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## The modern sonnet

If the modernists had got their way, this book would have ended right here. To its late Victorian and Georgian enthusiasts, the sonnet epitomized compact lyric perfection, its critical high-water mark probably being Crosland's assertion in *The English Sonnet* (1917) that 'when great poetry is being produced, great sonnets are being produced'.<sup>1</sup> But to the modernists, the sonnet represented the worst of the previous generation; its formal pattern was complicit with production-line thinking, and its polish with the genteel unreality in which an industrialized culture had wished to preserve its art. 'The sonnet is the *devil*', snarled Pound, because it was the modern West's first mass-produced, 'habitual' form, the lyric blueprint for 'anything not needing a new tune perforce for every new poem'.<sup>2</sup> 'Perish all sonnets!', wrote Wallace Stevens to his fiancée, after reading Stedman's *Victorian Anthology*. 'Sonnets have their place ... but they can also be found tremendously out of place: in real life where things are quick, unaccountable, responsive.'<sup>3</sup> Though Eliot's 'Reflections on *Vers Libre*' (1917) reassured traditionalists that 'formal rhymed verse will certainly not lose its place' with the coming of free verse, he added darkly, 'as for the sonnet I am not so sure'.<sup>4</sup> And for the surrealists, the sonnet was the refuge of poets who could no longer feel poetry's unconscious, electric charge, as Breton complained in 1933:

All these 'sonnets' that still get written, this senile horror of spontaneity, all this rationalistic refinement, these stiff-lipped supervisors, all this incapacity for love, leave me convinced that escape is impossible from this ancient house of correction ... Correct, correct yourself, be corrected, polish, tell off, find fault, never plunge blindly into the subjective treasury purely for the temptation to fling here and there on the sand a handful of frothy seaweed and emeralds.<sup>5</sup>

It isn't clear how the sonnet can be both 'senile' and 'rationalistic', but this tirade sums up how the sonnet form had, in a short space of time, become everything poetry wasn't. Although Mallarmé's sonnet 'Salut' may have

given Breton his 'froth' metaphor for poetry, the sonnet's closed order now signified every *ancien régime*, the discipline of the prison and the calculations of economics. Its 'correct' form was the superego's idea of poetry in which relentless criticism in the name of order stifled the unconscious's creative, unpredictable and irresponsibly plentiful power. Or as Williams remarked most bluntly of all, 'to me the sonnet form is thoroughly banal because it is a word in itself whose meaning is definitely fascistic'.<sup>6</sup>

Far from withering away, of course, the sonnet flourished in the twentieth century, but not because its best poets carried on regardless. The sonnet became more innovative in form and more diverse in content than in any previous age because of the climate that its modernist opponents created, and the new relationship their anti-sonnet forms negotiated between poetry and the social order. And the fact that Eliot, Stevens and even Williams ended up returning to sonnets of sorts suggests their discomfort was less with the form itself than with what it had come to stand for, the peculiar compact sealed by the sonnet's *fin de siècle* admirers between cultural elevation and formal rigidification. For despite the remarkable inventiveness of the nineteenth-century sonnet in both sequence and style, much late-nineteenth-century criticism still held that the true sonnet must be decasyllabic, must clearly divide octave from sestet with certain permissible rhyme variations, could express only a single thought and should chart the unfolding stages of that thought exactly according to the divisions of quatrain and tercet. For some, this was not enough: Crosland supplies twenty-one 'fixed, established, stable and unassailable' prohibitions, including rhymes ending in -ly, couplets, prosaism, cant, Americanism and too many lines beginning with 'And'.<sup>7</sup> Ironically, these formal prescriptions slashed through the sonnet canon as radically as the modernists ever would. Tomlinson's *The Sonnet* (1874) and Pattison's introduction to *The Sonnets of John Milton* (1883) doubt whether Wordsworth and Shakespeare's sonnets are sonnets at all. But the absurdity of dismissing so many actual sonnets to find a Platonic ideal is testimony to the extreme cultural pressure that the idea of a single, correct form represented. It had become the microcosm of the civilizing work culture was supposed to perform on the grandest scale, showing how the most intimate feelings of the modern buffered, detached and expressive self really could be disciplined into a freely chosen self-limitation. 'Where law is arbitrary', argued Pattison, 'the only authority that can bind is the consent of those who live under it', so Milton's sonnets become 'not deference to authority' but a training in self-discipline for author and reader.<sup>8</sup> Its difficulty made it token of cultural aspiration, while what de Vere called its 'bracing discipline' also appealed to the post-Evangelical, imperial ideology of masculine power achieved through voluntary self-restraint. As Quiller-Couch claimed: 'The



Sonnet is no arbitrary or haphazard invention ... every rule has its reason; and ... (in a phrase which I may be allowed to repeat) it is the men big enough to break the rules who accept and observe them most cheerfully.<sup>9</sup> The sonnets of the war poets in general, and the double sonnet of Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est' in particular, would gain terrible plangency from their suspicion that the codes of nobility and 'the highest' that their form connotes are complicit with the heroic culture whose ugly result they are recording.

Modernism's demand for an organic, intimate relation between the poet's form and her content, on the other hand, anticipated the wider cultural shift later in the twentieth century from a social good based on respectability, discipline and restraint to a social good impossible without the expressive and authentic. Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry* who had done so much to publicize the new verse forms, thought 'the free verse movement has been essentially a plea for a personal rhythm, for the poet's independence in working out his most expressive form and using it without prejudice'.<sup>10</sup> Though Eliot and Pound feared such independence in the mass, their attempts to find a new tradition of organic social order reappraise the poetry of the past according to the expressive standards that the new poetry had made its *raison d'être*: 'To create a form is not merely to invent a shape, a rhyme or rhythm. It is also the realization of the whole appropriate content of this rhyme or rhythm. The sonnet of Shakespeare is not merely such and such a pattern, but a precise way of thinking and feeling.'<sup>11</sup> Judging the sonnet by the standards of free verse means there is no simple way to turn the clock back by using an old form. Shakespeare's sonnet, Eliot believed, belonged to a vanished social order that today's poet cannot share: 'Only in a closely-knit and homogeneous society, where many men are at work on the same problems, such a society as those which produced the Greek chorus, the Elizabethan lyric, and the Troubadour *canzone*, will the development of such forms ever be carried to perfection.'<sup>12</sup>

Eliot was half right. For a wider culture made suspicious of established authority and self-sacrifice by the First World War, where informal directness was becoming the mark of honesty and public spiritedness, the formal pattern of the sonnet really would never sound the same again. But it had not sounded the same since Baudelaire wrote sonnets about modern Paris, sonnets whose ironic poise Eliot himself had thoroughly absorbed. Eliot's scepticism about the possibility of the modern sonnet, in fact, depends on believing that poetry should epitomize the social relations of its society and its age, as if there were one society and one age to be expressed. But poetic forms may inherit new significances as they move through cultures; they

may also mediate between societies or within cultures, and older forms may acquire new possibilities by the arrival of new ones. As the introduction of television gave radio a new role, rather than eradicating it, the new poetics that Eliot did so much to inculcate were, in fact, instrumental in reviving the sonnet they despised.

### The old-fashioned sonnet

When free and fragmented verse became the accepted face of 'the modern', the sonnet acquired a new aura of antiquity, the worn-out remnant of an older society that could never now be naturally the form of the present. This is how it appears in *The Waste Land*, where the jerky quatrains of the empty-hearted sex in 'Trams and dusty trees' become a metrically aborted sestet with the postcard title 'On Margate Sands'. Although the writer claims 'I can connect / Nothing with nothing', the fragmented lines still preserve the rhyme scheme of the Petrarchan sestet, as if the ghostly frame of the sonnet is the remnant of a now lost habit of mind, which ironically haunts the seduction in the canoe and the nervous breakdown that follows. But this sense of mismatch between a worn-out form and modern content was useful for poets writing about feelings that really were being engulfed by the past. Edna St Vincent Millay's more successful sonnets of bohemian bed-hopping in Greenwich Village, for instance, sound modern by allowing the adored but silent woman of so many male sonnets to be politely ruthless with her suitor now:

I shall forget you presently, my dear,  
So make the most of this, your little day,  
Your little month, your little half a year,  
Ere I forget, or die, or move away,  
And we are done forever; by and by  
I shall forget you, as I said, but now,  
If you entreat me with your loveliest lie  
I will protest you with my favourite vow.<sup>13</sup>

The 'as I said' is a nice touch, as if her attention were so fleeting that it has drifted off during the writing of the poem. But that 'favourite' vow is not merely a nasty way of telling a lover he or she is one of many, or more subtle kind of seduction, drawing from Shakespeare's Sonnet 138, to the effect that 'I am telling you I will lie to you because I want you not to believe me'. Millay's even pace, unruffled diction and perfectly metrical closures are so out of kilter with her free-love ethos of being 'faithless' to any particular person 'save to love's self alone' (Sonnet 3) that they suggest how endless novelty has become just as predictable as any vow of fidelity. The well-worn



form is essential to her sonnets' cool, melancholy and self-protective air of knowing every move of the affair well in advance.

By running the sonnet form against a brutal present, on the other hand, the war poets could draw attention to the distance between the high ideals represented by Rupert Brooke's infamous sonnet 'The Soldier' and the mess they were actually in. In Sassoon's 'Dreamers', the soldiers are supposed to long for 'some flaming, fatal climax', but in the sestet they actually dream of 'things they did with balls and bats ... and going to the office by the train'. 'Trench-Duty' uses a sonnet of mostly heroic couplets to express the panicky, unheroic thoughts of a real officer struggling awake to find one of his men might have killed himself. As well as ironizing noble ideals, the sonnet could also tacitly signify an erotic devotion to the men; as Sassoon's sonnet 'Banishment' claims, 'love drove me to rebel'. Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' is a sonnet, because the actual anthem is being sung by the 'wailing shells'. Pounded into the mud, the soldiers' only memorial among the living will be the looks and unspoken emotions of boys and girls back home. By using the sonnet form, however, Owen quietly aligns his own protesting feelings with these quiet, longing looks that the nation prefers not to recognize. Ivor Gurney's 'Strange Hells' is also about emotions for which no public form is available, and it buckles the metrical and argumentative patterns of the sonnet to say so. In an unusual 5.5.4 pattern, the first stanza slides between grammatical subjects and sentence topics as it is drawn into this inner hell:

There are strange hells within the minds war made  
Not so often, not so humiliatingly afraid  
As one would have expected – the racket and fear guns made  
One hell the Gloucester soldiers they quite put out:  
Their first bombardment, when in combined black shout

Of fury, guns aligned, they ducked lower their heads

We can't tell whether the 'they' in the fourth line are the guns or the soldiers, and the confusion is exactly the mental experience of saturation bombardment the poem is talking about, the memory running over stanza boundaries and metrical restraints alike. This uncontainable hell persists for all ex-soldiers, whatever their civilian lives:

Some civic routine one never learns.

The heart burns – but has to keep out of face how heart burns.

Twisting the romantic cliché, the 'heart burns' because it is scorched, not because it is in love – and the penumbra around 'heartburn' suggests a stomach sick with fear, and the emotions of 'jealous enmity' (*OED*) toward that civic routine.



### The discovered sonnet

As Gurney's example suggests, though, modern sonnet writers were not limited to ironizing an old-fashioned form with unexpectedly modern content. They also made the form itself far more flexible in rhyme, rhythm, diction and spacing, and they were freed to do this because of modernism's attack on the idea of 'correct' form itself. The *moral* shock of open forms was that they claimed the same intensity of feeling and self-chosen law as the sonnet, without having any prior ideal to live up to. But in making their forms rather than being made by them, modernist poetics also gave those writing sonnets in the wreckage of that idealistic tradition the chance to save the form from the twentieth century's gut reaction against overt authority, and all the hierarchies of ideal-over-real, mind-over-body or government-over-governed that set form now connoted. Rather than being an *a-priori* list of requirements to which the poet's skill must bend, the modern sonnet became a genre, a set of expectations that the poet might conform to, rebel against or simply sidle along with for as long as necessary. To survive in an anti-authoritarian age, the sonnet had to incorporate a sense of process and the possibility of being otherwise into its accomplishment, rather than already knowing the solution from the start. Robert Frost's remark that 'the sonnet is the strictest form I have behaved in, and that mainly by pretending it wasn't a sonnet' sums up this turn, by making the genteel cultural discipline of his upbringing into school rules that the adult knows not to be all that serious, and that the poet realizes he mustn't think about in order to avoid frightening off his creativity.<sup>14</sup>

In his early poem 'Mowing', for instance, Frost discarded the quatrain-tercet pattern and its rhymes for a fourteen-line meditation on the way poetry and mowing are both kinds of self-distraction. Although this is a poem about 'labor', there is an odd passivity to the mower; it is the scythe's 'earnest love' that 'laid the swale in rows', rather than his hard work, and it is the abstract 'labor' that dreams of facts, not the labourer. The rhythm and whispering of mowing are self-sustaining, leaving 'the hay to make' and the mower's mind to listen only in its wake. That sense of belated creativity is also present in the unpredictable rhymes, in which every line will turn out to have a partner – and 'Mowing' to be a more-or-less sonnet – only after it's been finished; nothing in the form predestines it to turn out that way. Despite the hard work that goes into making both of them, then, the poem suggests hay and poems are both things that make themselves as well as being made: the poem's 'most precious quality will remain its having run itself and carried away the poet with it', thought Frost, for it remains fresh only by having 'a meaning that once unfolded by surprise as it went'.<sup>15</sup>

Writers who have the end in mind at the beginning 'have it all fixed up to set like a trap to close with', but 'it should not be that way at all', for even the intricacies of a sonnet must be discovered en route. In 'The Constant Symbol', Frost imagines Shakespeare writing the first line of Sonnet 29 and wondering what should come next:

He may proceed in blank verse. Two lines more, however, and he has let himself in for rhyme, three more and he has set himself a stanza. Up to this point his discipline has been the self-discipline whereof it is written in so great praise. The harsher discipline from without is now well begun. He who knows not both knows neither. His worldly commitments are now three or four deep.<sup>16</sup>

Discovering yourself to be writing a sonnet is also discovering what people will expect of you for writing it: form becomes an extended negotiation between self and society that, even for Shakespeare, was tricky:

As a matter of fact, he gets through in twelve lines and doesn't quite know what to do with the last two.

Things like that and worse are the reason the sonnet is so suspect a form and has driven so many to free verse and even to the novel. Many a quatrain is salvaged from a sonnet that went agley.

This sense of the sonnet's necessary precariousness is perhaps why so few of Frost's sonnets repeat their rhyme schemes, and it's essential to 'Acquainted with the Night', which begins untraditionally in *terza rima* stanzas. Wandering the lonely streets in the rain, Frost's speaker is mortified by the city's failure to give his misery any meaning: the cry of another was not meant 'to call me back or say good-bye', and the town clocks 'proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right'. But then the *terza rima* – Dante's form for a voyage into the eternal because it endlessly generates the next stanza from its middle line – simply stops, and the poem becomes a sonnet by bathetically returning to its first line. Its achieved form is the result of not being able to go anywhere else, in other words, rather like the speaker himself. And the collapse from an epic to a sonnet also suggests how much its grandiose melancholy may have been all along covertly in love with failure, as the coy word 'acquainted' is so often a polite cover-up for a real passion. 'Design' also plays games with form and intention. At first, it seems like an hysterical reaction to a natural coincidence of coming on a white spider eating a white moth on a flower that isn't normally white. Frost was no purveyor of country lore, though, and the final couplet sends the poem swerving away somewhere else:

What but design of darkness to appall? –  
If design govern in a thing so small.



The last line seems to recognize how implausible it is that 'darkness' has conspired to 'appall' (i.e. whiten) us alongside all these deathly whitenesses. But on the other hand, if no design governs at this level, as the modern sceptical reader wants to say, when does it start, since we are also so small in the scale of the universe, or of evolution? And design *is* definitely governing in this small poem, because it is an almost perfectly Petrarchan sonnet that manages the difficult feat of repeated rhymes in English (*abbaabba*). But its very skill then provokes the teasing, Frostian question of how much the demands of that rhyme and form locked the poet into writing what the poem says about design in general: if it surprised its author in the making, at what level of formal complexity was it, or evil, or good, 'designed'?

'Design' also demonstrates Frost's reinvention of the sonnet as an argumentative, self-testing form, unlike the genteel sonnet's pursuit of frictionless, lyric exaltation. He adopted the easy-going tone, story-telling and naturalistic language of his immediate New England predecessor, Edwin Arlington Robinson, because he also wanted to make sonnets that sounded like a real person talking. Unlike Robinson, though, he also experimented a great deal with the sonnet's form, running sentences across the nominal boundaries of quatrains and tercets, or making novel rhyme patterns that pull against the syntax, because this push-and-pull of talk against the sonnet's form was a scaled-up version of the 'strained relation' Frost liked between speech and metre, and the strained relations he also thought made good art itself.<sup>17</sup> 'Form exists when one principle is locked in its opposite' in 'the clash of two goods', he wrote, and poetry *is* that dynamic opposition: 'Poetry is play. Even King Lear is called "a play", isn't it? I'd even rather have you think of it as a sport. For instance, like football – than as some kind of academic solemnity.'<sup>18</sup> Perhaps this is why Frost discusses Shakespeare's writing like a sports commentator watching a player set up a shot, and why he thought to write free verse was as pointless an exercise as 'to play tennis with the net down'.<sup>19</sup> In 'The Silken Tent', Frost's beautiful sonnet about a woman's 'ease' and upright 'sureness' being created by her countless 'silken ties of love and thought' to others, those 'loosely bound' ties are a playful allusion to the tugs of the sonnet's rhymes and rhythms as the poem's single sentence glides through all fourteen lines:

And only by one's going slightly taut  
In the capriciousness of summer air  
Is of the slightest bondage made aware. (12–14)

Placing the unassuming 'of' in a metrically stressed position in the final line is the only sign of tension between metre and speaking voice, as the line



draws the slightest attention to its bondages. But Frost's tent metaphor is not just about poetry's ability to reconcile freedom and commitment, like love should. For if one admiring tie goes slack, another goes taut: all the woman's ties are actually pulling against each other, not just the tent. And if Frost's biographers are right to think that, over its gestation, this sonnet came to be about Kay Morrison – the secretary who kept several admirers, including Frost, on the go – then Frost's sense of form as live competition becomes even more palpable.

Although Frost hints that modernists were failed sonnet writers, his anti-Platonic intuition that abstract form lives by being *performed* in concrete instantiations was also the motive for more radical experiments in the sonnet by E. E. Cummings and, despite himself, an older Wallace Stevens. Stevens's 'Autumn Refrain', 'The Dwarf' and 'The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain' are all maybe-sonnets: they don't rhyme or split into sestet and octave, and the latter two are both seven separate couplets amid a number of other multiple-couplet poems whose length is not particularly significant. But, as with most of Stevens, they are poems about the make-believe necessary for art to happen. 'Autumn Refrain', for instance, describes the stillness of everything gone: light, the world, summer and a Keatsian nightingale. Yet a 'skreaking and skittering residuum' remains to grate against the poet's imaginary hearing of that nightingale, perhaps the sound of the poet's pen itself writing. By the last line, 'the stillness is all in the key of that desolate sound'. The felt, unheard stillness has become attuned to the residuum and/or the imagined sound of the nightingale, as if poetry itself has a *musical* relationship with its own absence. Belated and autumnal, modern poetry happens anew through the withdrawal of poetry, just as the sonnet's form is present in a new way through not being obviously there in the older sense. Feeling its presence engages the sceptical, imaginative faith that Stevens thought it was art's role to encourage in an age of religious disillusionment and compensatory political dogmatism.

Cummings's sonnets, on the other hand, stretch the boundaries of the form beyond anything Frost or Stevens, or anyone, had ever tried. The 'Sonnets-Realities' section of *Tulips and Chimneys* (1923) opens with an attack on 'the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls', and one assumes those rented, upholstered spiritual apartments have their formal equivalent in the genteel cosiness of the sonnet form in which the poem is couched. But Cummings wanted to refurnish the form, not to abandon it, and the first thing he did was to knock out any sense of Cambridge's satisfied closure by abandoning octaves, sestets, full metres, predictable rhymes and any formal pressure to begin at the beginning, or come to rest at the end of a line. The second was to make the sonnet as ungenteel as possible:



O It's Nice To Get Up In, the slipshod mucous kiss  
of her riant belly's fooling bore  
– When The Sun Begins To (with a phrasing crease  
of hot subliminal lips, as if a score  
of youngest angels suddenly should stretch neat necks  
just to see how always squirms  
the skilful mystery of Hell) me suddenly  
grips in chuckles of supreme sex.  
In The Good Old Summer Time  
My gorgeous bullet in tickling intuitive flight  
aches, just, simply, into, her. Thirsty  
stirring. (Must be summer. Hush. Worms.)  
But It's Nicer To Lie In Bed  
–eh? I'm  
not. Again. Hush. God. Please hold. Tight

Cummings's sonnets begin and end in the middle of things. Subject and object switch places, co-ordinating phrases are overwritten by lines from other thoughts (here a song) running concurrently through the mind, and the syntactical hierarchies of main and subordinate clauses are suspended, all to make a myriad of contrary feelings take place simultaneously and intersubjectively. The only requirement is that the experience should be of breathless, overwhelming intensity, refusing the separations of the oppressive technological 'normality' he despised. This is more than a de-idealization of strict form in the name of sexual honesty, however. Cummings's explicit sonnets are really reinventions of the mutability sonnet, here rhyming 'worms' with 'squirms' to suggest corpses as well as copulation, while the connotations of 'fooling bore' suggest the vagina is a hard-to-find waterhole *and* a rifle shooting at him – not to mention his boredom and dissatisfaction with the prostitutes about whom these sonnets were written. A note on modern art from around this time says: 'The highest form of Composition is the Squirm, it is made of Creeping, Stretching, Gliding, Shrinking, Gripping. As emphasis tends towards angularities, the composition Wags, Hops, Bounds, Fiddles, Sprints, Fumbles, Trembles and Struts.'<sup>20</sup> In Cummings's hands, the sonnet itself squirms, stretching and shrinking its lines, hopping over line endings with rhymes on unstressed words ('suddenly', 'I'm') and fiercely gripping others with those erased spaces and panting commas. Squirming, of course, is what small children do a lot of, and the squirm was, for Cummings, the supreme achievement of children's art and its power to fuse doing and depicting. It's also what adults do in sex, crossing the bodily limits from which the grown-up self, its laws and its embarrassments have been made. Both content and form of these modernist sonnets blend the infantile, the



erotic and the morbid, and the wilful naiveté and refusal to 'develop' that so grated on his critics are essential to their outlook. After Cummings found some personal happiness later in life, though, his later sonnets lose some of that greedy intensity, becoming collations of drifting phrases whose out-of-order connections are gentler intimations of love's power to resist death's closure and the sequence of time. In the seventy poems of *W*, he anticipates the postmodern hyper-sonnet by spacing sonnets every seven poems and then finishing with a sequence of seven; just as the proportions of the sonnet invisibly structure the whole order of the volume, so love, it's hinted, will turn out to have been the principle all along, whether the poet knew it at the time or not.

### The politics of the sonnet

But by making form something to be discovered en route, rather than anxiously aspired to, modernism also unwittingly created a new cultural politics of the sonnet. For one virtue of the cultural prestige of a strict sonnet form had been to act as a means of public recognition for poets whose race, gender or class had otherwise debarred them from attention. The sonnet's role as the gold standard of civilized self-discipline made achieving it, for a late-nineteenth-century African American writer like Paul Lawrence Dunbar, effectively a claim for public equality. For the modernist sensibilities of some Harlem Renaissance writers, on the other hand, the stiff, unreal vocabulary and rhythm of Dunbar's sonnets were aping a hidebound white gentility, not a sign of universal culture. 'The mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America', to Langston Hughes, was 'this urge within the race towards whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization'.<sup>21</sup> Standardization meant the contented, respectable folk of the aspiring middle class, whereas the unruly, gin-sipping lives of the 'common folk' will 'furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations'.<sup>22</sup> Effectively a manifesto for his own blues poetry, Hughes's folk poetics were a challenge to the bourgeois poetics of his rival, the formalist Countee Cullen, whose most famous sonnet, 'Yet do I marvel', smoothly claims that God must doubtless have reasons to justify the torments of Tantalus or Sisyphus, but that his own faith cannot understand God's will 'to make a poet black, and bid him sing'. But Cullen complains about being set up by the Almighty for a life of unceasing failure in a perfectly metrical sonnet ending in three deft couplets; for the new poetics of culturally self-defining authenticity, this anguish felt rather too urbane expressed.

Cullen, however, thought Hughes's poems had fallen into the same racial trap that Dunbar's dialect poems had:

'The selections in this book seem one-sided to me. They tend to hurl this poet into the gaping pit that lies before all Negro writers, in the confines of which they become racial artists instead of artists pure and simple. There is too much emphasis here on strictly Negro themes.'<sup>23</sup>

Both were accusing each other of pandering to a white audience, in effect. For Hughes or his promoter Alain Locke, the poet's job was to create a new sense of pride on the model of Romantic nationhood, by uniting the individual artist and the unconscious poetry of the folk, which explains the unblinking switches between 'individuality' and the 'common' in Hughes's article, and his fear that difference in class taste within the black community indicated allegiances other than race. For integrationists like Cullen, on the other hand, cultivating the folk or primitive was still acting up to a white audience's prejudices, whereas the black artist should seek respect as a human being through the continuity of his work with the western cultural tradition; given the situation of black poverty in white America, he wrote in 1928, 'Negroes should be concerned with making good impressions.'<sup>24</sup>

For a younger generation of African American poets, however, making the sonnet more idiomatic also meant renegotiating these terms of cultural approval: trying to see whether the sonnet, and its implied audiences, would fit them, rather than the other way round. Gwendolyn Brooks was the first to make the sonnet *sound* like it was written by an African American poet, rather than just saying so, but her sequence *Gay Chaps at the Bar* expresses her reservations about it by making complex triangulation between the form and two other themes: the uniform equality promised by the inclusion of black sailors in the US Navy, contrasted with real pervading racism (they were usually not allowed to fight, though they were in just as much danger), and the remorseless readjustment of ideals in love, patriotism and faith that the women left behind to wait experience. All three are twisted together in the second sonnet of the sequence, which begins 'each body has its art, its precious prescribed / Pose', and ends:

And even in death, a body, like no other  
On any hill or plain or crawling cot  
Or gentle for the lilyless hasty pall  
(Having twisted, gagged, and then sweet-ceased to bother),  
Shows the old personal art, the look. Shows what  
It showed at baseball. What it showed in school.

Zora Neale Hurston had identified posture as one of the 'characteristics of Negro expression', the 'whole body panging and posing' in the unscripted



public art that was black social life.<sup>25</sup> Here the pose is still a provocation, but to grief: because it was made by twisting in agony, because the dead were so recently at school themselves, and because wrapped in a pall, the pose is now the property of both black and white. So far, so multiracial, but the mid-line stop before the final sentence is a beautifully timed pose itself, asserting the speaker's independence from *having* to fulfil the form, and a catch in the throat that the sonnet, too, is a living pose 'showed in school' and now also *rigor mortis*. Many of the poems that follow keep that discreet analogy going between the pulls of speech against the sonnet form and the discovery that pre-war commitments (to purity, lovers, God or the 'fixed ... instructions' of race) may now be outdated shells, while Brooks's skilful consonant-only rhymes keep the feeling of bonds coming apart but not yet finished. These fears culminate in the final sonnet about commitment to America itself. 'Still we wear our uniforms', it begins, but wonders how long we can 'salute the flag, thrill heavily, rejoice / For death of men who too saluted, sang':

For even if we come out standing up  
How shall we smile, congratulate: and how  
Settle in chairs? Listen, listen. The step  
Of iron feet again. And again                      wild.

The ambiguity of whether the 'step of iron feet' is the Allied forces or the Axis threat suggests that all American soldiers may find themselves in conflict with their own nation, as African American civilians had long felt they were. But as the iron feet of the sonnet, they also express Brooks's issue with the form: is using it falling in rhythmically with an abstract promise of equality such as the military offer, or committing oneself to the ranks of the dead?

Robert Hayden's stirring unrhymed sonnet to Frederick Douglass takes a more positive stance, however, by running the rising accents of black oratory over all its line endings to tell how Douglass's sense of universal liberty came *through* the culturally restricted, white-dominated forms he experienced:

this man, this Douglass, this former slave, this Negro  
beaten to his knees, exiled, visioning a world  
where none is lonely, none hunted, alien,  
this man, superb in love and logic, this man  
shall be remembered.

The syllabic links between 'Negro' and 'knees', or 'none', 'lonely' and 'alien' suggest how closely Douglass's sense of liberty and identity came from his bondage, which neatly heads off problems with Douglass's later politics – supporting the imperial US annexation of Dominica in the interests of a greater black nationhood, for instance – while quietly acknowledging that



the sonnet form itself is also a limit to what Douglass will mean. We will only really remember him, it begins, when freedom 'belongs at last to all, when it is truly instinct', or, in other words, when the sonnet itself has disappeared.

The sonnets in Louis Zukofsky's "A"-7 and "A"-9, on the other hand, seek political freedom through formidable technical obstacles. The first part of "A"-9 runs excerpts from Marx (on the divorce of labour from value) across the internal and external rhyme schemes of Cavalcanti's *canzone* 'Donna mi prega' (a touchstone for Ezra Pound), while ensuring the distribution of the letters 'r' and 'n' according to the mathematical ratios of the conic section. The second re-runs some of the same words and rhymes in the transforming light of extracts from Spinoza (on thinking God's thoughts), making the sonnet form a construction device where sound and sense, chance and design or intended and unintended meanings are kept constantly interdependent. The patient work required to assemble and to read them was for Zukofsky one way to restore poetry to the unalienated craft tradition he admired; they are labours of love, forms whose intricate delight in both work and family he felt were sorely lacking in cynical, industrialized America, not to mention the fascism that his erstwhile mentor Pound had espoused.

But perhaps the most persistent politician of the sonnet was Hayden's one-time tutor, W. H. Auden. In Auden's hands, the sonnet became potted psychobiography, in profiles of artists and thinkers (Rimbaud, Housman, Luther and Nietzsche), vocations ('The Composer', 'The Traveller', 'The Quest'), a cultural mindset ('Macao', 'Hongkong') and, in *Journey to a War*, the fall of man himself; almost anything but the task he had early on employed it for, lyrical seduction. 'If Art were magic' he later wrote, 'then love lyrics would be love charms which made the Cruel Fair one give one her latch key. In that case a magnum of champagne would be more artistic than a sonnet.'<sup>26</sup> There is more here than Auden's opposition to the crudely instrumentalist uses of art as persuasion or propaganda. As the keyword 'magic' suggests, Yeats is in the back of his mind, and Auden's mature ethos of poetic form was largely worked out as a response to the power of Yeats's style, and the political irresponsibility he felt it entailed. Both Auden and Yeats were committed to reinventing the political sonnet, but they divided sharply on what it could do to its readers.

For Yeats, form in poetry was a continuation of his belief in magic, and the poet is the 'successor' of the magician: 'All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their pre-ordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or, as I prefer to think, call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we



call emotions.<sup>27</sup> Traditional forms do not merely refer to or comment on a past, in other words, but move modern minds onto the eternally present plane of the spiritual world, shaping our small feelings now into the patterns laid down by the great myths that structure historical events far more than any individual actor knows. For a nation whose past had so many wrongs that remained unrighted, poems could be interventions, as well as commentary. But until the great crises of the Easter Rising and the First World War, Yeats did not call down the Italian or English aristocrats of the sonnet. 'Precisely because of its centrality to English literature', argues Helen Vendler, 'the sonnet compelled from Yeats both his literary allegiance and his nationalist disobedience'.<sup>28</sup> Only as Yeats began to identify himself with an Anglo-Irish heritage opposed to monocultural Catholic nationalism did his imagination really seize on the half-alien form, and in 'Leda and the Swan' he made his famous sonnet about the hybrid birth of new civilizations through a disturbing fusion of violence and desire. Using a mixture of English octave and Italian sestet, Yeats alters the older tradition of Leda's gradual seduction by Zeus into the 'sudden blow' of rape, perhaps registering his shock at the killings of the Easter Rising and the massacres he feared in Bolshevik Russia. But the language refuses entirely to separate the god's will from his victim's:

And how can body, laid in that white rush  
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?  
A shudder in the loins engenders there  
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower  
And Agamemnon dead.

'White rush' could refer to the swan's violent snatch, or Leda's reclining in the cushion of his feathers, as if she were both attacked and enticed. And it is deliberately ambiguous whose 'strange heart' she is feeling, or whose loins 'shudder' in both horror and desire, as the line itself shudders with a skipped stress on 'in'. That mixture of attack and unexpected intimacy would repeat itself in the Trojan war between rivals for beautiful Helen, and then in the family vengeance that kills Agamemnon after the war; and Yeats was horribly acute to sense it coming in the future civil war in Ireland, too, with its cycle of revenge attacks between those in charge of the new Irish state and their former resistance comrades. Yet to ask 'did she put on his knowledge with his power' is odd, since it assumes Leda had power to 'put on' at all. Can one put on a pregnancy? But it makes more sense if Leda is a figure for the poet-magician Yeats himself, who can 'put on' the borrowed symbolic forms of the spirit world, like a robe or a mask, and know himself an instrument of their design. Being 'caught up',

of course, means both being snatched and being utterly absorbed, and the horrifying events Leda might be intimating seem to be coming to the poet in a continual present, like a film. The 'and's of 'the burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon dead' are followed by those daring half-lines of complete silence, as if Yeats himself were stunned by his own vision of coming desolation. But such empty-mouthed astonishment is, at the same time, a confirmation of the poem's own performative power, astounding the one through whom it is being made. Yeats's vision of violence is, in both senses of the word, a ravishing one.

For Auden, on the other hand, Yeats was enticing his own nation toward such violence by writing poems that are thrilled as well as appalled by seeing it coming. Yeats's fusion of form and power wanted to make poetry the doorway to a world where poems, our emotions on reading them and the activity of the spirits in creating the events of history all merge. But however attractive Auden thought a world recreated by poetry would be, magic has no space in it for choice and consent, and with it, freedom and democracy: 'Art ... is not Magic, i.e. a means by which the artist communicates or arouses his feelings in others, but a mirror in which they may become conscious of what their own feelings really are: its proper effect, in fact, is disenchanting.'<sup>2</sup> That disenchantment should be the means of transforming closed communities into open ones, by making our response to art one of painful recognition, rather than one that encourages the fantasies of identification with a hero or a community that dictators rely on. Rather than seduce, then, Auden's first task for the sonnet was disenchanting, by uncovering the blind spots, weaknesses and unforeseen consequences that really make up the life of a person or a place. In 'Luther', for instance, the great reformer unwittingly accelerates the decline of real Christianity by insisting that 'the Just shall live by Faith', and condemning all social action as justification by works:

And men and women of the world were glad  
Who'd never cared or trembled in their lives.

By separating faith from all worldly activity, Luther unwittingly enabled people to carry on as usual, privatizing faith into mere Sunday belief. While this Shakespearean couplet looks at first like an ironic counterpart to Luther's anguish in the previous three quatrains, its rhymes actually show it is a separate part of an Italian sestet, as if to show that worldly indifference is actually a *consequence* of Luther's efforts at interiorizing faith.

In the sonnets of *Journey to a War*, his metaphysical counterpart to Isherwood's lumped account of their actual travels in China, Auden writes directly about disenchantment in the more sociological sense, describing



mankind's uneven progress to recognition that democratic freedom depends on law ungrounded by *any* prior order, unlike racist or totalitarian ideologies. Sonnet xxv asserts baldly that 'Nothing is given: we must find our law', and Auden's snapshot content, surprise adjectives, unpredictable rhymes and formal deviations in these sonnets are all to confirm how much the form is being remade, rather than inherited. But any order was at odds with the chaos in China that Auden was witnessing at the time, and Sonnet xvi, about the unreal calm of a command tent away from the front, also has poetry in the back of its mind when it criticizes monuments that simplify a war or the 'flags on a map' that deny 'living men in terror of their lives'. The silences as the sestet's lines grow shorter reflect the poet's sense of the inadequacy of his own representations, and Auden's lurking guilt about being a detached observer:

But ideas can be true although men die,  
And we can watch a thousand faces  
Made active by one lie:  
And maps can really point to places  
Where life is evil now:  
Nanking; Dachau.

But they also speak of the poet's power to bring that failure to attention, and this is the oddity of Auden's sonnets in a nutshell. To seduction and magic, they oppose an aesthetic of disenchantment, 'a bringing to consciousness, by naming them, of emotions and their hidden relationships', stressing artifice to make readers alert to their own motives for being interested.<sup>30</sup> But they also want to dazzle by the sheer verve of their analysis, as if disenchantment were enchantment by other means. 'The Quest', Auden's most sustained experiment with the sonnet form, comes nearest to recognizing this. Sonnet xii has an unusual 3.3.3.5 pattern:

Incredulous, he stared at the amused  
Official writing down his name among  
Those whose request to suffer was refused.  
The pen ceased scratching: though he came too late  
To join the martyrs, there was still a place  
Among the tempters for a caustic tongue

The gap where we expect the final line of a quatrain is the blankness of the would-be martyr finding that the life and death he had anticipated won't now happen. Instead, the *b*-rhyme on 'among' connects unpredictably to the tempters' 'caustic tongue' and his aim 'to test resolution of the young', because the disenchanter's own 'informal style' and 'worldly smile' are actually a reaction to his own frustrated idealism. If this is a self-portrait,



its cruelty only confirms the emotional wellsprings of its passion to disenchant the disenchanter. Sonnet x addresses Yeats even more explicitly, describing a tower where 'Lost Love in abstract speculation burns / And exiled Will to politics returns', which is a brilliant summary of the compensations politics and magic supply in *The Tower*. But the sestet's warning applies to Auden too:

Here great magicians, caught in their own spell,  
Long for a natural climate as they sigh  
'Beware of Magic' to the passer by.

### Conclusion

Auden's acute discomfort at his own role is perhaps emblematic of the change modernism brought to the sonnet. When form is thought of not as an ideal, but a concentration of the 'mental outlook' of its age, then form becomes not just the internal organization of the art, but a mediator of the ever-shifting social relations between the artist and the public.<sup>31</sup> Making the sonnet's form more optional and democratizing its diction does not, therefore, mean that the modern sonnet becomes, simply, more 'free'. It might better be said that the modern sonnet had to become more responsive to be felt as art, and more responsible. Indeed, I have avoided analyzing twentieth-century sonnets in the terms of artistic freedom and formal limitation, not because that binary doesn't motivate some great modern examples – Patrick Kavanagh's chafing 'Inniskeen Road: July Evening' or Claude McKay's 'superhuman' restraint in 'The White House', for instance – but because the option of free verse so altered where that limit was sensed. Free or fragmented verse did not abandon the act of voluntary self-discipline for which the nineteenth century praised the sonnet, it presupposed it. Indeed, one might say that free verse is the purest internalization of sonnet discipline, so pure it leaves no external trace, allowing Imagist poetics to take over the sonnet's status as *the* condensed lyric form, as well as its difficulty and remoteness. But if early modernists scorned the sonnet because it represented their own disavowed reformist urges, they also gave it a new sense of social dependence. Able to shape any poem according to its inner logic rather than agreed pattern, free-verse writers encountered new limits in the generic expectations of 'poetry', the frameworks of cultural authority that their poems wanted to evade. For sonnets and fragments alike, a successful form would now have to be preternaturally sensitive to the changing ways its audiences would hear it.



Notes

The text of each sonnet quoted is taken from its author's *Collected Poems* unless otherwise indicated.

- 1 T. W. H. Crosland, *The English Sonnet* (London: Secker, 1917), p. 21.
- 2 Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* [1951] (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 157.
- 3 Wallace Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 42.
- 4 T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 36.
- 5 André Breton, 'The Automatic Message' [1933], in *The Automatic Message; The Magnetic Fields; The Immaculate Conception*, trans. Antony Melville (London: Atlas, 1997), pp. 11–12.
- 6 William Carlos Williams, 'The Tortuous Straightness of Chas Henri Ford', in *Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1954), pp. 235–6 (p. 236).
- 7 Crosland, *The English Sonnet*, pp. 56, 88–97. For Petrarchan standards, see [C. W. Russell], 'Critical History of the Sonnet', *Dublin Review* 27:54 (October 1876), 400–30 (p. 404).
- 8 John Milton, *The Sonnets of John Milton*, ed. Mark Pattison (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, 1883), pp. 20, 46, 27. For disciplinary sonnet form, see Gillian C. Huang-Tiller, *The Power of the Meta-Genre: Cultural, Sexual, and Racial Politics of the American Modernist Sonnet*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis (University of Notre Dame, 2000), pp. 93ff.
- 9 Aubrey de Vere, 'Mémorial', in *Sonnets* (London: Basil Montague Pickering, 1875), p. xiii; Arthur T. Quiller-Couch, ed., *English Sonnets* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1897), p. xx.
- 10 Harriet Monroe, *Poets and Their Art*, rev. edn (New York: Macmillan, 1932), pp. 321–2.
- 11 T. S. Eliot, 'The Possibility of a Poetic Drama', in *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen, 1920), pp. 54–63 (p. 63).
- 12 T. S. Eliot, 'Reflections on *Vers Libre*', in *Selected Prose*, p. 36.
- 13 Edna St Vincent Millay, Sonnet 11, lines 1–8, in *Collected Sonnets of Edna St Vincent Millay* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941).
- 14 Robert Frost, *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), p. 381.
- 15 Robert Frost, *The Collected Poems, Prose and Plays of Robert Frost*, ed. Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1995), p. 778.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 789.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 680.
- 18 Robert Frost, *Collected Prose*, ed. Mark Richardson (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), p. 314; Selden Rodman, *Tongues of Fallen Angels* (New York: New Directions, 1974), p. 43.
- 19 Frost, *Collected Poems*, p. 735.
- 20 Quoted in Richard S. Kennedy, *Dreams in the Mirror: A Biography of E. E. Cummings* (New York: Liveright, 1980), p. 180.
- 21 Cary D. Wintz, ed., *The Harlem Renaissance 1920–1940*, 7 vols. (New York: Garland, 1996), Vol. II: *The Politics and Aesthetics of 'New Negro' Literature*, p. 166.



- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 167.
- 23 *Ibid.*, Vol. IV: *The Critics and the Harlem Renaissance*, p. 145.
- 24 Countee Cullen, 'The Dark Tower', *Opportunity* (March 1928), p. 90.
- 25 Zora Neale Hurston, 'Characteristics of Negro Expression', in *Negro College*, ed., *Negro* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1934), p. 39.
- 26 W. H. Auden, 'Squares and Oblongs', in *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose*, ed. Edward Mendelson, 3 vols. (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), Vol. II: 1939-1948, p. 346.
- 27 W. B. Yeats, 'The Symbolism of Poetry', in *Yeats's Poetry, Drama and Prose*, ed. James Pethica (New York: Norton, 2000), p. 272.
- 28 Helen Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 147.
- 29 Auden, 'The Poet of the Encirclement', in *Prose*, Vol. II, p. 198.
- 30 Auden, 'Squares and Oblongs', in *ibid.*, p. 345.
- 31 T. S. Eliot, 'The Music of Poetry', in *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), p. 37.