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THE SONNETS OF ROBERT FROST

by ۵۳۳۵۳

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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).<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>1</sup> Karl Shapiro, A Prosody Handbook (New York, 1965), p. 140.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

The second sonnet form is, of course, the Shakespearean or English. It is composed of three quatrains and a couplet--the difference between it and the Italian being obvious. Where the Italian sonnet tends to break into two parts, thus lending itself to a question and answer or situation and response construction, the English, with three quatrains, lends itself to presenting three aspects of an idea.<sup>4</sup> The English sonnet does at times, however, appear to have an octave-sestet division, with the first two quatrains presenting a unified idea and the final quatrain and couplet reacting to that idea.

The final recognized sonnet form is the Spenserian. It has a different rhyme scheme to maintain, ABABBBCDCDCDEE, apparently a scheme for which only Spenser had a penchant. For there are no great sonnet writers following in this tradition, and Frost does not use the form at all.<sup>5</sup> These definitions are, of course, quite narrow. And, since a clear, workable definition of the sonnet form is quite crucial to an examination of Frost as a sonneteer, the insertion of a rather lengthy excerpt from The Princeton Encyclopedia Of Poetry And Poetics might, at this point, be excusable.

A 14-line poem in iambic pentameter (normally iambic hexameter in France) whose rhyme scheme has, in practice, been widely varied despite the traditional assumption of limited freedoms in this respect. The three most widely recognized forms of the sonnet, with their traditional rhyme schemes, are the Italian or Petrarchan (octave: abbaabba; sestet: cdcdcd or cdcdcd or a similar combination that avoids the closing couplet), The Spenserian (ababbcbcb - cdcddee), and the English or Shakespearean (ababcbcdcdcdcdcd). With respect to the Italian pattern (by far the most widely used of the three) it will be observed that a two-part division of thought is invited, and that the octave offers an admirably unified pattern and leads to the volta (q.v.) or "turn" of thought in the more varied sestet. ... The Spenserian and Shakespearean patterns, on the other hand, offer some relief to the difficulty of rhyming in English and invite a division of thought into three quatrains and a closing or summarizing couplet; and even though such arbitrary divisions are frequently ignored by the poet, the more open rhyme schemes tend to impress the fourfold structure on the reader's ear and to suggest a stepped progression toward the closing couplet.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 139.

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.<sup>6</sup>

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.

6

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.<sup>7</sup>

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 forevermore<sup>8</sup>  
Together wing to wing and oar to oar.

<sup>7</sup>Robert Frost, Complete Poems Of Robert Frost (New York, 1967), p. 22.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 392.

The rhyme scheme of this English sonnet is quite regular--ABABCDCDEFEFGG. 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> 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

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> 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,<sup>11</sup>

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

<sup>11</sup>Frost, 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.<sup>12</sup>  
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,

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 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.<sup>13</sup>

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 than "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

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 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.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps it is not as irregular as was "The Oven Bird," following as it does a fairly regular rhyme scheme of ABABABABCDCDEE. 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,

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 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.<sup>15</sup>

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

<sup>15</sup>  
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.<sup>16</sup>

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