

THE NORTON
INTRODUCTION
TO *Poetry*

NINTH EDITION

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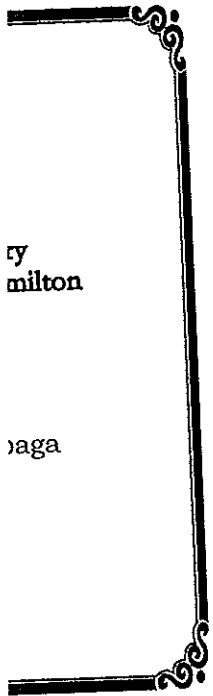
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EXTERNAL FORM

Most poems of more than a few lines are divided into stanzas—groups of lines divided from other groups by white space on the page. Putting some space between groupings of lines has the effect of sectioning a poem, giving its physical appearance a series of divisions that often mark turns of thought, changes of scene or image, or other shifts in structure or direction. In Donne's "The Flea" (chapter 3), for example, the stanza divisions mark distinct stages in the action: between the first and second stanzas, the speaker stops his companion from killing the flea; between the second and third stanzas, the companion follows through on her intention and kills the flea. In Nemerov's "The Goose Fish" (chapter 6), the stanzas mark stages in the self-perception of the lovers: each stanza is a more or less distinct scene, and the scenes unfold almost like a series of slides. Not all stanzas are quite so neatly patterned as these, but any formal division of a poem into stanzas is important to consider; what appear to be gaps or silences may be structural markers.

Historically, stanzas have most often been organized by patterns of rhyme, and thus stanza divisions have been a visual indicator of patterns in sound. In most traditional stanza forms, the pattern of rhyme is repeated in stanza after stanza throughout the poem, until voice and ear become familiar with the pattern and come to expect and, in a sense, depend on it. The accumulation of pattern allows us to "hear" deviations from the pattern as well, just as we do in music. The rhyme thus becomes an organizational device in the poem—a formal, external determiner of organization, as distinguished from the internal, structural determiners we considered in chapter 6—and ordinarily the metrical patterns stay constant from stanza to stanza. (That is, a formal rhyme scheme is *external* to the unique inner logic of a poem's narrative, descriptive, or discursive design.) In Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," for example, the first and third lines in each stanza rhyme, and the middle line then rhymes with the first and third lines of the next stanza. (In indicating rhyme, we conventionally use a different letter of the alphabet to represent each rhyme sound; in the following example, if we begin with "being" as *a* and "dead" as *b*, then "fleeing" is also *a*, and "red" and "bed" are *b*.)

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,	<i>a</i>
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead	<i>b</i>
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,	<i>a</i>
Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,	<i>b</i>
Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou,	<i>c</i>
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed	<i>b</i>

The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,
 Each like a corpse within its grave, until c d
 Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow c

In this stanza form, known as *terza rima*, the stanzas are linked to each other by a common sound: one rhyme sound from each stanza is picked up in the next stanza, and so on to the end of the poem (though sometimes poems in this form have sections that use varied rhyme schemes). This stanza form was used by Dante in *The Divine Comedy*, written in Italian in the early 1300s. *Terza rima* is not all that common in English because it is a rhyme-rich stanza form—that is, it requires many rhymes, and thus many different rhyme words—and English is, relatively speaking, a rhyme-poor language (not as rich in rhyme possibilities as Italian or French). One reason for this is that English is derived from so many different language families that it has fewer similar word endings than languages that have remained “pure”—that is, more dependent for vocabulary on the roots and patterns found in a single language family.

Many contemporary poets use rhyme sparingly, finding it neither necessary nor appealing, but until the twentieth century the music of rhyme was central to both the sound and the formal conception of most poems. Because poetry was originally an oral art (and its texts not always written down), various kinds of memory devices (sometimes called mnemonic devices) were built into poems to help reciters remember them. Rhyme was one such device, and most people still find it easier to memorize poetry that rhymes. The simple pleasure of hearing familiar sounds repeated at regular intervals may also help to account for the traditional popularity of rhyme, and perhaps plain habit (for both poets and hearers) had a lot to do with why rhyme flourished for so many centuries in so many languages as an expected feature of poetry. Rhyme also helps to give poetry a special aural quality that distinguishes it from prose, a significant advantage in ages that worry about decorum and propriety and are anxious to preserve a strong sense of poetic tradition. Some ages have been very concerned that poetry should not in any way be mistaken for prose or made to serve prosaic functions, and the literary critics and theorists in those ages made extraordinary efforts to emphasize the distinctions between poetry, which was thought to be artistically superior, and prose, which was thought to be primarily utilitarian. An elitist pride and a fear that an expanded reading public could ultimately dilute the possibilities of traditional art forms have been powerful cultural forces in Western civilization, and if such forces were not themselves responsible for creating rhyme in poetry, they at least helped to preserve a sense of its necessity. But rhyme and other patterns of repeated sounds are also important, for countless historical and cultural reasons, to non-Western languages and poetic traditions as well.

There are at least two other reasons for rhyme. One is complex and hard to state justly without long explanations. It involves traditional ideas about the symmetrical relationship of different aspects of the world and the function of poetry to reflect the universe as human learning has understood it. Many cultures (especially in earlier centuries) have assumed that rhyme was proper to verse, perhaps even essential. Poets in these ages and cultures would have felt themselves eccentric or even foolish to compose poems any other way. Some English poets (especially in the Renaissance) did experiment—often very successfully—with blank verse (that is, verse that did not rhyme but that nevertheless had strict metrical require-

ments), but the cultural pressure for rhyme was almost constant. Why? As noted above, custom or habit may account in part for the assumption that rhyme was necessary, but there was probably more to it than that. Rather, the poets' sense that poetry was an imitation of larger relationships in the universe made it seem natural to use rhyme to represent or re-create a sense of pattern, harmony, correspondence, symmetry, and order. The sounds of poetry were thus, they reasoned, reminders of the harmonious cosmos, of the music of the spheres that animated the planets, the processes of nature, the interrelationship of all created things and beings. Probably no poet ever thought, “I shall now tunelessly emulate the harmony of God's carefully ordered universe,” but the tendency to use rhyme and other repetitions or re-echoings of sound (such as alliteration or assonance) nevertheless stemmed ultimately from basic assumptions about how the universe worked. In a modern world increasingly perceived as fragmented and chaotic, there is less of a tendency to assert a sense of harmony and symmetry. It would be far too easy and too mechanical, of course, to think that rhyme in a poem specifically means that the poet has a firm sense of cosmic order, and that an unrhymed poem testifies to chaos, but cultural assumptions do affect the expectations of both poets and readers, and cultural tendencies create a kind of pressure on the individual creator. If you take a survey course (or a series of related “period” courses) in English or American literature, you will readily notice the diminishing sense that rhyme is an indispensable aspect of poetry. And similarly, other linguistic and national traditions vary usages in different times, depending on their own evolving philosophical and cultural assumptions.

One other reason for using rhyme is that it provides a kind of discipline for the poet, a way of harnessing poetic talents and keeping a rein on the imagination, so that the results are ordered, controlled, put into some kind of meaningful and recognizable form. Robert Frost said that writing poems without rhyme or regular meter was pointless, like playing tennis without a net. Writing good poetry does require a lot of discipline, and Frost speaks for many (perhaps most) traditional poets in suggesting that rhyme or rhythm can be a major source of that discipline. But neither one is the only possible source, and more recent poets have usually felt they would rather play by new rules or invent their own as they go along; they have, therefore, sought their sources of discipline elsewhere, preferring the sparser tones that unrhymed poetry provides. It is not that contemporary poets cannot think of rhyme words or that they do not care about the sounds of their poetry; rather, many recent poets have consciously decided not to work with rhyme and to use instead other aural and metrical devices and other strategies for organizing stanzas, just as they have chosen to work with experimental and variable rhythms instead of writing necessarily in the traditional English meters. Nevertheless, many modern poets have continued to write rhymed verse successfully in a more or less traditional way, finding that, in fact, rhyme can be a useful spur to the imagination—the search for a rhyme word can often lead to unexpected discoveries. It might well be, for example, that the need to find a rhyme for “dirt” led Theodore Roethke to the wonderful final line of “My Papa's Waltz” (chapter 4): “Still clinging to your shirt.” A free-verse poet might have judged the poem complete after the previous line: “Then waltzed me off to bed.”

The amount and density of rhyme vary widely in stanza and verse forms, from elaborate and intricate patterns of rhyme to more casual or spare sound repeti-

*Concentration is the
 very essence of poetry.*

—AMY LOWELL

tions. The Spenserian stanza, for example, is even more rhyme-rich than terza rima, using only three rhyme sounds in nine rhymed lines, as in Keats's *The Eve of St. Agnes*:

Her fair ring hand upon the balustrade,	a
Old Angela was feeling for the stair,	b
When Madeline, St. Agnes' charmed maid,	a
Rose, like a missioned spirit, unaware:	b
With silver taper's light, and pious care,	b
She turned, and down the aged gossip led	c
To a safe level matting. Now prepare,	b
Young Porphyro, for gazing on that bed;	c
She comes, she comes again, like ring dove frayed and fled	c

On the other hand, the ballad stanza (as in "Sir Patrick Spens") has only one set of rhymes in four lines; lines 1 and 3 in each stanza do not rhyme at all:

The king sits in Dumferling town,	a
Drinking the blude-reid wine;	b
"O whar will I get guid sailor,	c
To sail this ship of mine?"	b

Most stanza forms use a metrical pattern as well as a rhyme scheme. Terza rima, for example, involves iambic meter (unstressed and stressed syllables alternating regularly) and each line has five beats (pentameter). Most of the Spenserian stanza (the first eight lines) is also in iambic pentameter, but the ninth line in each stanza has one extra foot (thus, the last line is in iambic hexameter). The ballad stanza, also iambic, as are most English stanza and verse forms, alternates three-beat and four-beat lines; lines 1 and 3 are unrhymed iambic tetrameter (four beats), and lines 2 and 4 are rhymed iambic trimeter (three beats).

THE SONNET

The sonnet, one of the most persistent verse forms, originated in the Middle Ages as a prominent form in Italian and French poetry. It dominated English poetry in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and then was revived several times from the early nineteenth century onward. Except for some early experiments with length, the sonnet has always been fourteen lines long, and it usually is written in iambic pentameter. It is most often printed as if it were a *single* stanza, although it actually has several formal divisions that represent its rhyme schemes and formal breaks. As a popular and traditional verse form in English for more than four centuries, the sonnet has been surprisingly resilient even in ages that largely reject rhyme. It continues to attract a variety of poets, including (curiously) radical and even revolutionary poets, who find its formal demands, discipline, and fixed outcome very appealing. Its uses, although quite varied, can be illustrated fairly precisely. As a verse form, the sonnet is contained, compact, demanding; whatever it does, it must do concisely and quickly. To be effective, it must take advantage of the possibilities inherent in its shortness and its relative rigidity. It is best suited to intensity of feeling and concentration of expression. Not too surprisingly, one subject it frequently discusses is confinement itself.

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

Nuns Fret Not

Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room;
 And hermits are contented with their cells;
 And students with their pensive citadels;
 Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,
 5 Sir blithe and happy, bees that soar for bloom,
 High as the highest Peak of Furness-fells,¹
 Will murmur by the hour in foxglove bells:
 In truth the prison, unto which we doom
 Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,
 10 In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound;
 Within the sonnet's scanty plot of ground;
 Pleased if some souls (for such there needs must be)
 Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,
 Should find brief solace there, as I have found.

1807

Most sonnets are structured according to one of two principles of division. On one principle, the sonnet divides into three units of four lines each and a final unit of two lines, and sometimes the line spacing reflects this division. On the other, the fundamental break is between the first eight lines (called an octave) and the last six (called a sestet). The 4-4-4-2 sonnet is usually called the English or Shakespearean sonnet, and ordinarily its rhyme scheme reflects the structure: the scheme of *abab cdcd efef gg* is the classic one, but many variations from that pattern still reflect the basic 4-4-4-2 division. The 8-6 sonnet is usually called the Italian or Petrarchan sonnet (the Italian poet Petrarch was an early master of this structure), and its "typical" rhyme scheme is *abbaabba cdecde*, although it too produces many variations that still reflect the basic division into two parts, an octave and a sestet.

The two kinds of sonnet structures are useful for two different sorts of argument. The 4-4-4-2 structure works very well for constructing a poem that wants to make a three-step argument (with a quick summary at the end), or for setting up brief, cumulative images. "That time of year thou mayst in me behold" (chapter 4), for example, uses the 4-4-4-2 structure to mark the progressive steps toward death and the parting of friends by using three distinct images, then summarizing. "Let me not to the marriage of true minds" (page 19) works very similarly, following the kind of organization that in chapter 6 was referred to as the 1-2-3 structure—and doing it compactly and economically.

Here, on the other hand, is a poem that uses the 8-6 pattern:

1. Mountains in England's Lake District, where Wordsworth lived.

HENRY CONSTABLE

[My lady's presence makes the roses red]

- My lady's presence makes the roses red,
 Because to see her lips they blush for shame,
 The lily's leaves, for envy, pale became,
 And her white hands in them this envy bred.
 5 The marigold the leaves abroad doth spread,
 Because the sun's and her power is the same.
 The violet of purple colour came,
 Dyed in the blood she made my heart to shed.
 In brief: all flowers from her their virtue take;
 10 From her sweet breath their sweet smells do proceed;
 The living hear which her eyebeams doth make
 Warmeth the ground and quickeneth the seed.
 The rain, wherewith she watereth the flowers,
 Falls from mine eyes, which she dissolves in showers.

1594

The first eight lines argue that the lady's presence is responsible for the color of all of nature's flowers, and the final six lines summarize and extend that argument to smells and heat—and finally to the rain that the lady draws from the speaker's eyes. That kind of two-part structure, in which the octave states a proposition or generalization and the sestet provides a particularization or application of it, has a variety of uses. The final lines may, for example, reverse the first eight and achieve a paradox or irony in the poem, or the poem may nearly balance two comparable arguments: Basically, the 8-6 structure lends itself to poems with two points to make, or to those that wish to make one point and then illustrate it.

Sometimes the neat and precise structure is altered—either slightly, as in Wordsworth's "Nuns Fret Not," above (where the 8-6 structure is more of an 8½-5½ or 7-7 structure), or more radically as particular needs or effects may demand. And the two basic structures certainly do not define all the structural possibilities within a fourteen-line poem, even if they do suggest the most traditional ways of taking advantage of the sonnet's compact and well-kept container.

During the Renaissance, poets regularly employed the sonnet for love poems, and many modern sonnets continue to be about love or private life. And many continue to use a personal, apparently open and sincere tone. But poets often find the sonnet's compact form and rigid demands equally useful for many varieties of subject, theme, and tone. Besides love, sonnets often treat other subjects: politics, philosophy, discovery. And tones vary widely too, from the anger and remorse of "Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame" (chapter 15) and righteous outrage of "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont" (chapter 3) to the tender awe of "How Do I Love Thee?" (page 2). Many poets seem to take the kind of comfort Wordsworth describes in the careful limits of the form, finding in its two basic variations (the English sonnet, such as "That time of year," and the Ital-

ian sonnet, such as "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" [chapter 11]) a sufficiency of ways to organize their materials into coherent structures.

. . . .

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

A Sonnet Is a Moment's Monument

- A Sonnet is a moment's monument—
 Memorial from the Soul's eternity
 To one dead deathless hour. Look that it be,
 Whether for lustral² rite or dire portent,
 5 Of its own arduous fullness reverent.
 Carve it in ivory or in ebony,
 As Day or Night may rule; and let Time see
 Its flowering crest imperaled and orient.³
 A Sonnet is a coin: its face reveals
 10 The soul—its converse, to what Power 'tis due—
 Whether for tribute to the august appeals
 Of Life or dower in Love's high retinue,
 It serve; or 'mid the dark wharf's cavernous breath,
 In Charon's palm it pay the toll to Death.⁴
 1881

- In Rossetti's metaphor comparing the sonnet to a coin (lines 9–14), what are the two "sides" of a sonnet?

JOHN KEATS

On the Sonnet

- If by dull rhymes our English must be chained,
 And like Andromeda,⁵ the sonnet sweet
 Fettered, in spite of pained loveliness,
 Let us find, if we must be constrained,
 5 Sandals more interwoven and complete

2. Purificatory. 3. Sparkling.

4. In classical myth, Charon was the boatman who rowed the souls of the dead across the river Styx. Ancient Greeks put a small coin in the hand of the dead to pay his fee.

5. According to Greek myth, Andromeda was chained to a rock so that she would be devoured by a sea monster. She was rescued by Perseus, who married her. When she died she was placed among the stars.

To fit the naked foot of Poesy⁶
 Let us inspect the lyre, and weigh the stress
 Of every chord,⁷ and see what may be gained
 By ear industrious, and attention meet;
 10 Misers of sound and syllable, no less
 Than Midas⁸ of his coinage, let us be
 Jealous of dead leaves in the bay-wreath crown,⁹
 So, if we may not let the Muse be free,
 She will be bound with garlands of her own.

1819

- What is the rhyme scheme of this poem? How well does this unusual structure meet the challenge implied by the poem?

SIR PHILIP SIDNEY

*My True Love Hath My Heart*¹

My true love hath my heart, and I have his,
 By just exchange, one for the other given.
 I hold his dear, and mine he cannot miss,
 There never was a better bargain driven.
 5 His heart in me keeps me and him in one,
 My heart in him, his thoughts and senses guides;
 He loves my heart, for once it was his own,
 I cherish his, because in me it bides.

His heart² his wound received from my sight,
 10 My heart was wounded with his wounded heart;
 For as from me on him his hurt did light,
 So still methought in me his hurt did smart.
 Both equal hurt, in this change sought our bliss,
 My true love hath my heart, and I have his.
 1590

- How does this poem illustrate the three-step argument typical of the English sonnet? How does the pun on “heart” play out through the poem?

6. In a letter that contained this sonnet, Keats expressed impatience with the traditional Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet forms: “I have been endeavoring to discover a better sonnet stanza than we have.”
7. Lyre string; *Muse* proper.
8. The legendary king of Phrygia who asked, and got, the power to turn all he touched to gold.
9. The bay tree was sacred to Apollo, god of poetry, and bay wreaths came to symbolize true poetic achievement. The withering of the bay tree is sometimes considered an omen of death, *Jealous* suspiciously watchful.
1. This poem is embedded in Sidney’s prose romance, *Arcadia*, where it is sung by a simple shepherdess named Charita.
2. The pun on heart (deer), pretty much submerged earlier in the poem, begins to operate openly in mid-poem: “Heart” was often spelled “hart” in the sixteenth century (as it was in early editions of this poem).

HENRY CONSTABLE [Wonder it is, and pity]

Wonder it is, and pity is, that she
 in whom all beauty’s treasure we may find,
 that may enrich the body and the mind,
 towards the poor should use no charity.
 5 My love is gone a-begging unto thee,
 and if that Beauty had not been more kind
 than Pity, long ere this he had been pined;
 but Beauty is content his food to be.
 Oh pity have, when such poor orphans beg
 10 Love (naked boy) hath nothing on his back;
 and though he wanteth neither arm nor leg,
 yet maimed he is, sith³ he his sight doth lack.
 And yet (though blind) he beauty can behold,
 and yet (though naked) he feels more heat than cold.
 1592

- Explain the poem’s metaphorical representation of Love.

LADY MARY WROTH

In This Strange Labyrinth

In this strange labyrinth⁴ how shall I turn?
 Ways are on all sides while the way I miss;
 If to the right hand, there in love I burn;
 Let me go forward, therein danger is;
 5 If to the left, suspicion hinders bliss;
 Let me turn back: shame cries I ought return
 Nor faint though crosses with my fortunes kiss.
 Stand still is harder, although sure to mourn;
 Thus let me take the right, or left hand way;
 10 Go forward, or stand still, or back retire;
 I must these doubts endure without ally
 Or help, but travail find for my best hire;
 Yet that which most my troubled sense doth move
 Is to leave all, and take the thread of love.
 1621

- In what ways is the poem itself a “strange labyrinth”? How does the concluding couplet “solve” the conundrum posed by the three quatrains?

3. Since.
4. The image of love as a labyrinth is traditional, going back at least to Petrarch. In Greek mythology, Ariadne helps Theseus escape a labyrinth by giving him a skein of thread (line 14) to guide his way.

HENRI COLE

White Spine

Liar, I thought, kneeling with the others,
 how can He love me and hate what I am?
 The dome of St. Peter's⁹ shone yellowish
 gold, like butter and eggs. *My God*, I prayed
 5 anyhow, as if made in the image
 and likeness of Him. Nearby, a handsome
 priest looked at me like a stone; I looked back,
 not desiring to go it alone.
 The college of cardinals¹ wore punitive red.
 10 The white spine waved to me from his white throne.²
 Being in a place not my own, much less
 myself. I climbed out, a bear in a crib.
 Somewhere a terrorist rolled a cigarette.
 Reason, not faith, would change him.

1998

- What are the hidden rhymes and near-rhymes that help to knit this poem together? How is the form of this poem itself "a place not my own"?

ROBERT HASS

Sonnet

A man talking to his ex-wife on the phone.
 He has loved her voice and listens with attention
 to every modulation of its tone. Knowing
 it intimately. Not knowing what he wants
 5 from the sound of it, from the tendered civility.
 He studies, out the window, the seed shapes
 of the broken pods of ornamental trees.
 The kind that grow in everyone's garden, that no one
 but horticulturalists can name. Four arched chambers
 10 of pale green, tiny vegetal proscenium arches,
 a pair of black tapering seeds bedded in each chamber.

9. St. Peter's Basilica, Rome. 1. The Pope's counselors.

2. The ceremonial chair on which the Pope ("white spine") sits.

A wish geometry, miniature, Indian or Persian,
 lovers or gods in their apartments. Outside, white,
 patient animals, and tangled vines, and rain.

1996

- Why do you think the poet has chosen, with this title, to identify the poem with the traditional sonnet form? What is appropriate in the image of the "four arched chambers"?

BILLY COLLINS

Sonnet

All we need is fourteen lines, well, thirteen now,
 and after this one just a dozen
 to launch a little ship on love's storm-tossed seas,
 then only ten more left like rows of beans.
 5 How easily it goes unless you get Elizabethan
 and insist the iambic bongos must be played
 and rhymes positioned at the ends of lines,
 one for every station of the cross.
 But hang on here while we make the turn
 into the final six where all will be resolved,
 10 where longing and heartache will find an end,
 where Laura will tell Petrarch to put down his pen,
 take off those crazy medieval tights,
 blow out the lights, and come at last to bed.

1999

- In what respects is Collins's poem a traditional sonnet? In what respects is it not?

ANTHONY HECHT

Spring Break

I
 The beach is the hot parade ground where brigades
 Of sunnanned girls disport themselves and thrust
 Upon one's notice pelvis, butt, and bust,
 And whitened noses bridged with heart-shaped shades.
 5 The boys are beery, laying plots to score,
 Exhibiting heroic abs and pecs,
 The showy animality of sex,
 Which the girls make weak pretenses to ignore.