

Why Sonnets?

Robert Hamberger

I shamefacedly admit that I've written sonnets since I was a bookish teenager. Why the attraction? At that time, writing sonnets was a challenging puzzle. Could I finish fourteen lines, with end-rhymes in a fixed pattern, that still made sense and retained my voice? As a teenager I failed; but having now written eighty or more sonnets, the balancing act of puzzle and creativity - order and fluidity - remains to drag me back to that form.

One of Edna St. Vincent Millay's late sonnets sums up the tension and attraction when she writes:

'I will put Chaos into fourteen lines
And keep him there'. (1988: 153)

The moment I read those lines in a bookshop, I knew that she understood why I'm repeatedly drawn to sonnets. The start of any poem is wordlessness struggling for voice, a rhythm and shape, a temporary break from silence. In the early drafting process, when a poem starts to nudge itself towards the sonnet form, I know that the tussle of finding the right rhymes and half-rhymes, in the expected order, will give me a template in which the mess of my emotions might temporarily feel secure enough to speak. Imagination is subversive. It's as if the editing part of the mind is so distracted by hunting the next rhyme that it allows the saboteur - the rule-breaker - to smuggle taboo words under the apparent barbed-wire of form.

Fifteen years ago I wrote a sequence called 'Acts of Parting'. It was basically about my experience during the last illness of my best friend Clifford, whom I'd known since we met as eleven-year-olds on our first morning at secondary school. When I write a sequence of poems, in each case it doesn't begin with a calculated decision, which I plot like a military campaign. There's usually a gradual realisation that a cluster of themes is insisting on more space and

attention than one poem will permit. So the possibility of a sequence, and (in the process of writing) the shape that each sequence insists on, evolves.

With 'Acts of Parting' I knew instinctively, after writing the first three free-verse poems, that I wanted free-verse to alternate with sonnets. Obviously, when starting the sequence, I couldn't foresee that the next six months would carry us all through Clifford's last illness. He had contracted HIV five years before, and in those days combination therapies to manage the condition were at a relatively early stage. So, while my conscious mind was willing him back to health, and my days were filled with hospital and home visits, supporting his partner and mother, juggling the needs of my wife and young children, keeping my job and house going, I understood that I needed the space to find words for what I was experiencing.

It appeared to be a mixture of instinct and conscious choice when I deliberately picked the Petrarchan form for the 'Acts of Parting' sonnets. I view this as the strictest sonnet form, because it only allows the poet four rhymes (compared to Shakespearean sonnets with seven rhymes.) It felt as if I was choosing a form whereby the apparent straitjacket of a limited rhyme-scheme would hold me tight, give me a strange sense of security. There's no doubt that my emotions at the time were wild, contradictory and apparently incoherent. How could I give them words, allow them to speak?

As I recall, the sonnets came slowly, but they were written during the immediacy of my experience. This was far from Wordsworth's recommendation of emotion recollected in tranquillity. But at the same time writing those sonnets promised the relative safety of an empty page, a quiet space to confront my experience as honestly as possible. One poem I wrote at this time describes the simultaneously wonderful and tortured period of remission during a long and difficult terminal illness:

Remission

Now you know they can do nothing for you
you go home, walking out of hospital
as if walking is one of those beautiful
humdrum acts you reclaim, like standing in a queue
or using your own key. You're back in charge for two
months, ten, twenty. Anything's possible
when you talk like that. Risk it: be hopeful.
For weeks we watched a hyena chew
your fat, skinning you to the bone. Scratching a flea
it yawns and drops you now. It will let
you walk away for a while, plotting to be free:
"Listen. We'll go to London and send that
fucking doctor a photo of me
in a kiss-me-quick hat saying Not Dead Yet." (Hamberger 1997: 51)

I remember the first line being a stark admission to myself at the time: they can do nothing for him. I was almost saying to myself *Face it* when that line stared back at me from the page. Writing sonnets usually includes the poet scribbling lists of '*nose blows rose*', as Don Paterson describes that undignified scramble for the right rhyme (Paterson 1999:), or (often, in my case) half-rhyme. Rhyming pushes a poet to examine both the music and meaning of a limited list of words, the possibilities of which can tip a poet towards images they hadn't previously imagined or expected. This is how the hyena arrived halfway through the sonnet, apparently out of nowhere: simply because *chew* rhymed with *two*, *queue* and *you*. What creature or process might *chew* in this context; how could *chew* fit into this poem, or should I discard it for another rhyme? Hooking onto that rhyme led to the horrible recognition of what we'd been watching during Clifford's last illness, and how he was escaping for a while. All poetry can (and perhaps should) jolt a poet during its composition, but rhyme is certainly another trick for

catching a poet unawares, surprising their controls by the accuracy of a metaphor or image they may otherwise have ignored.

It seems no coincidence that Dylan Thomas (an often freewheeling poet in relation to form) chose the rigorous rules of a villanelle for 'Do not go gentle into that good night' (1998), as if its discipline could hold his grief in check for long enough to address his dying father. In the process he achieved one of the finest examples of that apparently artificial form.

It's equally significant that Gerard Manley Hopkins' six sonnets (1953), usually known as the Terrible Sonnets for their painful subject-matter, express spiritual desolation in an acutely personal way, yet each are held tight within the Petrarchan form. His biographer Robert Bernard Martin explains the paradox of these poems with a 'sense of contained anarchy, of inchoate, almost unspeakable emotion given verbal form...Whether or not he thought out the matter, the fact is that (Hopkins) chose one of the most disciplined verse forms because it best held his explosive emotions in check. These poems shock doubly because of the contrast between the decorum of the sonnet form and the dark energy pulsing against its restraints.' (Martin 1991: 383.)

The continued popularity of the sonnet for love poetry since its origins in thirteenth century Italy may partly be explained by the fact that falling in love is itself a period of extreme emotion, akin perhaps to a sense of chaos in relation to the former self. So the sonnet's semblance of direction lends a steadying hand through the blind-alleys and happy accidents of composition. Don Paterson said 'Poets write sonnets because it makes poems easier to write.' (1999: xxii) The paradox is that strict form can, at times, become a liberation, an odd permission for the poet to allow their saboteur (their chaotic emotions) to speak plainly. If you're lucky, and during the drafting process your words and images coalesce into an order that both surprises you and confirms your truth-telling instincts, the sonnet will give shape to:

'nothing more nor less
Than something simple not yet understood.'
(St. Vincent Millay 1988: 153)

Robert Hamberger

REFERENCES:

- Hamberger R (1997) *Warpaint Angel*, Nottingham: Blackwater Press c/o Five Leaves Publications.
- Hopkins GM (1953) *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. London: Penguin.
- Martin RB (1991) *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Very Private Life*, London: Flamingo/Harper Collins.
- Paterson D (1999) *101 Sonnets from Shakespeare to Heaney - Edited with an introduction by Don Paterson*, London: Faber and Faber.
- St.Vincent Millay E (1988) *Collected Sonnets* New York: Harper and Row.
- Thomas D (1998) from *Generations: Poems between Fathers, Mothers, Daughters, Sons - Edited by Melanie Hart and James Loader*. London: Penguin.

Originally published in *Writing Works: A Resource Handbook for Therapeutic Writing Workshops and Activities* (edited by Gillie Bolton, Victoria Field and Kate Thompson), Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, 2006.

© Robert Hamberger 2006