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21L.004 Reading Poetry

Spring 2009

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Notes on the sonnet

Genre

A sonnet = 14 lines. Rhyme (and sometimes grammar) usually divides it into two parts: 8 + 6, or (4+4) + (3 +3), or (4+4) + (4 +2). The two most general sorts – the Elizabethan form, with three quatrains and a couplet, or the Italian or Petrarchan kind, with an octave (abba, abba) and a sestet (various groupings of cde)

History

English poets got the idea of writing this way from two Italians who wrote in the 1300's: Dante and Petrarch. Dante's *Vita Nuova* was in autobiographical account in prose of his lifelong love for a young girl, Beatrice, beginning when they were children and continuing after her early death. Embedded in the narrative are a series of poems inspired by this love, accompanied by Dante's own technical commentary; the book is also an account of Dante's early career as a poet learning to write in his native language (as opposed to Latin). What he invented -- a sequence of vernacular love poetry addressed to a single object -- seems overwhelmingly obvious now. Really, that is a testament to the power and influence of Dante's innovation.

A generation of poets some 50 years before Shakespeare worked at translating into English another sequence of Italian sonnets, by Dante's successor Petrarch, and mastering *in* English formal requirements (rhyme scheme for example) that were far easier to do in Italian (because many more words end with similar sounds). Spenser's sonnet 67, for instance, translates a poem by Petrarch which was also translated by Thomas Wyatt decades earlier (you can find it in the Norton as "Whoso list to hunt"). Think of it as akin to doing a cover of someone else's song; in any event, Dante and Petrarch's *topic* of a long, unrequited love and their *form* of tightly rhymed 14-line sonnets in groups proved inspirational to Shakespeare's generation.

Yeats and Wordsworth

Yeats' "Leda and the Swan" is a rhyming sonnet that seems to have been physically traumatized. The first two quatrains float free, while the third quatrain is cleft crosswise, its final segment dangling precariously. Wordsworth's "The World is Too Much With Us" is a rhyming sonnet: abba, abba, cdcdcd; the rhyme scheme is Petrarchan or in two parts – 8 lines + 6 lines.