Melodies Unheard
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Among the many charms of the fourteenth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, few can match the pleasure of pure surprise and unexpectedness conveyed by the bold, unequivocal assertion: “The earliest sestina in English was published in 1877 by Edmund Gosse.” In *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia* (1593) Sir Philip Sidney, usually credited with being the first to employ the form in English, introduces three sestinas, each distinctly different from the others. The first (70), beginning “Since wailing is a bud of causefull sorowe,” is formally the most conventional, disposing its terminal words according to what have become orthodox permutations. This established form, which is commonly attributed to the invention of the troubadour poet Arnaut Daniel, was quickly imitated by, among others, Dante, whose sestina “to the ‘stony lady, Pietra’” is a superb example of the form. William A. Ringler Jr., editor of the Clarendon Press edition of Sidney’s *Poems* (1962), remarks that “the monotonous sevenfold repetition [if the final tercet is taken into account] of the same six words is appropriate to a song of mourning, though Puttenham, the only Elizabethan critic to recognize the form, commented that ‘to make the dittie sensible will try the makers cunning’” (416).

I take these two points to be of the greatest importance and to be potentially self-contradictory. The sevenfold repetitions of the same terminal words does indeed invite a monotony that best accompanies a dolorous, despairing, and melancholy mood, such as would possess Dante’s forlorn lover in his stony sestina. The repeated words, inexorable in their order, seem designed to convey a state of obsession, and of gloomy obsession especially. But what Puttenham calls “the makers cunning” may refuse to yield to that mood of solitary and redundant woe or may at the very least wish to vary it through the “cunning” of art. “To make the dittie sensible” is presumably to put those redundancies in a meaningful and
effective order; but it may also mean “to create something that is acutely felt; markedly painful or pleasurable.” And a number of poets have taken up the challenge of composing sestinas that defy the mood of desolation seemingly imposed by the rigid monotony of terminal repetition. One such poem is Pound’s bravura “Sestina: Altaforte,” which gleefully rejoices in violence and sanguinary enthusiasm, while another is Ashbery’s comic “Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape.” Such poems specifically repudiate the more familiar and lugubrious music of most sestinas.

The Sestina

![Diagram of the sestina pattern]

Fig. 1 The sestina, whose invention is commonly attributed to the troubadour poet Arnaut Daniel (c. 1180–1210), is composed of six stanzas of six lines each (hence its name) and is usually concluded by a tercet, three lines, each of which contains two of the six terminal words that end the lines throughout the poem. The permutations of these terminal words is rigidly and inflexibly fixed, and this diagram is meant to illustrate the pattern. Roman numerals indicate stanzas; arabic numbers represent the words that terminate individual lines. Once the six terminal words ending the six lines of the first stanza have been established, the order in which they will appear throughout the entire length of the poem is absolutely determined. Let TW represent terminal word. Then the TW of the final line of stanza I becomes the TW of the first line of stanza II. The TW of the first line of stanza I falls into second place in the next stanza. The penultimate TW (5) of stanza I becomes the third TW of stanza II, while the second TW of the first stanza takes fourth place in the second. Of the two remaining TWs, the latter (4) becomes the fifth of the following stanza, while the remaining TW (3) falls into last place in stanza II. The word order for the third—and all ensuing stanzas—is attained by deriving its TW order by repeating this exact reordering by which the second stanza was derived from the first. Observe that when the TWs of the final (VI) stanza are subjected to this reordering, they return to the order of the first stanza—1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6—as Sidney’s double sestina illustrates.
Of Sidney’s two remaining sestinas in the *Arcadia*, one of them (76) departs from canonical form by employing rhymes, its first stanza’s terminal words deployed in this order: *light, treasure, might, pleasure, direction, affection*. The subsequent stanzas redeploy these words according to the canonical system of sestinas, and the poem, in keeping with tradition, is mournful and valedictory throughout. T. S. Eliot, too, wrote a rhymed sestina, though, unlike Sidney’s, his rhyming links did not occur within the limits of a single stanza. In “The Dry Salvages,” third of the *Four Quartets*, Eliot rhymes all the first lines of his six stanzas with one another and proceeds to do the same with the terminal words of the five remaining lines. Again, the poem is mournful and even dirgelike.

Possibly inspired by Sidney’s example, Spenser, in the mouth of August in *The Shepherd’s Calendar*, included a sestina of his own, though varying the permutations of the terminal words in an original and unexceptionable order of his own. Both in its music and its substance, Spenser’s poem seems to owe much to Sidney’s pioneering efforts in the field, as Spenser’s first stanza makes clear.

Ye wasteful woods! bear witness to my woe,  
Wherein my plaints did oftentimes resound:  
Ye careless birds are privy to my cries,  
Which in your songs were wont to make a part:  
Thou, pleasant spring, hast lulled me oft asleep,  
Whose streams my trickling tears did oft augment.

The stanzas that follow faultlessly pursue the doleful tone that had become the ensign of sestinas and at which both Sidney and Dante had excelled. But as his scholiast, E. K., tells us, Spenser’s August eclogue is indebted to another tradition as well: one that derives from Theocritus and Virgil, not because the classical poets wrote sestinas (which they did not) but because they wrote poems in the form either of debates or contests between competing shepherds, the competition sometimes judged by a third. In Virgil’s Third Eclogue, Dameotas and Menalcas compete in a singing contest judged by Palaemon, while in the Fifth Eclogue Mopsus and Menalcas compete in mourning for Daphnis. In the Eighth Eclogue, Damon pines for Nysa (“Farewell, O / my woods. I’ll hurl me into the
sea / From yonder peak”) while Alphesiboeus pines for Daphnis. Theocritus, too, in his Sixth, Eighth, and Ninth Eclogues, presents competitions in song and in lyric devotion to a lost or absent loved one.

These independent traditions, of sometimes lighthearted and cheerful rivalry and competition between shepherds for excellence at song, and the other, melancholy and painful song of lament that seemed especially to belong to the sestina, are surpassingly braided, musically and dramatically intertwined in Sidney’s masterful and brilliant double sestina, “Yee Gote-heard Gods,” one of the greatest achievements of English Renaissance poetry.

The Fourth Eclogues

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**Strephon**  Klauis

*Strephon*  
Yee Gote-heard Gods, that love the grassie mountaines,
Yee Nimphes which haunt the springs in pleasant vallies,
Ye Satyrs joyde with free and quiet forrests,
Vouchsafe your silent eares to playning musique,
Which to my woes gives still an early morning:
And draws the dolor on till wery evening.

*Klauis*  
O *Mercurie*, foregoer to the evening,
O heavenlie huntresse of the savage mountains,
O lovelie starre, entitled of the morning,
While that my voice doth fill these wofully vallies,
Vouchsafe your silent ears to plaining musique,
Which oft hath *Echo* tir’d in secret forrests.

*Strephon*  
I that was once free-burges of the forrests,
Where shade from Sunne, and sport I sought at evening,
I that was once esteem’d for pleasant musique,
Am banisht now among the monstrous mountaines
Of huge despaire, and foule affliction’s vallies,
Am growne a shrich-owle to myself each morning.
Klaius
I that was once delighted every morning,
Hunting the wilde inhabiters of forrests,
I that was once the musique of these vallies,
So darkened am, that all my day is evening,
Hart-broken so, that molehills seeme high mountaines,
And fill the vales with cries in steed of musique.

Strephon
Long since alas, my deadly Swannish musique
Hath made it selfe a crier of the morning,
And hath with wailing strengh clim’d highest mountaines:
Long since my thoughts more desert be than forrests:
Long since I see my joyes come to their evening,
And state throwen downe to over-troden vallies.

Klaius
Long since the happie dwellers of these vallies,
Have praide me leave my strange exclaiming musique,
Which troubles their daye’s worke, and joyes of evening:
Long since I hate the night, more hate the morning:
Long since my thoughts chase me like beasts in forrests,
And make me wish my selfe layd under mountaine.

Strephon
Me seemes I see the high and stately mountaines,
Transforme themselves to lowe dejected vallies:
Me seemes I heare in these ill-changed forrests,
The Nightingales doo learne of Owles their musique:
Me seemes I feele the comfort of the morning
Turnde to the mortal serene of an evening.

Klaius
Me seemes I see a filthie clowdie evening,
As soon as Sunne begins to clime the mountaines:
Me seemes I feele a noysome sent, the morning
When I do smell the flowers of these vallies:
Me seemes I heare, when I doo heare sweete musique,
The dreadful cries of murdred men in forrests.

Strephon
I wish to fire the trees of all these forrests;
I give the Sunne a last farewell each evening;
I curse the fiddling finders out of Musicke:
With envie I doo hate the loftie mountaines;
And with despite despise the humble vallies:
I doo detest night, evening, day, and morning.

_Klaius_
Curse to my selfe my prayer is, the morning:
My fire is more, than can be made with forrests:
My state more base, then are the basest vallies:
I wish no evenings more to see, each evening;
Shamed I hate my selfe in sight of mountaines,
And stoppe mine eares, lest I growe mad with Musicke.

_Strephon_
For she, whose parts maintainde a perfect musique,
Whose beawties shin’d more than the blushing morning,
Who much did passe in state the stately mountaines,
In straightnes past the Cedars of the forrests,
Hath cast me, wretch, into eternall evening,
By taking her two Sunnes from these darke vallies.

_Klaius_
For she, with whom compar’d, the Alpes are vallies,
She whose lest word brings from the spheares their musique,
At whose approach the Sunne rase in the evening,
Who, where she went, bare in her forhead morning,
Is gone, is gone from these our spoyled forrests,
Turning to desarts our best pastur’d mountaines.

_Strephon_
These mountaines witness shall, so shall these vallies,

_and Klaius_
These forrests eke, made wretched by our musique,

(in unison) Our morning hymne this is, and song at evening.

Sidney’s was not the first double sestina. He had for a model one published by Sannazaro in his _Arcadia_ of 1502, as David Kalstone reminds us in his excellent book _Sidney’s Poetry_ (1965), where, among other valuable observations, he remarks, “Sidney had seen the possibilities in Sannazaro’s organization of the sestina as a dialogue, employing pairs of stanzas, statement and response” (77). And explaining the dramatic context in which
Sidney’s Strephon and Klaius render their joint poem, Kalstone declares, “The only shepherds not native to Arcadia, they are clearly to be distin-
guished from the rustics of the eclogues. They have come to the seacoast
to mourn the departure of Urania for the island of ‘Cithera’” (72). Ac-
cording to Ringler, “Strephon and his older friend Klaius” were “two
gentlemen who had become shepherds because of their love for a maiden
named Urania, ‘thought a Shepherdes Daughter, but in deede of farr
greater byrthe.’ She never returned their affection, and some months pre-
viously had departed from Arcadia, leaving orders that they should remain
there until they had received written instructions from her” (416). It is of
supreme importance that “the island of ‘Cithera’ (Cythera) was reckoned
as sacred to the goddess Venus, who was from thence surnamed Cytherea”
and who rose, as some suppose, from the sea near its coast, near Laconia
in Peloponnesus. The island was traditionally supposed to be joyfully de-
voted to the rites of Venus and to be a continuous festival of erotic plea-
sures. Strephon and Klaius, therefore, have specifically been denied en-
trance into the sacred domain of Requited Love.

Cithera, that realm of “gratified desire,” to use Blake’s words, has
played a long and troubled role in the human imagination. It figures in a
famous painting (or, rather, in two versions of one painting) by Jean-
Antoine Watteau, called Departure for the Island of Cythera. One com-
mentator, Michael Schwarz, notes:

For the Departure Watteau brightened his palette, using pastel shades
of pink and pale blue. Thin clouds and diaphanous veils of mist spread
across the picture, increasing the delicacy of the pastel shades and
making them glow even more intensely. Pairs of happy lovers are
grouped around the boat. One cavalier is helping his lady to embark
while she coquettishly tucks up her skirt. They are joined by a second
couple, who go arm-in-arm, while others, who are seen approaching
the boat, are indulging in friendly or amorous banter. The boat itself,
which is enveloped in haze and surrounded by numerous putti, looks
almost as if it had descended from the roseate heavens. These putti,
the charming envoys of Venus, rise up high into the air as they sport
and play with one another. The sailors, who were seen straining on
their oars in the first painting of the Departure, were omitted from
the later version so as not to mar the perfect serenity of the arcadian
setting. In this work, ancient mythology and eighteenth-century custom combine to form a world that appeared entirely real to Watteau’s contemporaries. They themselves become dream figures and in Watteau’s paintings they were able to enter into the lofty regions of the supernatural world previously denied to them. By daring to rise to these heights, by entering into this world of the imagination, they were able to transfigure their own everyday world. But would not this illusion be followed by profound melancholy? There is a hint of melancholy in all of Watteau’s painting; it is one of the characteristic features of his style.¹

In his brilliant and precocious survey of the tonal inflections and molecular linkages of English poetry, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1947), William Empson has set down with remarkable compression some of the wisest and most probing comments on Sidney’s double sestina.

The poem beats, however rich its orchestration, [Empson declares] with a wailing and immovable monotony, forever upon the same doors in vain. *Mountaines, vallies, forrests; musique, evening, morning;* it is at these words only that Klaius and Strephon pause in their cries; these words circumscribe their world; these are the bones of their situation; and in tracing their lovelorn pastoral tedium through thirteen repetitions, with something of the aimless multitudinousness of the sea on a rock, we seem to extract all the meanings possible from these notions. (14–15)

He proceeds to show how richly and emotionally equivocal are those six terminal nouns, colored in each case by the speaker’s state of mind, as they might reflect a former state of happiness or a present state of deprivation. “Mountaines,” for example, can be great challenges to feats of strength but also a barrier, if not a weight beneath which one would be crushed to extinction. They can also become metaphorical “mountaines / of huge despair,” and their metamorphosis from the literal to the figurative provides one of the most unnerving elements in the poem, as the distracted minds of the speakers seem to approach an almost suicidal phantasmagoria. In

the same way, *vallies* are protected and secure and yet are cut off from other, and perhaps better, kinds of life. Their lowness befits humility, but also the status of the unworthy. “Forrests” are places of danger, but a challenge to the courageous hunter, a place where stately cedars grow, where the mixed “musique” of Nightingales and Owls are both to be heard. “Morning” is the time of rising and hopefulness, unless you are so depressed that it can only renew the misery of the day before. “Evening” at least ought to bring rest after the labors of the day and the serenity of sleep after waking hours of misery, but evening is also a fading of light and hope as well, and Strephon claims that he has been cast “into eternal evening.”

I have summarized here, far too briskly, the analysis Empson bestows on these six crucial nouns, demonstrating how slippery and unstable they become in a troubled mind. It is worth noting also that of the six, four are naturally mated pairs: morning is matched with evening, mountains with vallies. (Forests and music are not natural mates except by a pastoral extension; forests are places where shepherds dwell and, according to tradition, sing their songs to one another; music belongs to those pastoral songs but also to the more musical creatures of the forests, the nightingales. Used ironically, music is applied to the cacophony of owls or the painful groans of the tormented lovers.)

But there is something about this beautiful work of Sidney’s that calls for further comment and, in my view, seems to challenge all the criticisms brought against it under the heading of *monotony*. Not that such a claim is baseless; Ringler, Empson, and I have used the word, which, given the mandatory repetition of six terminal words in an inflexible order, seems hard to avoid. But clearly one of the first resolves of any poet who sits down to compose a sestina must be the evasion, by whatever cunning at his disposal, of that imposition of monotony. The poet’s job is somehow to divert us by his drama, his pathos, his crescendo of emotional forces and to encourage us to feel that in one way or another each succeeding stanza will provide some novelty or a wholly new perspective. Few readers have any patience for monotonous poetry, and good poets, of whom Sidney was certainly one, are perfectly aware of this.

We may usefully return to a remark of David Kalstone’s quoted earlier: “Sidney had seen the possibilities in Sannazaro’s organization of the sestina as a dialogue, employing pairs of stanzas, statement and response.” Nothing, it seems to me, so characterizes Sidney’s double sestina as the
careful (one may say “musical”) parallelisms of its paired stanzas, and there cannot be the least doubt that Sidney expected this to be noticed and appreciated. The first two paired stanzas contain the same line (“Vouchsafe your silent eares to playning musique”), which appears in the fourth line of the first stanza and the fifth line of the second. It serves as a link between the speakers, Strephon and Klaius, but in each case the addressee is different, Strephon addressing the earth deities, Pan, Priapus, nymphs, and satyrs, while Klaius addresses the celestial deities, including Diana, who is, poignantly, both goddess of the hunt, and thus protectress of the shepherds, and also goddess of chastity and enemy of the love they both profess. The fact that one addresses earthly, and the other, heavenly deities may be seen as either something that divides them or, more probably, as two aspects of prayer that together embrace the entire cosmos.

The second pair of stanzas begin with identical wording: “I that was once.” They also contain two lines which, while not identical, bear a close resemblance to one another. The third line of the first of these two stanzas (“I that was once esteem’d for pleasant musique”) resembles the third line of the next stanza (“I that was once the musique of these vallies”). The two stanzas, moreover, describe the transformation of the two speakers from a former freedom, happiness, and capacity for musical performance to a present state of utter despondency, wretchedness, and complete remove from that realm of music that both belonged to the pastoral life and betokened the harmonies of nature and of love. The parallelisms are worth a moment’s thought. The second speaker, always Klaius, does not seem intent on besting his companion in misery by outstripping Strephon in the severity of his complaints. This is not a competition in who suffers most or who can utter the most miserable complaint. The paired stanzas are instead like musical variations on each other, and the parallelisms can suggest that Klaius quite humbly takes his cue from the speech of Strephon that precedes his own. This will be especially striking in the next two stanzas.

The first, fourth, and fifth lines of both the fifth and sixth stanzas begin “Long since,” and both speakers are now concerned to explain that they have been languishing in the depths of misery for some time. Strephon’s music has turned “deadly” and “Swannish,” indicating not only his expectation of an imminent death but also that one who was “once esteem’d for pleasant musique” is now incapable of anything but unmelodious complaint. Klaius, too, confesses that “the happie dwellers
of these vallies, / Have praide me leave my strange exclaiming musique.”

The two pastoral swains have lost possession of the one art that most characterized their profession. It is just possible that Sidney is making a subtle joke at his own expense—or at the expense of the traditional dolorous monotony of sestina writers. In any case, these two stanzas have become profoundly more “inward,” describing states of mind that are neurotic, self-tormenting, and virtually suicidal. They are preparing us for the even more hallucinatory stanzas that immediately follow.

The seventh and eighth stanzas are rich in parallelisms. The first, third, and fifth lines of both stanzas begin with almost identical phrases, subtly varied. The first of the stanzas offers them as “Me seemes I see,” “Me seemes I heare,” and “Me seemes I feele,” while the following stanza alters the sequence to “see,” “feele,” and “heare.” These stanzas are morbidly surrealistic, reminding one of the weird and primitive terrors in the paintings of Piero di Cosimo. All the familiar values have been transvalued; nothing is stable or familiar; the minds of Strephon and Klaius are profoundly disoriented and given over to a morbidity that is the more frightening in that we have seen it grow in intensity right before our eyes in the course of the poem.

The ninth and tenth stanzas are the most violent in their self-condemnation. The first line of the ninth (“I wish to fire the trees of all these forrests”) is echoed but altered in the tenth’s second line (“My fire is more, than can be made with forrests”). The ninth’s second line (“I give the Sunne a last farewell each evening”) is restated in other terms in the tenth stanza’s fourth line (“I wish no evenings more to see, each evening”). These two stanzas are, in their way, more terrible than the immediately preceding ones, since they have abandoned the protective devices of hallucination and are now coldly and self-condemningly analytical. Someone who can say unflinchingly, “I doo detest night, evening, day, and morning,” has covered all possibilities and left himself nowhere to exist. And someone who says of himself that I “stoppe mine eares, lest I growe mad with Musicke” has acknowledged that the single most powerful and celestial cure for the soul not only avails him nothing but drives him to further disorder. This important reference to music as that harmonious and reconciliating power that was thought to operate throughout the universe, presented as unavailing at the end of the tenth stanza, leads now to the unfolding of the mystery: the revelation in the final two full stanzas of the source and cause of all this disorder.
Both Strephon and Klaius begin “For she,” but Strephon continues with the musical metaphor that closed the previous stanza: “For she, whose parts maintainde a perfect musique.” Her “parts” are certainly bodily parts, assembled in a perfect proportion. They are also her attainments, as “a woman of parts.” But they are of course the musical parts of a composition scored for the interweaving and combination of several musical “parts,” as in a madrigal or motet. Both Strephon and Klaius, in praise of their departed mistress, return once again to images of utter perfection, to the very sovereign “music of the Spheres,” but only at the end to contrast that perfection to the desolation in which both of them now must, as it seems, forever abide.

I should like to claim that the poem escapes, at least to some degree, the charges of tedium and monotony by virtue of the intensifying psychological drama it presents, and through the pairing, yet the distinct separateness of the two speakers, who seem to take up cues from one another, to enhance and embroider upon the other’s statements. No doubt this point must not be made too forcefully. The terminal words are, if anything, more insistently repetitive in a double sestina than in a single one. And yet I can’t imagine anyone wishing this poem to be shorter than it is. It fills out all its stanzas with richness and variety; its tone is not merely dolorous but terrifying, unbalanced, and in fact not so remote from that self-disgust that characterizes certain late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century poems.

But if this poem, and some other sestinas, can be defended against accusations of monotony, it is more difficult, I think, to protect them from the claim that they tend to be dramatically static. They present a frame of mind, sometimes an interestingly disturbed frame of mind but usually an obsessed one, which tends to harp on the same sad theme, varying it in certain ways but never departing from it, bound to it by the shackles of those six terminal words. Indeed, something about those compulsory repetitions seems to prohibit the possibility of a sestina developing in the way other kinds of poems do. A familiar lyric freedom is curtailed, richly detailed descriptions are pretty firmly excluded, narrative development, above all, is difficult to accommodate. The resources of the sestina seem astonishingly circumscribed.

But if these seem to be characteristic limitations imposed by the form itself, we are entitled to be the more delighted, impressed, and gratified when we find some poet intelligent and ingenious enough to overcome
them. And such triumph over the form has been attained not once but twice by Elizabeth Bishop, in two sestinas which otherwise bear very little resemblance to each other.

A Miracle for Breakfast

At six o’clock we were waiting for coffee, waiting for coffee and the charitable crumb that was going to be served from a certain balcony,—like kings of old, or like a miracle.

It was still dark. One foot of the sun steadied itself on a long ripple in the river.

The first ferry of the day had just crossed the river. It was so cold we hoped that the coffee would be very hot, seeing that the sun was not going to warm us; and that the crumb would be a loaf each, buttered by a miracle.

At seven a man stepped out on the balcony.

He stood for a long minute alone on the balcony looking over our heads toward the river. A servant handed him the makings of a miracle, consisting of one lone cup of coffee and one roll, which he proceeded to crumb, his head, so to speak, in the clouds—along with the sun.

Was the man crazy? What under the sun was he trying to do, up there on his balcony! Each man received one rather hard crumb, which some flicked scornfully into the river, and, in a cup, one drip of the coffee. Some of us stood around, waiting for the miracle.

I can tell what I saw next; it was not a miracle. A beautiful villa stood in the sun
And from its doors came the smell of hot coffee.
In front, a baroque white plaster balcony
added by birds, who nest along the river,
—I saw it with one eye close to the crumb—
and galleries and marble chambers. My crumb
my mansion, made for me by a miracle,
through ages, by insects, birds, and the river
working the stone. Every day, in the sun,
at breakfast time I sit on my balcony
with my feet up, and drink gallons of coffee.
We licked up the crumbs and swallowed the coffee.
A window across the river caught the sun
as if the miracle were working, on the wrong balcony.

This extraordinary, elusive, but mesmerizing poem has something of
the nature of a parable about it. Shy of making anything that might be
taken for grandiose religious claims, Bishop wryly referred to it as “my De-
pression, or Bread Line poem.” But however much it may apply to enfee-
bled social programs for the poor, it also clearly seems like a secular equiv-
alent of the Feeding of the Multitudes and of the Eucharist. The mystery
of the poem (an analogy, perhaps, to the mystery of the Feeding or the Eu-
charist) resides in that completely unexpected vision of wealth and comfort
embodied in the “beautiful villa that stood in the sun.” Its “galleries and
marble chambers,” its “baroque white plaster balcony” make it sound posi-
tively Spanish or Italian in its luxury and altogether alien from the vague,
unspecified, but generally bleak setting of the rest of the poem. The “vi-
sion,” for that’s what it is, of a palatial glamour is attained by the minute,
close-up inspection of a crumb of bread that was handed out in the Bread
Line. As I have commented elsewhere, “The complex intricacies of the ‘ar-
chitecture’ of the risen dough, its baroque perforations, corridors, its struts,
ribs and spans of support, all form the ‘beautiful villa’ with the ‘white bal-
cony.’ And this bread, and the vision it provides, have come into existence
by the miraculous and infinitely patient workings of that evolutionary pro-
cess that Darwin (one of Miss Bishop’s favorite writers) and other natural-
ists have so painstakingly recorded. The process itself is awesome enough to be characterized, not improperly, as a ‘miracle.’”

But the chief point about this sestina is that it is composed as a kind of narrative. It begins at six o’clock in the morning; a crowd has gathered, waiting to be fed; the first ferry of the day had only just crossed the river. It is depressingly cold out. At seven a man appears on the balcony; a servant joins him, handing him “the makings of a miracle.” The man proceeds to distribute individual crumbs and drops of coffee. How are we to make sense of the dispensing of these Loaves and the Fishes? In any case, action is going on by specific stages, as in a religious ritual. And this action precipitates a “vision” and concludes on a note of cheerful, contented comfort and serenity. The familiar bane of “monotony” and “stasis” has been triumphantly overcome. As it is once again in another Bishop sestina.

Sestina

September rain falls on the house.
In the failing light, the old grandmother sits in the kitchen with the child beside the Little Marvel Stove, reading the jokes in the almanac, laughing and talking to hide her tears.

She thinks that her equinoctial tears and the rain that beats on the roof of the house were both foretold in the almanac, but only known to a grandmother. The iron kettle sings on the stove. She cuts some bread and says to the child,

*It’s time for tea now,* but the child is watching the teakettle’s small hard tears dance like mad on the hot black stove, the way the rain must dance on the house. Tidying up, the old grandmother hangs up the clever almanac.

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on its string. Birdlike, the almanac hovers half open above the child, hovers above the old grandmother and her teacup full of dark brown tears. She shivers and says she thinks the house feels chilly, and puts more wood in the stove.

*It was to be,* says the Marvel Stove. *I know what I know,* says the almanac. With crayons the child draws a rigid house and a winding pathway. Then the child puts in a man with buttons like tears and shows it proudly to the grandmother.

But secretly, while the grandmother busies herself about the stove, the little moons fall down like tears from between the pages of the almanac into the flower bed the child has carefully placed in front of the house.

*Time to plant tears,* says the almanac. The grandmother sings to the marvelous stove and the child draws another inscrutable house.

Superficially, nothing much happens in this little drama with its two characters who don’t interact in any dynamic way on the wet September afternoon they share. But their situation and their setting is laden with omens and portents. The grandmother not only weeps in the very first stanza but must also struggle to conceal her tears from the child. Something predestined governs the season of the tears, as of the rainy weather, and the recurrent cycles of the year return annually to the anniversaries of past events. Conspicuous by their absence from this poem are the intervening generation between child and grandmother; where are the parents? The drawing of a house by a child is regarded as an expression of a desire for security, though this child seems touchingly unaware that anything is out of order. The almanac prophesies tears to come, presumably when the
child is old enough to understand what the grandmother already knows and is trying to conceal. The drama is the more poignant and terrible for being so carefully understated and evaded. Were the parents killed in some accident? How long ago? Did they die in some other terrible way? The poem allows us a terrifying latitude in which to let our imaginations range. The almanac, half open, is even likened to a bird, traditionally a prophetic creature. The drama is the more eloquent for its sparseness. But the point is that a story has been unfolded in a way that is not usually to be found in a sestina.

We may take the story as a poetic fiction, and it stands up with perfect form and as much clarity as the situation permits. But biographers have been diligent in pointing out that Elizabeth Bishop’s father died in 1911, when she was eight months old. His death so deeply disoriented his wife, the poet’s mother, that she was in and out of hospitals and rest homes for the next five years, after which, in 1916, she was permanently hospitalized in Nova Scotia, and Elizabeth never saw her mother again, though her mother lingered on as a patient until 1934. There was a time when I felt that this documentary information was required for a full understanding of the poem. I no longer think so. The poet has created a heartrending drama, from which she has deftly removed herself except as the artificer of the work. And it remains to be said that the challenge she has set for herself is the more demanding in that this poem is composed in tetrameter, rather than pentameter, lines, thus making even tighter than usual the constrictions of the six-linked chain of terminal words she has bound herself with.

Let me cite one more, this one by James Merrill, that clearly defies the lugubrious, monotonous, static condition usually associated with sestinas.

**Tomorrows**

The question was an academic one.
Andrey Sergeyvitch, rising sharp at two,
Would finally write that letter to his three
Sisters still in the country. Stop at four,
Drink tea, dress elegantly and, by five,
Be losing money at the Club des Six.
In Pakistan a band of outraged Sikhs
Would storm an embassy (the wrong one)
And spend the next week cooling off in five
Adjacent cells. These clearly were but two
Vital details—though nobody cared much for
The future by that time, except us three.

You, Andrée Meraviglia, not quite three,
Left Heidelberg. Year, 1936.
That same decade you, Lo Ping, came to the fore
In the Spiritual Olympics, which you won.
My old black self I crave indulgence to
Withhold from limelight, acting on a belief I’ve

Lived by no less, no more, than by my five
Senses. Enough that circus music (boom-two-three)
Coursed through my veins. I saw how Timbuctoo
Would suffer from an undue rainfall, 2.6
Inches. How in all Fairbanks, won-
der of wonders, no polka would be danced, or for

That matter no waltzes or rumbas, although four
Librarians, each on her first French 75,
Would do a maxixe (and a snappy one).
How, when on Lucca’s greenest ramparts, three-
fold emotion prompting Renzo to choose from six
Older girls the blondest, call her tu,

It would be these blind eyes hers looked into
Widening in brief astonishment before
Love drugged her nerves with blossoms drawn from classics
Of Arab draughtsmanship—small, ink-red, five-
Petalled blossoms blooming in clusters of three.
How she would want to show them to someone!

But one by one they’re fading. I am too.
These three times thirteen lines I’ll write down for
Fun, some May morning between five and six.
I think there can be no denying that this brilliant, quasi-inebriated poem is crowded with incident: so much for the charge that sestinas are doomed to be static. Just what all the activities add up to is open to some conjecture, though apparently the speaker regards himself as someone gifted with “second-sight” and concludes by foretelling the composition of the poem he has just finished. There is a wonderful mixture of milieux, events, of the fictive and the seemingly factual, astonishingly disparate and unrelated characters (we learn no more of Andrée Meraviglia, Lo Ping, or Renzo than of Eliot’s Mr. Silvero, Madame de Tornquist, or Fräulein von Kulp) as if in a sort of hashish trance, yet with enough tantalizing detail (the Chekhovian particulars of the first stanza seem comfortingly familiar) to persuade us, however briefly, that we are in a world we ought to recognize. This is emphasized by the curious historical context provided for some of the events; dates, statistics are urged upon us. And these historical and factual details have a bearing, however obscure, on the whole notion of futurity (the poem is titled “Tomorrows”), of “second-sight,” and the significance of all events, whether large or small, real or fictive, since even fictive worlds are made to resemble the one we commonly think of as “real.” All this is accomplished with a bravura sense of ridiculousness, though not, I would claim, with frivolity. The question of how much we think we understand our lives and the lives of others and the course of history itself lurks among the interstices of this poem.

It hardly seems necessary to defend the poem against the charge of lugubriousness, so I turn directly to the indictment of monotony, commonly brought against sestinas because of the inexorable repetitions of the terminal words. Merrill has ingeniously taken the first six ordinals for this purpose, but he has escaped his fetters by the ingenious use of homophones, homonyms, word fragments and hyphenation, and various sorts of wordplay. In the last line of the third stanza he forms the sound of five by borrowing the f at the end of “belief” and joining it to “I’ve.” This is neither unprecedented nor irresponsible. In the 32nd stanza of Hopkins’ great and deeply serious poem “The Wreck of the Deutschland,” the poet rhymes “unconfessed of them,” with “the breast of the” and borrows the needed m sound from the word that begins the following line, “Maiden.” To be sure, when Hopkins takes this kind of “liberty” it is done in behalf of the pulse and pressure entailed by a lyrical rapidity of action and meditation, which makes use of free-flowing enjambments. Merrill, too, has
his enjambments ("won-/der of wonders"), but they are dictated by easy colloquial speech rather than by Hopkins’ kind of agitation. No doubt a certain lightness of tone and intention is a necessary ingredient in Merrill’s versatility, but it may be claimed that he has for once emancipated the sestina from some of the bondage traditionally imposed upon it. He serves cheerfully to remind such commentators as Ringler, Empson, and others that monotony, obsession, and gloom are not the destined trademarks of all sestinas.

At the same time, the possibilities Merrill discovers in no way offer disrespect to the still more virtuosic achievements of Sidney’s great double sestina. Sidney’s world in the Arcadia was a world he shared in part with Ariosto and many other writers of pastoral romance, in which the lament of the forlorn lover enjoys a long and honorable history. The “tradition” of frustrated and unreciprocated love was popular in the Middle Ages and is to be found in Wyatt and Surrey as well as in the belated “Definition of Love” by Marvell. Great as was the pain described by these poets, it was thought to confer the spiritual benefits of mortification, and “the poets in the circle of Charles D’Orléans,” Huizinga tells us, “compared their amorous sadness to the sufferings of the ascetic and the martyr. They called themselves ‘les amoureux de l’observance,’ alluding to the severe reforms which the Franciscan order had just undergone.” Writing of this tradition from its medieval origins, Maurice Valency observes, “Love was . . . a special hazard of the poet’s trade, for it was chiefly out of the pain of love that poetry was made. The symptoms of love-illness, heresy, Chaucer called it, were often described; from the Vaticum of Constantious Africanus in the eleventh century to Burton’s Anatomy in the seventeenth, the love-syndrome varied little. In the initial stages the symptoms were not unbecoming—sleeplessness, loss of appetite, loss of flesh, and the characteristic pallor of the lover, together with love of solitude and a tendency to weep, particularly when music was played. But, we are told, unless the disease was cured, it became dangerous—the lover might pass into a melancholy, waste away, and die.” And these are the perils to which, in his Arcadia, Sidney exposes Strephon and Klaius. They were the perils of an abundant literature.