail of the beloved's lips which "touch / another's," but the scene soon gains credibility through the description of "dear strong fingers," which gives the scene its first individual characteristic. The second quatrain, on the other hand, describes the intimate sight of the "sweet hair" lying in "such a silence as i know" or "uttering overmuch," using synaesthesia and the novel image of hair speaking to accord reality to a scene that may never have occurred.

Through this conceit of an imagined tryst between the beloved and another man, the speaker of the sonnet gains a psychological complexity which is rare in an individual sonnet. As the octave progresses, the speaker begins to inject more adjectives into his description, indicating his increased emotional involvement in the imagined scene. The lips at the beginning are merely lips, but the fingers are "dear," while the hair is "sweet" and, in its ability to communicate emotion, transforms into a "great writhing," "uttering overmuch," and a "helpless" standing. The sestet returns to a more subdued tone in a manner suggestive of Michael Drayton's *Idea* 61 ("Since there's no help"), which was

discussed briefly in the chapter on E. A. Robinson.<sup>115</sup> The octave of Drayton's sonnet contains a great deal of suppressed emotion as the speaker attempts to leave his beloved Idea without hinting at his distress over doing so:

Shake hands forever, 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.

This bravado is unmasked as a lie in the sestet, which imagines that Love is now on his deathbed, although the beloved may revive him "from death to life" by renewing their love. Similarly, Cummings's speaker wishes his beloved "all happiness," but then declares that the music he will hear afterward comes from "terribly afar from the lost lands" of his former happiness. Yet the two works differ in the increased complexity of Cummings's speaker, whose grounds for imagining this scene remain obscure. His reaction to what is only a possibility, his insistence on envisioning the scene of infidelity in such detail, and his extreme image of despair in the sonnet's final image make the psychological motivations into the most interesting aspect of the poem. His obsession in imagining the tryst shows him crossing over to paranoia, but it is an open question as to whether he is becoming saddened over a spontaneous realization of this possibility of infidelity, warning his beloved not to seek another love lest he despair as in the sonnet's final image, or even asking her to confess if she has been unfaithful to him through an offer of acceptance and his hints that he knows of the intimate details of the affair. The achievement of "it may not always be so" is in its suggestions of all these scenarios, lending the speaker a remarkable psychological veracity.

Unfortunately, Cummings did not pursue this type of rich psychological portrait in any sonnet after the early experiment in "it may not always be so" or the final image of "i have made,my lady." Instead, his early sonnets show him accepting and adapting the

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<sup>115</sup> See the section on "The Sonnet as Allegory" in chapter 2, pp 70-71. above.

conventions of the Elizabethan sonneteers, while later in his career he turned to writing abstract and satirical sonnets which do not attempt any exploration of psychological states. Before moving to a consideration of these sonnets, however, Cummings's debt to the Elizabethan sonnet must again be emphasized. Even while he was making original contributions to the love sonnet in his open depictions of paranoia in "it may not always be so" or of Parisian prostitutes and sexual encounters, Cummings remained staunchly within the tradition of the despairing narrators of Elizabethan sonnets who praised the objects of their desires in similar terms. Nowhere does Cummings offer an alternative to the convention that is as fundamental as Frost's challenge to any notion of Platonic love or Robinson's attempt to shift the predominately lyric sonnet to a form of narrative. Instead, Cummings adapted the imagery and basic themes of his precedents to slightly different purposes, always praising some form of love as an end in itself and his women as being particularly worthy of this attention.

This limitation of Cummings's experiments in the love sonnet may be seen by a comparison of the works discussed above to what may be the most powerful sonnet of the period, Yeats's "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?

Many of the effects of "Leda and the Swan" stem from the fact that it is a sonnet, the same poetic form that housed the great love lyrics of the English Renaissance. Not even the sonnets of Robert Frost invoke so many images from the Renaissance while questioning the form from within. Yeats's great innovation in this poem was to recall the familiar Renaissance conceits involving potentially explosive subject matter - violence, sex, and a favourable interpretation of the classical tradition - and to recast them so that they become literal and terrifying. The violence of the rape in "Leda and the Swan," for example, which Thomas R. Whitaker has called an "incursion of starkly physical power" (*Swan and Shadow*, 107), echoes the comparison of love to a battle which lies behind Cummings's "when citted day" and which appeared in Surrey's early translation of Petrarch's *Sonetto in Vita* 91, "Love, that Doth Reign":

Love, that doth reign and live within my thought,  
And built his seat within my captive breast,  
Clad in the arms wherein with me he fought,  
Oft in my face he doth his banner rest. . .

This conceit was used frequently by the Elizabethan sonneteers, and even Spenser's lyrical *Amoretti* opens with a similar image:

Happy ye leaves when as those lilly hands,  
Which hold my life in their dead doing might,  
Shall handle you and hold in loves soft bands,  
Lyke captives trembling at the victors sight. (*Amoretti* 1)<sup>116</sup>

In "Leda and the Swan," this conceit is for the first time made literally true, as the scene begins with its "sudden blow," and we are given a depiction of a violent rape with its "staggering girl," "terrified vague fingers," and the forced caresses of her thighs and

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<sup>116</sup> *Petrarch in England* lists Wyatt's translation "The long love that in my thought doth harbour," as well as *Astrophil and Stella* 8 and 36, *Amoretti* 11 and 57, and *Idea* 29 and 63 as borrowing this conceit. Many less conspicuous examples could also have been listed.

breast. The overt violence of the scene is its main feature, and in a passage on the rape from A Vision, Yeats makes this comparison between love and war explicit:

I imagine the annunciation that founded Greece as made to Leda, remembering that they showed in a Spartan temple, strung up to the roof as a holy relic, an unhatched egg of hers; and that from one of her eggs came Love and from the other War. (268)

By drawing the natural conclusions of this equation of love and war in a sonnet, Yeats is able to recast the use of these images. The previously innocent conceit is made terrifyingly real, thereby forcing his readers to realize the true implications of this line of wit in the sonnet tradition.

A second revision of the sonnet tradition occurs in the description of Leda's body. Cummings's early sonnets adopt the stock praise of piercing eyes, red lips, white skin, perfumed breath, and other particulars of beauty to reveal the lovers' physical attraction towards the beloved. At times this longing may break out into moments of undisguised eroticism, as in "i like my body" from And or the examples by Spenser or Barnes quoted above. It is this type of playful eroticism that is absent from "Leda and the Swan." By being focussed on an act of rape, the physical features of Leda are robbed of their mystique, revealing her reduction into a mere "body" which is beaten into submission. The descriptions of her caressed thighs, the nape of her neck, or her "helpless breast" might have been the object of romantic longing in a Renaissance work, but here they only indicate the progress of Zeus's mastery. The grotesque juxtaposition of Zeus's "dark webs" and his bestial "feathered glory" with the Leda's thighs strips the scene of any pleasurable erotic associations. The distance between the Renaissance tradition and Yeats's poem can be measured in the difference between Barnes's wish to "her pappes tickle" or Cummings's "her obscene shy / breasts tickle" with Leda's "helpless breast. . . being so caught up" in the beak of Zeus. Here Leda is reduced to a sum of attractive features, although this reduction leads to a purely physical reaction and mastery rather than the elaborate praise and despondency claimed by earlier courtly lovers.

The third sonnet conceit revisited by "Leda and the Swan" lies in its use of classical mythology. In the Renaissance, pseudo-mythological tales featuring Cupid were sometimes created to explain an aspect of love, most often the great beauty of the lady. This type of tale, the anacreontic, was important enough to receive an honoured place as an introduction to Spenser's *Amoretti* and as a playful finale to Shakespeare's sonnets, which attempt to explain the beauty of the mistress's eyes:

But at my mistress' eye Love's brand new-fired,  
The boy for trial needs would touch my breast,  
I sick withal the help of bath desired,  
And thither hied a sad distempered guest.  
But found no cure, the bath for my help lies  
Where Cupid got new fire; my mistress' eyes. (sonnet 153)

In the early sonnets by Cummings, something of this tradition survives in "when the proficient poison of sure sleep" from *Xli Poems*, where the end of a love affair is figured in the flight of a Cupid-figure:

and He without Whose favour nothing is  
(being of men called Love) upward doth leap  
from the mute hugeness of depriving deep,

with thunder of those hungering wings of His. . .

Yeats revises the tradition by treating his subject more seriously than any Renaissance sonneteer could or did. While Shakespeare uses classical myth to tell a witty tale about his attraction to his love, Yeats treats mythology as an equivalent to historical truth, so that the rape of Leda becomes an "annunciation" which bequeathed Greek civilization the "burning roof and tower" of Troy and the fall of the house of Atreus. This dislocation from playful wit to tragedy raises the classically-inspired sonnet to a new seriousness. The subsequent question about the relation of knowledge to power and its implication for civilization, while not inconceivable for a Renaissance writer,<sup>117</sup> was impossible in an

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<sup>117</sup> In fact, Yeats in his sextet may be echoing Marlowe's famous lines on Helen of Troy from *Doctor Faustus*: "Was this the face that launched a thousand ships / And burnt the

anacreontic situation, so that once again we are forced to recognize the great divide between Yeats's poem and the sonnet traditions which it evokes.

The achievement of "Leda and the Swan" lies in its replacing of Renaissance wit with the force inherent in the scene, of erasing romantic illusions with a vision of reality stripped to its essential components of power, knowledge, lust, and fate. Underlying this revision of the sonnet tradition is a fundamental clash of sensibilities, with tragedy replacing the playfulness sanctioned by the history of the form. Yet there remains one further revision which we must note in Yeats's poem, expressed through the role of the sestet. In many love sonnets, as was described in the section on Frost's rewriting of the Platonic love tradition,<sup>118</sup> the sestet marks a movement from the worldly to the heavenly, from the transient to the eternal. In "Leda and the Swan," however, history has replaced any notion of the transcendent. In the place of comforting reflections on eternity that resolve the problems raised in the octave, Yeats alludes to the further violence of the burning of Troy and the tragedy of Agamemnon, which are seen to be required by the workings of myth and history. By beginning these references with the sestet, Yeats in effect denies that there is any force greater than the temporal succession of events and asserts that the categories of "power" and "knowledge" brought by the "annunciation" are the only transcendent reality available.

"Leda and the Swan" relies on its quarrels with the sonnet tradition to convey its significance; rewritten in blank verse or as a villanelle, its density of allusion would be lost. But this attempt to explode the tradition of the Renaissance love sonnet is foreign to Cummings's sensibility. Even when Cummings injects new variations into the history of the love sonnet in his description of Parisian prostitutes or a new level of frankness in describing the sexual act, he remains faithful to the tradition of describing eroticized

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topless towers of Ilium?" (V.i.98-99).

<sup>118</sup> See the beginning of the section entitled "Robert Frost and the Platonic Love Sonnet" from chapter 3 above, pp. 106-107.

women, primarily through their physical endowments. Cummings's love sonnets may be read as a series of witty variations on the standard themes and views of the great sonnet writers of the English Renaissance, a tradition with which he identified himself in his six nonlectures but which he did not attempt to challenge fundamentally or rewrite.

### **The Sonnet as Satire**

Even as he was composing the love sonnets that echoed the images and conceits of the English Renaissance, Cummings was employing the sonnet for other ends. The first sonnet of Tulips and Chimneys is not a love lyric but a satire, the famous poem "the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls":

the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls  
 are unbeautiful 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

Perhaps the most stunning aspect of "the Cambridge ladies" is how modern and fresh the poem seems next to the love sonnets. The language remains sharp and unexpected, especially in its use of adjectives. The phrases "furnished souls" and "comfortable minds" still retain their surprise as the inner life of Cambridge is shown to be identical to its surroundings. And in a manner similar to his use of abstract adjectives in many of the love sonnets, the ladies are described as being "unbeautiful," while their daughters are "unscented shapeless spirited." Lines six through ten mark a shift in the poem and mimic the language of the Cambridge ladies themselves in order to mock it, with its silly question "is it Poles?" and the society-page gossip of the "scandal of Mrs. N and



Professor D." The final images, with their surreal "sky lavender and cornerless" and the moon "like a fragment of angry candy," mark yet another shift in the poem's language, presenting the greatest contrast to the views of the Cambridge ladies, in which their comfortable lives are seen to be at odds with the shocking reality surrounding them. In his reading of the sonnet, R. P. Blackmur complained that:

Mr. Cummings's line about the moon and candy does not weld a contradiction, does not identify a substance by a thrill of novel association. It leaves the reader at a loss; where it is impossible to know, after any amount of effort and good will, what the words mean. ("Notes on E. E. Cummings's Language," 63)

But the obscurity of the image is precisely the point, as the introduction of a comparison that cannot be properly explained heightens the contrast between the comfortable world of the ladies and the inexplicable cosmos at large.

The contrast between "the Cambridge ladies" and the love sonnets is remarkable, as the object and means of the satire have no real precedent in the sonnet tradition as even the most original of Cummings's love sonnets do. While the love sonnets openly draw from the sonnet conceits popular in the English Renaissance, "the Cambridge ladies" is an attack on the conformity which leads to the "comfortable minds" and "shapeless" daughters of its subjects. In his "nonlectures," Cambridge and the mass conformity of modern society are associated explicitly:

. . . all groups, gangs, and collectivities - no matter how apparently disparate - are fundamentally alike; and that what makes any world go round is not the trivial difference between a Somerville and a Cambridge, but the immeasurable difference between either of them and individuality. (31)

The sonnet had been used to attack a privileged stratum of society before Cummings in Shelley's anti-aristocratic "England 1819," and a conformity in its own language and themes in Shakespeare's anti-Petrarchan sonnet 130. But in this sonnet Cummings finds a distinctly contemporary object of attack that had never been singled out for notice in the sonnet. And to further sharpen his attack, Cummings also drew on another recent attack on conformism, George Santayana's suspicion of the "genteel tradition" in his 1915

essay "Genteel American Poetry." The "genteel tradition" was identified with the protestant upper-class society of New England, which Santayana described as follows:

Poetry in America before the Civil War was an honest and adequate phenomenon. It spoke without affectation in a language and style which it could take for granted. It was candid in its tastes, even in that frank and gentle romanticism which attached it to Evangelines and Maud Millers. It modulated in obvious ways the honorable conventions of the society in which it arose. It was a simple, sweet, humane, Protestant literature, grandmotherly in that sedate spectacled wonder with which it gazed at this terrible world and said how beautiful and how interesting it all was.

The accent of these poets was necessarily provincial, their outlook and reflectiveness were universal enough. Their poetry was indeed without sensuous beauty, splendor, passion, or volume, but so was the life it expressed. To be a really great poet an American at that time would have had to be a rebel. (147)

Longfellow (the author of "Evangeline"), convention, protestantism, the lack of beauty, and the reaction of "how interesting it all was" all appear in Cummings's poem. The rebel poet who was to fight against these conventions thus becomes Cummings himself. Cummings's poetical language in "the Cambridge ladies," which is by turns inventive, satirical, and surreal, is made to stand in marked contrast with the Cambridge ladies and performs the task of providing an alternative to their predictable protestantism. While the ladies believe in "dead" teachings, Cummings's rebellious sonnet is very much alive in its experiments with rhyme scheme and its meter. Lines twelve and thirteen drop a syllable and in their rhythms resemble free verse rather than iambic pentameter, while the rhyme scheme of *abcd dcba efg gfe* presents the rhymes one after the other in the octave and sestet and then repeats them in reverse order, thus describing the Cambridge ladies in a sonnet variation that they themselves would not recognize. A description that Cummings wrote of T. S. Eliot's poetry summarizes his own technique here:

By technique we do mean one thing: the alert hatred of normality which, through the lips of a tactile and cohesive adventure, asserts that nobody in general and some one in particular is incorrigibly and actually alive. (as quoted in E. E. Cummings: The Magic-Maker, 122)

By means of this rhetoric, the sonnet is made to turn on two conflicting world views, that of the genteel conformity of the Cambridge ladies and the inventiveness represented by the language and unusual structure of the sonnet itself.

"The Cambridge ladies" provides an excellent introduction to the method and wit of Cummings's sonnet satires. These satires always attack orthodoxy, whether it be that of a specific type of individual or group, as in "the Cambridge ladies," or a general attitude or view, as in the attack on science in "pity this busy monster," which was quoted in the introduction to this chapter. These attacks operate through his language, which mocks its subject by casting it in terms that are foreign to its sensibility. Much of the humour of "the Cambridge ladies," for example, arises from the fact that the ladies would not comprehend a phrase such as "unscented shapeless spirited," even while it condemns them. In his attack on progress and science from "pity this busy monster" as an "unwish," the belief that an electron microscope can "deify one razorblade" is incomprehensible within the terms of science itself. The language here is carefully chosen to lie outside of scientific discourse, so that the act of reading the poem brings one closer to the "hell of a good universe next door" of Cummings's poetry that stands against modern physics.

Cummings's other famous satire in the sonnet form, "next to of course god america i" from *is 5*, shows a similar technique in opposing its subject to the wit of its language. The target of the satire in this poem is empty sloganeering and patriotism, which is mocked as follows:

"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 geen by gosh by gum. . .

The number of satirical effects contained in these eight lines is impressive, ranging from a pointed lack of capitals ("god america"); the abrupt switch from one slogan to another that leaves the entire phrase meaningless ("oh / say can you see by the dawn's early / my country 'tis of centuries come and go"); the mixing of high rhetoric and slang ("thy sons acclaim your glorious name by gorry"); the use of sudden line breaks to interrupt the meaning of a phrase, thus diminishing it ("my / country"); and the completion of phrases with satiric or meaningless additions ("tis of centuries come and go / and are no more"). Throughout the poem, one senses Cummings's presence as he recasts the various slogans so that they are simultaneously surprising and unfamiliar, even though they are largely constructed out of phrases that have become clichés. More than any single effect, however, the sheer number of familiar slogans creates the satiric thrust of the poem. Each fragment is made to appear as mere rhetoric, another meaningless phrase which is abruptly interrupted by the next. A single patriotic slogan might be stirring in context, but the promise of an endless number of them makes each one seem tiresome and empty.

One of the most interesting aspects of "next to of course god" is that its subject is language itself, a fact which is emphasized in the sonnet by the phrases "oh say," "every language," "acclaim your glorious name," "why talk," "shall the voice of liberty be mute," and "he spoke." The language that is represented by the speaker of the poem is dead and empty, mere rhetoric. By contrast, Cummings's odd phrases, typography, and coinages offer a glimpse into the enormous burden that his language assumes in the satires, of providing a witty alternative to the limited and unattractive subjects that it satirizes. In another context, Roy Harvey Pearce labelled this use of an innovative language to satirize a conventional subject as Cummings's attempt to "literally to rescue language from the discursive, analytic abstractness that threatens to deaden it" (363). The extent of Cummings's inventiveness may be seen by comparing this poem to other "list" sonnets, or sonnets that are organized by gathering together a great number of loosely-related details

or images, from the Renaissance. Spenser's *Amoretti* 64, briefly alluded to in the section above, lists eight comparisons between the beloved and various flowers:

Her lips did smell lyke unto Gillyflowers,  
 Her ruddy cheekes lyke unto Roses red:  
 Her snowy browes lyke budded Bellamoures,  
 Her lovely eyes lyke Pincks but newly spred,  
 Her goodly bosome lyke a Strawberry bed,  
 Her neck lyke to a bounch of Cullambynes:  
 Her brest lyke lillyes, ere theyr leaves be shed,  
 Her nipples lyke yong blossomd Jessemynes. . . <sup>119</sup>

Here each comparison is introduced with a parallel construction, and the wit lies in both the particular comparisons and the poet's ability to sustain this structure through two quatrains. Herbert's sonnet "Prayer I," a very different sonnet from Spenser's, is closer to Cummings's poem in its structure, in that it collects a number of loosely-connected metaphors without insisting on a strict parallel structure:

Prayer the church's banquet, Angel's age,  
 God's breath in man returning to his birth,  
 The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,  
 The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth. . .

Once again, the wit of the poem depends on the poet's ability to connect a large number of metaphors over the course of a sonnet. But neither Spenser's nor Herbert's poem invents so many ways of connecting its elements, nor does it throw its component metaphors into such startling combinations. In its ability to move from one slogan to another through shifts in mid-sentence and surprising juxtapositions, Cummings's technique itself establishes the theme of "next to of course god," which argues for the superiority of its poetic language over the empty slogans that it derides.

Surprisingly, "the Cambridge ladies" and "next to of course god" are the only satirical sonnets that appear in the first four volumes of poetry, even though they are the

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<sup>119</sup> See also *Amoretti* 9, 15, 26, and 55 for more examples of this type of sonnet by Spenser. Shakespeare also employs it in his sonnet 66 and sonnet 91.

best known of any of his poems written in the sonnet form. It was only in his final volumes, from No Thanks onwards, that satirical sonnets appear with any frequency. When Cummings did begin to produce large numbers of satires, he remained consistent in his technique. Throughout his satirical sonnets, various facets of the modern world are mocked by being described in Cummings's own language or by having their own terms distorted. In his attack on commercialism, "a salesman is an it that stinks Excuse / Me" from the later 50 Poems, for example, the opening lines deride the salesman both by Cummings's own turn of phrase (the pronoun "it," which denies him any humanity) and the salesman's own introductory phrase "Excuse Me," which is presented with self-important capitals. The poem proceeds to question commercialism in general by jumbling together various abstract and concrete nouns that are being "sold" in a manner reminiscent of "next to of course god":

but whether to please itself or someone else  
 makes no more difference than if it sells  
 hate condoms education snakeoil vac  
 uumcleaners terror strawberries democ  
 ra(caveat emptor)cy superfluous hair

This list of products jumbles commonplace items (strawberries, vacuum cleaners) with those that are vaguely unrespectable (snakeoil, condoms), clichéd (superfluous hair), or nonsensically abstract (hate, terror, and democracy, with the insertion of "buyer beware"). The result is that even selling strawberries is made to appear silly or suspect. The sonnet concludes with another burst of Cummings's word play: "or Think We've Met subhuman rights Before." The wit lies not only in the coinage "subhuman rights," but also in the pointed refusal to capitalize these words in a line filled with capitals, thus deflating them in the same manner as the nouns "god" and "america" in "next to of course god."

While Cummings's basic method of opposing his own individual language and that of his subjects remained fairly constant, his later satires do tend to become more

general in their language and targets. Most often he extends the critique of "pity this busy monster" by attacking modern science and rationalism. As Charles Norman observes, Cummings "was against 'progress,' which he called 'regression to barbarism'"

(7). Or, as Norman Friedman describes these subjects, Cummings wrote in:

opposition to scientific rationalism and the commercialistic vulgarity of modern middleclass life, an insistence upon the value of the irrational and intuitive, an interest in technical and stylistic experimentation, a single-minded devotion to the role of the artist and the function of poetry, and so on. ("E.E. Cummings and the Modernist Movement," 160-1)

In "proud of his scientific attitude" from 50 Poems, Cummings creates a ridiculous figure who is:

proud of his scientific attitude  
and liked the prince of wales wife wants to die  
but the doctors won't let her. . .

The "scientific attitude" is connected with frivolous details and personal failure, subjects that are run together indiscriminately. In his next volume, LX L, Cummings adopts the novel device of playing with numbers in "one's not half two" to argue that mathematical logic does not explain the case of two lovers who unite to become one:

one's not half two. It's two are halves of one:  
which halves reintegrating, shall occur  
no death and any quantity; but then  
all numerable mosts the actual more<sup>120</sup>

These lines verge on nonsense verse, as the expectation of a logical train of thought in the mathematical imagery is subverted to reveal the inadequacy of logic itself. In "conceive a man" from no thanks, Cummings again exploits this point as the poem's commandment to define "a man" quickly degenerates into nonsense verse:

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<sup>120</sup> Cummings may have in mind here the opening of Shakespeare's sonnet 36 ("Let me confess that we two must be twain, / Although our undivided loves are one") or sonnet 39, "let us divided live, / And our dear love lose name of single one."

(his autumn's winter being summer's spring  
 who moved by standing in november's may). . .

and dark beginnings are his luminous ends  
 who far less lonely than a fire is cool  
 took bedfellows for moons mountains for friends. . .

The point of these lines, presumably, is to argue that people are not logical systems and hence are incapable of a rational definition or description. Cummings's satire of logic in these sonnets might have been what led R. P. Blackmur to conclude that "the general dogma of [his] group is a sentimental denial of intelligence and the deliberate assertion that the unintelligible is the only object of significant experience" ("Notes on E.E. Cummings's Language," 47-48). Against this charge, one may note the consistent wit inherent in the language of the poetry. Yet it is true that Cummings continually satirized the pretensions of rational system-building, as in "sonnet entitled how to run the world" from no thanks, which attempts to give vague directions ordered by a child's a-b-c:

A always don't there B being no such thing  
 for C can't casts no shadow D drink and

E eat of her voice in whose silence the music of spring  
 lives F feel opens but shuts understand. . .

The list reaches only to the letter "h," when it is abandoned in despair. The point is that all forms of knowledge are equivalent in Cummings's imagery to a child's play and cannot be taken seriously.

The sonnets quoted above are satires in their attempt to mock logic and rational thought, either directly or through their refusal to remain within the bounds of logic even while using the language of mathematics or epistemology. Once again, the inventiveness of Cummings's language carries the weight of the satire, and the opposition between the humorous play of his language and science or mathematics drives the poem. This technique of creating startling juxtapositions of the nonsensical and serious, which plays such a role in "next to of course god," was later turned on a large number of targets. In



"When serpents bargain for the right to squirm" from XAIPE, commercial society is satirized as follows:

when serpents bargain for the right to squirm  
and the sun strikes to gain a living wage -  
when thorns regard their roses with alarm  
and rainbows are insured against old age

William Heyen has properly called this sonnet a "satirical instruction" in its nonsensical application of monetary concerns to nature ("In Consideration of Cummings," 241) . In "you shall above all things be glad and young" from New Poems, this opposition between nature and modern society is carried to another extreme:

that you should ever think, may god forbid  
and (in his mercy) your true lover spare:  
for that way knowledge lies, the foetal grave  
called progress, and negation's dead undoom.

I'd rather learn from one bird how to sing  
than teach ten thousand stars how not to dance.

Here progress becomes a "foetal grave," which gives birth to many inventions but which is still believed to be a "death" that is opposed to love and life. In the concluding couplet, knowledge and progress are believed to teach the "stars how not to dance," presumably a reference to a scientific and rational, as opposed to a magical and poetical, appreciation of nature. In one sense this assertion is meaningless, since science does not presume to teach the stars anything. In Cummings's poems, however, such statements represent a vision that lies outside the rational knowledge that is being derided, a poetical flourish meant to confound any logical explication. Elsewhere, Cummings used the same technique in returning to the target of "the Cambridge ladies," the "comfortable" minds and conformity, in "these people so-called" from 50 poems:

and as for souls why souls are wholes not parts  
but all these hundreds upon thousands of  
people so-called if multiplied by twice  
infinity could never equal one

Here the language of mathematics is not used in a logical sense, but in an effort to show the emptiness of a soulless mass society by substituting a free poetic play (multiplying by "twice infinity") for any rational, scientific equation.

In his sonnet satires, Cummings consistently used a single technique, in which the playful inventiveness of his verse stands in opposition to the subject being satirized. The innovations in language - the refusal to employ capital letters, a fondness for running together many disparate phrases or items in a list, the use of nonsensical mathematics - tend to have a satirical function that emphasizes the difference between poetic wit and the presumed lifelessness of progress, science, history, and so forth. The Cummings who emerges from these sonnets is very different from the author of the love sonnets. Yet the poet who satirizes those who blindly follow convention was also capable of adopting, with minimal variation, the most familiar conventions of the Elizabethan love sonnet. Cummings never attempted to resolve this tension in his poetry. Instead, "his notion of love," as Von Albe writes, "put it in opposition to *any* merely intellectual operation, especially those of scientists" (925, original italics). As the opening of "love's function" from no thanks declares:

love's function is to fabricate unknownness

(known being wishless;but love,all of wishing)

At the same time that love is being declared to be "unknownness," the poem adopts the repetitions and general rhetorical mode of Shakespeare's sonnet 116, whose first quatrain was quoted in the previous section of this chapter. Cummings was certainly aware of this precedent (he included it in the second of his "nonlectures"), but the irony of condemning the "known" in a sonnet that itself echoes a famous "known" poem appears to have been

overlooked. Instead, the "known" refers only to scientific or rational knowledge<sup>121</sup> or the conformity of the modern age, although this distinction is never made explicit.

### **Innovation in the Sonnet Structure**

In the discussion of Cummings's love sonnets and satires above, the emphasis was placed on the subject matter of the sonnets. In the love sonnets, many of Cummings's themes, conceits, and rhetorical modes are adapted from the Elizabethan sonneteers, so that in this sense Cummings proves to be a highly traditional poet. Even when he is repeating the most familiar Petrarchan conceits, however, there is another sense in which the poems remained highly original. The following lines from "whereas by dark" from *And* were declared to be traditional in their use of the images of fire to describe passion and their eroticism in the discussion above, but they are as striking for their appearance and prosody as for their traditional conceit:

whereas by dark really released, the modern  
 flame of her indomitable body  
 uses a careful fierceness. Her lips study  
 my head gripping for a decision: burn  
 the terrific fingers which grapple and joke  
 on my passionate anatomy  
 oh yes!

Cummings's use of slant rhymes in pairing "body" and "study"; his rhyming of stressed and unstressed syllables in pairing "modern" and "burn"; the surprising space break between lines six and seven; the omission of an initial unstressed syllable in line 6; the lack of capitals; the free use of abstract adjectives in place of concrete imagery; the unusual oxymoron of "careful fierceness"; and the shift of subject between lines 6 and 7, from the description of an action to the speaker's emotions, rather than a placing of the turn after line 8, all inject a radically new element into the sonnet. It is these features - the novel rhymes, meter, and sudden shifts in the argument - that are usually invoked in

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<sup>121</sup> Compare the use of the word "wishless" here with the belief that science represents an "unwish" that is "hopeless" in "pity this busy monster," quoted above, p. 202.

discussions of Cummings's inventiveness or experimentalism, or what Allen Tate called the "laboriously wrought, but simply presented, arrangements of observation into magnificent patterns" ("E. E. Cummings: *Tulips and Chimneys*," 13). Each of these characteristics possesses a special significance for the sonnet form, since it is the meter, rhyme, total of fourteen lines, and division between quatrains or octave and sestet that tend to define the sonnet structure. Cummings took great liberties with each of these elements, especially in the early sonnets of his first two volumes, and through these experiments he searched for a novel approach to the organization of the sonnet, even while the basic features of a sonnet form continued to be respected.

These technical features of his poetry have been explicated at length in a number of excellent essays;<sup>122</sup> here the discussion will be restricted to the implications of these innovations for the sonnet form. Of all the aforementioned features, Cummings took the fewest liberties with the meter, although in his early sonnets the meter is often varied. In these poems, Cummings frequently dropped syllables or substituted trochees for iambs, as in the lines from "whereas by dark" quoted above, which made Yvor Winters complain that "his use of regular meter is inexpert to an extreme degree" ("American Literature," 209). At times the meter disappears altogether, as in the end of "O It's Nice To Get Up" from *And*: "not. Again. Hush. God. Please hold. Tight." The pauses and use of one-syllable words make this line very difficult to scan, if any scansion is possible. Yet it was in his shorter lines that Cummings varied his iambic pentameter to the greatest extent. The sonnet "the bed is not very big," an aubade from *And*, playfully echoes its substance by shrinking the pentameter line while loosening the iambs to the point of becoming free verse:

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<sup>122</sup> Rudolph Von Albe's "Only to Grow': Change in the Poetry of E. E. Cummings," S. V. Baum's "E. E. Cummings: The Technique of Immediacy," chapter 7 of Richard S. Kennedy's *Dreams in the Mirror*, and Robert E. Maurer's "Latter-Day Notes on E. E. Cummings's Language" all provide excellent introductions to this subject.

the bed is not very big

a sufficient pillow shoveling  
her small manure-shaped head. . .

Here the poetic line is "not very big," as is the bed. In "my love is building a building," the length of the poetic line again reinforces the argument, as the sonnet "builds" from two loose trimeter lines to a tetrameter and then a full and regular iambic pentameter in the first quatrain:

my love is building a building  
around you, a frail slippery  
house, a strong fragile house  
(beginning at the singular beginning

The sonnet thus "builds" toward a proper line in both its length and iambic meter, just as the building is being constructed. Nothing quite like this had ever occurred in the sonnet before in English. While some sonnets did shorten the sonnet's line into a tetrameter,<sup>123</sup> the progression from a trimeter to a tetrameter line, and then to a pentameter line, is unprecedented. In spite of their novelty, Cummings soon abandoned these experiments. While many of the later sonnets such as "pity this busy monster" are difficult to scan, in only one sonnet, "little joe gould" from no thanks, did Cummings introduce a line longer than a pentameter (in this case, a hexameter), and a meter (a loose anapestic) that varied the iambic pentameter in order to mimic the sound of a nursery rhyme.

As these examples suggest, Cummings did not make any systematic or concerted attempt to experiment with the iambic pentameter line of the sonnet. Instead, he tended to adapt his experiments to the requirements of a particular sonnet or image, although a broad trend towards a more standard line may be noted. The degree to which Cummings varied his rhymes and rhyme schemes also fluctuated through individual poems and volumes. In general, the early sonnets contain his most daring experiments with full

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<sup>123</sup> See, for example, Shakespeare's sonnet 145.

rhymes, while the later sonnets, as Norman Friedman has noted (E.E. Cummings: The Art of His Poetry, 102-3), experiment more freely with slant rhymes and irregular rhyme schemes, but making any generalizations along these lines is very difficult.<sup>124</sup> Tulips and Chimneys, his first volume, opens with "the Cambridge ladies," as was stated above, an irregular Italian sonnet with the playful rhyme scheme of *abcd dcba* in the octave, which is then followed by the regular Shakespearian sonnet "goodby Betty," and six poems later by "it may not always be so," a regular Italian sonnet. But the fourth sonnet of Tulips and Chimneys, "when you rang at Dick Mid's Place," rhymes *abcbacdbedfggf*, an irregular scheme with the novel feature of having one line that fails to rhyme with any other. The late volume XAIPE, meanwhile, includes "now all the fingers of this tree" which, with the allowance of slant rhymes, is a perfectly regular Shakespearian sonnet. But XAIPE also contains "luminous tendril of celestial wish" with its highly irregular rhyme scheme of *a bbc d eda c ecb ff*, again allowing for the free use of slant rhymes.

The significance of Cummings's irregular rhyme schemes will be discussed along with his line breaks below; here we should note several of his innovations in creating rhymes. In the early sonnets, Cummings shows a great playfulness in ensuring that full rhymes are present. In several of the sonnets, words are broken across lines to satisfy a rhyme for what Von Albe has dubbed a "split rhyme" (922). The poem "my sonnet is" from And, for example, creates the rhymes in its second quatrain as follows:

which quite undoes the mandolin-  
 man's tiny racket. The horses sleep upstairs.  
 And you can see their ears. Ears win-  
 k, funny stable.

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<sup>124</sup> In his essay "Only to Grow," Rudolph Von Albe provides a numerical chart that proves Cummings's increasing use of slant rhymes (921).

The wit of the poem lies in its determination to see the rhyming pattern fulfilled at any cost, even to the extent of forcing the letter "k" from the word "wink" to stand alone at the beginning of a line. Similarly, "next to of course god america i," quoted above, rhymes "mute" with the first syllable of "beaut - iful," again forcing parts of words to stand alone on the page. Janice P. Stout may have been referring to this practice when she remarked that "even more insistently than Berryman, Cummings can dot the i's and cross the t's of sonnet convention as a kind of joke" ("Fretting Not," 33). In both of these examples, the broken words do not make any great contribution to the argument of their poems; instead, these novel rhymes exist primarily as a form of wit that is added over and above the particular themes.

A more significant feature of Cummings's rhymes lies in their stresses on the relatively unimportant parts of speech. Often articles, pronouns, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and auxiliary verbs appear in the rhyming positions, creating an impression of novelty as well as an unexpected line break. In "the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls," for example, the rhymes include such unusual pairings as "D" - "the" and "of" - "above" in the sestet. In part, these rhymes provide a form of wit and humour in much the same way that the broken words of the above examples do, by showing the sonnet's rhyme scheme preservation at any cost. Yet this technique, coupled with another, shows one of the more serious functions of rhyme in a Cummings sonnet. Both "the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls" and "(the phonograph's voice" employ a rhyming technique first noticed by W. K. Wimsatt in his seminal essay "One Relation of Rhyme to Reason": the rhyming of unexpected words (often from different parts of speech) to emphasize difference and movement. "The Cambridge Ladies" employs a long series of unexpected rhymes in addition to those listed above, including "souls" - "Poles," "spirited" - "dead," and "bandy" - "candy," so that the shock of the rhymes points to the difference between the poet's art and the comfortable world of the Cambridge ladies.

These unusual rhymes have the further effect of creating a rhythm that is new to the sonnet. Ending a line with part of a word, article, or preposition erases the natural pause at the end of a line by forcing the reader's eye to skip to the following line in order to complete the word or phrase. A Cummings sonnet that employs these conventions introduces a novel, erratic cadence, in which the customary pauses at the end of a line or sonnet division are effectively erased. In "(the phonograph's voice," this effect is exploited to mimic the effect of a record skipping:

(the phonograph's voice like a keen spider skipping  
 quickly over patriotic swill.  
 The,negress,in the,rocker by the,curb,tipping  
 and tipping,the flocks of pigeons. And the skil-  
 ful loneliness,and the rather fat  
 man in bluishsuspenders half-reading the  
 Evening Something  
 in the normal window. and a cat.

The experiments in rhythm are created in a variety of ways: through the running together of words, erratic punctuation and capitalization, and unexpected line breaks and spacing, each of which makes it difficult to read the sentence at anything like a conventional pace. The rhyming is among the most important of these techniques, since Cummings's rhymes either ask the reader to skip over a blank line to complete a word or phrase as in lines 4 and 6 above, or to pause in order to help emphasize the rhyme sound, as in lines 2 and 7, creating an erratic rhythm in following the poem down the page. A similar effect occurs in "a salesman is an it" or "next to of course god i," both quoted above, which force the reader to ignore the customary pauses in moving from one line to the next, this time to run the list of "sold" products or empty slogans together into a rapid jumble of items.

The effect of these unusual and broken rhymes, which occur in sonnets written throughout his career, has the additional property of erasing the traditional boundaries



between quatrains or the octave and sestet. In "(the phonograph's voice," the internal division created by moving from the first to second quatrain is destroyed by breaking the word "skilful" across them. Coupled with his free use of irregular rhyme schemes that do not create any obvious divisions, this technique effectively erases the internal divisions of the Italian or Shakespearian sonnet, which use their rhymes to create distinct parts of the sonnet, either an 8-6 or 4-4-4-2 grouping of lines. The free use of slant rhymes, which are not as immediately recognizable as true rhymes, also helps to blur the structure of several of his later sonnets, since the rhyme sounds no longer mark a perceptible shift between a sonnet's parts. As a result, the presence of any turn in the argument becomes problematic, which may have led to Cummings's dramatic use of spacing or line breaks to create the internal structure in many of his sonnets.

Before exploring this aspect of his spacing, however, it is important to realize that Cummings's use of space and spacing between lines and within them is as complicated and varied as his use of rhyme, and was often used for purely local emphasis, especially in the early sonnets. In "my love is building a building" from Tulips and Chimneys, the final lines help to mimic the act of "hanging" that is being depicted:

where the surrounded smile  
hangs  
  
breathless

At other times, there occurs what S. V. Baum has described as "stanza divisions, line breakages, and word relationships [being] freely varied for the indication of auditory rhythms" (75). In "an amiable putrescence carpenters" from And, the lack of spaces establishes the rhythm of a woman's speech, in which her words follow one another, presumably, with little pause:

... While grip Hips simply. well  
fussed flesh does surely to mesh. New  
and eager. wittily peels the. ploop. - OOc h get:breath  
once,all over,kid how,funny Do tell

In "light cursed falling," also from And, ellipses and ample spaces indicate the pauses and halting speech of this speaker and his lover:

. . . .merci . . . .i want to die  
 nous sommes heureux  
  
 my soul a limp lump  
  
 of lymph  
     she kissed  
         and i  
  
     . . . cheri. . . nous sommes

In "helves surling out of eakspeasies" from Viva, the slurred speech and actions of the drunken patrons of the speakeasies are portrayed with twelve lines of uninterrupted words that are misspelled or run together, again in an attempt to mimic heard speech.

The first quatrain runs:

helves surling out of eakspeasies per(reel) hapsingly  
 progress heandshe-ingly people  
 trickle curselaughgroping shrieks bubble  
 squirmwrithed staggerful unstrolls collaps ingly

A similar technique is used in "next of course to god," in which the jumble of slogans in the first thirteen lines is printed without any inserted spaces. In each of these cases, the unusual spacing (or lack of space) possesses a mimetic function as Cummings depicts speech or the action of "hanging" through the visual appearance of the words or through the spacing between the words themselves. The importance of these innovations to the sonnet lies in their ignoring of the iambic meter and the mere sound of the words to establish the rhythm of the passage. In effect, the traditional means of indicating rhythm in a sonnet has been swept away to be replaced by Cummings's typography.

However, these attempts to represent speech or visual pictures are comparatively rare in Cummings's sonnets. Far more common is the emphasis of important shifts in tone or argument through their visual separation on the page. In "my naked lady framed"

from And, the spacing between words emphasizes the fact that each one is unexpectedly based on what has come before. By placing them on separate lines, Cummings can emphasize his unusual diction more strikingly than if the words were set as a single line, where their novelty might become lost:

ferocious  
                   rhythm of  
                                   precise  
 laziness.

At times this technique can be extremely subtle. In "the dirty colours of her kiss," also from And, the unexpected descriptions are once again set off from the common usages:

at six exactly  
                   the alarm tore

two slits in her cheeks. A brain peered at the dawn.  
 she got up

                  with a gnashing yellow yawn

The point seems to be to separate the ordinary phrases "at six exactly" and "she got up" from the more original imagery by means of the dramatic spacing, thus breaking what may be read as the integrity of the sonnet's iambic pentameter line, that is, the tendency of sonnets to print their lines as complete units on the page.

The main use of spacing in a Cummings poem, however, is to emphasize shifts in subject matter, imagery, or themes - that is, to highlight the internal divisions created by the poem's argument, where the insertion of blank lines compensates for any lack of a traditional rhyme scheme, true rhymes and punctuation. The final lines of "luminous tendril of celestial wish" from the volume Xaïpe provides a clear example of this function of the spacing:

dreamslender exquisite white firstful flame

-new moon!as(by the miracle of your  
 sweet innocence refuted)clumsy some

dull cowardice called a world vanishes

teach disappearing also me the keen  
illimitable secret of begin

The arrangement of these six lines into stanzas of one, three, and two lines is justified by the shifts in the sonnet's argument. The first of these lines offers a charged but rather abstract description of the moon, while the second group of lines begins a new clause and moves to a praise of the new moon as it disappears from view. The concluding couplet switches to the effect of this sight on the speaker, who then asks the moon to "teach" him the secret of starting anew. The startling separation of the sestet of this highly irregular sonnet into smaller units ranging from one to three lines may be meant as an attempt to fit a new sonnet form to the subject of an ever-renewing moon, but it also emphasizes the various stages of the argument as it unfolds.

The strategy of using a sonnet's appearance on the page to emphasize its structure is hardly a new one. E. A. Robinson inserted a space to mark the movement from the octave to sestet, while Yeats creates a dramatic pause after the phrase "Agamemnon dead" in "Leda and the Swan" by his sudden line break. Older sonnets often indented lines that rhymed with one another to emphasize the rhyme scheme. But Cummings was the first to take this technique to its extreme, dividing his sonnets into smaller units of one to three lines solely through the spacing. The spacing of "pity this busy monster," quoted at the beginning of this chapter, creates a sonnet structure of 1-2-3-1.5-1.5-2-1-2 lines, in which the divisions correspond to every shift in image, subject, or emphasis. The divisions of "luminous tendril of celestial wish" results in a structure of 1-3-1-3-1-3-2, and an attempt to list some of the earlier sonnets, which break a single line into several pieces, would result in even more complicated divisions.

The effect of these divisions on his sonnets is profound. In the works of these earlier sonneteers, readers could expect a major shift or shifts in argument in several predictable places, between the octave and sestet in an Italian sonnet or between the

quatrains and the final couplet in an English one. In both these examples, the turns in the argument would correspond to the various changes of rhyme sounds. Cummings's division of the sonnet into smaller sections makes any formal emphasis of these major turns difficult or even impossible. It could be argued, for example, that the phrase "A world of made" in "pity this busy monster" is meant to introduce a major shift in the argument akin to a sestet, since here the "world of born" which opposes progress is introduced for the first time. Cummings's free use of inserted spaces, however, makes it impossible for him to call attention to this turn in his argument, which becomes lost in the large number of minor shifts that are highlighted through his spacing. As a result, his sonnets are either all of one piece, as in "luminous tendril of celestial wish," or depend on a sudden introduction of a radically new image or figure of speech, as in the "hell of a good universe next door" in "pity this busy monster," which injects modern slang into a poem otherwise marked by Cummings's idiomatic language to mark the shift to what amounts to a concluding couplet. Where his sonnets do contain a traditional structure, Cummings is forced to separate his lines into quatrains and a couplet or octaves and a sestet with the insertion of a blank line, since his fondness for slant rhymes makes the rhymes ineffective in emphasizing any internal divisions or turns in the argument. The reliance of Cummings's sonnets on their spacing can be seen through his fondness for writing concluding couplets, pairs of unrhymed lines that act as a summary or introduce a new image distinct from anything that comes before, in the absence of any rhyme scheme that would encourage them. The following couplets, which provide dramatic conclusions to their respective sonnets, are without full rhymes in the final couplets, even though they are separated from the body of their sonnets via space breaks:

Then shall i turn my face, and hear one bird  
sing terribly afar in the lost lands. ("it may not always be so")

salute. and having worshipped for my doom  
pass ignorantly into sleep's bright land ("a light Out")

and possibly i like the thrill

of under me you so quite new ("i like my body")

I'd rather learn from one bird how to sing  
than teach ten thousand stars how not to dance ("you shall above all things")

(now the ears of my ears awake and  
now the eyes of my eyes are opened) ("i thank you God")

These examples reveal Cummings's fondness for the couplet and his wish to employ a concluding couplet by setting off lines through their spacing rather than through their rhymes. In their dramatic images and self-contained syntax, these couplets do resemble the final, epigram-like couplets of a sonnet by Shakespeare, although they do so without the main formal characteristic that Shakespeare employed.

The use of spacing to create the internal divisions of a sonnet has an important consequence for Cummings's sonnets, since it tends to shift the sonnet from an auditory to a visual structure. A traditional sonnet depends on the sound of its rhymes to call attention to its various parts and on its meter to establish the poem's rhythm. Cummings's sonnets, however, tend to establish their internal divisions through their spacing on the page. Many of the effects catalogued above, from the creation of rhymes by breaking the word to his irregular meters and later preference for subtle slant and eye rhymes, also help to shift the emphasis from the sonnet's sound to its appearance. This aspect of Cummings's poetry has been described at length by several critics. Rudolph Von Albe has identified a "typographical rhetoric" in Cummings's poetry, by which he means "effects [that] are gotten whose apprehension demands participation of the eye" (914). John Peale Bishop has described this facet of the poetry through an analogy to painting:

What could be more natural than that Cummings, who is painter as well as poet, should attempt to emulate in literature the innovations of his contemporaries in painting? In Picasso, as in some others who were renewing the painter's art, he saw what intensity might follow distortion of line and immensity of form. And Cummings has taught himself to see somewhat

as they see, but without losing his personal vision. He juxtaposes words as they do pigments. (87)

As perceptive as these and other such comments are, there exists another possible influence on Cummings's attempt to use visual techniques to organize his sonnets: that of free verse.

The poet and critic Dana Gioia has discussed the "organizing principle" of William Carlos Williams's famous poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" in similar terms to those that have been used with Cummings's sonnets above. Williams's poem runs:

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens

The method of organizing the stanzas and line breaks, Gioia remarks, is "visual," so that the "visual placement of those sounds on the page" helps to lend the poem significance ("Notes on the New Formalism," 35). This arrangement "slows the language until every word acquires an unusual weight" (36) in a manner similar to many of Cummings's line breaks. The impression made by "The Red Wheelbarrow," Gioia notes, changes dramatically when it is rewritten as two lines of roughly blank verse:

so much depends upon a red wheel barrow  
glazed with rain water beside the white chickens.

As in Cummings's sonnets, the visual aspect of Williams's lines creates a rhythm and emphasis that differ greatly from that imposed by the stresses and sounds of the words which have traditionally organized a line of English verse.

Through their use of spacing and a visual typography, Cummings's sonnets come closer to free verse than any other sonnets of the period, and not until Robert Lowell's *Notebook* poems will the sonnet again draw on the techniques of *vers libre*.<sup>125</sup> The basic features of the sonnet - the requirements that the sonnet be a lyric consisting of fourteen lines of iambic pentameter with a rhyme scheme - remain present, so that his sonnets fit any liberal definition of the form. But in many of these sonnets, the organizing principle approaches that of free verse and its arrangement on the page rather than that of the traditional sonnet. No longer do the rhyme schemes and the recurring unit of the iambic pentameter line always organize or reinforce the rhythm or major shifts in the argument. Instead, in many of the sonnets the spacing, punctuation, and even capitalization help to establish these elements. As a result, Cummings is free to vary his meters (even to the point of writing lines or coining phrases that do not easily scan) and experiment with subtle slant rhymes that are difficult to hear, since the meter and rhymes no longer carry the burden of organizing the poem. The advantages of this reliance on the visual aspects of the poem for its organization are many: this type of organization allows for a number of smaller shifts in the argument in unexpected places, local emphases and weightings of the argument, the running together of phrases through a lack of spacing, and the use of rhyme for emphasis independent of any turn in the argument. Cummings's use of spacing is also immediately recognizable, and the various internal divisions that he creates are easier to discern than those of a traditional English or Italian sonnet, whose divisions become clear only as the poem is being read. At the same time, however, the clear and profound structure and musical nature of the iambic pentameter and full rhymes of the traditional sonnet are obscured or become lost.

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<sup>125</sup> Lowell's blank verse sonnet "Robert Frost" is discussed in the section of the epilogue titled "Influence on Succeeding Sonnets," pp. 273-274 below.



Cummings's sonnets reveal all of these possibilities and weaknesses, creating effects that have few, if any, precedents in the long history of the sonnet form. These effects occur in his early love sonnets, satires, and abstract disquisitions on love or knowledge that occupied the end of his career - that is, in every type of sonnet that he attempted to write. And while none of his experiments with metrics, line length, rhymes, rhyme schemes, and spacing challenges the fundamental definition of a sonnet or sonnet themes as do certain poems by Frost, Robinson, and Millay, and while his themes in many cases remained highly conventional, his pioneering of visual means to organize a sonnet stands as an important moment in its development. Coupled with his interest in turning the sonnet towards a satire of modern rationalism and consumerism, this exploration of new methods of organizing a sonnet's argument marks Cummings as one of the most daring technical innovators of the form.

## Epilogue

In his early essay "Reflections on *Vers Libre*" (1917), T. S. Eliot argued that the sonnet, because of its "intricate formal pattern," was no longer a suitable poetical form for the modern era:

We only need the coming of a Satirist - no man of genius is rarer - to prove that the heroic couplet has lost none of its edge since Dryden and Pope laid it down. As for the sonnet I am not so sure. But the decay of intricate formal patterns has nothing to do with the advent of *vers libre*. It had set in long before. Only in a closely-knit and homogeneous society, where many men are at work on the same problems, such a society as those which produced the Greek chorus, the Elizabethan lyric, and the Troubadour canzone, will the development of such forms ever be carried to perfection. (189)

This argument was expanded in the much later "The Music of Poetry" (1942), which declared that the sonnet needed to be "put aside" during the modern age:

At one stage the stanza is a right and natural formalization of speech into pattern. But the stanza - and the more elaborate it is, the more rules to be observed in its proper execution, the more surely this happens - tends to become fixed to the idiom of the moment of its perfection. It quickly loses contact with the changing colloquial speech, being possessed by the mental outlook of a past generation; it becomes discredited when employed solely by those writers who, having no impulse to form within them, have recourse to pouring their liquid sentiment into a ready-made mould in hopes that it will set. In a perfect sonnet, what you admire is not so much the author's skill in adapting himself to the pattern as the skill and power with which he makes the pattern comply with what he has to say. Without this fitness, which is contingent upon period as well as individual genius, the rest is at best virtuosity: and where the musical element is the only element, that also vanishes. Elaborate forms return: but there have to be periods during which they are laid aside. (37)

The preceding chapters have argued that not only had the sonnet "lost none of its edge," to borrow Eliot's phrase, but it thrived to such an extent that the modernist American sonnet rivals the sonnets from the Elizabethan and Romantic periods in importance and quality. And rather than being a period during which the "elaborate form" of the sonnet had to be "laid aside," the various innovations that Robinson, Frost, Millay, Cummings, and other poets brought to the form are striking for both their spirit of experimentation

and their ability to adapt such basic features of the sonnet as its genre, metre, rhyme, and line length to express their concerns, helping to produce modern sonnets that are distinct from anything in the English poetic tradition.

The preceding chapters have discussed the work of four of the most prolific and important sonnet writers of the early twentieth century - E. A. Robinson, Robert Frost, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and E. E. Cummings - with the innovations that each poet made to the form receiving the majority of attention. Robinson's creation of a "dramatic" or narrative sonnet, Frost's quarrels with the Platonic love tradition, Millay's use of opposing sonnet voices within a sequence or an individual poem, and Cummings's attempts to incorporate the principles of free verse and a satiric vision of modern society were thus explored at length. The sum of these innovations establish the early twentieth century as one of the most free and daring periods in the sonnet's long history in English. The more familiar and traditional features of the sonnet were also retained, although different writers used different conventions in their work. Both Millay and Cummings echoed the rhetoric and imagery of the Elizabethan love sonnet (a tradition that Frost went to great pains to separate himself from), while Robinson wrote sonnets in a variety of traditional lyric topics that were common in the English Renaissance and Romantic periods. All four poets composed sonnets with conventional Italian and English rhyme schemes, even if numerous variations were also introduced, and all of them to some extent echoed famous sonnets from the tradition.

The American sonnet of the early twentieth century thus attempted to strike a balance between a spirit of innovation that would help it meet the objections of Eliot, Pound, Williams, and other influential critics and the retention of familiar features of the sonnet form. The legacy that these four poets left for their successors was therefore a mixed one, as they simultaneously respected the traditional elements of the sonnet while indulging in a wide range of experiments. This ambiguous legacy had at least two major implications for the sonnet. First, the work of these poets challenged basic notions of

what constitutes a sonnet to such an extent that established definitions of the form no longer quite hold for a large number of sonnets written during this period. To account for sonnets as diverse as Robinson's "The Pity of the Leaves," Frost's "Once by the Pacific" and "Mowing," Millay's *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree*, and Cummings's "Kitty," to cite only a few examples, the very notion of a sonnet needs to be redefined or loosened. The first section of this epilogue will attempt to make a short catalogue of the structural and thematic advances in the sonnet during this period with reference to several standard definitions of the sonnet. But the most lasting legacy of the sonnets written during this period may be found in the work of their successors, including that of John Berryman, Robert Lowell, and Elizabeth Bishop, the three poets whose work tends to shape any view of American poetry of the middle decades of the twentieth century. The sonnets that these poets produced reflect the spirit of innovation common to the sonnets that preceded them but push the experiments of their predecessors even further, thus threatening to leave behind any established definition of the form altogether.

### **Sonnet Features and Experiments**

A detailed summary of the echoes and experiments in the sonnets of these four poets, together with brief glances at the work of other sonnet writers of the period, might best be attempted through a glance at definitions of the sonnet form culled from standard reference works. No two definitions of the sonnet are exactly alike, but the following selection indicates the main features that tend to be associated with the form. The OED defines the sonnet as "a piece of verse (properly expressive of one main idea) consisting of fourteen decasyllabic lines, with rhymes arranged according to one or other of certain definite schemes." M. H. Abrams defines the sonnet as "a lyric poem consisting of a single stanza of fourteen iambic pentameter lines linked by an intricate line scheme" in his influential A Glossary of Literary Terms (197). The New Princeton Encyclopedia's definition runs as follows:

A 14-line poem normally in hendecasyllabics (in It.), iambic pentameter (in Eng.), or alexandrines (in Fr.) whose rhyme scheme has, in practice, varied widely despite the traditional assumption that the sonnet is a fixed form.  
(1167)

These attempts to define the sonnet yield a variety of characteristics that are thought to be essential to the form: lyricism, rhyme, meter and line length, and a total of fourteen lines. This list of both the formal and thematic requirements, taken in order, will help to catalogue both the numerous experiments and the persistence of traditional sonnet features during the period, although none of these definitions successfully describes the sonnets written in the early twentieth century.

*Lyricism.* In the preface to The Golden Treasury, perhaps the most famous anthology of lyric poetry in the English language, Francis Turner Palgrave defined the lyric as a "Poem [that] shall turn on some single thought, feeling, or situation." As a result, any "narrative, descriptive, and didactic poems, - unless accompanied by rapidity of movement, brevity, and the colouring of human passion," - were excluded from his selection (5). By this definition, the overwhelming majority of sonnets written in the early twentieth century were lyrics. Almost half of Robinson's sonnets, all of Millay's work in the form with the exception of the seventeen *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree*, and the majority of Frost's and Cummings's output of sonnets were lyrics, either through their emphasis on a speaker's "thought, feeling, or situation" or, as in Cummings's satires, through the "colouring of human passion" which was applied to their subjects.

Of the various lyric subjects that traditionally have been treated in the sonnet form, love was by far the most popular during the early twentieth century, either because of the lingering influence of Elizabethan love sonnets or the example of Victorian sonnet sequences such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* or George Meredith's *Modern Love*. But whatever the source, the popularity of the love sonnet was remarkable. Both Millay and Cummings favoured them almost exclusively in the early part of their careers, while Frost also maintained a fondness for the genre, most notably

in "Meeting and Passing" and "The Silken Tent," two of the greatest love sonnets in the language. The traditional love sonnet is also the basis for Elinor Wylie's reserved and precise sequence *Air and Angels*, John Crowe Ransom's "Piazza Piece," and R. P. Blackmur's playful "Since There's No Help," which acts as the woman's reply to Michael Drayton's famous sonnet *Idea 61*:

You, Michael, were but righting wrong with wrong.  
 Why should I pocket my imploring hands,  
 why seal my inner ear to inmost song  
 or quench the radiance in which she stands?

Among the major American sonnet writers, only Robinson tended to avoid the love sonnet, although he did write two minor sonnets, "To Arvia" and "Another Dark Lady," that fall within the genre.

This great outpouring of individual sonnets and sequences marks early twentieth century America as a rival of Elizabethan and Victorian periods as one of the great eras of the love sonnet. But even though many of Cummings's and Millay's love sonnets borrowed heavily from traditional language and imagery, several important innovations were made. Frost's sonnets argued at length that "earth's the right place for love" (l. 52) in the words of his blank verse poem "Birches," and strove to favour the real over the ideal, in opposition to notions of Platonic love which urged an ascension to an ideal of "absolute beauty" which lies, at least in part, outside the temporal realm. Millay, meanwhile, attempted to mix traditional sonnet language with the language of a modern, independent woman, often in the same poem, while Cummings turned the sonnet to a description of jealous paranoia, frank descriptions of the sexual act, and a startling praise of prostitutes and Parisian women who are in no way idealized.

But outside these love sonnets, there was an attempt to turn the sonnet toward an exploration of a wide range of lyric subjects. E. A. Robinson turned to such obscure sonnet precedents as the dream vision, which hearkened back to Sir Walter Raleigh's commendatory sonnet to The Faerie Queene, as well as to allegories, literary portraits,

and epistolary sonnets. Occasional sonnets also enjoyed a renewed popularity. Millay, in her "Two Sonnets in Memory" of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti and in her sonnet "Upon this marble bust that is not I," which was read at the unveiling of a statue of Inez Milholland, was the most prominent poet to attempt them, although Frost wrote a series of undistinguished sonnets on contemporary politics and science, including "Why Wait for Science," "No Holy Wars for Them," and "Burning Rapture," which treat the topics of scientific progress, the domination of world politics by a few nations, and the meaning of the atomic bomb, respectively. Here three lyric subjects need to be noted specifically because of their historical importance for the sonnet form or the prominence which they attained during this period: the nature, war, and devotional sonnet. Of these sonnet types, the sonnet written as a description of nature, which was perfected in the Romantic era by Wordsworth and Coleridge, was the least important, although it did inspire several major poems. Robinson in "The Sheaves" and Frost in "Once by the Pacific," "The Oven Bird," "On a Bird Singing in its Sleep," and "Acceptance" produced notable examples of this type of sonnet that can stand beside those written by Wordsworth. And in "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same," Frost even extended the genre by proposing a new relationship between the natural and human worlds in which human speech could influence and permanently change nature.

The sonnet on war, meanwhile, stood in even less prominence than the nature sonnet among American poets of this period. Only Frost's "A Soldier" and "Range-Finding," which describes the effect of war on a cobweb, and Robinson's vague "The Garden of Nations" approached World War I with any attempt to describe its politics or real, human effects. Millay's *Epitaph for the Race of Man* responded to the war by casting her glance backwards to the dinosaurs in order to envision it as the harbinger of an apocalypse for the human race. E. E. Cummings, who served in the war and wrote The Enormous Room, a memoir of his time served in a French prisoner-of-war camp, did not write any sonnets about his experiences. This failure by American poets to turn one

of their favourite poetical forms to descriptions of the war is rather surprising, given the achievement of their British contemporaries. Unlike the Americans, British poets wrote sonnets that memorialized their experience of the war, both from the home front (as in the sonnets of Thomas Hardy),<sup>126</sup> and from soldiers about to travel to the front, as in Rupert Brooke's famous "The Soldier." The war sonnet is perhaps best represented by Wilfred Owen in "Anthem for Doomed Youth," one of the greatest poems of the period:

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?  
 - Only the monstrous anger of the guns.  
 Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle  
 Can patter out their hasty orisons.  
 No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;  
 Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,-  
 The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;  
 And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?  
 Not in the hands of boys but in their eyes  
 Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.  
 The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;  
 Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,  
 And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

The impact of the war may be found not only in the suffering that is described in these lines, but also in the new role that "Anthem for Doomed Youth" proposes for the sonnet form. Owen's poem is an exercise in definition and limitation, as announced by the repetition of the words "only" at the beginning of lines two and three in answer to the question that opens the sonnet, and in continued use of the negatives "no," "nor," and "not" in the lines that follow. The poem thus serves to direct the reader to the "doomed youth" and to types of remembrance they receive. These remembrances take two major forms: the sounds of the war, represented by guns, rifles, shells, and bugles, so that the

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<sup>126</sup> These sonnets include "On the Belgian Expatriation," "An Appeal to America on Behalf of the Belgian Destitute," "The Pity of It" (one of the great sonnets inspired by the war), "In Time of Wars and Tumults," "Often When Warring," and "A Call to National Service."



passing-bells become those sounds most closely associated with their deaths, and the immediate suffering of children (the boys' eyes, presumably, "glimmer" from their tears), quiet contemplation, and the acknowledgement of the "dying" of each day - in other words, the war as it affects the home front. In both cases, the rites accorded to the mourning of the soldiers are those of the war itself, and any other "prayers or bells" or memorials are believed to be either absent or inadequate. This charge is interesting since poetry, even that of Owen himself, is denied the function of memorializing the war dead, as the "only" substitutes for the passing bells mentioned in the poem are allowed this function. The effect of this stricture is to deny the consolation traditionally associated with the sonnet, what D. G. Rossetti called its role as "a moment's monument" in the opening poem of *The House of Life* or the famous Elizabethan claim that the sonnet may immortalize the beloved after his or her death.<sup>127</sup> The war thus becomes so drastic in its effect for Owen as to overwhelm the traditional role of poetry, as no idealistic promise of the sonnets from former times is seen as being adequate to its horrors.<sup>128</sup> The contrast between Owen's claims and the wide-spread tendency to ignore the war in the work of American poets is extreme, to say the least.

The devotional sonnet, however, did find a renewed life in the American sonnets of the period. Spurred, perhaps, by the belated publication of Hopkins's sonnets in 1918, a number of important sonnets portrayed openly religious themes. Robinson's "Credo" and "Christmas Sonnet" both present what appear to be personal confessions of faith, while his sonnet "Calvary" meditates on the inability of Christ's sacrifice to affect the modern, irreligious world. Frost's "Once by the Pacific" and "Design," meanwhile,

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<sup>127</sup> A number of these sonnets were quoted in the section "The Sonnet as Ornament" above, pp. 11-12, in the introduction. Shakespeare's sonnets 18 and 55 may be the most familiar examples.

<sup>128</sup> The irony of Owen's argument is that his poetry has been accepted as a memorial to the war dead; however, this is not a role for which the sonnet itself argues.

consider the darker, destructive aspects of God's creation in such a way as to rival Hopkins's late "terrible sonnets" in their questioning. "The Silken Tent," whose central image recalls the "tents of Kedar" from The Song of Solomon, as Richard Poirier has noted (Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing, xv), imagines a soul pointed "heavenward" even while it is rooted in the earth, while his "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same" describes Eve's effect on bird song with a tenderness that transforms it into a love sonnet, thereby presenting a much more hopeful vision of the relationship between heaven and earth, the human and God's creation. E. E. Cummings included "i thank You God," a sonnet that recalls Hopkins's lyric "Pied Beauty," in his collection Xaipe:

i thank You God for most this amazing  
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees  
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything  
which is natural which is infinite which is yes. . .<sup>129</sup>

Millay's jumble of Christian and pagan references in *Epitaph for the Race of Man* may also be read as a contemplation of God's role in the destiny of the human race, although her sequence does not engage this religious question as directly as Auden's *In Time of War*. The devotional sonnet was also written by several of the Fugitive poets, with R. P. Blackmur composing a sonnet sequence entitled "Of Lucifer" and Allen Tate writing a pair of sonnets entitled "Christmas Sonnets," in which he "confessed" to helping have a black boy whipped. This effort was followed nine years later by a sequence of seven sonnets with the inevitable title of "More Christmas Sonnets."

The greatest innovation to occur to the lyric sonnet during the twentieth century, however, was the attempt to remove the sonnet from the lyric genre altogether. E. A. Robinson pioneered what Allen Tate described as the "dramatic lyric," sonnets that were

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<sup>129</sup> The opening of Hopkins's twelve-line lyric runs: "Glory be to God for dappled things - / For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow; / For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim; / Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings." The poem concludes with the commandment to "praise him."

concerned with problems of narrative or the external portrayal of character through reported speech or actions. This shift from the lyric to the narrative was accompanied by a number of technical innovations, which required such features as the rhymes, division between the octave and sestet, alliteration, and repetition to help advance a narrative action, rather than to organize or adorn lyric emotions. Robinson's innovation quickly spread to the work of other poets. His near-contemporary Robert Frost, for example, wrote "A Dream Pang" and "Meeting and Passing," both of which feature a short, seemingly trivial narrative. He also composed "An Old Man's Winter Night," a description of an old man alone in a farmhouse, which may be read as a cleverly-disguised pair of sonnets. At first glance Frost's poem appears to be twenty-eight lines of blank verse, but on closer inspection the poem breaks into two fourteen-line units. The first eight lines describe the old man's scrutiny of the winter night, his "lamp tilted near" and the "barrels round him" while he feels "at a loss." The next six lines, written as a single sentence, depict his "clomping off" from the cellar. The subsequent eight lines expand to a comparison of two "lights": the moon, "so late-arising," and the old man, who was "a light. . . to no one but himself," while the final six lines shift to a description of the sleep of the old man and a summary of his attempt to "keep a house." In its divisions, "An Old Man's Winter Night" thus approximates the Italian sonnet's octave and sestet, so that it may even be described as a blank-verse sonnet which alludes to Robinson's sonnet "The Pity of the Leaves."

More often, however, the influence of Robinson's innovation was more direct. John Crowe Ransom's "Piazza Piece," which Randall Jarrell called a "good exampl[e] of Ransom's microscopic successes" ("John Ransom's Poetry," 104), depicts Death as an older gentleman's soliloquy in its octave as he sighs over a young woman's beauty. In the sestet the young lady replies:

- I am a lady young in beauty waiting  
Until my truelove comes, and then we kiss.

But what grey man among the vines is this  
 Whose words are dry and faint as in a dream?  
 Back from my trellis, Sir, before I scream!  
 I am a lady young in beauty waiting.

The presentation of a scene in which the two characters interact and speak soliloquies was possible in the modern sonnet only after Robinson's work. In Millay's *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree*, the narrative sonnet achieved its apex by being extended to a sequence of seventeen poems while borrowing the narrative technique of the indirect monologue from prose fiction, which led John Fuller to label it as "the poetic equivalent of . . . a short story" (*The Sonnet*, 46). The sum of these experiments helped lift the sonnet outside of the lyric genre, thereby challenging any notion that the sonnet is restricted to a single genre of writing.

*Rhyme.* The early twentieth-century American sonnet was notable for its innovations in rhyme schemes, but not for experimenting with the rhymes itself. The sonnet found no champions of Wilfred Owen's para-rhyme, Shakespeare's attempt to reproduce the feminine rhymes of an Italian sonnet in his sonnet 87, or other systematic attempts to alter the traditional full rhyme sounds. The one great exception to this generalization lies in the work of E. E. Cummings, who introduced what Rudolph Von Albe has called the "split rhyme," in which a rhyme sound is produced by breaking a word across two lines (922). Cummings also grew to favour slant rhymes in his later sonnets, so that the first quatrain of "i thank You God," quoted above, could rhyme "amazing" and "every-thing" as well as "trees" and "yes." Occasionally sonnets such as Yeats's "Leda and the Swan," which rhymes the words "up" and "drop," also employed slant rhymes, but in this experiment Cummings largely stood alone. His contemporaries Robinson, Frost, and Millay all favoured traditional full rhymes in their sonnets. In "Why Wait for Science," Frost even placed an accent over the second syllable of the word "zero," as Janice P. Stout has noted, changing its stress to create a rhyme for the words "know," "go," and "show" ("Convention and Variation in Frost's Sonnets," 30).

Poets of this period were far more daring in introducing new rhyme schemes into the sonnet, a practice that finds a precedent in Keats's "If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd," which proposed the new scheme of *abcabdcabcdede* in order to "free" the sonnet from its traditional English or Italian structures. Frost's sonnet "Mowing" and Cummings's "pity this busy monster" and "luminous tendril of celestial wish" (along with many other examples) followed Keats's example by creating rhyme schemes without any discernible order or pattern.<sup>130</sup> Frost, Cummings, and other contemporary poets also incorporated novel rhyming patterns in their sonnets. Cummings played with the Italian octave in "the Cambridge ladies" by creating the playful scheme of *abcd dcba*, which presents the rhymes in order in the first quatrain and then reverses them in the second. Merrill Moore, perhaps the most prolific sonnet writer during the period, also introduced a great number of patterned rhyme schemes. His unusual sonnet with the title of "He was twelve years old; a junior space cadet; / Actually a fine lad from Woonsocket; / If he could, he would be flying yet, / Ready to take off for Mars in a rocket" (one of the oddest sonnet titles ever written) introduced the equally novel scheme of *abb cdcd eeeee df*. But in these innovations Frost was the key figure. "The Oven Bird" introduces a rhyming couplet at the beginning of both the octave and sestet, while "Acquainted with the Night" offered a rhyme scheme based on the terza rima. Rhyming couplets make up "Into My Own" and "Once by the Pacific," while numerous sonnets, including "Meeting and Passing," combine an Italian octave with a "sestet" constructed out of an English quatrain and concluding couplet. But in these examples, Frost had important precedents in the sonnet tradition, which tempers the notion that he was being widely experimental in his rhyming. French sonnets often begin their sestet with a couplet; "Acquainted with the Night" imitates the rhyme scheme of the stanzas in Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind";

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<sup>130</sup> The rhyme scheme of "Mowing" runs *abcabdecdfefgf*, while "pity this busy monster" rhymes *a ba bca d cd be fcf* and "luminous tendril" rhymes *a bbc d eda c ecb ff*. The spaces between the letters indicates the spacing of the lines in the poems.

Robert Herrick's "The Argument of His Book" is composed of seven couplets which, like an Italian sonnet, turn from the depiction of "brooks, of blossoms, birds, and bowers" in the first eight lines to "sing of times trans-shifting" in the final six; and Thomas Wyatt's sonnets, including "My Galley" and "Whoso List to Hunt," often introduce a concluding couplet into the Italian sonnet. Even his seemingly novel attempt to reduce the total number of rhyme sounds to three in the otherwise regular Italian sonnet "Design" finds a precedent in *Astrophel and Stella* 89, which reduces its rhymes to the two words "night" and "day."

These examples show the wisdom of The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics in its attempt to describe the sonnet's rhymes as having, "in practice, varied widely" in its definition of the form. Yet the continued importance of rhymes and rhyming patterns in the face of the rise of unrhymed *vers libre* is an interesting aspect of these sonnets, as it appears that sonnet writers wished to maintain one of the elements that distinguished these poems from free verse. It is significant that the Italian sonnet, with its requirement of finding words to fill out five rhyming sounds, remained one of the most popular forms. E. A. Robinson used its rhyme scheme almost exclusively, while Millay preferred it in many of her individual sonnets and for her final sequence, *Epitaph for the Race of Man*. The English sonnet also continued to be popular, forming the basis of Millay's other two sequences, *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* and *Fatal Interview*, as well as many individual sonnets by Frost and Cummings.

By contrast, examples of what Lee M. Johnson called the "blank verse sonnet" in his essay "Milton's Blank Verse Sonnets,"<sup>131</sup> or sonnets that abandoned rhyme altogether, were quite rare during the period. Cummings's "when you rang at Dick Mid's Place" does contain one line that, even with the allowance of slant rhymes, does not rhyme with any

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<sup>131</sup> See also his book Wordsworth and the Sonnet, which discusses the blank verse sonnets embedded in Wordsworth's longer poems.

other line in the poem, but he did not venture beyond this example to abandon rhyme completely. Frost's "An Old Man's Winter Night," discussed above, may be read as two linked blank verse sonnets, but it was not until R. P. Blackmur's "Mirage," which first appeared as section nine of the sequence "Sea Island Miscellany," that the twentieth century produced a blank verse sonnet that could stand on its own. The poem runs:

The wind was in another country, and  
 the day had gathered to its heart of noon  
 the sum of silence, heat, and stricken time.  
 Not a ripple spread. The sea mirrored  
 perfectly all the nothing in the sky.  
 We had to walk about to keep our eyes  
 from seeing nothing, and our hearts from stopping  
 at nothing. Then most suddenly we saw  
 horizon on horizon lifting up  
 out of the sea's edge a shining mountain  
 sun-yellow and sea-green; against it surf  
 flung spray and spume into the miles of sky.  
 Somebody said mirage, and it was gone,  
 but there I have been living ever since.

"Mirage" declares itself to be a sonnet primarily through the turns in its argument, which follow those of both the Italian and English sonnet. The first eight and a half lines present the sea scene, with its emphasis on the "nothing" that the walkers find. Part way through the ninth line, the same place as the turns in several of Milton's sonnets, the poem shifts to a description of the mirage with the phrase "Then suddenly we saw," which also introduces colour and the concrete image of the "mountain" of water that the walkers envision. The final two lines approximate a concluding couplet in their shift to the disappearance of the mirage, which is stressed by the end-words "gone" and "since" that emphasize the disappearance, and they even come close to rhyming through their repetition of the "n" sound. In its internal divisions, "Mirage" so closely mirrors a sonnet that it would seem wrong to deny it the status of one. Hence even the loose requirement that the sonnet contain some form of rhyme scheme finds important counter-examples during the period.

*Meter and Line Length.* Like its use of rhyme, the modernist American sonnet did not experiment with its meter and line length to any great degree. The overwhelming majority of sonnets were written in iambic pentameter, and the variations listed here are very much the exception to the general practice of the period. Robinson never attempted to vary his meter or line length, while Millay's experiments were restricted to her use of a final heptameter line in *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree*, which recalls an old practice of ending poems with a hexameter line, and her "Three Sonnets in Tetrameter," which recall Shakespeare's sonnet 145, his only tetrameter sonnet. Frost also wrote a tetrameter sonnet, "Unharvested," which, in contrast to Millay's trio of sonnets, assumes the light tone of Shakespeare's poem. Here Cummings was the only poet to attempt any sustained experiments, both in loosening the iambic beat through his unusual coinages (as in the compound word "wherewhen" from "pity this busy monster," which is impossible to scan), and through his introduction of shorter trimeter and tetrameter in sonnets such as "my love is building a building," in which this clause represents the entire first line of the poem. In his early sonnets, Cummings freely varied his line length and abandoned the iambic meter, creating a rhythm utterly unlike that of any other sonnet writer. The final lines of "i like my body" from *And* reveal his free approach to metrics:

i like, slowly stroking the, shocking fuzz  
of your electric fur, and what-is-it comes  
over parting flesh . . . . And eyes big love-crumbs,

and possibly i like the thrill

of under me you so quite new

The first of these lines reads like regular iambic pentameter, although the phrase "slowly stroking" substitutes two trochees for iambs. The next line is also regular until its fourth foot, where the novel phrase "what-is-it" adds an extra syllable. The third line is difficult to scan at all, as its first phrase reads like iambic measure beginning with a headless foot, but the final four words may all be stressed. The final two lines are regular iambic, but



they shift to tetrameter, so that the sonnet's usual requirement of an iambic pentameter line is wholly absent. Frost also experimented with abandoning the iambic measure in "Mowing," but next to the freedom of "i like my body" his free substitution of anapests for iambs seems rather conventional. Yet none of the definitions of the sonnet quoted above allow for even "Mowing" to be included as a sonnet, let alone "i like my body."

*Total Length.* Perhaps the most stable feature of the sonnet during this period was the requirement that it contain a total of fourteen lines. Among the sonnet writers studied in depth in this dissertation, only Millay attempted to vary the total number of lines of a sonnet by introducing a thirteen-line sonnet, a development first noticed by Norma Millay. In her introduction to the Collected Sonnets, Norma Millay notes that two poems, "Grief that is grief" and "Felicity of Grief," appear to be regular Italian sonnets, but both omit "the seventh, or penultimate line of the octave" (xxiii). Only Merrill Moore attempted to break this convention consistently during the period. As Denis Glover notes in his introduction to Cross Currents: A Selection by Denis Glover of Sonnets by Merrill Moore, Moore held "that a sonnet is a short poem, iambic of course, but rhyming as it may, that expresses in fourteen, fifteen, even sixteen lines, one single mood or thought" (5). The opening sonnet in this collection, with the unwieldy title of "Bob was a lovely child, his old aunt said, but, poor fellow, he had had too much to contend with," consists of sixteen lines divided into four quatrains.

In spite of Moore's explicit definition, which in turn led to Williams's belief that the sonnet needed to be radically redefined as an "incident upon a certain turn of mind" ("Forward to Merrill Moore," 92), the sonnet continued to be written in fourteen lines, even though this fact was often obscured by Cummings's habit of splitting lines on the page through his use of line breaks. This persistence is significant, since the number of lines is one sonnet characteristic that has varied throughout the form's history. For example, the early sequence *Hekatompathia* by Thomas Watson (1582) consists of poems of eighteen lines, while Milton's tailed sonnet "On the New Forces of Conscience

Under the Long Parliament" increased the sonnet's length by adding six lines as a "tail" to the end of an Italian sonnet, while George Meredith's sequence Modern Love extended the sonnet's length to sixteen lines by replacing the sestet with a second octave.

However, these precedents had little influence during the early twentieth century, and with the exception of Millay's two sonnets mentioned above, her Collected Sonnets, Robinson's Collected Sonnets, and the groupings of sonnets at the end of Cummings's first four volumes of poetry scrupulously avoid the inclusion of any poems of thirteen, fifteen, sixteen or eighteen lines. Robinson did compose a series of eight-line "octaves" that were derived from the sonnet form but, pointedly, he never included them as true sonnets. Ironically, this requirement of the sonnet, which begins the three definitions of the sonnet quoted above, was the one which remained steadfast during the period, even though there were strong precedents to experiment freely with it.

This overview of sonnet conventions and experiments indicates how difficult it is to define the sonnet during the early twentieth century. The various requirements that state a sonnet must be a lyric poem of fourteen lines written in iambic pentameter with some rhyme scheme were frequently broken, to the extent that some might argue that Frost's "Mowing" or Cummings's "pity this busy monster" are not sonnets at all. What emerges from these experiments is not a new sonnet structure or set of conventions, but rather a spirit of innovation. No feature of the sonnet was seen to lie outside a poet's realm of experimentation, so that every aspect associated with the sonnet was either abandoned or transformed by at least one poet of the period. It was this freedom to use or drop established conventions that was to inspire the next generation of poets.

### ***Influence on Succeeding Sonnets***

The sonnets of John Berryman, Robert Lowell, and Elizabeth Bishop inherited this freedom with regards to the fundamental characteristics of the sonnet, and their work extended the spirit of innovation even further. In Berryman's sonnets, features of the traditional sonnet and recent experiments were combined into a single sequence,

resulting in a virtual compendium of sonnet conventions and innovations. His friends Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop went even further. In hundreds of late sonnets, Lowell dropped any requirement of rhyme and iambic meter while injecting elements of the nonfictional memoir, what Warren Slesinger called a "reach for the autobiographical" ("The Notebook as Poetry," 535), into the sonnet form, while Bishop played with the sonnet line until it was no longer iambic pentameter or even any form of accentual-syllabic line.

Among these three poets, Berryman and Lowell were the most prolific writers of sonnets. Berryman's efforts in the form were collected in the plainly-titled volume Berryman's Sonnets and constitute a sequence of one hundred fifteen love poems, making him the author of the longest sonnet sequence of the twentieth century. By comparison, Millay's *Fatal Interview* contains fifty-two poems and Auden's *In Time of War* a mere twenty-seven, although his sequence falls well short of Shakespeare's one hundred and fifty-four sonnets. One of the most impressive feature of Berryman's sequence is its ability to encompass many of the innovations of the early twentieth-century sonnet. All of his sonnets were written in the Italian form, but his frequent recourse to slant rhymes and even split rhymes followed the innovations of E. E. Cummings, who is mentioned by name in sonnet 27. Berryman's sonnet 79, to mention just one example, rhymes "something" and "dumb," "worm-shot" and "uniform." His final lines are often extended, as in "Flooding blurred Eliot's words sometimes, face not your face, hair not you blonde but iron" from sonnet 5, recalling Millay's *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* through its length and Cummings's sporadic attempts to incorporate free verse lines into his sonnets through its absence of any recognizable meter.

But the most modern feature of Berryman's sonnets is his willingness to mix innovative and traditional sonnet features as freely as Robinson, Frost, Millay, and

Cummings did before him.<sup>132</sup> One of the novel elements of this sequence is its playful rhyming of words from different languages. Sonnet 65 rhymes the French "*faire*" and the German "*mehr*" with the words "chair" and "despair," which have Greek and Latin roots, respectively. However, Berryman most often uses full rhymes in English which would have been recognizable to an Elizabethan sonneteer. The subject matter also combines the traditional and the new. His sequence's depiction of a failed love affair is familiar from the sequences of Sidney, Drayton, Meredith, and Millay, although the fact that Berryman's speaker and the object of his affections, Lise,<sup>133</sup> are conducting an extra-marital affair while both remain married to other people is without precedent. Also interesting are Berryman's frequent combinings of traditional sonnet tropes, which as a Renaissance and Shakespeare scholar he would have known thoroughly,<sup>134</sup> with new interpretations and phrasing. His sonnet 15, for example, adapts the familiar conceit of the lover as a storm-wracked ship and ends with the note "after Petrarch and Wyatt," even while it creates such novel allegories as "Cargoed with Forget" and "Thought frank & guilty to each oar set." His sonnet 40 begins:

Marble nor monuments whereof then we spoke  
 We speak of more; spasmodic as the wasp  
 About my windowpane, our short songs rasp -  
 Not those alone before their singers choke -

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<sup>132</sup> See David K. Weiser's remark that Berryman's "decision to revive an outmoded structure with all its conventions implies a firm belief in the continuity of literary culture" ("Berryman's Sonnets: In and Out of Tradition," 141). His misleading adjective "outmoded," however, neglects the fact that many of these conventions had been retained in the sonnets of the preceding generation of poets.

<sup>133</sup> The "Lise" of the sequence, who in later editions of the sequence is called "Chris," has never been identified, and recent critics, including John Haffendon, have argued that she is a fictional creation (John Berryman: A Critical Commentary, 4).

<sup>134</sup> Berryman's Shakespeare criticism has recently been collected in the volume Berryman's Shakespeare, edited by John Haffendon. Two essays on Shakespeare's sonnets, "William Houghton, William Haughton, The Shrew, and the Sonnets" and "The Sonnets" are included in the book. Both are concerned with matters surrounding the dating of Shakespeare's sonnets and so fail to illuminate Berryman's own work.

Our sweetest; none hopes now with one smart stroke  
 Or whittling years to crack away the hasp  
 Across the ticking future; all our grasp  
 Cannot beyond the butt secure its smoke.

The opening phrase, with its vaguely archaic "whereof," alludes to the opening image of Shakespeare's sonnet 55: "Not marble, nor the gilded monuments / Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme." Shakespeare's sonnet proceeds to declare the power of poetry to outlast "sluttish time," an image which is recalled in Berryman's phrase "whittling years." The sonnet thus incorporates Elizabethan conceits as freely as do the love sonnets of Millay and Cummings, but in his shift to a contemporary image of the modern consciousness as a cigarette butt,<sup>135</sup> Berryman employs Millay's technique of using archaic and modern voices to counterbalance one another within a single poem. The result of this shift is that the sonnet moves from an archaic echo of Shakespeare to a distinctly modern image within a space of eight lines, a movement that would have been impossible without the example of Millay's sonnets from earlier in the century.

In contrast with Berryman's sonnets, which make free use of the innovations of the preceding generation of poets, Robert Lowell's sonnets depart from those of his predecessors through their attempt to abandon the most conspicuous sonnet features, with the exception of the key requirement of a total of fourteen lines. After publishing the tetrameter sonnet "In the Cage" in Lord Weary's Castle and the irregularly rhymed sonnets "Words for Hart Crane" and "Beyond the Alps" in Life Studies (the latter being a daring attempt to weave the unrelated stories of a train ride through the alps, a recent Swiss failure to climb Mt. Everest, and the Catholic church's acceptance of Mary's Assumption as dogma in a sequence of three sonnets), Lowell turned to producing hundreds of blank verse sonnets. These poems were first published in Notebook 1967-

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<sup>135</sup> This image may be meant to recall Millay's well-known sonnet "If I should learn," which is quoted in chapter 4 above, p 160.

68, which was then revised into the volumes History and For Lizzie and Harriet,<sup>136</sup> and later in the volumes Nineteen Thirties, Mexico, and The Dolphin. Lowell's choice of the blank verse sonnet is an interesting one. His own rationale for this form occurs in the "afterthought" to Notebook 1967-68:

My meter, fourteen line unrhymed blank verse sections, is fairly strict at first and elsewhere, but often corrupts in single lines to the freedom of prose. Even with this license, I fear I have failed to avoid the themes and gigantism of the sonnet. (160)

The admission that even a blank verse fails "to avoid. . . the gigantism of the sonnet" is pertinent, since the form does recall the precedents of Frost's "An Old Man Winter's Night" and R. P. Blackmur's "Mirage" in their lack of rhyme and Cummings's freedom with iambic pentameter in their approach to rhythm, although these works fail to provide precedents that illuminate Lowell's sonnets to any great extent. The key to Lowell's sonnets lies not in their technical aspects, but in their claim to being the record of the raw thoughts and processes of their author with "the freedom of prose," to present what appears to be a notebook of Lowell's own thoughts. As Lowell described this linking of subject matter and technique in an interview with Ian Hamilton:

Q. In Notebook what do you feel the fourteen lines actually did?

A. Allowed me rhetoric, formal construction, and quick breaks. Much of Life Studies is recollection; Notebook mixes the day-to-day with the history - the lamp by a tree out this window on Radcliffe Square. . . or maybe the rain, but always the instant, sometimes changing to the lost. (270-1)

The blank verse sonnets in Notebook 1967-68 range across Lowell's personal history, reading, and reactions to contemporary events such as the student protests to the Vietnam War, and though his afterthought noted that "this is not my diary" but a "fiction" (159), the poems themselves strive to create the illusion of presenting immediate impressions. This linking of the brevity of the form to an instantaneous observation is a new departure

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<sup>136</sup> These revisions are briefly described by Philip Hobsbaum in his A Reader's Guide to Robert Lowell, p. 159.

in the history of the sonnet. The sonnets of Robinson and Frost, though they employ a modern idiom, retain a formal aspect through their attention to the sonnet's requirements of rhyme, meter, and a certain elevation of diction. In Rossetti's phrase, they remain a "moment's monument" in their deliberate shaping of language in accordance to certain conventions. Lowell's sonnets, by contrast, record his impressions of the moment while abandoning the iambic meter, set line length, or rhyme - that is, any feature that would push them towards the gigantic, formal, or monumental.

"Robert Frost," one of the most accessible sonnets from Notebook 1967-68, will help to introduce the problems that Lowell's sonnets raise:

Robert Frost at midnight, the audience gone  
to vapor, the great act laid on the shelf in mothballs,  
his voice musical, raw and raw - he writes in the flyleaf:  
"Robert Lowell from Robert Frost, his friend in the art."  
"Sometimes I feel too full of myself," I say.  
And he, misunderstanding, "When I am low,  
I stray away. My son wasn't your kind. The night  
we told him Merrill Moore would come to treat him,  
he said, 'I'll kill him first.' One of my daughters thought things,  
knew every male she met was out to make her;  
the way she dresses, she couldn't make a whorehouse."  
And I, "Sometimes I'm so happy I can't stand myself."  
And he, "When I am too full of joy, I think  
how little good my health did anyone near me."<sup>137</sup>

The sonnet is remarkable for its rhetorical shift from the outrageous opening pun and surprising metaphors of the first three lines to a seemingly more objective report of their speech, interrupted by the occasional authorial comment ("and he, misunderstanding"). In its presentation of the freely shifting thoughts of a single consciousness, the sonnet

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<sup>137</sup> This version of the sonnet comes from the revised 1969 printing of Notebook 1967-68. The version published in the revised edition of Selected Poems is slightly different: line 3 begins "his voice is musical and raw," while line 4 reads, "*For Robert from Robert, his friend in the art.*" It is significant that the only written trace of the conversation - the only one that would seem not to rely on memory - was altered by Lowell, which casts considerable doubt on whether any detail in this sonnet is factually true.

recalls Robinson's portraits of literary figures, which also range between metaphors, snatches of biography, and various rhetorical modes, although Robinson's witty literary reflections do not produce the same effect as "Robert Frost." Lowell's use of free verse rhythms, lack of rhyme, complete avoidance of traditional sonnet conceits, and the addition of one to four syllables to his decasyllabic lines (all of which are longer than ten syllables) all create the impression that Frost's speech and the dedication that have not been changed to fit the requirements of the sonnet. The result is the impression that we are being presented with the "raw" memory of a meeting with Frost, or what Helen Vendler has called "nearly indigestible fragments of experience, unprelaced by explanation, unexplained by cause or result" ("A Difficult Grandeur," 126), an effect that is reinforced by the crude and offhand comments that are attributed to Frost himself. This sonnet marks a departure from those written earlier in the century. Millay in her balancing of modern and literary rhetoric, Cummings in his surprising use of slang in several sonnets, Frost in his vaunting of "fact" over "dream," and Robinson in his dramas centred in the contemporary Tilbury Town, all helped to bring the sonnet closer to depictions of modern life. Robinson's "Karma" and Millay's *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* 15 even attempt to render the thoughts of a character who confronts a contemporary event or setting. But none of these poets tried to create the illusion of presenting their raw experiences, nor did they abandon the formal characteristics that draw the sonnet away from such depictions.

By contrast, Elizabeth Bishop's innovations to the sonnet were more concerned with poetic structure, and in their tone they tended to be rather playful. The Complete Poems include three conventional Italian sonnets bearing the titles "Thunder," "Sonnet," and "The Reprimand," all of which are regular in their structure, and a short sequence entitled "Three Sonnets for the Eyes," which mixes iambic pentameter and hexameter lines. But it was not until "Anaphora," a pair of sonnets which concluded her first collection North and South (1946), that she began to experiment with abandoning the



conventional sonnet line. "Anaphora" mixes iambic trimeter, tetrameter, pentameter, and even hexameter lines throughout the first ten line sections of its two sonnets while introducing an intricate and irregular rhyme scheme. Each sonnet ends with a quatrain made up of three trimeter lines and a dimeter. The final four lines of the poem run:

prepares stupendous studies:  
 the fiery event  
 Of every day in endless  
 endless assent.

Not only does the line length shrink to its shortest length in the final line, but the iambic rhythm is also obscured by the substitution of the initial trochee. It is as if the verse moves towards a line that least resembles what is expected in a sonnet, or towards a conclusion that is as unsonnet-like as possible.

Bishop's fondness for a short line within the sonnet form reappears in the last poem that she submitted for publication during her lifetime, the playful "Sonnet" (1979).<sup>138</sup>

Caught - the bubble  
 in the spirit-level,  
 a creature divided;  
 and the compass-needle  
 wobbling and wavering,  
 undecided.  
 Freed - the broken  
 thermometer's mercury  
 running away;  
 and the rainbow-bird  
 from the narrow bevel  
 of the empty mirror,  
 flying wherever  
 it feels like, gay!

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<sup>138</sup> The date is included to distinguish this poem from the earlier poem titled "Sonnet." As Brett C. Millier notes, the poem was published by The New Yorker "on October 29, 1979, three weeks after her death" (Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It, 545).

Even more than any poem by Cummings, Bishop's "Sonnet" raises the question of whether it may be called a sonnet at all, as only one of the formal characteristics of the form is met. "Sonnet" substitutes a two-beat accentual line for iambic pentameter and contains only three full rhymes ("divided" - "undecided," "level" - "bevel," and "away" - "gay") in its fourteen lines. In fact, only its title acts as a reliable indication of its form, although once this identification is made, the poem reads as a revision of the sonnet that is as playful as any sonnet by Cummings or Frost. "Sonnet" is divided into two parts of six and eight lines through its syntax and its images connected to the words "caught" and "freed," so that it reads like an Italian sonnet "inverted so that the sestet precedes the octave," as Charles Sanders has noted ("Bishop's 'Sonnet,'" 63). In other words, the poem appears to be an Italian sonnet that has been stood on its head. The rhymes, meanwhile, function as in a traditional Italian sonnet to divide the argument into its two major parts, as Bishop's "Sonnet" breaks into two halves. And as is the case in a strict Italian sonnet in which the octave and sestet are further divided into two quatrains and two tercets through a repetition in the rhymes, Bishop's rhymes break each part of her poem into two images of being "caught" and "freed," though her "sonnet" divides into units of 3-3-3-5 instead of the expected 3-3-4-4. Bishop's use of a two-beat line, meanwhile, may be a witty allusion to Shakespeare's tetrameter sonnet 145, which uses its shorter line to present a light-hearted argument, the speaker's anxiety over hearing the words "I hate" being uttered by his mistress.<sup>139</sup> His worries are resolved as follows:

'I hate' she altered with an end  
That followed it as gentle day

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<sup>139</sup> In his discussion of Bishop's line length, Anthony Hecht traces the tradition of a playful shortening of the sonnet line to the one-syllable lines of Rimbaud's "Coucher Ivre": "Pouacre / Boit: / Nacre / Voit: // Acre / Loi, / Fiacre / Choit! // Femme / Tombe, / Lombe // Saigne: / Geigne. // Clame!" Hecht translates these lines as: "(The) Slob drinks: (The) pearl (of a girl) sees (what's coming): (The) bitter law (of gravity takes effect), (The) carriage collapses! (The) woman tumbles, loins bleed, whimpers. Pandemonium!" ("The Sonnet: Ruminations on Form, Sex, and History," 137)

Doth follow night who, like a fiend,  
 From heaven to hell is flown away.  
 'I hate,' from hate away she threw,  
 And saved my life saying 'not you.'

The light-hearted tetrameter sonnet was adapted by Frost in "Unharvested" and was extended in the shorter lines of Cummings's "my love is building a building." Similarly, Bishop follows her playful innovation of the sonnet with the final image of the bird "flying wherever / it feels like, gay," which describes her own approach to the sonnet form.

Together, the sonnets of Berryman, Lowell and Bishop represent the limits of innovation found in the poets who followed those of the early part of the twentieth century. Berryman's radical combination of traditional sonnet language and imagery with a modern idiom marks him as an heir to Edna St. Vincent Millay, while his experiments with line length, rhythm, and rhyme follow the innovations introduced by Cummings. Lowell's varying of the length of the sonnet line and abandonment of rhyme and the iambic pentameter line was drawn at least in part from notable precedents in the work of Frost, Blackmur, and Cummings, while his attempts to present his raw impressions, or at least the illusion of them, were anticipated (though only in part) by the work of the four most important American sonnet writers of the previous generation. Bishop's play with the sonnet's structure also has important precedents in the work of Cummings and Frost, and her attempt to explore new functions of rhyme and internal divisions may also have been inspired in part by their work. But most importantly, the freedom with which these poets approached the sonnet form, which had earlier been declared to be "an ending or at least a decline of metric invention" by Pound ("Cavalcanti," 170) or an "arrest of the truth in some particular phase of its mutations" by Williams ("Against the Weather," 205), was very much the legacy of the work of the sonnet writers of the early twentieth century. Without the example of Robinson, Frost, Millay, and Cummings, who not only preserved many sonnet conventions and features in their work but opened the sonnet form to a

myriad of new possibilities, the sonnets of John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, and others would not have been possible.

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