SIX VILLANELLES

& OTHER THOUGHTS ON DRAWING FROM POEMS

Poetry is governed by the two-fold principle of "variety within unity."
Octavio Paz, *The Other Voice*

The regulating line is a means to an end; it is not a recipe.
Le Corbusier, *Toward a New Architecture*

WRAP A PHENOMENON IN WORDS, in layers of repeating lines in an order that suggests two distinct voices, assure that it has no real beginning or end. Further shape these words into a structure of six stanzas, the first five of three lines each, the last of four. The final lines of the first and second stanzas must rhyme, and then repeat alternately as the final lines of stanzas three, four, and five. These two lines appear once more as a heroic couplet at the end of the final stanza. This is the specification for a villanelle.

One may perhaps think of this kind of poetic form as the equivalent of building typology in architecture. Banister Fletcher's *History of Architecture According to the Comparative Method*[54] is organized according to typologies of such buildings as Greek temples, medieval timber churches, and Gothic cathedrals; more recently, cultural historians have illustrated and discussed the subtle variations within such vernacular typologies as African villages, roadside diners, and Irish rural houses.[55] Now, the simple volumes[56] of modern building types such as the 'high-rise' office and the 'big box' retail offer to architecture new 'closed form' typologies for experimentation. My premise is that the study of closed forms in the art of poetry can help us to understand the potential for the art of modern architecture to rewrite itself. This new architectural canon, distributed across time instead of geography, can equally well demonstrate the "variety within unity" of which Paz speaks.

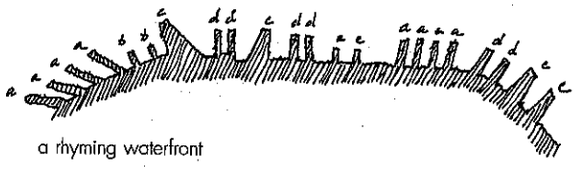
Four primary devices define closed form in poetry: rhyme, meter, repetition and stanza. Not all closed forms use all of these—the sonnet does not

customarily include repetition, and the end-words in the lines of the sestina do not rhyme. Blank verse employs neither repetition nor rhyme, only meter; the villanelle makes use of all four. Inquiry into the architectural analogues for each of these devices leads us to ever more metaphysical questions, like: "How can architecture rhyme?"

Rhyme belongs to the dazzling couplets of arrival.
Robert Hass, "Not Going to New York: A Letter"

RHYME AND METER represent respectively the vertical and horizontal systems of classic structure in poetry. Like columns and beams, they depend upon one another; like columns and beams also, in the best poems they remain so intrinsic to the structure that they forebear to overwhelm the sense of the whole with their details; they are nearly invisible.

Rhyme, normally a device that marks the ends of lines, forms a porous edge at the right margin of the poem. In architecture we can look to edge conditions like sidewalks and waterfronts for their rhyming potential:



a rhyming waterfront

Meter divides the line of poetry into parts; it tells the voice how to read the poem by establishing a rhythm of stressed syllables. The number of stresses determines the number of feet in a line. (In the language of architecture, such parts are called *bays.*) The pattern of stresses and the number of parts in each line make up the meter. As an example, Shakespeare wrote his sonnets

in *iambic pentameter.* An *iamb* is an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one, as in the word un-*til*. *Penta* means five; an *iambic pentameter* line contains five iambic feet.

> Not from the stars do I my judgment plucke
> And yet me thinkes I have Astronomy.[57]

This simplest and most familiar of English meters sounds like a horse's trot (*anapestic* meter sounds like a canter), and graphically scans like this:

/ u u / u / u / u /
u / u / u / u / u /

Often, as in this example, the first foot ("*Not* from") of the first line departs from the meter and begins with a stressed syllable—this gives the overall poem a bit more symmetry, and a more definitive start.

And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.
Robert Frost, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"

REPETITION IN POETRY EXCITES MULTIPLE READINGS, but it is perhaps the most underappreciated virtue of good buildings. Contemporary architects often worry that their designs will be 'boring,' and compensate by distinguishing every feature of the program with unique form. As a result, our landscape is littered with buildings that seem noisy, hyperactive, and even neurotic.

Repetition is soothing, but hardly boring. Unlike the refrain of a song, which is a device clearly positioned to mark the different verses, repetition in a poem

sets us up for delight in the small exceptions to it. Paz elucidates his concept of "variety within unity" when he writes: "What we call development is merely the alliance between repetition and surprise." [58]

T. S. Eliot conditioned us to the *sound* of repetition in "The Hollow Men:"

> This is the way the world ends,
> This is the way the world ends,
> This is the way the world ends
> Not with a bang but a whimper

and to the *idea* of repetition in "East Coker:" [59]

> You say I am repeating
> Something I have said before
> I shall say it again.
> Shall I say it again?

Repetition is both a tug and an anchor; it can work to pull time forward, or to slow time down. The latter effect drew Mark Strand to the villanelle form when he decided to write poems about two of de Chirico's paintings:

> The lines keep coming back, and in de Chirico's paintings you have the same things coming back, the flags, the towers, the boats, the trains, the shadows, long shadows. So I chose the form that I thought came closest to the paintings' spirit...I don't think a villanelle would work for many painters. I associated it specifically with de Chirico. [60]

The first repeating line of Strand's "The Disquieting Muses" is: "Boredom sets in first, and then despair." Both the meter and the content of this line echo the slow time of the painting. The other repeating line, "something about the silence of the square," complements the tempo of tedium by suggesting an ineffable sense of anticipation.

Architecture begins with the making of a room.
Louis Kahn

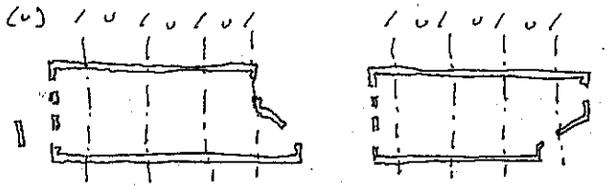
MODERN POETS WHO ARE NOT AFRAID TO WRITE IN STANZAS are like modern architects who are not afraid to design in rooms; there is nothing inherently archaic about either one. In Italian, the word stanza *means* room. Like a room, a stanza encloses an interior. The stanza is the most provocative visual quality of the poem, and inspires graphic representation.

Here are two quatrains, one written in the eighteenth century (William Blake, "The Tyger"), the other in the twentieth (W. H. Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats"):

> Tyger Tyger burning bright
> In the forest of the night.
> What immortal hand or eye
> Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

> Earth receive an honored guest:
> William Yeats is laid to rest.
> Let the Irish vessel lie
> Emptied of its poetry.

Except for one syllable (the unstressed "dare" at the beginning of Blake's fourth line) the meter is the same in both poems—each line is iambic, seven syllables, and begins and ends with a stress. Even more striking, the rhyme scheme of each is *aabb*, and "eye–symmetry" and "lie–poetry" show the same slanted rhyme. [61] If a stanza is defined by its number of lines, its meter, and its rhymes, these two 'rooms' are nearly identical:



'Closed forms' in poetry are most recognizable in the structure and number of their stanzas. In order to more fully explicate the tectonic implications of poetry,

I have chosen to 'draw from' three stanzaic forms in addition to the villanelle: the *ballad*, the *sestina*, and the *pantoum*.[62]

THE BALLAD is one of the oldest forms of English poetry. Yet like other traditional forms it lends itself with astonishing versatility to modern adaptation, to being stripped of both ornament and sentiment. This ballad by Gwendolyn Brooks maintains the ballad's distinct function of narrative, but breaks the tradition of extended length. The poem still tells a story, but the story is as brief as the lives it describes; the form of the poem and its content are congruent.

WE REAL COOL

The Pool Players.
Seven at the Golden Shovel.

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk Late. We
Strike Straight. We

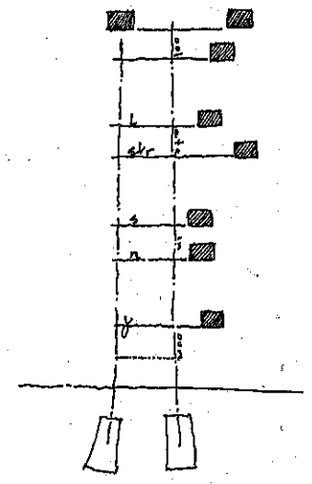
Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

There is probably no other poem in English in which all words are only one syllable, and all syllables are equally stressed. This poem contains no prepositions, no conjunctions, no articles; it is a poem without transitions or details. There is only one pronoun ('we' is also the speaking subject) that is repeated exactly the same number of times as there are lines in the poem. There are

three rhymes, all of which are internal.[63] Strong consonants 'inhabit' the stanzas of the poem, first the *l*'s, then the *s*'s, finally the *j* sounds and the hard *d* at the end, only slightly softened by the sweet sound of *soon*.

"We Real Cool" balances itself like a slender building with cantilevers. The poem could not be more modern in the sense that it is absent of both ornament and hierarchy. Its structure may be drawn like this:

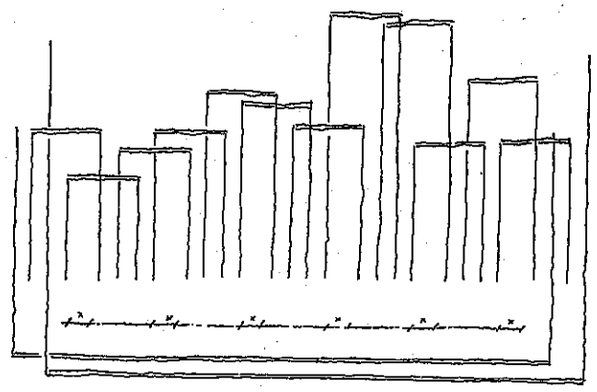


The ballad is historically a form with social content. At a time when the question of whether to embrace social agendas has divided the architectural profession into those concerned with a purity of form and those concerned with the human condition, this tough spare poem gives us a lesson in an economy of means that supports both.

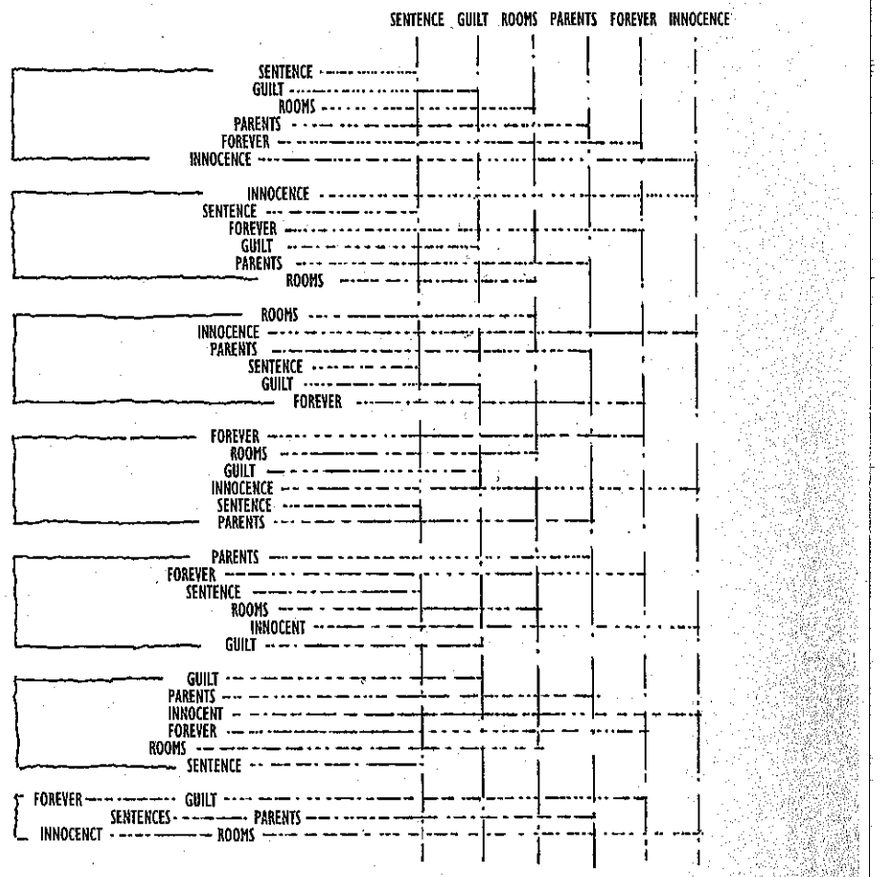
THE SESTINA, like the villanelle, enjoyed a renaissance in the twentieth century. It has a precise architecture of six stanzas with six lines each, and an *envoi* of three lines at the end. Six unrhymed words at the end of each line reoccur in each stanza, in a strict pattern. On the facing page is a drawing of the poem "After the Trial" by Weldon Kees, and below is a word 'schedule' showing the order of the repeating words for each stanza.

LAST WORD	SENTENCE	GUILT	ROOMS	PARENTS	FOREVER	INNOCENCE
Stanza I	1	2	3	4	5	6
II	6	1	5	2	4	3
III	3	6	4	1	2	5
IV	5	3	2	6	1	4
V	4	5	1	3	6	2
VI	2	4	6	5	3	1

THE PANTOUM is a poem that repeats every line; its repetitions spiral slowly forward through an unspecified number of stanzas of four lines each. Here is a drawing of John Ashbery's poem "Pantoum":



A teacher once told me (in defense of his preference for classical architecture) that it was more efficient to design a symmetrical building, since one only had to do half the work. The same could be said of writing a pantoum;



Weldon Kees, "After the Trial"

every line in the poem occurs exactly twice. The second occurrence is always three lines following the first; thus the steps of the dance are predictable. This creates a mesmerizing sense of *déjà vu* in the reading of the poem. The pantoum closes its spiral into a loop by repeating the first line as the last.

Oh Dil I have seen time curved around space, biting his tail.
Peter Schneeman, "Through the Finger Goggles"

THE VILLANELLE HAS PROVED POPULAR among modern poets choosing to experiment with a closed form; perhaps this is because its cyclical shape appealed to a century in which both time and space took on curvature. The space of the villanelle seems both infinite and hollow; it has none of the mass of the pantoum with its lumbering pace, or of the sestina with its stern and didactic repetitions of single words. Like a Gothic cathedral, the villanelle is an ideal form for exciting our emotions without the distraction of content.

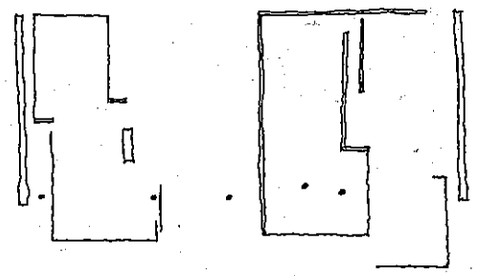
Like cathedrals also, villanelles look deceptively alike until one becomes familiar with the details unique to each one. The form of the cathedral expresses the aspirations of a culture in stone; it is also an acoustic chamber for singing voices. The effect of the villanelle, write Mark Strand and Eavan Boland, is to "make an acoustic chamber for single words."[64] Rhyme and repetition collaborate to form this round spatial structure. In fact, it is generally believed that the form began as a seasonal tradition in the agrarian fields of Italy, where it was sung in 'rounds.'

Its 'specification' demonstrates that rhyme and repetition in the villanelle are intrinsic to its stanzaic structure. Of these, repetition contributes most fully to the construction of the 'acoustic chamber' for words. But even within this

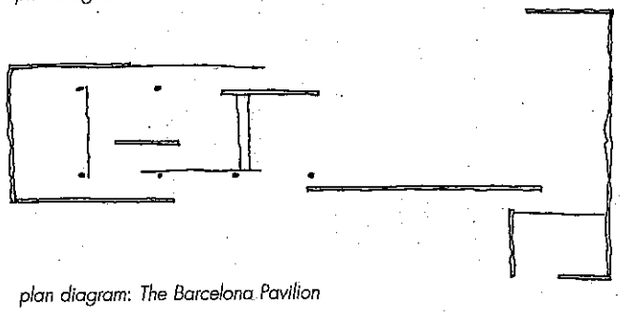
formal constraint, the poet can 'detail' the repeating line in a way that changes the pattern of enclosure. In Merrill's villanelle "The World and the Child," a change in syntax opens an unexpected doorway halfway through the last line of a stanza, with "*Awake*":

> Their talk, mild variation, chilling theme,
> Falls on the child. Awake and wearied of
>
> Mere pain, mere wisdom also, he would have
> All the world waking from its winter dream,

Like the Barcelona Pavilion of Mies van der Rohe, one can enter this poem in many places:

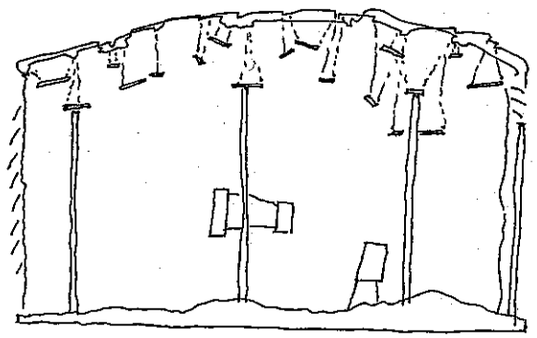


plan diagram: "The World and the Child"

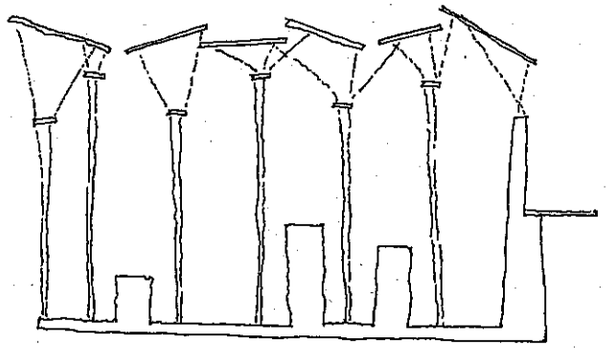


plan diagram: The Barcelona Pavilion

IN SECTION, the lines of a poem might act more like columns than like beams, and a sectional drawing of a villanelle expresses the metaphor of the "acoustic chamber" graphically. To appreciate this effect in the overlay drawings of the six villanelles throughout this book, turn the book 90° so that the lines of text run vertically up the page. View any of the drawings in this manner, and it becomes clear that the left margin of the poem acts as a foundation that holds up its form, while the rhyme scheme forms a complex and undulating roof.

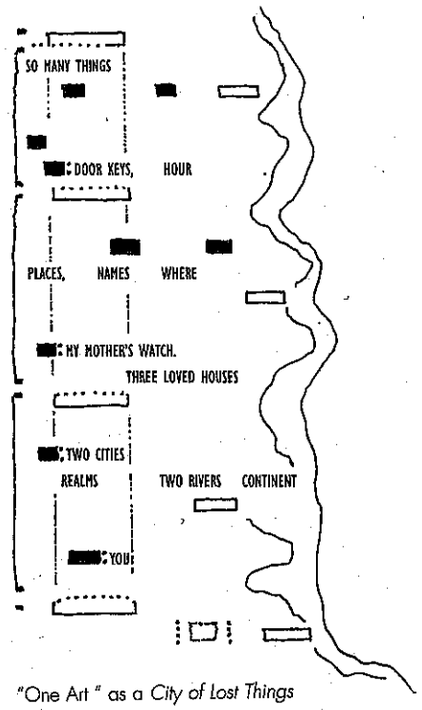


section: "The Waking"



section: "Villanelle for the Middle of the Night"

IF WE MAKE A LEAP IN SCALE, the villanelle can be drawn as an urban plan; the words and lines make not columns or furniture or even rooms, but entire structures of blocks. The morphology of the poem creates a narrative space within which 'building types' reappear with measured frequency.



"One Art " as a *City of Lost Things*

map key:

DOOR KEYS	nouns lost
	verbs of losing
	"art of losing"
	the river

The last poem in this collection is one of the best known villanelles in the English language: Theodore Roethke's "The Waking". The form of this poem is absolute, and its meaning is absolutely ambiguous. The relentless *iambic pentameter* works like a metronome; it measures time by describing time through space. The internal paradox of "wake to sleep" is as hypnotic as the weighty stones that seem to levitate Chartres Cathedral from its earth. Like Chartres, "The Waking" represents its type to perfection.

This so weighty metal, when it becomes the associate of a fancy, assumes the most active virtues of the mind. It has her restless nature. Its essence is to vanish.[65]

Paul Valéry, *Eupalinos or The Architect*

THE TWIN PARADOXES of the heaviness of words and the lightness of built form underscore the potentially rich dialogue between poems and buildings. Though Valéry is speaking of currency in its pure state, we might apply his theory of disappearance directly to architecture. It, more than any other art, needs that 'weighty metal' to exist; yet I would say that if architecture is to become meaningful again, it too must vanish.

The French word *calque*, meaning *to copy*, is the name of the transparent paper that architects in France use to make overlay drawings. In English we call this paper *trace*, and we understand that a tracing is not really a copy at all; it is an evolution, a transformation that sometimes manifests addition and sometimes erasure. In some sense each villanelle is a tracing of the ones that have been written before it; certainly it is *not* a copy. The copy does not acknowledge the passing of time, the trace does. We distrust the trace, particularly when it involves subtraction, because in some sense, the desire to hold time at bay is a motive for all art. But architecture has, in turn, confused

ignorance of the past with a revolutionary present and trivial reminders of the past with meaningful memory. This 'romance of progress' and 'nostalgia for ruins' are both linear concepts, lines drafted in opposite directions against time's own measure, as if time were something we can either accept or reject at will. Such simplemindedness has both impoverished our landscape of meaning and filled it up with stuff.

While poetry at its best continues to make us think of poetry, architecture at its best cannot allow us think of architecture. Industry continues to tempt us with new products in wood, concrete and steel, but our primary building material is nearly weightless; in fact, it is air. Not only weightless but invisible, quixotic. Building space requires that we make our buildings empty. The villanelle as an 'acoustic chamber' is a suitable metaphor for what architecture can now become, because it so perfectly illustrates the ideal of emptiness.

SO HOW DO WE FIND the magic that makes a window hinge into a butterfly, the metaphysics that allows a curtain wall to drift like a curtain?

Answers are not
What the poem is about.