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A. D. COUSINS AND PETER HOWARTH

Introduction

A lawyer invented the sonnet. Sometime in the mid 1230s, at the Sicilian court of Emperor Frederick II, Giacomo da Lentini created a lyric form that has now travelled a long way from its small, but cosmopolitan, place of origin. It has since been written in dozens of languages and dialects, on vellum, parchment, paper, screen and Valentine's card. It has circulated between lovers and would-be lovers, among coteries, as celebrity confession, religious meditation and appeal to the public conscience. It has been held up as poetry's epitome and poetry's enemy; it has been the language of lords and the reply for bondsmen, a foreign import and a cultural talisman, and has proved itself capable of joint ventures with everything from the novel to the haiku.[1] It has been fashionable, neglected, and fashionable again for reasons that would have been incomprehensible to the people who first made it fashionable. The sonnet has become the international and transcultural form it is today, in other words, not simply because it had the good fortune to hitch-hike round the world on the back of English imperial power a few hundred years later, but because that lawyer's invention was very good at being adapted, adopted, and talking back.

This capacity to flourish in dialogue and persuasion was endemic to the form from the very start. From its legal beginnings, the sonnet brought together music, desire and the arguing of a case, through the turn or *volta*, which allows the sonnet to state more than one point of view, change its mind or adapt an interlocutor's. Because da Lentini and his friends exchanged sonnets discussing the nature and experience of desire, it also brought together love and its public performance, making the sonnet a form at once expressive, imitative and performative. Moreover, by way of its early affinity with the *strambotto* it bears kinship to the epigram, and so unites the ideas of brevity and of saying much in little: of fashioning microcosms or miniature heterocosms. Sometime around the middle of the thirteenth century, a successor to da Lentini, named Guittone d'Arezzo, began to write sequences of sonnets. Thereafter the sonnet could either stand alone or be patterned into

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extended discourse. The main directions for the sonnet's development, that is to say, had been set within decades of its invention.

Its future success was not guaranteed, however, since every form depends on the historic and economic circumstances in which people want to use it. Unlike the ballad, the sonnet has done well from being a predominantly written form circulated among a globalizing cultural elite, whether Italian courtiers, English aristocrats or modern participants in higher education. It has always had aspirational connotations: hoping to woo a lover, to form inchoate feelings into something more resolved, to impress a courtly master, or to show the nation that your kind of people feel and think in just as sophisticated a way as the elite. For these reasons, the sonnet has had to bear the weight of tremendous cultural expectation or snobbery. But it also succeeded because it could encourage rejoinders. Its internal turns of thought involve anticipating and pre-empting a response – to oneself or by another – in a space whose smallness makes foreclosure inevitable. For this it has been much resented, but that 'fore-' is itself dramatic, and it invites a 'not so fast'.[2] By claiming closure so quickly, it opens the space for an alternative reply in a way that longer genres do not. The response may be a new sonnet dealing with the emotions suppressed by foreclosure, or it may be the series of surprises that changing circumstances bring to the *Rime sparse* of the sonnet sequence. Or it may come in the sonnet's later adoption by poets sensing an analogy between the way it conspicuously cuts and selects so much and their own foreclosed and artificially presented lives, as women, homosexuals or colonial subjects. The sonnet has survived so long and across so many different cultures and audiences because its internal checks and imbalances provide ready encouragement for anyone wanting to remake it in a manner more suitable to themselves.

For the same reason, it has survived tremendous changes of poetic culture – from mimetic to expressive, from coterie to public, from the authoritative to the informal – by provoking poets to adjust it precisely where it needles the priorities of an age. So the English form adopts the couplet when the display of individual wit as well as longing becomes a necessity for courtly advancement. The Romantics fret at the sonnet's shortness, and then write sonnets that override a set turn to shuttle unendingly between past and present or subject and object instead. The modernists hate the sonnet's decorum and invent the free-verse, unrhymed or natural-speech sonnet; more contemporary poets despair of the idea of form as destiny, and produce poems that revel in the chances created by bouncing apparently indifferent sentences off the sonnet's walls. Just as an individual sonnet may look finished, but is not, so the sonnet has many times looked finished as a genre, but has not been.

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Critical responses to the sonnet have had their own lines of development. Down the centuries, commentary has been especially preoccupied with the sonnet's formal constraints and with the scope of its subject matter. Among the most vigorous writers on those concerns have been, as is hardly surprising, writers of sonnets about sonnets. In the mid eighteenth century, Anna Seward combatively praised the sonnet for its demanding design. She imagined Apollo, weary of anyone who can put 'trite ideas' in 'loose verse' calling himself a poet, thereupon creating 'The rigorous sonnet; to be framed alone / By duteous bards, or by just taste admired' ('On the Structure of the Sonnet', 2–3, 7–8). To master the sonnet's formal constraints is to be a true poet; to appreciate them is to be a true critic. Seward's better-known contemporary, William Wordsworth, wrote of finding artistic liberation in the sonnet's confines, of finding its small and private space a free zone of creativity ('Nuns fret not at their Convent's narrow room', 8–14). Elsewhere, unfolding an honour roll of famous sonneteers, he warned against undervaluing the sonnet because of its compactness, since the history of the form shows that it can serve valuable private ends, or even great social purposes ('Scorn not the sonnet; Critic, you have frowned'). And with that address to the critic, rather than the lady or the public, Wordsworth raises the self-consciousness about the form to a new level. Since in Romantic poetics imitating a model is no longer a good in itself, but only desirable insofar as it aids the poet's public self-expression, choosing a sonnet is a self-conscious restriction of other possibilities and invites technical criticism of the means. In the light of the free-verse revolution Wordsworth himself helped foster, every modern sonnet becomes partly a sonnet about sonnets, because its very use calls attention to the poet's explicit procedural choices, an effect amplified by the poets from non-white and non-English backgrounds making a statement about just what their language can do to the sonnet too.

There has also long been an anxiety about the sonnet's appropriate content. In 1610, George Herbert wrote a sonnet for his mother in which, however, he addresses God and asks: 'Doth poetry / Wear Venus' livery, only serve her turn? / Why are not sonnets made of thee, and lays / Upon thine altar burnt?' ('To His Mother', 3–6). The scope of the sonnet's subject matter, Herbert suggests, should be much larger than the carnally desirous self. About a decade later, Michael Drayton also complained about Poetry wearing the livery of Venus, but his complaint introduces an ironic sequence of love sonnets. Fashionably defining himself against use of the sonnet as a means for expressing unfulfilled sexual desire, he announces: 'Love from mine eye a tear shall never wring, / Nor in *Ah me's* my whining sonnets dressed' ('To the Reader of These Sonnets', 6–7, prefacing *Idea*). From Milton to Wordsworth to Owen to Berrigan, sonnet writers have had to fight the

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assumption that the sonnet is a genre with one proper subject and aim, like tragedy or elegy. But the sonnet's association with sexual desire is so strong that using the form often lends a passionate edge to non-sexual relations, a connotation that the best poets turn to their advantage. By writing a sonnet, Keats longs to be worthy of Homer's realms of gold with a yearning that does not pretend to be disinterested, because Keats's class makes that impossible for him. Claude McKay's rebellion against the 'America' that despises him for his race equally suggests how much she is the cruel mistress who can be fought but never escaped, as his later cat-and-mouse relation with the FBI perhaps shows.[3] Now that the sonnet is one of the few lyric forms still widely recognized, the weight of critical self-reflexiveness has increased to the degree that some see it as a curse on self-expression. Auden once warned that 'conventional forms like the sonnet are so associated with a particular tradition of thoughts and attitudes that the immature writer can do little with them'.[4] But that, as Auden knew, was as much a provocation as a warning, and the form's surprising reappearance among today's most experimental poets suggests how well the sonnet suits the avant-garde principle that art be an intervention in the discourse about art, rather than simply lyric self-expression. Indeed, 780 years of sonnets make it inevitable that writing a new one always involves some blocking, channelling and realignment of public and market expectation, rather than the autonomous stay against social pressure its modernist-traditionalist defenders have cultivated.

Today the sonnet is probably the most widely read, taught, practised and written-about of lyric forms. The aim of this book is in no small part to show how that happened and, by taking the long view, to ask why the sonnet continues to fascinate contemporary poets. Although it is the first book for many years to offer a survey of the sonnet from its inception to the present, it does not seek to offer an all-encompassing history of the sonnet's globalization or of its ups and downs in status, although these enter into discussions of particular poets. Nor is it concerned with discussing every great writer who wrote sonnets, since many magnificent poets are not at their best in the form. Rather, it focuses on inventive and landmark uses of the sonnet, and their interactions between tradition and experimentation, social and poetic form, vision and revision, emphasizing variation in the designs and uses of the sonnet just as much as continuity. Throughout, the contributors focus simultaneously on how a formal pattern shapes and suggests desires, and how the poems' historical situation recognizes and misrecognizes them. In this historicized attention to a form, they look for the ways in which the sonnet's internal music and its cultural resonance meet, blend or clash, including the alterations that the sonnet's transmission by way of manuscript, print and electronic media make to its meaning. Those are

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critical questions about how the academy should read poetry, of course, but they are also what every poet has to face when actually writing a sonnet: not just 'How can I accomplish this in fourteen lines?', but 'What will this form make my poetry become?' and 'What will other people find in it?'. With our poets' discussion, then, this is a companion both to reading and to making sonnets: a guide to appreciating past and current practices of the sonnet as a literary form, and also, we hope, a springboard for writing more of them.

Notes

1 Vikram Seth, *The Golden Gate* (New York: Vintage, 1991); *Renga: A Chain of Poems*, trans. Charles Tomlinson (London: Penguin, 1979).
2 Michael R. G. Spiller, *The Development of the Sonnet: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 11.
3 James R. Keller, '"A Chafing Savage, Down the Decent Street": The Politics of Compromise in Claude McKay's Protest Sonnets', *African American Review* 28:3 (1994), 447–56; William J. Maxwell, 'F. B. Eyes: The Bureau Reads Claude McKay', in Bill V. Mullen and James Smethurst, eds., *Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism, and Twentieth-Century Literature of the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), pp. 39–65.
4 W. H. Auden, *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose*, ed. Edward Mendelson, 3 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), Vol. II: *1939–1948*, p. 48.

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I

PAUL MULDOON, MEG TYLER AND JEFF HILSON,
EDITED BY PETER HOWARTH

Contemporary poets and the sonnet: a trialogue

This conversation was initiated by poets' individual answers to the editor's questions, and then developed as they responded to each other's replies.

Auden once said that the sonnet was a trap for new writers because it had too much history to it. How do you help aspiring sonnet writers manage the reverberating meanings and connotations of the form?

MT: Part of the pleasure of writing (and teaching) sonnets is that you have an instant sense of community. The sonnet relieves us of our loneliness; as soon as you settle into its parameters, the conversation begins. As Christopher Ricks says, 'the one thing allusion provides and calls upon is company (the society of dead poets being a living resource in its company)'.[1] I think about Heaney's 'Out of Shot' (from *District and Circle*), where he quietly calls upon several fellow poets (Petrarch for the rhyme scheme, Yeats for content). By using the words 'lost' and 'loosed' repeatedly, Heaney echoes the prophetic Yeats, 'Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed' from 'The Second Coming', which is not a sonnet but hints at the dimensions of one as the first stanza is eight lines long and the second is fourteen lines; this poem is definitely a sounding-board or springboard for Heaney's sonnet (of a donkey, he writes, 'Loosed from a cart that had loosed five mortar shells / … / Lost to its owner, lost for its sunlit hills.'). Note how Heaney positions his rhyming partners at line's beginning and middle, not line's end.

Some ambitious young writers compose sonnets in order to act out against the tradition – I think of the younger Heaney, who when he sat down to compose the Glanmore Sonnets, composed them as a sequence that in essence talked back to the English sonnet. He purposefully used words like 'cuckoos' and 'corncrakes' to make them clash with the Latinate vocabulary.

I think recent sonnets need to revisit the great ones of the past – to learn from them. Enough of what Iris Murdoch calls 'the fat relentless ego'.[2] Does

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the first line of any recent sonnet quicken the heart and mind like Wyatt's 'Whoso list to hunt, I know where is a hind'?

Another way the aspiring writer can combat a worry about being trapped in a closed form is to take the advice of T. S. Eliot, who reminds us that 'a poet cannot help being influenced, therefore he should subject himself to as many influences as possible, in order to escape from any one influence'.[3]

JH: I would from the start want to distinguish two different kinds of history in sonnet form. One is the history of the form's development, which requires a painstaking account of its transformations over time. The other is the emergence of a sonnet canon, the 'construction' (by practitioners, literary historians and the editors of sonnet anthologies) of a received history of the form. In a way the problem with the sonnet is that there's not been *enough* history. One recent sonnet anthology claims to tell 'the full story' of the form, an impossibly totalizing assertion that on inspection, unsurprisingly, turns out to be wildly false. But it's a publication by a major press that will be bought (in both senses of the word) by an unsuspecting public. The history of the form that we've acquired often feels more like heritage than history – a neatly packaged (as well as sanitized and sentimentalized) version of the history of the form, which avoids many of the more unorthodox and challenging paths that poets have taken it down, especially when it comes to the twentieth century.

As a teacher I think the only thing to do with writers approaching the sonnet for the first time is to be honest with them about the historical record. Sure, show them Thomas Wyatt, show them Shakespeare, show them Milton and Wordsworth, show them Robert Lowell and Seamus Heaney, but also show them Edwin Denby and Ted Berrigan, Bernadette Mayer and Alice Notley, Tim Atkins and Sophie Robinson. I speak here as someone who has recently assembled an anthology of 'linguistically innovative' sonnets by poets most of whom have been disregarded by the available anthologies either through lack of knowledge of alternatives, or, more worryingly, for ideological reasons. The story of the sonnet *has* to be as inclusive as possible if new writers are going to write sonnets. They have to be made aware of how poets of all schools have extended the meanings and connotations of the form. Surely knowing the history of the form also means not getting trapped. Traps only work if you don't know the terrain.

I worry about the notion of 'aspiring' sonnet writers, as if the sonnet were a kind of 'ultimate' form that all poets should aim to write, which seems to me the wrong reason for writing them. In this case, the sonnet becomes little more than a trophy. I do think that too many poets write sonnets merely to show how clever they are in doing something 'new' with

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aspects of the form – with the traditional turn or *volta*, or with the couplet for instance. The form's connotative aspects then become little more than commodified parts, endlessly updatable or exchangeable, like the parts of a sewing machine or a car. Ezra Pound's injunction to 'make it new' can feed easily into more pernicious modes of production.[4]

MT: So much of the history of the sonnet remains untapped. In the early Sicilian sonnets rhyme was not used – repeated words were; some contemporary writers have consciously seized upon this old practice as a strategy but unfortunately very few. Frank Bidart is one poet who recognizes the form's earliest impulses. His fourteen-line poem, 'Song', relies upon repeated words and phrasing, the meaning of which changes with each utterance. (In his early writing life, Bidart worked closely with Lowell as he revised hundreds of sonnets. When turning to the form as a poet himself, he perhaps deliberately did not want to write the American sonnet; reaching further back in the past gave him a cleaner energy source.)

JH: One of the things a sequence should do is lay down various lexical patterns including the repetition of words. Repetition of this kind is even more imperative in open-form procedure, where closed-form staples of repetition – most obviously metre and rhyme – are absent (though of course it's also present in closed-form sequences). Lexical repetition becomes a vital structuring device. Ted Berrigan's *Sonnets* is a key work in this respect as he takes repetition a stage further by recycling his own words, phrases and even whole lines.

Are the processes of writing a sonnet different from writing other forms? Can you give us an idea of the mental dialogue between your imaginative decisions and the direction it seems to want to push them in?

MT: The shapes come later for me. I usually end up writing something that has 'sonnet thought', a shift in direction, and the lines may be amenable to some re-shaping. I do not start out with a particular form in mind, but I do believe I am influenced (mostly subconsciously) by whatever it is I have been reading a lot of at the time.

Form can be a straitjacket. I am reminded of the sonnet-writing periods of some poets, like Robert Lowell, who wrote little else between 1967 and 1972; maybe doing it over and over means it gets a little easier: like remembering a dream.

This question makes me ask another one. Why do poets of stature turn to it (or not) at a certain age? American poets following in the wake of Lowell have strained similarly against and toward the sonnet. For example, Bidart

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has written only six fourteen-line poems, and yet each one consciously reckons with the sonnet tradition. His 'You Cannot Rest', a fourteen-line poem with a white space in between each couplet, turns in part on its relationship to Elizabeth Bishop's 'North Haven', the elegy (not a sonnet) for Robert Lowell (which ends, 'Sad friend, you cannot change'). 'You Cannot Rest', while it flamboyantly defies the traditional shape of the sonnet, adheres to its emotional proportions, offering shifts in thinking and a concluding couplet that reflects upon the whole. The sonnet is the ground against which the figure of Bidart's fourteen-line poems should be seen.

For me, the acoustics of the sonnet provide the most intriguing challenge. In such a small echo chamber, the correspondence between sounds in modern sonnets need not be as blatant as in, say, Renaissance sonnets (Sidney's 'might' and 'right'). While the ballad (for example 'Lord Randal') relies on repeated phrasing as a cohesive device (the story is erratic in nature, full of lacunae), the repetition is not all that you end up hearing or remembering. But if you repeat the same phrase over and over again in the smaller confines of the sonnet – I think of Frost's 'Acquainted with the Night' – it becomes not only the presiding sound but also the prevailing meaning of the poem. The phrase above all else stays with you.

I think of this as I work on sonnets here in my study while my infant son is crawling around the small confines of the room. Although day after day he accompanies me as I write, he never repeats the same pattern of movement exactly, and the sounds he makes, although similar, are not exactly the same either. But there is comfort, if not joy, I suspect, in knowing that the dimensions are familiar.

JH: Up until now, I have tended not to write using traditional closed forms such as haiku or villanelle; or rigid stanza forms such as the quatrain, the favoured stanza of such a lot of English poetry. I have tended to use forms that allow for more open-form procedures, forms that allow for aleatory development, discovering themselves as they go on. However, I am currently nearing the end of a sonnet sequence called 'In the Assarts', and in a way the sonnet seemed an inevitable next step. I was interested to see what happened when I tried working with a form that has, historically, acquired a self-imposed limit while using open-form procedures.

There is a significant body of writers who think of the sonnet form as something sacrosanct, a form that needs protecting against barbarians who are out to do it damage. But its properties have become habitual and familiar, actively preventing us from seeing the form clearly. What is needed is a defamiliarization of the form to make us see its potentialities anew. I find that the most useful approach to writing sonnets is to forget about the

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accumulated connotations in terms of both form and content. This might sound very dubious but I have found that because the conventions are so well known, overdetermined even, they feed unconsciously into the poems I have written, and often in unexpected and exhilarating ways. So I might find that in the middle of the poem a rhyming couplet will appear. It doesn't have to come at the end. Or I'll find myself using a *volta* where it's not supposed to be. However, rather than try to move it I'll leave it where it is. I'm entirely happy with these kinds of accidents (and I'd distinguish these from the 'showiness' I mentioned earlier). It's not unlike that old Godard quote where he says that his films do have beginnings, middles and endings but not necessarily in that order. It's the poet's responsibility to be irresponsible toward form. That's another way of ensuring that you don't become trapped by it.

PM: I love the observation of W. H. Auden that 'those who confine themselves to free verse because they imagine that strict forms must of necessity lead to dishonesty do not understand the nature of art, how little the conscious artist can do and what large and mysterious beauties are the gift of language, tradition, and pure accident'.[5] It's central to my own sense of things that the conscious artist is ill-equipped to meet a reality that is quite indifferent to her or his being conscious. All great art (like all great scientific revelations) is about the purely accidental, the intersection of the individual unconscious with what used to be called the collective unconscious. The very idea that one might be in the business of writing a sonnet at all should itself be accidental. One should realize only when one is part way into it (at line 8, maybe?) that a sonnet is indeed the received pattern into which the poem is falling. Some writers will be more predisposed than others to the capacities of the sonnet, particularly those who are familiar with the history of what's come into the world in that form. It's a form, finally, that is predisposed to us and, frankly, to the spectacular limitations of our consciousness. The sonnet, like most of us, can just about deal with one to two thoughts at a time. We have thought 1. In addition to thought 1 we have thought 2, or by contrast, we have thought 2. It's precisely because of what might be construed as its dullness that the sonnet has managed to be so durable.

MT: Lyric poetry implicitly wants us to forget that it is written – if it works right we do not wake up while sleep-walking. And yet, our endurance or our attention cannot be put to too great a test. In a long poem, for example, would we be able to attend closely to what Eliot calls the 'ethereal music' of sounds other than end-rhymes?[6]

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