

Elliott Stegall

The Sonnet: Petrarch, Ronsard, Shakespeare, Herrick, Wordsworth

If you would find an explanation for all this, you must recollect that although the delights of poetry are most exquisite, they can be fully understood only by the rarest geniuses, who are careless of wealth and possess a marked contempt for the things of this world, and who are by nature especially endowed with a peculiar elevation and freedom of soul. Consequently, as experience and the authority of the most learned writers agree, in no branch of art can mere industry and application accomplish so little.

The Sonnet

The earliest recorded sonnets are by Giacomo (or Iacopo) da Lentini, called "il Notaro" (fl. 1233 - ca. 1245), who was at the court of the Emperor Frederick II in Sicily (reigned 1220-1250). Giacomo da Lentini is usually credited with the invention of the sonnet but Petrarch perfected it.

Most of the entries in Il Canzoniere are sonnets.

The Petrarchan sonnet, at least in its Italian-language form, generally follows a set rhyme scheme, which runs as follows: **abba abba cdc dcd**. The first eight lines, or *octave*, do not often deviate from the **abba abba** pattern, but the last six lines, or *sestet*, frequently follow a different pattern, such as **cde cde, cde ced, or cdc dee**. Each line also has the same number of syllables, usually 11 or 7 by Petrarch. The English Sonnet has 10 syllables per line.

How to write a sonnet:

<http://petrarch.petersadlon.com/submissions/Sonnet.pdf>



Petrarch:*The Canzoniere (the Songbook) #1*

You who hear the sound, in scattered rhymes,
of those sighs on which I fed my heart,
in my first vagrant youthfulness,
when I was partly other than I am,

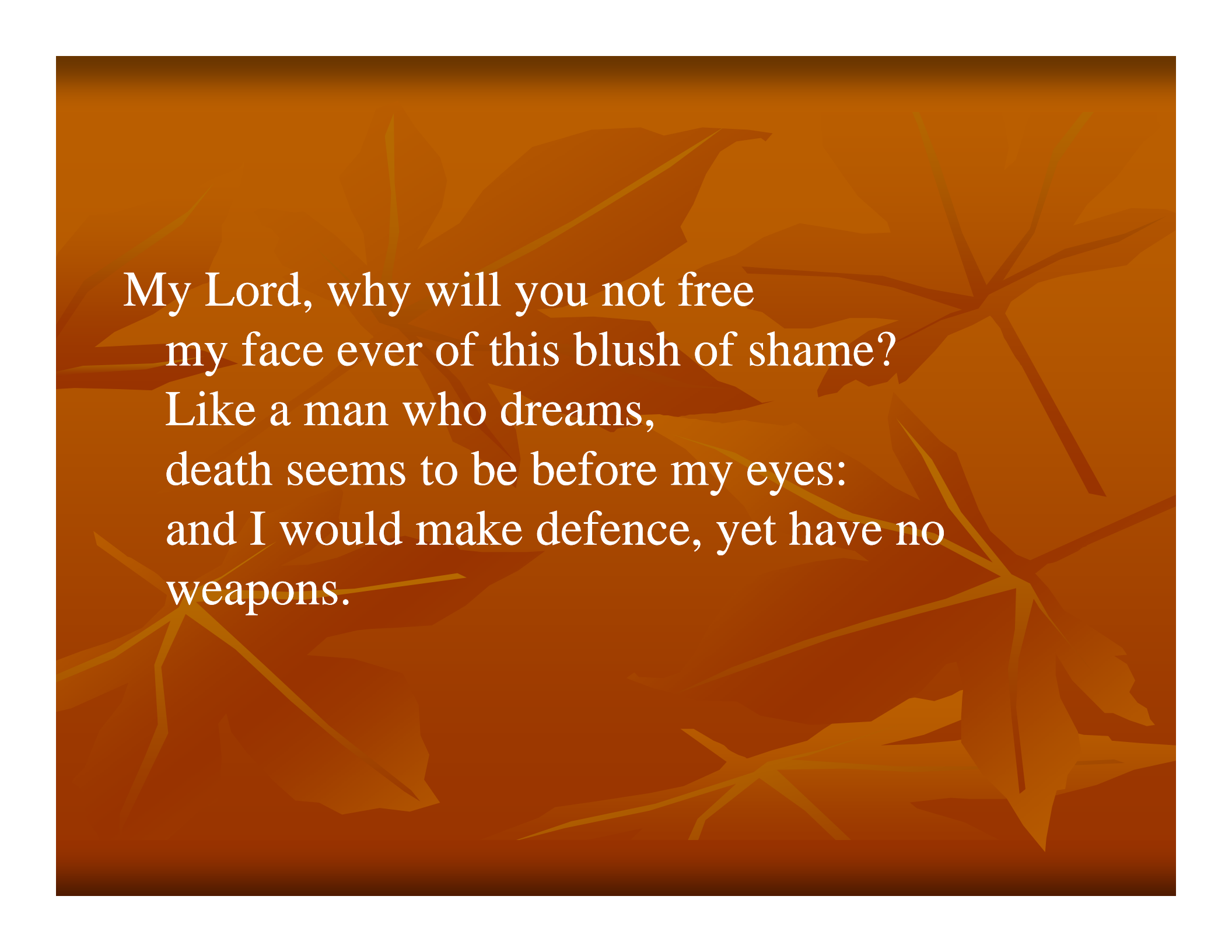
I hope to find pity, and forgiveness,
for all the modes in which I talk and weep,
between vain hope and vain sadness,
in those who understand love through its trials.

Yet I see clearly now I have become
an old tale amongst all these people, so that
it often makes me ashamed of myself;

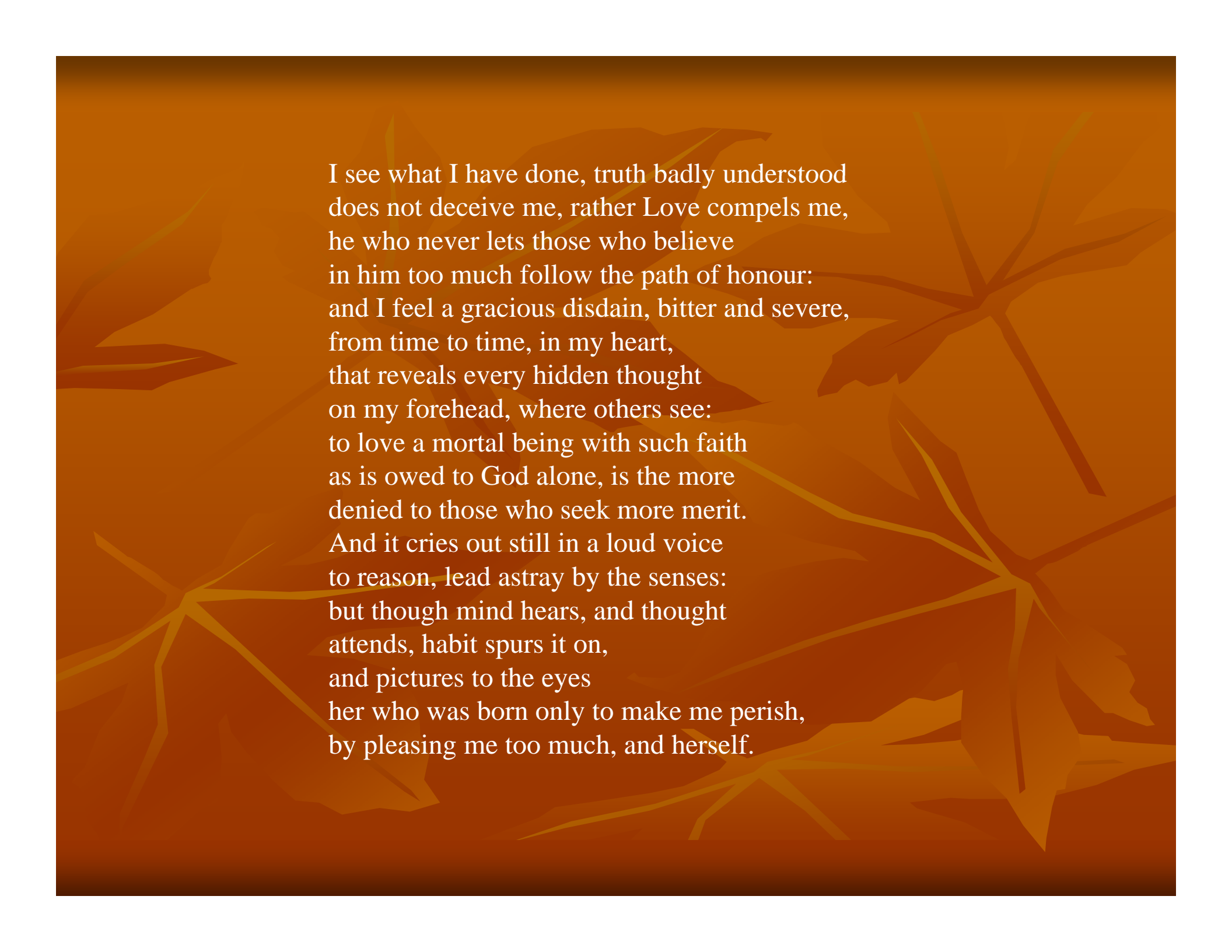
and shame is the fruit of my vanities,
and remorse, and the clearest knowledge
of how the world's delight is a brief dream.

Petrarch *I'vo pensando* (I go thinking) #264


- I go thinking, and so strong a pity
for myself assails me in thought,
that I'm forced sometimes
to weep with other tears than once I did:
for seeing my end nearer every day,
I've asked God a thousand times for those wings
with which our intellect
can rise from this mortal prison to heaven.
But till now nothing has eased me,
no prayers, or sighs, or tears I produce:
and that is what has to be,
since he who had strength to stand, but fell on the way,
deserves to lie on the ground and find his level.
I see those merciful arms,
I which I believe, still open wide,
but fear grips me
at other's example, and I tremble at my state,
that spurs me higher, and perhaps I near the end.



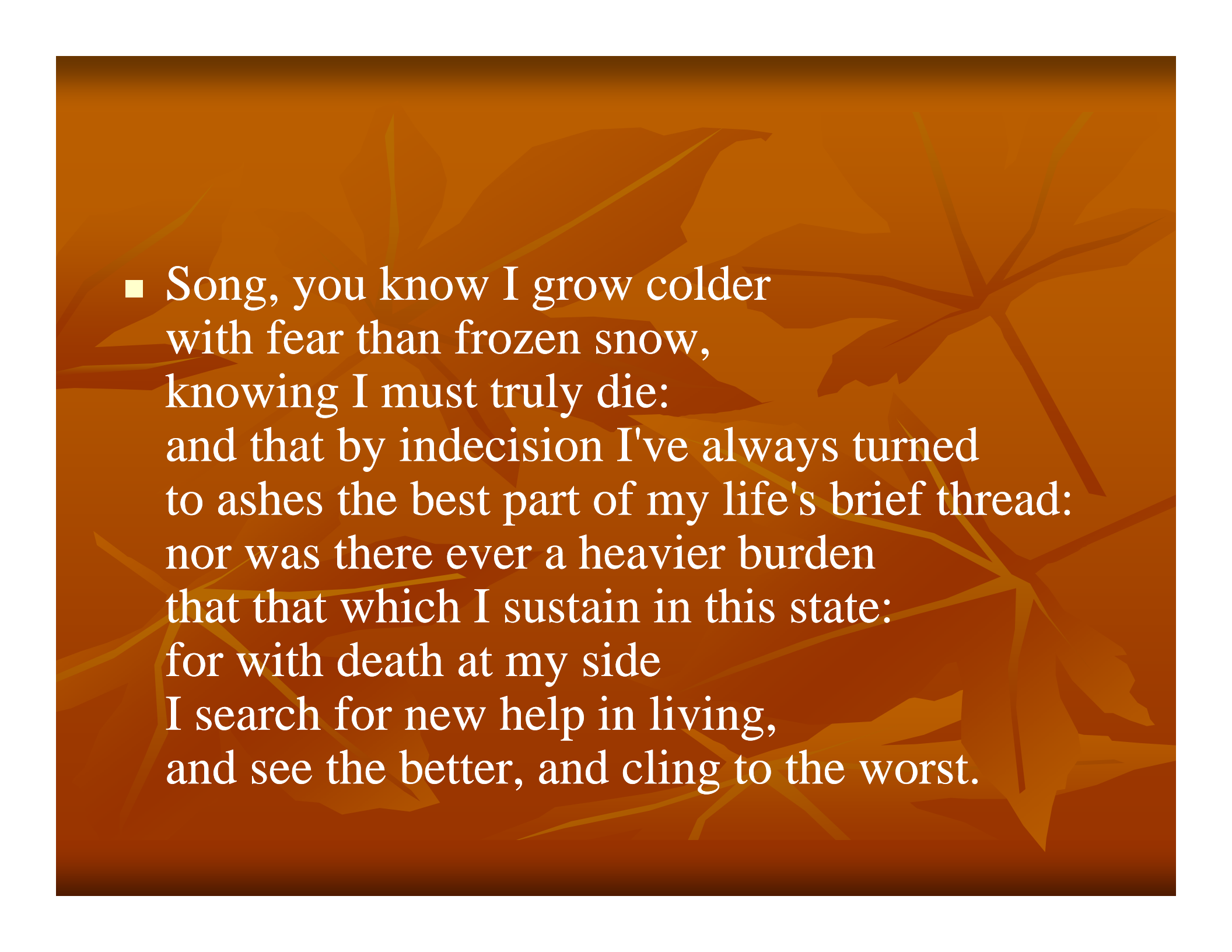
My Lord, why will you not free
my face ever of this blush of shame?
Like a man who dreams,
death seems to be before my eyes:
and I would make defence, yet have no
weapons.



I see what I have done, truth badly understood
does not deceive me, rather Love compels me,
he who never lets those who believe
in him too much follow the path of honour:
and I feel a gracious disdain, bitter and severe,
from time to time, in my heart,
that reveals every hidden thought
on my forehead, where others see:
to love a mortal being with such faith
as is owed to God alone, is the more
denied to those who seek more merit.
And it cries out still in a loud voice
to reason, lead astray by the senses:
but though mind hears, and thought
attends, habit spurs it on,
and pictures to the eyes
her who was born only to make me perish,
by pleasing me too much, and herself.



I do not know what span heaven allotted me
when I was newly come to this earth
to suffer the bitter war
that I contrive to wage against myself:
nor through the corporeal veil can I
anticipate the day that ends my life:
but I see my hair alter
and my desires change within me.
Now that I think the time for death
is near, or at least not far,
I'm like one that loss makes shrewd and wise,
thinking of how it was he left the path
of right, that brings us to our true harbour:
and I feel the goad
of shame and grief turning me about:
yet the other does not free me,
that pleasure so strong in me by custom
that it dares to bargain with death.

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- The background of the slide is a solid dark brown color with a faint, stylized pattern of autumn leaves in various shades of brown and orange. The leaves are scattered across the background, some overlapping, creating a textured, seasonal feel.
- Song, you know I grow colder
with fear than frozen snow,
knowing I must truly die:
and that by indecision I've always turned
to ashes the best part of my life's brief thread:
nor was there ever a heavier burden
that that which I sustain in this state:
for with death at my side
I search for new help in living,
and see the better, and cling to the worst.

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The golden hair was loosened in the breeze
That in many sweet knots whirled it and reeled,
And the dear light seemed ever to increase
Of those fair eyes that now keep it concealed:

And the face seemed to color, and the glance
To feel pity, who knows if false or true;
I who had in my breast the loving cue,
Is it surprising if I flared at once?

Her gait was not like that of mortal things,
But of angelic forms; and her words' sound
Was not like that which from our voices springs;

A divine spirit and a living sun
Was what I saw; if such it is not found,
The wound remains, although the bow is gone.

Sonnets of Petrarch: <http://website.lineone.net/~ssiggeman/petrarch1.html>

PIERRE de RONSARD, 1524-1585.



Ronsard's early years gave little sign of his vocation. He was for some time a page of the court, was in the service of James V. of Scotland, and had his share of shipwrecks, battles, and amorous adventures. An illness which produced total deafness made him a scholar and poet, as in another age and country it might have made him a saint and an ascetic.

With all his industry, and almost religious zeal for art, he is one of the poets who make themselves, rather than are born singers. His epic, the Franciade, is as tedious as other artificial epics, and his odes are almost unreadable. We are never allowed to forget that he is the poet who read the Iliad through in three days. He is more mythological than Pindar.

His constant allusion to his grey hair, an affectation which may be noticed in Shelley, is borrowed from Anacreon (A Greek lyric poet 582 – 485 BC). Many of the sonnets in which he 'petrarquizes,' retain the faded odour of the roses he loved; and his songs have fire and melancholy and a sense as of perfume from 'a closet long to quiet vowed, with moth and dropping arras hung.' Ronsard's great fame declined but he has been duly honoured by the newest school of French poetry.

The forms that dominate the poetic production of these poets are the Petrarchan sonnet cycle (developed around an amorous encounter or an idealized woman) and the Horatian/Anacreontic ode (of the 'wine, women and song' variety, often making use of the Horatian "carpe diem" topos - life is short, seize the day). Ronsard also tried early on to adapt the Pindaric ode into French and, later, to write a nationalist verse epic modelled on Homer and Virgil (entitled the *Franciade*), which he never completed. Throughout the period, the use of mythology is frequent, but so too is a depiction of the natural world (woods, rivers).

Poems of Pierre de Ronsard 1550

ROSES

I send you here a wreath of blossoms blown,
And woven flowers at sunset gathered,
Another dawn had seen them ruined, and shed
Loose leaves upon the grass at random strown.

By this, their sure example, be it known,
That all your beauties, now in perfect flower,
Shall fade as these, and wither in an hour,
Flowerlike, and brief of days, as the flower sown.

Ah, time is flying, lady--time is flying;
Nay, 'tis not time that flies but we that go,
Who in short space shall be in churchyard lying,

And of our loving parley none shall know,
Nor any man consider what we were;
Be therefore kind, my love, whiles thou art fair.

(this font is called "Constantia")

Les Amours de Marie: VI

I'm sending you some flowers, that my hand
Picked just now from all this blossoming,
That, if they'd not been gathered this evening,
Tomorrow would be scattered on the ground.

Take this for an example, one that's sound,
That your beauty, in all its flowering
Will fall, in a moment, quickly withering,
And like the flowers will no more be found.

Time goes by, my lady: time goes by,
Ah! It's not time but we ourselves who pass,
And soon beneath the silent tomb we lie:

And after death there'll be no news, alas,
Of these desires of which we are so full:
So love me now, while you are beautiful.

Note: Ronsard's Marie was an unidentified country girl from Anjou.

TO HIS YOUNG MISTRESS RONSARD, 1550.

Fair flower of fifteen springs, that still
Art scarcely blossomed from the bud,
Yet hast such store of evil will,
A heart so full of hardihood,
Seeking to hide in friendly wise
The mischief of your mocking eyes.

If you have pity, child, give o'er;
Give back the heart you stole from me,
Pirate, setting so little store
On this your captive from Love's sea,
Holding his misery for gain,
And making pleasure of his pain.

Another, not so fair of face,
But far more pitiful than you,
Would take my heart, if of his grace,
My heart would give her of Love's due;
And she shall have it, since I find
That you are cruel and unkind.

Nay, I would rather that it died,
Within your white hands prisoning,
Would rather that it still abide
In your ungentle comforting.
Than change its faith, and seek to her
That is more kind, but not so fair.

Sonnets Pour Helene Book I: L

Though the human spirit gives itself noble airs
In Plato's doctrine, who calls it divine influx,
Without the body it would do nothing much,
While vainly praising its origin up there.

The soul sees through the senses, imagines, hears,
Has from the body's powers its acts and looks:
The spirit once embodied has wit, makes books,
Matter makes it more perfect and more fair.

You love the spirit, now, and yet, without reason,
You say that all passion's defiled by the body.
To say so is merely a fault of imagination

That takes what is false for true reality:
And recalls the ancient myth of Ixion,
Who fed on air, and loved a cloud's deceit.

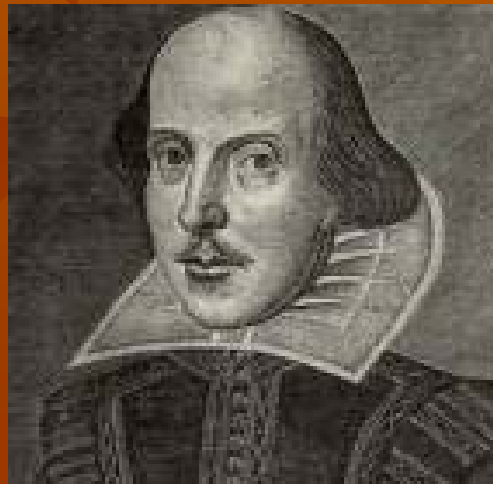
- Note: Ixion tried to seduce Juno, but Jupiter substituted a cloud for her person. Ronsard refers to Neo-Platonic metaphysics in criticising Plato's 'Idealism'. Compare John Donne's poem 'The Ecstasie'. Donne like Marvell seems to have been influenced by Ronsard and his peers.

Poems of Ronsard:

<http://www.tonykline.co.uk/PITBR/French/Ronsard.htm>

Shakespearean sonnet

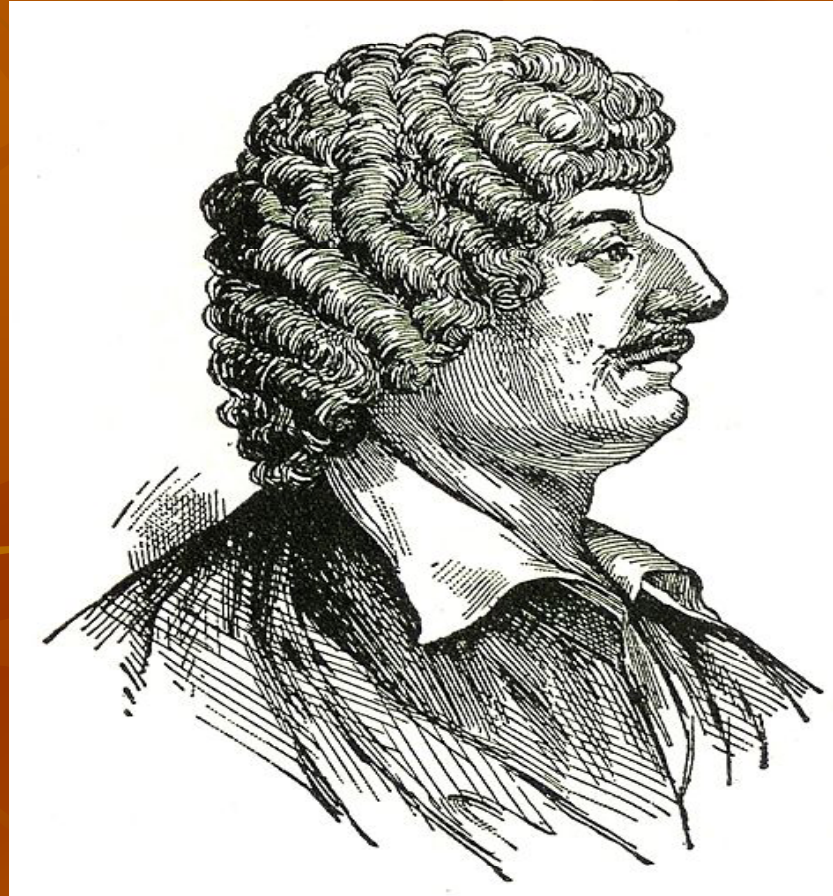
Not only is the English sonnet the easiest in terms of its rhyme scheme, calling for only pairs of rhyming words rather than groups of 4, but it is the most flexible in terms of the placement of the *volta*. Shakespeare (1564 – 1616) often places the "turn," as in the Italian, at L9:



"Sonnet XXIX"

When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweepe my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least,
Yet in these thoughts my self almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
(Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven's gate,
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings,
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

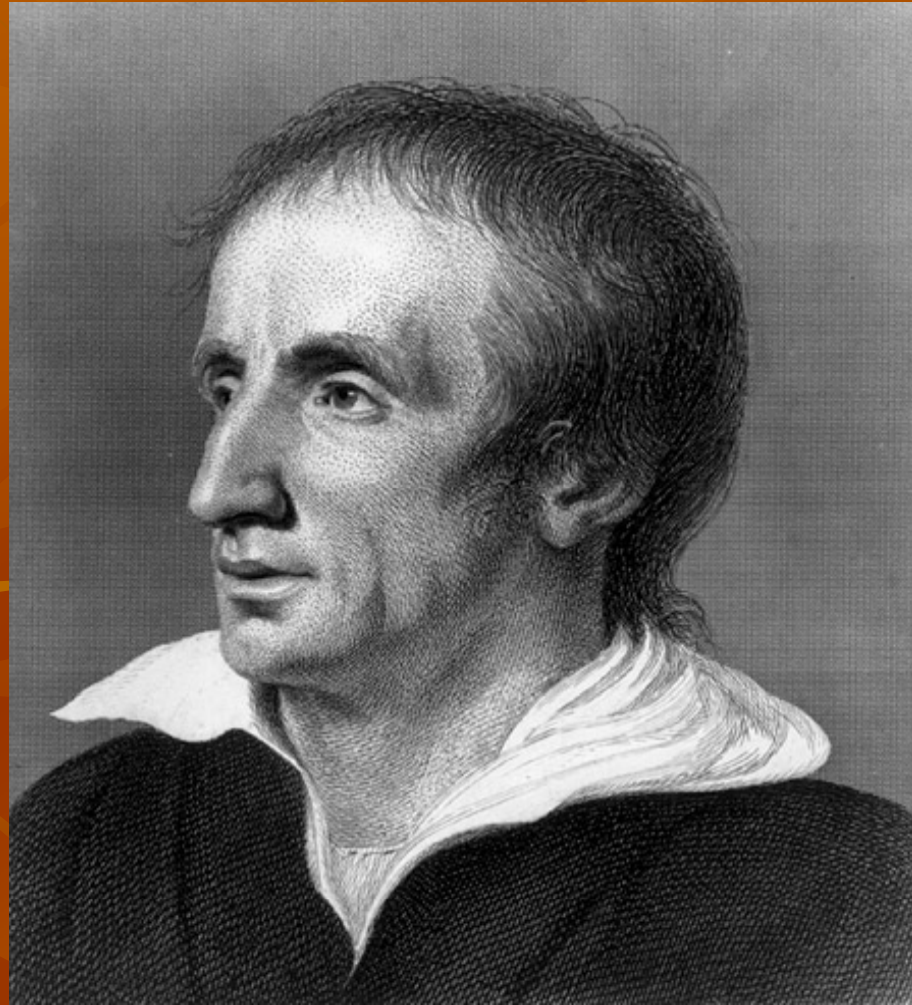
Robert Herrick (1591-1674)



TO THE VIRGINS, TO MAKE MUCH OF TIME.

GATHER ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old time is still a-flying :
And this same flower that smiles to-day
To-morrow will be dying.
The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun,
The higher he's a-getting,
The sooner will his race be run,
And nearer he's to setting.
That age is best which is the first,
When youth and blood are warmer ;
But being spent, the worse, and worst
Times still succeed the former.
Then be not coy, but use your time,
And while ye may go marry :
For having lost but once your prime
You may for ever tarry.

William Wordsworth (1770 – 1850)



"London, 1802"

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
England hath need of thee: she is a fen
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,

Have forfeited their ancient English dower
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.

Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart;
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,

So didst thou travel on life's common way,
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

Here, the octave develops the idea of the decline and corruption of the English race, while the sestet opposes to that loss the qualities Milton possessed which the race now desperately needs.