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Verse Forms: The Sonnet

In the last chapter we discussed the sonnet in relation to metaphor, focusing on how metaphor can be used to build a sonnet structure. Now we will consider the sonnet more generally as a verse form. Besides allowing a fuller examination of the sonnet itself, it will help us to begin thinking about the importance of formal features—frameworks, rules, conventions—for poetry and for the way poetry works.

The sonnet, as we saw, has a basic formal design. It has fourteen lines, each of a particular length, written in a particular rhythm, and marked by a particular order of rhymes. These lines can follow a number of patterns of division. The *English sonnet's* fourteen lines are divided into three quatrains of four lines each and two rhyming lines, the couplet, at the end. An *Italian sonnet* instead divides into one group of eight lines, the octave, followed by a group of six lines, the sestet. The octave, however, can also play on the quatrain structure. Its eight lines may fall into two groups of four, like quatrains. The sestet, similarly, can fall into two groups of three lines each, creating two tercets. It can, quite flexibly, be divided into other line groupings as well.

Indeed: despite—or rather, within—these set forms, the sonnet as a verse form is extremely flexible. There are, to be sure, limits to such flexibility. For example, the defining rule for a sonnet is that it must be fourteen lines long. If a poem does not have fourteen lines, it is not a sonnet. This is more or less an ironclad definition. Yet a poem may refer to a sonnet, play on a sonnet, recall a sonnet, by adding or taking away a line. That is, the strict rule of fourteen lines can serve as a reference point for variations that take on meaning exactly as they point to a fixed norm. This possibility of variation is still greater in terms of the divisions of a sonnet into quatrains, octaves, sestets, or couplets. These can be varied, to some extent in

THE SONNET

Line No.	English (Shakespearean)	Italian (Petrarchan)
1	a	a
2	b	b
3	a	b
4	b	a
5	c	a
6	d	b
7	c	b
8	d	a
9	e	c
10	f	d
11	e	d
12	f	c
13	g	c
14	g	d

Diagrammatic annotations from the image:

- Lines 1-4: English Quatrain; Italian Quatrain
- Lines 5-8: English Quatrain; Italian Quatrain
- Lines 9-12: English Quatrain; Italian Tercet
- Lines 13-14: English Couplet; Italian Tercet
- Lines 1-8: Octave
- Lines 9-14: Sestet

their rhyme patterns, but certainly in their logical, syntactic, and rhetorical development and distribution. The divisions permit, and indeed generate, creative variations: like variations on a musical theme. But to vary a theme you have to first have one. The invention relies on the norm. Creativity is generated by restrictions. This paradox is central to the sonnet and has often been its subject also, as was the case in the Wordsworth sonnet "Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room."

In the end, the sonnet's formal divisions and features such as rhyme and syntax are significant, and exciting, not as mechanical rules but because of what they do and how they work: how the divisions structure the sonnet's material by balancing its parts, developing its statement, distributing its concerns. The sonnet can be thought of as a building, with an architectural design. Its divisions are like rooms which open into each other, all shaped by use and function. For instance, in the Italian sonnet, the division into two parts often involves a "turn" or *volta*: that is, some new direction the sonnet takes in its final six lines. But such a turn can take place in the English sonnet, too, in its concluding couplet. In the Italian sonnet, moreover, some further "turn" may also occur in its last two

lines, suggesting a couplet structure; while in the English sonnet, a turn in logic, or emphasis, or self-reflection may take place in the ninth line, as it would in an Italian sonnet. The two forms, in this sense, remain in a dynamic relation with each other (although they can usually be formally identified by rhyme scheme, despite their structural flexibility). Divisions may also spill over into each other, as a sentence begun in one quatrain comes to syntactic completion in the next. Even a whole sonnet may spill over in a sense, becoming part of an ongoing *sonnet sequence* that allows for more extensive treatment of the subjects each sonnet raises, and of the poet who is writing them.

There is, for example, the question of rhyme scheme. Sonnets do have them. Rhymes mark basic sonnet structures: English or Italian, quatrain divisions, couplets. But rhyme is not simply mechanical. In chapter 12 we will see how rhyme can be used in poetry in very creative ways, serving a number of poetic functions. What must be underscored is the function of rhyme: how rhymes serve to group lines or images together, the relationships they develop between words in the text. This is the case as well within set patterns, such as the sonnet's. And the sonnet's rhyme schemes can vary to a considerable degree. They can be alternating (*abab*), as they are in the English sonnet. They can be enclosing, so that the first and fourth lines of a quatrain division match, framing the second and third lines within (*abba*), as in an Italian sonnet. They can be contained within individual quatrains; or they can be interlocking from quatrain to quatrain (Edmund Spenser experimented with interlocking forms) continuously through the octave. The lines of the sestet in an Italian sonnet can follow a variety of rhyme patterns, although there is usually not a concluding couplet.

Besides these strictly formal features, the sonnet also has a number of characteristic subjects, or topics, especially love, as well as characteristic ways of handling them that developed out of earlier verse forms. In this sense, a verse form is quite dynamic. Each form is a kind of historical field, or archeological site, in which the traces of past forms remain but take on new shapes and functions. In the case of the sonnet, one origin of the form goes back to Troubadour love poetry of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This was a courtly verse written in Provençal (a kind of old French), which then influenced later medieval Italian poets, especially Petrarch and Dante and his circle. It was addressed to a lady of the court, in admi-

ration and even adoration of her, also (or thereby) showing the effects of this admiration and worship on the writer.

In this sense, it is a perfectly valid riddle to ask: how is love like a sonnet? In attempting to reflect the experience of love (as it was then conceived) the sonnet took on certain features. Love, for example, was thought of as a malady, with carefully described symptoms, so you could tell whether or not you really had the disease, and how badly. Many sonnets therefore include imagery of illness. Thus Dante in his *Vita Nuova* (1294) speaks of how "Love takes hold of me so suddenly / My vital spirits I am near to lose." Sir Thomas Wyatt, whose translations of Petrarch brought the sonnet to England, speaks in "I Find No Peace" (from Petrarch's *In Vita* Sonnet XC) of how "I burn and freeze like ice; . . . I desire to perish, and yet I ask health" (1557). Sir Philip Sidney, in Sonnet 6 of *Astrophel and Stella* (1591), un.masks such imagery as already habitual to sonnetteering:

Some lovers speak, when they their Muses entertain,
Of hopes begot by fear, of wot not what desires,
Of force of heavenly beams infusing hellish pain,
Of living deaths, dear wounds, fair storms, and freezing fires;

Here, too, is already apparent the sonnet's uses of paradox; for love was considered paradoxical. It elevated and lowered, it was violent and gentle, cruel and wonderful, fleeting and eternal. Therefore, the sonnet characteristically introduced self-contradictory images (*oxymoron*) and intricately balanced opposites (*antithesis*).

But this sonnet material reached into other experiences. The intense consideration of love on one level encouraged psychological introspection. Thus, the sonnet became an early form for psychological self-examination. It was one of the first literary modes for identifying and pondering the inner world of experience in all its multiple aspects. This includes sexuality, which the poets did not shy away from exploring. But on another level love raised issues not only psychological, but also religious. God, of course, was the true, highest object of love in the religious tradition. So the sonnet came to explore the relationship between the love of the lady and the love of God. This had a double effect. On the one hand, it elevated the lady, and the lover too, in regarding earthly love as a conduit to love of divine things. On the other hand, it brought divine love down to an earthly level. This could lead to a sense of harmony and conti-

nunity between things earthly and heavenly (a harmony made easier if the beloved lady died and took up residence in heaven). Or it could set up a competition between them. At this point we want to remember that the sonnet is a Renaissance form, and that in it we see issues that were coming to the surface in the Renaissance—the whole question, for example, of religious devotion and its proper object; of allegiance to the heavenly world or to the earthly one; and of the proper balance between them. Love became a battleground for the struggle between these emerging questions and allegiances; and the sonnet, as a love poem, reflects these struggles.

But the sonnet is not only addressed to the lady. It also represents the lover, that is, the poet, who is writing to his beloved. Here, too, ideas emerging in the Renaissance can be felt: a new sense of the status of the individual, influenced in part by the rediscovery of the pagan classical texts of Greece and Rome, which had been neglected or lost during the Christian Middle Ages. With this rediscovery, and this sense of the individual, came also a new sense of the status of literature and of poetry. As lover, the poet explores his inner emotional, psychological, and religious life. But he also has a new sense of himself as poet, who not only experiences, but also reflects upon this interior world through artistic consciousness.

Humanism, which broadly speaking was a revival of classical values in sixteenth-century Europe, was more specifically a program of training, especially in eloquence. The humanists intended education in rhetoric to find its true application in public discourse and political life. But the rigor and splendor of its rhetorical training also bore fruit among writers and poets, whose elegant wit was particularly cultivated in courtly life. The sonnet, certainly in England, developed and came to its most extraordinary flowering in Queen Elizabeth's court. To a large extent a courtly genre, the sonnet was intimately shaped by courtly modes of conduct—in which eloquence itself played a defining role—as well as by scenes, terms, and social structures of the court. The sonnet's imagery and forms of address; its conceptions of social relationships; its figure of the lady; and its representation of the poet, who in many ways resembles a courtier, all reflect characteristics of the court. Finally, with the recovery of the classics, literature itself became an emblem of what could survive from the past, a monument to past cultures, and past writers, as they continue to live on and to inspire cultural achievements. Literature itself, that is, became a site for immortality. The

poet could gain eternal life, could defy time, by writing. This becomes a central, characteristic commitment of the sonnet.

There are other historical precedents that shaped the sonnet. As a short form, it took on certain features from the epigram—a sharp, witty saying—which can be felt in the witty conclusions of the couplet. But the epigram was not necessarily an admiring genre. It could celebrate public events and men, but it could also criticize and satirize, could act as a short, biting insult. The sonnet, too, can descend from the fine mist of adoring love to deliver a sharp, critical blow—can mix the “sweet” with the “salt,” genre terms that directly enter into the diction and imagery of the sonnet itself.

The main points to be emphasized from this historical sketch are: (1) that the sonnet as a verse form involves much more than the basic formal features such as its length, rhyme schemes, and divisions—or rather, that these formal features have in the sonnet particular *functions*, which are their purpose and point; and (2) that there are aspects of the sonnet other than its formal traits: its use of paradox; its psychological depth; its balancing of earthly and heavenly claims; its wit; and finally, the way in which its principal concerns—love or devotion or glory or fame—find expression through the sonnet’s particular formal progressions and construction, and the dual roles of the writer as lover and poet at once.

To see how reading a sonnet takes shape within the requirements, history, and intentions of a verse form, let us turn to an example: “My Love Is Like to Ice,” by Edmund Spenser (1552?–1599).

My Love is like to ice, and I to fire:
 How comes it then that this her cold so great
 Is not dissolved through my so hot desire,
 But harder grows the more I her entreat?
 Or how comes it that my exceeding heat
 Is not allayed by her heart-frozen cold,
 But that I burn much more in boiling sweat,
 And feel my flames augmented manifold?
 What more miraculous thing may be told,
 That fire, which all things melts, should harden ice,
 And ice, which is congeal'd with senseless cold,
 Should kindle fire by wonderful device?
 Such is the power of love in gentle mind,
 That it can alter all the course of kind.

This obviously is a sonnet devoted to love. The first thing to notice is how it is constructed around paradoxes: ice/fire, heat/cold, melting/freezing. These paradoxes also reflect the notion of love as malady. They are physical conditions, fever and chill. In this sense, Spenser did not invent the image-scheme of the poem, but used a convention (the topic of our next chapter) that was already well established, not only in manuals of love, but also in earlier sonnets, especially Petrarch’s. Here, that is, the originality of the imagery plays almost no role in the poem’s effect. Everyone already knew that love was like an illness, causing the lover to burn and freeze in turn. But the poet’s way of handling this well-worn image is of great effect: the way he develops it, both psychologically, and rhetorically, within a linguistic pattern of carefully balanced opposites.

Psychologically, the poem has considerable depth and offers a keen analysis of the lover’s interior condition. It in fact goes far toward presenting the immediate experience of internal sensation. It shows the very process of love as felt from within. For this psychological state, the sonnet offers an extended simile, or really double simile, introduced in the first line with the simile-word “like.” The beloved lady is said to be “like to ice”; the lover in his turn is like “to fire.” The sonnet develops each likeness, proceeding through three quatrains and a couplet. That is, the quatrains here do not separate into different image systems. Instead, they progress through the development of the central simile. This basic continuity of the sonnet is further realized through its rhyme scheme, which is alternating but continuous. Spenser, in his own adaptation of sonnet form, uses the same two rhymes throughout the sonnet (until the couplet). Spenser does this often. He is a great master of the music of poetry, a truly melodious writer, with a wonderful ear for rhyme—no easy accomplishment in English, which is basically a rhyme-poor language.

But despite this fundamental continuity through the sonnet, each quatrain does mark a particular stage. In the first quatrain, the focus is on the lady: on “her cold so great” which resists all his “hot desire.” The basic antithesis between ice and fire here is heightened through this image of ice that refuses to melt—refuses to allow the antithesis to relent, as it were. Instead, the opposition intensifies. The ice not only is not “dissolved” by heat; it grows even “harder.” As to the simile, the lady remains cold as ice; while the fire is associated with both desire and entreaty—both with the

poet's desire for the lady, and his desire to persuade her to respond to his desire.

In the first quatrain, the ice, representing the lady, intensifies, hardening rather than melting before the fire. In the second quatrain, the focus shifts from the lady to the lover, and to the intensifying figure of fire that represents him. Parallel phrasing and syntax help to define each quatrain and also to unify them in a definite structure. Before, the poet asks: "How comes it then that this her cold so great." Now he repeats "How comes it" (syntactic repetition becomes a structural principle) but this time with regard to his "exceeding heat." The quatrain as a whole plays on this reversal. Before, her ice would not melt under his fire. Now, his fire will not be cooled by her ice. Again, the oppositions are intensified rather than reconciled. Each term is only more obdurate and unrelenting in the face of the other. This quatrain further adds a physical dimension. The cold and heat acquire bodily location. Her cold is "heart-frozen." His heat is "boiling sweat." We notice here a change in diction level. Boiling sweat is much less polite than the elevated diction of the rest of the sonnet. It slaps us in the face with the fact that the poet is not only describing a psychological condition, but also a physical one. This has been implicit in the hot/cold imagery throughout, but the sexual implications of fire is here almost crudely concretized. As at the end of the first quatrain, where the fire became a double figure for both desire for the lady and the desire to persuade her; so here, too, the flames are "augmented manifold." Before, he desired both the lady, and to persuade the lady. Now he desires both in mind and in body.

The third quatrain is more reflective, looking back on the conditions and deployment of forces in the first two (this is often the function of the sestet of an Italian sonnet, almost as if Spenser were invoking the Italian sonnet form even though he does not, technically, follow it here). The poet reiterates what he has so far discovered: the strange transformation in the natures of fire and ice, such that each intensifies, rather than modifying the other. Again we are told how fire hardens ice, and ice kindles fire. Two things can be noted here. The first concerns the sonnet structure generally. The sonnet, as mentioned above, became a new arena for psychological exploration. One format in which this new exploration took shape was through the balance between the sonnet's divisions, where the opening section(s) provide a description of the poet's condition,

while the closing section(s) offers an interpretation of the condition that has been described. The sonnet's later sections, whether as sestet, as couplet, or as quatrain and couplet, reflect back on the material it has already presented. Thus, the sonnet can both record experience and analyze it, even as, in his imagery, Spenser represents the psychological territory of his internal world.

The second point concerns the role rhetoric can play in the sonnet. Although the third quatrain here seems merely to reflect and repeat what has gone before, its emphasis and evaluation has shifted. This is done mainly through the quatrain's adjectives, which begin to emphasize the power of fire and to associate it with wonder. The behavior of fire is called a "miraculous thing"; and although the miracle here is to "harden ice," we are also reminded that fire "all things melt." Ice, on the other hand, is described negatively: as "congealed," and as "senseless cold." And the quatrain's conclusion in effect subordinates cold to fire. If cold is "wonderful" here, it is so because it acts to produce more fire. The quatrain's final image is of increased kindling, giving fire the last word.

What, then, has happened, without any alteration in the sonnet's image pattern, is an alteration in its rhetoric. The balance between ice and fire has shifted, giving to fire the stronger hand. But this makes sense. The poem is after all addressed to a lady, and it has a particular purpose, seen in the first quatrain: to persuade her. It, too, is a kind of seduction poem; Spenser emphasizes the power of desire's fire, and also, the possibility of sudden change in the course of things. If the ice has stood fast until now, this does not mean it cannot melt in the future. It is this further implicit point that the couplet picks up: "Such is the power of love in gentle mind / That it can alter all the course of kind." Things, the lover reminds the lady, can change. Miracles can happen, changing the "course of kind," which also suggests that the course should be altered to one of kindness. Now, moreover, the love is not hot fire, but is "gentle." The poem, finally, combines three activities: description, analysis, and rhetorical persuasion. The ice-lady is invited, through subtle shifts in imagery and diction, to become gentle, in fact to melt, before this, the poet's entreaty.

Here we come across another feature characteristic of the sonnet: how one of its subjects tends to be the sonnet itself. The sonnet may be said to have two great overarching subjects: love and immortal fame. Love is obviously important here. But so is fame,

in the sense that the sonnet itself speaks for its writer, not only as lover, but as poet. It speaks for him here in its power to persuade the lady. For this poem is itself the way he "her entreat[s]." Thus, it reflects back on its own power, representing not only love, but the lover as poet, with his ability to encapture in the sonnet form the great struggle between desire and resistance, and the great miracle of conquering but gentle love.

"My Love Is Like to Ice" is one sonnet in a long sequence (*Amoretti*) that Spenser wrote to his lady, Elizabeth Boyle, who became his second wife, a sequence that concludes with his *Epithalamion* celebrating their marriage. In Spenser, the love of the lady becomes an avenue to virtuous love, not through warfare between spiritual longing and bodily desire, but as an image of their reconciliation and mutual affirmation. The role, or image, of love and the beloved can, however, vary greatly in a sonnet. The object of love very greatly affects the kind of love explored and expressed, as well as the condition and position of the lover. Therefore, sonnets that share a common resource of imagery, rhetoric, or topical concern can approach and treat this common material in strikingly different ways. A Holy Sonnet by John Donne provides an excellent example of a poet's reworking of a body of conventional material:

I am a little world made cunningly
 Of elements, and an angelic sprite,
 But black sin hath betray'd to endless night
 My world's both parts, and, oh, both parts must die.
 You which beyond that heaven which was most high
 Have found new spheres, and of new lands can write,
 Pour new seas in mine eyes, that so I might
 Drown my world with my weeping earnestly,
 Or wash it, if it must be drown'd no more:
 But oh it must be burnt! alas the fire
 Of lust and envy have burnt it heretofore,
 And made it fouler; let their flames retire,
 And burn me O Lord, with a fiery zeal
 Of Thee and Thy house, which doth in eating heal.

We see here strangely transformed many elements that were present in Spenser's sonnet. There are again paradoxical antitheses: this time not fire and ice, but fire and water. Again, there is an ap-

peal to the two parts of human nature—mind and body, in their complex and difficult relation. And again, love remains the underlying concern of this poem, generating these paradoxes. But this time the love at issue is not human, but divine. Donne, between writing "The Flea" as a courtier and writing this Holy Sonnet, had become an Anglican minister. In his own life he had therefore experienced the struggle that is also one of the sonnet's characteristic concerns: the relation between divine and human love. In one sense, his taking orders marked a profound change in his notion of the relationship between these loves. In "The Flea," he displays his courtly elegance and eloquence through his witty use of terms associated with religious love for love of the most profane kind. In this Holy Sonnet, he speaks as a minister, directing all love toward devotion to God. This is a change indeed. And yet, there is genuine continuity between Donne's earlier poetic methods and his later ones. What we see here, surprisingly, is not repudiation but transformation. Now he addresses God but still makes use of the same verse conventions for very different purposes.

This sonnet follows the Italian rhyme scheme of enclosing rhymes (*abbaabba*) through the octave. And yet, it concludes with a rhyming couplet, as in an English sonnet. And, like an English sonnet, its structural divisions seem to fall into three quatrains and a couplet. Formally, then, there seems to be a cross, or mutual reference, between the Italian and English forms in a highly dynamic and forceful use of elements from both. The question is if Italian or English becomes exactly beside the point. The poem's divisions are constructed around metaphoric blocks, as we have seen before. And, while each metaphor remains separate, there is also development and reference from metaphor to metaphor as the quatrains proceed. As is characteristic of Donne, these metaphors continue to be conceits—elaborate, sustained comparisons whose various parts are brought into a complex system of correspondences, and which contain in this system very varied and even straining degrees of likeness: a wit with considerable distance between the terms compared.

The first quatrain, then, compares the poet to a "little world." Here, Donne makes use of a traditional figure—what we will recognize in the next chapter as a *topos*, or conventional poetic unit. The comparison of the human person to a world is an ancient one. It relies on a whole structure of belief in which *microcosm*, or man

as a little world, is thought to correspond to the *macrocosm*, the universe at large, in ways both philosophical and physical. Here Donne intends both orders of correspondence. He is a "little world" in a physical sense, that is, in his actual composition. Like the universe as he (and his age) understood it, he is made of matter and spirit, "Of elements, and an angelic sprite." What the sonnet examines is the relation between these two "parts" in philosophical and religious terms.

The poem begins (in complex continuity with Donne's earlier work) with a disturbed relation between body and soul. "Black sin hath betray'd" both his "angelic sprite," his spirit, and his material "elements." Through black sin, "both parts must die." What is this sin? It is exactly an improper relation between flesh and spirit. "Black sin" occurs when physicality comes to contest, or to subordinate and control, the spiritual, when one's attachment to things of this world as opposed to eternal things; to things of the body as opposed to the life of the spirit, becomes too great. The destructive result of this disorder is represented in the first quatrain's micro/cosmic imagery as apocalyptic. The personal "black sin" corresponds to a world-destroying "endless night." But these religious-metaphysical hierarchies of body and soul, matter and spirit, structure more than the poem's image patterns. They are, as we shall see, fundamental to the poem's understanding of metaphoric language itself.

This becomes evident in the second quatrain. This quatrain develops the (conventional) figure of the worlds. It begins by focusing on the greater world to which the "little world" corresponds and is compared. It is addressed to a "You": "You which beyond that heaven which was most high / Have found new spheres, and of new lands can write." This "You" intends astronomers and explorers. Astronomers had, in Donne's own unsettling scientific day, discovered "new spheres" of planets and stars infinitely beyond the closed, perfect circles that, until Copernicus and Galileo, had been thought to represent the ordered cosmos. And it is addressed to the explorers who had in similarly unsettling fashion discovered unsuspected "new lands." Donne here registers in literature the shock of the profound changes in the picture of the universe and of his world which was felt during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as the geography of the earth and the skies, and indeed the very notion of place itself, was radically altered.

But the point of the quatrain is ultimately to turn attention away from this physical remapping of the world. This emerges in the use of the word "heaven" in the first line of the quatrain, which is almost, here, a pun. Seeing "heaven" after the opening mention of "black sin," we assume the poet means the word in a religious or metaphysical sense. But what he does instead is put the very meaning of "heaven" in question. "That heaven which was most high" means the highest sphere of the old Ptolemaic universe. But it has now been superseded by the "new spheres" mapped by Copernicus and made immediately vivid by Galileo's telescope.

The fact that the old highest "heaven" also had religious meaning is just the point Donne is raising, and in effect reaffirming. Donne contrasts a physical image of the universe, defined by physical place, with a religious, spiritual sense of "place" that transcends the physical, having no physical location. And he asks: is the word "heaven" a physical word or a spiritual one? If you recall that the "black sin" in the first quatrain was an imbalance between physical and spiritual states, you can see how this double meaning of the word "heaven" is of utmost importance. To refer to "heaven" only as physical space is an image of black sin. Seeing it in its proper spiritual sense will be a release from sin, from placing matter over spirit.

This is just what the sonnet, in its own language, will do. It will do this by insisting on the spiritual meanings of the images it employs. "Pour new seas in mine eyes, that so I might / Drown my world with my weeping earnestly." In the context of the new spheres and new lands, we expect these seas to be the ones just discovered and added to the new maps of the world, but they are instead seas of tears. This image continues the metaphor comparing the macrocosm and the microcosm, the world (seas) and the human (tears). But the "new seas" the poet asks to have poured in his eyes are for "weeping earnestly" in repentance for black sin. They are, that is, spiritual seas, seas in a metaphoric and not a physical sense. And they must "Drown my world." Which world? Well, that is exactly the question. The poem gives priority to spiritual experience; and the world that is drowned is therefore the world in material terms. This is, moreover, exactly what Donne in his language does. The physical "seas" are drowned by the metaphorical sea-tears of his repentance.

The water imagery is carried into the sestet (or third quatrain) where it is given an ever more intense metaphorical and spiritual meaning. "Or wash it if it must be drowned no more" is an allusion (a literary reference or echo of an earlier text): here the Bible and God's promise to Noah that there would be no more floods. It shifts the water from a destructive punishment to a cleansing purification, as in baptism. Yet the sestet will go on to insist on radical measures: "But oh it must be burnt." Now Donne shifts his vision from things of the past (the flood) and of the present (the new discoveries) to the future—to the Apocalypse, or end of the world, when things as they now are will undergo their final consummation and transformation. Moreover, although it will only take place at the end of time, Donne shows how the vision of these last things also penetrate here and now. By keeping in mind the final destruction of this world, Donne will arrive, even while in this world, at its proper image. Again, he enacts this in his language. The events of this sestet all take place entirely in the religious domain. All the images have only spiritual, interior meanings. The water is the water of penitence. The fire is the inner fire of lust and envy and also the "fiery zeal" of spiritual purgation, burning away these material attachments.

This purgatorial flame becomes the subject of the couplet, which is also part of the sestet, beginning in the second half of the twelfth line: "let their flames retire." "Retire," like "wash," promises a lessening of intensity, a move toward something gentler. Donne, however, instead brings his imagery to still greater intensity, concluding now in the paradoxes that the very sonnet form urges on him, as does his subject. "Burn me, Lord, with a fiery zeal." Nothing less than utter destruction will be enough to reorder the parts of his little world. Like the great world at the end of time, so now his little world must undergo apocalyptic fire. But this is a fire that "doth in eating heal." In destroying, it brings new health and new birth.

We conclude, then, with the deepest paradox of Christianity—that only in dying to the life of sin can you be reborn into the eternal life of grace. This sonnet attests to such transformation—not only in its religious assertions, but in its language, which constantly turns away from outward, material meanings to spiritual, inward ones. If you compare this sonnet to Spenser's, you see how the sonnet itself has been transformed. The sonnet in its earlier development often addressed a lady as an avenue toward divine love. It then

became a means for introspective examination of the psychology of love. Here Donne redirects introspection back toward religious meditation. Love becomes emphatically divine love. Instead of being, as Spenser's is, addressed to a lady with persuasive wit, here the wit is brought into the service of address to God, in renunciation, humility, and devotion.