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THE SONNETS OF ROBERT FROST

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I. INTRODUCTION

Karl Shapiro labels Robert Frost an American master of the sonnet form and adds Frost's name to a long list of sonneteers including Wyatt, Surrey, Spenser, Sidney, Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Wordsworth, Browning, and Hopkins.¹ But Frost, strangely enough, although placed among such weighty names in the history of the sonnet, has received but little critical attention as a sonneteer. The reason cannot possibly be lack of a substantial body of material, for there are thirty-two genuine sonnets in the Complete Poems of Robert Frost. In addition there are a great number of twelve, thirteen, fifteen, and sixteen line poems that are of about sonnet length although, strictly speaking, could not be defined as sonnets.

Mr. Shapiro suggests that by strictest definition there are only three recognized sonnet forms--all of them fourteen lines in length. Wyatt, the first sonnet writer in English, modeled his sonnets after Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374).² These sonnets, called Petrarchan or Italian, divide into two parts--the octave and the sestet. The octave rhymes ABBAABBA in all strict Italian sonnets, and the sestet varies--generally either CDECDE or CDCDCD.³ Changing the final two lines into a couplet is not unusual in the English language. In fact the couplet substitution was one of Wyatt's favorite techniques. For the purposes of this paper a couplet substitution in a sonnet that is otherwise regular Italian will not be considered sufficient to render the sonnet irregular.

¹ Karl Shapiro, A Prosody Handbook (New York, 1965), p. 140.

² Ibid., p. 136.

³ Ibid., p. 137.

Such matters of relationship between form and content are, however, susceptible of considerable control in the hands of a skilled poet, and the ultimate effect in any given instance may override theoretical considerations in achievement of artistic integrity.

Most deviations from the foregoing patterns have resulted from liberties taken in rhyming, but there have been a few novelties in use of the sonnet that may be mentioned, among them the following: terza rima sonnet (q.v.), with a rhyme scheme corresponding to terza rima; tetrameter, in tetrameters instead of pentameters.⁶

This material amplifies, so to speak, Mr. Shapiro's definitions. It suggests that while there are no "strict" definitions for the sonnet form, there do indeed exist traditional associations revolving around the three widely recognized forms. And furthermore, the most frequent variations from the traditionally recognized forms take place in the rhyme schemes and the meter.

In a sense, then, these traditional forms are a working definition and through an examination of rhyme and meter in Frost's sonnets one can isolate those individual poems in which Frost breaks the traditions, "overrides theoretical considerations," and "achieves artistic integrity." For want of a better word these sonnets which disassociate themselves from the strictest of traditional associations will be called irregular.

Using these traditional associations as some sort of framework one can begin to approach Frost's sonnets in search of the artistic variants. All of the sestets in his Italian sonnets are, strictly speaking, irregular. But allowing for the above mentioned English couplet substitution one can read a great number of these sonnets as being perfectly regular in Italian form. Perhaps the clearest example of this type of sonnet is "A Dream Pang," published in A Boy's Will of 1913.

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Lawrence J. Zillman, "Sonnet," Princeton Encyclopedia Of Poetry And Poetics, edited by Alex Preminger (Princeton, 1965), pp. 781-782.

I had withdrawn in forest, and my song
Was swallowed up in leaves that blew away:
And to the forest edge you came one day
(This was my dream) and looked and pondered long,
But did not enter, though the wish was strong:
You shook your pensive head as who should say,
'I dare not--too far in his footsteps stray--
He must seek me would he undo the wrong.'

Not far, but near, I stood and saw it all
Behind low boughs the trees let down outside;
And the sweet pang it cost me not to call
And tell you that I saw does still abide
But 'tis not true that thus I dwelt aloof,
For the wood wakes, and you are here for proof.⁷

The rhyme scheme of the octave is in Italian form. The octave-sestet division is very strong, the sonnet appearing on the printed page with a division after line eight. But even without the printer's or Frost's help, one can easily see the marked difference between the statement of situation of the octave and the statement of reaction in the sestet. Thematically, this poem provides an interesting parallel to "Into My Own" which is discussed below.

Frost also wrote regular English sonnets such as "The Master Speed" which appeared in A Further Range of 1936.

No speed of wind or water rushing by
But you have speed far greater. You can climb
Back up a stream of radiance to the sky,
And back through history up the stream of time.
And you were given this swiftness, not for haste
Nor chiefly that you may go where you will,
But in the rush of everything to waste,
That you may have the power of standing still--
Off any still or moving thing you say.
Two such as you with such a master speed
Cannot be parted nor be swept away
From one another once you are agreed
That life is only life forevermore⁸
Together wing to wing and oar to oar.

⁷Robert Frost, Complete Poems Of Robert Frost (New York, 1967), p. 22.

⁸Ibid., p. 392.

The rhyme scheme of this English sonnet is quite regular--ABABCDCDEFEGG. However, it must be noted that the poem does not necessarily work in the ordinary English fashion. It represents a clear example of Frost using a traditional form in a manner not strictly associated with that form. Although there are three quatrains and a concluding couplet, one would be hard pressed to find a tri-part division of thought based on the quatrains alone. The first quatrain states the couple's ability and can stand alone (although the reader is not aware that a couple is being addressed until later in the poem). But the second quatrain, which explains why the couple was given this ability, relies upon the first line of the final quatrain to complete the statement. And, consequently, the final line of this five line group receives unusual emphasis because of traditional associations, in an afterthought fashion, causing the poem to rest at that point. The final five lines, including the couplet, are then held together by a marked shift in the tone. More strictly, they are unified not by the shift in itself, but by the tone to which the shift is made--a tone of assertion. These final lines are full of repeated words and parallel structures within given lines. Consequently the poem is entirely in keeping with the occasion of its writing--the marriage of Frost's daughter. It has an intimate personal interest that is not at all characteristic of Frost. And while the use of a rhetorical pattern that does not parallel the rhyme scheme is nearly as traditional as the "regular" pattern, it does represent a departure from strict traditional expectations and, in subsequent sonnets, will lead to particularized effects that make Frost an "American master" of the sonnet form.

II. ANALYSIS

It is to these "irregular sonnets" that this paper will now turn its full attention. If the traditional definitions that are offered in the introduction and the legitimacy of a 14 line poem that bears relation to a sonnet only in one or two traditional aspects (such as a statement and response situation) are accepted, there are fifteen sonnets in all that do not fall into any of the three recognized forms of traditional sonnets. There are seventeen, including the two above mentioned, that do fall into either the Italian or English classes, and they are listed with brief annotations on a separate sheet at the conclusion of the paper. The purpose of examining the fifteen irregular sonnets is to discover what generalizations can be reached about Frost's practice as an irregular sonneteer.

The irregular sonnets are to be found throughout the Collected Poems, the first being the first poem in the volume and the last coming quite near the volume's end. There are three in A Boy's Will of 1913, two in Mountain Interval of 1916, three in West Running Brook of 1928, four in A Further Range of 1936, and three in A Witness Tree of 1943. Clearly the irregular sonnet form is not something that Frost picked up and then put away. It is not something that can be tied to any biographical incident. Rather it is something he began early in his career and worked with repeatedly though infrequently at periodic intervals. Perhaps the best way to approach it then, is in temporal sequence.

Upon opening the volume one first encounters "Into My Own."

One of my wishes is that those dark trees,
So old and firm they scarcely show the breeze,
Were not, as 'twere, the merest mask of gloom,
But stretched away unto the edge of doom.

I should not be withheld but that some day
Into their vastness I should steal away,
Fearless of ever finding open land,
Or highway where the slow wheel pours the sand.

I do not see why I should e'er turn back,
Or those should not set forth upon my track
To overtake me, who should miss me here
And long to know if still I held them dear.

They would not find me changed from him they knew
Only more sure of all I thought was true.⁹

The first quality one notices is that the poem is composed entirely of couplets. But the couplets do not work as couplets. They do not stand alone. Instead, through the use of enjambed lines and full stops Frost manages to make these couplets work as quatrains. Although the aabb scheme is technically a quatrain, it is not as popular as the abab, xbyb, or abba forms.¹⁰ In fact this couplet sonnet works exactly as a regular English sonnet should. And, although the pattern is at least as old as Surrey, it does represent a departure from the traditional rhyme of an English sonnet. There is a tri-part division of thought accentuated by division on the printed page. The first two couplets represent a statement of Frost's wish, the second two represent a subjunctive action (should), and the final two a statement of a particular attitude concerning that action.

The three part division works well for this poem. The vehicle makes the ambiguity of attitude more easily appreciated, for each of the three sections

⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁰ Preminger, p. 684.

stands alone and the poem can be digested, as it were, in three bites. The concluding couplet is typical of Frost's sonnets. While it has a metrical independence of its own, following as it does a full stop at line twelve, it depends upon the body of the poem for its meaning. Frost's final couplets are seldom aphoristic and this one is no exception to that rule. One might note the conversational rhythm of the couplet's first line straining against the underlying iambic pentameter. One interpretation of the specific ingredients of this "conversational rhythm" so often attributed to Frost is that the verse tends to an idiomatic, anapestic rhythm even though rooted in strict iambic pentameter. It represents the same idiomatic rhythm as does "would you like" or "do you want." This quality is typical not only of the sonnets, but of the body of Frost's work in general.

It is apparent that this early sonnet contains most of those characteristics by which Frost's work is so easily recognized. Among them is the tendency to the subjunctive, the ambiguous philosophical statement, and the unmistakable conversational rhythm. The limitations of the vehicle do not prevent Frost from including, in smaller quantity to be sure, most of the qualities of his longer works. But the strength of the poem, if indeed it is possible to isolate any one strength, is the use of the sonnet form to narrow and to concentrate the philosophical position.

The second irregular sonnet in A Boy's Will is "The Vantage Point."

If tired of trees I seek again mankind,
Well I know where to hie me--in the dawn,
To a slope where the cattle keep the lawn.
There amid lolling juniper reclined,
Myself unseen, I see in white defined
Far off the homes of men, and farther still,
The graves of men on an opposing hill,
Living or dead, whichever are to mind.

And if by noon I have too much of these,
I have but to turn on my arm, and lo,
The sun-burned hillside sets my face aglow,
My breathing shakes the bluet like a breeze,
I smell the earth, I smell the bruised plant,
I look into the crater of the ant,¹¹

Although it is unquestionably irregular, this poem does contain some of the formal aspects of an Italian sonnet. The vision of humanity in the octave is contrasted sharply with the vision of nature aside from humanity that is presented in the sestet. Furthermore the rhyme scheme of the octave is quite regular with the exception of the C substitution at lines six and seven. It is typical of many of Frost's irregular sonnets which show a reliance on some formal structure. Even as there are irregularities in those sonnets which are regular, so there are regularities in most of the irregular sonnets.

One notices immediately that the octave is composed of two end-stopped statements, the first concluding with line three. In these first three lines there is a marked change of rhythm, the first line being strict iambic pentameter while lines two and three with a separate rhyme have the conversational tendency to anapests--although they too are, strictly speaking, iambic. These two lines act as a sequel to line one, initially because the main clause of a sentence is always a sequel to an introductory adverbial construction, but also in this rhythmic manner. Carrying this pattern into the second statement of the poem which begins at line four and ends with the octave, one would expect lines six and seven to function much as do lines two and three. They contain the vision of lines four and five, the homes and graves of men, and are indented by the printer exactly as are lines two and three. They do act

¹¹Frost, p. 24.

as a sequel to line five (this time as the direct object of a transitive verb), but do not tend to anapestic rhythm as one might expect from lines two and three, and this departure from an expected pattern of rhythm is matched by a deviation in their rhyme--the C substitution which departs from the normal structure of an Italian octave. The departure is not without merit, for the iambic rhythm of these lines links them to the A lines four and five, and the final A line, line eight, beginning with a trochaic substitution receives unusual emphasis because of the rhythmic reliance of lines six and seven on lines four and five. This emphasis is functional, for line eight contains the panoramic vision of humanity which is the essential vision of the octave.

There follows a break on the printed page which, one might argue, is unnecessary because the thematic break between the octave and sestet is complete. Having established a sequential pattern of A lines to the B and C couplets in the octave, Frost does much the same thing in the sestet. Line nine is an "if" line followed by a sequential "then" couplet which, again, is indented. Line twelve shares the D rhyme of line nine and lines thirteen and fourteen are another indented couplet. One possible interpretation of this pattern is that lines twelve through fourteen continue the "lo" of line the; in fact, lines eleven through fourteen are the "lo" of line ten. But an additional interpretation based on the pattern of the octave is possible. One might argue that even as lines six and seven did not share the rhythmic precedence of lines two and three in the octave, so lines twelve, thirteen, and fourteen do not share the if-then construction of lines nine, ten, and eleven in the sestet. This interpretation would rely upon reading the final three lines as a single statement of the persona's reaction to nature and the final couplet as a typical anglicizing of the sestet of an Italian sonnet--that is, not emphasized.

A final observation, based upon this secondary interpretation, is that the expected rhythmic pattern disrupted in the octave is matched by the expected "if-then" statement pattern disrupted in the sestet. There exists an ordered disorder, a regular irregularity that renders this one of the most structurally interesting of Frost's irregular sonnets.

There is only one other irregular sonnet in A Boy's Will. And that poem, "Mowing," is perhaps the most difficult to approach in terms of the sonnet form.

There was never a sound beside the wood but one,
And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.
What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself;
Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun,
Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound--
And that was why it whispered and did not speak.
It was no dream of the gift of the idle hours,
Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf:
Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak
To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows,
Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers
(Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.
The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.¹²
My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.

Initially the rhyme scheme appears to be indiscriminate. It is certainly neither English nor Italian. Yet upon closer examination of the way in which this poem works it seems at least arguable that this poem represents a variation of both the English and Italian forms. As in the English form, there is a tri-part division of thought. The first three lines rhyming ABC present a question which the poem will answer. The following three, ABD, offer a hypothetical answer to that question, an answer that the poet does not consider sufficient. For the next six lines make clear the earnest love that is the genuine answer to the original question. And the final two lines, while independent of each other,

¹²Ibid., p. 25.

work somewhat in the manner of a concluding couplet.

The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.
My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.

There are, then, some similarities between this poem and the English form. But, at the same moment, it has some Italian characteristics. The octave-sestet division, while not a strong one, is nonetheless present. Reading the poem in this manner, one could say the octave presents a question, a hypothetical answer, and a secondary answer in negative terms. That is to say, lines seven and eight, ending in a full stop colon, say what the whispering was not. The first line of the sestet, then, represents the first positive statement of the poem which runs through four lines and leaves, again, two lines working in the manner of a concluding couplet. Whether one reading or the other is more accurate is open to question. But certainly elements of both forms are present.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this particular sonnet is the addition of unstressed syllables to lengthen the second line, mimicking the sweeping motion of the long scythe. It represents one of Frost's first attempts to achieve such an effect and, in the context of this quite irregular sonnet, works very well.

There are two irregular sonnets in Mountain Interval of 1916, one of which, "The Oven Bird," is a fine example of Frost's use of irregularities to emphasize particular lines.

There is a singer everyone has heard,
Loud, a mid-summer and mid-wood bird,
Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again.
He says that leaves are old and that for flowers
Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten.
He says the early petal-fall is past
When pear and cherry bloom went down in showers
On sunny days a moment overcast;
And comes that other fall we name the fall.
He says the highway dust is over all.

The bird would cease and be as other birds
But that he knows in singing not to sing.
The question that he frames in all but words
Is what to make of a diminished thing.¹³

Again, there appears to be no pattern to the rhyme scheme. Furthermore, there is no tri-part division of thought, nor is there any octave-sestet division. Yet this poem is ordered, and perhaps more so that "Mowing." The principle of order is not to be found in the rhyme scheme, or any of the other sonnet conventions, but in the flow of the lines themselves. As in "Into My Own" the natural rhythm of the speaker works against the underlying iambic pentameter. But this poem, unlike "Into My Own," has what might be called ground lines which appear at lines three, five, nine, ten, and twelve and mark the conclusion of separate sections of thought within the poem. Each of them is a full stop line that brings the poem to rest and causes these lines to be emphasized.

Consequently the poem is structured as follows: The first three lines present the bird itself, lines four and five one of his statements, and the following four yet another statement. Then an unusual structural device occurs. Line nine, which would normally be the first line of the sestet, is linked metrically in the role of a ground line to the three previous lines. Consequently line ten, which would normally receive little emphasis in the structure of a sestet, is exposed and, being regular iambic pentameter and end-stopped, receives an abnormal amount of emphasis. Indeed, it becomes the metrical focal point of the poem and rightfully so, for it contains the final statement of the bird and the essential theme of the poem--that everything exists in a fallen

¹³Ibid., p. 150.

condition. The final four lines are in the form of a quatrain, but the ground line twelve breaks it in half, causing the final two lines to act something like a concluding couplet. The poem represents perhaps the clearest example of Frost's use of end-stops against the expected sonnet form to achieve emphasis in particular lines.

The remaining irregular sonnet in Mountain Interval is "Putting In The Seed."

You come to fetch me from my work tonight
When supper's on the table, and we'll see
If I can leave off burying the white
Soft petals fallen from the apple tree
(Soft petals, yes, but not so barren quite,
Mingled with these, smooth bean and wrinkled pea;)
And go along with you ere you lose sight
Of what you came for and become like me,
Slave to a springtime passion for the earth.
How love burns through the Putting in the Seed
On through the watching for that early birth
When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,
The sturdy seedling with arched body comes
Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs.¹⁴

Perhaps it is not as irregular as was "The Oven Bird," following as it does a fairly regular rhyme scheme of ABABABABCDCEEE. But it is irregular in its own way with the sestet being in reality only five lines, line nine linked grammatically to the octave. Line nine is, in fact, the rhythmic focal point of the poem, the point of irregularity, and the one aspect most noteworthy in the sonnet.

The line is the first one with a full grammatical end stop. That fact along with the exclamatory nature of line ten which turns the poem's statement in another direction, give line nine a certain emphasis in a quiet, concluding,

¹⁴Ibid., p. 155.

afterthought manner. But it is the abnormal positioning of the final statement of the octave in the first line of the sestet that makes the line interesting. It is exposed, much as was line ten of "The Oven Bird." As such, it represents something Frost has done before and will do again. Lines seven and ten of "Unharvested" are another good example of this technique. It is for this reason that "Putting In The Seed" is included here with the irregular sonnets. However, the remainder of the sonnet is essentially regular and will receive no attention in this paper.

West Running Brook of 1928 contains three irregular sonnets, the first being "Once By The Pacific."

The shattered water made a misty din.
Great waves looked over others coming in,
And thought of doing something to the shore
That water never did to land before.
The clouds were low and hairy in the skies,
Like locks blown forward in the gleam of eyes,
You could not tell, and yet it looked as if
The shore was lucky in being backed by cliff,
The cliff in being backed by continent;
It looked as if a night of dark intent
Was coming, and not only a night, an age.
Someone had better be prepared for rage.
There would be more than ocean-water broken
Before God's last "Put out the Light" was spoken.¹⁵

This poem, like "Into My Own," is composed entirely of couplets. But it is not at all similar, structurally, to the earlier sonnet. While there is a tripart division of thought and a concluding couplet, the divisions are not composed of four-line blocks as they were in "Into My Own." Furthermore, no clear division exists between the first eight lines and the final six. Instead it is marked by typical Frostian reservation. Line ten has a characteristic

¹⁵
Ibid., p. 314.

"as if" construction and the enjambment ties it to line eleven. A full stop sets these two lines off by themselves--two lines of indefiniteness. At this point the tone changes. Line twelve asserts definitely that someone had better be prepared for rage. It, too, is end stopped and stands alone. Consequently the final couplet is set off from the body of the poem and asserts an atypical, definite warning statement that is as close to an aphoristic concluding couplet as is anything to be found in Frost's sonnets. In fact the entire poem works toward this final couplet. There is the fanciful personification of the ocean, inviting the imagination to enter the poem. There are the powerful images and the hesitant statement. But all of these lead to line twelve which properly functions as a definite introduction to the couplet of warning which is the final structural unit and the final, in a real sense, message of the poem.

The second irregular sonnet in this volume is "Acquainted With The Night."

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain--and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-by;
And further still at an unearthly height,
One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night.¹⁶

This sonnet is unlike any of those previously examined. It is neither English nor Italian. There is no tri-part division of thought and no octave-sestet

division. And, as will be made clear, the concluding couplet does not function as a couplet. The rhyme scheme up to the fourth stanza is terza rima--a form that picks up previous rhymes and interlinks them with new rhymes, tying the poem together in an intricate and concentrated manner. However, at line eleven where one would expect an E rhyme, Frost substitutes the A rhyme from the first stanza and carries this rhyme into the final couplet.

The result is unique. Each of the first two stanzas, rhyming in normal terza rima, is an independent unit of thought. Each, ending in a full stop, stands alone. But the third stanza ends with a comma and depends upon the first line of stanza four to complete the statement. Consequently the CDC lines of stanza three combine with the first D line of stanza four to produce what is, in effect, a quatrain. Although line ten ends in a semi-colon and not a period, it is clear that line eleven represents a new statement in the poem which runs through line thirteen. Lines eleven, twelve, and thirteen then, rhyming ADA become in effect another stanza of terza rima containing an independent statement of thought. Consequently the A substitution in the fourth stanza which appears initially to be an irregularity is, in reality, a technical substitution that works well to clarify the statement of the poem.

One other unique effect is achieved by the A substitution. The opening and closing lines of the poem are exactly the same. But the opening line is end-stopped and stands alone, whereas the concluding line is contained in a couplet. However, since line thirteen is linked both by rhyme and sense to the statement of lines eleven and twelve, the concluding line cannot be read as part of a couplet. Instead it, like the opening line, stands alone and the two form a neat framework for the twelve-line statement that they contain. The framework device is unique to this poem. Frost does not use it in any of the

other sonnets, and seen in the light of his careful rhyme substitution, it is fascinating and quite effective. In terms of rhyme, this is perhaps the most satisfying of all the irregular sonnets.

The last of the irregular sonnets in West Running Brook is "The Investment."

Over back where they speak of life as staying
('You couldn't call it living, for it ain't')
There was an old, old house renewed with paint,
And in it a piano loudly playing.

Out in the plowed ground in the cold a digger,
Among unearthed potatoes standing still,
Was counting winter dinners, one a hill,
With half an ear to the piano's vigor.

All that piano and new paint back there,
Was it some money suddenly come into?
Or some extravagance young love had been to?
Or old love on an impulse not to care--

Not to sink under being man and wife,
But get some color and music out of life?¹⁷

Here, as in "Mowing," is an example of a combined English and Italian form. But in this sonnet the combination is much clearer. There are three separate stanzas and a couplet carefully set off by the printer for the reader's convenience. Each of the first two stanzas contains a single predominant image-- in the first the piano; in the second the digger. With the third stanza containing separate questions about the images presented in the first two stanzas, it appears that some elements of the tri-part English form are present.

However, each of the three stanzas has an Italian rhyme structure--AABA, CDDC, EFFE. And the couplet is linked both grammatically and through statement to the third stanza. Since the couplet, like the third stanza, contains a question, one can read the final six lines as performing the function of an

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 337.

Italian sestet--complicated in this sonnet by the printer's separations. The poem then becomes an Italian sonnet with two images in the octave and questions in the sestet. One might also notice that the couplet, linked to the preceding four lines, is again typical of Frost. It is not strong, not aphoristic, and calls little attention to itself.

Consequently this poem stands as a clear example of the regularity of Frost's irregularities. While it is not what one expects in a traditional sonnet, it is under the careful control of the craftsman behind it.

Eight years passed after the appearance of West Running Brook until the publication of A Further Range in 1936. In this volume are some of the most popular of Frost's irregular sonnets, including "On A Bird Singing In Its Sleep," "Unharvested," "A Trial Run," and the previously cited regular sonnet "The Master Speed." The first of the irregular poems, "On A Bird Singing In Its Sleep," is another, and the final, of Frost's couplet sonnets.

A bird half wakened in the lunar noon
Sang halfway through its little inborn tune.
Partly because it sang but once all night
And that from no especial bush's height;
Partly because it sang ventriloquist
And had the inspiration to desist
Almost before the prick of hostile ears,
It ventured less in peril than appears.
It could not have come down to us so far
Through the interstices of things ajar
On the long bead chain of repeated birth
To be a bird while we are men on earth
If singing out of sleep and dream that way
Had made it much more easily a prey.¹⁸

One notices immediately that this poem, published eight years after "The Investment," maintains a philosophical posture. It appears across the page from "Design," another sonnet concerned with the rationale behind nature's actions.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 397.

While it is a couplet sonnet, the poem works in a manner very similar to the traditional Italian form. There is a noticable difference between the octave and sestet. Line eight ends with a full stop, and line nine begins a thought separate from that of the octave.

The sonnet has only two essential parts. The octave presents the bird in a setting of hostile nature and explains the precautionary tactics that it uses to protect itself. The sestet justifies the observations of the octave--saying indeed the situation must be as it is in the octave or we would have no bird song. It is a very unified poem resting on this two-part division, yet concerned with only one pervasive image--that of the singing bird.

The octave contains the fanciful personification, seen elsewhere in the sonnets, that invites the imagination to go beyond the poem's limitations. But from a technical point of view the sestet, in which the persona makes a direct statement concerning the condition of nature, and man and bird in nature, is far more interesting. It represents a fine example of the statement and the structure working together.

The secondary image is the image of the sestet--that of a "long bead chain of repeated birth." And the bird has come from somewhere by means of the chain to be a bird in the realm of man. The suggestion is that man, too, has a place on the chain. The notion of the unity of man and nature cannot be ignored. The theme of unity, or harmony, is the essential theme both of the sestet and of the poem.

Thematic material would normally have little to do with an analysis of irregular sonnets from a metrical or structural point of view. But in this particular poem an awareness of the thematic material makes one conscious of the way in which Frost uses his metrics, particularly in the sestet, to

complement the thematic statement. The theme of unity is supported by a unified sestet. Lines nine through fourteen are enjambed, being but a single sentence. Furthermore, they read fluently from beginning to end with only a slight pause falling at the end of line twelve. The technique is a slight touch to be sure, but taken in the total context of the sonnet is quite effective.

The second of the irregular sonnets in this volume is "Unharvested." Like "Into My Own" its appearance on the printed page indicates the way in which it should be read.

A scent of ripeness from over a wall.
And come to leave the routine road
And look for what had made me stall,
There sure enough was an apple tree
That had eased itself of its summer load,
And of all but its trivial foliage free,
Now breathed as light as a lady's fan.
For there there had been an apple fall
As complete as the apple had given man.
The ground was one circle of solid red.

May something go always unharvested!
May much stay out of our stated plan,
Apples or something forgotten and left,
So smelling their sweetness would be no theft.¹⁹

There appear to be but two major parts. The first ten lines describe the natural scene, and the final four offer a Frostian prayer much like those to be found in the longer poems. However, lines one through nine are three successive three line units rhyming ABA CBC and DAD respectively. They suggest that there is more to the opening section than a single, descriptive thought.

Lines one through three, rhyming ABA, do indeed contain their own statement--that the persona has stopped and looked. Having established this pattern,

¹⁹Ibid., p. 400.

one would expect lines four through six to contain but a single statement. However Frost breaks the pattern. For these lines containing the description of the tree depend upon line seven, the first line of the following rhyme unit to complete the thought. In fact, aside from the introductory line one, line seven represents the first full stop line in the poem. As a consequence of this pattern breaking and of the full stop, line seven receives more emphasis than the preceding lines and it is interesting to note that it contains the poem's first simile. Lines eight and nine then, being the final two lines of a broken rhyme unit and end stopped, stand alone. And their standing alone exposes, so to speak, line ten at the conclusion of the first section. As a result this end-stopped line, with a new end rhyme, receives a disproportionate amount of emphasis and it, interesting enough, contains the poem's first metaphor.

There follows the printed break and line eleven, the most heavily emphasized line in the poem. It picks up the newly introduced rhyme from line ten, allowing for some sort of transition between the sections, but receives its emphasis largely from the exaggerated end stop and the total change of tone from one of metaphorical description in line ten to one of imploring statement on the part of the persona. This line is, in fact, the focal point of the poem. While the final two lines are in couplet form, they do not act as a couplet, but are linked through statement to line twelve. Essentially the final three lines represent only a qualification of the all important line eleven.

The poem represents Frost's varied use of a concluding couplet. Whereas in "Once By The Pacific" the entire movement of the poem is to the final, strong couplet, here the point of significance of the poem is reached earlier with the couplet serving only to refer back to that moment. Thematic concerns

aside, it is perhaps one of the more satisfying, in a structural sense, of the sonnets.

"A Trial Run," the final irregular sonnet in A Further Range, is not at all satisfying from a structural point of view. Instead it relies upon rhythm for its unity.

I said to myself almost in prayer,
It will start hair-raising currents of air
When you give it the livid metal-sap
It will make a homicidal roar.
It will shake its cast stone reef of floor.
It will gather speed till your nerves prepare
To hear it wreck in a thunder-clap.
But stand your ground
As they say in war.
It is cotter-pinned, it is bedded true.
Everything its parts can do
Has been thought out and accounted for.
Your least touch sets it going round,
And when to stop it rests with you.²⁰

Essentially the poem is written in tetrameter. For the first time since the extended line in "Mowing" Frost changes the number of metrical feet within lines. Lines one through three have four definite beats, but line four, depending upon the reading, could have but three. And lines eight and nine have only two. The remaining lines all have four beats.

The rhyme scheme appears again to be indiscriminate. And if one attempts to equate its peculiarities to the various units of thought in the poem, as has been done with other sonnets thus far, he will meet with little success. For the profusion of single statement end-stopped lines offer no recurring pattern in relationship to the rhyme scheme.

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Ibid., p. 402.

The only real measure of form the poem offers is the division between the first seven lines of the persona's doubt and the final seven lines of reassurance in typical Frostian "man will prevail" fashion. Of course the two beat lines, eight and nine, occupy a central position and initiate the turn toward reassurance.

It is this rhythmic turning to a solution that finally makes this poem a sonnet. It has fourteen lines. But one might wonder why the two two-beat lines could not be printed as a single line, reducing the total poem to only thirteen lines and not a sonnet at all. The suggestion is that the poem is a sonnet, though quite irregular, because of the two beat lines. They hold the central position both in terms of number of lines and rhythm. They set off a problem from a solution and thus, though not in any precise parallel fashion, the poem works something like an Italian sonnet with an octave-sestet division. However, "A Trial Run" must be one of the least ambitious, certainly least successful from a technical point of view, of Frost's irregular sonnets.

The final volume in The Collected Poems, Steeple Bush, was published in 1947. In this late volume appear twelve sonnets, eight under the subtitle "Editorials." Four of the twelve are irregular. The first of these is "One Step Backward Taken."

Not only sands and gravels
Were once more on their travels,
But gulping muddy gallons
Great boulders off their balance
Bumped heads together dully
And started down the gully.

Whole capes caked off in slices.
I felt my standpoint shaken
In the universal crisis.
But with one step backward taken
I saved myself from going.
A world torn loose went by me.
Then the rain stopped and the blowing
And the sun came out to dry me.²¹

The most obvious characteristic of this poem is the unusual rhythm. It is so unusual, in fact, that one might consider a defense for considering this poem to be a sonnet at all. It is written throughout in iambic trimeter with an additional unstressed syllable following the final stressed beat in each line. The result of this restricted metrical form, along with the great number of end-stopped lines, is a rough, abrupt movement that complements the thought and statement of the poem.

Rhythm aside, however, the defense for including this poem with the sonnets is the interesting relationship of the rhyme scheme and structure of the poem as a whole to the traditional Italian sonnet form. Lines one through six are a sequence of three couplets containing descriptive language and ending with a full stop. As such they stand alone at the poem's beginning. Line seven introduces a new rhyme, is end-stopped, and reads very slowly because of the difficult alliteration of "capcs caked." Consequently it, too, stands alone and receives a slight emphasis in the central position of the poem. There follow lines eight and nine with a stop at the end of line nine. These lines mark the change in the poem from descriptive detail to direct statement by the persona. Likewise lines ten and eleven have a single

²¹Ibid., p. 519.

direct statement and a single stop at line eleven's conclusion. Line twelve, like line seven, contains a single statement, is end-stopped, and consequently receives a slight emphasis. So there exists a small pattern of thought from lines seven through twelve consisting of a one-line statement, two two-line statements, and a concluding one-line statement. As a result, lines thirteen and fourteen, which are marked both by a change in time and a change in disposition of the "universal crisis" are set off from the body of the poem. It is as though Frost has reversed the traditional sonnet form, putting the sestet at the beginning and reworking the octave in such a manner as to cause the final two lines to work as a concluding couplet--although they are not a couplet at all. This reversal technique is not to be found in any of the other irregular sonnets.

"Etherealizing" is the most interesting of the sonnets in terms of the working of the rhyme scheme, with the possible exception of "Acquainted With The Night."

A theory if you hold it hard enough
And long enough gets rated as a creed:
Such as that flesh is something we can slough
So that the mind can be entirely freed.
Then when the arms and legs have atrophied,
And brain is all that's left of mortal stuff,
We can lie on the beach with the seaweed
And take our daily tide baths smooth and rough.
There once we lay as blobs of jellyfish
At evolution's opposite extreme.
But now as blobs of brain we'll lie and dream,
With only one vestigial creature wish:
Oh, may the tide be soon enough at high 22
To keep our abstract verse from being dry.

²²Ibid., p. 562.

Essentially there are five sections in this poem. Lines one through four, rhyming ABAB, present a statement of theory and an example, presumably in the present tense. Lines five through eight explore the future, following the theory to its logical conclusion. These lines rhyme BABA. There follows two lines of reflection about the past, rhyming CD, and two lines of supposition about the future, rhyming DC. Finally the poem ends with a concluding, imploring couplet of the type seen before in Frost's sonnets. Each of these sections ends with a full stop period with the exception of the fourth, which ends in a colon. However, the change of tone in line thirteen causes the pause at the colon to be easily as sharp as those concluding the previous three sections.

One can see, then, the reversal of time in these sections being reflected in the peculiar reversals of the rhyme scheme. The poem, marked by elaborate contrivance, is indeed one of "abstract verse." And this intricately developed rhyme scheme is quite applicable to a poem of abstract theory. As a metrical construction, or exercise, it is quite effective.

Throughout this period Frost's sonnets show a concern with themes of man, science, political and social evolution. He asks the typical twentieth century questions of who is going to do the planning and where is civilization headed. For example, in the following irregular sonnet, "The Planners," Frost does much the same thing.

If anything should put an end to This,
I'm thinking the unborn would never miss
What they had never had of vital bliss.

No burst of nuclear phenomenon
That put an end to what was going on
Could make much difference to the dead and gone.
Only a few of those even in whose day
It happened would have very much to say.
And anyone might ask them who were they.
Who would they be? The guild of social planners
With the intention blazoned on their banners
Of getting one more chance to change our manners?
These anyway might think it was important²³
That human history should not be shortened.

Again there is a five part division based upon the statement, each part with a concluding full stop. But this poem is composed of four triplets and a concluding couplet. The triplet is an exceedingly difficult form to use effectively. Because of its three successive rhymes it naturally calls attention to itself. As a result of this difficulty it is often found in an enjambed form, the attempt being to draw attention away from the repetitive scheme.

Frost, however, does nothing of the sort. Each of the end rhymes, with the exception of lines ten through twelve and the couplet, is masculine and emphasized. The couplet rhyme is so exaggerated that through the obvious fabrication it calls attention to itself. There is no attempt to make the artificial structure of the poem secondary to the statement. Instead it is quite clear, even at a superficial reading.

The suggestion is that Frost in this poem and in this period (keeping "Etherealizing" in mind) was consciously bringing to the surface the structure of his poetry. Indeed the theme of the poem is one of social craftsmanship and the obvious craftsmanship of the sonnet supports the theme very well.

²³Ibid., p. 566.

But, as always seems to happen with Frost's irregular sonnets, once one has formulated such a theory he finds Frost in the following sonnet doing something quite different. Such is the case with the final irregular sonnet, "To The Right Person."

In the one state of ours that is a shire,
There is a District Schoolhouse I admire
As much as anything for situation.
There are few institutions standing higher
This side the Rockies in my estimation--
Two thousand feet above the ocean level.
It has two entries for coeducation.
But there's a tight shut look to either door
And to the windows of its fenestration,
As if to say mere learning was the devil
And this school wasn't keeping any more
Unless for penitents who took their seat
Upon its doorsteps as at mercy's feet
To make up for a lack of meditation.²⁴

Here is a sonnet that aside from having fourteen lines from start to finish, offers little else in the way of order. The rhyme scheme has no recurrent pattern and the statement divisions come in three three-line groups and a five-line group, depending upon whether or not one takes the "as if" in line ten to be the beginning of a new statement. There is no certainty. There is no octave-sestet division. There is no concluding couplet. It is like no other sonnet yet considered. And yet it is like many of them.

III. CONCLUSION

In the final analysis there are certain generalizations that can be made about these sonnets, although isolating them is a difficult undertaking. The

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Ibid., p. 572.

only characteristic that all of them have in common is a length of fourteen lines. But stylistic patterns do tend to recur throughout the corpus of the sonnets, although not all of them are exclusive to Frost's sonnets.

Perhaps the most obvious of the patterns is the one that is, if any of them are, strictly Frostian in character. That is, of course, the conversational rhythm, or tendency to idiomatic language that is most clear in "Into My Own", "The Vantage Point", and "The Oven Bird." Another almost exclusively Frostian pattern is the heavy reliance upon the subjunctive mood that is quite clear in "Into My Own" and "Once By The Pacific." Although Frost's sonnets are almost totally concerned with philosophical statement, there is a reluctance, almost an unwillingness to state a definite, clear philosophical position. And the use of the subjunctive mood indicates quite clearly this reluctance. Also, Frost likes to use fanciful personification that suggests there may be more to animals and nature than the poem states and invites the reader's imagination to go beyond the sonnet's strict limitations. This tendency is perhaps marked in the longer poems, but is quite evident in sonnets such as "Once By the Pacific," "Into My Own," and "On A Bird Singing In Its Sleep." At times one notices Frost assuming an imploring, almost prayer-like tone in his sonnets. "Unharvested" and "Ether-ealizing" are notable examples of this particular quality. But for the most part there is little personal interest on the part of the poet in these sonnets. Frost is more concerned with larger, philosophical statement and is hardly ever an occasional sonneteer. The most noteworthy exception to this generalization is, of course, "The Master Speed."

In addition, there exist more general patterns--patterns not necessarily associated with Frost alone. He repeatedly breaks the traditional expectations

of the sonnet form to achieve emphasis in particular lines--lines which often contain the crucial, focal point of the poem's statement. One can see him operating in such a manner most clearly in "A Vantage Point," "The Oven Bird," "Putting In The Seed," and "Unharvested."

Frost's concluding couplets are seldom aphoristic, or strident. And while, as has been noted, strident couplets are not characteristic of English sonneteers in general, he achieves the breaking of his couplets by breaking the very sonnet form. "Acquainted With The Night" and "Unharvested" are notable examples of this technique. But this pattern is so pervasive that noting the exceptions to the rule--"Once By the Pacific" and "Etherializing"--might be more useful than listing those sonnets that comply.

He always relies upon certain traditional, formal aspects of the sonnet, and he is not adverse to the addition or subtraction of unstressed syllables to vary the length of the metrical line, as in "Mowing" or "A Trial Run."

There are, then, generalizations that can be made about the body of Frost's irregular sonnets. And, in a sense, these generalizations are meaningful and significant. For one can take a sonnet such as "To The Right Person" and recognize immediately that it was written by Robert Frost. The recognition is facilitated by these generalizations, for the sonnet does have a conversational rhythm working against the underlying iambic pentameter. Furthermore, there is the indefinite "as if" construction, much like the subjunctive mood noted in the first of the irregular sonnets--"Into My Own." And while it remains impossible to say finally that all of these sonnets have a common, underlying principle (a concept that defies the very notion of irregularity), it is possible to say that all of them do comply to more than one of these patterns, or principles of generalization.

THE REGULAR SONNETS:

BRIEF ANNOTATIONS

1. "A Dream Pang" p. 22* A regular Italian sonnet with an English couplet substitution.
2. "Meeting And Passing" p. 148 A regular Italian sonnet with an English couplet substitution.
3. "Range Finding" p. 159 A regular Italian sonnet.
4. "On A Tree Fallen Across The Road" p. 296 A regular English sonnet.
5. "Acceptance" p. 313 A regular English sonnet.
6. "The Flood" p. 323 A regular Italian sonnet with an English couplet substitution.
7. "A Soldier" p. 332 A regular Italian sonnet with an English couplet substitution.
8. "The Master Speed" A regular English sonnet.
9. "Design" p. 396 A regular Italian sonnet.
10. "The Silken Tent" p. 443 A regular English sonnet.
11. "Never Again Would Bird's Song Be The Same" p. 452 A regular English sonnet.
12. "Time Out" p. 479 A regular English sonnet.
13. "Why Wait For Science" p. 563 A regular Italian sonnet with an English couplet substitution.
14. "Any Size We Please" p. 564 A regular Italian sonnet with an English couplet substitution.
15. "No Holy Wars For Them" p. 567 A regular English sonnet.
16. "Bursting Rapture" p. 568 A regular Italian sonnet with an English couplet substitution.
17. "The Broken Draught" p. 571 A regular Italian sonnet with an English couplet substitution.

*All page numbers refer to Collected Poems Of Robert Frost cited in the bibliography for the main body of the paper.

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THE SONNETS OF ROBERT FROST

by

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ABSTRACT

Karl Shapiro labels Robert Frost an American master of the sonnet form and adds Frost's name to a long list of sonneteers including Wyatt, Surrey, Spenser, Sidney, Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Wordsworth, Browning, and Hopkins. But Frost, strangely enough, although placed among such weighty names in the history of the sonnet, has received but little critical attention as a sonneteer. The reason cannot possibly be lack of a substantial body of material, for there are thirty-two genuine sonnets in The Complete Poems Of Robert Frost.

Mr. Shapiro suggests that by strictest definition there are only three recognized sonnet forms--the Italian, English, and Spenserian. The Princeton Encyclopedia Of Poetry And Poetics amplifies Mr. Shapiro's definitions and suggests that while there are no "strict" definitions for the sonnet form, there do indeed exist traditional associations revolving around the three widely recognized forms. And furthermore, the most frequent variations from the traditionally recognized forms take place in the rhyme schemes and the meter.

In a sense, then, these traditional forms are a working definition and through an examination of rhyme and meter in Frost's sonnets one can isolate those individual poems in which Frost breaks the traditions, "overrides theoretical considerations," and "achieves artistic integrity." For want of a better word these sonnets which disassociate themselves from the strictest of traditional associations will be called irregular.

By looking at the rhyme and meter of Frost's irregular sonnets one can reach certain generalizations about his practice as a sonneteer. There are fifteen irregular sonnets in all--three in A Boy's Will of 1913, two in Mountain Interval of 1916, three in West Running Brook of 1928, four in A Further Range of 1936, and three in A Witness Tree of 1943. Clearly the irregu-

lar sonnet form cannot be tied to any biographical incident and the best way to approach it is in temporal sequence.

After examining each of the fifteen irregular sonnets one can make certain generalizations. Stylistic patterns do tend to recur throughout the corpus of the sonnets.

There is a conversational rhythm, or tendency to idiomatic language. There is a heavy reliance upon the subjunctive mood that reflects an unwillingness to state a clear philosophical position. In addition Frost uses fanciful personification that invites the reader's imagination to go beyond the poem's limitations, and there is hardly ever any personal interest by the poet--that is, Frost is not an occasional sonneteer.

More general patterns include breaking the traditional forms to emphasize crucial lines and a reluctance to use strident couplets. Yet he always relies upon certain formal, traditional aspects of the sonnet form.

And while it remains impossible to say finally that all of these sonnets have a common, underlying principle (a concept that defies the very notion of irregularity), it is possible to say that all of them do comply to more than one of these patterns, or principles of generalization.