

The Fifteener

Some years ago, fooling around with the end-rhymes on a Petrarchan sonnet, I tried a modification: instead of an octave and a sestet, I changed to an octave and a SEPTet. It's common enough to rearrange the end-rhymes in the sestet. Some schemes one frequently sees are the traditional c,d,c,d,e,e. Or perhaps c,d,e,c,d,e. A radical rearranging might place a couplet in the middle.

With the septet I quickly settled into end rhymes of c,d,c,d,e,d,e. The final couplet, e,e, is split up by the thrice-recurring d. Thematically, this allows one to interweave the concerns of the end of the poem with the argument that the poem is processing. It is a form that is suited to rumination, to conclusions that are not, as with a couplet, actually concluded. In keeping with my general outlook that life consists of learning to contain incongruities, the septet rhyme scheme feeds the contrasting elements of a poem. It is more inclined toward philosophical contemplation than toward ultimate decidability. All of this is abstract until one works with the form. I like having an "extra" line to explore more complex topics. And having, in effect, a tercet buried within the stanza forces one to choose rhymes (skewed or straight) that are somewhat common. This both accesses greater possibilities for meaning, and abstractly democratizes the poem. Poets rarely go in for ballad measure anymore, but a tercet, with its historical nod in the direction of humor, gathers readers in, functions as a kind of social leveler, and "evens out" the intellectually bumpy flight of the septet.

That being said, when I bring in a fifteener to the writing group, there is stress; it's hard to critique a poem that is strapped in by a rhyme scheme. For this reason, I sometimes write a fifteener, then break open the form by de-lineation. For example, this kind of clunky poem:

Howled or Hissed

The wind has hissed from the west all night long.
Or maybe howled: who knows how the wind feels?
It's late fall, and some oracle reveals
A mundane truth: about winter we're wrong.
It doesn't come on, it's resident. Things
Like seasons are internal, they congeal
And surface. Like weak kings, a while they rule,
Then recede, or cede to the next, or fail,
Or fail to leave. Or else the wind flicks them
Like crumbs off a table, the last repeat
Of climate. All these leaf, these stalk, these stem,
Have root within. Each season has its feet,
And walks from ear to ear, and year by year
I am inured. No hiss, no howl. A beat,
a beat, and beat by beat we disappear.

Now the same poem, with the form broken open. I've bolded the end-rhymes to show where they result. The poem is maudlin, but, at least when shorn of its form it will be easier to repair. Stanzas fall out like paragraphs, each concerned with its own theme. Poets in group are less adversarial when they're not hamstrung by the rhyme scheme. Broken open, the decasyllabics and erstwhile end-rhyme still provide a density and intensity like a planet on a tight orbit:

Howled or Hissed

The wind has hissed from the west all night **long**. Or maybe howled,
who knows how the wind **feels**? It's late fall, and some oracle **reveals**

A mundane truth: about winter we're **wrong**. It doesn't come on,
it's resident. **Things** like seasons are internal, they **congeal** and surface.

Like weak kings, a while they **rule**, then recede, or cede
to the next, or **fail**, or fail to leave. Or else the wind flicks **them**

Like crumbs off a table, the last **repeat** of climate.
All these leaf, these stalk, these **stem**, have root within.

Each season has its **feet**, and walks from ear to ear,
and year by **year** I am inured. No hiss, no howl.
A **beat**, a beat, and beat by beat we **disappear**.