THE DEVELOPMENT OF
THE SONNET
An Introduction

MICHAEL R. G. SPILLER

ROUTLEDGE

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SONNET

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In this indispensable introductory study of the Renaissance sonnet, Michael R.G.Spiller takes the reader on an illuminating guided tour. He begins with the invention of the sonnet in thirteenth-century Italy and traces its progress through to the time of Milton, showing how the form has developed and acquired the capacity to express lyrically ‘the nature of the desiring self’. In doing so Spiller provides a concise critical account of the major British sonnet writers in relation to the sonnet’s history.
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to Pamela
‘il soave mio fido conforto’

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PREFACE

The greatest sonneteer of them all, Francis Petrarch, looking back many years after the death of his beloved Laura upon what he had written with so much art and so much longing, said that

quant'io di lei parlai nè scrissi.
fu breve stilla d'infiniti abissi.

[Whatever I wrote of her was a small drop out of infinite depths….]

He meant to praise her, not his own sonnets; but spoke perhaps better than he knew, for the sonnet is at once small, and clearly formed, and capable of holding desires from the most tremendous depths. If it were not so, it would not have been used consistently and continuously by the poets of Europe from its invention in southern Italy about 1235, a hundred years before Petrarch saw his Laura, to the present day.

My own task has been to look at the sonnet in Renaissance Britain and, by concentrating upon those sonnet-writers who seem to have done most to extend its powers, show how the self and its desires were imaged. As for what came before, considerations of length and practical use to students of the form have urged me to make choices: Petrarch, of course, is massively and justly there, but as the history of the sonnet does not often take much notice of the century before him I have discussed the sonneteers of the thirteenth century at some length, with lots of examples, all translated, both because that is when the parameters of the sonnet were formed and because the Italian material is widely scattered and difficult to get at for those with little or no knowledge of the language. I have passed over many later sonneteers of great merit, such as the Italian women poets, Lorenzo dei Medici, Michelangelo and others, who are good but of less relevance to the British sonnet; and the excellent work of Walter Monch, Sidney Lee, Janet Scott, Gary Waller and others has made it possible for me to deal lightly with the French sonnet, knowing that sources and themes are accessible to the student elsewhere.

Sonnets are all alike in form; but they can be, and were, used to talk about anything at all, and in critical discussion I have used concepts and ideas freely, as they seemed to have explanatory force. If there is a critical bias, it is against

the view of the sonnet as a piece of lyrical autobiography—if that view any longer needs opposing.

Sonnets not in English are taken from available critical editions or anthologies that libraries in Britain are likely to have, and are usually in modern spelling; British sonnets are reproduced either from the original texts or in the original form from a critical edition, with the accepted alterations of *i* to *j* and *u* to *v*. All translations are my own unless assigned to someone else. For the help I have received from friends, colleagues and above all from my family, I am sincerely grateful; and my students over the years have, I hope, at least taught me what it is I ought to teach them in such a book as this.

MS

1
THE SONNET AND ITS SPACE

> And if no peece of Chronicle wee prove,
> We'll build in sonnets pretty roomes;
> As well a well wrought urne becomes
> The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombes….
>
> ('Zohn Donne, The Canonization')

The sonnet is Donne's original 'well wrought urne'—compact, shapely, highly finished, and able to contain, in concentrated form, almost all that is human. Donne wrote when the sonneteering vogue was at its height in England, in the years 1580–1610, and was perfectly familiar with the sonnet, singly or in groups, as the commemorator of love, when every Jack could promise his Jill that

> though that *Laura* better limned bee,
> Suffice, thou shalt be lov'd as well as shee.

Petrarch's achievement of a sequence of 317 sonnets and forty-nine other poems in praise of his love for one woman, his Laura, though it was imperfectly understood, was the glass of fashion and the mould of form for European sonneteers from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century. But love is not the only occupation of the sonnet, nor was it for Petrarch himself; its astonishing success and persistence has to be explained by recourse to rather wider terms.

The sonnet was invented about the year AD 1230, in southern Italy; and by the end of the thirteenth century[1] *abouta* thousand sonnets had been written, almost all in Italian (that is, in one of the dialects of it), exploring most of the varieties of its form and most of the possibilities of its subject matter. Francis Petrarch (1304–74), writing in the middle of the century following, inherited an already very sophisticated poetic instrument. The sonnet came into the vernacular of Spain in the midfifteenth century, into the vernaculars of Britain and France in the early sixteenth, and into German in the early seventeenth.[2] With the exception of the Augustan poets in Britain, there have been few major poets who have not attempted sonnets; and even today, when verse is freer, formally

speaking, than ever before, most contemporary poets—even such apparently wild men as e.e. cummings—have at least one or two sonnets among their lyrics. The existence of hundreds of thousands of sonnets in all the vernaculars of western Europe proves that, for 750 years at least, the sonnet has been challenging and satisfying the poetic imagination.

The sonnet is probably the longest-lived of all poetic forms, and certainly the longest-lived of all *prescribed forms*. A prescribed form, or *closed form* as it is sometimes called, is one whose duration and shape are determined before the poet begins to write: the limerick, for example, or the triolet, or the sonnet. Identity is formal, not thematic, as it is in tragedy or ode. If we suggest that an art work occurs when imaginative energy is successfully contained in a discursive structure, then in general the poet can accept varying degrees of constraint. He or she may write in free verse, whose bounds are determined only by his or her own will acting from moment to moment. Then a poet may choose a verse form such as blank verse, the heroic couplet, or *terza rima,* which compels certain kinds of recurrence—of rhyme, of rhythm—but says nothing as to whether the poem should be of ten lines or ten thousand. Next, there is strophic verse, sometimes called stanzaic verse, which defines not only rhythm and rhyme but also, in a limited way, duration—Spenser, for example, having started *The Faerie Queene* in nine-lined stanzas, must thereafter compose in units of nine lines, though he may have as many of them as he wishes. Finally, there is the prescribed form: here the duration as well as the structure of the whole poem is predetermined, as in the limerick, which must have five lines, and the sonnet, which must finish after fourteen. The poet may choose to write another one, of course, as often as he or she likes, but the poem itself ends at a point not controlled by the author's will.

If this had been felt as a frustration, poets would not have gone on writing sonnets: Alistair Fowler, in his magisterial study, *Kinds of Literature* (1982), suggests that this kind of formal or generic preempting of the author's decision is actually helpful:

> far from inhibiting the author, genres are a positive support. They offer room, as one might say, for him to write in—a habitation of mediated definiteness, a proportioned mental space; a literary matrix by which to order his experience during composition.[3]

The sonnet pre-emptively solves two problems: proportion and extension; and, while this is a challenge, it is also a security, a kind of metrical extension of feudalism, a definite service required and requited.

The 'proportioned mental space' which the sonneteers so consistently chose to inhabit emerges, right at the start, as the familiar fourteen-line sonnet, with eleven syllables (or ten, depending on the vernacular) to a line, dividing into eight and six, and using in the *octave* two rhymes arranged either ABAB ABAB or ABBA ABBA; and two or three rhymes rhyming CDCDCD or CDECDE or

almost any possible arrangement of these, in the *sestet.* The tendency was, among the Italian poets, to have a very definite sense pause (marked, in modern editions, by a full stop, semi-colon or comma) in the octave, between lines four and five, giving thus two *quatrains* in the octave; and less clearly in the sestet, to have a sense pause between lines eleven and twelve, giving two *tercets.* Occasionally, the sestet divides four and two, a quatrain and a *distich,* but when this happens there is never any support from the rhyme: a sense couplet, in Italian sonneteering, is never marked by a rhyming couplet at the end.

Until the rhyming couplet to conclude the sonnet was reinvented by Sir Thomas Wyatt about 1525,[4] and then adopted by most British sonneteers, the pattern just described above created the space of the European sonnet for three centuries. Alternative sonnet forms did appear in profusion in the thirteenth century alongside the *sonettus consuetus* or 'normal sonnet', but none of these variants—additional lines, shorter lines inserted (indicated with a lower case letter when they occur, thus: AaBAaB), reduction of eleven syllables to seven, the three-line 'tail' of the *sonetto caudato* or 'tailed sonnet'—superseded the standard fourteen-line pattern; and only one, the tailed sonnet, achieved anything like independent status among Italian comic sonneteers. The fourteenline sonnet is the norm, and departures from it are brief and not in any continuing sense satisfactory.

But, though this book cannot for reasons of space deal with sonnet variants, it is worthwhile here answering the question, when is a sonnet not a sonnet? May one have a sonnet of sixteen lines, or twelve? or a sonnet without rhymes? or a sonnet in trimeters, instead of the standard ten- or eleven-syllable line? When Guittone d'Arezzo, in the midthirteenth century, presents his readers with a twenty-two-line poem rhyming AaBAaB AaBAaB CcDdC DdCcD, why should we call it a sonnet at all?

The short answer is that there is by custom a basic or simple sonnet, of which the others are variations: it has proportion, being in eight and six, and extension, being in ten- or eleven-syllable lines, and duration, having fourteen of them. Any poem which infringes one of these parameters will remind us of a sonnet quite closely; a poem which infringes two will be more difficult to accommodate, but we will probably try to establish some procedure to account for the deformation; and a poem which infringes all three will not be recognisable as a sonnet at all, and we will regard it as something else unless there is contextual pressure—if, for example, we found it in the middle of a group of normal sonnets. So a poem which contained twenty-one lines might establish itself as a sonnet if we noticed that it was blocked out—by sense or rhyme or both—in twelve and nine, inferring the rule: eight plus half of eight/six plus half of six. And the rhymescheme of Guittone's poem above shows clearly a normal sonnet extended by shorter lines, leaving its basic structure intact. If, then, the poem is structurally a variant of the basic sonnet, we can rest happy in calling it a sonnet, too.

But once the 'pretty room' has been built, how does one live in it? Are there constraints upon the sorts of thing one can think, or say, or be in it? As we look at

the practice of the early sonneteers in the chapters that follow, it seems clear that both proportion and extension affect the kind of discursive life that can be lived. The sonnet extends to fourteen lines, providing 140–54 syllables in all. This seems to be rather more, in most modern European vernaculars, than one requires for the simple expression of a feeling or state of mind, but rather less than one would like for a full discussion of that feeling or state of mind. It is certainly too short for narration: a sonnet can present a narrated event, but it must be highly compressed if anything at all is to be said about it. The proportionality of the sonnet, eight parts to six, works against any kind of simple repetition of an initial point or emotion, since the second part is structurally different from the first, and almost compels some kind of development or analysis. The voice that speaks in this room, the /I/ of the sonnet, almost has to 'make a point', to go beyond merely declaring a feeling.

Historically, the proportionality of the sonnet, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, seems to have been influenced, in the thirteenth century in Italy, by the proportions of the poetic form closest to it, the *canso* or *canzone* of the Provençal poets: this was a poem of variable length made up of a number of stanzas, each of which was divided into two (usually unequal) parts. Originally, this break seems to have been a musical requirement: a melodic unit was given out, repeated once, and then made way for a new melodic phrase. The verbal recognition of this musical alteration is first of all syntactic: a new sentence at the change, or perhaps a medial pause in a long sentence. But this in turn begets a conceptual alteration, turning proportionality of lengths into consequentiality of thought. Six is to eight as conclusion is to proposition, or as development and summing up is to statement. (This much is speculation, since none of the writers who used the sonnet in the thirteenth century left a record of their thoughts on its structure.)

To illustrate this link between proportion and thought, which is basic and crucial to the sonnet's success and distinctive voice, we may take the slightly easier example of that other prescribed form, the limerick, which consists of two similar lines, two shorter lines, and a single return to the first-line pattern:

> There was a young man of Bengal,
> Who went to a fancy-dress ball;
> He thought he would risk it,
> And go as a biscuit,
> But a dog ate him up in the hall.

The pattern of statement (1–2), development (3–4) and conclusion (5) is clear. Early writers of limericks often emphasised the return of the first pattern by combining conclusion with repetition, as Edward Lear does:

> There was a young lady of Bute,

Who played on a silver-gilt flute;
She played several jigs
To her uncle's white pigs,
That amusing young lady of Bute.

Later writers, however, found it much more satisfactory to treat the last line as the completion of the narrative, adding an extra item of information but sacrificing the echo, or reprise, of the opening line; and the reader of limericks now expects the returning rhythm of the last line to bring with it, like the fifth act of a play, a solution of previous incompleteness, by peripety, anagnorisis or catastrophe:

A superintelligent flea
Was having its tea on my knee:
My bloodpressure sank,
As it drank and it drank—
Then I squeezed it all back into me!

So rhythmic, metrical and conceptual patterns unite. If we think, anachronistically of course, of the sonnet as an expanded limerick, in which the octave takes the first two lines, the first part of the sestet the next two, and the last part (three lines or two, depending on the particular sestet used) the last line of the limerick, we can sense the kind of developmental pressure which the structure of fourteen lines in eight and six exerts. The extra length of the sonnet gives the writer more choice where to begin the ending than has the limerick writer: poets using the Italian form (4+4+3+3) show no particular preference among the last three lines for a point at which to begin to end; and, though those of a witty cast of mind will often put a clinch or *sententia* in the last line, the sense that the last tercet should be a complete unit remains strong. When the final couplet became popular in English sonnet-writing, the alternative 4+4+4+2 grouping emerges, to drive British poets into a rhyming couplet ending, with strong pressure towards epigram or witticism.

The sonnet, because of its brevity, always gives an impression of immediacy, as if it proceeded directly and confessionally or conversationally from the speaker, and therefore from the creator of that speaker. Since it has for so long appeared to offer a stage or arena on which the /I/ of the writer speaks to his or her audience, it is important to insist that the modes of presentation of the sonnet are not simple. With the decay of 'naïve realism' in recent literary study and teaching (that is, the assumption that a poem or a literary work is simply the words of the author in his or her own person), modern criticism has become very concerned with the *fictionality* of works of art, with understanding the ways in which the text creates in its space a self, an /I/, who interposes between writer, or speaker, and reader. It is Aristotle, in the *Poetics,* who begins the investigation of

this kind of modality of presentation, when he distinguishes between dramatic works, in which the voices are persons different from the author, and narrative works, in which the speaker offers us some kind of /I/ as the source of the words ('Arms and the man I sing…'). The *Poetics* has nothing to say about the lyric voice, but the Aristotelian modal tradition has been powerfully influential among modern readers of poetry in stimulating an interest in mimesis, in the creation of fictional selves to represent our own. A recent critic of Shakespeare's sonnets, for example, instead of accepting with Wordsworth that 'with this key/ Shakespeare unlocked his heart', argues that the speaker of the *Sonnets* is a victim of the rhetorical devices Shakespeare has used to create him, very much as might be said of any character in the plays.[5] Similarly, without discounting the possibility that Petrarch's sonnets contain autobiographical details (many of them are specifically dated), we would now be inclined to regard as lost labour the enormous ingenuity of the glosses in many Renaissance editions of Petrarch's poems, which laboured to detect the exact spot in the Avignon countryside where the lovers met, or where Laura waded in a stream. 'The autobiographer always writes…a fiction, about a third person.'[6]

The sonnet's lyric voice is a dramatic construct: authors refract their /I/ in different ways. The sonneteer may have his or her speaker narrate, to tell in effect a short story about a character distanced from /I-who-speaks/ at least as far as /I-that-was/ (a gap peculiarly important to and for Petrarch, who was obsessed with his own past); he or she may dramatise, by inventing dialogue or creating the illusion of a hearer or interlocutor, as Sir Philip Sidney loved to do; he or she may indeed make the /I/ speak of itself in an unlocated present—the archetypal lyric position—but this last is only one of the possibilities open, and is thus a constructed choice, like any other stance the poesis creates.

It is simply a matter of record that the sonnet, from the very beginning of its long career in the early thirteenth century, has offered its readers a variety of fictional positions. It has been used to mimic not just 'the sound of the sighs that nourished my heart', as Petrarch said, but every other kind of fictional persona as well. Though its shortness makes it uncongenial for objective narration, it was once used (in a sequence) for an adaptation of the French *Roman de la Rose,* called Il *Fiore,* written in Italian sonnets in the late thirteenth century, and sometimes attributed to Dante; semi-narrative sequences, such as Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* (1592), and descriptive sequences, such as Folgore di San Gemignano's catalogue of the months,[7] are common; devotional and moralising sequences, in which the /I/ represents some sort of public voice giving guidance to the community, are frequent. At the level of the single sonnet, the lyric/narrative/dramatic mix is very varied, from dramatic slanging matches in the street by Cecco Angiolieri, a marvellously inventive Sienese of the late thirteenth century, through political speeches by Milton to the introspective analyses of Keats, Hopkins or Shakespeare, which have tended to stand as the quintessence of sonnetwriting. But even within Shakespeare's sonnets, a

collection much less anecdotal and circumstantial than many, one notices how the voice shifts: in narrative stance,

> Alas, 'tis true I have gone here and there…(110)

in a dramatic situation,

> So, now I have confessed that he is thine…(134)

as well as in 'pure lyric':

> When I consider everything that grows…(15)

But what seems a very modern concern with the way in which voice comes to us in poetry, and with the kinds of persona that are constructed by texts, is really a reworking, or perhaps a recovery, of the dominant late-medieval and Renaissance habit of looking at texts as rhetorical performances; we in the twentieth century are looking from the reader's side at what these earlier poets would have approached from the writer's or speaker's side, namely, what sort of a person the text creates by its rhetorical signs.

Classical rhetoric, as taught through the schools of the centuries before the invention of the sonnet, was adept at assigning different kinds of text to different social occasions and different social levels, so that the /I/ created in, for example, an ode would be defined by the function of praising a social superior at a high level of learning. What seems to have happened, however, is that the Italian vernacular in the thirteenth century developed very fast in its creation of forms, leaning heavily upon the practice of Provençal poets, and made quite sophisticated use of the sonnet, the *canzone* and the *ballata* (a short poem with a refrain) before it occurred to any theoretician that texts composed in the vernacular were literature at all—indeed, the very word 'literature' meant 'that which was written', and thus that which was in Latin, as distinguished from that which was spoken, and thus in the vernacular. The first writer to notice the sonnet theoretically is Dante, and by the time he wrote his treatise *De vulgari eloquentia* (a title that must have sounded paradoxical at the time—'Pop Eloquence' is perhaps the nearest we can get to it) the sonnet had been up and running for seventy years, from 1235 to about 1305.[8]

Dante's spirited defence of the Italian vernacular—or, more accurately, of the dialect of Italian which he himself spoke, the Tuscan form —in that treatise was an attempt to show that what could be done in Latin could be done in the vernacular: in the course of arguing that vernacular poetry could be as serious as Latin, he produced the first theoretical comment on the sonnet—briefly, because he intended a fuller analysis in a later part of the work which he did not complete:

> Those who have composed vernacular poetry have issued their poems in many different forms, some in *canzoni,* some in *ballate,* some in sonnets, and others in irregular and inadmissible forms. …*Canzoni* by themselves do all that they have to do, unlike *ballate,* which need dancers to keep time and accentuate their form; and therefore *canzoni* should be reckoned nobler than *ballate,* and hence their form should be reckoned noblest of all, since no one can doubt that the *ballata* is of higher quality than the sonnet. Whatever features of [poetic] art are found in other forms are included in the *canzone,* but not the other way around.[9]

He then describes the *canzone* as 'the only form appropriate to the highest vernacular', and promises to deal with the *ballata* and the sonnet 'in the fourth book of this work, where I deal with the middle vernacular'.

The *canzone* is superior because of completeness and comprehensiveness. Since the sonnet did demonstrably deal in Dante's time with those subjects which he thought appropriate to the highest verse—'prowess in arms, the flames of love, and the guiding of the will' (as we might say, heroism, love and virtue)—its downgrading, which Dante assumes to be everyone's opinion, must be due to its brevity. This would prevent its employing the most elaborate kinds of rhetoric, the figures of speech that marked the highest style in classical poetics, such as epic similes, extended personifications and conceits. The sonnet can deal with high subjects, but can only do so in a simpler and therefore lower style. The writer of the sonnet cannot elevate his /I/ to epic, elegiac or tragic proportions, since these require, according to the rules of classical eloquence, rhetorical elaborations that are simply too extended for fourteen lines. Dante's brief remarks remind us that the sonnet appeared at the beginning of the fourteenth century to be a straightforward form, in which the /I/, or any other subject, appeared at a level below that of the highest art. (The quotation from Donne with which this chapter begins is clearly acknowledging the same assumption.)

To say that the sonnet is a kind of workhorse in the Renaissance lyric stable is not to devalue its role as the poem of love—even noble ladies, after all, customarily rode smaller and lighter horses. There were not wanting those who claimed that a great sonnet could reach the sublimity of the highest style,[10] but the physical limitations of its size, which have the peculiar property of constituting its identity, always made grandeur something extraneous to it, that it might reach on occasion despite its nature. It was only after the Renaissance that an aesthetic theory developed in which sublimity could be a quality of condensation, rather than expansion, of material.

However, it is interesting that a special 'resistive' theory of art did develop around the sonnet, as we can see from a number of selfreflexive sonnets written at various times from the fourteenth century to the present day. High Renaissance poetry tends to work within an expansive theory of art: that is, the poet typically asks to be given sufficient words, support, sustenance, inspiration to enlarge his efforts to enable him to stay the course of his poem. The resistive

theory which appears when sonneteers talk of their form supposes on the contrary that the poet is subdued or caught, and must work or struggle against confines; or, to change the metaphor, must learn delicacy, as if handling small and fragile things. Such, again, is the theory implicit in the quotation from Donne already referred to: Pieraccio Tedaldi, writing a sonnet to instruct people how to write sonnets, warns that every line must 'dir bene a proposta il suo dovere'[11]—say what it has to say exactly to the point; Francesco Bracciolini, writing at the end of the sixteenth century, uses the figure of disadvantage turned to advantage:

> Come più ferve in chiusa parte il foco
> dove le sue rovine ardon più strette,
> calor di Febo in circoscritto loco
> fulmina più da sette carme e sette
>
> [As the fire burns hotter in an enclosed space, from which its violence blazes more directly, so the heat of Phoebus *(i.e. poetic inspiration)* in a restricted place flashes out more from seven plus seven lines…

The Romantic writer Gabriele d'Annunzio most splendidly compares the sonneteer, Yeats-like, to a goldsmith:

> Otto e sei verghe d'oro, o Musa, io batto
> su l'incude con fervido martello,
> e ognuna di lor piego ed anello
> e pongo su 'l cuscino di scarlatto.
>
> Poi, con più grave pazienza, in atto
> d'un maestro orafo antico su un gioiello
> regale, ognuna a punta di cesello
> (m'è Benvenuto nel pensiero!) io tratto….

[Eight and six rods of gold, O Muse, I beat out on the anvil with a busy hammer, and each of them I bend into a ring, and place on a scarlet cushion. Then, with the greatest patience, like a master goldsmith of olden time working upon a royal jewel (Cellini comes to my mind!) I work each one with the chisel's point…

This 'forma avara' ('unsparing form') that leaves no space for error, this well-wrought urn that is, in Iain Crichton-Smith's words,

> a vase in bloom
> gathering light about it clearly clearly
> …its bare constant self, its paradigm

of straining forces harmonised sincerely,[12]

has always seemed both immensely challenging and immensely adaptable. No other lyric form has so consistently offered to accommodate the normal speaking voice, and at the same time so successfully challenged it to come to the point. 'Apollo himself, said an Italian critic, inaccurately but suggestively, 'invented this short poem as a touchstone for great genius.'[13]

2
SICILIANS AND CITIZENS: THE EARLY SONNET

Qualunque vuol saper far un sonetto
e non fusse di ciò bene avvisato,
s'e' vuol esser di questo ammaestrato,
apra gli orecchi e lo intelletto!

(Pieraccio Tedaldi, c.1330)

[Whoever wants to learn to write a sonnet, and hasn't had the method given correct, if he would like some sound instruction on it, must open up his ears and intellect!]

It might fairly be said that the notion of 'coming to the point' dominates the sonnet throughout its seven centuries in Europe. Since its foreclosure is the essence of its being—or, rather, foreclosures, since the sonnet closes at eight lines and again at six, that last line being at once the close of a sestet and of an entire poem—any writer, no matter whether a modernist, a Romantic or a thirteenth-century rhetorician, must 'come to the point' if he or she is to create a sonnet at all. Interesting things happen when writers, such as Petrarch or Milton, try to devise ways of resisting closure while formally retaining it; but the sonnet is always, inescapably, a 'pointed' form, even before it becomes explicitly associated with the epigram.

Pieraccio Tedaldi, who so amiably offered to instruct novices in sonnet-writing,[1] remarks later on in the quoted sonnet that 'Undici silbe ciascun vuole punto'—'each line should have eleven syllables'. The term 'punto' ('point') meant, as it did for Shakespeare, a full stop or a major punctuation mark; but by metonymy it comes to mean, as here, the unit of writing or thought at the end of which a stop is inserted. So, for Tedaldi, the place where a unit of thought would be marked should occur every eleven syllables, confirming the line, rather than the couplet or the quatrain, as the basic unit of the sonnet. Before Tedaldi wrote in the early fourteenth century, we find in the major manuscripts of the late thirteenth in northern Italy, which have preserved for us the first sonnets of all,[2] a

layout that emphasises graphically how for writers and readers the sonnet 'made its points': sonnets are often written by the scribes with the octave in four lines, two sonnet lines per manuscript line, but with a stop, or 'punto', after each sonnet line; then the sestet is written in two lines and one, two lines and one, again with a stop after each sonnet line. The scribes also mark each couplet or tercet with a capital or a symbol such as C (='cominciamento', 'beginning'), so that the sonnet is laid out thus:

C xxxxxxxxxx. xxxxxxxxxxxx.
C xxxxxxxxxx. xxxxxxxxxxxx.
C xxxxxxxxxx. xxxxxxxxxxxx.
C xxxxxxxxxx. xxxxxxxxxxxx.
C xxxxxxxxxx. xxxxxxxxxxxx.
xxxxxxxxxx.
C xxxxxxxxxx. xxxxxxxxxxxx.
xxxxxxxxxx.

This is, in a conceptual as well as a graphic sense, the shape of the sonnet at least until Petrarch begins to modify it: even he, however subtle his internal structures, thinks of the sonnet as an accumulation of points, as does Shakespeare. The sense of the sonnet as a collection of briefly made 'points', with closures throughout its fourteen lines, from eleven syllable units upwards to the whole utterance of 140–54 syllables, links the sonnet to the proverb or maxim and also to the catalogue, and thus to an /I/ with wisdom and the authority to give counsel.

A very early sonnet, written by Re Enzo (Enzo, King of Sardinia, 1224–72), shows how this sense works into the pattern shown above:

Tempo vene chi sale e chi discende
tempo è da parlare e da taciere
tempo è d'ascoltare e da imprendere
tempo è da minaccie non temere;
tempo è d'ubbidir chi ti riprende
tempo è di molte cose provedere;
tempo è di vegghiare chi t'offende,
tempo d'infignere di non vedere.
Però lo tegno saggio e canoscente
che fa i fati con ragione,
e col tempo si sa comportare,
e mettesi in piacere de la gente,
che non si trovi nessuna cagione
che lo su' fatto possa biasimare.
[There comes a time for rising, and for falling,

a time to speak, and a time to keep silence, a time to listen, and a time to act,
a time not to fear threats;
a time to obey those who check you,
a time to anticipate many things,
a time to rise against an injury,
a time to seem not to notice it.
Still, I reckon him wise and experienced
who acts with reasonableness,
who knows how to comply with the time,
to make himself agreeable to people,
so that no cause can be found
to reprove his actions.]

A bland reflection, but with an extra irony for Enzo, who languished for twenty years in prison. The echo of *Ecclesiastes* 3 gives this poetic voice biblical wisdom and universal applicability; nevertheless this remains a fairly primitive composition, for the octave is just an assembly of single lines, though the sestet manages a more complicated syntax which unifies its six-line block, and the thought begins to develop. The pattern is there, but had not been taken full advantage of—this was something which the early sonneteers had to learn to do.

The shape and size of the sonnet, and the beginnings of the ways in which the voice might move and proclaim its identity within those limits, were established by a small group of poets working and writing at the court of the Hohenstaufen Emperor Frederick II of Sicily, who reigned from 1208 to 1250 over the southern half of Italy. Thirty-five sonnets, out of about 125 poems which survive from this period, are regarded by scholars as constituting the first European sonnets;[3] and, of these thirtyfive, twenty-five are usually attributed to one man, a notary and legal deputy of the Emperor named Giacomo da Lentino. He is a mere shadow: three legal documents, one bearing his autograph, and a number of circumstantial remarks in 'his' poems attest to his existence, and it is conjectured that he was born about 1210 and died some time after 1240. When literary works are attributed to emperors and princes, one has suspicions; but the attributions to da Lentino cannot come from flattery or the magnetism of the great, and there is no reason to deny this thin shade the credit of writing the first sonnets in the world. Which among *his* sonnets were or was his first, cannot be even suggested from the traces; there are no signs of experiment, for all his sonnets have fourteen lines, and all are in the eleven-syllable line that became in Italian verse what the ten-syllable iambic line is in English.[4]

The sonnets divide into an octave and a sestet, the octave rhyming in all cases ABAB ABAB, and the sestet varying: CDE CDE (15), CDCDCD (9) and GCD CCD (actually AAB AAB) (1). All the sonnets except one deal with the theme of Love, and all are spoken by an /I/ who occasionally identifies himself as coming

from the town of Lentino (now Lentini), which was and is in Sicily, twenty miles north of Syracuse. This all seems very familiar; but it is also startling, in that da Lentino appears to have invented the sonnet perfectly immediately: only one of his sonnets, 'Lo viso, e son diviso da lo viso' ('I see the face, and yet I am parted from it'), seems in any way primitive, in having the sestet repeat the rhymes of the octave, ABAB ABAB AAB AAB—a trick which blurs the fundamental difference between octave and sestet.[5]

Da Lentino has left us no critical comments, not even a sonnet about the sonnet: in trying to see the space of the sonnet as he saw it, we are forced back on the poems themselves and the ambience of Frederick's court.

The first sonnets in Italian, and thus the first in the world, emerged from an environment strikingly similar to that of the first sonnets in English, those written by Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503?-1542) and the Earl of Surrey (1517?-1547) at the court of Henry VIII. The Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, who ruled from 1208 to 1250 over the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, that is, the southern half of Italy and the island of Sicily itself, was an absolute ruler, but an enlightened and (for those days) tolerant one, who inherited from his forebears, the Norman kings of Sicily, a culturally very diverse realm, stretching from Naples in the north to Calabria in the south; the philosophy and literature of the Arabs, of the Sicilian and Byzantine Greeks, of classical and neo-Latin Italy, and of southern France and Spain, all flowed into Frederick's realm, and even faraway Scotland contributed Frederick's personal soothsayer, the reputed wizard Michael Scot. Due allowance made for flattery, the Emperor is said to have spoken Italian (that is, a dialect of it, since there was no single Italian language at this time), German, French (with the same qualification), Latin and Arabic, and to have been able to write Greek. Like Henry VIII, he was a patron of scholars, translators, poets and musicians, an activity which always tends to sharpen the interest of courtiers in the arts. It is perhaps anachronistic to think of Frederick as maintaining a court in the later Renaissance sense, but as he moved about among his various cities and castles, principally on the mainland, he required the centralised control of the *imperium* to be administered by a highly loyal staff of professional legal administrators, the executive arm of his own inner council or chancellery. It was to this secular corps that the inventor of the sonnet belonged.

Power and command of language go together; and central to the command that such administration required was the notion and practice of *eloquentia,* the 'speaking out' of the self in texts that were designed to persuade, control, stabilise power and enhance authority. Whether trained in Naples or further north in one of the university centres outside Frederick's dominions, such as Bologna, da Lentino and his fellows learnt *eloquentia,* that elaborated speech and writing distinctive of the educated man, by help of the *artes eloquentiae,* the textbooks of rhetoric which, with elevated vocabulary, complex syntax, figures of speech and whole anthologies of *fiori di rettorica* (striking maxims or epigrammatic turns from approved authors), assisted the budding official to signal to the world

his membership of a class above the common herd—a function still served, though without the same reverence paid, by civil-service jargon today.

Such training and the writing that it produced were of course in Latin, and members of Frederick's court wrote poetry in Latin, as did educated men all over Europe. To write in the vernacular might seem to contradict the very purpose of *eloquentia,* and to write in the vernacular while simultaneously inventing a new form, the sonnet, seems to accomplish a great deal very fast. However, an extensive courtly poetry already existed, known to da Lentino and his circle, that was not in Latin: that is, the poetry of the troubadours, the courtly poets of southern France, who flourished from about AD 1100 to about 1300, and wrote in Provençal.[6] In the atmosphere of the noble households of southern France, rhetorical skill and a high degree of artifice were marks of the courtly persona; and the troubadours, who were either themselves of noble rank or were clients of nobility, developed numerous difficult verse forms, often containing language of a high degree of allusiveness and conceit though, as befitted a vernacular art, with no great display of scholarly learning. They composed poems and music of sensual love between high-born and nobly disposed lovers, often but not always unrequited, often but not always from the male viewpoint, and often with the woman placed in the higher social position. (Worth noting here in passing is that they also sang of political and moral matters, themes which the poets of the Emperor Frederick avoided.)[7]

Provençal poets validated the practice of *eloquentia* in a language that was not Latin; they knew nothing of the sonnet (the word *sonet* exists in Provençal, but means simply 'a poem'), but they did establish and pass over to da Lentino and his circle a closely related poem, the *canso* or *canzone,* already mentioned in connection with Dante.[8] This was a long poem, but it was made up of a number of identical stanzas, and the practice of constructing these seems to bear on the sonnet. The stanzas might have from seven to nineteen lines, but because they were designed to be sung in Provençal they developed a musical structure as follows. The stanza fell into two not necessarily equal parts, called *fronte* and *sirma,* each with its own musical phrase. Each of these might again break into two, but then the second half repeated the first: the *fronte* had two *pedes* (*pes* means 'a foot') and the *sirma* had two *versus.* The major break between fronte and *sirma* was called the *diesis* or *volta* ('turn') in Italian.

The possible patterns, which would in Provençal be musically articulated, were thus:

Ia+Ib : II	–	pes+pes+sirma
I : IIa+IIb	–	fronte+versus+versus
Ia + Ib : IIa+IIb	–	pes+pes+versus+versus

and the simplest, not much used,

I : II	—	fronte+sirma

The fourteen-line sonnet, as da Lentino invented it, breaks the same way:

Ia+Ib : II	–	4 lines+4+6
I : IIa+IIb	–	8 lines+3+3
Ia+Ib : IIa+IIb	–	4 lines+4+3+3
I : II	–	8 lines+6.

What was a musical framework in Provençal becomes a syntactical structure in Italian, and has determined the parameters of the sonnet from the thirteenth century to the present day.

We cannot prove this debt; but no contemporary poetic form exists which is closer to the sonnet than the *canzone* stanza. Da Lentino wrote several *canzoni,* and it is interesting that none of them uses a fourteenline sonnet scheme as a stanza; in particular, no *fronte* has eight lines rhyming ABAB ABAB. If da Lentino's choice was deliberate, what better way to signal that the sonnet was not a wandering canzone-stanza than by giving it a *fronte* that actually appears in no *canzone,* but which recalls a very common one—twenty-two extant *canzoni* begin with a fourline *fronte* rhyming AB AB.

Scholars have pointed out that there existed in the Sicilian area a popular verse form called the *strambotto,*[9] allegedly sung by peasants, which consisted of eight eleven-syllable lines rhyming ABAB ABAB. Again, there is no proof of indebtedness, but it is certainly not impossible that an educated circle desirous of affirming a southern Italian culture in competition with that of the north should have written distinctive poems not only in their local dialect but also deriving from local song. (The *strambotto*-form was known to Sir Thomas Wyatt from the poetry of a later sonneteer, Serafino dell' Aquila.)

No obliging peasants, however, provided da Lentino with what must be the masterstroke of the sonnet's invention: the decision to use a *sirma* of six lines. The six-line *sirma* was common in *canzoni,* and it was his genius to see that six added to eight preserves in words the principle of difference between the two parts of binary structure which was originally the *melodic* requirement of the Provençal *canso*. His contemporaries took it up, and out of 123 poems which survive from the court of Frederick II thirty-five are sonnets.

The frame was prepared: fourteen lines of eleven syllables, breaking eight and six. The speakers who advanced into that space had to learn how to use it. One requirement they inherited: that there should be a change of some kind at the end of the octave *(fronte)*. The other main requirement, that of closure, was forced on them by da Lentino's decision that fourteen lines made a complete poem. To announce a theme, to change it, and to close it: these features are essentially part of the structure of the sonnet and, though they can be rearranged, they cannot be eluded. So a tripartite structure of discourse—statement, development and

conclusion—belonging to a speaker whose *eloquentia* is the outgrowth of wisdom begins to appear on top of the binary structure of octave and sestet; and this is an /I/ congenial to writers for whom eloquence signalled power.

The sonnet is shaped at its beginning as a *forensic* instrument, so to speak: for pleading, arguing, asserting in a voice that is in control of worldly experience. Even in the more restricted sphere of *fin amor,* the courtly devotion made fashionable by the poets of Provence, the speaker asserts some kind of knowledge of experience, however bitter or frus-trated. Da Lentino's sonnet 'Lo basilisco a lo speclo lucente' is representative of this kind of argumentative control:

Lo basilisco a lo speclo lucente
traggi a morire con isbaldimento;
lo cesne canta plu gioiosamente
quand' è plu presso a lo suo finimento;
lo paon turba, istando plu gaudente,
poi c'a suoi piedi fa riguardimento;
1'augel fenise s'arde veramente
per ritornare i' novo nascimento.
In ta' nature eo sentom' abenuto,
ch'allegro vado a morte, a le belleze,
e'nforzo il canto presso a lo finire;
estando gaio torno dismaruto,
ardendo in foco inovo in allegreze,
per voi, plu gente, a cui spero redire.[10]

[The basilisk is drawn rejoicing to its death in the polished mirror, the swan sings most joyfully when nearest to its end;

the peacock is perturbed, just at its most joyful, when it beholds its feet, the phoenix really burns in order to return in a new birth.

These natures I feel I have adopted, for I joyfully go to my death, towards beauty, and I urge my song when near my end;

being joyful, I change to dismay; burning in fire, I am reborn in joy, because of you, noble lady, to whom I hope to return.]

The sonnet begins with a voice from the world of scientific learning: if the speaker emerges later as a lover, he is first of all an /I/ with the impersonal authority of the learned man. Natural science occupies the octave; the development then applies this to 'eo' (/I/) until the last line, which makes the point, the conclusion that the lady is the cause of this natural/unnatural behaviour. Because the octave has eight lines, da Lentino has used four creatures from medieval lore, fitting one to each distich; this then causes a proportional problem: each animal in turn supplies him with a point of comparison to himself, and he must deal with all four and come to a conclusion in six lines. The sestet accordingly divides 1+4+1: the first line asserts generally that he has all four