English Poetic Forms

The Sonnet — Regular and Irregular Rhyme Schemes

The two regular sonnet rhyme-sequences are (1) the Shakespearean ab ab cd cd ef ef gg — that is three quatrains with alternate rhymes with a closing couplet and (2) the Miltonic with an octet abba abba (as in your second and third quatrains) and a sestet of three rhymes arranged according to choice. The Shakespearean is closer to the natural lyric rhythm, the Miltonic to the ode movement — i.e. something large and grave. The Miltonic is very difficult for it needs either a strong armoured structure of the thought or a carefully developed unity of the building which all poets can’t manage. However there have been attempts at an irregular sonnet rhyme-sequence. Keats tried his hand at one a century ago and I vaguely believe (but that may be only an illusion of Maya) that modern poets have played loose fantastic tricks of their own invention; but I don’t have much first-hand knowledge of modern (contemporary) poetry. Anyhow I have myself written a series of sonnets with the most heterodox rhyme arrangements, so I couldn’t very well go for you when you did the same. One who has committed many murders can’t very well rate another for having done a few. All the same, this sequence is rather rather — a Miltonic octet with a Shakespearean close would be more possible; I think I have done something of the kind with not too bad an effect, but I have no time to consult my poetry file and am not sure. In the sonnet too it might be well for you to do the regular thing first, soberly and well, and afterwards when you are sure of your steps, frisk and dance. 22 February 1936
Sonnet and Satire

In a sonnet thought should be set to thought, line added to line in a sort of architectural sequence, or else there should be a progression like the pressing of waves to the shore, with the finality of arrival swift in a closing couplet or deliberate as in the Miltonic form.

As to your other proposition, I am not sure that satiric verse and the metaphysical lyrical can rightly be put together. Naturally, a great poetic genius could or might do it with success; but genius can do anything. Satire is more often than not a kind of half-poetry, because its inspiration comes primarily from the critical mind and a not very high part of it, not from the creative vision or a moved intensity of poetic feeling. Creative vision or the moved intensity can come in to lift this motive but, except rarely, it does not lift it very high.

It is Dryden and Juvenal who have oftenest made something like genuine poetry out of satire, the first because he often changes satire into a vision of character and the play of psychological forces, the other because he writes not from a sense of the incongruous but from an emotion, from a strong poetic “indignation” against the things he sees around him. Aristophanes is a comic creator — like Shakespeare when he turns in that direction — the satiric is only a strong line in his creation; that is a different kind of inspiration, not the ordinary satire. Pope attempted something creative in his *Rape of the Lock*, but the success, if brilliant, is thin because the deeper creative founts and the kindlier sources of vision are not there. 27 April 1931

The Ode

A successful ode must be a perfect architectural design and Keats’ Odes are among the best, if not the best in English poetry, as I think they are, at any rate from the point of view of artistic creation, because of the perfect way in which the central thought is developed and each part related to the whole like the design of the masses in a perfect building — each taking its inevitable place.
in the whole. In yours the ideas, words, images flow like your “Ocean” with a certain fluent grandeur of diction and richness of colour, but there is not any inevitable beginning, middle, connections and end. An ode in that respect should be like a sonnet though on a bigger scale and with a different principle of structure — but it must be, like the sonnet, a perfect structure.

4 March 1935

The Ballad

I have not much taste for the English ballad form; it is generally either too flat or too loud and artificial and its basic stuff is a strenuous popular obviousness that needs a very rare genius to transform it.

20 November 1932

Poem and Song

No, a song is not a kind of poem — or, at least, it need not be. There are some very good songs which are not poems at all. In Europe, song-writers as such or the writers of the librettos of the great operas are not classed among poets. In Asia the attempt to combine song-quality with poetic value has been more common; in ancient Greece also lyric poetry was often composed with a view to being set to music. But still poetry and song-writing, though they can be combined, are two different arts, because the aim and the principle of their building is not the same.

The difference is not that poetry has to be understood and music or singing has to be felt (anubhūti); that one has to reach the soul through the precise written sense and the other through the suggestion of sound and its appeal to some inner chord within us. If you only understand the intellectual content of a poem, its words and ideas, you have not really appreciated the poem at all, and a poem which contains only that and nothing else, is not true poetry. A true poem contains something more which has to be felt just as you feel music, and that is its more important and essential part. Poetry has a rhythm, just as music has, though of a different kind, and it is the rhythm that helps this
something else to come out through the medium of the words. The words by themselves do not carry it or cannot bring it out altogether, and this is shown by the fact that the same words written in a different order and without rhythm or without the proper rhythm would not at all move or impress you in the same way. This something else is an inner content or suggestion, a soul-feeling or soul-experience, a life-feeling or life-experience, a mental emotion, vision or experience (not merely an idea), and it is only when you can catch this and reproduce some vibration of the experience — if not the experience itself — in you that you have got what the poem can give you, not otherwise.

The real difference between a poem and a song is that a song is written with a view to be set to musical rhythm and a poem is written with the ear listening for the needed poetic rhythm or word-music. These two rhythms are quite different. That is why a poem cannot be set to music unless it has either been written with an eye to both kinds of rhythm or else happens to have (without especially intending it) a movement which makes it easy or at least possible to set it to music. This happens often with lyrical poetry, less often with other kinds. There is also this usual character of a song that it is satisfied to be very simple in its content, just bringing out an idea or feeling, and leaving it to the music to develop its unspoken values. Still this reticence is not always observed; the word claims for itself sometimes a larger importance.

No, a song need not have a less intricate metre than a poem; and if it appears usually more simple in its rhythmical turns, yet in that apparent simplicity a considerable, though very delicate subtlety is possible. A certain liquidity of sound is essential, but so long as you keep that, you can play variations to a great extent. I don’t think an identical regularity or unbroken recurrence is imperative — though equivalence of sound values may be. It is a matter of the inner ear and its guidance rather than of any exact external measurements — especially in the English language, which is too free and plastic for the theories which
are sometimes imposed upon its movements. The theories don’t matter much, because the language contrives to go its own way even while pretending to conform to the theories. I don’t know what models to propose to you — old style English practice was too regular for the freer spirit of the modern lyric and my reading in contemporary poetry has been too fragmentary and unsystematic for me to remember the right models, though they must be there. 17 December 1931

About French or German songs I know nothing — but as for the English, except for a few like Cardinal Newman’s hymn “Lead, kindly Light” they don’t exist so far as I know,— I mean of course as regards their contents, manner, style. I believe in European music the words are of a very minor importance, they matter only as going with the music. But I am not an expert on the subject, so I can’t go farther into it. When religious songs were written in mediaeval Latin, they were very fine, but with the use of the modern languages the art was lost — the modern European hymnals are awful stuff. 13 May 1936

Nursery Rhymes and Folk Songs

The question you have put, as you put it, can admit of only one answer. I cannot agree that nursery rhymes or folk songs are entitled to take an important place or any place at all in the history of the prosody of the English language or that one should start the study of English metre by a careful examination of the rhythm of “Humpty Dumpty”, “Mary, Mary, quite contrary” or the tale of the old woman in a shoe. There are many queer theories abroad nowadays in all the arts, but I doubt whether any English or French critic or prosodist would go so far as to dub “Who killed Cock Robin?” the true movement of English rhythm, putting aside Chaucer, Spenser, Pope or Shelley as too cultivated and accomplished or too much under foreign influence or to seek for his models in popular songs or the products of the café chantant in preference to Hugo or Musset or Verlaine.
But perhaps something else is meant — is it that one gets the crude indispensable elements of metre better from primitive just-shaped or unshaped stuff than from more perfect work in which these are overlaid by artistic developments and subtle devices — an embryo or a skeleton is more instructive for the study of men than the developed flesh-and-blood structure? That may have a certain truth in some lines of scientific research, but it cannot stand in studying the technique of an art. At that rate one could be asked to go for the basic principles of musical sound to the jazz or even to the hurdy-gurdy and for the indispensable rules of line and colour to the pavement artist or to the signboard painter. Or perhaps the suggestion is that here one gets the primary unsophisticated rhythms native to the language and free from the artificial movements of mere literature. Still, I hardly fancy that the true native spirit or bent of English metre is to be sought or can be discovered in

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall

and is lost in

Rarely, rarely, comest thou,
Spirit of Delight.

Popular verse catches the child ear or the common ear much more easily than the music of developed poetry because it relies on a crude jingle or infantile lilt — not because it enshrines in its movement the true native spirit of the tongue. I hold it to be a fallacy to think that the real spirit and native movement of a language can be caught only in crude or primitive forms and that it is disguised in the more perfect work in which it has developed its own possibilities to their full pitch, variety and scope. It is as if one maintained that the true note and fundamental nature of the evolving soul were to be sought in the earthworm or the scarabaeus and not in the developed human being — or in the divinised man or Jivanmukta.

As for foreign influences, most of the elements of English prosody, rhyme, foot-scansion, line lengths, stanza forms and
many others have come in from outside and have altered out of
all recognition the original mould, but the spirit of the language
has found itself as much in these developments as in the first free
alliterative verse — as much and more. The spirit of a language
ought to be strong enough to assimilate any amount of imported
elements or changes of structure and measure.

23 February 1933