

Annotations

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Lux/Lines/Rhythm/Pacing

Thomas Lux (**Split Horizons**, Houghton Mifflin Company) writes free-verse poems marked by their plain style and hints of sarcasm, a fair bit of urbanity, and a definite slant regarding modern life and religion. What is of interest for me, though, is how he uses rhythm, lines, and pacing to contribute to the motion of the poem. A poem I like from the collection is **Grim Town in a Steep Valley**.

GRIM TOWN IN A STEEP VALLEY

This valley: as if a huge, dull, primordial ax
once slammed into the earth
and then withdrew, innumerable millennia ago.
A few flat acres
ribbon either side of the river sliding sluggishly
past the clock tower, the convenience store.
If a river could look over its shoulder,
glad to be going, this one would.
In town center: a factory of clangor and stink,
of grinding and oil,
hard howls from drill bits
biting sheets of steel. All my brothers
live here, every cousin, many dozens
of sisters, my worn aunts
and numb uncles, the many many of me,
a hundred sad wives,
all of us countrymen and -women
born next to each other behind the plow
in this valley, each of us
pressing to our chests a loaf of bread
and a jug of milk.... The river is low
this time of year and the bedstones' blackness
marks its lack
of depth. A shopping cart
lies on its side in center stream
gathering branches, detritus, silt,
forcing the already weak current to part for it, dividing it,
but even so diminished
it's glad to be going,
glad to be gone.

The poem is a landscape of a town set in a valley where the most living character is the river, which moves slowly through the town as if observing, and which rejoices its passage out of town limits. The town itself, seen as if from the perspective of the river, is indeed grim, inhabited by people whose lives are (nearly) meaningless—at least anonymous.

The poem is not blocky—not set in a block as are Philip Levine's poems—implying that line length is serving a pacing function and perhaps a drama/focus/emotional purpose.

The first two lines use rhythm to help set the scene: an explosive ax blow. The first two words, *This valley*, start with a spondee as a double ax blow would. The line continues with, *as if a huge, dull primordial ax/once slammed into the earth*. The repeated spondees rhythmically emphasize the image—the second line starts with, I think, a molossus (three stresses).

The valley sides are steep but the valley itself is flat as the next line says both with its words and its rhythm:

and thén withdréw, innúmerable millénia agó

The paeon (stress followed by 3 unstressed) followed by the dactyl, combined with the difficulty of saying the syllables, *innumerable millenia*, slow down the reader or speaker, as the river slows in town. Part of the cleverness behind this phrase is that one could scan *innumerable* as *innúmerablé*, but anticipation of the word, *millenia*, forces us to keep the stresses at the tail end of *innumerable* short and perhaps nonexistent.

The river contrasts with the valley in being slow while the steepness of the valley seems quick. The real contrast, though, is between the people who are slow like the river in contrast to what Lux seems to think they ought to be.

The line, *A few flat acres*, stands out for its short length. The short line here is simply rendering a banal picture of an unremarkable town, painting the picture a bit dramatically after the poem's abrupt beginning with the creation of the valley and the slow revealing of the river.

Some lines and pairs of lines set up equations in which two things are thrown against each other for us to compare:

past the clock tower, the convenience store.

Here Lux juxtaposes the old, quaint parts of the town—presumably representing the parts of the town that still remain from the time when the town was livable—with the convenience store. In this line—a list of two—the two parts are of equal weight, and hence an equality is set up, implying that to the townspeople these two items are held equally, and hence without notice (for who can notice a convenience store unless short of RC Cola?). Because the view is as seen from the river looking back over its shoulder, perhaps this is the opinion of the river/Lux.

Another example of an equation is a two-line pair:

*hard howls from drill bits
biting sheets of steel. All my brothers*

Here the comparison is set up as a mirror image: animate-inanimate/inanimate-animate. But the people in the town are merely part of the factory *in town center*, its heart. And so the brothers are just drill bits or sheets of steel, just parts of someone's large machine. This equality is set up by the reflective line breaks and crossover equality in the resulting equation.

Lux's list of inhabitants uses the lines breaks to catalog futility—starting with the seeming command, *live here, every cousin, many dozens*, with its internal rhyme to attract attention to the (dull) numbers involved, to the more precise *of sisters, my worn aunts*, the repetitive (through off rhymes and pure repetition) *and numb uncles, the many many of me*, the set off and hence clearly lonely *a hundred sad wives*, and the paired countrymen and -women with its implied lesser or more boring role for the women.

This list is long and really presents little new information as it goes along except the repetitiveness of the place as conveyed through the repetitiveness of the images, though each is well-presented and displayed in the form of the lines. This seems one of the major pacing elements in the poem.

An interesting pair of lines are these:

*pressing to our chests a loaf of bread
and a jug of milk.... The river is low*

The first line is a single thought—the preciousness (to folks in the town) of simple things, and the thought continues without new information in *and a jug of milk....*, which trails off. The addition to the image of another precious commodity (*pressing to our chests*) is negligible and not worthy of remaining, and, coming at the end of the list of life-images in the town, it signals that all that can be said has been said—but this most human image is not sufficient to hold the line and needs to be boosted by the return to the river, which is low.

The line, *marks its lack*, shows by its shortness and its own marked lack of syllables its own meaning. It's stressed by near-rhyme—it's an important line for the poem.

The last two lines are, by their relative shortness, dramatic, but by their rhythm peaceful:

*it's glad to be going,
glad to be gone.*

One can read an interesting subpoem by reading only the shortest lines (and adding punctuation):

*A few flat acres
of grinding and oil,
a hundred sad wives,
mark its lack;
it's glad to be going,
glad to be gone.*

If we look at these lines as images in the poem turned counterclockwise on its side, it indeed represents a grim town in a steep valley.

Mary Oliver—House of Light

Mary Oliver seems to be a poet of owls, lilies, turtles, music, and snakes. The poems in **House of Light** (Beacon Press, Boston, 1990) are set in one of four ways:

- as a Williams-like cascade of 3 or 4 lines per stanza
- as centered lines of mixed length

THE SUMMER DAY

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean—
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

- as flush-left lines where most lines are (nearly) a sentence
- as flush-left lines of mixed length

They are free verse, unrhymed, with a habit of full thoughts per line with some hurry-up and ambiguous reading enjambments, and with an interesting (possibly over-) use of repeated words, phrases, and sentence patterns.

What makes it a little tough to understand about her poetry is that it appears that some lines are broken merely because the form factor of the books is narrower than the lines would like to be.

The poem at the left is one of the ones which uses mixed length lines with nearly one thought per line and is set flush-left. It is also one which heavily uses repetition, and I've marked some

of the obvious repetitions with boxes.

Oliver's poems are often not tough to figure. This one is about prayer, nature, life, and death; its biblical repetitions and stately lines tell a story of reverent, slanted toward nature. It doesn't preach praying and formalized religion but nature- and life-prayer. *Who made..../Who made..../Who made....* asks what appears to be the question of creation, but the next line, *This grasshopper, I mean—*, particularizes it, remaking the question from a universal, abstract one to one that nature can answer. The grasshopper is humanized (anthropomorphized, almost) by its flinging, eating, chewing, gazing, washing, and flying. The language is still biblical—*the one who.../the one who.../who is.../who is..../Now she..../Now she....*

The next repetition is the key question of the poem: *I don't know exactly what a prayer is./I do know how to pay attention....* What follows is a prescription for the elements of praying mixed with elements of how to enjoy life and nature—paying attention, falling into the grass, kneeling, being idle and blessed, strolling.

The repetitions that seem biblical—the ones that could be taken as an affirmation of a more traditional religious bent—begin lines; the ones that are contrapuntal in meaning also are interspersed within lines—*how to.../how to.../how to.../how to....*

What else is there beyond the enjoyment of nature and life when we are given a single life, and a wild one at that?

Death at a Great Distance is an example of the Williams-cascade stanza style that Mary Oliver uses.

The story of this poem is that the speaker observes some poisonous mushrooms and contemplates that eating them would kill the speaker, though there is no deeper reflection of what would happen to the speaker's body than remarking that this thought was not pursued.

<p style="text-align: center;">DEATH AT A GREAT DISTANCE</p> <p>The ripe, floating caps of the fly amanita glow in the pinewoods. I don't even think of the eventual corruption of my body,</p> <p>but of how quaint and humorous they are, like a collection of doorknobs, half-moons, then a yellow drizzle of flying saucers. In any case</p> <p>they won't hurt me unless I take them between my lips and swallow, which I know enough not to do. Once, in the south, I had this happen:</p> <p>the soft rope of a watermoccasin slid down the red knees of a mangrove, the hundreds of ribs housed in their smooth, white sleeves of muscle moving it</p> <p>like a happiness toward the water, where some bubbles on the surface of that underworld announced a fatal carelessness. I didn't even then move toward the fine point</p> <p>of the story, but stood in my lonely body amazed and full of attention as it fell like a stream of glowing syrup into the dark water, as death blurted out of that perfectly arranged mouth.</p>	<p>With a surprising link—<i>not to do./Once, in the south</i>—the story moves on to a time when the speaker witnessed what would happen to another dead body—one that had fallen into a swamp or river. The scene is a water moccasin slithering out of a tree to get the body while it is in its last throes.</p> <p>I retell the story because it is told with a small amount of mystery beneath some beautiful though plain language.</p> <p>The first stanza begins by unfolding in short 3-stress lines. What stands out, though, is the 5th line, which still has 3 beats but packs them in 12 syllables. This line states the theme of the poem (contemplating post-life). The first line of the next stanza repeats the length of the previous line and serves as a distraction from the theme. The whole poem is built around these distractions and misdirections, which hint that thoughts of what happens after life are being avoided by the speaker.</p> <p>After the long distracting line (line 6; 4 beats) the lines shorten in a funneling move that Oliver uses with some frequency in the collection. The funnel ends at the spondee, <i>half-moons</i>. This series of images conjured by the speaker represents an attempt to avoid facing the real impact of the</p>
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mushrooms on (let's say) her life. Deadly amanitas are anything but quaint and humorous, doorknobs (a funny sounding word), half-moons (as seen from the side), or flying saucers.

In any case, a line by itself, is a linguistic move to show the speaker as uninterested. Next is a fascinating and perhaps disturbing way of stating an obvious observation:

*they won't hurt me unless
I take them between my lips
and swallow, which I know enough
not to do. Once, in the south,
I had this happen:*

Sure, if you don't eat the mushrooms they won't harm you, but to take them between your lips and swallow is an erotic if not outright sexual image. She knows enough not to do this—once, as the fourth line implies by reading run-on.

Notice how the strong substory in the poem is introduced by the casual and oddly worded, *I had this happen*. The first reaction is that it's a casual, idiomatic way of introducing a story, but on deeper reflection, it is possible to read *I had this happen* as *I ordered the following to happen*.

The next sentence, written over a stanza and a half, mixes deadly snake movement with sensuousness: *the soft rope of.../slid down the red knees/.../housed in.../sleeves of muscle moving it/like a happiness....* Of the lines in this sentence, only *of a mangrove, the hundreds of ribs* seems like a setup line, transitioning between the strong *slid down the red knees* and *housed in their smooth, white*.

The line, *a fatal carelessness. I didn't...*, introduces another avoidance of the issue by the speaker—the *fine point of the story*. *Amazed and full of attention* echoes *The Summer Day*—part of the ritual of praying, perhaps one of the only real, effective parts. Then another sensual image: *fell/like a stream of glowing syrup into/the dark water, as death/blurted out of that perfectly arranged mouth*. The mystery is to fix whose mouth this is. After some small reflection it is the mouth of whatever beast made the *fatal carelessness* and fell in the water.

The phrase *perfectly arranged mouth* carries the hint of the speaker's final view of the thing—that death and dying are among the good things that happen in life, or at least we are equipped with ways to enact death perfectly.

James Wright: Line and Rhythm

James Wright, starting with **The Branch Will Not Break**, seems to be a poet of dark inner exploration who tries either to break down the walls between the inner being and outer existence or else is to validate or illustrate one by using the other. What is interesting about his poetry is that it is a bit surrealistic, seeks the beautiful phrase, focuses on the line a basic unit of construction, and uses echoes and cross-fertilizations to weave meanings or proto-meanings. As his work progresses through his career, these meanings and references become highly compressed, and perhaps it is impossible for a

In Memory of Leopardi

I have gone past all those times when the poets
Were beautiful as only
The rich can be. The cold bangles
Of the moon grazed one of my shoulders,
And so to this day,
And beyond, I carry
The sliver of a white city, the barb of a jewel
In my left clavicle that hunches.
Tonight I sling
A scrambling sack of oblivions and lame prayers
On my right good arm. The Ohio River
Has flown by me twice, the dark jubilating
Isaiah of mill and smoke marrow. Blind son
Of a meadow of huge horses, lover of drowned islands
Above Steubenville, blind father
Of my halt gray wing:
Now I limp on, knowing
The moon strides behind me, swinging
The scimitar of the divinity that struck down
The hunchback in agony
When he saw her, naked carrying away his last sheep
Through the Asian rocks.

reader who approaches only his latest work to get all that can be gotten from it, because he became so self-referential toward the latter part of his writing life (which ended when his natural life did).

His lines are for me the most riveting aspect of his writing. Each line seems sculpted to get the most solitary meaning and interestingness as it can. Only rarely does a line set up another without much to recommend it otherwise. Each line has its own internal rhythm logic, and frequently a line will enjamb in such a way that expectations of what will follow or what a line means will be shattered by seeing the next line.

Wright is the first poet whose work has shown me that you can (or should) construct lines, then stanzas, then poems more than lineate a prose work. That is, each building block is made as perfect as it can be while under the constraints enforced by both what it's made of and what it's part of, and one of those building blocks is the line. Before Wright I think I would have, if pressed, admitted that line breaks are something you add like a spice to a poem.

I reproduced **In Memory of Leopardi** not so much because it is an example of his typical line construction—though it's not a bad example—but because in it he does something that stands out from his other work, at least in its degree of exaggeration: Almost every line (I think only one doesn't) contains at least a spondee—sometimes there are 3 or 4 stresses in a row. The exception is the last line which is straightforwardly iambic. This is quite a break from his earlier work which is fairly formal and definitely iambic. Here are the spondees: *...gone past all.../...as only/...cold bangles/...moon grazed.../...to this day,/...I carry/...white city.../...left clavicle.../...lame prayers/...right good arm.../...me twice...dark jubilating/...smoke marrow. Blind son/...huge horses...drowned islands/...blind father/...halt gray wing/...limp on knowing/...moon strides...behind me.../...struck down/...hunchback.../...last sheep.*

Of these, the classic is **struck down**, which reminds me of Milton's use of the spondee to not only emphasize a phrase but to sound its meaning.

A more typical poem in use of lines and rhythm is **The First Days**, reproduced to the left. It caught my eye in its use of line in the first 5 lines, where the scene is revealed as if by a stripper or a landscape artist painting and overpainting.

The first thing someone might see in the morning could be the ceiling or a lover, not a *bee ploughing*—which doesn't really seem possible—*his...shoulder into the belly*—of whom, the lover?—*of a...pear*. The least interesting revelation is that the pear is *low on a bough*, though when I read it first I thought the pear was on the ground, which is where bees are most commonly seen.

The First Days

Optima dies prima fugit

The first thing I saw in the morning
 Was a huge golden bee ploughing
 His burly right shoulder into the belly
 Of a sleek yellow pear
 Low on a bough.
 Before he could find that sudden black honey
 That squirms around in there
 Inside the seed, the tree could not bear any more.
 The pear fell to the ground,
 With the bee still half alive
 Inside its body.
 He would have died if I hadn't knelt down
 And sliced the pear gently
 A little more open.
 The bee shuddered, and returned.
 Maybe I should have left him alone there,
 Drowning in his own delight.
 The best days are the first
 To flee, sang the lovely
 Musician born in this town
 So like my own.
 I let the bee go
 Among the gasworks at the edge of Mantua.

Many of the lines express complete thoughts on their own, for example, *The pear fell to the ground* and *The bee shuddered, and returned*. In these cases Wright acts as if there is no point in being clever with lines and line breaks when the straightforward narrative is in full bloom. In a pair of lines like *Before he could find that sudden black honey/That squirms around in there*, the interest is in the word *sudden* (which I don't find particularly riveting except for its affinity to *quick*, which implies life or life beginning) or in the word *squirm* which would seem to refer more readily to the bee in its actions (and maybe it really does), but not in the lineation itself, so breaking the lines into syntactic units works fine.

The next line, *Inside the seed, the tree could not bear any more*, has more power as a line because of its reading as a unit: if a tree were indeed inside the seed, it would not be able to bear (fruit), but it wouldn't be as accurate to say *any more* as to say *yet*.

He would not have died if I hadn't knelt down stands on its own, and we are curious to find out what about the kneeling down saved the life of the bee, but we don't feel compelled to read on as some enjambments might force us to. *And sliced the pear gently* tells us what he did, but there is a small mystery about how this would help—it seems more like an act of curiosity to find out what the bee had done or was doing. Only the word *gently* tells us that the cutting was done with the bee's safety in mind. *A little more open* explains it. I remark on this line because in my first-time-read notes on the poem I put a ? next to it because I wasn't sure why it was there. In slicing the pear a little more open, it's made clear that the pear was open already, and the speaker is, in a sense, following the bee in its path or enlarging what the bee had already done, making the scene more one of joining than rescuing.

From *Maybe I should have left him alone there*, to *I let the bee go* Wright does what I call "funneling". Funneling is when the lines get progressively shorter and signals (to me) a narrowing of focus or an instruction for the reader to concentrate more. Longer lines are more emotional or meditative while shorter ones are more dramatic, so in funneling, the poet is aiming to up the drama or tension. The best lines in the poem are these:

*The best days are the first
 To flee, sang the lovely
 Musician born in this town
 So like my own.*

The best days are the first is an example of a line which has a perfectly fine reading as a thought without going to the next line, and the meaning is slightly off or even contrary to what the next line or lines add. Here the meaning is that the best days are the ones experienced at the start, as in childhood or youth. When we add *To flee*, we don't actually change the objective semantics of that reading, but the slant is different: The best days are indeed the ones of youth, but it is important to note that

they are therefore the first to go away and we are left from then on to experience days which are not best—they've saved the worst for last.

The rest of the line, *sang the lovely*, puts a little brighter spin on it, but the line itself, *To flee, sang the lovely*, seems to provide a remedy to the problem: flee. This is like the advice that the bee is given regarding the pear: There is death or at least death of sensibility if one decides to drown in his own delight, but the choice is to flee the best days, perhaps. Perhaps growing old is a fleeing of youth, youth that would drown us with delight if not ended quickly.

Musician born in this town/So like my own would seem to refer to a poet like Wright, because this town *so* like his own could be his town, and the musician could be him.

We can read this line and next as a pair with results:

*So like my own.
I let the bee go*

We can read this as saying that like the speaker's own rescuer—who rescued Wright from drowning in his own delight in his youth—the speaker will rescue the bee. Finally, the last line seems like Wright's inability to put a positive spin on some things, especially having to do with the horror of modern (mid-20th century American) life. The line is expansive, implying a meditation and a summing up or retaking the reader's attention by being different from the narrow funnel end just come to—*Among the gasworks at the edge of Mantua*.

One final remark is that the poem seems to play off inside and outside and boundaries. Notice that the words *in*, *into*, and *inside* appear 7 times, the string (pair of characters) "in" appears 12 times (including the 7 times mentioned already). Slicing the pear is erasing or eliminating part of the boundary between inside and outside, and the last image is of the edge of Mantua, another in/out boundary.

John Berryman: DreamLines

John Berryman uses a number of special effects in the **Dream Songs** (*The Dream Songs*, The Noonday Press, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York). The bulk of the **Dream Songs** are written in a sonnet+4 form: three 6-line stanzas. There are some minor variations—extra lines here and there, sometimes a couplet added—but the form is generally preserved. Rhyming seems occasional with a variety of what seem like *ad hoc* schemes. For example one song rhymes as follows:

20
The Secret of the Wisdom
When worst got things, how was you? Steady on? Wheedling, or shockt her & you have been bad to your friend, whom not you writing to. You have not listened. A pelican of lies you loosed: where are you?
Down weeks of evenings longing by hours, NOW, a stoned bell, you did somebody: others you hurt short: anyone ever did you do good? You licking your own old hurt, what?
An evil kneel & adore. This is human. Hurl, God who found us in this, down something . . . We hear the more sin has increast, the more grace has been caused to abound.

abcacb (xy) deedff gghhii

The parenthesized couplet is an addition to the standard form.

In the **Songs** Berryman uses a variety of dictions: medium formal, blackface, punning, erotic, and chaotic. This last one is demonstrated in **Song 20** to the left. In this style, word order is arbitrary or is scrambled to (sometime) provide some other subreading.

The first line contains an example:

When worst got things,....

This phrase can be read exactly as it stands: **when** the thing or quality referred to as **worst** got a hold of **things**.... Or, it could be read with only little difficulty as:

When things got wors(t),....

Better, more clear cut examples are:

whom not you writing to....

and

anyone ever did you do good?

The first of these examples is an explanation of how the person addressed in the poem is being bad to his friend. It can be rearranged as **to whom you (are) not writing**. The second can be rearranged as **did you ever do anyone good**.

In both cases we can try alternative readings based on the actual word order. **Whom not you writing to** can be parsed as *whom-not he's writing to*—that is, it is describing the friend as someone to whom **you** ought to write to but isn't. Or it can be read as the person *whom not-you is writing to*—that is, it is describing the friend as someone that some other person is writing to, but, again, not **you**, who ought to be. The distinction is that in the first subreading, the friend is not being written to by **you** and in the second the friend is being written to by someone else and not by **you**.

The second phrase can be read as *did anyone do to you that which is known as do-good?*

Another kind of inversion of wording occurs in the lines

*.... Hurl, God who found
us in this, down
something...*

We can read this as *God, who found us in this, hurl down something*. The actual first line of this phrase, though, is

This is human. Hurl, God who found

I think this line can be read as *This is how humanity treats God: They hurl Him....* This reading is reinforced by the mysterious line just before, *An evil kneel & adore*. This line doesn't entirely make sense, but I take it as referring to sort of anti-prayer.

Look at the next line in isolation:

us in this, down

Linking this to the meaning we've already gather from the previous line we get that God has found humanity in a degraded or fallen state.

Berryman uses a lot of other verbal cleverness or playfulness in this poem. Words like *shockt* seem like they are dialect, but this word sets us up to later accept *increast* and perhaps misread it as *incest*. Words like *NOW* made us take the present as the most important time—it is certainly the most present time.

Sometimes Berryman is just playful, as in the line

you loosed: Where are you?

which can be read, by its sound, as *you (are) lost: Where are you?* We can do that because the blackface dialect permits *you lost* as a valid sentence, so we are then able to hear this reading.

In other poems he uses verbs as nouns, such as in **Song 31** (*pray=prayer*):

*Henry Hankovitch, con guitár,
did a short Zen pray,
on his tatami in a relaxed lotos
fixin his mind on nuffin, rose-blue breasts,
and gave his parnel one French kiss;*

One way to look at what Berryman is doing in these poems is that he is teaching us how to read the poems as we go along. These poems are dreams, after all. For example, how can you make sense of a phrase like *others you hurt short?* It seems to me it starts to make some sense when you look back two lines to *Down weeks of evenings of longing/by hours....* Longing is an emotion based on relating one's self to others (or more properly, others' absence). *Short*, then, can be taken as a sort opposite emotion—one of isolation and selfishness.

By using dialect and a variety of dictions and styles, Berryman can play with language like this and allow readers to appreciate the poem who only enjoy the sounds the words make clanging against each other. It also provides a way to use language games to pack in meanings by playing words and phrases off each other.

These are dreams, and dreams don't always make sense. I think an important mistake readers of poetry make is to think that there is one single point or theme to each poem which must be located or determined or ferreted out before you can say you have successfully read the poem. Each poem is a performance by itself, and that performance can be appreciated or enjoyed a variety of ways, and each is as valid as any other.

I don't think Berryman believes each poem should be designed to have a single point.

Roger Fanning: Proportion

Roger Fanning's poetry—at least the poetry in the first half or so of his book, **The Island Itself** (Viking, 1991)—strikes me as poetry of the arresting image. The language is a bit plain with just enough soar to boost these images. In **Beyond the Cloud People** (reproduced below left), the image is of people warming their hands over the belly of a pregnant woman. I want to look at this poem in terms of his use of proportion, by which I mean both the amount of information provided and the images, descriptions, etc used to convey that information.

BEYOND THE CLOUD PEOPLE

By cloud people I mean elderly women
whose white hair poofs out: cumulo**ci**rrus.
Between the filaments blue ether flows.
It would be peaceful to lean my face in. . . .

Why don't I? After all, it's okay to touch
a pregnant woman, an acquaintance, where she feels
the baby move; I feel it too. We love
the unborn because we love the ideal

of a safe place where even as adults
we can, as over a campfire, warm our hands.

But a cloud hairdo looks cool, cold
as a person's last pillow. Oblivion we solo.

There are several ways to approach analyzing whether the amount of information presented is ideal. One would be to look at all the bits of information and determine whether questions a reader might legitimately ask are answered by those bits or by bits that follow by logical inference. Another way would be to look at the poem from top to bottom and, at each point, see whether questions asked at that point are subsequently answered, either directly or indirectly. All techniques are, of course, logically equivalent, so all I'm discussing is the process or heuristics, if you will. Let's use the second technique.

The title raises the question, who or what are the cloud people? And, what could be beyond them? This question is immediately answered in the first line, which leads to the question of why elderly women are cloud people and what is cloudy about them. The answer is in the hair. Poofed-out hair might not be sufficient for some to know what the hair looks like, so cumulo**ci**rrus is a way to nail it—in fact, a reader could find a picture of this cloud formation in a dictionary or encyclopedia.

The third line, *between the filaments blue ether flows*, contains a mystery never answered: is it *between the (filaments blue) ether flows* or *between the filaments (blue ether) flows*? The latter reading has a more literal meaning because many older women tint their hair blue. The former reading links the image to clouds: between clouds is the blue sky, sky being like an ether. Syntax to make this reading possible, though, is obscure.

There are two readings to *ether*. Ether is an anesthetic and was once used to put down animals. Ether is also the medium hypothesized in the late 19th century to explain how light and radio waves were transmitted. Before quantum mechanics, it was reasonable to reason that radio waves and light waves, as waves, required a medium for transmission, much as ocean waves require an ocean. This undetected substance was called ether.

It would be peaceful to lean my face in.... But why didn't he? Fanning seems to be teaching us how to analyze the poem by asking this question in the next stanza. At this point he veers off in what seems like a random direction by starting to talk about pregnant women and the odd ritual of relative strangers touching the abdomens of largely pregnant women to feel the fetus kick. There is something special about this behavior because it is not OK, in general, to touch womens' abdomens, certainly not in polite company and possibly not even at her request in public.

The next line contains a nice enjambment: *...I feel it too. We love/the unborn....*, as does the next line: *...because we love the ideal/of a safe place....*

Fanning builds the image of warming our hands at the campfire of womens' abdomens, though the real image, which takes a moment to sink in, is of warming hands at the place where life is created.

This leads to wonder what all this has to do with the cloud people and elderly women. This random detour is fun—even poetic—but what was all that other information about? Particularly at a stanza break this question is natural.

As if to acknowledge this puzzlement, the next stanza starts, **But....** Cloud hair is not warm—at the very least, clouds exist at high, cold altitudes, and when it is at ground-level the air is cool. Clouds look cool, white like snow. (Fanning also teases us with the reading that *a cloud hairdo looks cool* (pronounced *coo-ul* in current times) as in neat, far out, acceptable, or in.

...cool, cold/.... hints at a process of getting colder. **Oblivion we solo** is the enclosing move of the poem. Coldness is the final state, cloud hairdos are cool, wombs are warm, and as we move from cold to warm we also move from individuals alone to people in groups. The process of living, then, is shedding heat and people, perhaps as those we know pass before us.

Death and oblivion are what lies beyond the cloud people.

Cavafy: Proportion & Repetition

Cavafy tells stories, and like a good storyteller presents enough to get the story straight but not enough to cheat the listener from the joys of filling in what might be the rest of the story. Because, a story is really an abstraction in the sense that not all the details are presented—actually, they cannot be because every physical detail cannot be told. Therefore, the storyteller chooses what to leave out, which provides a place for the listener to fill in what seems most appropriate or most entertaining.

The poet does this in spades.

VERY SELDOM

He's an old man. Used up and bent,
crippled by time and indulgence,
he slowly walks along the narrow street.
But when he goes inside his house to hide
the shambles of his old age, his mind turns
to the share in youth that still belongs to him.

His verse is now recited by young men.
His visions come before their lively eyes.
Their healthy sensual minds,
their shapely taut bodies
stir to his perception of the beautiful.

This the story of a poet now old who has lived a full, perhaps overfull life. Whether he was ever prosperous is not known, but we do know that he is not now. He walks narrow streets, his house is suitable for hiding the shambles that is his old age. These outer qualities—his age and decrepitude, the meager streets, the house that holds him—are balanced, it would seem, by his mind which has some youthful turn.

His poetry still stirs youth, and what they feel as full of life and liveliness includes his verse and visions. Their minds

not only think thoughts but sense the world. Their shapely, taut bodies are in contrast to his crippled, used up, and bent one. Nevertheless, his perception of what makes life worth living still stir them.

The story seems complete, the poem neat, and we're ready for the next one. End of annotation.



But wait, not all questions and mysteries are cleared up. What used up the old man and what were his indulgences? What does he need to hide by going in his house? Why is his old age a shambles? If he is a poet whose verse is still sung and revered, why isn't he revered? His verse is *the share in youth that still belongs to him*; what share belonged to him formerly?

Though we have only a translation, we can still wonder about the words that are used. *Lively eyes, sensual minds, shapely taut bodies, stir to his perception. Young men.* Later poetry (this poem was written in 1911) is a bit more openly homosexual, and I can't help reading the lines, *their shapely taut bodies/stir to his perception of the beautiful*, as a reference to tumescence. And this is how he is crippled, used up, this is the indulgence, this is what he hides, this is his shambles of old age, this is his narrow street, this is what his mind turns to because his body no longer can, and his mind is where this share of youth remains.

Except, very seldom. Very seldom he is able to get back that physical share of youth, so not only is his mind and written perceptions of youth part of what he shares with youth, but something physical is as well—his own shapely taut body.



As interesting as Cavafy's proportion is his use of repetition—which I assume is accurately represented in the English translation. A good example is **To Call Up the Shades**, reproduced here. I've underlined each of the words, phrases, and phrase patterns that are repeated. In music repetition is used for a variety of things:

- to indicate a theme (by indicating importance)
- to indicate recollection
- to indicate consideration or thoughtfulness
- to indicate obsession
- to remind the listener of a containing or related passage

TO CALL UP THE SHADES

One candle is enough Its gentle light will be more suitable, will be more gracious when the Shades arrive, the Shades of Love.

One candle is enough. Tonight the room should not have too much light. In deep reverie, all receptiveness, and with the gentle light—in this deep reverie I will form visions to call up the Shades, the Shades of Love.

For example, as shown in such relatively boring pieces as **Peter and the Wolf**, a phrase can be linked to a character, an emotion, or a situation that is thoroughly explored or introduced somewhere, and the mere hint of that phrase can call up that character, emotion, or situation. In some ways this is like sign language in which the space in which something is signed can be used as a reference—that is, by simply pointing at that space, the

“speaker” can refer to whatever complex was signed in that space. We can do that in written text to that extent only with graphics.

In this poem, *one candle is enough* is linked with *gentle light* in the first line, setting a peaceful setting, which is recalled in the second stanza. Not only do we recall the gentle feeling, but we get the impression that the speaker is mulling over this concept by referring back to the indicating phrase.

Cavafy uses a pattern one of whose instances is *in deep reverie...in this deep reverie*. In this pattern a noun phrase is introduced in a generalized way and then particularized, somewhat, by adding *this* or *that*. To me this is used to structure the argument as a general or abstract one presented in a particular case. Kind of like starting a story with ‘chickens are afraid of thieves; this chicken was afraid one day when....’

Other repetitions are for mystery, or to make the reader think a bit before revealing the full story. *When the Shades arrive, the Shades of Love* presents us with the oddity *Shades*, which is capitalized; we immediately think of death through its ghosts, some kind of important, authoritative death. What’s revealed in the elaborated repetition is the concept that love or a particular love is gone, but what’s primary is the idea of death which was presented first.

The repetitions in the last line of each stanza are strike me as repetitions to indicate theme or even obsession.

I find the use of these devices compelling in Cavafy in a way that I rarely have in English or American poets. It seems that his poetry through these devices is more contemplative or more thoughtful while American poetry, for example, by contrast, is full ahead or even blunt.

Other effects Cavafy uses seem musical to me as well. One is his occasional use of an indented line. For example, **Comes to Rest** starts out like this:

*It must have been one o'clock at night
or half past one*

*A corner in the wine-shop
behind the wooden partition:
except for the two of us the place was completely empty.....*

The poem goes on to describe a (homosexual?) tryst and its later use in this poem. The space at the start of line 3 seems to me to be a pause of consideration or a pause while courage is gathered or while

the passage is planned. When we hear such a pause in speech we know that there is something hard about what is about to be said. In music this pause is used to let the background music establish its harmonic backdrop so that the phrasing that comes in eventually is more completely weighed against that backdrop or as a response or contrast to it.

That Cavafy would seem such a poet of music even through translation is remarkable. I'm sorry it took this long for me to discover him.

Oppen: Proportion and Learning How to Read

The first thing you have to do with George Oppen is to learn how to read his poetry. And by this I mean literally how to go about taking what's on the page and to turn it into the semantic content the poet (possibly) intended. The obvious approach of reading left-to-right and top-to-bottom as if the text were straightforward prose doesn't quite work. Let's look at how this poem looks that way:

<p>One may say courage And one may say fear</p> <p>And nobility There are women</p> <p>Radically alone in courage And fear</p> <p>Clear minded and blind</p> <p>In the machines And the abstractions and the power</p> <p>Of their times as women can be blind;</p> <p>Untroubled by a leaf moving In a garden</p> <p>In mere breeze Mere cause</p> <p>But troubled as those are who arrive</p> <p>Where games have been played When all games have been won, last difficult garden Brilliant in courage Hard clash with the homely</p> <p>To embellish such victories</p> <p>Which in that garden She sought for a friend</p> <p>Offering gently</p> <p>A brilliant kindness Of the brilliant garden</p>	<p>One may say courage And one may say fear And nobility There are women Radically alone in courage And fear Clear minded and blind In the machines And the abstractions and the power Of their times as women can be blind; Untroubled by a leaf moving In a garden In mere breeze Mere cause But troubled as those are who arrive Where games have been played When all games have been won, last difficult garden Brilliant in courage Hard clash with the homely To embellish such victories Which in that garden She sought for a friend Offering gently A brilliant kindness Of the brilliant garden</p>
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read the first line as it is: *One may say courage*. Then read each stanza with a slightly less binding power than the line. This way we capture the meaningful sentence fragment of the first two lines, *one may say courage/and one may say fear*. Rather than proceed at the next level, I find it better to read each stanza as a separate thought unless what follows or precedes has such a strong syntactic force that you must collapse them. A sufficient force is one that would cause the stanza by itself to be meaningless by itself. For example, the stanza:

*Brilliant in courage
Hard clash with the homely*

really doesn't need to be read with *when all games have been won, last difficult garden* before or *to embellish such victories after*. But,

*And nobility
There are women*

profits well from what precedes and follows. When you read a stanza by itself, read it with significant pauses after each line and very long pauses before and after the stanza. The poems, then, have a meditative quality, like thoughts occurring to the speaker.

Then, adjust what you've heard by the sense that syntax requires.

This approach frees us from trying to make perfect syntactic sense of the poem as it is the first time through and lets us drink in the phrases to get a sort of gestalt or impressionistic view of the poem. Sort of as if you looked up close at certain impressionistic painting and tried to make sense of it, it would look like “tongue lickings,” as one critic of the time put it. If you stand back—as any sensible person would do—you can see the painting perfectly well as it mimics the workings of sunlight and color a certain way. You can do this with Oppen's poems—and if you don't, as I didn't for a long time, you might find no sense in it.

For a short poem (114 words including the title) there is a lot of repetition: Sometimes its phrases like *one may say* or *games have been*, sometimes it's words (*courage* 3 times, *garden* 4, *brilliant* 3, *fear* 2, etc), and sometimes it's sounds *ty/ly*, *ish/ash*, *may/say*, *mind/blind/kindness/times*, and *se/ze* (*cause/breeze*). *Mere* is repeated twice and something about the tone of Oppen reminds me of Stevens, particularly this poem reminds me somehow of **Of Mere Being**.

In terms of information, we get just barely enough to get a sense of what's going on. How can he describe his sister? *One may say courage/One may say fear/and nobility*. She is singular in her combination of fear and courage, in how clear-minded she is of some things but blind to such irrelevancies as machines, abstractions, and power. Things of small disturbance in nature don't trouble her, but she is troubled by the games people play. She works hard to find ways to ease the minds of those who feel at a disadvantage in the games of life, and searches her garden—her life, her mind, her world—for ways to share what's brilliant there.

One of the more noticeable pattern repetitions is the series, *in the machines*, *in a garden*, *in mere breeze*, *in courage*, and *in that garden*. What makes it stand out is that syntactically it is difficult to get *in the machines* to fit in its sentence—not impossible, but, shall we say, improbable. The phrase it fits into is filled with 'n' sights and sounds, *clear minded and blind/in the machines*, linking the phrase, in antithesis to the strengths of his sister.

As a poem read slowly and meditatively as I suggested, the poem is lovely. Read as a piece of information revealed slowly, it is difficult and perhaps satisfying only in gestalt. But, that's Oppen for you.

Cesar Pavese: Narrative and Lyric

Pavese wrote one book of poems—in a relatively short period of time, though some of the poems were written a few years later than the bulk of them—and in this book he develops three types of poems: the pure narrative (**South Seas**), the image-poem (**The Voice**), and the erotic explosion (**Instinct**). Even though I read about these three types in the introduction to **Hard Labor** (translated and introduced by William Arrowsmith, Ecco), I noticed the three types (there might be a fourth, a

kind of political statement found in the sub-book **Green Wood**, but these poems largely seemed out of place in the context of the whole).

The pure narrative poems, exemplified by **South Seas** and really represented almost exclusively by that poem, tell a simple story simply. **South Seas** is the story of a wanderer who returns home. The idea of the displaced person seems central—though perhaps not the most central—to Pavese’s poetry, which, in order to explore this displacement, sets up contrasts between the city and the country, closed and open, large and small, dying and living, men and women (or maybe reversed), pavement and grass.

Each narrative poem is a kind of story though told as an image or a series of linked images layered in presentation though not particularly layered in meaning. Even in the image-poems there are situations or events that are about things that happen or could happen or are prevented from happening and so they each also tell a kind of story.

The Voice

Every day the silence of the lonely room closes on the rustle of movement, of every gesture, like air. Every day the little window, unmoving, opens on the quiet air. In the fresh silence the voice, husky and sweet, does not return.

Opens like the breathing of a voice just beginning to speak. Then silence. Every day is the same. And the voice is the same as always, the silence unbroken. Only that huskiness, gathering always, in memory stilled. The window swims. Quivering light. With the light, the stillness of before.

Every gesture jars it, this stillness of before. If the voice spoke, the pain would return, gestures would break in the startled air, and the voice would speak. Softly. Words, words. If the voice spoke, if anything jarred this barely quivering silence of always, the sound would be pain.

The gestures would all return, the pain would come back, pointless, jarring. The jangle of time would begin. But no voice returns, the faraway whisper stirs no ripple. Memory is still. Quivering freshness comes with the motionless light. The silence is always stilled, husky and gentle, in the memory of before.

The erotic eruption is like the image-poem in most ways but focuses on sex, women, suppressed or ill-fated sexual pressures.

The image-poem, though, is the type most generously represented and presents what I think are the most interesting aspects of Pavese’s writing. Some of the things I notice right off are that the poems are roughly the same length, though not of a strict length (later, reading Pavese’s two essays at the end of the book, I noted that he started with a strict idea of the length but allowed the length of the poem and its exact structure to adapt to the subject matter); the poems seem to aim at naming the scene or setting exactly, precisely, and clearly (though how much this is an effect of the translation I cannot say); the poems use layering of image, links between images, and a cinematic technique of looking at the scene or situation over and over from slightly different (**temporal**) angles; and there seems not to be significantly deeper meanings to the poems than what they present on their clear surface, though there seems to be a shared mythology or underlying story behind them all—I suspected (until Pavese said there wasn’t) that the poems were really a large autobiography, recounting his move from the country to the city and either a particularly bad situation with a woman or a very bad attitude about women.

By **temporal angles** I mean the technique of showing us the same scene or situation over and over but each time starting at a slightly different time and perhaps ending at a different time. You can see this technique most often in explosion special effects where, because it is expensive and a one-shot deal to do a big explosion on screen, the actual explosion is filmed by many cameras at different angles and distances, and the explosion we see on screen is actually several of these angles and distances spliced one after the other perhaps with each splice starting a little bit further along in the explosion. Combined with slow-motion, the explosion (which really lasts for perhaps 3 seconds) can last on screen for 30 seconds.

One of the best examples of this is **Ancient Civilization**:

Ancient Civilization

*Of course the day doesn't tremble, not so you can see it. And the houses
are still, rooted in the pavement. The hammer in the hand
of the man sitting there tamps a cobble down
into the soft dirt below. The kid cutting school
that morning doesn't know the man is working
and stops to look. People don't work in the street.*

*The man is sitting in the shade that falls from the top
of a house, cooler than a cloud's shadow,
tapping his cobbles, concentrating, not looking.
The pounding of the cobbles echoes in the distance
where the street, in sunlight, shimmers away. There are no
children on the street. The boy's all alone,
he knows nobody else is around but men and women,
who don't see what he sees and rush busily by.*

*But that man there is working. The boy stops and looks,
struggling with the idea that a man is working
in the street, sitting there like a beggar.
Even the people passing seem to be concentrating
on getting something done. The whole length of the street,
nobody's looking behind him, nobody's looking ahead.
But if the street belongs to everyone, it ought to be enjoyed,
not doing anything else, just looking,
now in sunlight, now in shade, in the crisp air of the morning.*

*Every street opens out wide like a doorway,
which nobody enters. The man sitting on the street
looks like a beggar, looks like he doesn't see
the people going and coming, in the cool of the morning.*

Notice that each stanza points to the man sitting in the street, and in all but one he is described as looking like a beggar. This poem operates for me exactly as does the cinematic technique: We see the man sitting against the background of the city, then in the shade (of the city) with the sunlight and openness behind, then in a crowd of people, and finally with doorways leading away. We see the man actually in one setting but from different angles (including angles of relation to other people, places, ideas).

This poem contains mysteries as well: The boy is on the street, but *[t]here are no children on the street*, the boy is alone, there is nobody else except *men and women, / who don't see what he sees*. There are questions of why a man should be sitting on a street—a place of freedom and enjoyment, perhaps, because a street can lead to the open and hills and sky—working when the boy is on the street while escaping his job (school). Also there is the loneliness of the man whom no one but the boy appears to

notice, and in fact, all these people who could but don't notice seem not to be people at all (they are *nobody*) and the boy who does is not a child.

Other image-poems use this same temporal layering technique to almost obsessively look at an situation or emotion. **The Voice** is very good example of this technique, and we can see it by looking at the repetitions throughout, which are underlined. You'll notice that because I underlined everything I thought was a significant repetition, nearly everything is underlined. Because of poems like this (and this one in particular), I came to the conclusion there was some woman (with a husky, sweet voice) who held an important but painful place in Pavese's life (and Arrowsmith seems to confirm this).

Notice in particular the open/closed dimension where the room, the silence closes, the window *opens on the quiet air . . . opens like the breathing*. In many of Pavese's poems there is a scene of the country as an open, large place (filled with hills, for example), viewed from the closed-in world of the city, rooms, and oppressive situations, but where the open country is framed by a small opening (like a window or walls). In many ways there is a desire for the openness but a fear of or resignation to it, as in this poem where the husky voice, which is sweet and therefore (?) desirable, is also dreaded because its *sound would be pain*. The tension between wanting the voice back and dreading it leads to the quivering silence that runs through the poem. Words are gestures or meanings, and with the return of the voice would come the return of the gestures along with it—as if the sound of the voice is what was sweet while what it said was not, and the wanting is of the sound of the voice not the gestures those sounds made/make.

The poems seem linked just as this poem is itself by the use of common phrases, words, and images—the husky voice being one; others include closed in places and views (windows, walls, streets), hills, grass, dogs, women as bitches, sex and warmth, the sky and clouds, wine, the sea, colors (relating to women almost always), drinking and drunks (discipline versus lack of discipline), etc. Pavese remarks on this himself by saying that once a poem is written, its structure determines the structure of the book of poems that goes with it, that the structure of the whole mirrors the structure of the parts. This seems true with **Hard Labor** because the poems in the whole work are repeated (with variations) as are the phrases, images, and image linkages in the poems. For example, there are a number of poems that talk disparagingly (to our ears) of women, likening them to bitches (let me clarify that I mean female dogs): **Instinct**, **Lack of Discipline**, even **Motherhood** fall into this category.

Another good example is the narrow window into an expansive world—in **The Voice** we have the little window, and in **Passion for Solitude** we have both a window and quiet lanes:

*I eat a bite of supper beside the bright window.
By now it's dark inside the room, you look into the sky.
Step outside the house, and the quiet lanes will lead you,
after a short walk, into the open country.
I eat and look into the sky—think of all the women
who are eating supper now—and my body is still.
Drudgery deadens my body, it deadens women too.*

Despite these repetitions of image or idea, sometimes a casual reader might miss them. For example, in **Fatherhood** Pavese writes, *Women, for them all, is one woman . . . all the bodies fuse into one . . .* And in **Night Pleasures** he writes, *We all have a home. a house waiting for us/in the dark, a woman lies there sleeping, waiting for us all . . . Tonight we'll all go home to a sleeping woman/with frozen fingers feeling for her body . . .* In the second passage one might think it was a quirk of translation or the translator's poor grammar that accounts for the clear(ly wrong) message that all of us are going home to

the same woman who waits sleeping for all of us. In **Hard Labor** many of the references to women seem to boil down to referring to a single particular woman.

We see familiar contrasts: the darkness of the room versus the bright window and sky beyond, the closed in house and lanes leading to open country, men versus women, who have things in common but are separated, it seems, from the speaker of the poems.

It seems like Pavese is trying through repeated attempts to get at a relatively small number of objective facts (not concepts) and trying to nail them with description or definition. We see the sky so many ways, leaves and bits of shadow, hills and grass contrasting with streets, walls, and windows, that after a while we can really see these things and there is a linkage between them and the words that refer to them. In some ways Pavese can be seen as defining these words for us through their use to define situations so that the meanings evolve to the mythology that Pavese wants, which perhaps amounts merely to reality. When Pavese talks about the sky, for example, I don't get the impression that the sky represents something to him, but that its presence is part of a set of experiences for him and later for me as well.

In **The Voice**, we have what amounts to a single image of a room which closes in on the speaker, and so we picture him in that room. A voice keeps coming back to him in the sense that the voice seems about to speak—the silence of the room or absence of the voice closes or restricts movement and gestures, whereas the opening of the small (restrictive window) is like the voice about to speak. But any such speech would bring with it pain, jarring the world or at least jarring the speaker back into real time instead of whatever imaginary time he is experiencing in the room, again with the tension created by this causing the *light*, *silence*, and *freshness* to quiver.

Behind this imagery in **The Voice** is a story of a rejection or reprimand (or at least something terrible about the words) which is desired and dreaded at the same time. Because a woman's husky voice is mentioned in other poems, we come to believe that the husky voice in this poem is the husky voice of a particular, same woman (this then leads me to suspect it's a real woman). It is as if by losing the woman the man gained some peace, while losing some other comfort, and whereas he could gain some of that comfort back if she (her voice) returned, the inevitable rejection would happen again or the reminder of it.

In this way, Pavese has put together what seems a very lyric poem with an apparent story behind it. Pavese himself talks about writing these poems as *telling* these poems.

Carlos Drummond de Andrade: Narrative Versus Lyric

The poems of de Andrade seem to me to be introspection frameworks, sort of a set of abstract poems that we as readers can use to perform our own introspections. Now let me spend some time explaining what I mean by this. In many of his poems there appears to be a story being told about de Andrade himself, often with significant details. Yet, when we look closely at those stories not very much is actually revealed. There is enough to tell us that there would be a story perhaps worth hearing were de Andrade prepared to reveal it.

Travelling in the Family

To Rodrigo M. F. de Andrade

In the desert of Itabira
the shadow of my father
took me by the hand.
So much-time lost.
But he didn't say anything.
It was neither day nor night.
A sigh? A passing bird?
But he didn't say anything.

We have come a long way.
Here there was a house.
The mountain used to be bigger.
So many heaped-up dead,
and time gnawing the dead.
And in the ruined houses,
cold disdain and damp.
But he didn't say anything.

The street he used to cross
on horseback, at a gallop.
His watch. His clothes.
His legal documents.
His tales of love-affairs.
Opening of tin trunks
and violent memories.
But he didn't say anything.

In the desert of Itabira
things come back to life,
stiffly, suddenly.
The market of desires
displays its sad treasures;
my urge to run away;
naked women; remorse.
But he didn't say anything.

Stepping on books and letters
we travel in the family.
Marriages; mortgages;
the consumptive cousins;
the mad aunt; my grandmother
betrayed among the slave-girls,
rustling silks in the bedroom.
But he didn't say anything.

What cruel, obscure instinct
moved his pallid hand
subtly pushing us
into the forbidden
time, forbidden places?

I looked in his white eyes.
I cried to him: Speak! My voice
shook in the air a moment,
beat on the stones. The shadow
proceeded slowly on
with that pathetic travelling

across the lost kingdom.
But he didn't say anything.

I saw grief, misunderstanding
and more than one old revolt
dividing us in the dark.
The hand I wouldn't kiss,
the crumb that they denied me,
refusal to ask pardon.
Pride. Terror at night.
But he didn't say anything.

Speak speak speak speak.
I pulled him by his coat
that was turning into clay.
By the hands, by the boots
I caught at his strict shadow
and the shadow released itself
with neither haste nor anger.
But he remained silent.

There were distinct silences
deep within his silence.
There was my deaf grandfather
hearing the painted birds
on the ceiling of the church;
my own lack of friends;
and your lack of kisses;
there were our difficult lives
and a great separation
in the little space of the room.

The narrow space of life
crowds me up against you,
and in this ghostly embrace
it's as if I were being burned
completely, with poignant love.
Only now do we know each other!
Eye-glasses, memories, portraits
flow in the river of blood.
Now the waters won't let me
make out your distant face,
distant by seventy years . . .

I felt that he pardoned me
but he didn't say anything.
The waters cover his moustache,
the family, Itabira, all.

Such revelation would not be his aim, though. By presenting us with the skeleton of an autobiography, we are able to fill in that autobiography with our own particulars. That is, we can fill out the story to satisfaction only by filling it with details we have at hand as readers, and what better or closer ones than our own? When only enough structure is presented to suggest a family of stories, I call it a *framework*. Frameworks actually refer to a general category of things—of which a story framework is an example—in which an entire structure is already constructed and someone else fills in the details. You can think of this as being like the frame of a house where the home-owner completes the construction as he/she sees fit. When details are left out in such a way that they can be filled in by someone else, the skeletal thing can be called an *abstraction*—in this case an abstract poem. Abstractions seem like they'd be boring, especially if we think in terms of generalized nouns and verbs and the like, but there is no need for such boring devices, as de Andrade shows.

Travelling in the Family is a good example, but there are many others in the collection called, oddly enough, **Travelling in the Family** (Ecco Press), for example, **In the Golden Age**, **Death in a Plane**, **Morning Street**, **The Disappearance of Luisa Porto**, and **To a Hotel Scheduled for Demolition**. **Travelling in the Family** is sort of

Christmas Carol situation: The speaker's father's ghost takes the speaker by the hand and shows him things about the father's past and the family—but the ghost never speaks. We visit many places and see many situations, apparently in some detail: houses, mountains, streets, books, marriages and affairs, grief, relatives, and family bonds. In it we see loves and controversies, hard wills, and all the familiar things that go on in a family over decades.

But, when we look more closely, there really is little detail. All we know, for example, is that there were marriages, mortgages, consumptive cousins, a made aunt, a grandmother betrayed *among the slave-girls, more than one old revolt, the crumb that they denied* the speaker, silences within silences. Thinking about these details, we don't know what the betrayal is and whom it affected, what the revolts were against (were they political revolts or familial revolts?), what the speaker did to deserve (in someone's mind) denial of food.

What we *do* see are the typical things that happen in a family along with the Russian nested dolls trait of each father not telling the sons about his own life and the facts of the family. In this way, these silences are passed down, and this is what this poem is about. The father comes back after death when all he can do is be silent and shows the son things that the son can see for himself and with as little explanation as ever.

There are several real mysteries, though, not simply ones of more detail. For example, who is the *you* addressed in the poem? In the general presence of the speaker's father and immediate presence (in the stanza) of the speaker's grandfather, one could guess it's the speaker's son. This seems right until there is a little trip-up of *now the waters won't let me/make out your distant face,/distant by seventy years . . .* Until now the easiest model to have is that the speaker is alive, but these lines along with the possibility the listener is the speaker's son requires us to possibly think that the speaker is dead and the son is quite old. This interpretation is countered by the fact that the speaker and listener seem to be *in the little space of a room*, and, presumably, both alive—though the speaker and his father seem to have been hand-in-hand and most likely the father was dead.

Another mystery (to me) is what the waters really are? The waters obscure the son's face, and being introduced 1 word away from blood one is naturally drawn to contrast the blood and water (in the familiar (pun intended) way).

At the end there is a final mystery: Is the last stanza within or without (outside) the poem? That is, the previous stanza drifts off in ellipsis, and the last stanza reads:

*I felt that he pardoned me
but he didn't say anything.
The waters cover his moustache,
the family, Itabira, all.*

And the question arises who is pardoning whom? Is it the speaker's father pardoning the speaker (and for what?) or is it the speaker's son pardoning the speaker (for being as silent as the speaker's father and grandfather had been before)? For this latter interpretation to hold true, the structure of the poem would have to be that the first 11 stanzas (all but the last) are a story told, and the last stanza is the speaker turning to the audience and telling us his feelings or conclusions about the story.

I want to take this second interpretation because I have a hard time determining what the speaker's father would pardon the speaker for when it is the silence of the father (the silence of fathers) that is the offense.

Nevertheless, the overall effect de Andrade achieves is that of the impressionist painting where trees seem full of leaves in each leaf's detail, the forest is full of individual trees, and fully functional-looking birds fly in flocks, yet when you look up close there are merely blotches of paint, trees are made

from a wide brushes bristles, and what looks from a distance as detail is mere indication. The reader naturally fills details from his or her own life or experiences, and so the effect is that of a detailed look at a family history, but the history we see is a mixture of de Andrade wants us to see and our own family histories.

The strategy of the poem is to weave the relationship between father and son with the narrowing journey of silent discovery until the relationship is the narrow focus. That is, the journey starts with the region (Itabira), the landscape, the streets, more distant relatives, closer relatives, then events within the speaker's immediate family, and finally between father and son. At this point we are introduced to the listener where what has been the experience of the poem for us becomes the topic of the poem as the speaker laments the inheritance of male familial silence—or perhaps the speaker is doing something about it.

This seems to be the ideal of drawing the reader into the poem literally as a boat is pulled into a maelstrom. Many of de Andrade's poems are like this, and one always senses tremendous detail which actually signals tremendous engagement.

Pablo Neruda: Narrative Versus Lyric

Neruda seems to me to be a poet of pure passion. By this I mean that his method is to transfer some portion of his topic to objects of nature and then to speak passionately of those objects, sort of placing a spider web filament between a human concern and a tree, for example, then moving to the roots and linking that back, so that we end up with a web that holds the human concern to the natural object in such a way that the figure is complete and inexorable. Speaking passionately about nature

seems less objectionable than about love, let's say. I suppose we could say this is how he gets away with it.

Horses

From the window I saw the horses.

I was in Berlin, in winter. The light was without light, the sky skyless.

The air white like a moistened loaf.

From my window, I could see a deserted arena, a circle bitten out by the teeth of winter.

All at once, led out by a single man, ten horses were stepping, stepping into the snow.

Scarcely had they rippled into existence like flame, than they filled the whole world of my eyes, empty till now. Faultless, flaming, they stepped like ten gods on broad, clean hoofs, their manes recalling a dream of salt spray.

Their rumps were globes, were oranges.

Their colour was amber and honey, was on fire.

Their necks were towers carved from the stone of pride, and in their furious eyes, sheer energy showed itself, a prisoner inside them.

And there, in the silence, at the midpoint of the day, in a dirty, disgruntled winter, the horses' intense presence was blood, was rhythm, was the beckoning light of all being.

I saw, I saw, and seeing, I came to life. There was the unwitting fountain, the dance of gold, the sky, the fire that sprang to life in beautiful things.

I have obliterated that gloomy Berlin winter.

I shall not forget the light from these horses.

The book **Extravagaria** (University of Texas Press) is, to me, completely remarkable because he pulls off this technique with a maturity discouraging to the beginning poet (it's that good). A good example is **Horses**, reproduced over to the left, which I selected for its passion and because Dobyns is a horse-guy.

This poem is simple in its narrative content: The speaker looks out a window on a winter day in Berlin, sees a guy take out 10 horses (to exercise them, I presume), and says, "wow, Berlin is nothing compared to these horses!" Look at some of the lines or phrases that on their own seem a little overdone in their passion—lines that might make us want to throw the poem across the room:

- *The light/was without light, the sky skyless*—these are nonsensical.
- *ten horses were stepping, stepping into the snow*—repetitions like this are too "poetical" (however, looking at the Spanish, I gather this is the work of the translator).
- *Scarcely had they rippled into existence/like flame, than they filled the whole world of my eyes,/empty till now*—overwritten, and do you really mean that your eyes were literally empty until this very minute? I don't believe it—your

credibility is zip.

- *Their necks were towers/carved from the stone of pride,/and in their furious eyes, sheer energy/showed itself, a prisoner inside them*—this is just going to earn you a guffaw. Stone of pride? Furious eyes?? Sheer energy?? Give me a break.
- *I saw, I saw, and seeing, I came to life*—this is a little too poetical, sounds like 19th century verse.

Neruda's poem works quite well, though, because it isn't simply string of passionate overwritten phrases strung together by a simple (trivial) story. Though it's usually inappropriate to go over the poem nearly line by line, I think in this case it's worth it to see how the story and the weaving of concerns between the observer (speaker) and the observed combine to make this a winning poem.

First, note that the stanza structure is well-formulated: Each stanza is a complete thought realized as fully as it needs to be in the poem—no fluff, no mysteries. The first stanza starts the story and a little of the scene. The next stanza completes enough of the scene for present purposes: The speaker sees horses, which form one of the important topics of the poem, and we know the speaker is at least logically remote or at least removed (looking out a window). It's Berlin in the winter. Berlin is in the far North and we know that the light and sky even at mid-day must be lightless and skyless. For me this sets a mood: Such winter scenes make me look at the less optimistic and less uplifting parts of life. In three lines Neruda gets this across. And somehow the horses have something to do with this. *The air white like moistened bread*: This seems at first a nonsequitur until we see that a moistened loaf is a lump, heavy and unappealing.

*From my window, I could see a deserted arena,
a circle bitten out by the teeth of winter.*

We are brought back into the scene. [**D**]eserted arena implies a place where people aren't; the circle bitten by winter hints at the harshness of feeling the speaker feels or perhaps the desperation.

*All at once, led out by a single man,
ten horses were stepping, stepping into the snow.*

The horses seem magical from this description—the whole scene is magical. Horses that step, step into the snow are majestic and somehow beyond ordinary horses. And to be led by a man alone conveys some of that magic to him. He appears nowhere else in the poem.

*Scarcely had they rippled into existence
like flame, than they filled the whole world of my eyes,
empty till now. Faultless, flaming,
they stepped like ten gods on broad, clean hoofs,
their manes recalling a dream of salt spray.*

Flame is energy. The speaker was seeing nothing else until the horses appear, now they are all he sees. repeating **step** adds to the majesty of the horses, who are explicitly likened to gods. The dream of salt spray simply conjures the image of waves cresting with a strong offshore wind blowing spray back to sea. The horses are now like nature's pure energy to the speaker. Because we are told that the horses fill the speaker's eyes, we see that this magical quality has everything to do with the speaker's feelings toward the bleak winter Berlin scene.

Faultlessness is a trait of people not, in general, animals, and so this is another link back to the speaker. Though the stanza seems to speak mostly about the horses, it actually speaks only of the speaker.

Their rumps were globes, were oranges.

How can we interpret this?—not literally. We are in a world of magic and overstatement already, led there quietly by Neruda, perhaps without our having realized it. The most powerful parts of their bodies were like the whole world, were like the most delicious food. The horses take on extreme significance to the speaker—they are everything, everything wonderful.

Their colour was amber and honey, was on fire.

We've already seen the fire image, and we can take this as reinforcing their color or their effect on the speaker.

*Their necks were towers
carved from the stone of pride,
and in their furious eyes, sheer energy
showed itself, a prisoner inside them.*

Towers are mythical. Pride can belong to a horse, but normally it's human. The horses eyes and the eyes of the speaker are linked. The energy held captive in the horses is the energy of natural life as separate (for the moment) from human life.

*And there, in the silence, at the mid-
point of the day, in a dirty, disgruntled winter,
the horses' intense presence was blood,
was rhythm, was the beckoning light of all being.*

We are reminded of the contrast between what the speaker was seeing before and what he's seeing now. Blood and rhythm are life. Winter cannot be disgruntled, but people (living in it) can be. Again Neruda links the speaker with the scene.

*I saw, I saw, and seeing, I came to life. There was the
unwitting fountain, the dance of gold, the sky,
the fire that sprang to life in beautiful things.*

A repeated phrase like **I saw, I saw** can seem overwritten or overwrought, but here it has an *at last* component to it. The **unwitting fountain** could be the horses' manes. The speaker's revival is linked to the horses. Everything that's happened really is just a series of thoughts in the speaker's mind. The horses really do nothing but tromp around. It's how they look and the speaker's reaction to it that are the essence of the poetical strategy. In fact, all the passion is linked to the transformation of the speaker, not to the horses in any way intrinsic to them.

I have obliterated that gloomy Berlin winter.

Of course the winter is not obliterated, but it is in the form of its figurative representation of the speaker's frame of mind.

I shall not forget the light from these horses.

Slightly biblical sounding, but the light, the fire, the spray, the captive energy are the life the speaker seeks. The city represents how humanity and its concerns can drag one down.

Perhaps there is more one could say about the choice of Berlin as the setting, but I feel the most important qualities of Berlin to the story is its far-north location, its general greyness and dinginess, and the fact that its winters don't inspire much. Berlin represents the grey side of human concerns, and by inhaling the energy of the scene of horses prancing the speaker leaves that side behind.

That Neruda can pull this off while showing such passion and with such a thin narrative (though there is one) is what I mean by his maturity. The small reading I did of his earlier poetry seems less assured than this and less magical in its effect, too.

The poem is largely lyric, but the fact of the thin narrative puts it somewhere in between. Most of the poems in **Extravagaria** are like this in varying degrees. All Neruda's apparent nature poetry is really poetry about the human condition weaved through this web technique. If we don't get it, Neruda supplies the **Point**:

*There is no space wider than that of grief,
there is no universe like that which bleeds.*

Bill Knott: Formal Devices

Bill Knott uses a number of devices in his poems, and the breadth of the range of these devices can be a little confusing to readers not used to them/him, and sometimes their use can make it seem like Knott isn't completely serious about a subject. Seeming less than serious, though, can be an aid in approaching some poems and topics, and it can make reading the poet fun even if the "true subjects" are not approachable or understandable. Rarely, though, is Knott impenetrable.

SEE NOTE FIRST

The world's machines have not grown old,
whose inheritors reign everywhere.
Their silicon sons are strong; their
digital daughters wield power, take hold.

We humans long to break them
into coin, into ore—to make them
dross and toss them down on infernal fires
that birthed them, cool to our desires.

The machines aren't scared. They know
harder control, how to turn the wheel
of time past those whom they sure as hell won't miss:

Cyborg android robot shall steel
themselves, consolidate, and, rising, go
unto that universe whose promise
we flesh-and-carbonoids could merely premise.

Note:

Anti-translation of a Rilke poem (*Die Könige der Welt sind aft*, from "Des Stundenbuch," 1901), which Heidegger in his 1946 lecture "What Are Poets For?" cites for its "highly prophetic lines." A prose paraphrase of the original poem's ending might go something like:

The metals, the oils—all the ores we've ripped from the earth are homesick. They long to leave our machines, to flow out of our cash-registers and factories—to return to the gaping veins of the mountains we reft; whereupon the mountains will close again.

"Heidegger maintained . . . until the end of his life," Richard Wolin writes (*The Heidegger Controversy*, MIT Press, 1993), ". . . [that] the 'inner truth and greatness' of Nazism is to be found in its nature as a world-historical alternative to the technological-scientific nihilism bemoaned by Nietzsche and Spengler."

Among the devices he uses are rhyme, syllabic line lengths, Hopkins-style word creation and word-play, academic structures, syntax bending, sound schemes, and misdirection. The poem at the left (**See Note First** from **The Quick-en Tree**, BOA, 1995) uses a bunch of these devices.

First, there is rhyme, but the scheme is not exactly regular: AB-BA CCDD EFG FEGG. The first stanza is packaged by its rhyme, gripping it into a whole, sort of like what the stanza is saying—that the machines are taking hold. The second stanza opens up a bit in that there is no center—the rhyme is like a clamp in which nothing is clamped. The last two stanzas can be viewed either as a kind of further opening up or a continuation of the scheme up to this point: with a differ-

ent grouping we obtain: EFGFE GG. When I read rhyme schemes like this—irregular or slightly regular—I try to look at what's linked by the rhyme. In fact, what I do is to draw lines between rhymes to see if reading those lines together adds meaning or enlightens. Here, there is some enlightenment: *old/hold* captures the notion of machines getting an upper hand or a better hold on the world, encompassing *everywhere/their* presence is felt. *[M]ake them/break them* are opposites—what we have done, what we would like to do; *infernal fires/our desires* represent a similar dichotomy—hell: where they're conceived, *cool desires*: what they spawn (or in which spirit they were conceived). *[M]iss/promise/premise* is the strongest thread—those who dislike machines won't be missed, the machines showed such promise, but this is only because we assumed they could have characteristics like ours.

The poem is about how in the course of invention and progress we have moved from building machines with physical characteristics to building those with mental ones. Whereas before these machines might have had no personality or human characteristics, now they deserve to be called our sons or daughters, implying they can reproduce themselves (without our help). We see them as less

desirable and would like to smelt them down into things more easily controlled while retaining value (*coin, ore*), but these machines are not scared of this possibility—not because they cannot experience fear, but because they know that time is on their side. Just as physically menial labor has been eliminated (or redefined at a higher level), so these machines will redefine or have redefined mental menial labor at a higher level.

Note that the three sorts of artificial life—cyborg, android, and robot—are linked without punctuation, implying (to me) that the distinction between them is blurred. Cyborgs are artificially enhanced humans, androids are artificial life forms (typically) made from biological material, and robots are pure artificial beings (typically) using artificial intelligence.

The question of mental machines is at least partly a philosophical question, and the poem is a mini-philosophical treatise *in form*. The title **See Note First** informs us of this by instructing us where to start reading (the footnote, which any reader of philosophical tracts knows is where the philosopher really writes the paper or book) and sets the tone (a little facetious, perhaps to prevent us from falling too deep into fear). (It is possible, but really silly, to parse the title as *C-Note First*, meaning please provide a \$100 bill before reading.)

Note that the footnote talks about an anti-translation, a lecture entitled “What Are Poets For?,” Nazism, and nihilism. In the poem we see a hint, *Cyborg android robot shall . . . go/ unto that universe whose promise. . . . Unto* means either *to, until, or by*, but normally has a connotation of mysticism or religiosity. *Universe* can be read as a single verse or single poem (*one poem*), which I don’t think is too far-out a way to read it given that the instructions the title provides is to read the note first which talks about anti-translation and what are poets for—agreed, it’s a stretch, but this one (large poem) is one whose *promise* people can merely provide the foundation for (*premise*).



Knott uses a variety of other effects in other poems in the collection:

- very short lines (*Quickie: Poetry/is/like/sex/on/quicksand/viz/foreplay/should/be/kept/to/a/minimum*)
- syllabics: [*Romance (Hendecasyllabics)*]
- fancy use of words [*Oct–Nov (Michigan Memory #4). . . Breath sheds a breath-effect, brief-bloomed steam-sheaf . . .*]
- made-up words (*outramerican*)
- showing in addition to or instead of telling (Note the heavy use of stresses in *Stress Therapy: Time, tíme, tíme, tíme, the clóck/váccinátes ús,/and thén éven thát lácks/próphyláxis. . . .*)
- syntactic tricks:
 . . . *Then I insert my slits*
 into love/lovestyle. . . .

- syntactic tricks and obscurity:

VISION OF THE GODDESS IN A CITY SUMMER
to Carolyn Kizer

And yet what if the sweat that breaks
Even from Her feet as they pass
Can never rain these pavements back
To a mud- a milk-cud grass ←

Time that diamond instant raw dulls
Is it quicker than them quote
That strode presence those fading puddles } Grammar?
Not in this goadless heat

Oh mirage oh haze of hydrants
Go Isis-proud across crosswalks ← Sounds
Leave brief seas without a halt ←

Till all my doubts dissolve at once
And down I'll follow cowed to lick
Your soleprints for my salt ← The odd rhyme

- puns: goadless/godless, soleprints/soulprints
- sound fun: mud- a milk-cud, across crosswalks.

♪ ♪ ♪

At the very least, Knott makes reading the poems fun, and every now and then he just knocks you out. He sprinkles every trick in the book in his work, and it's a rare poem that doesn't provide a little pause in the way you would normally think.

Brigit Pegeen Kelly: Formal Devices

I selected **Divining the Field** from **Song** (BOA, 1995) because it not only exhibited some characteristic effects Kelly uses but because when I first read the poem I had the feeling (though I did not conclude it) that perhaps there were too many disparate metaphors or at least metaphoric things being juggled at once. I felt that the poem was “brought off” though I wasn’t sure how.

Divining the Field

Through the body of the crow the finch flies:
Small yellow-green patch of flower springing
Up in the weedy field: of briefest flight.
The flower will be shot dead by the coming cold
Or by the woman’s disregard. Her forgetfulness
Arrows him the way Saint Sebastian was arrowed:
Poor man stuck with a hundred bony wings, laddered,
The stripped shafts trembling, as if Sebastian
Had been instructed to climb his own flesh
Up into the high regard his skewered sight
Was planting there: Crow’s Nest: House of the Spy.
Regards grow up like trees. The thing Sebastian
Was thinking when he died: a leafy assemblage
With a driven core: swift monument of oak or stone
The heart passes through, the way the finch
Passes through the body of the crow: the lord
Of highness. From his post the crow shouts
The other hawkers down: sells tickets to
Sebastian’s fledging: devours in one gesture
The finch like a piece of fruit: like a roasted morsel.
It is too much to bear sometimes: a tree
Of flame-flung arrows, a bird selling portions,
Our endless lust for spectacle to rouse
The stupored sight. As if the body of Sebastian’s
Death were not always with us: This high
White garment of grasses the birds fly through,
Opening with their sharp gold wings
The purple and crimson wounds of the flowers.

This collection of poems is unified in several ways: Nearly all of the poems have some reference to birds or birdsong, many of the poems are built in what I call layers, and a number of the poems have a formal look to them (couplets, patterned indentation). Possibly the best poem in the collection is the title poem, **Song**, which is about a pet goat that is killed by some boys. It is told in a parable style in which the fact of the killing is hidden from the goat’s mistress, but dreams and the separation of the head from the body of the killed goat are linked by a song that soon comes to pervade the poem. This poem perhaps can be taken as an instruction manual on how to read the poems in the collection: they will be linked, there is a layering of meanings and figures, there is a thread of religious concern throughout, and flight, song, and a sort of seeking grace will play roles. There is also a voice that speaks every now and then signaled by italics. It is never explicitly made clear who this voice is, but in places it seems like a biblical voice (*I know your works . . . God’s eyes are like/A flame of fire* in

The White Pilgrim: Old Christian Cemetery or *the fruit tree/Beareth its fruit* from **Of Ancient Origins and War**) and others like a Greek chorus (*We followed them all* from **Courting the Famous Figures at the Grotto of Improbable Thought** and *There are four angels standing at the four corners of the earth* in **Three Cows and the Moon**).

This poem, **Divining the Field**, uses a number of these effects. Notice how there are recurring images: the finch, crows, feathers, Saint Sebastian, the field and its flowers, arrows, and wounds. Notice the explicit layering through the use of colons (:), in which an image or a thought is refined or added to through a string of colon-clauses. How can we interpret these cascading colons? Here’s an example, the first use in this poem:

*Through the body of the crow the finch flies:
Small yellow-green patch of flower springing
Up in the weedy field: of briefest flight.*

We read that a finch is flying through the body of the crow in the first line—what can this mean? To me, colons have a couple of purposes: First it signals that the remainder of the sentence answers the question “what is meant by this?, how can I take it?”; the second is as an example or list of examples; the third is as a list of any sort introduced by the material to the left of the colon; and the fourth is as any sort of elaboration or further commentary. The colon at the end of the first line signals an answer to the first question: What can you mean by this? The answer is that the speaker means that this just like a flower beginning to grow in a field of weeds. This sets up an equation of sorts where the finch is

like the flower and the crow like the weeds. In fact, the color scheme reflects this as well—the yellow-green patch matching the finch and the presumably darker weeds matching the crow.

The finch which flies through the body of the crow is a small feathered thing, which is like the arrows that pierce Sebastion, and Kelly makes this linkage explicit (*a hundred bony wings, Sebastion's fledging*). There are a number of passing-through images: the finch and the arrows, of course, *flower springing/Up in the weedy field, the high regard his skewered sight/Was planting there, a leafy assemblage/With a driven core, swift monument of stone the heart passes through, the crow . . . devours in one gesture/The finch like a piece of fruit*, and *This high/White garment of grasses the birds fly through*. Notice how the image of passing-through or piercing turns into one of driving (*With a driven core*), which later transforms into the heart.

Another thread is the one of regard and disregard, and the notion of perspective overall: *The flower will be shot dead by the coming cold/Or by the woman's disregard, as if Sebastion/Had been instructed to climb his own flesh/Up into the high regard his skewered sight was planting there, Regards grow up like trees*. *Regard* is used at least in three of its primary meanings: *to look at attentively, to pay attention to or heed*, and (in a plural form) *good wishes*. *Disregard* causes the flower to be shot dead, Sebastion's high regard (gaze?) is where he has been instructed to climb through his own mortification, and regards (good wishes?, gazes?) are plentiful.

Following the threads is easily done by looking at the poem, so the real question becomes how these threads contribute to an understanding of why the poem came to exist. One approach to the meaning seems relatively clear: transformation, even religious transformation, can or does take place after a wound, painful passage, or a sacrifice. In general, the things that pass through (finch through crow, arrows through Sebastion, the heart through the monument, flower through weeds) are lighter than what they pass through.

There is an interesting turn in the poem, though, which perhaps holds a clue to the question of why this poem was written. As we are regarding Sebastion's high regard, the crow turns into *the lord/Of highness*, starts selling tickets to Sebastion's passion, devours the finch—so that we wonder about how the finch is actually passing through the crow (as food digested?). Witnessing Sebastion's death and angelic gaze (subject of dozens of renaissance paintings, prompting one of my ex-wives to call him Saint Sebastion of the Apaches) becomes *our lust for spectacle to rouse/The stupored sight*. In the end, all that's left for us to remember this event or category of events (Sebastion's sacrifice) is the flight of birds through clouds which open (*the purple and crimson wounds of*) flowers.

One small mystery (to me) is who the *him* is in line 6. The grammatical solution is that it is the flower *shot dead* by her disregard. But, anthropomorphizing the flower this way (why *him* for a flower?) seems unnecessary and unlike everything else in the poem. Grammatically *him* could refer to Sebastion (which would fit with the later references to *Sebastion's death* not being *always with us*) if it were taken as a cataphoric reference, but this seems to be stretching it a bit.

That such transformations and passages are divine in origin or nature seems to be the point of the poem and perhaps its point of departure. That it came about seems possibly to be the result of envisioning a scene (acquiring an image) in which all of these threads are present at the same time and pointing in the same direction. Even the turn helps the image by making it sharper, more bitter.

Despite the high nature of poems like this one, Kelly isn't an over-earnest sort of poet. She treats common subjects acting within the influence of the known laws of physics, and her diction is strictly late 20th century. Her method, at least in this poem and I think also in many of her poems, exemplifies what Mark Jarman once lectured on—that a successful poem will have all its parts building toward its meaning or point or reason for having been written. Jarman could have made his point most effectively using a Kelly poem.

Bill Knott: The Closet

Knott is a difficult poet in the sense that he is sometimes obscure, he sometimes has a playful attitude in selecting subject matter and treatment strategies, and he mixes these with absolutely knock-out language and devastating topics. As readers we are never sure what we'll find in a Knott poem, but in this poem, **The Closet** (*New Poems 1963–1988*, University of Pittsburgh Press), what we

find is pretty well presaged in the epigraph:

(. . . *after my Mother's death*). What I notice right away is that Mother is capitalized, which I take as a hint as to the importance Knott's perceived his mother to have to him one way or another. However, the poem is not a sappy elegy though elegy it may be; instead, it is the view (probably seen from an adult distance) of an encounter between the 6-year-old Knott and his mother's emptied closet soon after her death.

The poem, though, is not simple—in it we find that this encounter is placed in the context of a grappling with life and death, the life and death of the child as well as the mother. What Knott finds in the closet are the hangers on which his mother's clothes once hung. The image of the skeletal hangers in the empty closet high up from the perspective of the boy is where the poem begins and from whence it takes off. The clothes his mother once wore are perhaps emblematic of her life (livingness) so that the hangers are an up-holding force that remains after death. Hangers are explored in several disturbing ways:

- The hangers enjoy the room they have in the absence of what they held (his mother's clothes).
- The hangers are like birds, buzzards perhaps, who expand by excluding the boy Knott.
- The hangers are a crude tool for abortions which can lovelessly scrape uteri, which would exclude Knott were he the partially intended subject of an abortion.
- The hangers are sharp, but Knott tries to catch them and throw them around the closet (or at least from their perch high above him).
- The location of the hangers—above his head and unreachable—is mixed in with a treatment of God and by implication His role in such a scene as Knott plays out (his own abortion, his stillbirth by a dead mother in a dream).

THE CLOSET

(. . . *after my Mother's death*)

Here not long enough after the hospital happened
I find her closet lying empty and stop my play
And go in and crane up at three blackwire hangers
Which quiver, airy, released. They appear to enjoy

Their new distance, cognizance born of the absence
Of anything else. The closet has been cleaned out
Full-flush as surgeries where the hangers could be
Amiable scalpels though they just as well would be

Themselves, in basements, lovelessly scraping uteri
But, here, pure, transfigured heavenward, they're
Birds, whose wingspans expand by excluding me. Their
Range is enlarged by loss. They'd leave buzzards

Measly as moths: and the hatshelf is even higher!
As the sky over a prairie, an undotted desert where
Nothing can swoop sudden, crumple in secret. I've fled
At ambush, tag, age: six, must I face this, can

I have my hide-and-seek hole back now please, the
Clothes, the thicket of shoes, where is it? Only
The hangers are at home here. Come heir to this
Rare element, fluent, their skeletal grace sings

Of the ease with which they let go the dress, slip,
Housecoat or blouse, so absolvingly. Free, they fly
Trim, triangular, augurs leapt ahead from some geometric
God who soars stripped (of flesh, it is said): catnip

To a brat placated by model airplane kits kids
My size lack motorskills for, I wind up all glue-scabbed,
Pawing goo-goo fingernails, glaze skins fun to peer in as
Frost-i-glass doors. . . But the closet has no windows.

Opaque or sheer: I must shut my eyes, shrink within
To peep into this wall. Soliciting sleep I'll dream
Mother spilled and cold, unpillowed, the operating
Table cracked to goad delivery: its stirrups slack,

Its forceps closed: by it I'll see mobs of obstetrical
Personnel kneel proud, congratulatory, cooing
And oohing and hold the dead infant up to the dead
Woman's face as if for approval, the prompted

Beholding, tears, a zoomshot kiss. White-masked
Doctors and nurses patting each other on the back,
Which is how in the Old West a hangman, if
He was good, could gauge the heft of his intended. . .

Awake, the hangers are sharper, knife-'n'-slice, I jump
Gropelessly to catch them to twist them clear,
Mis-shape them whole, sail them across the small air
Space of the closet. I shall find room enough here

By excluding myself; by excluding myself, I'll grow.

Normally I would be careful to write of the speaker in the poem and not identify that speaker with the poet. Something about this poem doesn't push me in that direction, but actually in the opposite. The closet was a place where Knott played and in this poem he speaks of visiting the closet too soon *after the hospital happened*, a phrase that distances him even at the time of speaking about it from the event at the hospital which is probably his mother's death, but the hospital dream seems to throw that interpretation into some minor question or at least links the truth with the dream. In fact, Knott enters the closet while interrupting his play. Unlike Knott, the hangers enjoy their freedom which Knott discovers by looking at, and at this point the hangers take on some symbolic or mythic proportions for him.

First they become the potential tools for abortion, which is linked to Knott himself by combining the image of the abortion with the expansion of hanger-freedom by excluding him. Freedom of a sort can be gained by abortion when the live birth would be a nuisance—did Knott feel his mother thought his existence a nuisance?

Second, Knott's skill at (free) association is shown by starting with the sentence, *Their/Range is enlarged by loss*, and moving to an image of buzzards circling (*measly as moths* compared to the hangers) presumably over a desert (or range) where circling predators can be seen and unexpected death is less possible (at least for observers and not the prey)—*As the sky over a prairie, an undotted desert where/Nothing can swoop sudden, crumple in secret*. Was there something secret about his mother's death? Well, presumably yes—Knott is not far removed from my generation and 6-year-olds were routinely shielded from such realities. If the mother is suddenly swooped upon and crumpled in secret, could it not be for some reason secret from the child and therefore implicating him at least as someone unwanted?

Prairies, deserts, buzzards—*ambush*: Knott free associates over to the discussion of the fact that the boy Knott was at play and sets the stage a little more by telling his age when this happened. At this point he goes meta, saying that isn't this encounter really too much to ask a 6-year-old to handle, can't he just go and play as normal kids that age would do? But the hangers interrupt again—he will shortly go back to a discussion of playing. This effect shows that the image of the hangers is to be taken as compelling. In this interlude the hangers are shown to have slipped the clingy bonds of clothes easily, are shown as augurs of a geometric God (hangers are triangular and clothes (and people) are not). The clothes-filled closet was once a playroom of sorts.

Then ends the interruption to talk about the model airplane kits that would placate him, though kids his size lack the *motorskills* to build them. Here there are two moves, let's say, that demonstrate the kind of building and layering that Kelly also uses well. First, the toys that placate the child are airplane kits, and the hangers have been likened several times to birds, to flying things, and as being linked to things (a God) who soars. Second, the child doesn't have the *motorskills* to handle these kits just as the child doesn't (or does) have the *mentalskills* to handle this event—his mother's death. Now, Knott never makes that claim, but he has shown us through his own free associations that we are free (or even encouraged) to associate this way.

The association continues: model airplanes use a sort of glue that when mishandled dries on the hands and fingers in a translucent way, forming a window through which one can view said hands or fingers. Knott says that *the closet has no windows*, neither *opaque* nor *sheer*, and to see in he must dream. This opens the way to contrast a dream with reality, which Knott does in the remainder of the poem, but it also includes an interesting linkage that, once again, shows Knott's skill: *opaque* and *sheer* are terms used to describe various clothes, typically intimate female apparel. In talking about how to look into the closet, Knott says, *I must shut my eyes, shrink within/To peep into this wall*. Peeping, intimate apparel—maybe it's too thin a connection, but the next image (in the dream) is of the dead mother on the delivery table giving birth (death?) to a dead baby while the obstetrics crew

cheers on. Nakedness accompanies birth: Was it a dream or did Knott witness something he felt he shouldn't have? And this is his punishment? Something surrounding the possibility of birth, but thwarted somehow? A stretch, no doubt, but Knott teaches us to read this way in this poem.

The doctors and nurses pat each other on the back the way an expert hangman in the Old West might size up a client. Hangman/hanger. Old West/range/prairie/desert. Knott's free associations don't move far from a tight circle.

In the end Knott tries to jump up and transform the hangers into something else. Notice he doesn't throw them clear of the closet, but throws them within the closet. He says: *I jump/Gropelessly to catch them to twist them clear,/Mis-shape them whole, sail them across the small air/Space of the closet. Gropelessly* echoes a possible *Hopelessly*, but it's less hopeless. I could really go for a stretch and try to make something of *Mis(s)-shape them*, but I won't.

The last words state a tentative conclusion: *I shall find room enough here/By excluding myself; by excluding myself, I grow*. Earlier we learned that the hangers expand their wingspans by excluding Knott, and in doing so they are *pure, transfigured heavenward*. So Knott clearly is stating that it is his intention (or it was then, though unlikely) to grow (he is gropeless not hopeless) and perhaps become pure and become transfigured heavenward, but he does it by excluding himself from somewhere. Note, *I shall do x* means *x will occur with the I as the agent regardless of whether the I wills it or not*—it's a sort of fatalistic admission or mere futurity, while *I will do x* means *the I intends to do x*. So saying *I shall find room enough here* means that the speaker believes it will happen regardless of his intention or will to do it. Obscure perhaps, but I think Knott uses words carefully. There will someday be room in this closet (metaphoric or not) for both him and those hangers, and someday perhaps he will be large enough to transform them so he may be transfigured.

We need to figure out what *exclude myself* can mean to feel total satisfaction in this poem, I think. Ok, from what can he exclude himself:

- The closet? Well, he says that he will find room enough in the closet by excluding himself, so I take it as more likely than not that he wants to find room for both him and the hangers in the closet.
- Responsibility for his mother's death? Possibly, if the hint that he feels responsibility is strong enough elsewhere in the poem.
- Memory? He can exclude himself from the closet by forgetting about part of it or what it means or the events and feeling the closet represents.
- Childhood? Knott almost sets up this equation himself: *by excluding myself, I'll grow*. That is, *what I mean by excluding myself is that I'll grow up*. This is similar to simply forgetting, at least until he grows up.

Another way to look at it is that Knott has already said that to expand, something has to be excluded, and the only thing that can be excluded from the closet is the 6-year-old Knott. Viewed during the events in the closet, Knott is too small to exclude the hangers, and viewed after, the event in the closet has already happened and the hangers *were* there, therefore they cannot be excluded, the death of his mother cannot be excluded—the only thing over which Knott has control enough to exclude is himself.

This is a real eye-opening poem for me, though I could not have really come to it before reading Kelly. Every word seems to point in one direction, contributing to the issues Knott wants us to focus on.

Ritsos: The Difficulties of Reading Poetry

Yannis Ritsos appears to be a poet who uses a collection of images to create his poetry machines. In many poems—and he has written *many* poems—he puts together what seem at first to be unrelated

HELEN'S HOUSE

The trees hide the view from the window.
Broad leaves, delicate, curled, elongated.
A white plate with fruit on the table.
The child's bicycle, the wooden pony
all confused with the cries of the cicadas.
What secret
sequence has raised up this insignificant scene
into that region of incorruptibility, barely held
above chaos by a green branch, as by the finger
of a handsome young god?

images, which can be appreciated on that level quite well, but as the poem goes on or perhaps on a second reading the images snap into some kind of relationship, though perhaps not a relationship as connected as, say, the clues of a mystery might come together to reveal a cleverly constructed set of circumstances. As it seems while reading Ritsos's short poems, these images or details form part of some related fabric, and so their grouping within a poem strikes the reader as not entirely coincidental, despite the

fact that the plain presentation of the details is pleasant enough by itself. **Helen's House**, reproduced just above from **Selected Poems: 1938–1988** (edited and translated by Kimon Friar and Kostas Myrsiades, BOA Editions Limited) is not only an example of this technique but serves as a lesson on how to read his work. Notice the series of images: trees, window, leaves, a plate, fruit, a table, a bicycle (and the child that goes with it), the toy pony, the cicadas and their chirps. What can these things have in common? Among other things, they are in this poem together which is united through the mind and perception of the poet. Another way to look at it is that the sequence forms a cinematic sequence of panning through a scene, setting a mood, embracing what is important to a particular observer on a particular day. However, I think that Ritsos might not be one of those who believes in contingent beauty but rather in the pre-17th century notion of objective beauty. That is, these items are not important merely because they seem so to an observer, but because of what they say through their own nature about some particular thing.

The second stanza tells us this by asking a question: somewhere there is a *secret sequence* that has taken the scene and made it timeless. The scene is held up by a *green branch*, that is, the finger of a god, perhaps the poet. But, the poet is as a god in this case, and therefore the scene is timeless because poets are the agents of that secret sequence.

What about the scene? The scene is pastoral, and, one thinks, ultimately Greek. There is a hidden view, hidden by the trees, and what we would see were the trees not there is a simple scene of a table with fruit and children's toys. The house is full of life, and all around the air is filled with the sound of life.

Or, the house is not full of life, perhaps it is filled with death—where is the child? why is no one eating the fruit?—and all around the air is filled with the sound of life, a sharp contrast. Ritsos is not, I believe, afraid of such ambiguity, and there really are not enough probabilities to settle the question either way.

PROBABILITIES

The caique all white, and behind it red boats.
He counted them, counted them again: six. He wondered
what meaning the number and the counting might have. In a while
both the number and the counting faded in the dusk,
along with the question. Well then, it's possible
that what we call "beauty" may exist; it may also be
the silent, inexplicable certainty of a postponed happiness.

As if on cue, the very next poem in the selection is entitled **Probabilities** and tells us more about how to read Ritsos's poetry. It is presented just to the left. The white boat seems improbable among so many red ones, the unlikely can exist. So it may be that objective beauty as I've called it can exist as well.

If beauty is mere contingency, then its existence is not assured in the same way as is the whiteness of a particular caïque. “Bigness” is merely an idea that someone small (in relation) might have. Ritsos returns often to the idea of postponement—that perhaps there is a better time for things

This poem is one of Ritsos’s optimistic poems (when in prison he was still fundamentally optimistic in his poetry but with just the edge of it taken off enough that it had a bitter quality to it). Happiness postponed is happiness intended to be savored perhaps in better circumstances, or it would be easy to view missed happiness as irrecoverable rather than postponed. And because there is optimism, that

happiness is assured just as is, probably, the objective quality of beauty.

1972

Nights with guns firing and walls. Afterwards, quiet.
Scrubbed floors. The chair legs, straight.
Behind the door, a second door and a third; between them
insulating cotton of the kind used to stuff the mouths
of the hungry or the dead. The heroes—he said—
have grown white, dear God, they’ve grown fat and small.

But, probabilities and possibilities are the glue binding together Ritsos’s images and details, so we must search for them.

Ritsos’s program is not trivial, and the poem at the left illustrates the difficulties.

This poem is not one of the better examples of seemingly unrelated images apparently piled up only to be connected later. It serves as an example of how there could not be enough information in a poem to get a clear meaning or drift. Let’s look at the components:

1. Nights, guns firing, and walls
2. Quiet, scrubbed floors
3. Straight chair legs
4. Door after door
5. Cotton in between, the kind that silences the hungry and the dead
6. Heroes have aged and are no longer heroes

The probabilities here are, I think, difficult. From 1, 2, and 3 we can infer that outside at night there is gunfire and accompanying confusion, and inside it is quiet, clean, and neat. From 4 and 5 we can infer that the concept of “inside” can be multiplied or perhaps is recursive, meaning that if our awareness of the horror outside is muffled by the walls and cotton-like ignorance, knowledge that we are hiding can be hidden, knowledge of knowledge of hiding can be hidden, etc. From 6 we can conclude that heroes can hide like this if the world permits it or if we hide deeply enough.

There is the question of who *he* is, and as makes sense in other Ritsos poems, we can start by assuming it’s the poet.

However, this reading, which I think fits all the probabilities, is not what Kimon Friar says:

After the quiet, both appalling and serene, that follows an execution by firing squad, the charwoman comes to scrub away the blood. Amid such devastation, where men and ideals go under, it would seem that even inanimate objects, drenched with blood, would also crumple and fall, but the legs of the chair remain firm and straight, a hint that there are men, like those who have been executed, who will remain upright and firm under every trial. There are endless obstacles to be overcome, one door that opens behind another to infinity, and between each of them the repressive insulating cotton used by all tyrants to prevent outcries either of the hungry or the dead. Then suddenly, we are reminded of the very antithesis that may happen amid such scenes of heroism and moral rectitude, for our heroes— either because of their own compromises, or as exploited by ourselves or our leaders, or because we have forgotten them— abruptly grow old. white-haired and pallid, grow fatter and lose their stature.

This reading is probable only if one knows the history of its writing, has spoken with the poet, or if you start off reading *walls* as being the backdrops of execution and the executions as being performed indoors (so that the floors are bloody enough to be scrubbed). There is no hint of a charwoman except through an unnecessary implication, and reading the *chair legs, straight* as hinting firmness and resolution seems no less likely than hinting at order. Doors representing obstacles rather than an invitation to hide one's self does not seem more probable and perhaps less so. Therefore, though Friar may know more about the circumstances of this poem and has perhaps talked about it with Ritsos, I think his reading is less probable than mine. (Note that each reading is equally supported by the title which is a year of an oppressive dictatorship in Greece.)

However, the two readings are in harmony though they may each be singing a slightly different melody when heard alone. The images of the poem are clearly related by a story, and so the hidden connection between them is clearly indicated. This, I think, highlights Ritsos's program of poemachinery where images and details can be taken on many levels, with as much or little analysis as you like, and if what's left is mystery or solution, well, you got it.

Zbigniew Herbert: Ironic Images

Revelation (from **Selected Poems**, translated by Czeslaw Milosz and Peter Dale Scott, Ecco Press) is about writing poetry—or at least about how the poetic moment is arrived at. The poem's story is

Revelation

Two perhaps three
times

I was sure
I would touch the essence
and would know

the web of my formula
made of allusions as in the Phaedo
had also the rigour
of Heisenberg's equation

I was sitting immobile
with watery eyes
I felt my backbone
fill with quiet certitude

earth stood still
heaven stood still
my immobility
was nearly perfect

the postman rang
I had to pour out the dirty water
prepare tea

Siva lifted his finger
the furniture of heaven and earth
started to spin again

I returned to my room
where is that perfect peace
the idea of a glass
was being spilled all over the table

I sat down immobile
with watery eyes filled
with emptiness
i.e. with desire

If it happens to me once more
I shall be moved neither by the postman's bell
nor by the shouting of angels

I shall sit
immobile
my eyes fixed
upon the heart of things

a dead star

a black drop of infinity

simply constructed: a description of the poet about to encounter the poetic moment, a distraction, and a resolution to never allow distractions again.

The poems in this selection are translated using no punctuation. In general each stanza is a sentence (if there are two sentences, they can be linked with a semicolon, the connection between clauses is that close). There is little backtracking required to parse sentences.

There is a thread of stillness that runs through the poem (*immobile, quiet, stood still, stood still, immobility, moved neither, immobile, eyes fixed*) and a thread of filling/unfilling (*fill, pour out, spilled, eyes filled with emptiness*).

The interruption is set indented—an interruption to the poem—and I presume the original was similarly typeset, but this is not a particularly interesting effect; possibly it puts a slight emphasis on the notion of interruptions.

A couple of places there are references to historical or mythical characters. I'm not sure to whom Phaedo refers (and my books at home don't help), but I seem to recall it was one of the books of Plato, perhaps that one with the cave, which would explain the connection to allusions. Heisenberg was a well-known physicist whose famous "equation" stated that it is not possible to know with exact accuracy both a particle's position and momentum (I believe). In fact, there are many results (in quantum mechanics and computability theory) that highlight situations where complete knowledge is impossible. Siva is the Hindu god (?) of reproduction and dissolution, the latter being the key here.

The idea of immobility is central to the poem: It is only when the poet is as still as a *dead star* or a *black drop of infinity* that it is possible to know more than can be known. Besides being nice poetic language, these two images are congruent with the knowledge background of the poem as given by the reference to Heisenberg: A dead star is perhaps a black hole which is a gravitational singularity (meaning gravity is infinite). Not only can nothing (including light) escape a black hole, but neither can information. In fact, contemporary physics holds that there is either little or no information within a black hole and perhaps there are no laws of physics or alternative laws are equally likely. It's

doubtful Herbert knew these things, but the fact that black holes pull in things without releasing them probably was known to him. It is this state of perfect immobility that makes a poet a poet.

The interruption is interesting in its own way. One wouldn't think that a postman could provide such an interruption, and a postman is someone who can be ignored. It's unlikely that making tea for the postman is required in any usual course of events, though it's not absolutely stated that the tea is for the postman. But, a postman delivers information, but of an ordinary sort. Therefore, the ideas of information being provided, sought, jumbled, dissolved are emphasized (in this regard, one could consider Siva the god of entropy).

As I move through this annotation, I'm less certain that the poem is about writing poetry, and rather, is simply about ideas and how to gain information. Notice that it is the idea of a glass that is spilling, not the glass itself, and if Phaedo is really the Plato dialog about the cave (and so-called Plato's heaven), then there is a connection between what happens in the ideas-only world of this heaven and the information-poor world of real physics. And, do ideas move in the world of ideas or is there only the idea of moving—the sought-for absolute stillness would imply that there is only the idea of movement, and that's why actual movement must be suspended to learn of that world. Emptiness being desire is yet another link between the world of concepts and a real—in this case human/animal—world.

The poem operates almost entirely at the level of images and metaphors—it is always clear that there is a discourse about ideas and traffic between the worlds of ideas and reality, but the language is not particularly abstract or is abstract only when setting up the metaphors.



Report from Paradise uses irony/humor to talk about/make fun of the Communist idea of a workers' paradise. One nice thing about the poem is that it can also be read as a fun look at how heaven might be organized because of a minor design flaw in the human-to-pneuma transformation system. It is perhaps difficult for the American mind to grasp even the theoretical advantages of a communistic society though the US embodies some

Report from Paradise

In paradise the work week is fixed at thirty hours
salaries are higher prices steadily go down
manual labour is not tiring (because of reduced gravity)
chopping wood is no harder than typing
the social system is stable and the rulers are wise
really in paradise one is better off than in whatever country

At first it was to have been different
luminous circles choirs and degrees of abstraction
but they were not able to separate exactly
the soul from the flesh so it would come here
with a drop of fat a thread of muscle
it was necessary to face the consequences
to mix a grain of the absolute with a grain of clay
one more departure from doctrine the last departure
only John foresaw it: you will be resurrected in the flesh

not many behold God
he is only for those of 100 per cent pneuma
the rest listen to communiqués about miracles and floods
some day God will be seen by all
when it will happen nobody knows

As it is now every Saturday at noon
sirens sweetly bellow
and from the factories go the heavenly proletarians
awkwardly under their arms they carry their wings like violins

aspects of it, and so this poem might be less surprising to American readers than to Polish. I can easily imagine a Pole laughing uncontrollably while listening to it.

There are lots of neat points about the poems ironical turns. The work week is thirty hours long, but appears to extend into Saturday and perhaps Sunday. This means there is work every day. One could also interpret this as a statement about the state's views on Jews because what kind of heaven would it be for Jews if they had to work on Saturday.

Perhaps it's an artifact of translation, but the second line contains the clearly noticeable phrase **higher prices**, which is contrary to the economic theory of communism. **Manual labour is not tiring** because there is **reduced gravity**, and of course we read this at

first as being because heaven doesn't want to put such a burden on its denizens, but after a few seconds we realize that there is really a gravity shortage, just as there were shortages of raw materials making for very short work days (at least in East Germany). Similarly, chopping wood is not hard because there isn't much of it, and it's not harder than typing on nonexistent paper. Similar sarcasm fairly oozes off a line like *really in paradise one of better off than in whatever country*.

The second stanza explains why heaven is this way, and it's here that we could choose to read it as a straight description of heaven. Thing didn't work out in practice quite the way the theory predicted because in most cases some degree of human flesh makes it to heaven whereas the theory stated only pneuma (spirit) would make it. Had theory panned out, there would have been *different luminous circles* and *degrees of abstraction*, meaning that there would have been distinctions, perhaps class and individual distinctions in heaven, but the unfortunate flaw prevented paradise from being precisely paradise. In the end Herbert notes that only John—in his description of the apocalypse—foresaw this horrendous outcome.

As I recall my reading of the theory behind communism, there was to be a temporary period during which the state would have rulers until people could learn to live in perfect classlessness (or could forget how to live within classfulness). Herbert mocks this with his remarks on who may see God and how those not yet ready experience His existence.

But paradise is revealed for what it is when we hear of *sirens sweetly bellowing* and *heavenly proletarians awkwardly* carrying their wings under their arms.

As I mentioned, one can read this a description of an alternative view of heaven, one situated between the imagined one and life on earth. In fact, one can read the poem as a bit of an ironic look at heaven.

Hass: Nature Imagery

When I think of Robert Hass's poetry, I think mainly of his use of nature to condense a mood, set the scene, capture a metaphor or image, or otherwise link ideas together, not quite the way Ritsos does, but in a way that would lead me to call him a nature poet or a poet whose sensibility is landscape, birds, plants, and animals. Of course, such a sweeping statement cannot be completely justified because there are many poems where hardly a hummingbird or mite flutters or flits.

The Pornographer

He has finished a day's work.
Placing his pencil in a marmalade jar
which is colored the soft grey
of a crumbling Chinese wall
in a Sierra meadow, he walks
from his shed into the afternoon
where orioles rise aflame from the orchard.
He likes the sun and he is tired
of the art he has spent on the brown starfish
anus of his heroine, the wet duck's-feather tufts
of armpit and thigh, tender and roseate enfoldings
of labia within labia, the pressure and darkness
and long sudden falls from slippery stone
in the minds of the men with anonymous tongues
in his book. When he relaxes, old images
return. He is probably in Central Asia.
Once again he is marched to the wall.
All the faces are impassive. Now
he is blinded. There is a long silence
in which he images clearly the endless sky
and the horizon, swift with cloud scuds.
Each time, in imagination, he attempts
to stand as calmly as possible
in what is sometimes morning warmth.
sometimes evening chill.

I've selected two poems to talk about, one from **Field Guide** (Yale University Press) and the other from **Praise** (Carcanet New Press). The first is **The Pornographer**, reproduced just to the left; it is one of a short series of poems in **Field Guide** concerning a pornographer. It's of interest to me because the use of nature imagery is slightly incongruous, the line breaks are in places a bit overstated (I think), and the scene where the pornographer imagines himself being executed is puzzling. I think this is not one of his better poems.

The poem starts out with a pretty regular rhythm, 3 or 4 (sometimes 5) stresses per line. If we didn't notice the title of the poem we would not know what kind of work the man does until we reached line 10, which is where the rhythm is extended to 5 stresses per line. There are a couple of puzzling details: why a marmalade jar (except for the pun-ish sound of it), why the Chinese wall, why is the wall (in the figure) in a Sierra meadow, and what about the orioles? The

Chinese wall is connected with the Central Asian wall toward the end of the poem, and the connection seems only to be in the speaker's mind, an association he has. Thus we see that the descriptions of natural things are descriptions that the speaker would make and therefore could reveal things about the speaker. *Marmalade* fits the line rhythmically, has the nice pun-ish nature (*mamma laid*), and hints at an old-fashioned nature. *Marmalade jar* also has a nice ring to it rhythmically and in terms of the various **a** sounds. The image of the orioles visually blends into the image of the sun and morphs later into the *roseate enfoldings*.

The line breaks *he is tired/of the art* and *spent on the brown starfish/anus of his heroine* seem sudden and jarring. Though we are nicely led away from the actual reading and are surprised each time, those surprises seem a little too clever or perhaps overdramatic.

The natural details and smooth rhythms contrast starkly with the harder rhythms and sounds in the lines *anus of his heroine, the wet duck's feather tufts/of armpit and thigh, tender and roseate enfoldings*. The phrase *wet duck's feather tufts* is almost impossible to say and the stresses in it are relieved briefly only on the second syllable of *feather*.

The tension in these lines is nearly turned 180° by the easy-listening dactyls of *labia within labia, the pressure and darkness/and long sudden falls from slippery stone/in the minds of the men with anonymous tongues....* This is followed by the hard sentence *When he relaxes, old images/return*.

Here the strange image emerges, which is explicitly placed in the mind of the speaker, of what seems to be an execution in China, against a wall. He is *blinded* (blindfolded?) by impassive executioners,

and imagines a peaceful view of the horizon with its clouds—sometimes at dawn. sometimes at dusk.

Everything in the poem is connected somehow (Dobyns' Lemma), and it might be that because the speaker feels he is wasting his talent on pornography, he believes he desires this fate, or possibly it is the fate that pornographers in China faced at some point. I really don't know, and the juxtaposition seems merely odd to me. The images we face are: working on art, a nature prelude, a varied staccato and fluid view of pornography, and finally the execution which is both chilling and beautifully drawn. Though the poem is nicely made, it does not compel me in any direction.



Meditation at Lagunitas is from **Praise**, Hass's second book of poetry. It is about the relation between words and things, and about the distinction between the concept behind a word and instances of that concept. The poem works by first speaking of generalities and then speaking of particular ex-

Meditation at Lagunitas

All the new thinking is about loss.
In this it resembles all the old thinking.
The idea, for example, that each particular erases
the luminous clarity of a general idea. That the clown-
faced woodpecker probing the dead sculpted trunk
of that black birch is, by his presence,
some tragic falling off from a first world
of undivided light. Or the other notion that,
because there is in this world no one thing
to which the bramble of *blackberry* corresponds,
a word is elegy to what it signifies.
We talked about it late last night and in the voice
of my friend, there was a thin wire of grief, a tone
almost querulous. After a while I understood that,
talking this way, everything dissolves: *justice*,
pine, *hair*, *woman*, *you* and *I*. There was a woman
I made love to and I remembered how, holding
her small shoulders in my hands sometimes,
I felt a violent wonder at her presence
like a thirst for salt, for my childhood river
with its island willows, silly music from the pleasure boat,
muddy places where we caught the little orange-silver fish
called *pumpkinseed*. It hardly had to do with her.
Longing, we say, because desire is full
of endless distances. I must have been the same to her.
But I remember so much, the way her hands dismantled bread,
the thing her father said that hurt her, what
she dreamed. There are moments when the body is as numinous
as words, days that are the good flesh continuing.
Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings,
saying *blackberry*, *blackberry*, *blackberry*.

amples. That is, the poem operates by moving within the context of the problem it discusses and so provides examples of the things it explains.

The argument Hass makes is that particulars don't diminish general ideas, and further the words that mediate between the two can be as wonderful as either. In fact, the words themselves can act in many ways to bring together the concrete and abstract and to provide wonder to life.

The way Hass puts together his argument is remarkable: He uses description (the woodpecker) and beautiful-sounding words (*blackberry*), he shows us that the sound of the voice that speaks words can affect what those words mean, he tells us a little story in which the particular is not small compared to the general idea, and he points at specific words that sound nice, mean nice, and construct meaning nice.

Hass also argues against the notion that using the argument that particulars diminish the abstract leads to losing both

abstract clarity and particular beauty. That is, the loss is in looking for loss where none need be.

Particulars can bring us closer to ourselves (and others) through associations triggered by those particulars. The story of the woman (never named) triggers remembrance of the word *pumpkinseed*, a sort of fish, though the word means something else (a pumpkin seed). Both abstract ideas (presented in words) and instances of them can equally vector us to new understanding, longing, and appreciation of our lives.

Sometimes words work by creating new metaphors (*in the voice of my friend, there was a thin wire of grief*), and sometimes words work through institutionalizing metaphors: *longing* because desire is like distance.

(As an aside, I believe that his argument is a little off in identifying too strongly the abstract with the word used to refer to it: The concept of blackberries is different from the word *blackberry* and each is different from any particular blackberry bush.)

The words and rhythms in the poem also work toward presenting the argument, from the surprisingly regular 5 stresses per line to the hard-stopped consonants of a line like *-faced woodpecker probing the dead sculpted trunk*, or to the sibilants in the line *with its island willows, silly music from the pleasure boat*.

This poem is, I think, a more effectively constructed poem than **The Pornographer** because each element points directly at the crux of the meditation, and very little is wasted on mood or details that distract or mislead. Even a simple statement like *But I remember so much...what she dreamed* is effective because how could the poet know what the (intentionally) unnamed woman dreamt except through words.

Nâzım Hikmet: The Whole Story

For me, while reading Hikmet, it is hard to separate interest in the poems from interest in the man—Hikmet’s poem tell the story of his life, at least starting at the point he was thrown in prison for 10 years in the late 1930’s. Many things about Hikmet are inherently uninteresting to me: I don’t know much about Turkey, overtly political poetry bores me, Communism and Marxism seem outdated and inhuman, laments strike me as self-indulgent. However, the book **Poems of Nazim Hikmet**

(translated by Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk, Persea Books) read like a page-turner detective story—and the way Hikmet puts each poem together is clear, compelling, and expertly done. It’s hard to figure how to take a translation, particularly when the lineation is as nonlinear looking as the poems in this collection, but even in translation the effect of the pauses caused by indentation are profound.

Hikmet’s life comes through in his poems starting with his 10-year prison stay. This life-story is not thrust in our faces but emerges when we realize why he must have written each poem. Though some might have little sympathy for Hikmet’s political views, we can have nothing but it for the way he lived his life in the context of those views.

In many poems, such as **Prague Dawn**, reproduced at the left, mood plays an important role, and the elements of the poem contribute to the mood of isolation and loneliness that accompanies exile. This mood is constructed through the scenes or images Hikmet builds: the contrast of light and dark (*In Prague it’s growing light/and snowing—/sleety,/leaden./In Prague the baroque slowly lights up:/uneasy, distant,/its gilt grief-blackened.; ...his coffee and milk,/the*

PRAGUE DAWN

In Prague it’s growing light
and snowing—
 sleety,
 leaden.
In Prague the baroque slowly lights up:
 uneasy, distant,
 its gilt grief-blackened.
The statues on Charles Bridge
look like birds descended from a dead star.

In Prague the first trolley has left the garage,
its windows glow yellow and warm.
But I know
 it’s ice-cold inside:
no passenger’s breath has warmed it.
In Prague Pepik drinks his coffee and milk,
the wood table spotless in the white kitchen.
In Prague it’s growing light
and snowing—
 sleety,
 leaden.

In Prague a cart—
 a one-horse wagon—
 passes the Old Jewish Cemetery.
The cart is full of longing for another city,
 I am the driver.
In Prague the baroque slowly lights up:
 uneasy, distant,
 its gilt grief-blackened.
In Prague’s Jewish Cemetery, death is breathless, stone-still.
Ah my rose, ah my rose,
exile is worse than death. . .

20 December 1956

wood table spotless in the white kitchen.), the contrast of warm and cold (*its windows glow yellow and warm./But I know/it’s ice cold inside:*), life and death (Hikmet the cart-driver in contrast to the Jewish Cemetery).

Hikmet builds the images together by a layering technique in which he uses repetition of words, phrases, lines, and stanzas to reinforce the images and accompanying moods, and he’s careful to weave together different images that reinforce each other so that an obscure image can be clarified by looking for the commonalities. For example, why does the cart pass an Old Jewish Cemetery rather than some other cemetery? When we look at all the contrasts up to that point, they are characterized as being including or excluding—we’d rather be in the light than in the dark and in the warm than in the cold. Jews in Prague are exiles, and dead Jews in Prague are permanently exiled or excluded. If we don’t get the connection right away, we will after reading the last line (*exile is worse than death. . .—* and death with exile is even worse).

The cart is another example: the cart seems inexplicable—at least there is the question of why, apparently, Hikmet is driving the cart; why is it a one-horse wagon; why a cart in a moderately modern city? The hints are in the other images: The cart is like the trolley which is empty and not apparently going anywhere—inviting but having successfully invited no one (yet). Because there is another such conveyance we know it is significant as an image and not merely a detail. The horse is that which propels the wagon—it is the heart (a common image in Hikmet), the cart is Hikmet's body or being (full of longing for his country), and the driver, Hikmet, is Hikmet's soul or essence. The trolley is empty and the cart is full of longing, hence emptiness. The longing can be read as *yellow and warm*, suggesting something attractive or at least familiar, but the longing is actually *ice-cold*.

As a simple-minded poet, it would be tempting to try to convey that the cart is the self, but how more intriguing, rewarding, and powerful is the choice to make the self the driver of the cart (note the trolley has no apparent driver).

One of Hikmet's favorite tricks (in the best sense of the word) is the use of repetition and linking through simple repetition. For example, when Hikmet tells us that the inside of the trolley is empty he says that *no passenger's breath has warmed it*. Later he tells us that *death is breathless, stone-still*. Thus we link the inside of the trolley with death (warm and inviting but ice-cold) and then with Hikmet's longing.

Hikmet sometimes repeats lengthy phrases, such as the lines:

*In Prague it's growing light
and snowing—
 sleety,
 leaden.*

To read Hikmet we must look at the poem over and over rather than linearly. That is, to understand the longing in the cart we must link *death is breathless* with *no passenger's breath has warmed it* and then the image of the trolley with that of the cart. When Hikmet repeats long segments such as the beginning lines in this poem, he is, in effect, inviting us to start reading the poem again—he is giving us the instructions that the poem is nonlinear and to not expect the poem to evolve from top to bottom, left to right. The developmental strategy is to weave threads in the poem and use Hikmet's ample signposts to do it.

I think it is not a coincidence that his lines are indented irregularly (but I cannot analyze them in translation) because such lineation implies nonlinear development, reinforcing the use of repetition to force us back into earlier parts of the poem.

There are three things left unexplained in the poem: the bird image, Pepik, and the rose. The rose is easy, referring most likely to Hikmet's heart, his love, his country, life, his son, or just something alive and worth talking to. The *statues on Charles Bridge* which look like *birds descended from a dead star* set up the importance of death (as viewed over against exile) and link to the *growing light*—we are already looking up as it were and so an image referring to a star like our sun which will one day die out (the subject of another Hikmet poem, I believe) is easy to latch onto. Pepik and his coffee and milk (the light and dark pair) and the spotless wood table (probably dark) and the white kitchen (light) reflect and reinforce the feelings of minimal existence in the place of exile. We doubt Pepik has any joy in his breakfast, though his surroundings are at least spotless and white, because the meal is unfulfilling (though I often have coffee and milk for breakfast and feel pretty happy about it).

Hikmet doesn't dazzles us with supersonic language, obscurity, or even complexity, and it is possible to read and enjoy his poems without ever seeing the depth of the developmental complexities he uses, but many of his poems nevertheless reveal careful construction which seem natural to him. But I find that much more often than not each poem is constructed in this way.

William Carlos Williams: The Art of Noise

William Carlos Williams writes poetry that strikes me as focussed on the sound and sense of close observation more than on what one might call less surfacey concerns. That is, Williams seems to want us to see what he has seen, including how that observation “went off” in his head, and to experience the cognitive experience in both the reconstruction of the observation and in the noise in which that reconstruction is couched. Even though most every technical sense of the definition is inapplicable, the impression I get from Williams’s work is that it is original American Haiku. This annotation takes several poems from **Pictures From Brueghal** (from **The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams**, edited by Christopher MacGowan, New Directions, New York, 1988) and remarks on them.

The Polar Bear

his coat resembles the snow
deep snow
the male snow
which attacks and kills

silently as it falls muffling
the world
to sleep that
the interrupted quiet return

to lie down with us
its arms
about our necks
murderously a little while

Many of Williams’s later poetry is unpunctuated and written in short lines—his variable foot or variations on it. I find such poetry requires the reader to sometimes ponder its parse, which directs us to look at the words, the sentence construction, the counterbeat of sentences on lines. Sometimes one can only gather possibilities as to meaning. For example, consider **The Polar Bear**, at left. Before I talk about its grammatical difficulties, let me mention how it uses sounds. The first line contains *s*’s and long *o*’s, to me a serene pair of sounds, quieting sounds. The next line

keeps those two, diminishing both, but adding hard *d*’s and *p*’s, and the long *e*. These hard sounds begin to hint at a harder side to the bear, which is finally discussed explicitly in the even harder line *which attacks and kills*.

The line *silently as it falls muffling* returns to the quiet sounds, speaking as it does about the quiet death the bear can wreak. The line *the interrupted quiet return* is *r*-heavy with other repeated sounds within in—the soft *u*, *t*’s, the softish *e/i*’s. The harsher sounds of *interrupted* and *return* surround the soft-then-hard sound of *quiet*, which implies the quiet then noisy deaths bears inflict.

The final line, *murderously a little while*, starts hard (*r* and *d*) and then settles out into final calm.

The interesting grammatical puzzle for readers to solve, though, is how to attach the clause *that the interrupted quiet return to lie down with us*. Normally we would want to attach that clause to something it restrictively qualifies, and a partial reading of the clause pushes this approach: *that the interrupted quiet return*—the likelihood of this interrupted reading is enhanced by the stanza break. In this, Williams seems to be misleading us, thereby slowing us down (as readers) and asking us to refocus on that which precedes. The first place to look for a home for the *that* clauses is as a parallel to the *which* clause:

the male snow { which attacks and kills silently as if falls muffling the world to sleep
that the interrupted quiet return to lie down with us

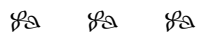
This clearly doesn’t work—at least we would need *return* to be *returns*. The next place to look is as a qualifier to *the world*, but this fails because, again, the verb *return* clearly has *the interrupted quiet* (plural) as its subject. We’re running out of options. The next, and I think successful, attempt is to take the *that* clause not as a qualifier but as a reason—a *so that* clause. Now it starts to make sense: *His coat resembles the snow, deep snow, the male snow which attacks and kills silently as it falls muffling the world (so) that the interrupted quiet (victims) return to lie down with us, its (the polar bear’s) arms about our necks, murderously, a little while*.



Williams's ability to draw a picture which contains a deeper image is remarkable and well-exemplified by the poem **Short Poem**, reproduced just below. Notice how the poem slowly reveals itself a line at a time—the first line shows us a commonplace bit of small violence, an act performed usually in the face of an insult or sudden dispute; the second line is a counter, we see some delicacy or tenderness and wonder why; the third line is the nonsequitur that makes us wonder; and the final line is the surprise of the physical scene. The interest in the poem comes from the number of syllables required for the performance and the fact that the meaning of a slap is so well-conceived and explained. That is, a slap is small violence between lovers and typically, I'd say, between a man and a woman. But a slap is not an indicator of indifference, nor is it an indicator of finality, but one of being peeved. So, given that a slap is an sign of emotional commitment, a gentle slap is a sign of deep love, something to smile about.

<p>Short Poem</p> <p>You slapped my face oh but so gently I smiled at the caress</p>
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The first line combines the harshness of *slapped* with its hard *p* and *d* sounds with the softer *s* in *face*, foreshadowing the paradoxical nature of slap revealed in the poem. The next line has two *o* sounds and the soft *g* of gentle (the *l* is soft too). *I smiled* rhymes, has the gentle *s* and *l*. The final line end with the very soft *-ess*. The sounds parallel the argument.



The sonnet, **Sonnet in Search of an Author**, is a kind of 180° turn. The form is different from classic sonnets because of the 3-5-4-2 stanza lengths, though the turn comes at a recognizable place (the 3rd stanza), and the last couplet wraps things up. The rhythmic structure follows the argument roughly, the first two stanzas have an average stresses per line of 3½ and the last two 4⅓—there might be more familiar ways of saying the same thing, but sometimes a simple statistic tells the story of the general feel better than listing line lengths. In this case, the first two stanzas seem quick while the last two seem slow with the first stanza seeming the quickest (fewest stresses per line) and stanza 3 the slowest. The average stresses per stanza for the 4 stanzas are 3⅓, 3.6, 4.5, and 4.

<p>Sonnet in Search of an Author</p> <p>Nude bodies like peeled logs sometimes give off a sweetest odor, man and woman</p> <p>under the trees in full excess matching the cushion of aromatic pine-drift fallen threaded with trailing woodbine a sonnet might be made of it</p> <p>Might be made of it! odor of excess odor of pine needles, odor of peeled logs. odor of no odor other than trailing woodbine that</p> <p>has no odor, odor of a nude woman sometimes, odor of a man.</p>

The turn comes at a recognizable place (the 3rd stanza), and the last couplet wraps things up. The rhythmic structure follows the argument roughly, the first two stanzas have an average stresses per line of 3½ and the last two 4⅓—there might be more familiar ways of saying the same thing, but sometimes a simple statistic tells the story of the general feel better than listing line lengths. In this case, the first two stanzas seem quick while the last two seem slow with the first stanza seeming the quickest (fewest stresses per line) and stanza 3 the slowest. The average stresses per stanza for the 4 stanzas are 3⅓, 3.6, 4.5, and 4.

The start of the sonnet is romantic enough: The scene is of two nude people (lovers, it seems) in an idyllic setting. Classic slant language indicates the action (*under the trees in full excess/matching the cushion of/aromatic pine-drift fallen*). The word *odor* strikes us as incidental in the first stanza.

The poem goes a little meta when it mentions *a sonnet might be made of it*, and we get the idea that perhaps the poet didn't realize until that point that the poem could be wrapped up in sonnet time. However, the turn at the start of the 3rd stanza begins with the shout *Might be made of it!* The poem proceeds to pound on the word *odor*. The word which was unnoticeable at the start is repeated 8 times in 6 lines, an extent that brings to mind *stink*. The sonnet, in the end, questions whether sonnets are necessarily high romance and whether the excesses of word choice in the context of sonnets can really be overlooked—that is, *odor* was snuck into the first stanza and we accepted it without question. The sonnet becomes the question we forgot to ask.

Williams is not known for sonnets (in fact I cannot think of another, but this isn't a reliable source), and so the title, **Sonnet in Search of an Author**, indicates that perhaps the overformulaic structure of the sonnet is not something he is comfortable with, or perhaps it indicates that the sonnet might not make the transition to modern times. Williams, though, makes it work pretty well while obeying what I take as the sonnet's primary structural requirement of a turn near line 9.