The Music of Forms

—Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.

I

Esquire magazine published a short piece of mine, introducing the double dactyl, a form of light verse, in 1966. The rules were laid out (two quatrains, with the last line of the first rhyming with the last line of the second; all the lines except the rhyming ones composed of two dactylic feet; the first line a nonsense line like “Higgledy-Pigglety,” while the second line must be a name that is two dactylics long; and the second stanza must contain a double dactylic word) and twelve examples were printed exhibiting these rules. The poems published in Esquire were about, among others, Marcus Aurelius, Klemens von Metternich, Vladimir Horowitz, and Franklin D. Roosevelt. The readers of Esquire were editorially challenged to contribute specimens of their own work in this light-hearted idiom (which, I may add, went on to enlist adoption by W. H. Auden); and, by way of heavy-handed hint, some further double-dactylic names were listed for readers’ use (Margaret Rutherford, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Judas Iscariot) as well as some double-dactylic words (heterosexual, incontrovertible, unconstitutional, misericordia), and Esquire promised to publish the best of its readers’ contributions in a forthcoming issue, the entries to be judged by me.

Reader response was enormous, which was initially gratifying, but it was not long before my more considered reaction was a bizarre mixture of amusement and dismay. Serenely undaunted by ground rules, readers
submitted poems about, among others, Fräulein Schicklgruber, Herr Chancellor Hitler, Enrico Caruso, and Alexander Calder, while using such putatively double-dactylic words as reorganization and indefatigable. Apart from culling the best of that strange harvest, I gave little further thought to the matter until much later, when I was regularly teaching Shakespeare to undergraduates. I quickly found it essential to begin with a lecture on Shakespeare’s prose and poetry, his employment of both in his plays, and, under the heading of verse, the lyrics of his songs as well as the role of blank verse in dialogue. Much care was given to discussion of iambic pentameter, and it became my practice to confirm my darkest suspicions about my students’ capacity to recognize metrical patterns by asking them, when beginning discussions of Romeo and Juliet, where the first line of verse appears in the text, apart from its sonnet-prologue. The play opens with prose dialogue, comic in character but edged with partisan rancor as minions of the Montague and Capulet households meet and taunt each other with increasing boldness that is prudently and comically leavened with a circumspect timidity, until, in line 65, Benvolio, who can see the true dangers of escalation, cries out: “Put up your swords, you know not what you do,” the play’s first blank verse line, which is responded to in like verse by Tybalt’s “What, art thou drawn among these heartless hinds? / Turn thee, Benvolio, look upon thy death.”

After a certain number of years I gave up asking my classes this question, which obviously embarrassed them and discouraged me, for it became transparently clear that the overwhelming majority of my students were quite simply deaf to almost all metrical considerations and that my introductory lecture on the topic was purposeless and wasteful. And I reluctantly concluded that there are many who are not so much mystified by meter as completely oblivious to it. There have even been established literary critics who, without the least embarrassment, have acknowledged this deficiency in themselves; so why should I have expected my students to be better attuned to such music?

It was only after many years of bafflement on my part about this metrical numbness in students that I bethought myself again of the readers of Esquire, and it dawned upon me that in many cases the names and words they had proposed as double-dactylic (Fräulein Schicklgruber, Alexander Calder, Herr Chancellor Hitler; reorganization, indefatigable), while monstrously deformed as regards the dactylic rhythm, which is essentially the
Oom-pah-pah, Oom-pah-pah beat of a Viennese waltz, nevertheless contained the requisite six syllables, though without regard to accentual values. And it struck me that there were those who read all poetry as though it were composed as syllabic verse, where, as in some of the poetry of W. H. Auden, Marianne Moore, and Richard Howard, to name only the most prominent practitioners, line length is measured entirely by the number of its syllables.

For a while this led me to account for discrepancies between the First Quarto (1608) and the First Folio (1623) editions of *King Lear*, where virtually the same words in the identical order appear, first, in prose, and later in verse, as though the earlier compositor had no ear for metrical measure. And a later atrocity in the editing of this play tended to confirm my suspicions. Here, to begin with, are the quarto and folio versions of I.iv.275–89.

*Leir.* It may be fo my Lord, harke *Nature*, heare deere Godeffe, fufpend thy purpose, if thou did’ft intend to make this creature fruitful into her wombe, conuey fterility, drie vp in hir the organs of increafe, and from her derogate body neuer spring a babe to honour her, if shee must teeme, create her childe of spleene, that it may liue and bee a thourt diſnutur’d torment to her, let it ſtampe wrinckles in her brow of youth, with accent teares, fret channels in her cheeks, turne all her mothers paines and benefits to laughter and contempt, that shee may feele, that she may feele, how sharper then a serpents tooth it is, to haue a thanklesſe child, goe, goe, my people?

*Lear.* It may be fo, my Lord.  
Heare Nature, heare deere Godeffe, heare:  
Suspend thy purpose, if thou did’ft intend  
To make this Creature fruitful:  
Into her Wombe conuey fterility,  
Drie vp in her the Organs of increafe,  
And from her derogate body, neuer spring  
A Babe to honour her. If shee must teeme,  
Create her childe of Spleene, that it may liue  
And be athwart of diſnatur’d torment to her.
Let it fľampe wrinkles in her brow of youth,
With cadent Teares fret Channels in her cheekes,
Turne all her Mothers paines, and benefits
To laughter, and contempt: That she may feele,
How sharper then a Serpents tooth it is,
To haue a thaklesse Childe. Away, away. Exit.

In 1975 Simon and Schuster issued, as one of its Parallel Text Series, an edition of *King Lear* with the folio text on the left-hand side and, facing it, a version intended to appeal to modern readers. The General Introduction explained:

The purpose of this series is to make Shakespeare fully intelligible to the modern reader. We should have the same immediate response to Shakespeare that we have to any modern writer, without the intervention of notes, commentaries, and glosses. Ironically, non-English-speaking readers of Shakespeare have always had modernized versions in translation, and their Shakespeare has been close to the reader’s own spoken language. We English-speaking readers are in some way penalized, and our Shakespeare, after 375 years, has become remote and difficult to understand—a school text that we struggle over. We hope that the modernized texts in the present series will encourage a more spontaneous enjoyment of the plays.¹

The modernized text of the I.iv passage quoted above is rendered as follows:

It may be so, my lord.
Listen to me, Nature, listen! dear Goddess, listen!
Set aside your normal purpose, if you ever intended
this creature Goneril to have children!
Make her womb sterile!
Dry up her reproductive powers,
and never allow that contemptible body to have
a baby to honor her! If she must breed,
let her child be made of hatred and spite, so that it may live

to be a perverse, unnatural torture to her!
Let her monster transform its youthful mother into a withered hag.
Let endless tears carve deep wrinkles in her cheeks.
Repay all her motherly cares and joys
with laughter and contempt, so that she may feel
how much more painful than the bite of a serpent’s tooth it is
to have an ungrateful child! I must go away! away!

I presume that, along with Maurice Charney, general editor of the Simon
and Schuster series, there must be others who feel no loss in the dignity of
utterance of the original. Yet I can’t help feeling that such dignity is con-
ferred by what in this essay I designate as a species of music, and which,
while not simply a question of meter, cannot wholly be separated from it.
The greatest of Shakespearean actors, such figures as John Gielgud,
Lawrence Olivier, and Paul Scofield, as they speak Shakespeare’s lines, al-
low us to hear more than soliloquies or dialogic exchanges of conversation;
in them we hear an intricate music of grammar and syntax, the richest of
vocabularies daringly deployed, and all this superimposed upon a grid of
meter, which itself is the more complicated by virtue of permissible vari-
ations of individual feet, as emphasis and dramatic pointing dictate. And
these permissible variations, recognized through the template of standard
meter, furnish a syncopation, a counterpoint that is lovely in its own right
and astonishing in its accommodation of all the other forces of language
at work in the plays.

It was Christopher Ricks who very kindly called my attention to, and
sent me the text of, an article on the Lear texts by Ann R. Meyer which
appeared in Studies in Bibliography (1994) and which is concerned with the
very discrepancies between quarto and folio that I had been fretting over.
With scholarship far beyond my reach, Ms. Meyer considered how
Shakespeare’s play was set in print and by whom. It appears that the
quarto edition was set in type by one Nicholas Okes. “It was the first play-
quarto Okes had ever printed,” Ms. Meyer declares, and she goes on to
cite Peter W. M. Blayney to the effect that this quarto “can claim a place
among Okes’s half-dozen worst-printed books of 1607–1609,” noting his
further estimate that “there were printers whose worst was worse than
Okes’s—but not very many, and not much worse.”

The problems for the compositor included the method of printing
signatures, sheets of paper that when folded and cut would produce an eight-page segment of text. This in turn meant printing pages on both sides of a sheet, half of them upside-down, so that when folded they would come out right-side up, thus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recto</th>
<th>Verso</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8 1</td>
<td>6 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 4</td>
<td>4 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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If, as Ms. Meyer suggests, the play were set by more than one compositor, “or in some cases more than one printing house,” a judgment would have to be made along the lines of guesswork about just how much text could be gotten onto eight pages. The supposition of several compositors would make possible simultaneous work on different segments of the text. “If,” Ms. Meyer conjectures, “the printer overestimated his copy, he would compensate for error by introducing ‘white space’ in the text. If on the other hand he had underestimated his copy, he would make adjustments by crowding verse into prose, neglecting proper punctuation, or by leaving little or no space between words and sentences. The quickest and easiest solution, of course, was simply to cut portions of his copy when he had underestimated the number of sheets necessary to print the text accurately and was therefore running out of room. Deletions under these circumstances were not uncommon.”

This seems persuasive and has behind it the authority of careful scholarship. Or perhaps I had better say “seemed persuasive” until I tried to reckon with a quarto/folio problem that presents itself in Love’s Labour’s Lost. In that case, quarto and folio agree on the text of the two songs that end the play, Spring and Winter. Here is what is usually taken, as it is by the editor of the Arden Shakespeare, to be the canonical text.

**Spring**

When daisies pied and violets blue
And lady-smocks all silver-white
And cuckoo-buds of yellow hue
Do paint the meadows with delight,
The cuckoo then, on every tree,
Mocks married men; for thus sings he,
Cuckoo;
Cuckoo, cuckoo: O word of fear,  
Unpleasing to the married ear!

When shepherds pipe on oaten straws,  
And merry larks are ploughman’s clocks,  
When turtles tread, and rooks, and daws,  
And maidens bleach their summer smocks,  
The cuckoo then, on every tree  
Mocks married men; for thus sings he,  
Cuckoo;  
Cuckoo, cuckoo; O word of fear,  
Unpleasing to the married ear!

Winter  
When icicles hang by the wall,  
And Dick the shepherd blows his nail,  
And Tom bears logs into the hall,  
And milk comes frozen home in pail,  
When blood is nipp’d, and ways be foul,  
Then nightly sings the staring owl,  
Tu-whit;  
To-who, a merry note,  
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

When all aloud the wind doth blow,  
And coughing drowns the parson’s saw,  
And birds sit brooding in the snow,  
And Marian’s nose looks red and raw,  
When roasted crabs hiss in the bowl,  
Then nightly sings the staring owl,  
To-whit;  
To-who, a merry note,  
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

When Dr. Johnson set about to produce his edition of the plays he could tell this was wrong, and he made the appropriate correction. Form itself, made the more formal because these are songs, so the musical score must formally accommodate all the stanzas to an exactly repeated melody,
would have told him—though it has not told as much to later editors—that if Spring concludes each stanza with two tetrameter lines, so must Winter; therefore some kind of adjustment must be made. One modern editor solves the problem by concluding the Winter refrain with

To-whit, to-whoo! A merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

Though this solution furnishes two concluding tetrameters, it leaves unfulfilled the solitary disyllabic equivalent for the antepenultimate “Cuckoo” in each stanza of Spring.

Musical settings make demands of their own upon poetry, and in the great Elizabethan era of music devoted importantly to song as solo, as madrigal, as a cappella groups of various sizes, as rounds and catches, there were few poets—and Shakespeare, it may be affirmed, was not one of them—who were indifferent to these demands. Among the most elementary was the requirement that stanzas reduplicate formally so that the same musical text can be repeated. The same constraints obtain in modern popular song, sometimes in highly syncopated and closely rhymed passages. Cole Porter is celebrated for his skill in verse as well as music, but I will offer an instance from the team of Rodgers and Hart. In “The Lady Is a Tramp,” there is a passage that, with a fine rhythmic sophistication reads:

I like the free, fresh,
    wind in my hair,
    life without care.

I’m broke—
It’s oke.

This pattern in rhyme and rhythm recurs in each of the four stanzas of the song, importantly including the terse, two-syllable couplet—witty in itself, almost epigrammatic—and demanded by, or accommodating itself to, the musical frame in which it is set.

But we need not suppose that we must turn to Lorenz Hart for examples of this formal skill, as though there were no English Renaissance
specimens quite apart from Shakespeare. Here is a song from John Playford’s *Selectyed Musical Airs and Dialogues* (1653).

When, Celia, I intend to flatter you,
And tell you lies to make you true,
I swear
There’s none so fair—
And you believe it too.

Oft have I matched you with the rose, and said
No twins so like hath nature made;
But ’tis
Only this—
You prick my hand, and fade.

Oft have I said there is no precious stone
But may be found in you alone;
Though I
No stone espy—
Unless your heart be one.

And when I praise your skin, I quote the wool
That silkworms from their entrails pull,
And show
That new-fall’n snow
Is not more beautiful.

Yet grow not proud by such hyperboles;
Were you as excellent as these,
Whilst I
Before you lie,
They might be had with ease.

There is, moreover, a further ground to suppose Dr. Johnson’s emendation was shrewdly correct, and this has to do with the bearing of the two songs on the events in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. The play opens with the resolution of the King of Navarre and his courtiers to seclude themselves from
the world in order to devote themselves to study, virtue, and self-conquest. No sooner have they pledged themselves to this austerity, albeit somewhat reluctantly on the part of at least one courtier, than the Princess of France, accompanied by a train of noble ladies, appears and, perforce, must be entertained. The resolution of celibate study dissolves with expected speed as well as a certain comic hypocrisy, but the courtship of the ladies by the gentlemen is confounded at the last moment by news of the death of the father of the princess. This in itself demands of her an interval of mourning and makes the further prosecution of courtship unthinkable in the circumstances. The ladies not only resolve to go into mourning for a year, but they impose penances upon the king and his courtiers for breaking the oaths of austerity they had initially imposed upon themselves. There is a lovely and just irony in the imposition, as punishment, of a penalty that was initially self-imposed. The only characters in the play to escape from this term of celibacy are Don Adriano De Armado, a miles gloriosus, a braggart soldier, and Jaquenetta, a country wench whom he has gotten with child and must now make an honest woman by marrying her. So there is the further irony that the nobility are condemned for a year to sexual abstinence, while the lower-class characters, who have already indulged in carnal license, need only to solemnize their boisterous activities with wedding vows. And this clearly has a bearing on the songs, or, more accurately, they have a bearing on this curious situation.

The erotic celebration of *Spring* is unambiguous; and while it is edged with anxiety for husbands about the fidelity of their wives, it is richly evocative of the warmth and healthy license of fertility that belongs to the season and to all outdoors. Superficially, Winter seems designed in complementary opposition. It is cold where Spring is warm; it seems inhospitable in its icy discomforts. But if Spring invited the pleasures and liberties of the out-of-doors, Winter can at least recommend the diversions of indoor activities, which, if few, are nonetheless amorous, as the owl reminds us by inviting us all, precisely, *to woo*—which, as the song indicates, is “a merry note,” not a chilling or lugubrious one. Johnson, accordingly, concludes Winter’s song:

Then nightly sings the staring owl,
To woo,
To wit, to woo, a merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.
Finally, the flaws in the quarto/folio version cannot be attributed to a compositor’s “lack of space” for two reasons: the corrected, Johnsonian version requires no more lines of type than the erroneous one; and, positioned as they are at the end of the play, there could have been little uncertainty about how much space was left in which to set them.

The Lear speech quoted above in three versions raises some interesting puzzles. The quarto version (prose) contains a repetition towards the end, “that she may feele, that she may feele,” which, in view of what we know about the practices of Nicholas Okes, is likely to be an error. And yet in context the repeated phrase is actually quite moving and seems to emphasize the speaker’s desperate emotional turmoil. On the other hand, nowhere else in Shakespeare do we find a like repetition, in which a speaker feels almost unable to continue, as though sobbing were about to overtake him. When we come to consider the “modern” version, we cannot fail to be aware of its clumsiness, its importation of the epithet “monster” for which the original provides no precedent. Nevertheless, one point raised by Maurice Charney seems worth pondering. “Ironically,” he writes, “non-English-speaking readers of Shakespeare have always had modernized versions in translation . . . We English-speaking readers are in some way penalized, and our Shakespeare, after 375 years, has become remote and difficult to understand.”

So Matthew Arnold also thought and famously declared in the Preface to his Poems of 1853.

We must never forget that Shakespeare is the great poet he is from his skill in discerning and firmly conceiving an excellent action, from his power of intensely feeling a situation, of intimately associating himself with a character; not from his gift of expression, which rather even leads him astray, degenerating sometimes into a fondness for curiosity of expression, into an irritability of fancy, which seems to make it impossible for him to say a thing plainly, even when the press of action demands the very directest language, or its level of character the very simplest. Mr. Hallam, than whom it is impossible to find a saner and more judicious critic, has had the courage (for at the present day it needs courage) to remark, how extremely and faultily difficult Shakespeare’s language often is. It is so: you may find main scenes in some of his greatest tragedies, King Lear for instance, where the
language is so artificial, so curiously tortured, and so difficult, that every speech has to be read two or three times before its meaning can be comprehended. This overcuriousness of expression is indeed but the excessive employment of a wonderful gift—of the power of saying a thing in a happier way than any other man; nevertheless, it is carried so far that one understands what M. Guizot meant, when he said that Shakespeare appears in his language to have tried all styles except that of simplicity.

Doubtless it would be impertinent to wonder whether Messrs. Arnold, Hallam, and Guizot would have preferred the Simon and Schuster version of *King Lear*. That new version was, in effect, a translation into a more modern, idiomatic language, nearer the reader’s own usage, as Mr. Charney indicated. But is this always desirable? Should Shakespeare sound to us like Edward Albee or Tennessee Williams? Experiments in turning one English to another English have been adventurously undertaken, and it may be worth looking at a stanza of John Donne’s before and after such a translation.

**Loves Deitie**

I long to talke with some old lovers ghost,
Who dyed before the god of Love was borne:
I cannot thinke that hee, who then lov’d most,
Sunke so low, as to love one which did scorne.
But since this god produc’d a destinie,
And that vice-nature, custome, lets it be;
I must love her that loves not mee.

John L. Sweeney rendered this into Basic English, with its severely restricted vocabulary, as follows:

**Love’s Deity**

Talk with some old lover
Dead before the god of love had come to be
Would do my poor heart good. For he,  
As full of love when living as I am now  
Would not have done what I have done,  
Have given love to an unkind, unloving one.  
But as this god has made things so,  
And ways of men have not till now said 'no',  
No other way I see  
But to give my love to one  
Who has no love for me.2

The differences are clear enough. To begin with, Donne’s stanza employs sixty words, Sweeney’s eighty-four. Donne’s meter, with its idiosyncratic liberties in the fourth line, nevertheless keeps to its pattern of six pentameter lines followed by a tetrameter, a pattern adhered to in all four of its stanzas. Sweeney, on the other hand, maintains no fixed form at any point, and, for purposes of providing an unpatterned rhyme, has turned Donne’s seven lines into eleven. It is no more than minimal to claim that along the way Donne’s music has been lost.

When publishing his translation of that remarkable craftsman and employer of demanding forms, François Villon, Galway Kinnell wrote as commentary, “I decided against using rhyme and meter . . . What is more expressive of a poet than his images? Yet in rhyming translations we can’t even be sure the images are the poet’s . . . And I wonder, do rhyme and meter mean for us what they meant to Villon? It may be that in our day these formal devices have become a dead hand, which it is just as well not to lay on any poetry.” When I first read this, I was somewhat irked by it, until I realized that Mr. Kinnell was wittily and self-deprecatingly acknowledging that to observe the constraints of rhyme and meter is very, very difficult. And the difficulties, moreover, must be met with enough skill to make the reader feel they were not obstacles at all and that the poet was quite free to treat any subject and employ any tone of voice he wished, from the dramatic and serious to the importunities of love, and all with perfect ease. And yet, so much do the standards of formality change that we may wonder what the to-our-ear conventional Michael Drayton, who characterized his poetry this way—

My wanton verse ne’er keeps one certain stay,
But now at hand, then seeks invention far,
And with each little motion runs astray,
Wild, madding, jocund, and irregular

—would have made of the fourth line of Donne’s “Love’s Deity.” It may nevertheless be pointed out that Mr. Kinnell may be misrepresenting a poet’s resources when claiming that his images are what we most treasure in his work or what best characterize it. This would leave nothing to be said in behalf of Wyatt’s “Forget Not Yet,” Shakespeare’s “Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing,” Herbert’s “Bitter-Sweet,” Dickinson’s “Much Madness Is Divinest Sense,” as well as major passages of Eliot, Pope, Herbert of Cherbury, and many more.

Here is the first stanza and ensuing refrain of Apollinaire’s celebrated (and unpunctuated) poem, Le Pont Mirabeau, followed by three translations into English by William Meredith, Richard Wilbur, and W. S. Merwin.

Sous le pont Mirabeau coule la Seine
   Et nos amours
Faut-il qu’il m’en souvienne
La joie venait toujours après la peine
   Vienne la nuit sonne l’heure
   Les jours s’en vont je demeure

Under the Mirabeau Bridge flows the Seine.
   Why must I be reminded again
   of our love?
   Doesn’t happiness issue from pain?
   
   Bring on the night, ring out the hour,
   The days wear on but I endure.
   
   (William Meredith)³

Under the Mirabeau Bridge there flows the Seine
   Must I recall

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Our loves recall how then
After each sorrow joy came back again

Let night come on bells end the day
The days go by me still I stay
(Richard Wilbur)

Under the Mirabeau Bridge the Seine
Flows and our love
Must I be reminded again
How joy came always after pain

Night comes the hour is rung
The days go I remain
(W. S. Merwin)

The Apollinaire poem is distinguished for its music, made all the more intricate by the absence of punctuation, thereby requiring the reader to hesitate even while the poem flows as smoothly as the river, and the effect of reverie is beautifully mixed with uncertainty. Each translator has aimed at this fluidity and pathos, yet their versions are different not only in their music but even in their meaning. In the Meredith version, the speaker seems to feel he is well rid of a love the recollection of which only pains him; he yearns for surcease of memory. In Wilbur’s version, the regret is all for a departed love which, for all its intervals of sorrow, had its sufficient leavenings of joy as a compensation now no longer to be had. In Merwin the regret is much like Wilbur’s but with this important difference: where in Wilbur joy vanquishes sorrow (a sorrow that could be attributed to the normal fabric of life), in Merwin it comes in oscillation with pain, as though love itself were tainted with inescapable misery intrinsic to itself: if it’s joy you want, you’ve got to expect pain as well, and the pain comes first. It may be worth noticing that Wilbur is the only one who attempts to preserve the French pronunciation of *Seine* by rhyming it with *then*, to which *again* may be made to conform, whereas the other two

translators rhyme *Seine* with *pain*, with which *again* may also be made to conform. One further point as regards music: an ear attuned to the French and its literary resources would detect, as Francis Steegmuller pointed out, an echo, in Apollinaire’s refrain, of François Villon—music, that is to say, of the most durable kind.

It can be no surprise that so subtle and technically expert a poet as Donald Justice, who is also a trained musician and composer, should have addressed this shapelessly extensive topic, the music of forms, in a number of essays. One of them, called “Notes of an Outsider,” interestingly and provocatively presents two poems, one in English, one in French, both by Walter Savage Landor and one of them clearly a translation of the other. But the English one is a quatrains, rhyming *abab*, while the other is a couplet. Justice is characteristically shrewd in his conjecture about which came first.

He then goes on to quote a more elaborate Landor poem, which he acknowledges to be beautiful, “and part of its beauty,” he says, “at least for me, is its great brevity.”

After quoting the poem, Justice engages in the Donald Tovey game that I refer to in my Introduction, in which Gray’s “Elegy” was said to be

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trimmed down by cutting an adjective from every line and thereby turning the poem’s pentameter metric into tetrameter without sacrificing much, if anything, in the way of content. Justice experiments in paring down Landor, who, after all, is one of the sparest of poets. But I would want to claim that Landor’s music, as well as Gray’s (the latter being far more licentious in his profligate use of adjectives), attain by their line lengths a special music that is essential to the effects of their respective poems. The slow and mournful pathos of Gray, with rhythms of a natural yet stately measure that belong to rural and seasonal solemnities of eighteenth-century poetry, would lose a good deal of its effect if concentrated into the more epigrammatic limits of

The curfew tolls the knell of day,
The lowing herd wind o’er the lea,
The plowman homeward plods his way,
And leaves the world to dark and me.

In the Landor poem what struck me most of all was its employment of a stanzaic form and music used by Richard Wilbur in a superb translation he made of Baudelaire’s *L’Invitation au Voyage*.

My child, my sister,
    dream
How sweet all things would seem
Were we in that kind land to live together,
    And there love slow and long,
There love and die among
Those scenes that image you, that sumptuous weather.
    Drowned suns that glimmer there
Through cloud-disheveled air
Move me with such a mystery as appears
    Within those other skies
Of your treacherous eyes
When I behold them shining through their tears.7

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It is curious that the music of Wilbur’s translation is actually nearer to Landor than to Baudelaire, the French text being throughout a syllable shorter than its English version:

Mon enfant, ma soeur,
    Songe à la douceur
D’aller là-bas vivre ensemble!
    Aimer à loisir,
    Aimer et mourir
    Au pays qui te ressemble!

There is an interesting musical significance to Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” which cannot be mere inadvertence. Shelley himself has supplied a useful note on the poem’s genesis. “This poem was conceived and chiefly written in a wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence, and on a day when that tempestuous wind, whose temperature is at once mild and animating, was collecting the vapors which pour down the autumnal rains. They began, as I foresaw, at sunset with a violent tempest of hail and rain, attended by that magnificent thunder and lightning peculiar to Cisalpine regions.”

Shelley’s brilliant and innovative form for this poem pays a purposeful, echoing debt to Dante, a native of those very haunts along the Arno, since Shelley’s stanza is based, in part, on Dante’s terza rima, an homage to the English poet’s great predecessor and to the past. But the stanza is also an innovative sonnet, composed of four tercets and a couplet, a form absolutely original with Shelley, and an innovation, therefore, that looks to the future, as the terza rima looked to the past. And the poem itself, beginning with its tempestuous and almost destructive forces of autumnal and extinctive threats, concludes with the confident expectation of a rebirth.

William Carlos Williams avails himself of the same fecund and suggestive music in the opening of his poem “The Yachts,” in which the poem, composed throughout in tercets, opens with four lines that observe Dante’s terza rima, though promptly and completely abandoning rhyme thereafter. One must ask why the poet so meticulously adopted this fragmentary echo, and I think the poem’s submerged symbolism and imagery will explain and justify such allusiveness. The yachts are described as exceptionally beautiful, elitist, privileged, frankly spoiled, “surrounded
by / lesser and greater craft, which, sycophant, lumbering / and flittering, follow them,” and they have been cared for by crews “solicitously grooms-
ing them,” like thoroughbreds. They are being readied for a race, and presently they begin. But by the ninth tercet some surprising imagery rises, as it were, from the depths of the water:

Arms with hands grasping seek to clutch at the prows.
Bodies thrown recklessly in the way are cut aside.
It is a sea of faces about them in agony, in despair

until the horror of the race dawns staggering the mind;
the whole sea becomes an entanglement of watery bodies
lost to the world bearing what they cannot hold. Broken,

beaten, desolate, reaching from the dead to be taken up,
they cry out, failing, failing! their cries rising
in waves still as the skillful yachts pass over.

This violent ending of the poem, Gericaultesque in its ferocity, crops up so suddenly, in a poem that began so smoothly and indeed elegantly with a description of the preparations for and beginning of a modern yacht race, that we are cunningly invited to puzzle about just what is going on in this strange and wonderful poem. At one level at least, it appears to be about class struggle, though perhaps modified as instead the perfect triumphant of those favored ones (like film or rock stars) over those whose quotidian miseries are universally taken for granted and never relieved. These yachts have been carefully shielded “from the too-heavy blows / of an ungoovered ocean which when it chooses / tortures the biggest hulls,
the best man knows / to pit against its beatings, and sinks them pitilessly.” These craft have been exempted from certain dangers, and it could be claimed they are like the spoiled children of rich parents, blandly ignoring the sufferings of the multitudes who lack their means and graces. “Could be claimed,” I think, only if one forgets that terza rima opening with its invitation to recall Dante. For it brings to mind the eighth canto of the Inferno (lines 30–60), which, in Charles Singleton’s translation (1970), presents this terrible scene, in which the “master” referred to is Virgil:
While we were running through the dead channel, there rose before me one covered with mud, and said, “Who are you that come before your time?”

And I to him, “If I come, I do not remain. But you, who are you that have become so foul?”

He answered, “You see that I am one who weeps.”

And I to him, “In weeping and in sorrow do you remain, accursed spirit, for I know you, even if you are all filthy.”

Then he stretched both his hands to the boat, whereas the wary master thrust him off, saying, “Away there with the other dogs!” Then he put his arms about my neck, kissed my face, and said, “Indignant soul, blessed is she who bore you! He was an arrogant one in the world. No goodness whatever adorns his memory; so is his shade furious here. How many up there now [i.e., in the world of the living] account themselves great kings, that here shall lie like swine in mire, leaving behind them horrible dispraises.”

And I, “Master, I should like well to see him soused in this soup, before we quit the lake.”

And he to me, “Before the shore comes into view you shall be satisfied. It is fitting that in such a wish you should be gratified.”

A little after this I saw such rending of him by the muddy folk that I still praise and thank God for it.

It needs the whole theological structure of Dante’s poem to make clear the seeming heartlessness of Virgil and the pilgrim Dante at this point, hostile as they appear to be towards the hopelessly mired and deprived soul of (as we are to learn) Filippo Argenti, who is only one of the vast horde of the tormented, likened by Dante, on the authority of Thomas Aquinas, to dogs.

So the privileged status of the yachts in Williams’ poem is ultimately that of the saved, and their scorn for the damned is condoned and legitimized. Yet at the same time, the class distinction is maintained, yachts being by their very nature the pleasure craft of the wealthy; still more do they seem, in their preening aloofness and physical beauty (“they appear youthful . . . fleckless, free and / naturally to be desired”), the film and rock stars whose lives are supported on the adulation of multitudes about whose devotion and condition they are largely indifferent.
A much admired and frequently anthologized poem by Ben Jonson is titled “Epitaph on S. P. a child of Q. El. Chappel,” in which the child has been identified as Salathiel Pavy, and the chapel, of course, is Queen Elizabeth’s.

Weepe with me all you that read
This little storie:
And know, for whom a tear is shed,
Death’s selfe is sorry.
’Twas a child, that so did thrive
In grace, and feature,
As Heaven and Nature seem’d to strive
Which own’d the creature.
Yeeres he numbred scarce thirteene
When Fates turn’d cruell,
Yet three fill’d Zodiacks had he beene
The stages jewell;
And did act (what now we mone)
Old men so duely,
As, sooth, the Parcae thought him one,
He plai’d so truly.
So, by error, to his fate
They all consented;
But viewing him since (alas, too late)
They have repented.
And have sought (to give new birth)
In bathes to steepe him;
But, being so much too good for earth,
Heaven vowes to keepe him.

The critical commentary on this poem rarely touches on its music, which is subtle and ingenious. Despite its visible appearance of alternating tetrameter and dimeter lines, in which the shorter lines are uniformly given feminine endings, the poem may also be read as composed in quatrains, with a period at the end of each, except for the twelfth line, where we have a semicolon; and the quatrains rhyme abab. Nevertheless, the quatrains are not separated by space between them, and we are clearly
invited by the poet to read the poem as if it were an entire thing in itself, undivided into parts. The quatrains are identical in form, not only in rhyme but in meter as well; and this entails an abridgment of one syllable at the opening of the first line of each in an acephalic, or “headless,” line. This is done with such deliberate and formal exactitude as to supply a curious and notable music, an effect of truncation that symbolically reminds us of the truncated life of the young actor. This is not to say that wherever an acephalic line is used it must invariably refer to some kind of abridgment; Milton makes great use of such lines in “L’Allegro,” but he does so promiscuously, in something like random fashion, using the device for surprise and unexpectedness. But in Jonson’s case formalities both of verse and of the memorial occasion command, and so lines 1, 5, 9, 13, 17, and 21 all in their ritual order are abridged as, we might almost say, an act of respect to the dead child.

Conventionally, when we speak of “form” in poetry, we fall too easily into discussion of received forms, traditional stanzas, like sonnets, villanelles, rhyme royal stanzas, ottava rima, and quatrains of various kinds. Those who condemn form in poetry are often given to venting their wrath upon these received forms, and often chiefly on the grounds that they coerce the mind, limit the imagination, force language with Procrustean barbarity into set molds. But in fact our greatest formal poets—Donne, Herbert, Campion, Herrick, and Hardy—rarely embrace received forms apart from the sonnet. What they so conspicuously and brilliantly do is to invent forms of their own. This means that with such a poem the poet is free to create whatever pattern and music he cares for; but in each subsequent stanza of that poem the original music and pattern must be religiously observed. And in following a pattern of his own invention, the poet is being as obedient as he would be in writing a sonnet.

If Michael Drayton was able to think of his poetry, excellent yet conventional though it be, as “wild, madding, jocund, and irregular,” we must remind ourselves how standards of rigor will vary from one period to another. And these standards are by no means merely technical matters, but styles of writing and of experience that reflect upon one another. Modes of feeling themselves go in and out of fashion (a truth which is commonly
denied with the platitude that “human nature doesn’t change”). Describing the deportment of feeling appropriate to the medieval lover, Maurice Valency reminds us that

the true lover had also this special virtue, the quality called *mesura*, measure, that inner restraint which governs the appetites and keeps them subject to the intellect. This was both an aesthetic and an ethical concept, and obviously it had some relation to the Greek *sophrosyne* [moderation, prudence]. In the twelfth century it was closely identified with courtesy. “He may boast courtesy,” wrote Macabru [celebrated jongleur and troubadour], “who knows well how to keep measure.”

*Measure* is a musical term, and a metrical one, and when Dr. Johnson reproved the poetry of Cowley he observed, crushingly, “To the disproportion and incongruity of Cowley’s sentiments must be added the uncertainty and looseness of his measures.”

The music of forms requires some kind of regularity, some pattern that allows us as readers to judge proficiency, that engenders expectations which it can then fulfill in some novel way, withhold for strategic reasons, satisfy with dissonances or harmonies that surprise and delight. Our experience of this music is, of course, educated by the reach and breadth of our acquaintance with poetry in general. To begin with, one is able to write a poem because one knows what a poem is—not from dictionary definitions, but from experience. And our experience of poetry is no simple business. In *The Architecture of Humanism* (1974), Geoffrey Scott, addressing common factors in all the arts, observes,

Every experience of art contains, or may contain, two elements, the one direct, the other indirect. The direct element includes our sensuous experience and simple perceptions of form: the immediate apprehensions of the work of art in its visible or audible material, with whatever values may, by the laws of our nature, be inherently connected with that. Secondly, and beyond this, there are the associations which the work awakes in the mind—our conscious reflections upon it, the

significance we attach to it, the fancies it calls up, and which, in consequence, it sometimes is said to express. This is the indirect or associative element. (55)

I want to quarrel with this formulation of Scott’s, while acknowledging that he goes on later in his book to qualify and mute the, as I think, too crude distinction he makes here. What he is meditating upon has to do with the rapidity with which we assimilate a work of art as an aesthetic whole; or, rather, the division of assimilative rates, one more rapid than the other. Our ability to do this will be governed by our experience and the width of our acquaintance in the realms of that art. As Robert Frost has shrewdly and justly observed, “A poem is best read in the light of all the other poems ever written. We read A the better to read B (we have to start somewhere; we may get very little out of A). We read B the better to read C, C the better to read D, D the better to go back and get something more out of A. Progress is not the aim, but circulation.” Poems allude to one another formally, and so the breadth of our acquaintance will govern the speed with which we can assimilate poems we newly encounter. And, to explain my objection to Scott’s formulation above, I would say that very few works of art can achieve their initial impact in purely sensuous terms. A serious and durable work of art, whatever its medium, will make the sort of demands upon us that invite repeated experiences that will fail to exhaust the work. “It is the lowest style only of the arts, whether of Painting, Poetry, or Musick,” observed Joshua Reynolds in his *Discourses on Art*, “that may be said, in the vulgar sense, to be naturally pleasing. The higher efforts of those arts, we know by experience, do not affect minds wholly uncultivated.”

It may be claimed that the music of forms goes unheard in two senses. First, in that it makes itself felt subliminally, working upon us in ways of which we are not fully aware unless we put ourselves to the study of the work in question, and examine it with care, tact, and delicacy. It will not dwindle under such examination, though there are some who suspect that it will, such as William Stafford, who observed, “Poetry is one of those things. If you analyze it, it’s gone. It would be like boiling a watch to see what makes it tick.” Poetry is really sturdier than that; and the better it is

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the sturdier it becomes under inspection. Great works of poetry continue to yield new sense of themselves, and prove, to our delight and astonishment, utterly inexhaustible.

But there is a second way the music of forms—its echoic effects, recapitulations, harmonies, and above all its melody—goes unheard: all too often, alas, it falls upon deaf ears.