

MANOHAR SHETTY, 'THE OLD SCHOLAR'

Professor Tess Maginess



Picture source: <https://images.firstpost.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/manohar-shetty-1280.jpg>

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

- **Born:** Bombay, 5 November 1953. **Education:** St. Peter's High School, Panchgani; University of Bombay, B.A. 1974. **Career:** Since 1974 a journalist. Sub-editor, *For You*, Bombay, 1974–75, *Indian Express*, Bombay, 1977–80; editor, *Keynote*, Bombay, 1982; chief sub-editor, *Sunday Mid-day*, Bangalore, 1983–85; editor, *Goa Today*, Goa, 1987–93. **Awards:** Homi Bhabha fellow, 1995–97; Fundacao Oriente fellow, 1989–99.
- **Publications: Poetry**
 - *A Guarded Space*. Bombay, Newground, 1981.
 - *Borrowed Time*. Bombay, Praxis, 1988.
 - *Domestic Creatures: Poems*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994.
- **Other**
 - Editor, *Ferry Crossing—Short Stories from Goa*. New Delhi, Penguin India, 1998.

Source: <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/culture-magazines/shetty-manohar>

SUGGESTED READING

- [The Third Generation: Melanie Silgado and Manohar Shetty \(Chapter 21\) - A History of Indian Poetry in English \(cambridge.org\)](#)
- [Why reading Manohar Shetty's poetry is like knowing the earth all over again \(scroll.in\)](#)

Queen's University Belfast & University
of Hyderabad: "Ageing in Literature:
Global South and Global North
Perspectives"

‘THE OLD SCHOLAR’: A CLOSER LOOK

- The poem reads like a set of long sentences and, as such, is a **tour de force** – as if the old scholar were giving a flowing lecture.
- That, in itself, formally reflects his (or her) **teaching style** – a style from a previous era.
- **Tension** is established immediately with the opening lines:

**‘My pupils contend I’m in denial
Of the new fangled...’**

- The ‘argument’, the ‘agon’, is between **tradition and modernity**.
- And this is a key theme to consider in relation to older people. Much gerontological research attests to the importance for old people of **‘keeping up’ with the modern world**; most especially **technology** (Maginess, T (2018), *Dementia and Literature: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. London: Routledge)
- But there is another agon – **between generations**.



- The speaker elaborates the **opening gambit**, again revealing a **Western Classical stylistic approach**:

‘...That I harbour

A chip on my shoulder – I defer to

That subtle electronic

Allusion...’

- The old scholar is, of course, referring to **microchips**, but the charge from his students also reveals that the old scholar has considerable **animus with regard to technology** – that he is resentful and even contemptuous, certainly recalcitrant.
- And his tone, that ‘defer’ may well be **sarcastic** since the allusion is far from subtle.

- Now the old scholar begins to **mount his own case**:

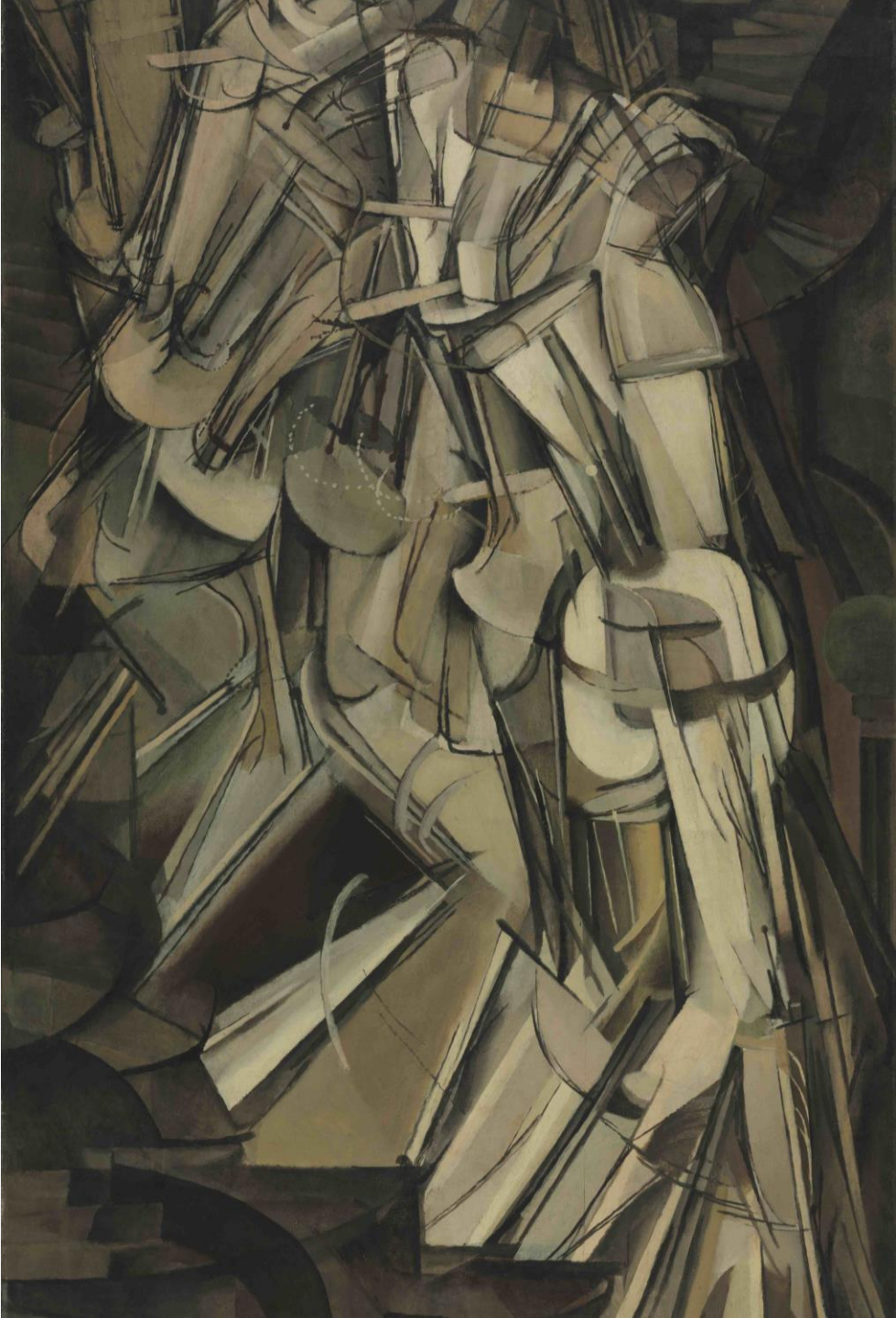
**'...But in my defence
I reiterate those serial
Windows and secondhand
Encyclicals leave me
Cold or have passed me by
Like rain in another latitude'**

- The scholar uses **elision or compression** – another technique from Classical western rhetoric, omitting the 'that' and thus giving greater rhythmical force and 'punch' to the line.

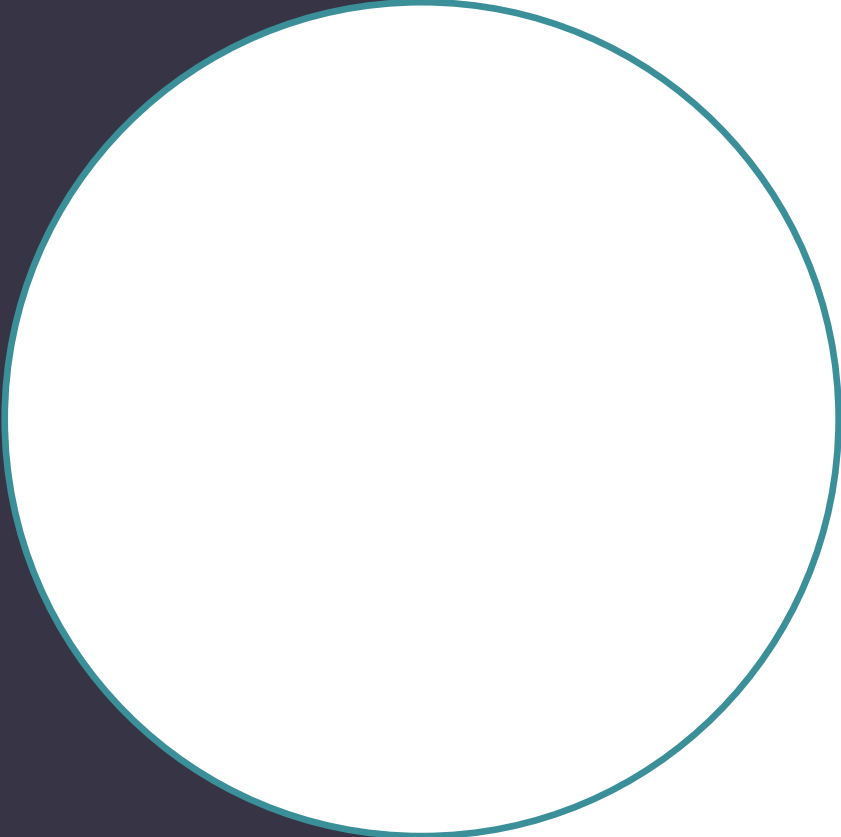


- We many note also how he structures the line to create a **pause** where the reader must carefully consider **multiple meanings** of words.
- Thus, we need to stop at **'serial'** and consider that its meaning is often very negative (serial killers, serial offences), while obeying the enjambment (the run on line) to arrive at **'Windows'**.
- The reader can be relied upon to recognise that Windows is a highly common IT operating system but also, perhaps, to consider the collocation **'serial windows'**, literally **between the lines**.
- Such an image (for it is a **sly metaphor**), suggests a **vertiginous, endlessly repeating geometry**, perhaps calling to mind Marcel Duchamp's famous Modernist painting which can symbolize dehumanized machine production.

Picture source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Duchamp_-_Nude_Descending_a_Staircase.jpg



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- What do we make of ‘**secondhand / Encyclicals**’?
 - Secondhand suggests a **lack of originality** and, indeed, a kind of debased, shabby quality.
 - ‘Encyclical’ is most commonly encountered as part of the lexis of the Catholic church and refers to a letter written by the Pope to the bishops, often on a matter of doctrine.
 - So what is the speaker implying here? The tone is **mocking**, specifically, he is using the Classical rhetorical technique of bathos to reveal how **tawdry and trivial** are the flashy **claims and pronouncements made by the proponents of IT.**

- The accoutrements and marketing 'puff' of the IT world leave the speaker 'cold' – this looks like a cliché until we connect it to the next line:

'like rain in another latitude'

- Now we have a sense, not just of **intellectual discomfort** but a kind of **physical shiver**. And, I take it to be that the speaker is reflecting the very cold class of rain to be suffered under in the global north/global west.
- This simile also cleverly locates the **source of this unwelcome technological conquest as emanating from 'another latitude'** also.

- We begin a new sentence and, with that, the speaker opens another front, offering a **different angle**.
- This is more personal perhaps, the tone more elegiac:

‘I regret there are no manuscripts left

Handwritten with asterisked

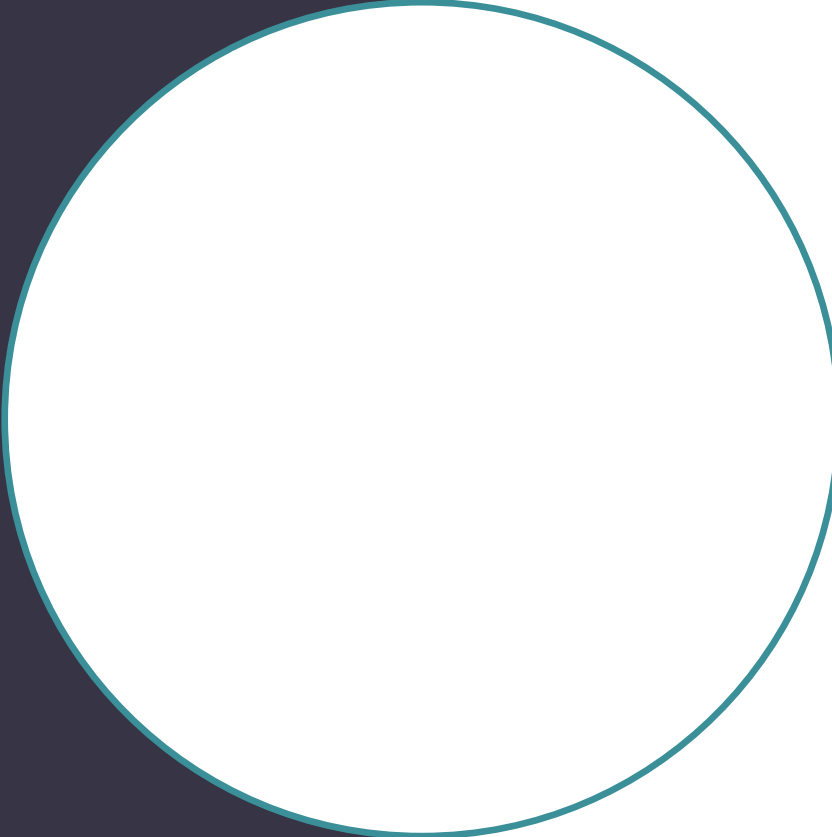
Annotations or with barely legible

Scribblings in the margins that have

Invoked my careful exegesis.’

- I think the scholar is referring here, not to ancient manuscripts of literary or sacred works, but to the **essays produced by his students**, all handwritten before computers. And, specifically also to his own ‘annotations’, as a scholar and teacher.
- However, the reference to barely legible scribblings in the margins seem to refer rather to his own marginal notes as he carefully interprets an old-fashioned manuscript. Or is he being a little **playful** here, suggesting that student work is, in fact, worthy of scholarly exegesis?



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- In the next sentence the old scholar mourns the **loss of a kind of personal connection with either student work or the work of fellow scholars** is, ironically, marginalized by the modern form of engagement with texts.
 - There is a sense too, that **what the scholar misses is the deep engagement with texts** which can only come from a slow and patient study; only in such circumstances can the scholar make a ‘doodle on the page to mark a pregnant / pause’.
 - Note how he reinstates the lost pause with subtle irony in the **enjambement**.

- The old scholar then proceeds to deploy the faddish jargon of much modern scholarship to critique not only this aspect of it but also the **sterile mechanization of scholarship production**:

‘...the paradigm

Shift to cold diskettes’

- We note the **repetition of ‘cold’** here, the diskettes are not pleasant to the touch. And, we may add, now too obsolete. The almost clinical and unhuman feel of the storage ‘record’ is sharply contrasted to the very human and sensory ‘memorably musty / Notebooks’.

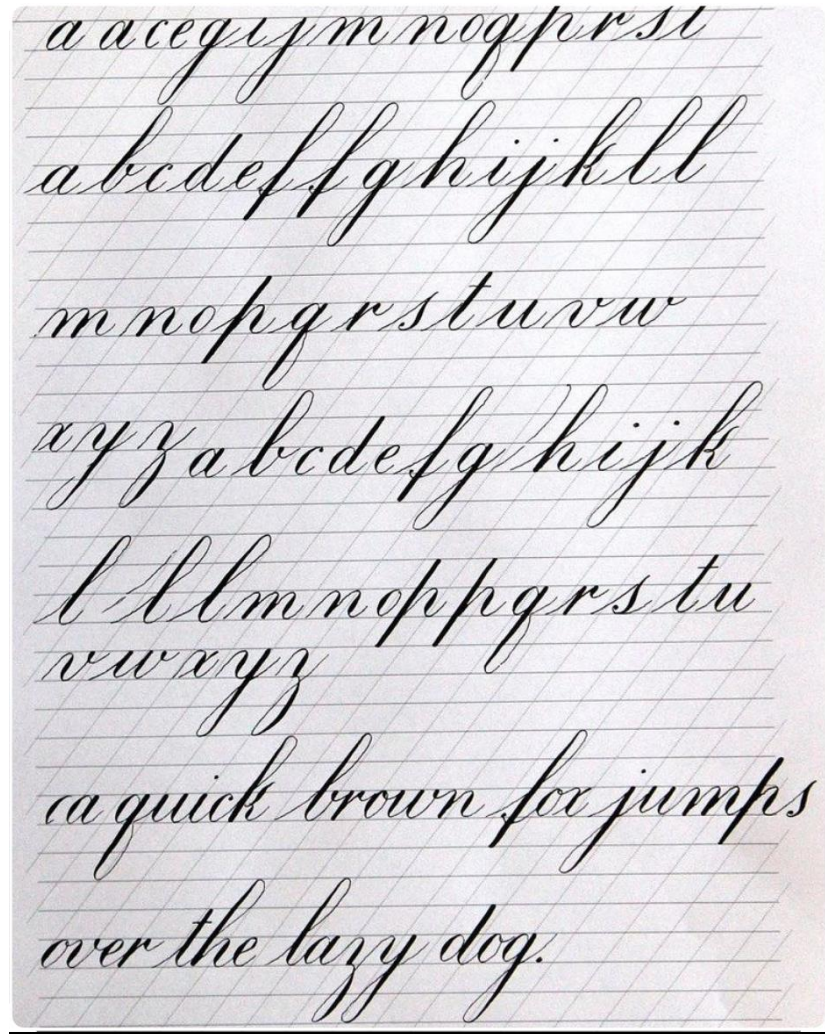
- The mention of **‘letters with franked / Postmarks from in distant lands’** evokes a delightful **global community of scholars** and this is elaborated – and maybe just slightly mocked:

**‘Signed with that distinctive flourish
Of elegant serifs in royal blue ink’.**

Surely the **height of sophistication** – or even blue black ink!

Picture source:

<https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/507710557989355222/>



Picture source: <https://design.tutsplus.com/articles/the-different-types-of-serif-fonts-with-serif-font-examples--cms-37673>



- The mood rises from the old scholar's memory:

'I recall the frisson of discovery

Of those crumbling but lucid

Illustrations on a doomed future

Peopled by machines and automatons

Whose veracity my distinguished

Colleagues would often dispute.'

- We can hear the **diction rising** here too, as the language expands into **Latinate mellifluousness**.
- But there is a **paradox**, because what they discover is a past which foretells a **doomed future of machines**. And, this is given a further twist – the veracity of this vision of a doomed future is called into doubt by colleagues – is this ironic, or is there a suggestion that **machine ages pass too?**

- But for the old scholar, the delights of his past scholarship cannot be invoked again:

‘...that

Singular pleasure in perusing

A set of papers delicate as parchment

With that one awry alphabet

On a typewriter’

- So here he is, I think, referring to **typescripts** – original writings but done on a typewriter – an individual machine, one is lead to believe – by the mention of its distinctive **‘awry alphabet’** – perhaps an ‘l’ or ‘t’ which sticks from years of being struck by the fast-moving fingers of a scholar or writer.

- The old scholar must concede that the typewriter is now **as extinct as the dinosaur:**

‘Who stamped forever

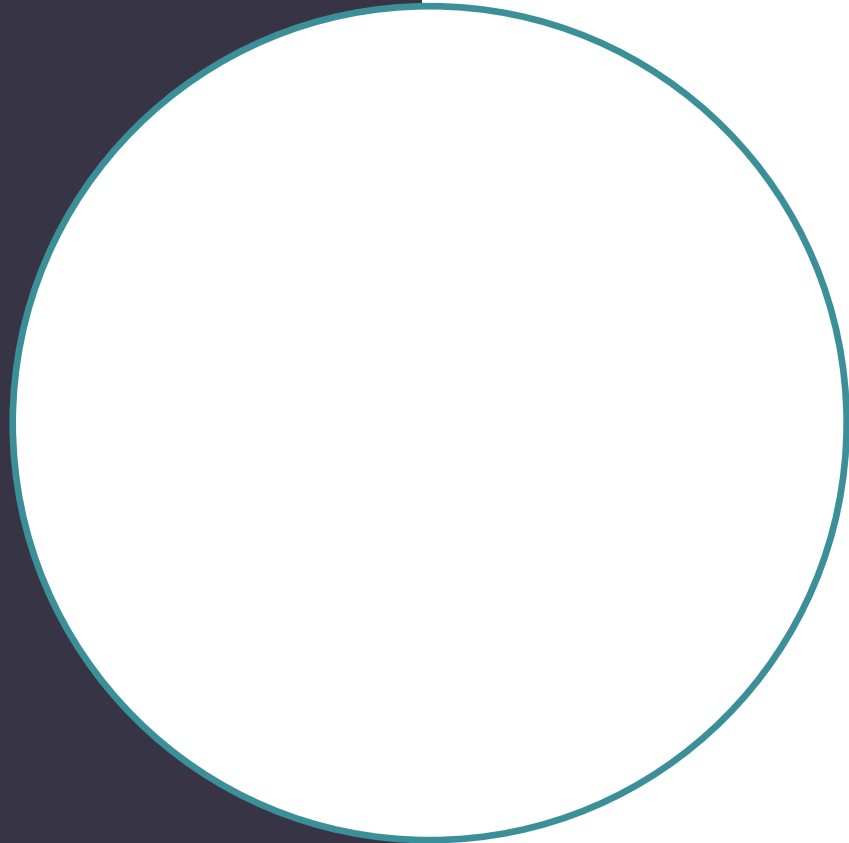
Its hallowed genesis, its undisputed

Provenance’

- That ‘stamped’ brings us back to the **exoticism of the letters**, just as letters lean forward into ‘alphabet’ – Shetty creates a kind of continuity which undercuts the ‘decline narrative’ with such ‘repetitions’.
- And what of that ‘hallowed genesis’ – does it mean that the dinosaur manifests its **divine origins** – created by a God or gods, or does that ‘hallowed’ carry an **ironic sting** – the dinosaur is now, after all, mostly trivialized as a cartoon figure?
- That ‘undisputed Provenance’ – a **sense of certainty about origins and habitation** – ‘it in its place and the place in it’, to misquote Heaney – that too has gone.

- In the long, concluding sentence, the old scholar ‘bows sadly’ to his young ‘charges’; **he has lost his own place**, his own provenance, but also, I think the poet is suggesting that **he feels for the young students** whose experience is so very threadbare compared to his own.
- In this world of instant gratification, knowledge must be consumed swiftly; **‘instant knowledge / Borrowed with a simple click’**.
- But as if in mimicry of that click, we snap to the next line which reveals that the knowledge is not won or earned or really cogitated upon, but rather, ‘from a universe / So ably charted and empirically / Established by my peers’.
- But then, we begin to apprehend the **superb swerve of the concluding thought**. The young borrow from knowledge rigorously and ably established by other old scholars – his peers.
- And those peers saw not just the past and the present, but also the future; predicting, in their **‘their prophetic wisdom’** how the old world would change. He and his peers, thus, knew, for certain, that modernity would win and, the paradox is, that **it is the old who are the prophets, young in their thought, reaching beyond what they understand is a world of mutability** – the pen, the typewriter, the dinosaur.





- Perhaps his ultimate sadness derives from his realization that **his young charges do not think in this profound way** and, are the poorer for it and also, perhaps, more exposed, more precarious.
- Ironically, then, it may be, to return to the opening gambit – **the students who are ‘in denial’**.
- An interesting **intergenerational checkmate?**

FORM

- There is **no rhyme scheme** and this is related to the decision to use the **long enjambed sentence** rather than end-stopped lines which could be tied together with rhyme.
- There is a **clear rhythm** in the poem which helps to moor it inside the long, loose and potentially formless poetic sentences:

My **pupils contend** I'm **in denial**

Of the **new-fangled** that **I harbour**

A **chip** on my **shoulder** – I **defer** to

That **subtle electronic**...

- You can hear and see that most of the lines have **four beats or metrical 'feet'** and that the stress pattern is a **mix of iambic** (weak stress followed by strong) **and dactylic** (strong stress followed by two weak stresses). But **the metre is not insistent**.

- We have many examples of quite **subtle assonance** (repetition of a vowel sound within a line) and **alliteration** (repetition of a consonant within a line).
 - **Fangled/harbour** – ‘a’ assonance, continued into the next line with ‘u’ assonance – **harbour/shoulder**.
 - **reiterate/serial** – ‘e’ assonance’, ‘r’ alliteration, creating a harsh and unpleasantly grating sound.
 - **Secondhand/Encyclicals** – ‘n’ alliteration with minor ‘s’ alliteration and ‘e’ assonance.
 - **Shift to cold diskettes** – ‘l’ assonance and ‘s’, ‘d’ and ‘t’ alliteration. You can hear the line harden as it goes along as if the speaker were spitting out this brittle, friable and artificial object.
 - Against this we have the warm ‘m’ alliteration of **‘memorably musty’**.
 - **Machines and automatons** – ‘s’ and ‘n’ alliteration.