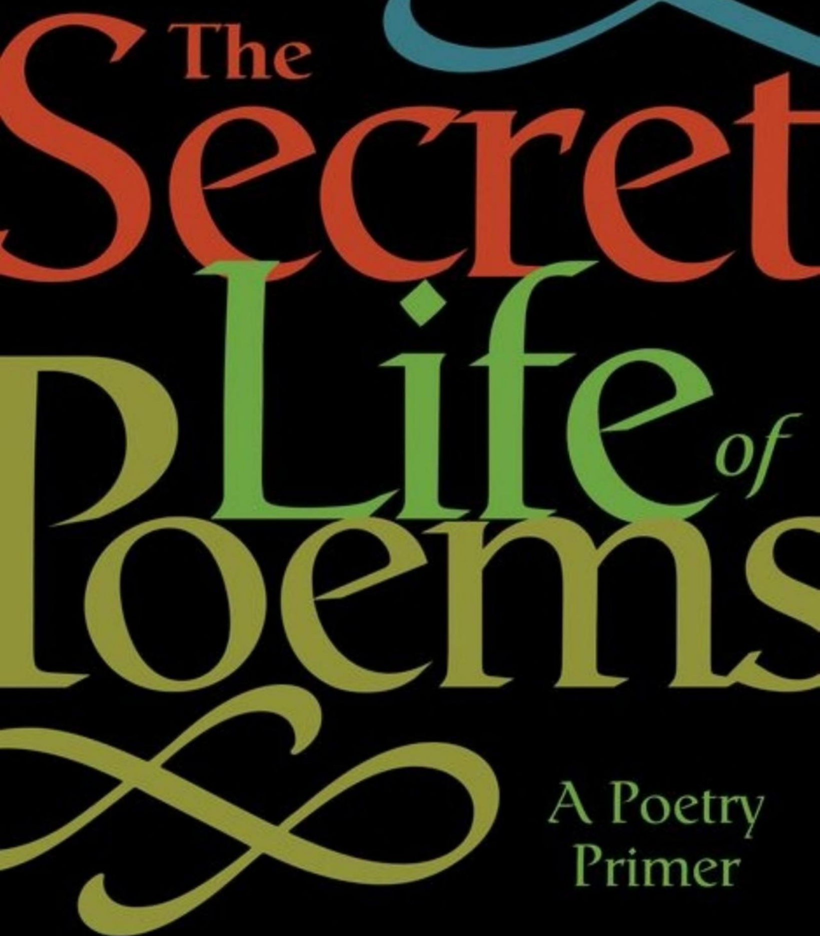

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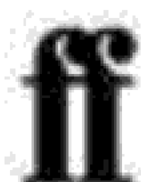
The Secret Life of Poems

A Poetry Primer



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Metrical Feet

iamb	the day
pyrrhic	and a
spondee	blank street
trochee	tiger
anapaest	on the fold
dactyl	just for a
amphibrach	the forest
cretic	bang about
molossus	crust coarse-grained

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Consonants

Aspirant: *h*
Fricative: *f, th, ph*
Dental (tongue and teeth): *d, n, s, t*
Guttural (throat and tongue): *g, k*
Labial (complete/partial lip closure): *p, b, f, v, w*
Liquid: *l, r*
Nasal (humming): *m, n*
Plosive: (strong) *p, t, k;* (weak) *b, d, g*
Sibilant (hissing): *s, sh*

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THE SECRET LIFE OF POEMS: A POETRY PRIMER

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Anonymous ~ ‘The Unquiet Grave’

The wind doth blow today, my love,
  And a few small drops of rain.
I never had but one true-love,
  In cold grave she was lain.

I’ll do as much for my true-love
  As any young man may,
I’ll sit and mourn all at her grave
  For a twelvemonth and a day.

The twelvemonth and a day being up,
  The dead began to speak:
Oh who sits weeping on my grave,
  And will not let me sleep?

’Tis I, my love, sits on your grave,
  And will not let you sleep,
For I crave one kiss of your clay-cold lips,
  And that is all I seek.

You crave one kiss of my clay-cold lips,
  But my breath smells earthy strong.
If you have one kiss of my clay-cold lips,
  Your time will not be long.

’Tis down in yonder garden green,
  Love, where we used to walk,
The finest flower that ere was seen
  Is withered to a stalk.

The stalk is withered dry, my love,
  So will our hearts decay.
So make yourself content, my love,
  Till God calls you away.

Poetry begins in speech, in the skipping rhymes and chants children

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make up in the playground and the street. It moves from there into the imagination and life of the common people – into rhymes, riddles, traditional songs – and is then sometimes collected so that it moves from oral tradition, communal memory, into print. Because poetry is rooted in speech, in the common tongue, poets have turned to the energies of traditional song, as well as to nursery and skipping rhymes, to keep in touch with the genius of the language and to prevent their writing from becoming bookish and cloistered. Burns and Clare collected traditional songs and enjoyed their bawdiness, Wordsworth and Coleridge imitated traditional ballads, Christina Rossetti and Hopkins were fascinated by nursery and skipping rhymes. Rossetti published a volume of her own nursery rhymes – *Sing-Song* – and Hopkins said that what he called sprung rhythm is found in 'nursery rhymes, weather saws'. Writing to his friend R. W. Dixon, he explained it:

> I had long haunting my ear the echo of a new rhythm which now I realised on paper. To speak shortly, it consists in scanning by accents or stresses alone, without any account of the number of syllables, so that a foot may be one strong syllable or it may be many light and one strong. I do not say the idea is altogether new; there are hints of it in music, in nursery rhymes and popular jingles, in the poets themselves … Here are instances: *Díng, dóng, béll*; Pússy's ín the wéll. *Whó pút her ín?* Líttle Jóhnny Thín. *Whó púlled her óut?* Líttle Jóhnny Stóut.' For if each line has three stresses or feet it follows that some of the feet are of one syllable only.

That most hermetic and difficult of symbolist poets, Mallarmé, taught his school pupils English nursery rhymes – to the great anger of a school inspector in 1880, who was horrified that Mallarmé had his pupils chanting:

> Liar liar lick spit
> your tongue shall be split
> and all the dogs in the town
> shall have a little bit

This is nonsense, the inspector wrote, wondering if their teacher was a sick man. But Mallarmé was instilling in his pupils a knowledge of the deep rhythmic structures of a language, which differs from French in its love of the spontaneous vernacular.

Thomas Hardy, who was the son of a fiddler and stone mason, knew many traditional songs and draws on their rhythms, forms and subjects

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throughout his writing. He would have agreed with Hopkins's remark that Tennyson's 'Locksley Hall' is a 'wonderfully ingenious piece of versification, wonderfully faithful to the rule which the writer had evidently put before him, yet I grew utterly satiate and weary with it, on this very account. It had the effect of being artificial and *light*: most unfit for intense passion, of which indeed there is nothing in it, but only a man making an unpleasant and rather ungentlemanly row.' We can see an opposite effect in this famous Belfast street song :

My aunt Jane has a bell on the door
a white stone step and a clean swept floor
candy apples hard green pears
conversation lozengers
candy apples hard green pears
conversation lozengers

This is sprung rhythm, a rhythm that delights in now and then texturing what in metrics is known as a 'molossus' – three strong stresses – into the metre. So 'white stone step', 'clean swept floor' and 'hard green pears' confidently play against the anapaestic and trochaic rhythms that the lines establish.

Such songs are seldom studied, but there is something so uniquely and humanly beautiful about their cadences that no consideration of the nature of poetry can afford to ignore them. The first stanza of the ballad 'The Unquiet Grave' seems to echo these famous lines:

Westron wynde when wylle thow blow
the small rayne down can Rayne
Cryst yf my love were in my Armys
and I yn my bed Agayne

On the other hand, this late fifteenth-century lyric may be picking up 'The Unquiet Grave'. As in 'My aunt Jane' the stressy, natural rhythm packs three stresses together – 'the small rayne down'. The effect is tactile, indisputable, a hard fact of experience, which is both material and poignant, like tears hitting and biting. The west wind is hard and intimate – 'thow' which assonates immediately with 'blow', so that 'wynde' carries 'whine', 'grief', and then releases the rhyme with 'Cryst', like an oath, before impacting on 'I', and releasing another agony in 'Agayne', which takes all the stress of the previous *n*s. The 'bed' he desires is near to 'dead' and carries also the plosive in 'blow'. The urge to fold his dead

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love in his arms is countered by the image of Christ with outstretched arms.

The first stanza of 'The Unquiet Grave' reworks the lines, beginning with a perfect iambic tetrameter, then changing to a line which puts three stresses together and so changes the rhythm, making it more tactile and immediate, then switching back into iambic before putting four strong stresses together, then three in the next line. The next stanza builds a spondee ('trūe lōve') against a molossus ('yōung mēn māy'), before repeating the molossus ('mōurn āll āt') and returning to the spondee ('twēlvemōnth') and completing the stanza with a fluid anapaest ('and a dāy').

Out of the guttural in 'speak' and the softer guttural in 'grave', the next verse prepares the strong, disturbing, tantalising line: 'For I crāve ōne kiss of your clāy-cōld lips', and then carries the guttural into 'clay-cold lips', whose three stresses echo the earlier triple, bunched stresses.

Then the dead woman's voice speaks back to him, making 'earthy' reflect 'breath', just as 'decay' in the last stanza brings 'clay' with it. Put an end to your grief, she says, or it will consume and destroy you. Let me go or you will kill your heart before it is time. Between that 'withered stalk' and the word from French 'content', something is going on – she is both a beautiful woman, the 'finest flower', and his shrivelled phallus, and also his obstinate memory of her body, her cunt, in 'content'. Let him remember them happily together before it is his turn to die. The 'garden green' is the bed they shared and made love in; 'walk' is that action and engagement – and it carries and transcends 'weeping' and 'sleep'. Her wise voice both cherishes and rebukes him, and in the mention of God, with its softer guttural, she gives him hope.

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Sir Thomas Wyatt ~ ‘They Fle from me that Sometyme Did me Seke’

They fle from me that sometyme did me seke
With naked fote stalking in my chambre.
I have sene theim gentill tame and meke
That nowe are wyld and do not remembre
That sometyme they put theimself in daunger
To take bred at my hand; and nowe they raunge
Besely seking with a continuell chaunge.

Thancked be fortune, it hath ben othrewise
Twenty tymes better; but ons in speciall
In thyn arraye after a pleasaunt gyse,
When her lose gowne from her shoulders did fall,
And she me caught in her armes long and small;
Therewithall swetely did me kysse,
And softely saide, *dere hert, howe like you this?*

It was no dreme: I lay brode waking.
But all is torned thorough my gentilnes
Into a straunge fasshion of forsaking;
And I have leve to goo of her goodenes,
And she also to vse new fangilnes.
But syns that I so kyndely ame serued,
I would fain knowe what she hath deserued.

Sir Thomas Wyatt was the foremost poet at the court of Henry VIII. He was reputedly the lover of Anne Boleyn, though most historians doubt this, and was imprisoned in the Tower of London along with her supposed lovers, whose executions he probably witnessed on 17 May 1536. He was released and prospered, but when his protector, Thomas Cromwell, was executed on 28 July 1540, his life was again in danger. As he said in a poem about this event, Cromwell was his ‘pillar’ and was now ‘perished’. Wyatt was charged with having encompassed the death of the king in a conversation in Rome with Cardinal Pole, Henry’s enemy. But he was again released and died of a fever in 1542.

In a chalk drawing by Hans Holbein the Younger, Wyatt looks

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sideways, a tough but anxious courtier. Choosing a plain style in his most famous poem, he speaks directly, not in a courtier's voice, though he chooses a stanza form – rhyme royal – used by James I of Scotland and brought into English by Chaucer. 'They Fle from me', is often linked to Anne Boleyn, though the *Dictionary of National Biography* states that neither Wyatt's poetry nor his imprisonment have any connection with her.

The four long *ee* sounds begin a game of hide and seek in a perfect iambic pentameter; then in the next line the rhythm changes, as the guttural *k* at the end of 'seke' travels down to 'naked' and gives it prominence – a naked foot is stealthy, soundless, a naked blade is dangerous, a naked body attractive. The adjective almost vibrates with such suggestions, as well as describing his honest, thinking voice. The guttural, repeated in 'stalking', gives that verb even more prominence, as if each of his former lovers is on tiptoe. It's a hunting term, which means 'to steal up to game under cover', as well as to 'stride, walk in a stately or imposing manner'. It is an ugly word which suggests a powerful creature stealthily hunting a defenceless animal. Here, Wyatt feminises himself as the hart, which is the subject of so much love poetry. The verb is also prominent because it is a reversed iambic foot – 'stalking' – but as the next two feet – 'in my chambre' – follow the same pattern, we could call these feet trochaic. The rhythm is tenser, tauter, more definite, compared with the relaxed iambic line that opens the poem.

This change in tone starts the sense of danger, and the next line continues the trochaic rhythm: 'I have/ sene theim/ gentill/ tame/ and meke'. This, though, is a subtle line because we hear 'and meke' as a single unit, as an iambic foot, which picks up the first line and leads into the third, which begins with two iambic feet. This means that we hear 'tame' as a monosyllabic, stressed foot as the hunting metaphor continues, because Wyatt's courtly readers would have known that the term 'faucon gentil' was applied to the female goshawk. Hopkins would probably have agreed that 'tame' is a single stressed foot.

The *ee* sounds in the first line are twice recalled in this line, so seeking and fleeing are part of its atmosphere, and slightly subvert the 'gentill tame and meke' adjectives that characterise the women as tame hawks or deer, and so restore the poet's masculine power, though 'me' can twice be discerned in the phrase. These women are 'gentill', a French word that means pleasant and well-mannered, as well as of a superior social class. The *ay* in 'tame' softens the *ay* in 'naked', while keeping the ghost of nudity somewhere in play. But the 'I' at the beginning of the third line foregrounds 'wyld' and makes it emphatic. From tame

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creatures that once ate bread from his hand, they now become like hawks that have turned wild, as tame hawks are prone to do. They range the skies ‘seking’ – a version of ‘stalking’, a repetition of ‘seke’ – for defenceless prey.

The dactyls and trochees that begin the last line of the first stanza – ‘Besely seking with a’ – speed up the movement after the drawn-out pause on ‘raunge’ (the pause is lengthened because of the rhyme back to ‘daunger’, a word which infects the free and powerful verb ‘raunge’).

Wyatt now takes up the *s* sounds at the start of the last line, and uses them in the next stanza to figure the erotic, ending the stanza on the sensuous *kiss/this.* But ‘caught’ brings back the *aw* – ugly sound – in ‘stalking’. He is now caught up in the wheel of fortune – ‘chaunge’ leads naturally to ‘fortune’. There is something uneasy in her arms being ‘long and small’ – maybe the rhyme demands it, but perhaps there’s a spider in here somewhere? A long arm is a powerful arm, which contradicts the diminutive ‘small’. The long *ee*s in the first line – ‘seke’ especially – are brought into play by ‘swetely’, and repeated in ‘dere’ – punning on the animal – and ‘dreme’.

Many lines, like the opening line of the third stanza, are divided by a strong caesura, because Wyatt’s ear is still tuned to the alliterative rhythms of Middle English verse. The two *ay*s in that line take us back to ‘naked’, and emphasise the change in power and circumstances since those times. This line also draws attention to itself, because it consists of only four feet, as does ‘Into a straunge fasshion of forsaking’. She is active, he is passive, taking her gentleness onto himself, which causes her to reject him. He asks a mock-naive question at the end, a question which has a sinister quality in that he clearly knows what has happened to her. The *serued/deserued* rhyme is used by Chaucer in *Troilus and Criseyde*, and this points to the nature of their relationship (like Criseyde she has betrayed him). The three *i* sounds in the final couplet work to place great emphasis through contrast on ‘she’. The effect is to target her, the object of his paranoid sexual fantasy, erotic memories and vindictive anger. The last couplet rather diminishes the poem – there is a mock courtesy in ‘fain’, but there is also implicitly ‘pain’. This is the last of these long *ay* sounds.

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George Herbert ~ ‘The Flower’

How fresh, O Lord, how sweet and clean
Are thy returns! ev’ n as the flowers in spring;
To which, besides their own demean,
The late-past frosts tributes of pleasure bring.
Grief melts away
Like snow in May,
As if there were no such cold thing.

Who would have thought my shrivel’d heart
Could have recover’d greennesse? It was gone
Quite under ground; as flowers depart
To see their mother-root, when they have blown;
Where they together
All the hard weather,
Dead to the world, keep house unknown.

These are thy wonders, Lord of power,
Killing and quickning, bringing down to hell
And up to heaven in an houre;
Making a chiming of a passing-bell.
We say amisse,
This or that is:
Thy word is all, if we could spell.

O that I once past changing were,
Fast in thy Paradise, where no flower can wither!
Many a spring I shoot up fair,
Offring at heav’n, growing and groning thither:
Nor doth my flower
Want a spring-showre,
My sinnes and I joining together.

But while I grow in a straight line,
Still upwards bent, as if heav’n were mine own,
Thy anger comes, and I decline:
What frost to that? what pole is not the zone,

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Where all things burn,
When thou dost turn,
And the least frown of thine is shown?

And now in age I bud again,
After so many deaths I live and write;
I once more smell the dew and rain,
And relish versing: O my onely light,
It cannot be
That I am he
On whom thy tempests fell all night.

These are thy wonders, Lord of love,
To make us see we are but flowers that glide:
Which when we once can finde and prove,
Thou hast a garden for us, where to bide.
Who would be more,
Swelling through store,
Forfeit their Paradise by their pride.

I want to look at how rhythm works in the first stanza of Herbert's poem 'The Flower' and in the opening lines of one of Lawrence's finest poems, 'Bare Fig-Trees'.

The first stanza of 'The Flower' is the subtlest of all the stanzas in its cadence and rhythm. It can be taken as a model of the essentially redemptive nature of poetic rhythm. Poetry is not made up of image or of rich and complex language – it can be, but it does not have to possess these things.

Let us scan it:

How fresh, O Lord, how sweet and clean
Are thy returns! ev'n as the flowers in spring;
To which, besides their own demean

These lines are almost completely regular iambic tetrameters, but the rhythm starts to shift:

The late-past frosts tributes of pleasure bring

The spondee in the second foot textures and slows the line, then we get two short lines, each of two feet:

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Grief melts away
Like snow in May

The first line is a spondee followed by an iamb, the next line is a straightforward iambic dimeter, which launches what we expect is another straightforward iambic line, which would scan:

As if there were no such cold thing

If we read it in this way we get a jumpy, unnatural, rather daft-sounding line.

What happens is a kind of acoustic miracle: ‘snow’ triangulates with ‘no’ and with ‘cold’ to give each word great emphasis and to halt the line momentarily at ‘no’, before allowing it to go forward, to stop again ever so slightly at ‘cold’, which reverberates with two anterior *o* sounds impacting on its own *o*, before reaching ‘thing’. The line has broken away from being composed of four iambic feet, and scans like this:

As if/ there were no/ such cold thing

The first foot is an iamb, the next an anapaest, the third an anapaest which really wants to be a spondee if it could only shed that unstressed ‘such’. Normally nouns take more stress than adjectives but ‘cold’ carries such weight, as I say, from the two previous *o* sounds that it perhaps even carries a shade more stress than ‘thing’. Put together and launched by the short two previous lines, they sound meticulous and unchallengeable. This is how poetry works. As Robert Frost, said ‘the ear does it’.

The redemptive nature of metre can also be found, curiously, in D. H. Lawrence, who mostly avoids traditional stress metre in his best poems, which are all in free verse. But if we look at the opening of ‘Bare Fig-Trees’ we can see another miracle of rhythm:

Fig-trees, weird fig-trees
Made of thick smooth silver,
Made of sweet, untarnished silver in the sea-southern air –
I say untarnished, but I mean opaque –

The poem begins heavily, straining for lift-off: ‘Fig-trees, weird fig-trees’ is a spondee, followed by a molossus, by three strong

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stresses. Every syllable is stressed, and the repetition boxes the line in. The next line consists of a trochee, 'Made of', followed by three strong stresses and an unstressed syllable: 'thick smooth silver'. Three adjectives in two short lines is risky, but he adds three or four, depending on how you count the compound adjective, in the next line: 'Made of sweet, untarnished silver in the sea-southern air'. Nine stresses, five *s* sounds, this line is struggling, and that compound adjective 'sea-southern' is an uncomfortable combination of 'sea air' and 'southern air', doubly so, because we don't talk about 'southern air'. Really this poem has failed to get off the ground.

Then in the next line, Lawrence makes it all suddenly run right, interjecting an afterthought between dashes:

> I say untarnished but I mean opaque –

This is a perfect iambic pentameter, which confesses to a mistake in the previous line. Lawrence's puritan aesthetic of spontaneity allows him to make mistakes, to work hit and miss, so that we see him like an artist in his studio having another stab at something he's just painted.

This means that when he returns to the bark of the fig trees, the adjectives are somehow cleansed of the effort of the first three lines.

> Thick, smooth-fleshed silver, dull only as human limbs are dull
> With the life-lustre,
> Nude with the dim light of full, healthy life
> That is always half-dark,
> And suave like passion-flower petals,
> Like passion-flowers,
> With the half-secret gleam of a passion-flower hanging from the rock,
> Great, complicated, nude fig-tree, stemless flower-mesh,
> Flowerily naked in flesh, and giving off hues of life.

The repeated *uh* sounds in 'dull', 'lustre', the run of *d* and *l* sounds, the chime of 'light' and 'life', the memory of 'silver' in 'suave', the plosives in 'passion' and 'petals', suddenly build a meshing pattern of related and relating sounds. He has succeeded in transforming metal into soft flesh. The word 'hues' in the last line of this, the first section of the poem carries 'smooth' in the second line to give the bark a living – a smooth but changing – complexion, which 'gives off' an inspired scent.

The *less/mesh/flesh* chime travels back to that repeated, highlighted

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word ‘untarnished’, just as ‘naked’ picks up ‘opaque’ – the sounds are like charged particles, constantly in motion, once they’ve been energised by the sudden interjection of the fourth line. This is dynamic form, picking itself up as it goes along.

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John Donne ~ ‘A Nocturnall upon St Lucies Day’

Tis the yeares midnight, and it is the dayes,
Lucies, who scarce seaven houres herself unmaskes,
The Sunne is spent, and now his flasks
Send forth light squibs, no constant rayes;
The worlds whole sap is sunke:
The generall balme th’hydroptic earth hath drunk,
Whither, as to the beds-feet, life is shrunke,
Dead and enterr’d; yet all these seeme to laugh,
Compared with me, who am their Epitaph.

Study me then, you who shall lovers bee
At the next world, that is, at the next Spring:
For I am every dead thing,
In whom love wrought new Alchimie.
For his art did expresse
A quintessence even from nothingnesse,
From dull privations, and leane emptinesse
He ruin’d me, and I am re-begot
Of absence, darknesse, death; things which are not.

All others, from all things, draw all that’s good,
Life, soul, forme, spirit, whence they beeing have;
I, by loves limbecke, am the grave
Of all, that’s nothing. Oft a flood
Have wee two wept, and so
Drownd the whole world, us two; oft did we grow
To be two Chaosses, when we did show
Care to ought else; and often absences
Withdrewe our souls, and made us carcasses.

But I am by her death, (which word wrongs her)
Of the first nothing, the Elixer grown;
Were I a man, that I were one,
I needs must know; I should preferre,
If I were any beast,
Some ends, some means; Yea plants, yea stones detest,

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And love; All, all some properties invest;
If I an ordinary nothing were,
As shadow, a light, and body must be here.

But I am none; nor will my Sunne renew.
You lovers, for whose sake, the lesser Sunne
At this time to the Goat is runne
To fetch new lust, and give it you,
Enjoy your summer all;
Since shee enjoyes her long nights festivall,
Let me prepare towards her, and let mee call
This hour her Vigil, and her Eve, since this
Both the yeares, and the dayes deep midnight is.

This study in negation begins dismissively – 'Tis the yeares midnight' – then it becomes more formal and paced, as the *ih* in 'Tis', repeated in 'mid', is then brought together by 'it is': *ih ih*, like two hard punches. The space between the two sounds is abolished. The compensation for this is the way the three strong stresses on 'yeares midnight' give way to the spaced out 'is the dayes'. This is perfectly natural, spontaneous, but carrying death and despondency in those repeated *d*s. This is only a preparation for the last line with its three *d*s and appearance of absolute finality.

After the first line the italicised '*Lucies*' comes as a relief, but Donne's ear runs away with the double *s* sound and he repeats the sound again and again, an uneasy and anxious susurrus. In the next line, Donne continues to flog the *s* sound. It is as if the sun has ejaculated, and is only weakly capable of sending forth light. The stars store light as flasks store gunpowder, and there may be a pun on 'flashes'. His ear has also got attracted to the guttural *k* in 'unmaskes', and it runs through 'squibs', 'sunke', 'hydroptique', 'shrunke'. Partly 'hydroptique' draws attention to itself, because it doesn't combine *k* with a sibilance, but also because it is trisyllabic and technical, diagnostic, and he has been deliberately placing simple monosyllables in the middle of the line before the caesura – *spent squibs sap.* Donne elides the repeated definite article to place the harsh, dry, technical 'th'hydroptique' in the middle of the line – a broken-backed, compound word with the caesura concealed inside it. The word sounds nasty and contains 'drop', i.e. fall. The *d*s come back here putting strong emphasis on 'drunk', which reverberates in the *unk unk unk* rhyme. The crisp plosives in 'spent' and 'sap' are emphasised in the 'drop' in 'hydroptique' – and the descent continues in 'beds-feet'; then

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of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry.

The ambiguity he is pointing to is historical, and at that time highly political because it carries sympathy for the practices and architecture of the old religion, Catholicism. Eventually, many years later, Empson's remark was to bear fruit in Ted Hughes's enormous study of Shakespeare, *The Goddess of Complete Being*, and in many scholarly discussions as to whether Shakespeare was a Catholic.

An ambiguity, Empson states, means something 'very pronounced, and as a rule witty or deceitful'. It gives room for 'alternative reactions' to the same piece of language. The joy of ambiguity is that it empowers the reader to find subtleties in a text, which open out like a secret labyrinth below the printed words. To adapt Eliot's lines on the Treaty of Versailles, poems are revealed to have 'many cunning passages, contrived corridors/ And issues'. Tracing what Empson in a revealing phrase terms 'the machinations of ambiguity', we enter the intricate, devious world of the imagination with its multiple ironies, its trembling light and fluid playfulness.

Shakespeare is talking about what it feels like to be middle-aged and unloved, when he compares himself to a tree in autumn. Lonely and fearing death, he is like the 'boughes' of a tree, which shake against the 'could'. The word 'could', pronounced as it often is in the north of Ireland, where Elizabethan pronunciation and some of its vocabulary are still current, picks up 'boughs' and makes the *ow* sound stronger, sadder. We remember that poor Tom in *Lear* is 'acould'. And in 'bare' we remember that 'poor, bare, forked animal' in *Lear*.

But then Shakespeare offers a metaphor for the boughs, and we see them as empty, bare choir stalls, which have been broken up and thrown out of a church. This had happened two generations ago, so this is a moment of Catholic antiquarianism. The Elizabethan injunctions of 1559 enjoined clergy to 'take away, utterly extinct and destroy all shrines, covering of shrines, all tables and candlesticks, trundles or rolls of ware, pictures, paintings and all other monuments of feigned miracles, pilgrimages, idolatry and superstition, *so that there remain no memory of the same* in walls, glasses, windows or elsewhere within their churches or houses'. Also the *hange/sang* rhyme maybe an echo of Psalm 137 ('we hanged up our harps'), which gives the rhyme an exilic and therefore Catholic association.

Shakespeare's father, John, who was a devout Catholic, had to preside over this destruction of the altars – he appears to have cooperated with the authorities slowly and reluctantly. The word 'late' means 'in the

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recent past', and it refers to the dissolution of the monasteries and the stripping of the altars by an aggressive iconoclastic Protestantism. The *t* in 'late' touches the *t* in 'sweet', an obsessive adjective in the sonnets, where it sometimes has a type of camp inflection, like Falstaff calling Prince Hal 'sweet boy'. As Empson points out, the narcissism here seems appropriate for choir boys.

Within the historical image, Shakespeare is also offering a Catholic image of the crucifixion. His flesh hangs on his skeleton like dead leaves or like Christ's body on the cross – the images of body/tree, body/cross, body/church are perfectly fused. Shakespeare plays on *leaues hue leaue*, as he tries to make the narcissistic, selfish young man he is in love with realise both his own mortality and the poet's and so return his love – a hopeless argument. The agony of being hopelessly in love becomes a cry out of the English Catholic experience of martyrdom and persecution (the head of Shakespeare's mother's family, Edward Arden, was executed as a traitor because he was a Catholic).

What Empson is pointing to is how we cannot draw a distinction between personal experience – being in love – and lived historical experience. The combination of the word 'hange' and 'shake' means that 'upon' could refer to the scaffold where so many Catholics were executed at Tyburn and elsewhere. Cruelly, Shakespeare rhymes 'sang' with 'hange', and so introduces a sinister sound to what should be a simply joyous verb. In a sense, he ruins the rhyme too.

In her epic study of the sonnets, Helen Vendler identifies a key-word which occurs in each quatrain, and a couplet tie, a word or words, which appear in the body of the sonnet and are then repeated in the couplet. The couplet tie in this sonnet is *leaue*[*s*], but she does not identify a key-word. In my view, there is a key long vowel sound *ee*, which appears several times in each quatrain, and is then repeated twice in the couplet. This binds the sonnet together, and gives great emphasis to the almost last word, 'leaue'.

Vendler sees 'glowing' as a 'positive word', but it could be argued that that noun, which she sees as no longer a noun 'but rather a verbal, an action', and therefore 'a glowing, not a dying', picks up 'yellow', which casts a shadow over it, just as 'hangs' crosses 'sang'. Rather, I think, this is an image of the unnaturally glowing complexion of a dying person – the 'bloom', in Keats's 'To Autumn', on the 'soft-dying day'.

Shakespeare is characterising himself as feeling similar to bits of holy furniture, which have been chucked like so much rubbish onto a bonfire. The Elizabethans spelt and pronounced that word 'bone-fire', a pronunciation that survives in the north of Ireland to this day. So the

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boughs are choir stalls and bones – we are close to the idea of martyrdom here, as a metaphor for dying lonely and loveless. Those hanging yellow leaves begin this idea, for this is a poem written in a consistent code. Just as Pasternak's 'Hamlet in Russia' is coded for the dilemma of artists under Stalin, this sonnet is coded for Elizabeth or James's regime, depending where one dates the sonnets. Shakespeare's multi-layered, shifting, ambiguous language reflects the dilemma of the Catholic artist in a harshly Protestant state.

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William Shakespeare ~ from *Macbeth*

Enter Macbeth, Lennox and Ross.

Had I but died an hour before this chance,
I had lived a blessèd time; for from this instant
There's nothing serious in mortality:
All is but toys. Renown and grace is dead,
The wine of life is drawn and the mere lees
Is left this vault to brag of.

Enter Malcolm and Donalbain. [II.iii.91–6]

The third scene of Act Two begins with the porter's speech as we hear the knocking on the gate. The knocking begins near the end of the previous scene, just after Lady Macbeth has gone backstage to gild the faces of the murdered grooms with their blood. Macbeth is on his own, and the heavy, repeated sound becomes a physical symbol of his disturbed conscience:

Whence is that knocking?
How is't with me, when every noise appalls me?
What hands are here? Ha! They pluck out mine eyes!
Will great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No; this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine
Making the green one red.

Lady Macbeth enters and rebukes him: 'A little water clears us of this deed'. But the knocking continues, and the scene closes with Macbeth's couplet:

To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself.
(*Knock*)
Wake Duncan, with thy knocking! I would thou could'st.

Macbeth has earlier called his bloody hands 'hangman's hands' – meaning they look as though they have drawn the bowels and plucked

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the heart out of the body of a half-hanged man, who was usually a traitor, as Macbeth now is. This was the fate of John Grant, the conspirator in the Gunpowder Plot, whom Shakespeare is most likely to have known. The word ‘drawn’ in ‘the wine of life is drawn’ carries somewhere a memory of ‘hung, drawn and quartered’. Macbeth’s speech is disturbed, guilty, full of regret for what he has done; he speaks mostly in short phrases, with only one full pentameter: ‘The labour we delight in physics pain’, his glib, civil answer to Macduff’s politesse earlier in this scene (Macduff says he knows it is a ‘joyful trouble’ for Macbeth to bring him to Duncan). The word ‘trouble’ has already been used by Duncan, who when Lady Macbeth advances to welcome him into the castle, where he will be murdered, says to Banquo:

> See, see, our honoured hostess!
> The love that follows us sometime is our trouble,
> Which still we thank as love.

That word ‘trouble’ we hear three times in ‘hubble, bubble, toil and trouble’. Shakespeare’s characters use language as though they’re unwittingly walking on eggshells, and in doing so they sow unease and attention in the audience.

When Duncan’s murder is revealed, Macbeth gives the short speech that begins ‘Had I but died an hour’ – it is a speech made in public, but it sounds like one of Macbeth’s earlier, agonised soliloquies. In Shakespeare’s memory is Faustus’s great final soliloquy, which he had earlier tried to imitate in Richard III’s final speech before Bosworth Field:

> Give me another horse! Bind up my wounds!
> Have mercy, Jesu! Soft! I did but dream.
> O cursed conscience, how dost thou afflict me!
> The lights burn blue. It is now dead midnight.
> Cold fearful drops stand on my trembling flesh.

This speech protests too much. Now, remembering Marlowe’s seminal, unprecedented soliloquy he takes the first line: ‘Ah, Faustus, now hast thou but one bare hower to live’, and puts the hour before, not after the present moment. That drawn-out, bisyllabic word (spelt ‘houre’ in the First Folio) also looks forward to one of his most tortured, later speeches:

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