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Contextualising Research

SUBVERTING THE SONNET: POEMS (2016-2020)

Contemporary mutations of the sonnet have been striking. Don Paterson and, on occasions, Geoffrey Hill, have written sonnets with a dramatically shortened line; Terrance Hayes in his celebrated sonnet sequence *American Sonnets for my Past and Future Assassin* has so dramatically lengthened the line the sonnet has assumed more of a landscape than a portrait form. The former decreased the number of words used in the space of fourteen lines to as little as eighty-four, while the latter increased the number to as many as two hundred. In terms of syllabics, Paterson's line sometimes contains as few syllables as two, Hayes's as many as nineteen. In Paterson's case, one word occasionally makes a single line.

The sonnet has been lauded for its endurance; now it should be recognised for its elasticity. In *Drysalter*, Michael Symmons Roberts added one line to the traditional form and wrote one hundred and fifty-two 'super-sonnets' of fifteen lines each. These major physiological changes in the corpus of the sonnet have in turn led to changes in expenditure. The twenty nine words that make up Paterson's poem 'Shutter' can be read in fifteen point-eight-four seconds; one sonnet from Peter Porter's sequence 'The Sanitized Sonnets,' slowed down by subtle punctuation and enjambment, can take almost a minute and a quarter to read. In Alice Oswald's 'Sea Sonnets,' perhaps, the expectation of sound has changed: the euphony is bound together by rhyme, half rhyme and assonantal connections between words that take their relationship to the breaking point. In the final section of Tracy K. Smith's poem 'The Greatest Personal Privation', the sonnet explodes into fragments of one to six syllables, thereby inventing, perhaps, the exploded sonnet.

What makes all of these poems remain within earshot of the original form is that each of them hinges upon an exact point of bidding for meaning and that a relationship is thereby maintained between proposition, argument and resolution.

I have a long relationship with the sonnet, and my ambition has always been deconstruction: take the little engine to pieces, then reconstruct it, possibly with some bits deliberately mislaid.

The metrical and stanzaic form of the traditional sonnet is incompatible with contemporary

linguistic tropes and subject matter. For this principal reason I have been working to extend and expand the sonnet: the form cannot be ignored or marginalised in the forward movement of one's poetics. The form intercedes; it stands in the way of all future development. The object, therefore, is not merely to master it, but to ensure that it can be adapted to one's own ends. I wanted to examine its expressive potential, to experiment with ways this could be increased, to loosen its restrictive laws further to see if its sounds and effects could be changed to increase expressive power. In my 2011 collection *The Storm House*, the second half of the book is devoted to a sequence of thirty-two sonnets that follow a subverted but nonetheless consistent narrative arc: the arc tells the story, but the narrative links are minimal. The individual poems concerned with the death of my brother are built of lunging movements of line-length, held together in each case by a pure-rhymed, half-rhymed or assonantal couplet that not only clinches the form but perhaps sustains the sense that the whole poem is rhymed, and provokes reappraisal of all that has been said before it. The apparent looseness of the line is drawn into the discipline of the final couplet:

I want to suck back the hissing along its jets
like the flame-spirits forced to withdraw the flames
and find you whole, sit you up, winch you
in your collapsed kilos by your armpits and swing
from left to right the mickle hams of your fists:
I want to wrestle you back into the world and lift your chin,
so very gently, off your chest, detach the dark
lying close against the balls of your eyes.
I want to put you in shoes, stand you up, persuade
the tiniest buttons through your button-holes
and, after the journey back, have you speak a few gruff words.
But look at the tongue—that giant glib muscle slumped
into speechlessness, less instrument than bung
and unable to tell us one damned thing.

In the sonnets I have written between 2016 and 2020, I have increased my demands on the form, and attempted the following transformations: the establishment of a conscious transatlantic euphony, the exploration of certain antiphonic effects between sonnets written as pairs and, perhaps above all, experimentation with the crucial positioning of the definitive inflection point in the poem's bid for meaning: the volta.

The lodestars of these poems are John Ashbery and Ted Hughes. While allowing gothic Hughesian iambs to drive the line, my sonnets also nod to Ashbery's apparent syntactical, if not wayward, looseness. The flexible line-length creates a sense of movement on both counts: the longest lines here are fifteen or sixteen syllables long, the shortest eight. This is an attempt to bully the sonnet rather than be bullied by it: the extreme restrictions can have a disfiguring effect on the diction. The pace—the speed at which each sonnet expends—is consciously varied throughout. I think these poems, therefore, have a certain paradoxical sound. They combine the vigorous immediacy and physicality of Hughes with the airy elusiveness of Ashbery.

Some of these sonnets are written in pairs: there is a responsive alternation between two voices actively engaging in discourse, and one is incomplete without the other. I am yet to see any other poet put the sonnet to this purpose. The method implicitly alludes to Marvell's 'A Dialogue Between the Body and Soul', though in that work the discourse took place within one poem and did not utilise space as part of the conversation. These poems take on antiphony enacted across spaces. The first raises questions that the second poem answers. The address to the drowned seaman is that of an anonymous voice, possibly the godhead the protagonist of William Golding's *Pincher Martin* has throughout a lifetime abjured; the reply comes directly from the drowned seaman himself. 'Ugly World to Empath' and 'Empath to the Punctured Kevlar Helmet' form an imagined conversation between a sheltering, introspective empath and the outer world. As choirs sing in antiphony, so these voices speak in harmony, but also in contradiction. The whole sonnet has become, by definition, one half dependent on another half.

Traditionally, the volta is the turn in the process of a train of thought or the moment in the argument of the poem when it makes its pitch for meaning: in Petrarchan or Italian sonnets it occurs between the octave and the sestet, and in Shakespearean or English before the final couplet. The effect of this is to offer the sonnet accountable phases, squeeze-points, sub conclusion and conclusion. I have wanted in these sonnets to mix it up, to change what is expected of a sonnet and to experiment with its engine room: to give the poem a constant sense of rejuvenating line by line.

In 'Address to the Drowned Seaman, in Answer to his Distress Flare at Rockall, Mid-Atlantic, 1944,' the volta is arguably to be found in the second and third line, by which time it has already been established that the seaman is dead. In 'The Drowned Seaman Replies', the volta is arguably spread over lines 9, 10 and 11: "Now I know/ a man needs anything more than rock as much/as Mary's fish a buckled velocipede." Shifting the volta, or perhaps making it more ambiguous, in both cases, is not only an experiment with sound—not merely a direct subversion of the predictable rhythms of the Petrarchan sonnet—but a shunting around of the elemental forces within the body of the sonnet itself to create different forms of energy. In 'Ugly World to Empath,' and its companion-piece 'Empath to the Punctured Kevlar Helmet', the volta appears in the eighth line, though its designation is intended to be ambiguous, as if to say: each phase of this argument aspires to be of equally importance as line after line tilts the sonnet towards meaning. In this sense, the volta occurs *throughout* the poem. In all of these poems, my principal aim was to ensure that a technical and substantive antagonism was at large in the poem, held in place by the apparent adherence to the form on the one hand, and an implicit refusal of it on the other.

The sonnets were drafted multiple times, anything between ten, twenty and a hundred drafts. Once the first draft had been written, each was left for a fortnight to gestate: I am much persuaded by the idea that a poem left to settle in its own graphemes and phonemes will enter the 'maturing' phase. My active method is based entirely on sound. The euphony of the

individual poem is preeminent. Each word, and each line, of these sonnets was interrogated for the ‘inevitability’ of its sound: that is to say, each word was closely inspected for its ‘acoustic density,’ its essential rightness and its exact location in the line. Each phoneme was assessed for its sound-level to ensure it was neither too harsh, nor too understated; neither too clangorous, nor too soft. Once tested, often competing with four or five rival words for the same spot, it was allowed to keep its place in the orchestration of notes that is a sonnet. The sound of each line was tested to ensure it continued to energise the whole poem, that each note heard every other note, each word heard each word. Each line-break and each punctuation symbol was magnified for precision.

All subsequent interrogations were based in sound. I recorded myself reading each poem and played the recording back to myself. In this way, I could hear—possibly for the first time—whether or not each word was earning its poetic keep. This process is intuitive but also rationally based upon acoustic effect. What followed was the final process of defamiliarization necessary to complete a poem: each sonnet was blown up to a typeface five or six times larger in an attempt to see through the diction into the mechanics of the language being used. On occasions, moreover, the actual typeface was changed in the attempt to act against inurement, the problem that arises when one’s own work becomes too familiar actually to be *seen* or *heard*.