

COMPOSED UPON WESTMINSTER BRIDGE, SEPTEMBER 3, 1802

1 Earth has not anything to show more fair:
2 Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
3 A sight so touching in its majesty:
4 This City now doth, like a garment, wear
5 The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
6 Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
7 Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
8 All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
9 Never did sun more beautifully steep
10 In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
11 Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
12 The river glideth at his own sweet will:
13 Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
14 And all that mighty heart is lying still!

The poem is a very complex experience for minds that effortlessly sail across it.

THE POEM'S UNITS (the identities its parts take on in passage)

Lines 1–8 (2 quatrains, each rhymed *abab*)

- 1 “Earth has not anything to show more fair” — is a complete logical unit: finished, done
- 2 “Dull would he be of soul who could pass by” — is potentially a unit: finished done.
- 3 “A sight so touching in its majesty” — continues and completes for a second time the syntactic unit that began in line 2.
The last word of line 3 — “majesty” — does not effectively rhyme with the last word of line 2 — “by” — not even as an “off” rhyme. Why not? Because the poem has not yet established itself as rhyming, has not yet taught us to expect end rhymes.
- 4 “This City now doth, like a garment wear” — is the first line that requires syntactic continuation in a following line. After the end of line 4, the poem is urgently incomplete syntactically — and, by presenting a rhyme for “fair,” the last word on line 1, just as urgently the completion of a four-line *formal* unit.

- 5 “The beauty of the morning; silent, bare” — completes the syntactic unit left incomplete at “wear.”
- And, by virtue of the “bare” / “wear” rhyme, line 5 completes a formal unit — a couplet — superimposed upon the defining final element in the quatrain given identity by the “bare” / “fair” rhyme. Note too that the phonic identity the final quatrain gets from “wear” is not only undercut when the “air” sound at the end of line 5 extends the finished unit “wear” established but is also undercut more severely than it would be if the rhyme that ties the end of quatrain 1 to line 5 were not a two-syllable rhyme — not just “bear” / “wear” but “-ent bear” / “-ent wear.”
- 6 “Ships, towers, domes, theaters, and temples lie” — is not very finished sounding — is not an assertion likely to be made — but its syntax is potentially complete.
- 7 “Open unto the fields, and to the sky” — continues and for a second time completes the syntax begun in line 6, this time in a way more obviously meaningful. And, by virtue of the “sky” / “lie” rhyme, line 7 completes another formal unit, another couplet.
- 8 “All bright and glittering in the smokeless air” — is final in always. Syntactically it is at once (1) a free-standing elliptical exclamation that, though a fragment, requires no syntactic continuation, and (2) a second continuation from “lie” at the end of line 6 (“Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie all bright and glittering in the smokeless air”). And, formally, line 8 closes a second quatrain — one now obvious to the ear as a second *abab* in which the *a* rhyme is the noise spelled “air” and the *b* rhyme is the noise spelled “eye.” (Now, I think, our ears probably behave as if they had recognized “majesty” at the end of line 3 as an off rhyme for “by.”)

Lines 9–14 (a sestet rhymed *cdcdcd*)

- 9 “Never did sun more beautifully steep” — makes a new start both syntactically and, because it introduces a new rhyme sound, “eep,” formally. Line 9 requires syntactic completion and, since our ears now expect rhyme, formal completion as well.
- 10 “In his first splendor, valley, rock, or hill” — completes the syntax, but not the form: it does not provide a rhyme for “steep,” and it presents another new sound in need of a mate: “-ill.”
- 11 “Ne’er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep” — is syntactically complete in itself. It also provides a rhyme for “steep.” But “hill” still waits.
- 12 “The river glideth at his own sweet will” — is also syntactically complete in itself — though, like line 6, it doesn’t feel very final — doesn’t, I think, because the third of the line’s five stresses, the one on “at,” is very weak.

But line 12 offers up the necessary “ill” sound.

- 13–14 “Dear God! the very houses seem asleep; / And all that mighty heart is lying still” — are, since both “steep” and “hill” have been furnished with rhymes, formally extra (the rules of sonnet form are not rules for the ear). The extra lines are, however, rhythmically strong and final sounding.

OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

- 1–14 The poem is laced with formally incidental phonic repetitions that give it extra-formal identity, but in a random-feeling, artless-seeming way. Here are a few of the casual sound patterns
- The unstressed seventh syllable of line 2, “who,” rhymes with the unstressed seventh syllable of line 1, “to.” The stressed syllable that precedes “who” in line 2 has the same vowel sounds as the stressed syllable that follows “to” in line 1: “soul who” / “to show.”
 - The sound of “more” in line 1 recurs in the first syllable of the substantively unrelated word “morning” in line 5, the line that, being as it is the line that follows the newly complete first quatrain, makes a new formal start. “More” itself recurs in line 9, the line that begins both an urgently new formal unit and an independent new logical/syntactic unit as well.
 - After the last syllable of “majesty” in line 3 neglected to establish the poem as rhymed — has not provided a rhyme for “by” in line 2 — the third syllables of the next two lines offer formally incidental rhymes for the “tee” sound at the end of “majesty”: “This City”; “The beauty.”
 - The next to last syllable of the poem, the “-ing” sound of “lying,” is the fifth of the poem.
 - The “st” sound that begins the poem’s last syllable is the last of the poem’s many pulsating “s” and “t” combinations. In line 1 the duration between the “s” sound of “has” and the “t” sound in “not” is slightly greater than that between the same two sounds in “sight” in line 3. Still in line 3, the delay is longer again in “so touching.” Then the two appear in reverse order and almost become one sound in “its.” And, at the end of the line, “s” and “t” are divided in “majesty” by the length of time it takes to start a new, separate syllable. And so on in the “s” and “t” sounds in “City” (4), “silent” (5), “ships, towers” (6), “theaters” (6), “temples” (6), “to the fields” (7), “to the sky” (7), “bright and glittering in the smokeless” (8), “sun more beaut-” (9), “steep” (9), “his first spleen-” (10), “saw I never felt” (11), “at his” (12), “sweet” (12), “heart is” (14), “still” (14).

Non-neat orderliness exists also in the dimension of sense. For instance, the “more” sound in “morning” in line 5 repeats the sound but not the sense of

“more” in “more fair” in line 1 and is itself both echoed and not echoed in “more beautifully” in line 9. “More beautifully” — “more” + *adverb* — echoes and does not echo the sense of “more fair” — “more” + *adjective* in line 1.

Also notice “never” in line 11. It both repeats and does not repeat its contracted form at the beginning of the line “Ne’er” — just as, in a complexly imperfect anaphora (anaphora is the repetition of the same word at the beginning of successive clauses or lines), “Ne’er,” the first word of line 11, repeats and does not repeat “Never,” the first word of line 9: “Ne’er” precisely repeats the sense of “Never” and repeats its sound only *imprecisely*.

Moreover, “-ver,” the unstressed second syllable of “never,” is the first element of a complexly related and unrelated trio that develops with the unstressed second syllable of “river” in line 12 and the stressed first syllable of “very” in line 13

ADDITIONAL NOTES AND COMMENTS

- 2 “Dull” makes a momentary gesture of general contradiction to the idea in “fair.”
- 3 Line 3 both does and does not present reference to two different senses: the sense of sight and the sense of touch. In “A sight so touching,” “touching” is the standard metaphor by which its reference to the sense of touch is forgotten and “touching” says “emotionally effecting.” But the word’s unheard literal reference collides noiselessly with “sight,” and the poem’s audience gets to accept a contradiction in terms without effort of any kind. The idea of a touching sight is as ordinary as it feels, but it is *also* and forever extraordinary, an enabler of mental agility in its audience that its audience is unlikely to be able to imagine in itself.
- 4 “Like a garment” momentarily tries to modify “this city” (does so because, in the syntax of English, similes usually modify the noun they follow, not one that follows them: “John, like a wounded lion, sprang upon his attackers”; “my state / (Like to the lark at break of day arising / From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven’s gate” [Shakespeare’s sonnet 29]; “Athwart his brest a bauldrick braue he ware / That shynd, like twinkling stars, with stons most pretious rare” [*The Faerie Queene* 1.8.29]). The construction leads us into an assertion that the city does something or other in the manner of something likenable to a city. But, though a city might be likened to a garment (clothing a landscape, perhaps), a garment cannot reasonably be imagined to *wear* anything. Only when the completed phrase “wear / The beauty of the morning” emerges does the clause let us know that “like a garment” must be understood to modify what is worn and not the wearer. So what? So the line folds one more easily mastered complication into the easy experience it generates for us.

The same can be said of “wear.” “Wear” presents the *sound* of “where” in a poem about place — presents it, presumably, to minds that take no conscious notice at all of the potential “wear” has to say what “where” — or, for that matter, “wear” itself — would say in a hospitable syntax — one in which “wear” would be recognized as a misspelling of “where” — just as context would tell us to take “where” for a misspelling of “wear” if the last word of line 4 were spelled *w-h-e-r-e*).

- 5 “Bare” relates not only phonetically but ideationally to “garment wear” in the preceding line. The idea that the garment-wearing city is also bare is inevitably — if only momentarily — present, even though (as the punctuation vainly and valiantly insists) “silent, bare” goes with line 6: “Ships, towers, domes, theaters, and temples lie.”
- 5-6 Note too the list-like effect of “silent, bare / Ships, towers, domes, theaters, and temples” — surely a list and surely not, *not* because “silently” and “bare” are adjectives and the five words that follow are nouns.
- 7 “Open unto the fields” presents a horizontal view; “and [open] to the sky” presents a vertical one. The result is an easy complication in which two things are both equitable and not. The same line also includes the like/different pair “unto the” and “and to”; there “unt-” and “and t-” are very similar to the ear. And, though “unto” and “to” are obviously different, in terms of their sense, one is only a two-syllable way to say exactly what the other says in one.
- 8 “Air,” the word that makes the octave complete, finally closes the two-quatrains sound pattern and the syntax of the sentence, provides the formally promised rhyme for “bare” in line 5. “Air” also complicates the neatness of that close by adding an extra coherence: “air” and “sky” are potential synonyms in this context — could be interchanged without altering the sense of the sentence; that is to say, “air,” the second *a* rhyme in the *abba* phonic scheme, rhymes ideationally with “sky,” the second *b* rhyme.
- 9-12 In line 9, “steep,” a word whose basic senses are liquid related — “soak,” “saturate with moisture,” “flood” — is used in the common metaphorical extension by which it refers to light (as in the idea of flooding a scene with light or the idea of sunbathing). Note, however, first that “valley,” “rock,” and “hill” pertain to a sense of the sound “steep” entirely irrelevant to the sense it has here, the sense in which it says “precipitous” as an adjective describing terrain. Secondly, note that the following lines flow toward a liquid topic, the Thames river in line 12.

Moreover, when one reaches reference to the river, that reference in line 12 relates to “deep” in the preceding line, where it asserted profundity entirely

devoid of the physical sense “deep” has in contexts where it describes a river.

So what? More substantively incidental complication in a nonetheless easy experience.

- 11 Reading “Ne’er say I, never felt, a calm so deep” is an experience as complicated as it is easy. The effect is sometimes called “zeugma” (from a Greek word for “yoking”) and here derives from the yoking of one object, “a calm so deep,” with two verbs that relate to it in ways both entirely congruent and entirely incongruent. The calm visible to the speaker is the calm of the city; the calm felt by the speaker is his inner response to what he sees.

So what? Right.

- 12 The idea of the river gliding “at his own sweet will” comes as close as the poem comes to completing a shadowy metaphor by which the city is like a sleeping woman unaware of the presence of a potential rapist and defenseless against him. Line 4 and 5 offer the sexually interesting idea of the city at once clothed in beauty and naked. So does the idea in the next two lines of all the city’s most attractive protuberances lying open to the fields and sky. The specifically masculine “his” and the idea of casual, irresponsible license in “his own sweet will” color the image of the Thames penetrating London with the suggestions of a male daydream of unopposed sexual dominance.
- 14 The easily understood idea of the mighty heart lying still gets great energy from its inherent contradiction (a strong heart is never still; a heart that is still is dead) — is exactly the opposite of what the line tells us the city’s heart is. The last line gets more obvious energy from the contrast between the stillness it asserts and the imminent burst of energy urgently suggested by “mighty heart” — the burst of energy that will follow when the work day begins.