

She could not trouble her mind with too long,  
She sighed and passed unscared along the wall.

\*

(Stevens)

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late  
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,  
And the green freedom of a cockatoo  
Upon a rug mingle to dissipate  
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.  
She dreams a little, and she feels the dark  
Encroachment of that old catastrophe,  
As a calm darkens among water lights.  
The pungent oranges and bright, green wings  
Seem things in some procession of the dead,  
Winding across wide water, without sound.  
The day is like wide water without sound,  
Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet  
Over the seas, to silent Palestine,  
Dominion of the blood and sepulcher.

The last is a single section of "Sunday Morning," but it also has the feel and shape of an (almost) unrhymed sonnet. Notice that of the preceding, Wordsworth's lines are the maziest, the closest to Milton's immensely flexible syntax (which probably came from studying Latin since he was a little kid).

Robert Hass, A Little Book on Form (New York, 2017).

## SONNET

The sonnet is the one durable, widely used form in English poetry in the last five hundred years. It came into English in the early sixteenth century through the translation of Petrarch. Its content was psychological and erotic, it brought Italianate extended metaphor into English, and it had philosophical roots in the Neoplatonic tradition of courtly love. It exploded in the sonnet sequences of the 1590s—Shakespeare's is the most famous—and was transformed in the early seventeenth century by Donne's use of it for religious poems and in midcentury by Milton's grand and masterly summation in poems on literary, personal, and political subjects.

(The Italian sonnet is Sicilian in origin. It is said to have been invented at the court of Frederick II, the Holy Roman Emperor and King of Sicily who had his court at Palermo and patronized poets writing in Sicilian, Provençal, Arabic, and Greek. Among them was Giacomo da Lentini, a notary at the court, who wrote in Sicilian and supposedly hit upon the sonnet some time around 1222–1225 by adding to a pair of quatrains a pair of triplet stanzas from a Sicilian folk song form he had heard. This established the fourteen lines and 4-4-

3-3 pattern of the form to which he gave the name of *sonetta*, or small song. Lentini wrote in Sicilian, adapting the idiom and subject matter of Provençal poetry, and eighteen sonnets by him survive in Tuscan transliterations. Guittone d'Arezzo (1235–1294) took the form into Tuscany—he produced three hundred sonnets—and passed it to Guido Cavalcanti (1250–1300) and Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), who passed it to Francesco Petrarch (1304–1374) and Michaelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564.)

That form, for me, was roughly—state it; dance it. Or—state it; dance the undoing of it. Without Italian, especially without medieval Italian, I found that the best way to study the relation of octet to sestet was a read through Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Early Italian Poets*, one of the sweetest of all books of Victorian poetry.

In English the sonnet evolved into two forms. One was an Italianate sonnet that retained the 4-4-3-3 rhyme scheme and with it its rhetorical structure—an eight-line development, a turn at the ninth line that initiates the six-line conclusion; the other came to be called the English sonnet and employed a 4-4-4-2 rhyme scheme, borrowing from the native tradition the strong finish of a concluding couplet rhyme. This was, of course, the form that Shakespeare made famous, and, though it still tended to introduce a turn at the ninth line, it allowed for other rhetorical strategies—twelve lines of development, for example, and the resolution or turn or summation in the couplet.

Peter Sacks has remarked that some of the appeal of the sonnet may have to be because it has the same proportions as the human face. Hans Holbein, painting in the heyday of the sonnet, observed that the proportions of the human face were upper half, brow, eyes, nose 8, and lower half, mouth, jaw, chin 6, proportions that mimic those of the sonnet. And, Sacks writes, the sonnet originates as a kind of staring into the eyes of the beloved. So it suggests one formal energy of the sonnet: it can be thought of as an intense gaze

at a subject. Though that doesn't quite capture the rhetorical flourish of the form. It's a very showy form in the sixteenth century, when skill at rhetoric and argument was part of a classical education. Some sonnets seem to sit comfortably in their basic formal proposition, but the best of them bring intensity or playfulness of imagination to the way energy moves in the form.

The English sonnet fell into disuse toward the end of the seventeenth century and was revived by poets at the very end of the eighteenth. See Wordsworth's "Scorn Not the Sonnet." The form got memorable use in the poems of Charlotte Smith, Wordsworth, Shelley, Clare, and Keats; and the Victorians revived the sonnet sequence in George Meredith's "Modern Love," Elizabeth Browning's "Sonnets from the Portuguese," the two volumes of Frederick Tuckerman's "Sonnets," as well as Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "House of Life" and his reinvestigation of the origin of the form in his great translation, *Early Italian Poets*. As Milton capped the first cycle of the sonnet, Gerard Manley Hopkins capped the second with his dark, explosive poems in the form. The sonnets of Edwin Arlington Robinson, narrative and naturalistic, are another powerful late transformation.

With the exception of Frost and Yeats and the early poems of Ezra Pound, the modernist project—partly because it radically de-emphasized rhyme—avoided or covertly adapted the sonnet, though it continued to be used. The best-known later sequences are Louis Zukofsky's ingenious deployment of it in "A-7"; John Berryman's *Berryman's Sonnets*; the late sequences of Robert Lowell, *History* and *The Dolphin*; and Ted Berrigan's *The Sonnets*. As a formal proposition the form has appealed also to neoformalist and language poets—Berrigan's Ashbery-and-O'Hara-inflected cutup sequence is an initiating instance, and so are the poems of Bernadette Mayer.

## QUICK TAKE ON THE HISTORY OF THE SONNET

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There are lots of sources. One of the best is Phyllis Levin's *The Penguin Book of the Sonnet*. Another is Stephen Burt's *The Art of the Sonnet*.

So the form comes into English in the 1530s, begins with Thomas Wyatt's translations of Petrarch, and experiments with the sonnet form in original poems in English. Wyatt died, age thirty-eight or thirty-nine, in 1542. Poems were first printed in *Tottel's Miscellany* in 1557. Henry Howard, fifteen years younger than Wyatt, was translating Petrarch at the same time or just after. Howard died five years after Wyatt, aged twenty-nine or thirty.

### TRANSLATIONS OF PETRARCH

- \* Thomas Wyatt: "The Long Love That in My Thought Doth Harbor"; "My Galley Charged with Forgetfulness"
- \* Henry Howard: "Love That Doth Reign and Live Within My Thought"

### EARLIEST ENGLISH SONNETS

- \* Thomas Wyatt: "Whoso List to Hunt" (c. 1542)
- \* Henry Howard: "The Soote Season" (c. 1547)

### THE NEXT GENERATION (1560–1580)

- \* George Turberville: "The Lover to the Thames of London to Favor His Lady Passing Thereon" (experiment with sixteen-line sonnet, 1567)
- \* George Gascoigne: "For That He Looked Not Upon Her" (1573)

### THE GREAT DECADES (1580–1610)

- \* William Shakespeare: Sonnets—printed 1609, earliest written in the 1580s, WS in his twenties
- \* Edmund Spenser: *Amoretti*—printed in 1595
- \* Philip Sidney: *Astrophil and Stella*—1582, printed in 1591
- \* Samuel Daniel: *Delia*—printed in 1592
- \* Michael Drayton: printed in 1619, written in the 1580s and '90s
- \* Sir Walter Raleigh: "Three Things There Be"—1610, the pure English tone, plain, moralizing
- \* Fulke Greville: *Caelica*—printed 1633, written mostly in 1580s and '90s

### THE NEXT GENERATION (1610–1630)

- \* Ben Jonson: classical models, took no interest in the sonnet
- \* John Donne: same age as Jonson, no sonnets in his "Songs & Sonnets" presumably because he felt it had been used up for purposes of eroticism and wit; came to the form relatively late, in the 1620s and 1630s, for the "Holy Sonnets," which would completely reframe the subject matter of the form. Possible that he took hints from Shakespeare, Greville, and Raleigh, as they moved away from the rhetoric of Platonic love toward a more spoken diction and graver, darker matter.
- \* Lady Mary Wroth: *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*—published 1621, first sequence of sonnets by an Englishwoman, many with an ababcdcdceefggf rhyme scheme that is variant version of the Italian sonnet.

### THE SONNET IN THE MID-SEVENTEENTH CENTURY (1630–1680)

- \* George Herbert: "Redemption"—probably imitating Donne (1633); "Prayer I" (1633); but Herbert mainly worked in his reli-

gious poems from the strenuous new stanza forms invented by Donne in his erotic and secular poems

- \* John Milton: "On Shakespeare" (1630); "How Soon Hath Time" (1631); "I Did But Prompt the Age" (1645); "When I Consider How My Light Is Spent" (1652); "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont" (1658)

Then, in the Restoration and the early eighteenth century, with the ascendancy of the heroic couplet, the sonnet falls into disuse. It's not interesting to the best poets. It doesn't show up again until after the Pope-Swift generation. The poets of midcentury and after, in the so-called age of sensibility, were attracted to the ode, the elegy, the epitaph, the hymn. But some of them began to write sonnets.

- \* Thomas Gray: "Sonnet on the Death of Mr. Richard West" (1742; see Wordsworth's dismantling of the diction of this poem in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*)

#### THE SONNET REVIVAL IN THE ROMANTIC PERIOD

(1780-1828)

- \* William Blake: "To the Evening Star" (1783; so eccentric from the point of view of its time as not to be a sonnet but fourteen lines of blank verse; notice the wildly unusual enjambments, but also the conventional turn at line 10)
- \* Charlotte Smith: "Written in the Churchyard at Middleton in Sussex" (1789); "Written Near a Port on a Dark Evening" (1797); "Written in October" (1797); "Nepenthe" (1797)
- \* William Wordsworth: "It Is a Beauteous Evening; London" (1802); "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802" (the signature poetics of immediacy in the dating, borrowed perhaps from Smith, marks the romantic turn in the

form); "On the Extinction of the Venetian Republic" (resurrects Milton's use of the form on a political theme); "Nuns Fret Not; The World Is Too Much With Us" (classical allusion and contemporary theme, Wordsworth soaked in Milton)—all printed in 1807; "Surprised by Joy" (1815); "Mutability" (1822); "Scorn Not the Sonnet" (1827; interesting take on the status of the form and the sense of its pastness)

- \* Samuel Coleridge: "Work Without Hope, Lines Composed 21st February 1825" (imitates W's dating; uses stanza breaks to emphasize unusual 6/8 turn; unconventional rhyme scheme)
- \* Percy Bysshe Shelley: "To Wordsworth" (1816); "Ozymandias" (1818); "England in 1819" (1819)
- \* John Keats: "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" (1816); "On the Sea" (1817); "On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Again, When I Have Fears, To Homer" (1818); "On the Sonnet, Bright Star" (1819)

#### SONNET IN THE 1830s

- \* Edgar Allan Poe: "Sonnet to Science" (1829)
- \* Ralph Waldo Emerson: "The Rhodora" (1834)
- \* John Clare: "Gypsies" (1837; see also "Badger," which is written in three stanzas, the first two of which are fourteen lines of couplets, almost sonnets, and "Farewell," with its 6/4/4 pattern) and all the Northborough Sonnets, 1832-1837, for the radical use of it as a purely descriptive form

#### THE VICTORIAN SONNET (1840-1880)

- \* Alfred Lord Tennyson: "The Kraken" (1830, very Shelleyan, written when he was twenty-one); "Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal" (1847, disguised sonnet from *The Princess*)
- \* Elizabeth Browning: *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1845-1846)

- \* Matthew Arnold: "Shakespeare" (1849); "Dover Beach" (1867, notice that the first stanza is a loose, Wordsworthian sonnet)
- \* Dante Rossetti: *The House of Life* (1847–80); *Early Italian Poets* (1860–70; Rossetti translated all the early Italian sonnets in two volumes; after Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat* they are probably the best literary translations of the nineteenth century)
- \* Christina Rossetti: "In an Artist's Studio" (1856)
- \* George Meredith: "Modern Love" (1862; a remarkable turn for the form, a kind of novel in sonnets); "Lucifer in Starlight" (1883); "Winter Heavens" (1888)
- \* Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: "Mezzo Cammin, Written at Boppard on the Rhine, August 25, 1842"; "Chaucer" (1873); "Milton" (1873; literary subjects having become naturalized to the form)
- \* Frederick Tuckerman: *Sonnets* (1854–60; maybe the intensest psychologically, after Meredith, of the Victorian sonnets)

#### TINKERERS, ENGLISH AND AMERICAN (1840–1924)

- \* Henry Thoreau: "Haze," "Smoke," "Low-Anchored Cloud" (1843; descriptive poems that hover around the sonnet form)
- \* Walt Whitman: "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing" (1860; a thirteen-line free verse poem, perhaps the first free verse sonnet)
- \* Herman Melville: "The Maldive Shark" (1888; sixteen lines sonnetish)
- \* Thomas Hardy: "Hap" (1866); "Jezreel, On Its Seizure by the English Under Allenby, September 1918" (1918; four long-lined quatrains with the tone and feel of a Miltonic sonnet)
- \* Gerard Manley Hopkins: "God's Grandeur," "The Windhover," "Duns Scotus' Oxford," "Pied Beauty" (truncated sonnet for which Hopkins invented the term "curtal sonnet"; all these poems 1877); "Felix Randal" (1880, astonishing long-lined son-

net); "Spring and Fall" (1880, 15 fifteen lines, couplet rhyme, trochaic meter); "As Kingfishers Catch Fire" (1882), the "Terrible Sonnets" (1885); "That Nature Is a Heraclitean Fire" (1888, an exploded sonnet?); "Thou Art Indeed Just, Lord" (1889).

#### VICTORIAN TO MODERN: SURVIVAL OF THE SONNET (1880–1930)

- \* Edwin Arlington Robinson: "George Crabbe," "Reuben Bright" (1897); "How Annandale Went Out" (1910); "New England," "The Sheaves" (1925)
- \* W. B. Yeats: "In the Seven Woods" (1903); "Leda and the Swan" (1923); "Meru" (1934, the political-apocalyptic sonnet, Milton to Shelley to Yeats)
- \* Robert Frost: "The Oven Bird," "Range-Finding" (1916); "Acquainted With the Night" (sonnet with a terza terza rima rhyme scheme, 1928); "Design" (1936); "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same" (1942); "The Gift Outright" (1942, read at John F. Kennedy's inauguration in 1960)
- \* D. H. Lawrence: "Baby Running Barefoot" (1916), "When I Read Shakespeare" (1929); "Trees in the Garden" (fifteen lines, 1932); "Andraitx—Pomegranate Flowers" (1932)
- \* Edna St. Vincent Millay: "Euclid Alone Has Looked on Beauty Bare" (1920); "I, Being Born a Woman and Distressed" (1923); "I Dreamed I Moved Among the Elysian Fields" (1930)
- \* Robinson Jeffers: "Shane O'Neill's Cairn" (1931); "Love the Wild Swan" (1935); "The Eye" (1941); "Carmel Point" (1954); "Vulture, Birds and Fishes" (1963, late work, sonnet based)
- \* e e Cummings: "the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished rooms" (1923), "next to of Course god America i" (1926)

## MODERNISTS AND THE SONNET (1913–1933)

- \* Gertrude Stein: “Susie Asado” (1913; if you look for a more decisive break in the tradition than Hopkins, this would be it, a cubist sonnet)
- \* Wallace Stevens: “The Snow Man” (1923; a fifteen-line poem. Stevens showed no interest in the sonnet after 1910)
- \* William Carlos Williams: Avoided the sonnet after 1911
- \* Ezra Pound: Avoided the sonnet after 1914, but published his translation of Cavalcanti’s sonnets in 1934 and embedded parts of them in the *Cantos* as tracers of a neo-Platonism that interested him
- \* H.D.: Avoided the sonnet
- \* Marianne Moore: Seems to have avoided the sonnet
- \* T. S. Eliot: Didn’t work in the sonnet form, but see the first fourteen-line stanza of “The Dry Salvages” and the first stanza of the third section of “Little Gidding”
- \* Hart Crane: “To Emily Dickinson” (1933)

People kept experimenting with the form though it is hard to name a decisive instance after Yeats’s “Leda and the Swan” in 1923 and Frost’s “Design” in 1936. The most ambitious instances are Robert Lowell’s sonnet sequences of the early 1970s and John Berryman’s sonnet sequence, which is not his best work. The New York School poets were drawn to the form—see the work of Berrigan and Mayer—and Seamus Heaney did important work in “The Glanmore Sonnets” (1979), “Clearances” (1987), and elsewhere.

## THE SONNET 1939–1989

- \* W. H. Auden: “Sonnets from China” (1939)
- \* John Berryman: *Berryman’s Sonnets* (1967)
- \* Robert Lowell: *Notebooks 1967–68* (1969), *Notebook* (1970), *The Dolphin* (1973), *For Lizzie and Harriet* (1973), *History* (1972)
- \* Adrienne Rich: *21 Love Poems* (1976)

- \* Seamus Heaney: “Glanmore Sonnets” (1979), “Clearances” (1987)
- \* Ted Berrigan: *The Sonnets* (1967)
- \* Bernadette Mayer: *Sonnets* (1989)

## THE SONNET AFTER 1990

- \* A range of work in the form can be found in *The Penguin Book of the Sonnet*, ed. Phyllis Levin, 2006.