

## Chapter 18

### Form: The Shape of Poems

**B**ecause poetry is compressed and highly rhythmical, it always exists under self-imposed restrictions, or conventions. Traditionally, many poets have chosen a variety of clearly recognizable shapes or forms—*closed-form poetry*. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, however, many poets have rejected regular patterns in favor of poems that appear more free and spontaneous—*open-form poetry*. Both terms refer to the structure and technique of the poems, not to the content or ideas.

#### Closed-Form Poetry

**Closed-form poetry** is written in specific and traditional patterns of lines produced through *line length*, *meter*, *rhyme*, and *line groupings*. In the closed form (and also in the open form), the **line** is, loosely, the poetic equivalent of the prose sentence. A prime characteristic of the closed-form line, as opposed to a sentence, is that its length is usually measured or restricted. Various numbers of lines may be grouped together through rhyme and other means to form a **stanza**, which is the poetic equivalent of a paragraph in prose. Individual lines may coincide exactly with sentences, although quite often sentences stretch out over two or more lines. Stanzas consist of groups of lines that are both connected and also separated by developments of subject, idea, or expression of feeling.

Over the centuries English and American poets have appropriated and evolved many closed forms. Among the most important of these are *blank verse*, the *couplet*, the *tercet* or *triple*, *terza rima*, the *villanelle*, the *quatrain*, the *sonnet*, the *song* or *lyric*, the *ode*, the *ballad*, the *elegy*, and *common measure* or the *hymnal stanza*, together with forms like the *haiku*, the *epigram*, the *epitaph*, the *limerick*, the *derivative*, and the *double dactyl*.

#### Blank Verse Consists of Five Unrhymed Iambic Lines

One of the most common closed forms in English is **blank verse**, or unrhymed iambic pentameter, which represents the adaptation and fusion of sentences to poetic form. The great advantage of blank verse is that it resembles normal speech but at the same time it maintains poetic identity. It is suitable for relatively short poems, but it may also extend for hundreds or even thousands of lines. It is the most adaptable line of English poetry. The master of blank verse is Shakespeare, who used it extensively in his plays. Since Shakespeare, poets of English have

used blank verse again and again. Milton used it in his masterly long epic *Paradise Lost*. Wordsworth was fond of blank verse and used it in some of his best-known poems. Let us look at a passage from his autobiographical poem *The Prelude* (1850) to see his blank verse—which has been praised as “conversational,” “flexible,” and “majestic”—in action (for another example, see Chapter 13, pp. 738–742).

Wisdom and Spirit of the universe!  
Thou Soul that art the eternity of thought,  
That givest to forms and images a breath  
And everlasting motion, not in vain  
By day or star-light thus from my first dawn  
Of childhood didst thou intertwine for me  
The passions that build up our human soul;  
Not with the mean and vulgar works of man,  
But with high objects, with enduring things—  
With life and nature, purifying thus  
The elements of feeling and of thought,  
And sanctifying, by such discipline,  
Both pain and fear, until we recognize  
A grandeur in the beatings of the heart. (Book I, lines 401–414)

The development of these lines takes place through a simultaneous blending of line lengths and grammatical coherence. Wordsworth expresses his ideas enthusiastically within his chosen iambic rhythm, which is both restricting and liberating, and by this means he brings about the “majestic” elevation that is characteristic of his poetry.

#### The Couplet Consists of Two Lines Connected by Thought and Rhyme

The **couplet** contains two rhyming lines and is the shortest distinct closed form. The two lines are usually identical in length and meter. Some couplets are short. Even lines in monometer (one major stress), like “I sing / Each spring,” can make up a couplet. However, most English couplets are in iambic tetrameter (four stresses) or iambic pentameter (five stresses), and they have been a regular feature of English poetry ever since Chaucer used them in the fourteenth century. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the iambic-pentameter couplet was considered appropriate for epic, or heroic, poetry. For this reason it is often called the **heroic couplet**. Because these centuries are considered the “neoclassic” age of literature, the form is also called the **neoclassic couplet**. It was used with consummate skill by John Dryden (1631–1700) and Alexander Pope (1688–1744).

Usually, the heroic couplet expresses a complete idea and is grammatically self-sufficient. It thrives on the rhetorical strategies of **parallelism** and **antithesis**. Look, for example, at these two couplets from “The Rape of the Lock,” Pope’s well-known mock-epic poem (1711):

Here Britain’s statesmen oft the fall foredoom  
Of foreign tyrants, and of nymphs at home;

Here thou, great Anna! whom three realms obey,  
Dost sometimes counsel take—and sometimes tea.

These lines describe activities at Hampton Court, the royal palace and residence of Queen Anne (reigned 1701–1714). Notice that the first couplet allows Pope to link “Britain’s statesmen” with two parallel but also antithetical events: the fall of nations and the “fall” of young women. Similarly, the second heroic couplet allows for the parallel and comic linking of royal meetings of state (“counsel”) and teatime (in the early eighteenth century, *tea* was pronounced “tay”). The example thus demonstrates how the heroic couplet may contrast amusing and ironic actions and situations.

### The Tercet or Triplet Consists of Three Lines

A three-line stanza is called a *tercet* or *triplet*. Tercets may be written in any unit-form line length or meter and most commonly contain three rhymes (*aaa*, *bbb*, and so on), which are, in effect, short stanzas. The following poem by Tennyson is in iambic tetrameter triplets.

### ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON (1809–1892)

For a photo, see Chapter 17, page 910.

#### The Eagle (1851)

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;  
Close to the sun in lonely lands,  
Ring'd with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;  
He watches from his mountain walls,  
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

In the first tercet, we view the eagle as though at a distance. In the second, the perspective shifts, and we see through the eagle's eyes and follow his actions. In this tercet the verbs are active: the sea “crawls” and the eagle “falls.” While the two tercets and the shift in perspective divide the poem, alliteration pulls things back together. This is especially true of the *k* sound in “clasps,” “crag,” “crooked,” “close,” and “crawls” and the *w* sound in “with,” “world,” “watches,” and “walls.”

**TERZA RIMA.** There are two important variations on the tercet pattern, each requiring a high degree of ingenuity and control. The first tercet variation is *terza rima*, in which stanzas are interlocked through a pattern that requires the center termination in one tercet to be rhymed twice in the next: *aba bcb cdc ded*, and so on. You can see an example of *terza rima* in Shelley's “Ode to the West Wind” (Chapter 17).

**THE VILLANELLE.** The most complex variation of the tercet pattern is the *villanelle*, a nineteen-line form containing six tercets, rhymed *aba*, and concluded by four lines. The first and third lines of the first tercet are repeated alternately in subsequent tercets as a refrain, and they are also used in the concluding four lines. For examples in this chapter, see Elizabeth Bishop's “One Art,” Theodore Roethke's “The Waking,” and Dylan Thomas's “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night.”

### The Quatrain Is a Unit of Four Lines

The most common and adaptable stanzaic building block is the four-line quatrain. This stanza has been popular for hundreds of years and has lent itself to many variations. Like couplets and tercets, quatrains may be written in any line length and meter; even the line lengths within a quatrain may vary. The determining factor is the rhyme scheme, and even that is variable, depending on the form and the poet's aims. Quatrains may be rhymed *aaaa*, but they can also be rhymed *abab*, *abba*, or even *abcb*. Quatrains are basic components of many traditional closed forms, most notably ballads and sonnets, and they are significant in many religious hymns.

### The Sonnet Is a Versatile Poem of Fourteen Lines

The *sonnet*, consisting of fourteen lines, is one of the most popular and durable closed poetic forms. Initially it was an Italian form (*sonnetto* means “little song”) created by the medieval Italian poet Petrarch (1304–1374), who wrote collections or *cycles* of sonnets. The sonnet form as made famous by Petrarch is called the *Italian sonnet* or *Petrarchan sonnet* in Petrarch's honor. The form and style of Petrarchan sonnets were adapted to English poetry in the early sixteenth century, and with variations they have been used ever since. As a form, the Petrarchan sonnet is in iambic pentameter, and it contains two quatrains (the *octave*) and two tercets (the *sestet*). In structure and meaning, the octave presents a problem or situation that is resolved in the *sestet*, as in Milton's “On His Blindness.” The rhyme scheme of the Petrarchan octave is fixed in an *abba*, *abba* pattern. The *sestet* offers a number of different rhyming possibilities, including *cdc cdc* and *cde cde*.

**THE SHAKESPEAREAN SONNET OR ENGLISH SONNET.** Shakespeare was the most original adapter of the sonnet tradition. Recognizing that there are fewer rhyming words in English than in Italian, he developed the *Shakespearean sonnet* or *English sonnet*, based on seven rhymes (in the pattern *abab cdcd efef*) rather than the usual five rhymes of the Italian sonnet. As indicated by the rhyme scheme, the Shakespearean sonnet contains three quatrains and a concluding couplet. The pattern of thought therefore shifts from the octave-*sestet* organization of the Italian sonnet to a four-part argument on the octave-*sestet* emotion. Each Shakespearean quatrain contains a separate development of the sonnet's central idea or problem, and the couplet provides a climax and resolution.

## The Song or Lyric Is a Stanzaic Poem of Variable Measure and Length

The song or lyric is a stanzaic form that was originally designed to be sung to a repeating melody, although few lyrics today are written specifically for music. Even so, the line lengths and rhyme schemes of the first stanza are duplicated in subsequent stanzas, as though for repeated singing to the same tune. The stanzas of a lyric may be built from any combination of single lines, couplets, triplets, and quatrains. The line lengths may shift, and a great deal of metrical variation is common.

The lyric is one of the most adaptable and variable of all verse forms at the present time. In fact, the lyric is one of the forms most commonly used by contemporary poets. The form may be personal, public, philosophical, religious, or political, in addition to its use as a vehicle to express love and other emotions. There is theoretically no limit to the number of stanzas in a lyric, although there are usually no more than five or six. A. E. Housman's "Loveliest of Ties" (Chapter 12), for example, is a lyric made up of three quatrains containing two couplets each. It is in iambic tetrameter and it rhymes *aabb*. The second and third stanzas repeat the same pattern of rhyme, *ccdd eff*. Lyrics often feature quite complex and ingenious stanzaic structures. Donne's "The Canonization" (Chapter 19) for instance, contains five stanzas, each of which follows the iambic pattern *5a4b5b5a4c4c4a3a*. This nine-line stanza contains three different rhymes and three different line lengths. Nevertheless, the same intricate pattern is repeated in each of the five stanzas.

## The Ode Is a Complex and Extensive Stanzaic Poem

The ode is a more variable stanzaic form than the lyric, with varying line lengths and intricate rhyme schemes. Usually the topics of odes are meditative and philosophical, but there is no set topic material, just as there is no set form. Some odes have repeating patterns, while others offer no duplication and introduce a new structure in each stanza. Poets have developed their own structures according to their needs. Keats's great odes were particularly congenial to his ideas, as in "Ode to a Nightingale," which consists of eight stanzas in iambic pentameter with the repeating form *ababcb3c3c3e*. Although many odes have been set to music, most do not fit repeating melodies.

## The Elegy Is a Poem About Death and Its Meaning for the Living

The elegy ("lament," or "mournful song") has had a long and rich history in other languages extending back to ancient times, and it has defined a number of topics, but for our purposes it is a poem of lamentation. Usually the topic is the death of a specific person, but it is also generally concerned with mortality and the negative and tragic aspects of life. In English the most notable elegy is Milton's "Lycidas" (1638), which he wrote in observance of the death by drowning of a "learned friend" with whom he had gone to school. Milton also composed this poem as a pastoral, that is, a poem describing rural lives and concerns, with direct allegorical

implications for the lives of city-dwellers. So that you may get a sense of this poem, here are the opening twenty-four lines.

Let once more, O ye laurels, and once more  
 Ye myrtles brown, with ivy never sere,<sup>o</sup>  
 Come to pluck your berries<sup>o</sup> harsh and crude,  
 And with forced fingers rude,  
 Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.  
 Bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear,  
 Compels me to disturb your season due;  
 For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime,  
 Young Lycidas, and hath<sup>o</sup> not left his peer:  
 Who would not sing for Lycidas? he knew  
 Himself to sing, and build the lofty rhyme.  
 He must not float upon his watery bier  
 Unwept, and welter to the parching wind,  
 Without the meed<sup>o</sup> of some melodious tear.  
 Begin then, sisters<sup>o</sup> of the sacred well,  
 That from beneath the seat of Jove<sup>o</sup> doth spring,  
 Hence with denial vain, and coy excuse,  
 So may some gentle muse  
 With lucky<sup>o</sup> words favor my destined urn,  
 And as he passes turn,  
 And bid fair peace be to my sable shroud.  
 For we were nursed upon the self-same hill,  
 Fed the same flock; by fountain, shade, and rill.<sup>o</sup>

*dry, withered  
 to write this poem*

*who hath*

*gift, honor  
 the muses  
 God (Jupiter)*

*providential, inspired*

*i.e., we went to the same school*

Today few people think of the traditional formalities of elegiac writing, and prefer to understand poems as elegies if they concern death, mortality, and grief. Thus, Collins's "The Names" (Chapter 16), Dryden's "To the Memory of Mr. Oldham" (this chapter) Pinsky's "Dying" (Chapter 16), Cummings's "Buffalo Bill's Defunct" (this chapter) and Dickinson's "The Bustle in a House" (Chapter 21), to name just a few poems in this book, might, broadly, all be considered elegies.

## A Ballad Consists of Many Narrative Quatrains

The ballad, which fuses narrative description with dramatic dialogue, originated in folk literature and is one of the oldest closed forms in English poetry. Ballads consist of many quatrains in which lines of iambic tetrameter alternate with iambic trimeter. Normally, only the second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme, in the pattern *xaxa xbx b xxc* and so on. The ballad was designed for singing, like the anonymous "Sir Patrick Spens" (Chapter 11). Popular ballad tunes were used over and over again by later balladeers, often as many as forty and fifty times, or more, and many of the tunes have survived to the present day and are still well known—for example, the anonymous "Lord Randal" (Chapter 22). The music to folk ballads like "Greensleeves" and "Waly Waly" (not in this collection) has been known now for the past 400 years in

both England and America, and many balladeers have written words to be sung to this music.

### Common Measure, or the Hymnal Stanza, Is a Poem Consisting of a Number of Quatrains

Common measure, a quatrain form, is similar to the ballad stanza. It shares with the ballad the alternation of four-beat and three-beat iambic lines but adds a second rhyme to the first and third lines of each quatrain: *abab cdcd* and so on. Because the measure is often used in hymns, it is sometimes called the hymnal stanza. Many of Emily Dickinson's poems, including "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" (Chapter 11), are in common measure.

### The Haiku Is a Complete Poem of Seventeen Syllables

The haiku originated in Japan, where it has been a favorite genre for hundreds of years. It traditionally imposes strict rules on the writer: (1) There should be three lines (a tercet) of five, seven, and five syllables per line, for a total of seventeen syllables. (2) The topic should be derived from nature. (3) The poem should embody a unique observation or insight. Today, English-language poets have adapted the haiku but have taken liberties with the subject matter and have often reduced the syllable count. Whether the traditional pattern is varied or not, however, the haiku must be short, simple, objective, clear, and (often) symbolic. The following anonymous haiku illustrates some of these qualities.

#### Spun in High, Dark Clouds

Spun in high, dark clouds,  
Snow forms vast webs of white flakes  
And drifts lightly down.

In the tradition of haiku, the subject is derived from nature, and the syllable pattern is 5-7-5. The central metaphor equates gathering snow with the webs of silkworms or spiders. To supply tension, the lines contrast "high" with "down" and "dark" with "white." Because of the enforced brevity, the diction is simple and, except for the word "forms," of English derivation (our word *form* is of Latin origin). In addition, most of the words are monosyllabic, and through this means the poem fits the seventeen-syllable form with sixteen words.

### There Are Additional but Less Significant Closed-Form Types

Many other closed forms have enjoyed long popularity. One of these, the epigram, is a short and witty poem that usually makes a humorous or satiric point. Epigrams are two to four lines long and are often written in couplets. The form was developed by the Roman poet Martial (Marcus Valerius Martialis, c. 40–103 CE) and has always been popular. Humorous and sometimes irreverent epigrams, brief poems composed to mark the death of someone, can also be epigrams.

Another popular type is the limerick, a five-line form popularized by the English artist and humorist Edward Lear (1812–1888). Like the epigram, limericks are comic, their humor being reinforced by falling rhymes. Usually, they are bawdy.

Comic closed forms continue to be devised by enterprising writers. The clerihew, a two-couplet form invented in the late nineteenth century by Edmund Clerihew Bentley (1875–1956), is related to the epigram. A final illustration of closed-form humor is the double dactyl, devised in the 1960s by Anthony Hecht and Paul Pascal. The form is related to the epigram, limerick, and clerihew, and it has rules that govern the meter, line length, and specific topic material.

### Poets Use the Closed Form to Shape and Polish Meaning

Although many contemporary poets consider closed forms restrictive and even stultifying, the closed form has always provided both a framework and a challenge for poets to express new and fresh ideas, attitudes, and feelings. Let us look at the way Shakespeare uses the sonnet form to shape thoughts and emotions:

#### WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1564–1616)

For a portrait, see Chapter 24, page 1354.

### Sonnet 116: Let Me Not to the Marriage of True Minds (1609)

Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediments.<sup>o</sup> Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove:  
Oh, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;  
It is the star to every wandering bark,  
Whose worth's unknown, although his height<sup>o</sup> be taken.  
Love's not Time's fool,<sup>o</sup> though rosy lips and cheeks  
Within his<sup>o</sup> bending sickle's compass come;  
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.<sup>o</sup>  
If this be error and upon me proved,  
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

is altitude  
sieve  
Times 10  
the Last Judgment

<sup>o</sup>Impediments: a reference to "The Order of Solemnization of Matrimony" in the Anglican Church's Book of Common Prayer: "I require that if either of you know of any impediment why ye may not be lawfully joined together in Matrimony, ye do now confess it."

#### QUESTIONS

1. Describe the restrictions of this closed form. How is the poem's argument structured by the form?
2. What is the poem's meter? Rhyme scheme? Structure?

- Describe the varying ideas about love explored in the three quatrains.
- What does the concluding couplet contribute to the poem's argument about love?

Even if we did not know that the poem is Shakespeare's, we would recognize it as a Shakespearean sonnet. It is in iambic pentameter and contains three quatrains and a concluding couplet, rhyming *abab cdcd efef gg*. The sonnet form provides the organization for the poem's argument—that real love is a “marriage of true minds” existing independent of earthly time and change. Each quatrain advances a new perspective on this idea.

This is not to say that Shakespeare exhausts the subject or that he wants to. The ideas in the third quatrain, for example, about how love transcends time, could be greatly expanded. A philosophical analysis of the topic might deal extensively with Platonic ideas about reality—whether it exists in *particulars* or *universals*. Similarly, the poem's very last line, if it were to become the topic of a prose discourse, might include the introduction of evidence about the poet's own writing, and also about many examples of human love. But the two lines are enough, granted the restrictions of the form, and more would be superfluous. One might add that most readers find Shakespeare's poem interesting and vital, while extensive philosophical discourses often drop into laps as readers fall asleep.

The closed poetic form therefore may be viewed as a complex consequence of poetic compression. No matter what form a poet chooses—couplet, sonnet, song, ballad, ode—that form imposes restrictions, and it therefore challenges and shapes the poet's thought. The poet of the closed form shares with all writers the need to make ideas seem logical and well supported, but the challenge of the form is to make all this happen *within the form itself*. The thought must be developed clearly and also fully, and there should be no lingering doubts once the poem is completed. The words must be the most fitting and exact ones that could be selected. When we look at good poems in the closed form, in short, we may be sure that they represent the ultimate degree of poetic thought, discipline, and skill.

## Open-Form Poetry

Among the closed forms, as we have seen, the ode is the form that gives poets great opportunity for variability and expansion. The ode is thus the closed form that is most nearly related, in spirit, to **open-form poetry**, but the open form eliminates the restrictions of the closed form. Each open-form poem is unique and unpredictable. Poetry of this type was once termed **free verse** (from the French *vers libre*) to signify its liberation from regular metrics and its embrace of spoken rhythms. But open-form poetry is not therefore disorganized or chaotic. Open-form poets have instead created new and original ways to arrange words and lines—new ways to express thoughts and feelings, and new ways to order poetic experience.

Poets writing in the open form attempt to fuse form and content by stressing speechlike rhythms, creating a natural and easy-flowing word order, altering and varying line lengths according to the importance of ideas, and creating emphasis through the control of shorter and longer pauses. They often isolate individual words, phrases, and clauses as single lines, freely emphasize their

ideas through the manipulation of spaces separating words and sentences, and sometimes even break up individual words in separate lines to highlight their importance. Sometimes they create poems that look exactly like prose and that are printed in blocks and paragraphs instead of stanzas or lines, as with “Museum” by Robert Hass (in this chapter). Such **prose poems** rely on a progression of images and the cadences of language.

## Open-Form Poetry Is Free in Form and Variable in Content

An early example of open-form poetry is Walt Whitman's “Reconciliation” This poem was included in *Drum Taps*, a collection of fifty-three poems about the poet's reactions to Civil War battles in Virginia.

### WALT WHITMAN (1819–1892)

For a photo, see Chapter 15, page 816.

#### Reconciliation (1865, 1881)

Word over all, beautiful as the sky,  
 Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage must in time be utterly lost,  
 That the hands of the sisters Death and Night incessantly softly wash again, and ever  
 again, this soiled world;  
 For my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead,  
 I look where he lies white-faced and still in the coffin—I draw near,  
 Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin.

#### QUESTIONS

- How do individual lines, varying line lengths, punctuation, pauses, and cadences create rhythm and organize the images and ideas in this poem?
- How do alliteration, assonance, and the repetition of words unify the poem and reinforce its content?
- What is the “word” referred to in line 1? What does the speaker find “beautiful” about this “word” and the passage of time?
- What instances of personification can you find? What do these personified figures do? What does the speaker do in lines 5–6? Why does he do this?

“Reconciliation” shows the power of open-form poetry. There is no dominant meter, rhyme scheme, or stanza pattern. Instead, Whitman uses individual lines and varying line lengths to organize and emphasize the images, ideas, and emotions. He also uses repetition, alliteration, and assonance to make internal line connections. Without going into every aspect of the poem, one may note the unifying elements in the first few lines. The “word over all” (i.e., reconciliation, peace) is linked to the second line by the repetition of the words “beautiful” and “all,”

while “beautiful” is grammatically complemented by the clauses “that . . . lost” (line 2) and “That . . . world” (line 3). The reconciling word is thus connected to the image of the two personified figures, Death and Night, who “wash” war and carnage (bloodshed) out of “this soiled world.”

In the third line, unity and emphasis are created through the repetition of “again” and the alliteration on the *ly* sound of “incessantly” and “softly,” the *s* sound in “sisters,” “incessantly,” “softly,” and “soil’d,” and the *d* sound in “hands,” “Death,” “soil’d,” and “World.” One may also note the unifying assonance patterns of *ih* in “its,” “in,” “sisters,” “incessantly,” and “this,” and *aye* in “sky,” “time,” and “Night.” The pauses, or junctures, of the line create internal rhythms that coincide with the thought, “That the hands // of the sisters // Death and Night // incessantly softly // wash again and ever again // this soiled world.”

This selective analysis demonstrates that open-form poetry creates its own unity. While some of the unifying elements, such as alliteration and assonance, are also a property of closed-form poetry, many are unique to poetry of the open form, such as the repetitions, the reliance on grammatical structures, and the control of rhythms. The concept of the open form is that the topic itself shapes the number of lines, the line lengths, and the physical appearance on the page. Unity is there—development is there—but the open form demands that there be as many shapes and forms as there are topics.

## VISUALIZING POETRY

### Poetry and Artistic Expression: Visual Poetry, Concrete Poetry, and Prose Poems

Along with the fact that many poets have rejected traditional closed-form patterns, they have moved in new directions with the open form. The idea has been to allow poetry to follow a wide range of poetic shapes, including avenues of experimentation. Poets have continued to express ideas about the topics we usually associate with poetry—which really means just about everything—but in addition, they have imaginatively invented new looks for their poems on the actual page. Some poets may indulge in creative playfulness by fashioning visual surprises, thus focusing on the medium itself, in which each poem starts its life, waiting patiently for readers. In fact, some poets give almost as much attention to their visual arrangement of letters, words, lines, and white space as they do to the content of their poems. To draw attention to particular thoughts, many poets deliberately alter the spellings of certain words; or they may run a number of words together, without spaces between them, to set them apart, or they may abandon the traditional capitalization of each new line; or, for that matter, they may simply reject some or all capitalization. We may see some of these characteristics in E. E. Cummings’s poem “Buffalo Bill’s Defunct,” in which Cummings uses stretched-out lines in contrast with shorter lines, runs successive words together, and varies the placement of line beginnings, all as the means of guiding readers to see, hear, and comprehend the poem in accordance with his wishes.

## E. E. CUMMINGS (1894–1962)

For a photo, see Chapter 12, page 686.

### Buffalo Bill’s Defunct° (1923)

Buffalo Bill’s  
defunct  
who used to  
ride a watersmooth-silver  
stallion  
and break onetwothreefourfive pigeonsjustlikethat  
Jesus  
he was a handsome man  
and what i want to know is  
how do you like your blueeyed boy  
Mister Death

The poem has no title; it is usually referred to as “Portrait” or by its first two lines, Buffalo Bill (William F. Cody, 1846–1917) was an American plainsman, hunter, army scout, sharpshooter, and showman whose Wild West show began touring the world in 1883; he became a symbol of the Wild West.

## QUESTIONS

1. What is the effect of devoting a whole line to “Buffalo Bill’s” (line 1), “defunct” (line 2), “stallion” (line 5), “Jesus” (line 7), and “Mister Death” (line 11)? How does this technique reflect and emphasize the content of the poem?
2. How does the typographical arrangement of line 6 contribute to the fusion of sound and sense? What other examples of this technique do you find?
3. Explain the denotations and connotations of *defunct*. What would be lost (or gained) by using the term *dead* or *deceased* instead?
4. To what extent is this poem a “portrait” of Buffalo Bill? What do we learn about him? Is the portrait respectful, mocking, or something in between?

Cummings’s poem is in the tradition of earlier poetry that was very much like anagrams or puzzles. One interesting early type featured the weaving of words inside a poem, with the special words in effect doing double duty—being coherent and meaningful within a poem, and having a separate coherence and meaning themselves. Such examples, both integral and extraneous at the same time, are almost like a verbal game, which applies also to much later concrete poetry. In the following poem, by the early seventeenth-century poet George Herbert, the poem develops out of the biblical text in Colossians: “Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, *who is our life*, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory” (3: 2–4). The idea of Paul, the writer of Colossians, is a complex one, and it is vital in Christian theology: that the human lifetime is short but only seemingly so, because eternal life is hidden to human beings and will not be recognized until the eventual return of Jesus. Within the poem, the sentence that Herbert creates is

this: "My Life Is Hid In Him That Is My Treasure." This sentence descends, word by word and diagonally downward from left to right. The words of the descending sentence are boldfaced, capitalized, and italicized here.

### GEORGE HERBERT (1593–1633)

#### Colossians 3:3 (Our Life Is Hid with Christ in God) (1633)

MY words and thoughts do both express this notion,  
That *LIFE* hath with the sun a double motion.  
The first *IS* straight, and our diurnal friend,  
The other *HID* and doth obliquely bend.  
One life is wrapped *IN* flesh, and tends to earth:  
The other winds *TOWARDS HIM*, whose happy birth  
Taught me to live here so, *THAT* still one eye  
Should aim and shoot at that which *IS* on high:  
Quitting with daily labor all *MY* pleasure,  
To gain at harvest an eternal *TREASURE*.

#### QUESTIONS

1. How is the Sun to be considered "our diurnal friend"? What is the distinction made in the poem between "straight" and "obliquely"?
2. What is the "double motion" that is embodied (a) in the lives of human beings, (b) in the poem itself, and also (c) in the line that descends within the poem? How does the form of the poem reinforce these ideas?

The "hidden" sentence is essential to the poem in two ways: it is integrated grammatically while at the same time it possesses its own separate coherence and meaning. It reminds us of the importance of the visual aspects of poetry. Visual poetry, also called **shaped verse** and sometimes **picture poetry**, is alive and well today. Within this form, poets not only emphasize the idea and emotion of their subjects but also fashion their poems into a generalized or pictorial shape on the page, using words, lines, and spaces. The Chinese have been producing such poetry for many generations, and there are surviving examples from ancient Greece. In the English Renaissance, many poets fashioned the lines of their poems to represent wings, altars, squares, triangles, stars, and the like. This type of poetry was often ingenious, and the figures were graphic extensions of traditional poetic images and symbols.

In writing about visual and concrete poems, you should seek correspondences between images and poetic ideas. Describe the shape of the poem and the figures it resembles. Determine how varying line lengths, the placement of individual words and phrases, and the use of space all contribute to the visual effect. A superb example of traditional visual poetry is "Easter Wings," also by George Herbert, which is a religious poem fashioned into two approximately equal shapes:

### Easter Wings (1633)

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,  
Though foolishly he lost the same,  
Decaying more and more

Till he became  
Most poor:  
With thee

O let me rise  
As larks, harmoniously,  
And sing this day thy victories:

Then shall the fall<sup>o</sup> further the flight in me.

My tender age in sorrow did I begin:

And still<sup>o</sup> with sicknesses and shame

Thou didst so punish sin,  
That I became

Most thin,  
With thee

Let me combine,

And feel this day thy victory;<sup>o</sup>

For, if I imp<sup>o</sup> my wing on thine,

Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

#### QUESTIONS

1. What does the poem look like when viewed straight on? When viewed sideways, with the left side at the top? How do these two images echo and emphasize the poem's content?
2. How does the typographical arrangement echo the sense? In lines 5 and 15, for example, how are typography, shape, and meaning fused?
3. What do lines 1–5 tell you about humanity's spiritual history, according to Herbert? What do lines 11–15 tell you about the speaker's spiritual state? How are these parallel?

In our own time, many poets have followed Herbert's precedent by creating shaped verse in which the visual image and the poetic meaning merge as separate aspects of one major idea. A unique shape for a recent poem is Charles Harper Webb's "The Shape of History." Let us see how Webb controls the lengths of lines to build his geometrical figure:

abundance

always, constantly

2, 10 foolishly he lost; fall . . . : Two references to the biblical account of how sin and death were introduced as a punishment for humankind after Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden. 18 victory: 1 Corinthians 15:54–57. 19 imp: to repair a falcon's wing or tail by grafting on feathers.

**CHARLES HARPER WEBB** (b. 1952)**The Shape of History** (1995)*Turning and turning in the widening gyre . . .*

Today's paper is crammed full of news: pages and pages on the Somalia  
Famine, the Balkan Wars, Gays in the Military. On this date a year ago,  
only 1/365 of "The Year's Top Stories" happened. *Time* magazine fits a  
decade into one thin retrospective. Barely enough occurred a century  
ago to fill one sub-chapter in a high school text. 500 years ago, one  
or two things happened every 50 years. 5000 years ago, a city  
was founded, a grain cultivated, a civilization toppled every  
other century. Still farther back, the years march by in  
groups like graduates at a big state university: 10,000 to  
20,000 BC; 50,000–100,000 BC; 1–10 million BC.

Before that, things happened once an Era: Mam-  
mals in the Cenozoic; Dinosaurs in the Mesozoic, Forests in the Paleozoic, Protozoans in  
the Pre-Cambrian. Below that, at the  
very base of time's twisting gyre, its  
cornucopia, its ram's-horn trum-  
pet, its tornado tracking across  
eternity, came what Christ-  
ians call Creation, astro-  
physicists call the Big  
Bang. Then, for tril-  
lions of years,  
nothing at  
all.

<sup>9</sup>Turning . . . gyre: See line 1 of Yeats's "The Second Coming," Chapter 19, page 1002

**QUESTIONS**

1. What shape does the poet give to history? How accurate is this shape?
2. How do the lengths of the first and final two lines graphically show how civilization has grown? What "top stories" are mentioned in the first few lines? How representative of modern news are these stories? How long will it take for such stories to be replaced by new, similar stories?
3. In the light of the epigraph by Yeats, what does the speaker apparently think will happen in the future?
4. Considering the content and the diminishing shape of the poem's twenty-four lines, what do you think is meant by "nothing at/all"?

A comparable visual poem is John Hollander's "Swan and Shadow." Notice that Hollander, in order to compose the top image and the bottom reflection he seeks, develops a creative pattern of lines and individual words. The pattern coheres grammatically, and it also functions constructively to create the visual picture, which is also three-dimensional. The connections here are skillful, and the finished poem shows a command over both poetic and graphic art.

**JOHN HOLLANDER** (b. 1929)**Swan and Shadow** (1969)

Dusk  
Above the  
water hang the  
loud  
flies  
Here  
O so  
gray  
then  
What  
When  
Where  
In us  
No Upon us As at the very edges  
of where we take shape in the dark air  
this object bares its image awakening  
ripples of recognition that will  
brush darkness up into light  
even after this bird this hour both drift by atop the perfect sad instant now  
already passing out of sight  
toward yet-untroubled reflection  
this image bears its object darkening  
into memorial shades Scattered bits of  
light  
No of water Or something across  
Breaking up No Being regathered  
Yet by then a swan will have  
Yes out of mind into what  
pale  
hush  
of a  
place  
past  
sudden dark as  
if a swan  
sang

**QUESTIONS**

1. How effectively and consistently does the shape image reinforce the meaning?
2. What specific words, phrases, and lines are emphasized by the typographical arrangement? To what extent does this effect give added impact to the poem?
3. How well does the structure echo the verbal images of the poem?
4. Do you find Hollander's experiment with shaped verse as successful as Herbert's in "Easter Wings"? If so, demonstrate how it succeeds. If not, explain why.

Many patterns of visual form may be variable and, sometimes, surprising. William Heyen creates a unique form in his poem "Mantle," which presents his



reflections about the brilliant professional career of Mickey Mantle, who is fondly remembered by sports fans as one of the superior home-run sluggers in baseball history. Many students experience a great joy of discovery when they recognize the shape that Heyen is simulating here with his poetic stanzas.

### WILLIAM HEYEN (b. 1940)

#### Mantle<sup>o</sup> (1980)

Mantle ran so hard, they said,  
he tore his legs to pieces,  
What is this but spirit?

52 homers in '56, the triple crown.  
I was a high school junior, batting  
fourth behind him in a dream.

I prayed for him to quit, before  
his lifetime dropped below .300.  
But he didn't, and it did.

10 He makes Brylcreem commercials now,  
models with open mouths draped around him  
as they never were in Commerce, Oklahoma,

where the sandy-haired, wide-shouldered boy  
stood up against his barn,  
lefty for an hour (Ruth, Gehrig),

then righty (DiMaggio),  
as his father winged them in,  
and the future blew toward him,

now a fastball, now a slow  
curve hanging  
like a model's smile.

<sup>o</sup>Mickey Mantle (1931–1995), a Yankee outfielder from 1951–1968. A switch hitter, he hit eighteen World Series home runs (a record) and 536 career home runs. He was the American League's most valuable player in 1956, the year he won the triple crown (line 4).

#### QUESTIONS

1. Describe the shape of the poem, being careful to study the last stanza. Why is this shape appropriate for a famous baseball player?
2. How does the poet use Mantle as a symbol in this poem?
3. Who are Ruth, Gehrig, and DiMaggio? In what ways are they like Mantle?

Just as some visual art is abstract and suggestive, rather than pictorial, so also may be the forms created by writers of visual poems. Such a poem is May Swenson's "Women," which is suggestive of feminine rhythm and movement. It is almost as though the poem itself is a dancing and gently swaying figure.

### MAY SWENSON (1919–1989)

#### Women (1968)

Women  
should be  
pedestals  
moving  
pedestals  
moving  
to the  
motions  
of men  
the gladdest things in the toyroom  
The  
pegs  
of their  
ears  
so familiar  
and dear  
to the trusting  
fists  
To be chafed  
eggs dismount and the legs stride away  
Immobile  
sweattipped  
sturdy  
and smiling  
women  
should always  
be waiting

Or they  
should be  
little horses  
those wooden  
sweet  
oldfashioned  
painted  
rocking  
horses  
the gladdest things in the toyroom  
feelingly  
and then  
unfeelingly  
To be  
joyfully  
ridden  
rockingly  
ridden until  
the restored  
willing  
to be set  
into motion  
Women  
should be  
pedestals  
to men

#### QUESTIONS

1. Is this poem an instance of closed-form, open-form, or visual poetry? In what different ways or sequences can it be read? How do the different sequences change the meaning?
2. How well does the image of the poem reinforce its meaning? Would the effect be different if the columns of words were straight instead of undulating?
3. To what extent do repetition and alliteration help to organize the poem and underscore its sense? Note especially *w*, *m*, *f*, *r*, and *s* sounds.
4. What does this poem *say* that women should be? Does it mean what it says? How are men characterized? In what way is this poem ironic?

Another and somewhat less graphic type of free verse is called the "prose poem." This phrase may seem like a contradiction in terms, but the idea that poets can write poems in the shape of prose is not surprising, granted that many modern poets are committed to principles of poetic freedom.<sup>1</sup> Some topics might possibly be more suitable to a prose form because they may seem less connected to poetry than to local or international news events, or they may involve the poet in

<sup>1</sup>See David Lehman, ed., *Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the Present* (New York: Scribner, 2003).



5

10

15

20

25

reflections about politics, or about moral or religious matters. “Museum,” by Robert Hass, is such a poem (p. 949), in which the speaker lays out a tranquil scene and draws an optimistic conclusion. But sometimes the subject may seem problematic, and therefore more appropriate for a less formal treatment than poetry might offer. Above all, however, the major characteristic of the prose poem is that it should have the compactness and intensity of poetry, even though on the page, from a distance, it may at first seem just like any ordinary prose paragraph. Carolyn Forché creates such poetic intensity in her prose poem “The Colonel.”

### CAROLYN FORCHÉ (b. 1950)

#### The Colonel (1978)

What you have heard is true. I was in his house. His wife carried a tray of coffee and sugar. His daughter filed her nails, his son went out for the night. There were daily papers, pet dogs, a pistol on the cushion beside him. The moon swung bare on its black cord over the house. Or: the television was a cop show. It was in English. Broken bottles were embedded in the walls around the house to scoop the kneecaps from a man's legs or cut his hands to lace. On the windows there were gratings like those in liquor stores. We had dinner, rack of lamb, good wine, a gold bell was on the table for calling the maid. The maid brought green mangoes, salt, a type of bread. I was asked how I enjoyed the country. There was a brief commercial in Spanish. His wife took everything away. There was some talk then of how difficult it had become to govern. The parrot said hello on the terrace. The colonel told it to shut up, and pushed himself from the table. My friend said to me with eyes: say nothing. The colonel returned with a sack used to bring groceries home. He spilled many human ears on the table. They were like dried peach halves. There is no other way to say this. He took one of them in his hands, shook it in our faces, dropped it into a water glass. It came alive there. I am tired of fooling around he said. As for the rights of anyone, tell your people they can go fuck themselves. He swept the ears to the floor with his arm and held the last of his wine in the air. Something for your poetry, no? he said. Some of the ears on the floor caught this scrap of his voice. Some of the ears on the floor were pressed to the ground.

#### QUESTIONS

1. Why does the poet use the prose poem form for this poem?
2. What is the character of the colonel? How can he be gracious, and then abusive, at the same time? What atrocities has he committed or ordered committed?
3. Why does the speaker include details about the walls about the house? What do the walls show about the mentality of those within the walls? Explain the meaning of the last sentence.

As you explore modern poems, you will regularly encounter many different forms. Most poems will appear to be no more than slight variations of traditional poetic lines, but many will stretch and alter normal and expected linear patterns. And some will aim at fusing words and pictures, such as those we have examined briefly here. Modern writers seek to explore ideas and to blend their own new thoughts and insights with the poetic medium of new and original patterns of development. In addition to the poets mentioned here, many other modern poets have worked similarly with free forms. Some of these poets, included elsewhere in this volume, are Robinson Jeffers, Marge Piercy, Alberto Rios, Sonya Sanchez, and C. K. Williams.

### Poems for Study

Elizabeth Bishop	One Art, 945
Billy Collins	Sonnet, 946
John Dryden	To the Memory of Mr. Oldham, 947
Robert Frost	Desert Places, 947
Allen Ginsberg	A Supermarket in California, 948
Robert Hass	Museum, 949
George Herbert	Virtue, 950
John Keats	Ode to a Nightingale, 951
Yusef Komunyakaa	Grenade, 953
Magus Magnus	Empirical/Imperial Demonstration, 954
Claude McKay	In Bondage, 955
John Milton	On His Blindness (When I Consider How My Light Is Spent), 955
Dudley Randall	Ballad of Birmingham, 956
Theodore Roethke	The Waking, 957
George William Russell (Æ)	Continuity, 958
Percy Bysshe Shelley	Ozymandias, 959
Dylan Thomas	Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night, 959
Jean Toomer	Reapers, 960
Phyllis Webb	Poetics Against the Angel of Death, 961
William Carlos Williams	The Dance, 961

### ELIZABETH BISHOP (1911–1979)

#### One Art (1976)

The art of losing isn't hard to master;  
so many things seem filled with the intent  
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster  
of lost-door keys, the hour badly spent.  
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster;  
places, and names, and where it was you meant  
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or  
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.  
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,  
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.  
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture  
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident

the art of losing's not too hard to master  
though it may look like (*Writie it!*) like disaster.

### QUESTIONS

1. This poem is written in a traditional closed form called the *villanelle* (originally an Italian peasant song), which was developed in France during the Middle Ages. A villanelle is nineteen lines long. Fairly strict rules govern the length and structure of stanzas: the rhyme scheme, and the repetition of complete lines. Try to formulate these rules. For comparison, see Roethke's "The Waking" and Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night."
2. On what idea is the poem based? What evidence does the speaker produce about losing? What feelings does she express about her losses?
3. How could the speaker have lost "two cities"? What other things has she lost that justify her claim that "the art of losing isn't hard to master"? What might she mean by having lost the "you" to whom the poem is addressed?

### BILLY COLLINS (b. 1941)

For a photo, see Chapter 11, page 642.

### Sonnet (1999)

All we need is fourteen lines, well, thirteen now,  
and after this next one just a dozen  
to launch a little ship on love's storm-tossed seas,  
then only ten more left like rows of beans.  
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,  
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.

### QUESTIONS

1. Why is this poem amusing? What makes it amusing?
2. What is the effect of lines 6 and 7? Why does the speaker refer to "every station of the cross" in line 8?
3. What is the "little ship" that is to be launched on "love's storm-tossed seas"? To what tradition of the sonnet form is this a reference?
4. Why does the poet conclude the poem with a description of a scene between Petrarch and Laura?

### JOHN DRYDEN (1631–1700)

#### To the Memory of Mr. Oldham.<sup>o</sup> (1684)

Farewell, too little and too lately known,  
Whom I began to think and call my own:  
For sure our souls were near allied, and thine  
Cast in the same poetic mold with mine.  
One common note on either lyre did strike,  
And knaves and fools we both abhorred alike.  
To the same goal did both our studies drive;  
The last set out the soonest did arrive.  
Thus Nisus<sup>o</sup> fell upon the slipp'ry place,  
While his young friend performed and won the race.  
O early ripe! to thy abundant store  
What could advancing age have added more?  
It might (what nature never gives the young)  
Have taught the numbers of thy native tongue.  
But satire needs not those, and wit will shine  
Through the harsh cadence of a rugged line;  
A noble error, and but seldom made,  
When poets are by too much force betrayed.  
Thy gen'rous fruits, though gathered ere their prime,  
Still showed a quickness; and maturing time  
But mellow what we write to the dull sweets of rhyme.  
Once more, hail and farewell;<sup>o</sup> farewell, thou young.  
But ah too short, Mærcellus<sup>o</sup> of our tongue;  
Thy brows with ivy and with laurels<sup>o</sup> bound;  
But fate and gloomy night encompass thee around.

John Oldham (1653–1683) was a young poet whom Dryden admired. 9 Nisus: a character in Virgil's *Aeneid* who slipped in a pool of blood while running a race, thus allowing his best friend to win. 22 hail and farewell: an echo of the Latin phrase "ave atque vale"; see Catullus, Poem 101.10 ("and for eternity, brother, hail and farewell"). 23 Mærcellus: a Roman general who was adopted by the Emperor Augustus as his successor but died at the age of twenty. 24 laurels: a plant sacred to Apollo, the Greek god of poetry; the traditional prize given to poets is a wreath of laurel.

### QUESTIONS

1. What is the meter of this poem? Rhyme scheme? Closed form? How does the form control the tempo? Why is this tempo appropriate?
2. What does the speaker reveal about himself in lines 1–10? About Oldham? About his relationship with Oldham? What did the two have in common?
3. What is the effect of Dryden's frequent classical allusions? What pairs of rhyming words most effectively clinch ideas?

### ROBERT FROST (1874–1963)

For a photo, see Chapter 21, page 1087.

### Desert Places (1936)

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast  
In a field I looked into going past,

And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,  
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

The woods around it have it—it is theirs.  
All animals are smothered in their lairs.  
I am too a-sent-spirited to count;  
The loneliness includes me unawares.

And lonely as it is that loneliness  
Will be more lonely ere it will be less—  
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow  
With no expression, nothing to express.  
They cannot scare me with their empty spaces  
Between stars—on stars where no human race is.  
I have it in me so much nearer home  
To scare myself with my own desert places.

#### QUESTIONS

1. What is the meter? The rhyme scheme? The form?
2. What setting and situation are established in lines 1–4? What does the snow affect here? What does it affect in lines 5–8? In lines 9–12?
3. What different kinds of “desert places” is this poem about? Which kind is the most important? Most frightening?
4. How does the type of rhyme (rising or falling) change in the last stanza? How does this change affect the tone and impact of the poem?
5. How does the stanzaic pattern of this poem organize the progression of the speaker’s thoughts, feelings, and conclusions?

### ALLEN GINSBERG (1926–1997)

For a photo, see *Chapter 13, page 723.*

## A Supermarket in California (1955)

What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman,<sup>9</sup> for  
I walked down the sidestreets under the trees with a headache  
self-conscious looking at the full moon.

In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went  
into the neon fruit supermarket, dreaming of your  
enumerations!<sup>6</sup>

What peaches and what penumbras! Whole families  
shopping at night! Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the  
avocados, babies in the tomatoes!—and you, Garcia Lorca,<sup>9</sup> what  
were you doing down by the watermelons?

I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber,  
poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys.

<sup>9</sup> *Walt Whitman*: American poet (1819–1892) who experimented with open forms and significantly influenced the development of twentieth-century poetry. <sup>6</sup> *enumerations*: Many of Whitman’s poems contain long lists. <sup>9</sup> *García Lorca*: Spanish surrealist poet and playwright (1896–1936) whose later poetry became progressively more like prose.

I heard you asking questions of each: Who killed the pork  
chops? What price bananas? Are you my Angel?  
I wandered in and out of the brilliant stacks of cans  
following you, and followed in my imagination by the store detective.  
We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary  
fancy tasting artichokes, possessing every frozen delicacy, and  
never passing the cashier.

Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in  
an hour. Which way does your beard point tonight?  
(I touch your book and dream of our odyssey in the supermarket  
and feel absurd.)

Will we walk all night through solitary streets? The trees  
add shade to shade, lights out in the houses, we’ll both be lonely.

Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue  
automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?  
Ah, dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher,  
what America did you have when Charon<sup>9</sup> quit poling his ferry  
and you got out on a smoking bank and stood watching the  
boat disappear on the black waters of Lethe?

<sup>9</sup> *Charon*: boatman in Greek mythology who ferried the souls of the dead across the river Styx into Hades, the underworld. <sup>31</sup> *Lethe*: the river of forgetfulness in Hades. The dead drank from this river and forgot their former lives.

#### QUESTIONS

1. Where is the speaker? What is he doing? What is his condition?
2. What effect is produced by placing Whitman and Lorca in the market?
3. To what extent do we find Whitman-like enumerations in this work? What is the effect of such enumerations?
4. Why is this a poem? What poetic devices are employed here? To what extent might it make more sense to consider this prose rather than poetry?

### ROBERT HASS (b. 1941)

## Museum (1989)

On the morning of the Käthe Kollwitz<sup>9</sup> exhibit, a young man and woman come into the  
museum restaurant. She is carrying a baby; he carries the air-freight edition of the *Sunday*  
*New York Times*. She sits in a high-backed wicker chair, cradling the infant in her arms. He  
fills a tray with fresh fruit, rolls, and coffee in white cups and brings it to the table. His hair  
is tousled, her eyes are puffy. They look like they were thrown down into sleep and then  
yanked out of it like divers coming up for air. He holds the baby. She drinks coffee, scans  
the front page, butters a roll and eats it in their little corner in the sun. After a while, she  
holds the baby. He reads the *Book Review* and eats some fruit. Then he holds the baby while  
she finds the section of the paper she wants and eats fruit and smokes. They’ve hardly  
exchanged a look. Meanwhile, I have fallen in love with this equitable arrangement, and

<sup>9</sup> *Käthe Kollwitz*: Kollwitz (1867–1945) was a German artist well known for her sculptures and engravings portraying the misery of poverty and war.

with the baby who cooperates by sleeping. All around them are faces Käthe Kollwitz carved in wood of people with no talent or capacity for suffering who are suffering the numberest kinds of pain: hunger, helpless terror. But this young couple is reading the Sunday paper in the sun, the baby is sleeping, the green has begun to emerge from the rind of the cantaloupe, and everything seems possible.

15

### QUESTIONS

1. Does this poem contain material that you ordinarily think of as poetic? What seems "poetic"? "Unpoetic"? Why?
2. Why does Hass not present the poem in lines? On what principle (topical, grammatical) might you set it up in line form? How might its being in lines change the way you read it as well as see it?
3. How does the poem contrast the young couple and their baby with the art of Käthe Kollwitz?
4. In the light of this poem, how seriously should we take the final statement ("and everything seems possible")?

### GEORGE HERBERT (1593–1633)

#### Virtue° (1633)

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,  
The bridal of the earth and sky:  
The dew shall weep thy fall tonight;  
For thou must die.

5 Sweet rose, whose hue, angry° and brave,<sup>o</sup>  
Bids the rash° gazer wipe his eye:  
Thy root is ever in its grave,  
And thou must die.

10 Sweet spring, full of sweet days and roses,  
A box where sweets° compacted lie:  
My music shows ye have your closes,<sup>o</sup>  
And all must die.

15 Only a sweet and virtuous soul,  
Like seasoned timber, never gives;<sup>o</sup>  
But though the whole world turn to coal,<sup>o</sup>  
Then chiefly lives.

<sup>o</sup>The title can allude to (a) divine Power operating both outside and inside an individual; (b) a characteristic quality or property; (c) conformity to divine and moral laws. 6 rash: eager or sympathetic. 11 closes: A line is the conclusion of a musical composition. 14 never gives: i.e., never gives in, never deteriorates and collapses (like rooted timber). 15 turn to coal: the burned-out residue of the earth after the universal fire on Judgment Day.

### QUESTIONS

1. What is the rhyme scheme of this poem? The meter? The form?
2. What points does the speaker make about the day, the rose, spring, and the "sweet and virtuous soul"?

### JOHN KEATS (1795–1821)

For a portrait, see Chapter 15, page 789.

#### Ode to a Nightingale (1819)

1 My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains  
My sense, as though of hemlock° I had drunk,  
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains  
One minute past, and Lethe-wards° had sunk:  
2 That through envy of thy happy lot,  
But being too happy in thine happiness,—  
That thou, light-winged Dryad° of the trees,  
In some melodious plot  
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,  
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

2 O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been  
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,  
Tasting of Flora° and the country green,  
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!  
3 O for a beaker full of the warm South,  
Full of the true, the blushing Hippocrene,<sup>o</sup>  
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,  
And purple-stained mouth;  
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,  
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

3 Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget  
What thou among the leaves hast never known,  
The weariness, the fever, and the fret  
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;  
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,  
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;  
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow  
And leaden-eyed despair,  
4 Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,  
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

<sup>o</sup>Lethe-wards: toward the river of forgetfulness in Hades, the underworld of Greek mythology. 7 Dryad: in Greek mythology, a semidivine tree spirit. 13 Flora: the Roman goddess of flowers. 16 Hippocrene: the fountain of the Muses on Mt. Helicon in Greek mythology; the phrase thus refers to both the waters of poetic inspiration and the cup of wine.

a poisonous herb

5

10

15

20

25

30

4

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,  
 Not charioted by Bacchus<sup>o</sup> and his pards,<sup>o</sup>  
 But on the viewless wings of Poesy,<sup>o</sup>  
 Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:  
 Already with thee! tender is the night,  
 And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,  
 Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;<sup>o</sup>  
 But here there is no light,  
 Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown  
 Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

40

5

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,  
 Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,  
 But, in embalm'd<sup>o</sup> darkness, guess each sweet  
 Wherewith the seasonable month endows  
 The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;  
 White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine,<sup>o</sup>  
 Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;  
 And mid-May's eldest child,  
 The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,  
 The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

50

6

Darkling<sup>o</sup> I listen; and, for many a time  
 I have been half in love with easeful Death,  
 Call'd him soft names in many a musèd rhyme,  
 To take into the air my quiet breath;  
 Now more than ever seems it rich to die,  
 To cease upon the midnight with no pain,  
 While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad  
 In such an ecstasy!  
 Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—  
 To thy high requiem become a sod.

60

7

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!  
 No hungry generations tread thee down;  
 The voice I hear this passing night was heard  
 In ancient days by emperor and clown:  
 Perhaps the self-same song that found a path

65



Gustave Moreau (1826–1898), *Thracian Girl Carrying the Head of Orpheus on His Lyre*, 1865. Oil on wood, 60 5/8 x 39 1/8 in. (154 x 99.5 cm). Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France. Image courtesy of The Art Renewal Center.

The story of Orpheus is briefly summarized in Chapter 20 (p. 1031). Compare the *Thracian Girl* with Hirsch's "The Swimmers" (p. 1032) and Strand's "Orpheus Alone" (p. 1033).

<sup>o</sup>2. *Bacchus*: Dionysus, the Greek god of fertility and power, and, as Bacchus, the god of Wine; see Chapter 14.

Through the sad heart of Ruth,<sup>o</sup> when, sick for home,  
 She stood in tears amid the alien corn,<sup>o</sup>  
 The same that oft-times hath  
 Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam  
 Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

70

*wheat, grain*

8

Furlorn! the very word is like a bell  
 To toll me back from thee to my sole self!  
 Adieu! the fancy<sup>o</sup> cannot cheat so well  
 As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.  
 Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades  
 Past the near meadows, over the still stream,  
 Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep  
 In the next valley-glades:  
 Was it a vision, or a waking dream?  
 Fled is that music.—Do I wake or sleep?

75

*imagination*

80

<sup>166</sup> Ruth: the widow of Boaz in the biblical Book of Ruth.

#### QUESTIONS

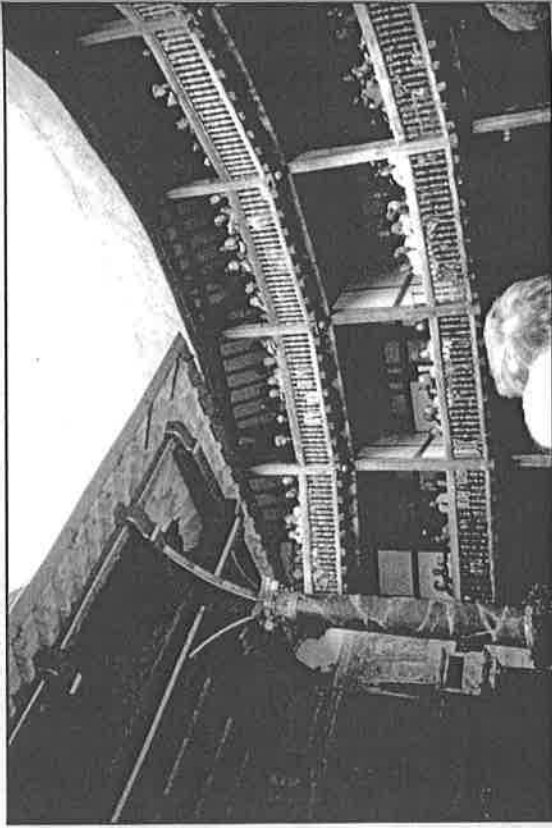
1. Formulate the structure (meter of each line and rhyme scheme) of the stanzas. What traditional form is employed here?
2. What is the speaker's mental and emotional state in stanza 1? What similes are employed to describe this condition?
3. What does the speaker want in stanza 2? Whom does he want to join? Why? From what aspects of the world (stanza 3) does he want to escape?
4. How do the speaker's mood and perspective change in stanza 4? How does he achieve this transition? What characterizes the world that the speaker enters in stanza 5? What senses are employed to describe this world?
5. What does the speaker establish about the nightingale's song in stanza 7? What does the song come to symbolize?

**YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA** (b. 1947)

**Grenade** (2008)

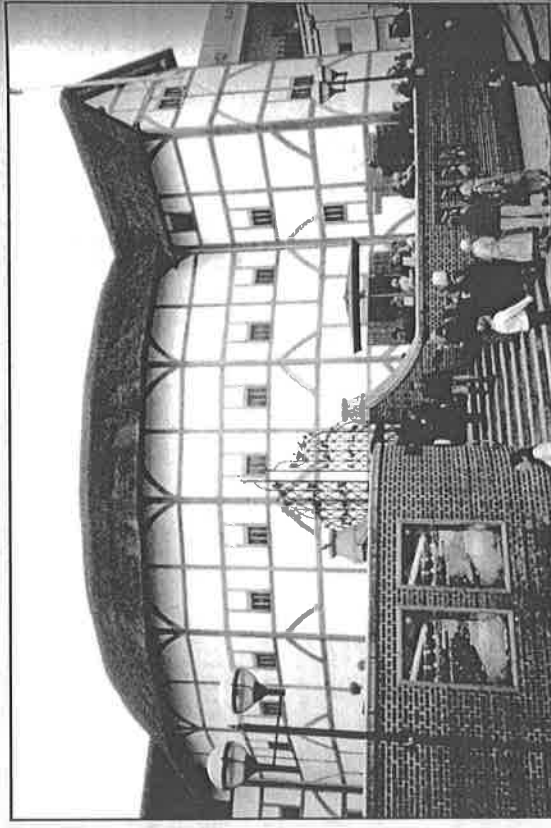
There's no rehearsal to turn flesh into dust so quickly. A hair trigger, a cocked hammer in the brain, a split second between a man & infamy. It lands on the ground—a few soldiers duck & the others are caught in a half-run—and one throws himself down on the grenade. All the watches stop. A flash. Smoke. Silence. The sound fills the whole day. Flesh & earth fall into the eyes & mouths of the men. A dream trapped in midair. They touch their legs & arms, their groins, ears, & noses, saying, What happened? Some are crying. Others are laughing! Some are almost dancing. Someone tries to put the dead man back together. "He just dove on the damn thing, sir!" A flash. Smoke. Silence. The day blown apart. For those who can walk away, what is their burden? Shreds of flesh & bloody rags gathered up &

5



Anonymous Elizabethan Architect, The Reconstructed Globe Theater, London. Interior of the Globe Theater in London. Courtesy of April E. Roberts.

Theaters of Shakespeare's day, particularly the Globe, are discussed in Chapter 24 (pp. 1350–54).



Anonymous Elizabethan Architect, The Reconstructed Globe Theater, London. Exterior of the Globe Theater in London. Courtesy of April E. Roberts.

Authentic reconstruction is based on sixteenth-century drawings and archaeological research (pp. 1353).

stuffed into a bag. Each breath belongs to him. Each song. Each curse. Every prayer is his. Your body doesn't belong to your mind & soul. Who are you? Do you remember the man left in the jungle? The others who owe their lives to this phantom, do they feel like you? Would his loved ones remember him if that little park or statue erected in his name didn't exist, & does it enlarge their lives? You wish he'd lie down in that closed coffin, & not wander the streets or enter your bedroom at midnight. The woman you love, she'll never understand. Who would? You remember what he used to say: "If you give a kite too much string, it'll break free." That unselfish certainty. But you can't remember when you began to live his unspoken dreams.

### QUESTIONS

1. What has happened? What do we learn that the dead man has done? Where did this event most likely occur?
2. Who does the speaker seem to be? How did he learn of the event? Is the poem less about the dead man than about him, the speaker? Why?
3. What are the first reactions of those who were near the dead man? Are these reactions to be expected? What does one of the men try to do?
4. What does the speaker say about the dead man, the one who made the sacrifice? Why does he say that he wishes the dead man would "not wander the streets or enter your bedroom at midnight"? What is meant by this language? What might be symbolized by what the dead man used to say: "If you give a kite too much string, it'll break free"?
5. Why do you think that Komunyakaa wrote this poem as a prose poem rather than as a more traditional poem?

### MAGUS MAGNUS (b. 1967)

#### Empirical/Imperial Demonstration (2008)

the difference between  
 what is seen and what is not seen  
 what is heard and unheard  
 what is touched and intangible  
 isn't the difference between  
 what is there and

### QUESTIONS

1. What is meant in this poem by the words "empirical" and "imperial"? (Look up these words if you are not sure what they mean.) What does the poem say about these two words?
2. How does the form of the poem affect your understanding of what the poet is saying?
3. How does the diction of the poem aid your reading of the poem?
4. Why do you think the poet did not use any words to complete the right side of line 6? How might this part of the poem be considered complete even without any words?

### CLAUDE MCKAY (1890–1948)

#### In Bondage (1922)

I would be wandering in distant fields  
 Where man, and bird, and beast, live leisurely,  
 And the old earth is kind, and ever yields  
 Her goodly gifts to all her children free;  
 Where life is fairer, lighter, less demanding,  
 And boys and girls have time and space for play  
 Before they come to years of understanding—  
 Somewhere I would be singing, far away.  
 For life is greater than the thousand wars  
 Men wage for it in their insatiate lust,  
 And will remain like the eternal stars,  
 When all that shines to-day is drift and dust.

But I am bound with you in your mean graves,  
 O black men, simple slaves of ruthless slaves.

### QUESTIONS

1. What is the meter of this poem? The rhyme scheme? The form? To what extent does the form organize the speaker's thoughts?
2. Lines 1–8 present a conditional (rather than actual) situation that the speaker desires. What word signals this nature? What is the speaker's wish?
3. What point does the speaker make about life in lines 9–12?
4. How does the couplet undermine the rest of the poem? What single word conveys this reversal? How effectively do the rhymes clinch the poem's meaning? What is the speaker telling us about the lives of African Americans?

### JOHN MILTON (1608–1674)

#### On His Blindness (When I Consider How My Light Is Spent) (1655)

When I consider how my light is spent  
 Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,  
 And that one talent<sup>o</sup> which is death to hide,  
 Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent  
 To serve therewith my Maker, and present  
 My true account, lest he returning chide;  
 "Both God exact day-labor, light denied?"  
 I fondly<sup>o</sup> ask: but Patience to prevent<sup>o</sup>

Milton began to go blind in the late 1640s and was completely blind by 1651. 3 *talent*: both a skill and a reference to the talents discussed in the parable in Matthew 25:14–30.

foolishly; forestall



That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need  
 Either man's work or his own gifts; who best  
 Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state  
 Is kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed  
 And post o'er land and ocean without rest;  
 They also serve who only stand and wait."

### QUESTIONS

1. What is the meter of this poem? The rhyme scheme? The closed form?
2. To what extent do the two major divisions of this form organize the poem's ideas?
3. What problem is raised in the octave? What are the speaker's complaints? Who is the speaker in the sestet? How are the earlier conflicts resolved?
4. Explore the word *talent* and relate its various meanings to the poem as a whole.

### DUDLEY RANDALL (1914–2000)

#### Ballad of Birmingham<sup>o</sup> (1966)

(On the bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama, 1963)

"Mother dear, may I go downtown  
 Instead of out to play,  
 And march the streets of Birmingham  
 In a Freedom March today?"

5 "No, baby, no, you may not go,  
 For the dogs are fierce and wild,  
 And clubs and hoses, guns and jails  
 Aren't good for a little child."

10 "But, mother, I won't be alone,  
 Other children will go with me,  
 And march the streets of Birmingham  
 To make our country free."

15 "No, baby, no, you may not go,  
 For I fear those guns will fire.  
 But you may go to church instead  
 And sing in the children's choir."

20 She has combed and brushed her night-dark hair,  
 And bathed rose petal sweet,  
 And drawn white gloves on her small brown hands,  
 And white shoes on her feet.

<sup>o</sup>Four black children were killed when the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, was bombed in 1963. A man was finally indicted for the murders in 1977 and convicted in 1982. There was an additional victim in 2002.

The mother smiled to know her child  
 Was in the sacred place,  
 But that smile was the last smile  
 To come upon her face.

For when she heard the explosion,  
 Her eyes grew wet and wild.  
 She raced through the streets of Birmingham  
 Calling for her child.

She clawed through bits of glass and brick,  
 Then lifted out a shoe  
 "Oh, here's the shoe my baby wore,  
 But, baby, where are you?"

### QUESTIONS

1. Formulate the structure (meter, rhyme scheme, stanza form) of this poem. What traditional closed form is employed here?
2. Who is the speaker in stanzas 1 and 3? In stanzas 2 and 4? How are quotation and repetition employed to create tension?
3. What ironies do you find in the mother's assumptions? In the poem as a whole? In the society pictured in the poem?
4. Compare the poem to "Sir Patrick Spens" (p. 649). How are the structures of all three alike? To what extent do all three deal with the same type of subject matter?

### THEODORE ROETHKE (1908–1963)

For a photo, see Chapter 12, page 697.

#### The Waking (1953)

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.  
 I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.  
 I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?  
 I hear my being dance from ear to ear.  
 I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?  
 God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,  
 And learn by going where I have to go.

Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?  
 The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;  
 I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Great Nature has another thing to do  
 To you and me; so take the lively air,  
 And, love, learn by going where to go.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.  
 What falls away is always. And is near.  
 I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.  
 I learn by going where I have to go.

15

### QUESTIONS

1. Compare the form of this poem with the poems by Bishop and Thomas in this chapter.
2. In what way or ways does the speaker “wake to sleep”? What other apparent contradictions does the speaker develop in this poem? Why might a reader conclude that the poem is positive rather than negative?
3. What does the speaker mean by saying that he learns “by going where I have to go”? In what way does “always” fall away (line 17)?

### GEORGE WILLIAM RUSSELL (Æ) (1867–1935)

#### Continuity (1897)

No sign is made while empires pass.  
 The flowers and stars are still His care.  
 The constellations hid in grass,  
 The golden miracles in air.

5

Life in an instant will be rent  
 Where death is glittering blind and wild—  
 The Heavenly Brooding is intent  
 To that las: instant on Its child.

It breathes the glow in brain and heart,  
 Life is made magical. Until  
 Body and spirit are apart  
 The Everlasting works Its will.

10

In that wild orchid that your feet  
 In their next falling shall destroy,  
 Minute and passionate and sweet  
 The Mighty Master holds His joy.

15

Though the crushed jewels droop and fade  
 The artist's labors will not cease,  
 And of the ruins shall be made  
 Some yet more lovely masterpiece.

20

### QUESTIONS

1. Describe the form of this poem, including the number of stanzas, the regularity of the meter, and the variations that you find.

2. What is the nature of the topic matter of this poem? Is it more appropriate for a song or for a hymn? Would you consider the poem personal, or public?
3. What is the conceptualization of “The Mighty Master” in this poem? In particular, consider the ideas in lines 2, 12, 16, and 18.
4. Compare this poem with Hardy’s “In Time of The Breaking of Nations” (Chapter 19). What comparable ideas do you find in the two poems? What differing ideas?

### PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY (1792–1822)

#### Ozymandias (1818)

I met a traveller from an antique land,  
 Who said—“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
 Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,  
 Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
 Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
 The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;  
 And on the pedestal, these words appear:  
 ‘My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,  
 Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!’  
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
 Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare  
 The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

5

10

### QUESTIONS

1. What is the meter of this poem? The rhyme scheme? What traditional closed form is modified here? How do the modifications affect the poem?
2. To what extent are content and meaning shaped by the closed form? What is described in the octave? In the sestet?
3. Characterize Ozymandias (thought to be Ramses II, pharaoh of Egypt, who died in 1225 BCE) from the way he is portrayed in this poem.

### DYLAN THOMAS (1914–1953)

#### Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night (1951)

Do not go gentle into that good night,  
 Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,  
 Because their words had forked no lightning they  
 Do not go gentle into that good night.



5

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright  
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

10 Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,  
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,  
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight  
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

15 And you, my father, there on the sad height,  
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.  
Do not go gentle into that good night.  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

### QUESTIONS

1. What conclusions do you make about the poem's speaker, listener, and situation?
2. What connotative words do you find here? Consider "dying," the "good" of "good night," "gentle," "Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray," and "grave."
3. What five different kinds of men does the speaker discuss in stanzas 2–5? What do they have in common? Of what value are they to the speaker's father (line 16)?
4. Compare the form of this poem with the poems by Bishop and Roethke in this chapter.

### JEAN TOOMER (1894–1967)



### Reapers (1923)

Black reapers with the sound of steel on stones  
Are sharpening scythes. I see them place the hones  
In their hip-pockets as a thing that's done,  
And start their silent swinging, one by one.  
Black horses drive a mower through the weeds,  
And there, a field rat, startled, squealing bleeds,  
His belly close to ground. I see the blade,  
Blood-stained, continue cutting weeds and shade.

### QUESTIONS

1. What is the poem's meter? The rhyme scheme? What is the difference between Toomer's use of the rhyming pattern and Dryden's?
2. How do the images of this poem relate to each other? How does the image of the bleeding field rat and the "blood-stained" blade heighten the impact?
3. How does alliteration unify this poem and make sound echo sense? Note especially the *s* and *b* sounds and the phrase "silent swinging."

### PHYLLIS WEBB (b. 1927)

### Poetics Against the Angel of Death° (1962)

I am sorry to speak of death again  
(some say I'll have a long life)  
but last night Wordsworth's 'Prelude'°  
suddenly made sense—I mean the measure,  
the elevated tone, the attitude  
of private Man speaking to public men.  
Last night I thought I would not wake again  
but now with this June morning I run ragged to elude  
the Great Iambic Pentameter  
who is the Hound of Heaven° in our stress  
because I want to die  
writing Haiku  
or, better,  
ling lines, clean and syllabic as knotted bamboo. Yes!

See Byron's "The Destruction of Sennacherib," stanza 3 (Chapter 22), 3 Wordsworth's "Prelude": See this chapter, page 927, 10 *Hound of Heaven* (The): a long poem (1893) by Francis Thompson (1859–1907) about attempting to evade God's love.

### QUESTIONS

1. In the poem itself, what is meant by the "Angel of Death"?
2. What attitude does the speaker express about iambic pentameter? How does the speaker explain this attitude? How defensible is the attitude?
3. For what poetic forms does the speaker express a preference? Why? How does the form of this poem bear out the preference?

### WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS (1883–1963)

### The Dance (1944)

In Brueghel's° great picture, The Kermess,  
the dancers go round, they go round and  
around, the squeal and the blare and the  
buddle of bagpipes, a bugle and fiddles  
hipping their bellies (round as the thick-sided  
glasses whose wash they impound)  
their hips and their bellies off balance  
to turn them. Kicking and rolling about  
the Fair Grounds, swinging their butts, those  
shanks must be sound to bear up under such  
collicking measures, prance as the dance  
in Brueghel's great picture, The Kermess.

Brueghel's Pieter Brueghel (c. 1525–1569), a Flemish painter. Peasants' Dance (The Kermess) shows peasants dancing in celebration of the anniversary of the founding of a church (church mass). See page 1–8.



## QUESTIONS

1. What effect is produced by repeating the first line as the last line?
2. How do repetition, alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, and internal rhyme affect the tempo, feeling, and meaning of the poem? How do the numerous participles (like “tipping,” “kicking,” “rolling”) make sound echo sense?
3. What words are capitalized? What effect is produced by omitting the capital letters at the beginning of each line? How does this typographical choice reinforce the sound and the sense of the poem?
4. Most of the lines of this poem are run-on rather than end-stopped, and many of them end with fairly weak words such as *and*, *the*, *about*, and *such*. What effect is produced through these techniques?
5. How successful is Williams in making the words and sentence rhythms echo the visual rhythms in Brueghel’s painting? Why is this open form more appropriate to the images of the poem than any closed form could be?

## WRITING ABOUT FORM IN POETRY

An essay about form in poetry should demonstrate a relationship between a poem’s sense and its form. Do not discuss form or shape in isolation, for such an essay would be no more than a detailed description. The first thing to do as you go about determining what you want to say is to examine the poem’s main ideas. Consider the various elements that contribute to the poem’s impact and effectiveness: the speaker, listener, setting, situation, diction, imagery, and rhetorical devices. Once you understand these, it will be easier to establish a connection between form and content.

You will find it helpful to prepare a work sheet that highlights the elements you are deciding that you wish to discuss. For closed forms, these elements will be rhyme scheme, meter, line lengths, and stanzaic patterns. They may also include significant words and phrases that connect stanzas. The work sheet for an open-form poem should indicate variables such as rhythm and phrases; the use of caesures; significant words that are isolated or emphasized through typography; patterns of repeated sounds, words, phrases, and images; and, if relevant, the relationship of the poem’s content and any special visual effects.

## Questions for Discovering Ideas

## CLOSED FORM

- What is the principal meter? Line length? Rhyme scheme? To what extent do these establish and/or reinforce the form?
- What is the form of each stanza or unit? How many stanzas or divisions does the poem contain? How does the poem establish a pattern? How does the pattern control the poem’s developing content?
- What is the form of the poem (e.g., couplet, tercet, ballad, villanelle, sonnet)? In what ways is the poem traditional, and what variations does it introduce? What is the effect of the variations?

- How effectively does the structure create or reinforce the poem’s internal logic? What topical, logical, or thematic progressions unite the various parts of the poem?
- To what extent does the form organize the images of the poem? How does the poet develop images within single units or stanzas? Do images recur in more than one section? What is the purpose and effect of this recurrence?
- To what extent does the form organize and bring out the poem’s ideas or emotions?

## OPEN FORM

- What does the poem look like on the page? What is the relationship of its shape to its meaning?
- How does the poet use variable line lengths, spaces, punctuation, capitalization, and the like to shape the poem? How do these variables contribute to the poem’s sense and impact?
- What rhythms are built into the poem through language or typography? How are these relevant to the poem’s content?
- What is the poem’s progression of ideas, images, and/or emotions? How is the logic created, and what does it contribute?
- How does form or typography isolate or unite, and thus emphasize, various words and phrases? What is the effect of such emphasis?
- What patterns do you discover of words and sounds? To what degree do the patterns create order and structure? How are they related to the sense of the poem?

## Strategies for Organizing Ideas

In developing your central idea, you should illustrate the connections between form and meaning. For example, in planning an essay on Randall’s “Ballad of Birmingham” you might develop your ideas according to the speeches that are a normal feature of the ballad form. The poem’s first part is a dialogue between mother and child about the hazard of the local streets and the safety of the local church. In the second part, after the explosion, the mother turns toward the church and calls for her child, who, ironically, will never again engage with her in further dialogue. Another plan is needed for an essay on Williams’s “The Dance”; such a plan might link the lively, bustling movement of the dancers pictured in Brueghel’s painting “Peasants’ Dance” (p. 1–8) to the rhythms, repetitions, and run-on lines of the poem. Still another plan would be needed for a discussion of Heyen’s “Mantle,” the form of which requires enough stanzas of approximately equal length to make up the pattern of a pitched ball. (What is this pattern?)

Your introduction should contain general remarks about the poem, but it should, above that, focus on the connection between form and substance. Describe the ways in which structure and content interact together, with a brief listing of your specific topics.

Early in the body, describe the formal characteristics of your poem, using schemes and numbers (as in paragraph 2 of the illustrative student essay).

With closed forms, your description should detail such standard features as the traditional form, meter, rhyme scheme, stanzaic structure, and number of stanzas. With open-form poetry, you should focus on the most striking and significant features of the verse (as in the brief discussion of Whitman's "Reconciliation" on pp. 935–36).

Be sure to integrate your discussion of both form and content. It may be that you have uncovered a good deal of information about technical features such as alliteration or rhyme, or you may wish to stress that words, phrases, and clauses develop a pattern of ideas. Remember that you are not making a paraphrase or a general explication, but instead are showing how the poet uses form—either an open or a closed one—in the service of meaning. The order in which you deal with your topics is entirely up to you.

The conclusion of your essay might contain additional relevant observations about shape or structure. It might also summarize your argument. Here, as in all essays about literature, make sure to reach an actual conclusion rather than simply a stopping point.

## Illustrative Student Essay

Although underlined sentences are not recommended by MLA style, they are used in this illustrative essay as teaching tools to emphasize the central idea, thesis sentence, and topic sentences.

Adams 1

Kimberly Adams  
Professor Patter  
English 102  
20 February 2011

Form and Meaning in George Herbert's "Virtue"<sup>o</sup>

[1] Herbert's devotional four-stanza poem "Virtue" (1633) contrasts the mortality of worldly things with the immortality of the "virtuous soul." This is not an uncommon topic in religious poetry and hymns, and there is nothing unusual about this contrast. What is unusual, however, is the simplicity and directness of Herbert's expressions and the way in which he integrates his ideas

<sup>o</sup>This poem appears on page 950.

within his stanzaic song pattern. Each part of the poem organizes the images logically and underscores the supremacy of life over death. \* Through control over line and stanza groupings, rhyme scheme, and repeated sounds and words, Herbert's stanzas create a structural and visual distinction between the "sweet" soul and the rest of creation. †

[2] Herbert's control over lines within the stanzas is particularly strong. Each stanza follows the same *abab* rhyme scheme. Because some rhyme sounds and words are repeated throughout the first three stanzas, however, the structure of the poem can be formulated as *4ab4a2b 4c4b4c2b 4d4d4d2b 4e4f4e2f*. Each stanza thus contains three lines of iambic tetrameter with a final line of iambic dimeter—an unusual pattern that creates a unique emphasis. In the first three stanzas, the dimeter lines repeat the phrase "must die," while in the last stanza the contrast is made on the words "Then chiefly lives." These rhythms require a sensitive reading, and they powerfully underscore Herbert's idea that death is conquered by eternal life.

[3] Like individual lines, Herbert's stanzaic structure provides the poem's pattern of organization and logic. The first stanza focuses on the image of the "Sweet day," comparing the day to "The bridal of the earth and sky" (line 2) and asserting that the day inevitably "must die." Similarly, the second stanza focuses on the image of a "Sweet rose" and asserts that it too "must die." The third stanza shifts to the image of "Sweet spring." Here the poet blends the images of the first two stanzas into the third by noting that the "Sweet spring" is "full of sweet days and roses" (9). The stanza concludes with the summarizing claim that "all must die." In this way, the third stanza is the climax of Herbert's imagery of beauty and mortality. The last stanza introduces a new image—"a sweet and virtuous soul"—and an assertion that is contrasted with the ideas expressed in the previous three stanzas. Although the day, the rose, and the spring "must die," the soul "never" deteriorates, but "chiefly lives" even "though the whole world turn to coal" (15). With its key image of the "virtuous soul," this last stanza marks the logical conclusion of Herbert's argument. His pattern of organization allows this key

<sup>o</sup>Central idea.  
<sup>†</sup>Thesis sentence.

Adams 3

image of permanence to be separated structurally from the images of impermanence.

[4] This structural organization of images and ideas is repeated and reinforced by other techniques. Herbert's rhyme scheme, for example, links the first three stanzas while isolating the fourth. That the *b* rhyme is repeated at the ends of the second and fourth lines of each of the first three stanzas makes these stanzas into a complete unit. The fourth stanza, however, is different in both content and rhyme. The stanza introduces the concept of immortality, and it also introduces entirely new rhymes, replacing the *b* rhyme with an *f* rhyme. Thus the rhyme scheme, by sound alone, parallels the poem's imagery and logic.

[5] As a complement to the rhyming sounds, the poem also demonstrates organizing patterns of assonance. Most notable is the *oo* sound, which is repeated throughout the first three stanzas in the words "cool," "dew," "whose," "hue," "root," and "music." The *oo* sound might also have still been prominent in the word "thou," so that in the first three stanzas the *oo*, which is suggestive of a moan (certainly appropriate to things that die), is repeated eight times. In the last stanza there is a stress on the *o* sound, in "only," "soul," "though," "whole," and "coal." While *oh* may also be a moan, in this context it is more like an exclamation, in keeping with the triumph contained in the final line.

[6] Herbert's repetition of key words and phrases also distinguishes the first three stanzas from the last stanza. Each of the first three stanzas begins with "sweet" and ends with "must die." These repetitions stress both the beauty and the mortality of worldly things. In the last stanza, however, this repetition is abandoned, just as the stress on immortality transcends mortality. The "Sweet" that begins each of the first three stanzas is replaced by "Only" (13). Similarly, "must die" is replaced with "chiefly lives." Both substitutions separate this final stanza from the three previous stanzas. More importantly, the shift in the verbal pattern emphasizes the transition from death to the virtuous soul's immortality.

Adams 4

[7] The lyric form of Herbert's "Virtue" provides an organizational pattern for the poem's images and ideas. At the same time, the stanzaic pattern and the rhyme scheme allow the poet to draw a strong distinction between the corruptible world and the immortal soul. The closed form of this poem is not arbitrary or incidental; it is an integral way of asserting the importance of the key image—the "sweet and virtuous soul."

Adams 5

## Work Cited

Herbert, George. "Virtue." *Literature: An Introduction to Reading and Writing*. Ed. Edgar V. Roberts and Robert Zweig. 10th ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2012. 950. Print.

## Commentary on the Essay

The introductory paragraph establishes the groundwork of the essay—the treatment of form in relationship to content. The main idea is that each part of the poem represents a complete blending of image, logic, and meaning.

Paragraph 2, the first in the body, demonstrates how the poem's schematic formulation is integrated into Herbert's contrast of death and life. In this respect the paragraph demonstrates how a formal enumeration can be integrated within an essay's thematic development.

The focus of paragraph 3 is the organization of both images and ideas from stanza to stanza. Paragraph 4 begins with a transitional sentence that repeats the essay's central idea and, at the same time, connects it to paragraph 3. In the same way, paragraph 4 is closely tied to both paragraphs 1 and 3. The main topic here, the rhyme scheme of "Virtue," is introduced in the second sentence. This paragraph asserts that rhythm also reinforces the division between mortality and immortality. On much the same topic, paragraph 5 introduces Herbert's use of assonance, which can be seen as integral in the poem's blending of form and content.

Paragraph 6 takes up the last structural element described in the introduction—repeated key words and phrases. The idea is that these repetitions emphasize the distinction in the poem between mortality and immortality.

Paragraph 7, the conclusion, provides a brief overview and summation of the essay's argument. In addition, it concludes that form in "Virtue" is neither arbitrary nor incidental but rather an integral part of the poem's meaning.

## Writing Topics About Poetic Form

### Writing Paragraphs

1. Consider any closed-form poem in this chapter. In a paragraph discuss the appropriateness of this form in relation to the poem's meaning.
2. Consider any open-form poem in this chapter. In a paragraph discuss why you believe open form to be appropriate—or not appropriate—for this poem.

### Writing Essays

1. In an essay describe the use of the ode form as exemplified by Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" (Chapter 17) and Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" (this chapter). What patterns of regularity do you find? What differences do you find in the form and content of the poems? How do you account for these differences?
2. In an essay discuss how Cummings, Dryden, Randall, and Thomas use different forms to consider the subject of death (in "Buffalo Bill's Defunct," "To the Memory of Mr. Oldham," "Ballad of Birmingham," and "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night"?). What differences in form and treatment do you find? What similarities do you find, despite these differences?
3. In an essay consider the structural arrangement and shaping of the following works: Brueghel's painting *Peasants' Dance* (p. 1-8), Hass's "Museum," Heyen's "Mantle," Hollander's "Swan and Shadow," Charles Harper Webb's "The Shape of History," and Williams's "The Dance." How do painter and poet utilize topic, arrangement, shape, and space to draw attention to their main ideas? How do the shaped and prose poems (by Hass, Heyen, Hollander, and Webb) blend poetic and artistic techniques?
4. In an essay compare and contrast the use of the villanelle by Bishop ("One Art"), Roethke ("The Waking"), and Thomas ("Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night"). What topics do the poets develop? Why do the poets choose the villanelle as their poetic form? What lines do they repeat? What is the effect of this repetition?
5. In an essay compare the sonnets in this chapter by McKay, Shelley, Milton, and Collins. In what ways are the poetic forms of these poets similar? Different? How may Collins's poem be read as a commentary on the sonnet forms of the other poets?

### Creative Writing Assignment

1. Write a visual poem, and explain the principles on which you develop your lines. Here are some possible topics (just to get you started): a telephone, a cat, a dog, a car, a football, a snow shovel, a giraffe. After finishing your poem, write a short essay that considers the following and other questions: What are

the strengths and limitations of the visual form, according to your experience? How does the form help make your poem serious or comic? How does it encourage creative language and original development of ideas?

2. Write a haiku. Be sure to fit your poem to the 5-7-5 pattern of syllables. What challenges and problems do you encounter in this form? Once you have completed your haiku (which, to be traditional, should be on a topic concerned with nature), try to cut the number of syllables to 4-5-4. Explain how you establish the first haiku pattern, and also explain how you go about cutting the total number of syllables. Be sure to explain what kinds of words you use (length, choice of diction, etc.).

### Library Assignment

1. Using an online reference system or regular card catalog, depending on availability in your college library, look up one of the following topics: "ballads, England," "concrete poetry," or "blank verse." How many references are included under these listings? What sorts of topics are included under the basic topic?

