

Annotations

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Use of Repetition in Some Shakespeare Sonnets

While reading some Shakespeare sonnets I was struck by the use of repetition, both of sounds and of words. Repetition is a musical device but can be used for other purposes:

- to link related parts of a poem
- to reinforce similarity or dissimilarity
- to define a coherent whole
- to create a mood through sound
- to obscure meaning

Let's see which of these Shakespeare is using. Here are the two sonnets I've chosen—the numerically named sonnets 30 and 129. Sonnet 30:

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh with the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste:
Then can I drown an eye, unused to flow.
For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,
And weep afresh love's long since canceled woe,
And moan the expense of many a vanished sight:
Then can I grieve at grievances forgone.
And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er
The sad account of fore-bemoanéd moan,
Which I now pay as if not paid before.
But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
All losses are restored and sorrows end.

Sonnet 129:

Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action, and till action, lust
Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;
Enjoyed no sooner but despiséd straight:
Past reason hunted; and no sooner had,
Past reason hated, as a swallowed bait,
On purpose laid to make the taker mad:
Mad in pursuit, and in possession so;
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe;
Before, a joy-proposed; behind, a dream.
All this the world well knows; yet none knows well
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

Sonnet 30 relies more than Sonnet 129 on the repetition of sounds.

When to the sessions of sw[̄]eet silent thought [s]
I summon up remembrance of things past, [s]
I sigh with the lack of many a thing I sought, [s]
And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste: [w,s,ō]
Then can I drown an eye, unused to flow. [ō,ow,s]
For precious friends hid in death's dateless night, [s,dt]
And weep afresh love's long since canceled woe, [s,l,ō,o]
And moan the expense of many a vanished sight: [o,s]
Then can I grieve at grievances forgone. [s,o]
And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er [l,o]
The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan, [o,ō]
Which I now pay as if not paid before. [o,a]
But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
All losses are restored and sorrows end.

Let's look at each line and see what the repetitions accomplish.

When to the sessions of sw[̄]eet silent thought [s]

The repeated **s** (ess sound and “s” visual) establishes a background sound that is repeated for the first 8 lines of the poem—that part of a sonnet that establishes the argument. In this first line the word *thought* has no s's, adding emphasis to the already stressed last word of the line.

I summon up remembrance of things past, [s]

The ess sound creates a soft windlike feel to the poem, calm and reflective.

Against the background **s**'s the doubled **m**'s are a thoughtful sound: hmmmm.

I sigh with the lack of many a thing I sought, [s]

Sigh and *sought*, having the only s's, are thereby linked, perhaps indicating that what is sought is sorrowfully sought. The phrase *lack of many a thing* stands out as the center of the line and also as a phrase with little or no strong repeated sounds within it.

And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste: [w,s,ō]

This line introduces two new sounds, **w** and **o**, while keeping the **s** thread going. The **o** and **w** combine to embolden the phrase *old woes new wail* and sets up the **o** sound for later repetition as well as the repetition of *woe*. The rare-in-this-line s's in *time's waste* add some weight to that phrase, as does the spondee of *time's waste*.

Then can I drown an eye, unused to flow. [ō,ow,s]

The **o** in the previous line set up the **o** sound here. The strongest **o** sound in the previous line is in *woe* which is now linked to *flow* and, weakly, to *drown*. That is, *woe* leads to the *drowning flow* of tears.

For precious friends hid in death's dateless night, [s,dt]

The **s**'s appear again, added to the **dt** sound, a harsh sound that places the friends pretty permanently within death. The **th** sound is not properly a **t** sound, but visually is a **t** and the the cab be pronounced harshly in the **dt** realm.

And weep afresh love's long since canceled woe, [s,l,o,ō]

Though the s's continue, the most interesting sound in this line is ō in the repeated *woe*. Of interest for its sound repetition and nearly sprung rhythm is *love's long since canceled*.

And moan the expense of many a vanished sight: [ō,s]

The interest here is the repeated ō which echoes *flow* and *woe*.

Then can I grieve at grievances forgone. [s,o]

This starts the turn of the sonnet. *Forgone* repeats the sounds of *long* 2 lines up. The s persists. More important is the beginning of repeated words—*grieve* (*grievance*). The repetition of *grieve* foreshadows and alters *forgone*: by repeating *grieve*, *grieve* has gone before (*foregone*) its other instance. Moreover, this highlights the difference between *fore* and *for* and invites us to read *forgone* as *because gone*.

And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er [l,ō]

The s has disappeared, but we get the repeated word *woe* and the triply repeated ō. The ō in *o'er* rhymes *woe* and *flow* and makes for *o'erflow*. The l sounds weave back through lines 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7. There is a repetition of sense too: *from woe to woe tell* already implies that the telling is over and over, and so *o'er* is itself a repetition.

The sad account of fore-bemoanéd moan, [o,ō]

The s repeats, but accidentally, I think. The real story is the ō which repeats within the line and repeats sounds from earlier lines and the feeling of heaviness and sadness. Besides the moaning and moaning implied by *fore-bemoanéd moan*, there is interest in the construct *fore-bemoanéd* which untwists to *before-moanéd*.

Which I now pay as if not paid before. [o,ā]

Pay and *paid* is what you do and did by *moaning* and having *moaned* for the *woe* and *woe* told *o'er* and *o'er*.

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

The repetitions, I think, are a setup for these two lines. Looking carefully, all the sounds we noted are repeated and also the significant word *friend* is repeated from earlier lines. Though there are sound repetitions from earlier lines and even within these last two lines (**the s's in the last line in particular**), the sense of repetitive sound is missing. The word repetitions in lines 9–12 serve to set up the over and over type of binary repeats. When the last lines come with their relatively even sounds, they stand out. This is reinforced by the short words, the plain words and sounds, the pure iambic of line 13, and the galloping rhythm of the last line, which is a fairly pure iambic.

[Heather notes this regarding the emboldened parenthetical remark: This can't be swept aside. I think your thesis holds fire for the penultimate line—though *think* and *thee* are significantly related. But in the last line *restored* and *sorrows* are powerful echoes and those s's undismisable. It might be seen rather as a return to repetition...only now the repeated effect is of restoration and redemption (losses restored, sorrows end).]

♪ ♪ ♪

Sonnet 129 not only uses repetition in a more sophisticated way but is the more interesting poem. We won't analyze the repetitions line by line as we did with Sonnet 30, not only because that can be boring but because the repetitions are not strictly line oriented.

Th' expense of spirit in a wage of shame
 Is lust in action, and till action lust
 Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame,
 Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;
 Enjoyed no sooner but despiséd straight:
 Past reason hunted; and no sooner had,
 Past reason hated, as a swallowed bait
 On purpose laid to make the taker mad;
Mad in pursuit, and in possession so;
Had having, and in quest to have, extreme;
 A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe;
 Before a joy-proposed; behind, a dream.
All this the world well knows; yet (none) knows well
 To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell

The boxes are repeated words where I've included repetition of sense or opposite senses as repeated words. The rounded boxes indicate internal rhymes which are another sort of repetition—where the rhymes are far away (geometrically) I put lines between them. Some of the word pairs set up points of comparison—before and during lustful action, what is experienced as bliss (*a bliss in proof*) is later woe, what the world well knows but no one knows well. Other pairs lead the argument on past line boundaries—*enjoyed no sooner...no sooner had, past reason hunted...past reason hated*. One sets up a progression from the point after which lust is experienced in action back to the quest for it. Finally, others set up contrasts—*enjoyed/despiséd, before/behind, all/none*.

All of this, it seems to me, leads up to the comparison, contrast, or spectrum represented by the pair *heaven/hell*. The question is which of these is it: the comparison, the contrast, or the spectrum? And, are there equal measures of heaven and hell in lust—perhaps in its experience?

The extreme use of complex repetition highlights the lines without it: *Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame/.../Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame,/Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust*. All are either short harsh words or simply harsh words.

Waste and *expense* hold a compare/contrast relation.

The use of repetition serves another purpose here, I think, which is to obscure the argument or at least the topic of the argument in high language: lust and its effects before, during, and after action aimed at satisfying it. Perhaps the very topic or its relationship to heaven and hell—or by linkage through lust, the linkage of heaven to hell—is too much for the commonplace reader. The topic is obscured for safety, and the poem uses its complex repetitions and internal rhymes (I've not marked them all) to create a poem completely pleasing to the ear alone even before the mind's involvement.

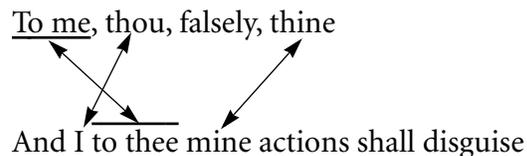
John Donne and Obscurity

In reading Donne I noticed a couple of things about his diction. One was that there is a high proportion of single syllable words, which is surprising given how hard it is to get the literal sense of so many passages. The other is that the syntax is often tortured in what could be characterized as cataphoric elision. I've been trying to figure out whether this is a stylistic choice for the purpose of moving the poetic "argument" forward or whether it is a means to get the rhyme/rhythm scheme to work.

Here is one of the choicest examples of cataphoric elision, from **A Lecture Upon the Shadow**:

If our loves faint, and westwardly decline;
 To me, thou, falsely, thine,
And I to thee mine actions shall disguise.

Read alone, the phrase "to me, thou, falsely, thine" simply makes no sense at all, and it's not because it is a fragment: Almost any contiguous fragment of the previous clause, "If our loves faint, and westwardly decline," can be understood as part of a coherent sentence. To decode the phrase in question we need to read the next line, which forms a pattern we can use.



We can now make substitutions—of the words from the obscure phrase into the pattern provided to decode it. We then get this expanded pair of lines:

Thou to me thine actions shall falsely disguise,
And I to thee mine actions shall disguise.

There are two effects of using this type of construction. One is to merely make the sense obscure, perhaps for the purpose of hiding the literal meaning of the poem. Another is to pull the reader forward to find out what could possibly be meant by the obscure passage. [Heather says: "Paradoxically, in *hiding* he reiterates his meaning: It is another disguise. This is, for wit, an important duplicity."]

The first theory could make sense because much of Donne's early poetry is concerned with sex, adultery, and, shall we say, adult situations. Perhaps Donne thought that these topics were a little too much for potential readers of the time and sought to hide the sense while revealing the poetry—more on this later.

The other theory probably is attributing too much deliberation to something that was intuitive to Donne. Lines like "To me, thou, falsely, thine" serve to shorten the argument and emphasizes the compressed nature of argument in poetry.

Though this particular poem is less obscure than many I read, it contains most of the devices Donne uses.

A Lecture Upon the Shadow

Stand still, and I will read to thee
A Lecture, love, in Loves philosophy.
 These three houres that we have spent,
 Walking here, Two shadowes went
Along with us, which we our selves produc'd;
But, now the Sunne is just above our head,
 We doe those shadowes tread;
 And to brave clearnesse all things are reduced.
So whilst our infant loves did grow,
Disguises did, and shadowes, flow,
From us, and our cares; but, now, 'tis not so.

That love hath not attain'd the high'st degree,
Which is still diligent lest others see.

Except our loves at this noone stay,
We shall new shadowes make the other way.
 As the first were made to blinde
 Others; these which come behinde
Will worke upon our selves, and blinde our eyes.
If our loves faint, and westwardly decline;
 To me, thou, falsely, thine,
 And I to thee mine actions shall disguise.
The morning shadowes weare away,
But these grow longer all the day,
But oh, loves day is short, if love decay.

Love is a growing, or full constant light;
And his first minute, after noone, is night.

One of the first things I noticed about Donne, though it isn't as clear here as elsewhere, is the use of punctuation more as a device to create pauses than to help elicit sense. The first comma is not necessary:

 These three houres that we have spent,
 Walking here, Two shadowes went

[Heather says: "Grammatical conventions regarding punctuation changed dramatically, and not so long ago." I respond: I've extensively read English prose back to the 17th century and cannot recall the use of a comma in this situation in anything published.] The following syntax, including punctuation, is obscure but understandable:

But, now the Sunne is just above our head,
 We doe those shadowes tread;

[Heather says: "Here (meaning between **now** and **the Sunne** above) the word 'that' is to be assumed *because of* the presence of commas."]

The following could be opaque to some, punctuation contributing:

So whilst our infant loves did grow,
Disguises did, and shadowes, flow,
From us, and our cares; but, now, 'tis not so.

I say “punctuation contributing;” but actually the punctuation is a signal that some words or phrases are left out or in an odd order that could clarify the meaning. The fair copy for this sentence might be something like this:

So whilst our infant loves did grow, disguises and shadowes flowed from us and from our cares; but now 'tis not so.

This punctuation is confusing because the comma leads us to expect less than a semi-colon stop:

If our loves faint, and westwardly decline;

The stop needs to be take as synonymous with “then” as in:

If our loves faint and westwardly decline, then
Thou to me thine actions shall falsely disguise,
And I to thee mine actions shall disguise.

Finally,

Love is a growing, or full constant light;

which is

Love is a growing or fully constant light;

The structure of the argument of the poem is reflected in the structure of these grammatical and punctuational oddities (though I cannot reliably testify that they are oddities in the historical period in which they were written). The structure of the argument is to compare the kinds of shadows people produce when they are starting a perhaps illicit romance with the kinds they produce when that affair does not grow. Before, the shadows are used to hide the truth of the situation from others (hence, the potentially illicit nature of it), while later, when it has not amounted to anything, the shadows are to hide feelings or reality from the partner.

The nature of the obscure syntax and punctuation is to lead the reader to decode or decipher phrases by comparison to others nearby or with similar apparent structure. We performed one of the particularly hard decodings at the outset.

Donne uses this device frequently, as in the first two lines of *Elegie V*, **His Picture**:

Here take my picture; though I bid farewell,
Thine, in my heart, where my soule dwels, shall dwell.

The fair copy would seem to be this:

Here, take my picture; though I bid farewell,
Thine soul (*or picture*) shall dwell in my heart, where my soule also dwels.

⌘ ⌘ ⌘

The use of obscure syntax and grammar, odd punctuation serves another, more pedestrian function than simply providing the structure of an argument or making the reader slow down and think (or provide a hurdle to prevent readers from understanding who are not prepared to receive the message). And that is that the contorted syntax and use of pause-creating punctuation makes the rhythm and rhyme schemes easier to implement. The constraint of English syntax, word order, and grammar is sometimes too much to make for relaxed rhymes, but in Donne's world of language, this isn't a problem.

And, partly, the contorted syntax is balanced by the simplicity of word choice—so many single-syllable words.



Despite the difficulty of getting the literal meaning of a lot of the poems (consider what this passage could literally mean (from **The Primrose**):

Live, Primrose then, and thrive
With thy true number five;
And women, whom this flower doth represent,
With this mysterious number be content;
Ten is the farthest number; if halfe ten
Belonge unto each woman, then
Each woman may take halfe us men;
Or if this will not serve their turne, Since all
Numbers are odde, or even, and they fall
First into this, five, women may take us all.

given that there is little other evidence that men rated women on a scale of 1–10 in the 16th century) there is little difficulty getting the poetry of it—nearly every poem I've read leaves me with something besides confusion.

[Heather says: “Interesting side-note: It's *pentameter*! And to Donne 'numbers' also meant verse (via metrics). (All numbers are off and women foll into this!).]

Frederick Seidel and Repetition

Seidel is fond of repetition in many forms: rhyme, syllable sounds, words, phrases, and meaning. (I happen to think he is fond of obscurity as well, but that's another topic.) Seidel's repetition is not limited to within a single poem or even within the same collection. For example, in **The Trip** from **Sunrise**, his second collection I believe, he writes:

How different it was to look up and see
The train you rode on curving away from you
On a long bend—like your child body, part
Of you, apart from you.

And in **The Hour** in **My Tokyo**, his fourth collection, he writes:

The engine pulling them around the bend
Exposes irresistibly the train
They're on extending from them through the rain
And then it's night. And it will never end.

The image is similar: an observer watches a train going around a bend. In the first example the train curving away is the past, remote yet connected. In the second example the train might be the past or the future—extending from them implies the future—but the key part of the image is that the train that the subjects are on extends from them through rain and night into obscurity—perhaps the train of their lives toward night—this is a future, too.

A pretty good example of the use of repetition within a poem is **Erato**, from **Sunrise**.

Erato

Suddenly the pace
Quickens, chill air dusts the air.
The leaves shrink
to a fawn color, held by their tails like mice,
the color of twine.

The fifty o'clock moon
Laid its cheek against the window,
Lay like snow on the carpet.
Outside the window,
Harlem in moonlight.

You walked outside.
Everyone knows
About the would-be suicide: you walk—
A step, a heartbeat—
Heartbeats. Sobsob, in the noon park,

The nannies were white,
Seated like napkins on the benches,
Starched and folded to sit up.
The babies did not choose the carriages,
Limousine coffers, blackly London;

They did not choose the rayless Tartar sun,
Sterile as the infected
Industrial steppes of Calvin—of
Bayonne. The reservoir banks were a purple socket
Like a black tulip.

Anything would do now
That inspired you
Below the Ninth Sphere, below the fixed stars
With fall, the electric cattle prod,
The cold juice that shocked you from your sleep

Lovelorn: slight,
Frizzy, sweating animal with feelings.
For fall, dawn rises in combers
Above the radiator shield's metal caning,
The sill flows like a pennant.

You smell the back-to-school,
Steam and rain on wool,
The tears not learning
And learning to write
With the sharp new chalk

Jacobean black and white,
The fantastic wrong and right, now dissolving
In Jamesian gray. You want to be a child—
You want to find the way
To either more or less than you are.

If you could choose.
Everywhere changes or fades.
Her hair streams like a willow's
As it leans to the river
When she leans toward you

Her anodyne, her healing face,
Eurasian, gypsy ease
(You have your memories),
Lovely lost love;
Erato's dark hair.

Some of the repetitions signal motifs, like color (*color*), dichotomy (*white/black*), and emphasis (*laid/lay, learning, lean*). In other cases it is used to draw attention to a fact or to other images: **chill air dusts the air**. The change from summer to fall is easily unnoticed in a poem unless it is referred to in a stunning way, such as air dusting air, giving the sense that the new fall air is a soiling rather than a cleansing (**dusts**); leaves shrinking not in size but in color, as if green were larger than fawn—and size is color, what is color? The fifty o'clock moon—a tired moon out of normal time—looks in the window and lies as (death) white color on the carpet. White and black, life and death, summer and fall, childhood and adulthood.

Of particular interest is the repetition **a heartbeat—/Heartbeats. Sobsob**, which points out the repetition (*heartbeat/heartbeats*) as if you missed it and allows Seidel to sell the possibly overly emotional **sobsob**, which overemotionalism is part of adolescence (**You want to be a child—/You want to find the way/To either more or less than you are.**).

Another interest point is the *rayless Tartar sun, / Sterile as the infected / Industrial steppes of Calvin—of Bayonne*. Rayless sun is an impossibility or oxymoron, sterile as infected ground an impossibility—or possible through extremity. The industrial is sterile—how can it be infected?—and the steppes are a region, not a factory.

The point of the poem centers around color: black and white and colors between. Summer for an adolescent is a time for love, lovesickness, trying to either go forward (to more) or backward (to less). It is hard to learn that there is a gray or that it's possible to live in a state between joy and despair.

The next to last stanza begins a dramatic lessening of the use of repetition with only some echoes. The dichotomies lessen—*Everywhere changes or fades*—as the mind learns while the heart does not or does at a lesser pace.

The leaning and leaning is the next to last repetition, but leaning is neither fully upright nor horizontal, it is the continuous continuing state of in-between. The near sound repetition in *Eurasian, gypsy...*, leads me to expect *eyes* not *ease*, and so *ease* is a word and image to reckon with—the ease of the sought after rather than the life-and-death electric shock of male adolescence.

We can buy *Lovely lost love*, which in a lesser poem might not make it, because its excesses are counterbalanced by its place in a scheme of revealing repetitions. The difference between the meaning of lovely and love-like begins to dawn on us.

Erato's dark hair. The dichotomy of Yes/no is not over—Erato's hair is dark, not something between white and black, something hinted at by *Everywhere changes or fades* just above. Erato is the muse of lyric, tender, and amorous poetry, but it isn't at all clear that Erato is not also a particular girl or woman for the speaker, and I can take from her name the echoed near repetition of Errata—mistakes.

Frederick Seidel and Obscurity

The Last Poem in the Book in These Days:

The Last Poem in the Book

I don't believe in anything, I do
Believe in you, vanished particles of vapor,
Fields of force,
Undressed, undimmed Invisible,
Losing muons and gaining other ones,
Counterrotations with your
Robed arms raised out straight to each side
In a dervish dance of eyes closed ecstasy,
Tireless, inhuman,
Wireless technology
Of a ghost,
Of a spinning top on its point,
Of a tornado perspiring forward a few miles an hour
Uprooting everything and smelling sweetly like a lawn.
It's that time of year.
It's that time of year a thousand times a day. A thousand times
a day.
A thousand times a day,
You are reborn flying to outski
The first avalanche each spring,
And buried alive.
I went to sleep last night so I could see you.
I went to see the world destroyed. It was a movie.
I went to sleep that night so I could see you.
And then a drink and then to sleep.
That's Vermont.
The universe hung like a flare for a while and went out,
Leaving nothing, long ago.
Each galaxy at war exhaled
A firefly glow, a tiny quiet, far away...
On and off...worlds off and on—and then
The universe itself brightened, stared and went out.
I cannot see.
I will not wake though it's a dream.
I move my head from side to side.
I cannot move.
The nights are cold, the sun is hot,
The air is alcohol at that altitude
Three thousand miles from here—is here
Today a thousand times.
You haven't changed.
There is a room in the Acropolis Museum.
The korai smile silence.
The way a virus sheds. The way
A weave of wind-shear
And the willingness to share is the perfect friend
Every child invents for his very own. I don't know.
The Parthenon suddenly made me cry.
I saw it and I sobbed.
And it doesn't share.
I was so out of it
You came too close. I got too near
The temple, flying low. I got too near
The power, past the ropes. I touched the restoration work.
It could mean a loss of consciousness
In the right-hand seat to be with God.
The Early Warning Ground Proximity Indicator is flashing.
Never mind. I knew it was.
The alarm ah-ooga ah-ooga and the computer-generated
Voice says
And say and says Pull Up Pull Up Pull Up Pull Up.

You say come closer.
You say come closer.
I cannot move.
You say I have to whisper this. Come closer.
I want to hear.
There also is the way a virus sheds.
I want to see. And the ground whispers
Closer. In the Littré the other day and you were there
In the Petit Robert. Grévisse—Larousse—
Ten million years from now, will there be anything?
The rain came down convulsively on the dry land,
As if it would have liked to come down even harder,
Big, kind, body temperature
Shuddering, and on the far bank of the newborn river,
The joyous drumming of the native drums,
Making a tremendous sound twelve feet beneath the snow
Without an avalanche beeper in those days. It's true—
I don't believe in anything I do
Believe in, but I do believe in you
Moving your face side to side to make a space to breathe.
I think I am crying on all my legs
From a dark place to a dark place like a roach.
I am running on the ground with my wings folded—
But now I am extending them,
Running across my kitchen floor and
Running down the Rue Barbet-de-Jouy,
Trying historically before it's too late to get into the air.
I have on my ten Huntsman suits,
And many shining shoes made to my last,
I believe in one Lobb.
Faites sur mesure. Everything
Fits my body perfectly now that I'm about to disappear.
I don't believe in anything.
Lightning touches intimately the sable starless. Thunder.
You start to breathe too much.
It starts to rain, in your intoxication.
Communism and capitalism go up in flames
And come back down as rain—I'm coming now—
But Greece stays parched.
I'm coming now.
I'm being thrown violently at the sky,
The deck of the carrier shrinking to a dot,
Thirty-some years ago
Suddenly catching sight of Chartres Cathedral miles away;
Horizon to horizon, a molten ocean
The beautiful urine color of vermeil,
Color and undercolor as with a fur;
Soaring stock-still above the windblown waves of wheat,
Dialing on the seemingly inexhaustible power.
Break it.
I swim over to the sealed
Aquarium window of the TV screen to try.
President of the United States descending the stairs
Of his helicopter pixels snap a salute at the American flag
Pixels. I turn the sound off
And the Marine band explodes.
I'm coming now.
I can't breathe.
I'm coming now to the conclusion that
Without a God. I'm coming now to the conclusion.

Some of Seidel's poetry reminds me of music videos where only a sense of the meaning comes through and some of the literal meaning is missing.

I've read this poem about a dozen or so times and still can't quite get it. Let's see how far I got. First, the poem appears in a very slightly different form in **My Tokyo** (in the newer version, *korai* is capitalized and *wind-shear* is no longer hyphenated) under the new title **The Death of Meta Burden in an Avalanche**. This title change provides a hint: the Meta Burden is the burden of dealing with the meta or with what describes what is or carries the means of interpreting what is. One could say that God carries the largest meta-burden.

Two images in this poem are repeated in other poems. The first is the image of the avalanche, in **Stanzas** (also in **These Days**):

Stanzas

I don't want to remember the Holocaust.
I'm *thick* of remembering the Holocaust.
To the best of my ability, I wasn't there anyway.
And then I woke.

My hands were showing me how to wash themselves.
They're clean. The heart is too. The hands are too.
They flush in unison like a row of urinals
Every few hours automatically. Two minutes Cockfoster's.
My heart was pure. And stood on a subway platform in London
Staring at the sign. One minute Cockfoster's.

I wasn't there anyway.
I don't believe in anything.
I was somewhere else
Screaming beneath an avalanche.

Skiers wearing miners' headlamps were not
Skiing down the mountain in the dark,
It would be beautiful. Seeds of light floating slowly on the dark
Downward without a prayer
Of finding any elephants to save because
The International Red Cross and the Roman Catholic Church
had not.

I cannot move.
I move my face from side to side
To make a space to breathe. I cannot breathe.
The screaming stops.

The other is the image of Chartres in **Chartres in My Tokyo**:

Chartres

The takeoff of the Concorde in a cathedral.
Ninety seconds into it they cut
The afterburners and the deathly silence
Was like a large breast as we banked steeply left.

Let's refer to the speaker as the poet. The poet doesn't believe in anything, except in some *Invisible* who is made up of vapors, fields of force that sheds and acquires subatomic particles. Seidel is interested in the origins of the universe—the Big Bang—as shown in **The Complete Works of Anton Webern** (in **My Tokyo**). This *Invisible* is clothed in robes and spins like a dervish. Whoever or whatever the *Invisible* is, it is not really there: It is *tireless* and *wireless*—initial rhymes in a couplet made to draw attention. The poet is concerned

with technology and physics. If the skier only had a beeper, he would be found. As it is, the searchers can really only drum on the snow, **making a tremendous sound**.

It's the time of year of tornadoes—Easter?—when the skier is continuously reborn to suffer the death beneath the avalanche. The poet sleeps to see the Invisible, to see the apocalypse perhaps as universe wink in and out then out.

To live for a few minutes beneath the snow the poet shakes his head “no”. The altitude of the accident is so high it's like an intoxicant, or the poet is in an airplane.

The poet recalls a visit to Greece and the Acropolis Museum which made him cry, and made him get too close to the Invisible or too close to the ground or the truth. That's what the poet risks by flying with God—the **loss of consciousness**.

By getting too close, a virus is transmitted from one person to another, and so by getting too close to the Invisible, the same can happen—a virus of knowing or remembering (from **Stanzas**). The poet has gotten some of the virus (**Big, kind body temperature/Shudders...**).

The poet does **not believe in anything** he does **believe in**, which can indicate that he does not believe in the real world, because the real world, perhaps, does not need believing in (as the Invisible does).

The poet is a cockroach (**Cockfoster's?**) trying to fly. Everything is decaying now that the poet is about to disappear (die?).

The poet is accelerating upwards (in a Concorde?) or from the deck of an aircraft carrier, where he sees Chartres—the marriage of 10th century technology and catholicism.

Soaring...Dialing on the seemingly inexhaustible power/Break it. Give up on technology.

What we see on TV—the pixels—doesn't actually exist. Buried under the snow—the snow on TV?—he must die, but he is coming. He is coming to the conclusion that unless there is a God, death is the conclusion.

I think a poet sometimes has to rely on a set of private images to muster the courage to say simple things, such as, it makes more sense to believe in God than in technology and science. The avalanche, turning the head side-to-side to make an air pocket to breathe, to soar over Chartres or to be in Chartres as it is soared over. These two books are four years apart yet Seidel is still working on those images and refining the message.

When a poet uses such private images, they amount to obscurity. **It's that time of year./It's that time of year a thousand times a day. A thousand times/a day./A thousand times a day,....** What time of year is it? Who really knows except that it is a time of year that the poet thinks occurs a thousand times a day, and if we're not sure it's important to him, he repeats it (thousand) 5 times in the poem. If we don't think **wireless** is important, he rhymes it with **tireless**.

Once we've seen these images several times in a poem or repeated in poems written over a long period of time, they are keys to reminding us of those other poems or of the images, feelings, or thoughts we've had while reading those poems.

How does one understand a reference like *Lobb*? Taking the hint of reference to the miner's headlamps, I lean toward thinking *lobb* means the vein of ore that is shaped like steps, and it's capitalized because of the phrase it's in: *I believe in one Lobb*, hinting at "I believe in the one true and catholic church." But, it's obscure at best.

I don't quite understand how obscurity works, but I can see it does. Seidel wants us to get this obscure poem—why else would he repeat it in two different volumes slightly differently with different titles (one more revealing than the other)?

To me one of the key ideas behind poetry is to be able to influence—some would say "dictate"—how readers read. Prose, on the other hand, can get away with merely stating (and, of course, there are places between). For prose, the ideas or the story is what matters. Poetry doesn't have that luxury. A poet desires to tell a big story or a big idea, and that big idea is maybe as big as all history or every story, and there just isn't time. A poem is like an abstraction in computer software. Here is the definition of software abstraction:

Abstraction in programming is the process of identifying common patterns that have systematic variations; an abstraction represents the common pattern and provides a means for specifying which variation to use.

The description of the abstraction can be boring—as you can see, an abstraction leaves out interesting details. Though this makes for an efficient way to convey information, it can be boring. A poem like any one of Seidel's quoted here is an abstraction in the sense that it is a small nugget that represents many experiences, both to Seidel and to his readers. What does a cathedral mean to Seidel and to the reader; what does Chartres mean to Seidel or to the reader if anything; what is the experience of flying; what does silence mean; what significance does a large breast have (in *Chartres*)? The poem is the common pattern and what we bring to it are the variations—they are systematic because they all have to plug into the poem to provide its significance (I won't say "meaning") to each.

In prose Seidel could explain what he means by this poem—that is, what the abstraction is—but it would, to say it again, be boring: The silence of technology juxtaposed against ancient feelings of religious comfort shows that technology comes second and a respect for human origins and concerns first.

What a poet has to do is to dress up that abstraction. There are a number of ways to do that.

- create situations or stories that in their brief telling are gripping
- use new ways to say things that are familiar so that the reader must look at what's told rather than merely absorbing it without thought (the prose problem)
- use pattern and variation to start the reader thinking one way and then, with the variation, jolt him or her the other, at least enough to make him or her pay attention
- use repetition to set up patterns and to link ideas that you want the reader to put together that would be hard to do in prose
- use difficult syntax or grammar or a very odd image to slow the reader down in an important passage—but don't make the difficulty overwhelming; instead, make it magical

- use obscurity to make the abstraction a puzzle with details fascinating.

One of the ways that pattern and variation in rhythm work is to trip up the reader with a different rhythm so that the tripping words have added significance. The famous example is from Pope:

When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
The line too labours, and the words move slow.

The spondees of *vast weight*, *too la-*, and *move slow* all have the effect of stress against the iamb and thus, as the poem says, slows us down to consider those words. Similarly, the mystery of how can a Concorde take off in a cathedral is something that slows us down through its obscurity. Or is it that the listener is in the cathedral when the jet takes off—given where Chartres is compared to Roissy it would make sense (I don't think they take off from Orly)—and the listener is leaning with the plane as the silence banks the turn. Anyhow, the mystery slows us down.

The long poem—**The Last one in the Book**—is full of many of these devices because the abstraction is too tough to say or else is too small and obvious to say in such a way as to attract notice from a modern reader unless the devices of poetry are used devilishly, and Seidel chooses the most devilish of all: obscurity.

Frederick Seidel and the Line

Seidel is good at a lot of things in his work—repetition, the stunning phrase, movement, form—but I’ve found his lines flawless. Though not, perhaps, the best example, a poem with a clear use of the line is **Stroke** in **My Tokyo**.

Stroke

The instrument is priceless.
You can’t believe it happened.
The restoration flawless.
The voice is almost human.
The sound is almost painful.
The voice is almost human.
I close my eyes to hear it.
The restoration flawless.
The beauty is inhuman.
The terrifying journey.
I strange new final music.
The strange new place I’ve gone to.
The blinding light is music.
The starless warm night blinding.
The odor of a musk rose
Presents itself as secrets.
Paralysis can’t stop them.
The afterburners kick in.
The visitors are going.
I dreamed that I was sleeping.
Physiastry can’t say it.
I can’t believe it happened.
A handshake is the human
Condition of bereavement.
A thixotropic sol is
A shaken-up false body.
I know another meaning.
A life was last seen living.
A life was last seen leaving.
The summit of Mount Sinai,
The top of their new tower,
The stark New North Pavilion,
Looks out on New York City,
The miles of aspiration,
The lonely devastation.
I listen to the music
Nine years before 2000.

As Marvin Bell pointed out with respect to his dead-man poems, the line here is (largely) equated with the sentence. This enables Seidel to achieve a couple of things. First, with short sentences the only real choice is a simple declarative, and this provides the opportunity to say things through comparative semantics. For example, the couplet ***The voice is almost human./The sound is almost painful.*** sets up the equation that ***voice*** is to ***sound*** as ***human*** is to ***painful***; it can do this because the other parts including syntax/grammar are the same. Another example is the couplet: ***A life was last seen living./A life was last seen leaving.***—living is a leaving, life is choice, life is leaving life behind eventually.

Second, Seidel can present simple “clues” about the meaning of the poem. For example, restoration, voice, sound, instrument, beauty, and closing the eyes create a sequence that makes us think of perhaps a damaged prime violin. Instead, the voice and instrument that were restored are the brain and human voice after a stroke. For a poet, the loss of voice is certainly the loss of a priceless instrument.

Third, with most lines equal to sentences, lines that are less (that is, sentences that span several lines) are highlighted: *The odor of a musk rose/Presents itself as secrets*. There is mystery in this statement, highlighted as it is. The musk rose is a clustered rose, and thus the secrets rather than secret; *Paralysis can't stop them*. The couplet *A thixotropic sol is/A shaken-up false body*. says a lot: sol can be the soul, and a thixotropic soul is one that changes state (to liquid) when shaken and returns to its original state (a gel) when it settles, just as a recovered stroke victim does, and also as the behavior of a stroke victim does.

Fourth, there is room for mystery and repetition. *The afterburners kick in./The visitors are going*. cataphorically refers to the next poem in the book, *Chartres*, which I discuss in another annotation. One wonders whether the visitors that are going are the ones on the plane or the ones in the cathedral.

Fifth, when lines are normally sentences, any rhymes stand out, and when the rhyme is in a couplet with a sentence spanning it, the effect is multiplied (well, maybe just added): *The miles of aspiration,/The lonely devastation*. Here the miles of aspiration seem to refer just to New York as seen from Mt Sinai hospital, but also to the soul and life.

Finally, with short sentences fitting into lines neatly, rhythm is easy and, I guess, natural, so variations stand out. Even just a line with a simple declarative has its own rhythm even if the actual rhythm is not exact.

In short, short simple lines sets up an opportunity for effective—sometimes overbearing—pattern and variation as well as equational arguments.

One additional effect in this poem is that the short simple sentences mimic, perhaps, how stroke victims speak while recovering.

Eugenio Montale and Movement through Landscape and Artifact

I've read Montale in translation, and that makes it a little hard to talk about effects he uses that involve pure language. The selection I read contains all or parts of **Ossi di Seppia** (**Cuttlefish Bones**), **Le Occasioni** (**The Occasions**), and **La Bufera e Altro** (**The Storm and Other Things**). I noticed a dramatic difference between the first two collections and **The Storm, The Storm** being bolder, more dramatic, and more compelling. In most of his work he uses the external world to carry the load of the poem.

Let's look at **The Shorewatcher's House** (**La Casa dei Doganieri**), from **The Occasions**:

The Shorewatcher's House

You don't remember the shorewatcher's house
above the rock reef, sheer, upon the height:
it waits for you bereavedly since the night
the swarm of your thoughts came there
to house,
unquietly to stay.

South-westers have thrashed the old
walls for years
and your laughter's ring is no longer gay:
the compass, at hazard, crazily veers
and the dice no longer favour our bets.
You don't remember; another time besets
your memory; and a thread is wound.

I still hold an end of it; but the distant-bound
house keeps receding, the blackened
weathervane,
spinning on the roof-top pitiless, stark.
I hold an end of it; but you remain
alone nor breathe here in the dark.

O the skyline in retreat where, flaring,
the tanker's light shows rarely on the verge!
Is this the crossing-point? (The breakers seethe
even now at cliffs which crash with every
surge...)
You don't remember the house of this my
evening.
And I don't know who stays and who is
leaving.

Montale sets up several landscape- and artifact-based focal points, in a particular order:

the shorewatcher's house, the cliff, the storm, the compass, the dice, the
thread, the weathervane, the tanker, the boundary, and the breakers

The shorewatcher's house is a place of people, where a person watches the shore, likely for the purpose of helping ships pass safely. The house, a place of safety, sits upon a rock cliff or something like it. The storm and the crazy compass and dice signal that many possibili-

ties and chaos abound, just like the swarm of thoughts that the speaker's companion—lover?, other?—caused to arrive at the house once. The compass signals any/many directions; the dice any/many possibilities.

The thread is a link between the speaker and this other or between the house a former time and the speaker.

The weathervane signals any/many directions. This fits with the stay/leaving dichotomy at the end of the poem.

The tanker (or a tanker) shows its light on the boundary between sky and ocean, a boundary or division line just like the cliffs where the breakers crash.

The poem asks certain questions through the use of movement through these places and artifacts. Does the other come to the house (even metaphorically) or only the other's swarm of thoughts sent through whatever means to disturb the speaker? Is the other linked to the house by the thread or to the speaker or is the speaker linked to the house by it? The thread, the cliff base, and the skyline mark a decision point or a place where things change; what is to be lost or gained by making a decision or remembering?

The last quatrain—really a couplet—asks the question explicitly: Who stays and who is leaving? The question is interesting because the assumption is that the choice is to stay or to be leaving, that leaving is a continuing if not continuous process.

The actions of the people in the poem are vague while the actions or situations of the landscape and artifacts are clear, and it is also clear that to make headway with the poem one has to look to these nonhuman players.

The house is a place of security on the cliffs and a place that provides safety for others. The speaker and the other are not tied strongly to that place because the thoughts of the other went to the house and the speaker holds a thin thread to it. The house is not near, probably in time (*another time besets your memory*). The last question—*And I don't know who stays and who is/leaving*.—seems to be asking, more than anything else, who remembers or wants to.

The phrase *and a thread is wound* puzzles me (I wish I had an Italian dictionary handy to figure out this translation). If one end of the thread is in the speaker's hands, where is the other end and what is its nature? I can only suspect that the thread is still wound around a spindle perhaps at the house (metaphorical or not), and the speaker and other are in a swarm, a storm, not unlike the tanker on the verge.

My sense is that Montale uses the landscapes and artifacts to carry most of the meaning and the literal meaning is not crucial. In fact, in many cases I cannot discern a clear literal meaning to a lot of his work though the poetry almost always comes through.

Jean Follain and the Run-on Sentence

Jean Follain uses sparse punctuation, and it appears that the primary reason is to create run-on sentences. Although there is a “theory” of run-on sentences expounded by French philosophers and theoretical literary critics, we will not go into that here, but rather we will look at the use of this device or effect for the purpose of generating poetry. We’ve chosen **Wonders of the Circle** as translated by Heather McHugh, a poet of considerable experience. The original French is punctuated exactly as is the translation presented just to the left.

Wonders of the Circle

When the orator speaks
of the wonders of the circle
the span of time
appears to enlarge
listeners grow animated
a woman with an assumed name
is trying to understand
with great dark eyes
deep wrinkles in her brow.
Soon for everyone the colors change.

This poem is an *ars poetica*, where the **orator** is the poet and **the wonders of the circle** are the things of the poem—there is really no better way to put it: That of which the poem speaks and the means of its speaking are **the wonders of the circle**. Perhaps this

phrase can be made clearer by noting that **the circle** can be taken to be the point or topic of the poem—everything encircled by the scope of the poem—and **the wonders** are the poetry of its expression.

Each line is a unit of effect, and one of the effects used here is to indicate potential starting points for embedded sentences (an embedded sentence is one which starts and ends within a run-on sentence but either its start or finish or both is not indicated by punctuation).

For example, in the first (run-on) sentence, there are two embedded sentences:

When the orator speaks of the wonders of the circle, the span of time appears to enlarge, <and> listeners grow animated.

A woman with an assumed name is trying to understand with great dark eyes <and> deep wrinkles in her brow.

Another effect of lines in an unpunctuated sentence is to bracket significant units of meaning, for example, the subject, predicate, and other clauses. For example, the subordinate clause, **when...circle**, occupies the entire two first lines, the subject, **the span of time**, occupies the third line, and the predicate, **appears to enlarge**, occupies the fourth. When combined with enjambment, the effect on the reader is to layer meanings onto the poem. For example,

When the orator speaks/of the wonders of the circle/the span of time appears to enlarg/ listeners...

We first understand that it is the span of time that appears to enlarge—that the poem talks about larger times or events than that to which we are accustomed. After we see the word **listeners** we understand that perhaps, under the influence of the poem, the span of time causes listeners to become larger, possibly in the sense of becoming wiser. But when we continue reading, we see that the first meaning is the proper one, yet the fleeting middle meaning occurred to the reader, and so it is part of the effect of the enjambed lines.

Enjambling meaning like this slows down some readers, thus pointing out significant alternative meanings entwined in the poem. We will return to this idea.

We've looked at the effect of individual lines in a run-on sentence, but what of the run-on sentence itself?

First, when a sentence or a run-on sentence has no punctuation (except the end-stop), the reader must slow down and try to parse the sentence more carefully by using semantic content rather than only syntactic clues—the punctuation is missing. The categories of words can usually guide the reader, but the interesting work in a poem with run-on sentences happens when we need to understand closely the meaning a sentence is constructing in order to understand the parts of the sentence enough to understand fully the meaning of the entire sentence and its true structure. That is, reading a poem with unpunctuated sentences and run-on sentences transforms the act of reading and understanding from a linear, left-to-right, top-to-bottom process to one where the meanings and readings settle into their proper place after successive approximations, like a relaxation technique in constraint satisfaction or optimization problems. We saw this process when we examined the enjambed line (lines 4–5).

A second effect, as practiced by Follain, is to set off the context, problem, or tension by placing it entire in the first run-on sentence; then the next sentence (in this case, the second sentence) is the solution, point, or twist. In this way the structure of

<run-on sentence>
<conclusion>

is like that of the sonnet, though the internal structure of Follain's first part, the run-on sentence, is not uniformly broken down into structurally recognizable subcomponents or subarguments as are sonnets.

Third, a run-on sentence groups sentences more strongly than does a paragraph or a stanza. We can understand this by considering what a sentence is and how a run-on sentence fits into that definition.

A *simple sentence* is roughly defined as a single complete thought. A run-on sentence, particularly one with no punctuation, has the appearance of a simple sentence but it comprises several sentences. If we take the run-on sentence to be a simple sentence, then the run-on sentence holds a single complete thought, not a single complex thought or a compound thought.

The single complete thought in the first sentence of **Wonders of the Circle** is that of the poem utterance and the efforts of the listeners *to understand* the poem. The second single complete thought is that *soon for everyone the colors change*. The argument of the poem is then that the work of the poem is not simple, that listeners need to *grow animated* and *try to understand* with *great dark eyes* and *wrinkled brows* before the *colors change*, the meaning or effect intended emerges.

The argument of the poem starts large with the circle and the enlarged span of time, grows narrow to a single woman with an assumed name (hiding her identity while listening to poetry, changing her identity in order to listen to poetry; or perhaps she is just a married woman with her husband's name?), narrows even more to the woman's eyes and wrinkles on her brow before expanding back to the people listening (or perhaps even literally to *everyone*).



When a poem explicitly breaks the rules of grammar and syntax, requiring us to work at parsing, it is only natural to look at other questions raised by different parses. In this poem there is the question of what colors Follain means by *the colors* in the last line, reference apparently to some particular colors. The only colors hinted at in the poem are the color of the woman's eyes, which have no particular color, only a dark color—perhaps, if black, no color. Are they the colors of whatever is meaningful to each listener that change? Are they the colors of the listeners' eyes (as their puzzlement becomes understanding, or their naïveté wisdom)?

With run-on sentences, as with poetry, we need eventually to run on faith and believe that the mysteries left are mysteries worth leaving, or at least there is no harm in those mysteries. Unlike sentences with exact punctuation, there will likely be ambiguities left—perhaps the woman is trying to understand the deep wrinkles in her brow and why her beauty cream is not working properly.

But when all questions are answered, the resounding click of the poem closing closes the door of chances for lingering thought and further revelation.

Constancy by Jean Follain

This poem is about death, innocence (and therefore guilt), and peacefulness. Follain uses a single run-on sentence for the whole poem, though the ambiguities of meaning and reference in the poem do not originate in the run-on-ness of the sentence.

Constancy

Articles of clothing fall one by one
in complete peace a body gets undressed
outside the houses
lights are coming on in the stables
the nightworkers
are still sleeping
a woman will have a dream with no outcome
a man with a child's face
will be pushing a handcart
full of uniforms
their gold trim removed.

The poem unfolds its meaning as the scene unfolds, with the key mystery being the meaning of the first subsentence: *Articles of clothing fall one by one/in complete peace a body gets undressed*. We see a body getting undressed. Because there is no identified agent we cannot yet determine whether a person is undressing himself or herself, whether that person is being undressed, or whether a corpse is being undressed. We have no clue about whom that body represents—it could even be a stripper,

which is appropriate because the poem drops its coverings a bit at a time.

There are some possibilities raised by the choice of words: *articles of clothing* is a cold, clinical way of talking about clothes. When they fall *one by one* we get a sense of methodical work. *In complete peace* indicates an extreme contrast or a contrast to an extreme. When something is a complete peace, the alternative is not merely chaos, it is either total chaos or, much the same thing, war.

After this opening we know neither where this takes place, when it takes place, nor even what exactly is taking place. But despite the ominous implications or guesses we could make, the overriding feeling after reading these lines is peacefulness. The easiest image to get from these lines is that of someone getting ready for bed or sex.

Outside the houses/lights are coming on in the stables: The houses have no sign of life in them as apparently day turns to night—we are still not sure because stable lights could come on at any time of darkness or impending darkness. Attention to life details seems to be working for animals but not people. We are also given a clue about the setting: it's a place with stables. This eliminates the possibility of a stripper and adds to the likelihood of a military setting (to go with the possibility of war or a battle).

The feeling one gets imagining a scene where lights come on in stables is one of peace at a peaceful time of day, reinforcing the serenity of the previous lines.

The nightworkers/are still sleeping: Now we are sure that the scene is at twilight. Who are the nightworkers and what sort of work do they do? They could tend animals, but animals sleep and the animals are being tended to already (by those turning on the lights) as they are prepared for the night. The only other job alluded to is undressing bodies. This is another mystery to unravel.

Still sleeping continues to indicate peace.

A woman will have a dream with no outcome: This is the turning point. A dream without outcome is either a dream that continues or the dream of the dead. A continuing dream is one that perhaps never ends or one that will resume after an interruption. *Une femme fera un songe sans issue* could also be taken as ***a woman will have a dream she cannot (without a way to) escape.*** Taken this way the dream could be a nightmare or a life sentence.

No matter how we take this line, it leaves an ominous feeling. Perhaps logically there is no reason to think that a dream should have an outcome, but the phrasing ***will have a dream with no outcome*** indicates that something is wrong because ***outcome*** has a positive connotation, even if only one of closure.

A more ominous interpretation is that some woman will have the fulfillment of her dreams thwarted, perhaps as her husband/lover/fiancé does not return from the war or battle.

A man with a child's face/will be pushing a handcart/full of uniforms/their gold trim removed: The mysteries are now as clear as they are going to be. A man with a child's face implies a man imbued with innocence. He will be, apparently calmly, moving uniforms with the only remaining bit of their value removed. This hardens the other meanings a bit.

The body being undressed is a corpse, and the setting is a military installation. The nightworkers are perhaps others who tend the dead soldiers. Peace reigns, but perhaps only temporarily. The woman's dream could very well be that of her future happy life with someone now gone.

the nightworkers are still sleeping a woman will have a dream with no outcome a man with a child's face will be pushing a handcart
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Another clue is the close proximity of references to a man, a woman, and a child, though the reference to a child is indirect through a description of the man. Of course, these three individuals are not linked in any way other than through an inference based on proximity, and the actual man

and the possible child are only speculated relations to the woman, but could very well represent her dream, which will now have no outcome.

What we now see is a scene in which the dead soldiers are being stripped of their uniforms, the gold trimming being removed as one of the remaining aspects of value. The scene, initially so peaceful, has its aspects of horror, as demonstrated by the woman's inescapable dream.

Of final interest is the title, **Constancy**. The serenity of the initial scene has a constancy of peacefulness. But there is also the constancy of the situation of death, death in war, and the grieving that goes with it.

Follain has used the technique of revealing his argument through the unveiling of what could be called clues. By revealing things this way the temporal aspect of his argument—the facts he wants his readers to see in the order he wants them to see them—is made apparent. Follain's language (in the original French and in translation) belies the sophistication of his images and the way they are revealed in the order he wants.

The Shadow of the Magnolia by Eugenio Montale

Eugenio Montale is a poet who, in **La Bufera e Altro**, writes apparently of a love lost to religion or perhaps only to Jesus. As best as I can piece together the situation from the poems, Montale fell in love with a woman who decided to join a convent and moved away, perhaps

The Shadow of the Magnolia

The shadow of the Japanese magnolia thins out now that its purple buds have fallen. At the top intermittently a cigale vibrates. It is no longer the time of the choir in unison, Sunflower, the time of the unlimited godhead whose faithful it devours that it may feed them. It was easier to use oneself up, to die at the first beating of wings, at the first encounter

with the enemy; that was child's play. Henceforth begins the harder path: but not you, eaten by sun, and rooted, and withal delicate thrush soaring high above the cold wharves of your river—not you, fragile fugitive to whom zenith nadir cancer capricorn remains indistinct because the war was within you and within whoso adores upon you the wounds of your Spouse, flinch in the shivering frost...The others retreat and shrivel. The file that subtly engraves will be silenced, the empty husk of the singer will soon be powdered glass underfoot, the shade is livid—it is autumn, it is winter, it is the beyond that draws you and into which I throw myself, a mullet's leap into dryness under the new moon. Goodbye.

living in Canada. In presenting this picture Montale uses a number of images: for example, the magnolia, cicadas, sunflowers (or more specifically Clizia as the name of the beloved), pulverized glass, and the seasons. **The Shadow of the Magnolia** is, I believe, the last poem in **La Bufera e Altro** about her and their love, and it is a goodbye. Let's look at the way the poem moves, and let's look at some of the connections, drawn through common images developed over the course of the collection, between this poem and others about Clizia, or Sunflower.

The shadow of the Japanese magnolia/thins out now that its purple buds have fallen: The magnolia is an image for his youthful love for her—it is introduced in **La Bufera** where he writes:

*The storm that pelts the tough leaves
of the magnolia with long
March thunders...*

*The way it was when
you turned, your forehead brushed
of a cloud of hair,
and waved to me—and stepped into darkness*

and is used again in **Nel Parco**:

In this last use of the image, in **The Shadow of the Magnolia**, Montale shows that the years apart and the disintegration of his youth and hope for the resumption of the love is over, because time has caught up with them or, as hinted at the end of this poem, because death has caught up with her. It is the magnolia's shade that is important: in the first reference (**La Bufera**), the magnolia shelters against the pelts of the storm, in the second reference it is the **ever stricter shade** of the magnolia under which the dart (of love?) grazes, but does not pierce Montale, and is gone. In **The Shadow of the Magnolia**, the sheltering shade of the magnolia become the stricter shade has become the thinning shadow as we see the progression of the relationship from hope and vitality to diminishment.

*In the magnolia's ever
stricter shade, at one
puff from a blowgun
the dart grazes me and is gone.*

ricorn look to be on the east-west axis). These distinctions are important to those living on earth or concerned with astrological matters, but not to the dead Clizia or the devout Clizia.

Of particular interest is the dangling phrase *flinch in the shivering frost*. I cannot find the subject for this by scanning backward, so it might be a command or a declaration that *you* are flinching in the face of what for others causes retreat and shriveling.

*This that at night keeps flashing
in the calotte of my mind,
mother-of-pearl trace of the snail
or emery of brayed glass,
is neither light of church or factory
that may sustain
clerical red, or black.*

The file that subtly/engraves will be silenced, the empty husk/of the singer will soon be powdered/glass underfoot: The engraving file is the file that engraves the headstone, and perhaps the glass singer is a grave monument of the sort popular in Italy at least during the 1940's. Or perhaps it is the husk of the cicada ground like glass. Montale uses the image of pulverized glass elsewhere, for example in **Piccolo Testamento** to

the above left. The image is of that which is built up or beautifully created now aged or degraded in death and decay, certainly by the chaos produced by pressing time.

The shade is livid: We opened with the shadow of the magnolia as it thins out. This thinning is bruised and discolored as it would be near winter, after a long life.

It is autumn. it is winter, it is the beyond/that draws you: The seasons hint at renewing cycles, and the zenith/nadir and cancer/capricorn dichotomies both hint at circles and renewal. Yet in the sequence of *autumn*, *winter*, and *the beyond* the cycle seems to spin out of control or off in a tangential direction. The magnolias will re-enliven, but in the shivering frost, in the bruised shade, Montale will *leap into dryness* under the dry, white dusty moon.

It is the beyond that/draws you and into which I throw/myself...: The hard path is the one Montale travels in living without Clizia, and this relationship of separation is until or even after death do them part. *Addio* means goodbye but in the sense of *I commend you to God*. In the end there is ambiguity even here. Do they meet after death? Does Montale finally give up? Is it hopeful, hopeless, or something orthogonal to hope?

Montale's images are familiar in a subversive way—not reading **La Bufera e Altro** as a sequence, it was only while looking at this poem more carefully that I started to notice the repetitions of images weren't merely random. This way they work by building up beneath the surface, only later splashing up into the light.

The Second Coming by William Butler Yeats

In this poem about the perception of chaos and doom in the face of conflict and revolution, Yeats employs the simple devices of *repetition* and *verbal redirection* to achieve his goal of turning Christianity on its head without obvious offense. By *verbal redirection* we mean the technique of using devices like juxtaposition to turn the reader toward a particular reading, or to invite the reader to consider an unexpected proposition. For example, the phrase *mere anarchy* invites the reader to consider what could be a worse alternative.

The Second Coming

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

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

The title, **The Second Coming**, implies a return—a repetition—and the first line adds a twist: When we think of the Second Coming we think of reunion, but the *turning* is in a widening *gyre* (spiral), and events appear to be spinning out of control, not headed for a happy reunion with Christ.

The first half of the poem (counting as a line the stanza break) is filled with images of turning and repetition: *Turning/turning, falcon/falconer, loosed/loosed, Surely...is at hand/Surely...is at hand, tide*, and *Second Com-*

ing/Second Coming. Of these, *falcon/falconer* stands out because, unlike the other pairs, this pair represents a relationship—between one with *loose* control or influence and the other controlled yet free. The reason the falcon spins away is that the falconer cannot be heard—the falconer’s message, like Christ’s through *twenty centuries of stony sleep*, is fading away as some centripetal force *loosens*.

Though the first half of the poem stresses repetition, the form of repetition tends toward unbalance (*widening gyre, fall apart, centre cannot hold, loosed, the best.../the worst...*), and, in fact, the two-stanza poem is itself unbalanced—the first stanza is 8 lines and the second 14.

The couplet at the start of the larger second half of the poem sets up a difficult repetition-based equation:

*Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.*

To make these syntactically equal clauses truly equal, *some revelation=the Second Coming*. **The Book of Revelation** is primarily about the coming of the Beast and the Apocalypse (something more than *mere anarchy*), so this equation seems to equate loosely the Beast with Christ.

Thus ends the heavy use of repetition in the poem and begins the surprising real second half—the half that starts at the exact middle of the poem (counting the stanza break as a line), in the middle of line 11. The poet is himself so startled at the implications of the equation that he exclaims the following line as he jumps out of the poem:

The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out

This line separates the poem into two separate ones: the first about a bloody conflict spinning out of control in *mere anarchy*, and the second a sort of meta-poem about the Beast as Christ—meta-poem because the poet interrupts the writing of the poem to comment on an image that comes to mind. Of course, these two parts are not orthogonal: The image that comes to mind is central—it is a comment on what might be horrific enough to account for the political state of affairs described in the first half.

Just as the entire poem is redirected by the poet's direct commentary, the poet uses verbal redirection to hint at readings.

We've already seen some: *Mere anarchy* hints at something more chaotic than anarchy and conflict (the Apocalypse), and the *revelation/Second Coming* equation directs us consider the identification of Christ with the AntiChrist. The image of the Sphinx is another redirection—if we aren't able to grasp that the lion's body with a man's head is the Sphinx of Egypt, the redirection of *a gaze* (Giza) *blank* should do it. *Pitiless as the sun* (Son) redirects us again toward seeing Christ as the AntiChrist; *moving its slow thighs* puts us in a mind to think of sexual desire. And if we think this is just an image as the poet says it is, there are the *Reel* (real) *shadows* that tell us this is a reality that can happen.

The poem is ultimately balanced and circular because Yeats brings back repetition and a loop back to the first half: the *rocking cradle* (harking back to *drowned innocence* while using the cyclical movement of rocking), and the phrase *its hour come round at last* loops us back.

The final redirection is the Beast *slouch*(ing) *toward Bethlehem*, its place of birth—a rebirth and hence a repetition as well as a redirection to the Beast as Christ.

I think that the conflict in Ireland that inspired (?) Yeats to write this poem put him in a mind to doubt that the *twenty centuries of stony sleep*—the centuries of Christianity—amounted to much of a reign of innocence and peace, and if the First Coming brought mere anarchy, think of what the Second would bring. But, Yeats couldn't or wouldn't come out and say this directly, so he redirects his readers and uses repetition to make us dread the *blood-dimmed tide* that washes over and over, worse and worse each time.

The Cold Heaven by William Butler Yeats

The Cold Heaven is about remorse over failure at love and fear that this remorse will continue after death as purgatorial punishment. Several commentators note that the failed love was for Maud Gonne, though it doesn't particularly matter to our understanding and appreciation for the poem.

The Cold Heaven

Suddenly I saw the cold and rook-delighting heaven
That seemed as though ice burned and was but the more ice,
And thereupon imagination and heart were driven
So wild that every casual thought of that and this
Vanished, and left but memories, that should be out of season
With the hot blood of youth, of love crossed long ago;
And I took all the blame out of all sense and reason,
Until I cried and trembled and rocked to and fro,
Riddled with light. Ah! when the ghost begins to quicken,
Confusion of the death-bed over, is it sent
Out naked on the roads, as the books say, and stricken
By the injustice of the skies for punishment?

What is striking about this poem is its attention to important craft details, none of which stand out but all of which contribute to the force of the poem. For example, the rhyme scheme is an obsessive ABABACAC-ADAD that is easy to miss on a casual reading—the first B pair is *ice/this*. The remorse is obsessive and feels to the poet as if it will literally never

end; the rhyme scheme supports the sense without being the center of attention.

Another subtle effect is what might be described as a sense of rocking back and forth, much as one would do when in grief. Line length, both the number of stresses and number of characters, rock back and forth a bit. Scanning the lines, the number of accents goes like this: 6, 7, 5, 6, 6, 7, 5, 6, 7, 5, 6, 7, 5, 6, 5. One line describes such rocking and is itself an exemplar of the effect:

Until I cried and trembled and rocked to and fro,

The rhythm of the line, its syntax, and its sense all support this rocking motion. Notice the *and*'s; the poem has 12 *and*'s in its 12 lines. Though it might not have been a speech pattern when this poem was written, today people under stress tend to string clauses together with *and*'s.

The poem is divided in half by a line loaded with spondees on hard-to-speak vowels, each an *o*-sound:

With the hót blóod of yóuth, of lóve cróssed lóng agó;

Dividing the poem in two sets up another reciprocating motion between the first half of the poem which contemplates the lost love today with death ahead and the second half which asks whether the intolerable grief will go on after death.

The sense of rocking suggested by these devices supports the remorse and obsessiveness of the poem, and adds to the fear that the cycle of remorse might continue after death.

Another subtle effect is connecting the dread of seeing the cold heaven with the *injustice of the skies* by linking the hard *i* sounds throughout: *I saw, delighting, ice, ice, wild, I cried, light, skies.*

Yeats links words and ideas in ways that help us get the sense of the poem. The two most mysterious images are of the grief-stricken poet being *riddled by light* and the ghost of the poet being stricken by the *injustice of the skies*.

The phrase *riddled by light* can have two readings: one is to be filled with small holes by the light and the other is to be put into a conundrum by the light. Putting *confusion* directly below *riddled* in lines 9 and 10 hints that the latter reading—being posed a puzzle—is the intended one. But the later phrase *stricken/by the injustice of the skies* makes us think it's the former—being filled with small holes. Contributing to the mystery is the linear juxtaposition of *quicken,/confusion*: This nice pair hints that the confusion arising from remorse is growing. Moreover, any injustice the sky could impose would seem to be physical.

Of course, either reading of *riddled* is as correct as any other, but this nexus of meanings is at the heart of the poem, and Yeats has nicely set this up by bunching so many possible directions in so small a space. The dichotomy of meaning is between a physical punishment and a mental or psychological one. The poem invites us to decide this for ourselves, and the invitation is to conscious not accidental decision.

At first, **The Cold Heaven** looks casually put together, perhaps even a bit prose-like when compared to other, earlier Yeats. But the subtlety of effects is enormous.

The Magi by William Butler Yeats

This short poem is about the ultimate dissatisfaction the mind experiences when it focuses on things other than life and the *uncontrollable mystery*. The scene is this: The poet looks at the sky and sees clouds slowly drifting, imagining that these are the Magi, who *appear and disappear*, looking forever for a turbulent, satisfying event like the birth of Christ.

The Magi

Now as at all times I can see in the mind's eye,
In their stiff, painted clothes, the pale unsatisfied ones
Appear and disappear in the blue depth of the sky
With all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones,
And all their helms of silver hovering side by side,
And all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more,
Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied,
The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.

A key phrase is *I can see in the mind's eye*, which tells us that the reality of the poet's "unsatisfaction" lies in the mind.

Yeats presents his argument by painting a picture of the cloud-Magi as obsessively unchanging, weary, and unalive, waiting for a passionate event.

To present the Magi as unchanging, Yeats uses a series of *s*-heavy words: *stiff*, *unsatisfied*, *stones*, *eyes still fixed*, and *helms of silver hovering side by side*. And the persistence of the poet's own dull vision is signaled by *now as at all times*.

Repetition of sound (the *s*-sound) and of syntax carries obsession:

With all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones
And all their helms of silver hovering side by side
And all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more

Even *hovering side by side* and *hoping to find once more* ring obsessively off each other. *All* is repeated four times. Phrase like *all their eyes fixed*, *hovering side by side*, and *all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones* demonstrate the obsession of the Magi.

Yeats shows us the Magi are weary—of their obsession or of their wait for excitement—by these phrases: *stiff*, *painted*; *pale*; *appear* and *disappear*; *rain-beaten stones*; *ancient faces*; *all their eyes fixed*; and *hovering*. By the essential metaphor we see dissatisfaction with an exclusively mental life.

There is perhaps some significance to the only words containing *u*: *unsatisfied*, *blue*, *turbulence*, and *uncontrollable*. This is certainly an interesting sequence, possibly suggesting that dissatisfaction lies in the peaceful blueness of the sky while satisfaction can be found in turbulence and uncontrolled events.

The last two lines deserve some comment. *Calvary* and the title *The Magi* put us in the mind to think of the birth and death of Christ as the two noted passionate, alive events that stir the mind, but the phrasing of the last line—*the uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor*—has more than a little sexual tension in it. It's a clever move to use *Calvary* to hint that *bestial floor* should refer to the birthplace of Christ, but the cleverness might not be enough to wrestle it away from the sexual reading when one considers the pull of line that rhymes with it: *And all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more/The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor*. This reading, with little doubt, supports Yeats' message.

Poem 829 by Emily Dickinson

This simple poem is one of my favorites. What strikes me about it is the way its plain language disguises questions and ambiguities that work eventually. In fact, Dickinson's simple style belies the lush underbrush of forces and workings of a sophisticated poet.

Ample make this Bed—
Make this Bed with Awe—
In it wait till Judgment break
Excellent and Fair.

Be its Mattress straight—
Be its Pillow round—
Let no Sunrise' yellow noise
Interrupt this Ground—

Some of the questions are as follows: Why should the bed/grave be made **ample**? Should one be filled with **awe** while making the bed or should the bed be constructed from awe? Is **Judgment** simply **breaking** as day breaks, is Judgment separating into pieces, or is it a pause from Judgment, like a Spring break? Why should the **mattress** be **straight** while the **pillow** is **round**? In what way could the **sunrise** disturb this ground? Finally—and to me most intriguingly—why choose the words **excellent and fair** to describe Judgment?

The first two lines share **make this bed**, setting up an implication that the bed is ample because it is made with awe, whichever way one chooses to read **with awe**. Why is there extra room in the bed? Will someone join us there? We aren't certain whether the bed is being constructed (brought into existence) or whether it is being straightened after use (note that we are told the mattress should be straight, reinforcing this second reading of **make this bed**).

Waiting for Judgment in the bed hints the bed is the grave (big surprise), but the confusion of how to read **break** mingles with the odd phrase **excellent and fair**. **Sunrise** and **interrupt**, which appear later, tug at the two primary readings for **break**. One waits in bed for daybreak, which draws us to read **Judgment break** as the analog of sunrise—a time when the dawning of Judgment day will bring light and happiness. But waiting can be boring, and so a break would be welcome—Judgment would break the boredom, break into the bed(room). Or one could be waiting for the Judgment to end (for a break in its continuity). Finally, when something breaks, it makes a noise, and daybreak makes a **yellow noise**.

Notice that the references to Judgment and Sunrise occur at the same relative place (line 3) in their stanzas. This invites us to consider the comparison. Judgment happens just once and in the poem is awaited, implying it is wished for; Sunrise happens every day and is wished away (**Let no Sunrise' yellow noise/Interrupt**). Hence, we can read the poem, based on this comparison, as telling us that we should not let the daily (and common) distract us from the eternal. **Yellow noise**, though an interesting and somewhat appealing synesthesia, eventually evokes negative feelings, reinforcing this reading.

Fair means equitable, light, or of pleasing appearance, but it also means moderately good, which is in contrast to **excellent**. The obvious reading is that the Judgment is of excellent quality (performed by a skilled Judge) and the results are equitable. But using the meaning moderately good, a Judgment both **excellent and fair** implies a broad range of Judgments. **Fair** also means sunny skies, and so Judgmentbreak will signal a pleasant day (or outcome).

Be its Mattress straight—/Be its Pillow round— leads us compare the mattress to the pillow. One holds the body, which is held straight—without corruption or even without the

full experience of life; the head is held round and full—full of thought and faith perhaps, but not atrophied like the body.

Finally, the last dash is an interruption in the poem itself—the poem would seem to go on, but stops, as if the making of the bed is over and the waiting has begun for the speaker. The ample bed is the preparation in life for Judgment, and the dash (—) is the dash from the land to the bay (one of Dickinson’s metaphors for death and the afterlife).

Though it be simple, the many ways to read this poem demonstrate Dickinson’s power. The multiple paths of reading all lead to the same conclusion about the “meaning” of the poem, just as every traveler may reach Judgment in his or her own way.

Poem 1102 by Emily Dickinson

Though all of Dickinson's poems are short—and very lyric—almost all of them have some sort of movement or action in them. We see Bees buzzing, Birds flying, singing and building nests, we see Death driving carriages, we even see weddings and brushes with intercourse. So, it is odd to find a poem where nothing is really happening, where there are no

His bill is clasped—his Eye forsook—
His Feathers wilted low—
The Claws that clung, like lifeless Gloves
Indifferent hanging now—
The Joy that in his happy Throat
Was waiting to be poured
Gored through and through with Death, to be
Assassin of a Bird
Resembles to my outraged mind
The firing in Heaven,
On Angels—squandering for you
Their miracles of Tune—

gestures or action. **Poem 1102** is one of them.

The subject is a dead bird—of the sort, perhaps, killed and sketched by naturalists of the time, captured in art (as, for example, Audubon did during roughly this period). Because this subject is unlike her others—it lacks movement—Dickinson wants to show this kind of physical death by the nature of the poem.

She uses slow sounds, difficult phrases, and static images to accomplish this.

First, Dickinson slows down the reader by using a series of *ell* sounds—**bill, clasped, wilted, low, claws, clung**, and **like lifeless gloves**. Among these *ells* are *cl-* words: **Claws that clung, like lifeless Gloves**. These sounds and words—along with **forsook, feathers, indifferent hanging now**, and **throat**—are hard to say, and, like the lifeless bird, have little spoken movement. The words get stuck, the movement is clotted, and we anticipate a glottal explosion after the stoppage.

Second, Dickinson adds to the quagmire difficult to say phrases like **The Claws that clung, like lifeless Gloves**, and **...waiting to be poured/Gored through and through with Death, to be**.

Third, she uses static images like the bill being held shut, the eye given up, claws hanging, and feathers wilted.

The images are clever, aiming toward the idea that there is a distinction to be made between the spirit and its earthy vehicle. The image of gloves serves this well because it is a word that slows down the reader and also shows an object that is just like a hand but requires a live hand to act like one, just as the bird's carcass looks just like a bird but requires a live bird to animate it.

Another slowdown is the (slightly) difficult to understand phrase,

**The Joy that in his happy Throat
Was waiting to be poured
Gored through and through with Death...**

where it turns out that it is **Joy** that is **Gored through and through with Death**. We are drawn to this phrase by the repetition of **through** and the adjacent rhymes **poured** and **gored**, a surprising pair.

This poem has a “me” and a “you”. The “me” is the singer/poet who laments anything that would deny the audience, the “you” from receiving song/poem. Thus, one could interpret this poem as being about poetry making.

Another clue to the meaning of the poem comes from the rhythm of the poem. It is an alternating 4/3 stresses per line. I’ve always associated a rhythm like that with ballads, and it’s interesting (to me) to note that you can sing this poem to the tune of the theme to **Gilligan’s Island**.

Dickinson, of course, wasn’t familiar with **Gilligan’s Island**, but I’m sure there were other ballads or popular songs whose bright and sprightly tunes would do as a backdrop for this poem. The result is a deep contrast between the subject of the poem and its presentation, a contrast almost unfathomable—just as unfathomable as the contrast between a person and an act, between the God-You who enjoys the music of angels and the human *you* addressed by the poem, or between the earthbound bird carcass and its singing, joyful bird essence.

At The End by Miroslav Holub

This poem, from “Vanishing Lung Syndrome,” is about endings—death, ending different eras of mankind and of individual lives, ending life, and ending the planet itself. As with most poems, the statement of this poem’s argument is more verbose in a prose explanation than is the poem. In some ways this is because a poem is like a novel in the mystery section

At The End

At the end of the **alley of Christmas trees**
and **road signs**,
at the end of the **area where you can pass**
the baton in the relay race,
magnetic tapes
and **dust behind a carriage**,
at the end of the crowd of **dummies and dolls**,
day-books and night-books,
table and chairs,
beds and eyes,
and **cells**

a little stumble
on a round pebble

and here it is:
the **end of talismania**.
But that wasn’t the point.

And here it is:
Nobody loves me, everybody hates me,
I think I’ll go eat worms.
But that will pass.

And here it is:
the pure literacy of roots,
devoted silence of greenery,
handing over of amino acids, so that
the amber-inspecting technician
won’t get angry.
Only from above
the prodigious fugue or **fading**
genes,
the planetary lullaby,
hardly audible
in all that hush.

So that was the point.
Probably.

of a bookstore: We know the novel will present a mystery and our job is to hunt down and understand clues. Though a poem isn’t always about clues, it is about a special way of reading in which we are open to images and connections, and the tools of the poet include rhythm, music, connections, and forms.

Let’s look at the various kinds of endings:

- **the end of youth**—the end of simple learning and self-doubt, feelings of worthlessness and of being unlovable
- **end of life**—death, the end of productivity and self-value
- **end of evolution**—when human “progress” is no longer possible
- **end of eras**—when humanity moves forward (learns as a species)
- **end of the planet (maybe)**—when all progress and learning are no longer possible

(In the poem to the left, a phrase of a particular color refers to the type of ending of the matching color above.)

The poem is about whether there really is any point to youth, life, evolution, eras, and the planet—whether there is a reason for existence. There is no specific extra-experiential point to life, from Holub’s viewpoint, but there is nothing wrong with the experiential viewpoint.

Some of Holub’s references are interesting.

The **area where you can pass the baton** is that place in life where procreation and teaching are possible. **Magnetic tapes** is a storage mechanism, and it isn’t farfetched to think of human DNA as a magnetic tape. The **carriage** is a baby carriage. **Cells** can refer to biological cells but also to prison cells. The **round pebble** could be the earth. **Talismania** could refer

to the era of alchemy, or any era of mankind or in an individual lifetime where objects hold a special magic—one could argue that the era of greed in which we live today is such an era. The *pure literacy of roots* refers negatively (by referring to its opposite) to the desire to find meaning or perhaps to write about human experience (through poetry?). *Pure literacy* could be taken to mean a literacy that reads or soaks up knowledge only—just as roots take from but not give to the earth. The *devoted silence of greenery* could again refer negatively to not writing or it could refer death (via the cemetery, where shrubbery is devoted to providing a shrine). *Handing over of amino acids* refers to procreation or evolutionary learning. The *amber-inspecting technician* could refer to the scientific assistant who studies fossilized (amberized) DNA (mosquitoes preserved in amber). The *prodigious fugue* is life itself (intertwining dance of DNA and lives, themes repeated when they are universal). *Fading genes* could refer to evolutionary decay (perhaps too politically charged a topic) or, humorously, to aging (faded jeans). Finally, the *planetary lullaby* refers to the end of the earth, and the end of all endings for us.

Holub's method is to present an ending or group of endings (*and here it is*) and propose a meaning for that ending. We can consider that proposal, but each is quickly withdrawn (*but that wasn't the point; but that will pass*). Finally there is the ending of the earth and the end of the possibility of meaning (*so that was the point*), but as the other simple explanations were withdrawn, we are invited to withdraw this one ourselves, if we choose (*Probably*). If we choose not to withdraw it—by arguing for some larger possibility of meaning—we are not judged, we are allowed to believe that Holub grants as probable this possibility of impossibility of further meaning.

On the other hand, there is the ambiguity about whether the passage about the planet is about the planet's end or not. A lullaby is a song to put someone to sleep (an ending), but the one put to sleep is usually a baby (a beginning). Perhaps it—the passage and the poem—is about whether any endings are true endings or whether hidden within each ending is a beginning. Or even whether endings can be recognized or accepted.

This reading is reinforced by the last stanza which can be taken as talking about the ending of the poem (*So that was the point.*, where *point*= [the period]), and the point (the period, the ending) isn't clear or clearly there (*Probably*).

God in the Middle Ages by Rainer Maria Rilke

It's unlikely that any poet alive since the Middle Ages could write a 14-line poem unconscious that it would be taken as a sonnet. In general, the stanza structure of this is a Petrarchan sonnet (an octet followed by a sestet), but in the detailed stanzaic structure and in its rhyme scheme (in the original German), it is its own beast: *abba cdcd efg feg*. The two

God in the Middle Ages

And they'd saved Him up inside themselves
and they wanted him to be and judge,
and finally (to keep him from ascending)
they attached to him like a weight

their great cathedrals' bulk and burden.
And all he was supposed to do
was over all his boundless numbers
circle pointing, and like a clock give signs

to guide their day-to-day transactions.
But suddenly he got all the way in gear,
and the people of the horrified city

allowed him, frightened of his voice,
to go on with striking-works yanked out,
and fled before his silent dial-face.

quatrains are as different in rhyme schemes as they can be and still remain quatrains. The two triplets have a linked rhyme scheme, which at least unifies the triplets into a sestet.

One of the familiar Rilkean marks is the parenthetical statement, which is best interpreted when removed from the poem—in theory, a parenthetical statement is unimportant to the essence of the sentence it is in, but with Rilke perhaps such statements are the essence. If we were to delete the parenthetical statement, we would possibly not know that by keeping God from ascending the people of the Middle Ages would be preventing God from becoming God.

If this is a sonnet, there must be a turn in the argument—at the octet/sestet break or in the

final couplet. But here, if there is a such a turn, it is at the 9-/10- line break. More importantly, there are small or near turns throughout—perhaps it's better to call them surprises. Let's look at the first half dozen or so lines:

And they'd saved Him up inside themselves

God is usually the one who does the saving, but *they* (people in the Middle Ages) are saving God (*up inside*). To *save up* has the connotation of collecting (money) to spend later, and so we can read this as saving God up for a rainy day or to spend later on something treasured (salvation?, God as commodity?).

and they wanted him to be and judge,

It makes sense they would want Him to be judge, but to *be and judge*? Is there some reason He might not *be*? And notice that *him* is not capitalized (and neither are any such references to God after the first line in the German original). Has being saved up inside people made God less likely to exist, less likely to be divine?

and finally (to keep him from ascending)

Does He want to ascend? Is ascending how god becomes God? Does He want to escape them? Would anyone enjoy being saved up while being restrained (or constrained)?

they attached to him like a weight

If they can save Him up, they can attach to Him a weight; God doesn't seem very God-like if He can be pushed around like this.

their great cathedrals' bulk and burden.

This weight, this anchor that keeps God from ascending away is the sum of all the cathedrals. To anyone loyal to Catholicism, this is unthinkable—that the purpose of cathedrals is to weight God down, to keep Him here to attend to the whims of His followers. As such, this is a critique of the Church (as it functioned in the European Middle Ages).

*And all he was supposed to do
was....*

God has been captured and is required to perform certain things—in order to survive?

Every line, up to this point, contains a surprise of some sort, but these surprises are surprising because it is possible to read the poem through without remarking or even noticing them.

God is supposed to sit on high and act like a clock to inform(?) people of certain things that might be useful to them every day. They *wanted* Him to judge (before) but perhaps they no longer do—they want a monument or something to show off, including God Himself. But even in the bound state, God was able to get into high gear and act like God, which was too frightening. And the people *allow* God to stay with His *striking-works yanked out*.

While reading this poem it is easy to not really understand what God is made to do, the language is so mild. When we read *striking-works yanked out*, though, we suddenly see what is going on. This phrase is so striking that we cannot avoid the implications—including that God really is being forced to act like a cuckoo clock and not like the ultimate judge. (Whether the phrase *striking-works yanked out* is as unnerving in German as it is in English, I don't know.)

Even with his voice (or fist?) removed, people are sufficiently undone by the event of God gearing up that they flee *his silent dial-face*. Before God was to act like a clock, but here He is more literally *being* a clock. Is God made into time in the myth of this poem—the face if God is time?

One of the nice effects—effected well in Snow's translation—is the Germanic building of language to crescendo of surprise. For example,

*And all he was supposed to do
was over all his boundless numbers
circle pointing, and like a clock give signs*

to guide their day-to-day transactions.

We easily skip over the ominous *all he was supposed to do* and see the God-appropriate *over all his boundless numbers/circle pointing. Like a clock give signs* gives us a bit of pause—literally echoed by the stanza break—before we realize that at best God is the Middle-Age's Ann Landers and at worst its timekeeper.

In the end we are so shocked by the image of God and His fate at the hand of the righteous that we don't need to much wonder what it is that the people saw in God's silent face that made them flee.

So, like a sonnet this poem contains a turn, and unlike a sonnet, there are almost nothing but turns.

The Stylite by Rainer Maria Rilke

Rilke is known particularly for sweet poems about flowers and saints, and many a poetry reading group fawns over such of his poems. But, Rilke has the power to grab a reader where that reader least prefers it, and *The Stylite* is an excellent example.

The Stylite

From all sides he was besieged by nations
which he might deem elected and condemn;
and grasping finally that he lost himself,
he climbed out of the collective stench
with clammy hands along a column's shaft

that still rose up yet lifted nothing,
and began, alone upon its surface,
to weigh once more from the beginning
his own weakness against the Lord's praise;

and there was no end to it: he compared;
and the Other kept growing greater.
And shepherds, raftsmen, farmers at their plow
saw him small and almost crazed

forever talking with the boundless sky,
dimmed by rainstorms sometimes, sometimes bright;
and his howling plunged down upon them all
as if he howled into each one's face.
Yet he hadn't seen for years

how the press and issue of the crowd
below constantly renewed itself,
and the polish on the princes long since
had ceased to shine so high.

But when he above, almost condemned
and from their resistance flayed to pieces,
alone there with despair-filled cries
tried to shake the daily demons:
huge worms fell slowly from his wounds
heavily and clumsily
into the first row's open crowns
and multiplied in velvet.

This poem is constructed as a series of images with attendant connotations or side-images. These connotations spawn disturbing readings and reactions to the poem.

We are introduced to an unnamed and undescribed man who is apparently *besieged* and as a result has lost his identity. But he has been besieged not by people, but by *nations*, nations that were *elected*. This is a mystery to be cleared up.

In response he climbs out the *collective stench* (of those nations or of their people). He climbs up a *column's shaft* with *clammy hands*. The shaft rises but lifts nothing. Something like this could be a structure that forces the observer to look up when it is encountered, but if we look at some of the attendant phrases another reading is possible. Consider *clammy hands, alone upon its surface, his own weakness*. These hint at sexual self-indulgence and the literally phallic shaft. That Rilke is capable of such an image is without doubt; take a look at this from *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge (The Temptation of the Saint)*, Stephen Mitchell translation:

His whip strikes him as weakly as a tail flicking away flies. His sex is once again in one place only, and when a woman comes toward him, upright through the huddle, with naked bosom full of breasts, it points at her like a finger.

The next image is of the man comparing himself to God (more or less, actually it's more complicated than that). In this comparison he comes up short (*he compared; and the Other kept growing greater*). But his initial weighing is *his own weakness against the Lord's*

praise. The man who retreats from the world has been besieged with praise from God, which has led, presumably, to his impossible position of self-doubt or self-importance.

The weighing and doubt seem, so far, private—if we take the masturbatory hint or even if—as stylites did, to expiate sin—we assume the man scales a column, we see him engaged within himself. But that evaporates with the next images of the local folk in their various occupations able to observe and moreover *forced* to observe (**his howling plunged down upon them all/as if he howled into each one's face**).

The self-examination or self-flagellation would seem aimed at self-diminishment, but, like the autoerotic, such acts are eventually self-gratifying and pleasurable without benefit to others, not even **the Other**.

Below him, for years, the crowd swells—its **press** reveals its size and obsessive interest, and its **issue** reveals its passion (**issue** as semen, as children, as ideas). The crowd renews itself, perhaps literally over generations or perhaps by people coming and going, or by people losing and regaining interest as their own daily issues take hold and let go.

The following lines hark back to an image at the start of the poem:

*and the polish of the princes long since
has ceased to shine so high.*

The **princes**, the **nations**, the **elected**. The strongest link is between **elected** and **princes**—the contrast is between those who are selected (with likely dissent) by peers and those who are chosen (through birth or divinity). At the start of the poem and the adventure, the man condemns elected nations, but he seems to hold high shining princes. Now he sees them as the same. Perhaps in his glorious self-flagellation all grow lesser.

The last stanza is the killer. Rilke has a standard move: He says, “here, look at this (if you dare).” He does this with parenthetical statements and with colons, which set off new bits for examination. If we isolate and approach each such Rilkean poetical event as something we can carve off and then later plug back in, we can see some of his power. In this case it is easy to isolate the key event: It's the last stanza which is about twice as long as the other stanzas in this poem. Read it without regard to the rest of the poem, if you can or if you dare.

The stanza is divided in half and within it is another instance of the Rilkean move: The first half of the stanza sets up a context and we are invited to examine the second half by itself and then within that original context. (And, in this case, the entire stanza must be interpreted by itself and then within the context of the surrounding poem.)

The first half-stanza is one the finest renditions of the crucifixion scene I've read. The Germanic syntax works wonderfully by piling up subordinate clauses, placing them on a high platform that tilts over at the urging of the verb phrase to drop them all down upon us.

The second half-stanza presents us the picture of the spreading of Christ's (unintended) Gospel to the world—spreading like devouring worms through the minds of those who hear.

But even in this astounding turn, there is more: Only the first row (the apostles?) hears the words, and the words (recall, they are self-flagellating, autoerotic droppings) fall into the *crowns* (of *princes*?) of those in the first row.

What is the genteel reader to make of this, then? Is the stylite really the Christ and is Christianity really the result of these heavy, clumsy worm-ideas? The body's obsessive remarkings on the spiritual only wind up corrupted by generation again—*multiplied in velvet* can imply sexual reproduction (in the velvety womb), which would be the worst carnal fall-out of spiritual pride (that is, to be nourished by temporal power and coddled and cultivated by the throne—*crowns*). Spiritual pride is analogous to (and intimate with) aristocratic self-promotion.

How about **The Bowl of Roses**, instead?

DeepInSnow—Paul Celan

HOLLOW HOMESTEAD OF LIFE. In the porch
the lung
blown empty
blossoms. A handful
of sleep grain
wafts from the mouth
stammered true,
out to the snow
conversations.

Michael Hamburger

Approaching Celan one feels humble and lost. His later poetry, especially, feels like mica bits where the pattern of lights in the rock depends entirely on where the light happens to be when you happen along. But sometimes the mica light makes a pattern, and one of the patterns in Celan is recurring images—light and dark, flowers, breathing/breath, sun in landscapes, and snow. I've chosen two poems from **Atem-**

wende (BreathTurn) which I happen to have in two translations. Michael Hamburger, the “classical” translator attempts to render Celan’s fits and starts into somewhat smoother English, sort of like a linguistic roadgrader. Pierre Joris, in a newer translation, takes on the task of rendering Celan as accurately as he can—as he says:

My first aim has not been to create

HOLLOW LIFEHOMESTEAD. In the windtrap
the lung
blown empty
flowers. A handful
sleepcorn
drifts from the mouth
stammered true,
out towards the snow-
conversations.

Pierre Joris

NO MORE SAND ART, no sand book, no masters.

Nothing won by dicing. How many
dumb ones?
Seventeen.

Your question—your answer.
Your song, what does it know?

Deepinsnow,
Eppinnow,
Ee—i—o.

Michael Hamburger

elegant, easily readable and accessible American versions of these German (under erasure) poems. The aim has been to get as much of the complexity and multi-perspectivity of Celan’s work over into American, and if elegant moments or stretches of claritas occur, all the better. Any translation that makes a poem sound more accessible than it is in the original has to be flawed.

The later poems are short and bursty—that is, the importance of individual words and of Celan’s compound-words is increased, if for no other reason than each word is such a large fraction of the whole.

These two poems strike me as two of the more accessible ones, and the differences in translation are not particularly significant except in two places (which I’ll point out).

The first poem fires three images at the reader: the setting, a lung blossoming, and the

NO SANDART ANYMORE, no sandbook, no masters.

Nothing in the dice. How
many mutes?
Seventen. (*sic?*)

Your question—your answer.
Your chant, what does it know?

Deepinsnow,
Eppinno,
I—i—o.

Pierre Joris

emanation drifting toward the *snow conversations*. Understanding *snow conversations* is the key to this poem (to the extent that the key opens anything universally recognizable). Let's try to decipher these images.

Hollow homestead of life.

A homestead is a house and usually a barn and some land—in American experience it is a place that is claimed by virtue of having been developed. Joris's *lifehomestead* captures it well: It's the place and surroundings where life or a life takes hold. It is hollow in several senses: hollow because it has little substance or literally hollow—a human body.

*...In the porch
the lung
blown empty
blossoms....*

*...In the windtrap
the lung
blown empty
flowers....*

A *porch* can be a kind of *windtrap*—a place to enter a house which protects the enterer from the elements. I don't know whether *Windfang* is German for the structure we know as a porch, but *windtrap* seems to imply a place that captures wind, and wind from the lungs is speech, and a place to capture speech is on the page or as a poem. This is a place where the *lung blown empty* can blossom. Especially when the *lifehomestead* is otherwise hollow.

Sleep grain or *sleepcorn* is the food of sleep—dreams or the unconscious, and it *wafts (drifts) from the mouth stammered true*. Words spoken so as to waft or drift are not spoken boldly nor with confidence. Perhaps such words are the last words spoken, or the last ones meant. *Stammered* words are hard to hear and hardly heard. But they are true in this poem. The words—the poem—drift toward the *snow conversations*.

A *snow conversation* can be a cold conversation or it could be conversation among snowflakes. Or a quiet conversation. Snow is one form of solidified water or vapor (clouds), and hence is like poetry on paper (solidified speech). Snow can melt or, in some cases, evaporate. Snow is temporary in average climates, permanent only in special ones.

I think this poem is about what poems are.



The other poem is more problematic. Some things are easy, though: *sandart* and *sand-books* are art and books drawn in sand, written in (or of) sand—they don't last, are ephemeral. There are no masters, either, to re-create them. What's worse: Even luck won't help us (*nothing in the dice*). Then there's nonsense:

*How
many mutes?
Seventen.*

Celan, though, pulls us out of this poem and into another: This is *your question* and *your answer*—they have no relevance to the rest of the poem (the real poem). Your questions and answers are meaningless to him and, he suggests, to the reader:

Your song, what does it know?

Here is the second place where Joris's different translation might help us:

Your chant, what does it know?

A chant is a monotonous, rhythmic phrase or song (sounds like poetry, eh?), often a prayer or intended to mesmerize, bringing about altered states of consciousness (these poems *were* published in 1967). So this line asks the question: What value or validity has your ritualistic faith? Do you believe in art?—it is blown away; do you believe in literature?—it is blown away; do you believe in masters?—what masters?; do you believe in luck and randomness?—nothing there; what about your questions and answers?—irrelevant. Then Celan demonstrates. One of his deepest images is snow, and here is the deepest: ***Deepin-snow***. Let's chant—and notice that the gesture here is to reduce and diminish in each subsequent line, just as Celan's own lifepoetic trajectory has been to distill and reduce:

Deepinsnow,

Eppinnow,

Ee—i—o.

Now, let's all sing about what it all means.

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