

Introduction

I

THE DECISION to assemble this anthology arose out of my capacity as co-organiser of *Crossing the Line*, a monthly reading series in London of what has come to be known as linguistically innovative poetry.¹ In that capacity I listened with great interest to poet and publisher Ken Edwards read from *Eight+Six*, a collection of sonnets whose content played much faster and looser with the form than its title implied. Here were poems which put the traditional sonnet under pressure with consistent wit and energy and which did so moreover with complete seriousness. After the reading I mentioned to Ken that someone should publish an anthology of linguistically innovative sonnets, but as is often the case after such events the proposition was left hanging. A few weeks later, however, Ken contacted me to ask whether I had been serious in my proposal. In spite of his own example, this question marked, I think, an uncertainty about whether there were sufficient numbers of linguistically innovative poets writing sonnets to make this a viable project, especially in Britain. After all, the paradigmatic English-language sonnet writers of the twentieth century – e.e. cummings, Edwin Denby, Ted Berrigan, Bernadette Mayer (not to mention John Berryman and Robert Lowell) – were American. In Britain surely one had to go back to Gerard Manley Hopkins for anything resembling consistent experimentation with the form and it's still easy to forget that the sonnets he is best remembered for are mostly poems of the 1870s and 1880s. I'd venture that Ken's question also marked an uncertainty as to whether the sonnet was a form suited to consistent innovation and that, again in spite of his own example and those Americans I've listed above, it wasn't instead a vehicle for more "mainstream" use.

For some time, however, I had been aware of a number of linguistically innovative poets here in Britain writing sonnets. A few years before Ken's reading at *Crossing the Line*, Tim Atkins read his *25 Sonnets* at London's SubVoicive reading series before it was published in the US by The Figures in 2000. At Bob Cobbing's fortnightly Writers Forum Workshops I heard Adrian Clarke test out the manuscript of *Skeleton Sonnets*, which Cobbing saw into print shortly before his death in 2002. A few years previously Cobbing had also put out *Astrophil and Stella*, an arresting set of visual sonnets by Sean Bonney. In 2001, Giles Goodland's *A Spy in the House of Years* appeared from Leviathan Press. Here was evidence of a range of poets, none of them connected to the mainstream, working assiduously with the sonnet form which provoked in each a variety of responses, from Atkins' radically pared down, 'dub' sonnets, through Clarke's wiry torquings and Bonney's playful 'gestalt' responses to the sonnet's shape, to Goodland's more compendious cultural assemblages. No two examples were remotely similar but they were all united by the sonnet umbrella. Alongside these contemporary instances I recalled

Thomas A Clark's "Sixteen Sonnets" and Peter Riley's "Ospita" from the Paladin anthology *The New British Poetry*, at the same time as discovering Allen Fisher's *The Apocalyptic Sonnets* (1978, Pig Press) whilst working in the archive of the special poetry collection at University College London. A recent trip to Foyles Bookshop had also unexpectedly thrown up Brian Marley's long out of print *Springtime in the Rockies* (1978, Trigram Press) in which I found his wonderful "Bargain Basement Sonnets".

It was no use looking in the existing sonnet anthologies for any of these poets. Indeed, on the whole reading through the Twentieth Century contributions of these big-press editions was, and continues to be, a disheartening experience. The roll-call of names in John Fuller's *Oxford Book of Sonnets* (2000), for example, is entirely predictable, limited as it is largely to US poets of the new critical/confessional/"strenuous-authentic" school and British poets of the Auden/Spender axis. These give way inevitably to Movement and post-Movement poets, and finally to poets of the so-called "New Generation". Even the eccentrics are the expected ones. At first glance, Phillis Levin's *Penguin Book of the Sonnet: 500 Years of a Classic Tradition in English* (2001) seems to offer little more hope. Whilst its roster of earlier names is quite laudable, its list of Twentieth Century and especially post World War II contributors is on the whole merely more *comprehensively* mainstream than Fuller's. Besides, as an American Penguin edition, more space is given over to US poets especially in its later pages (there are certainly no surprises amongst its British contributors). It came as something of a shock, therefore, to find in its pages the likes of Edwin Denby, Muriel Rukeyser, John Ashbery, Ted Berrigan, Ann Lauterbach and Hugh Seidman, though each is represented by only a single poem. However, at least there was some evidence here of an editor with a critical eye beyond the wholly conventional. More recent anthologies such as Faber's *101 Sonnets: From Shakespeare to Heaney* (2002) and the Library of America's *American Sonnets* (2007) merely revert to type. The most recent anthology, Norton's *The Making of a Sonnet* (2008), edited by Edward Hirsch and Eavan Boland, wears the face of inclusivity, containing the likes of Berrigan, Bernadette Mayer and Alice Notley, but it's something of a disguise.

If the available anthologies were anything to go by, therefore, linguistically innovative poets were clearly not interested in the sonnet as a form. The blurb on the back of Levin's anthology claims that it tells "the full story of the sonnet tradition in the English language", which if even possible it clearly does not do. What we are presented with is rather a narrative of Levin's own making. I don't want to rehearse here the reasons why major publishing houses refuse to commit to innovative poetry – instances in the last century are legion and the arguments of the "poetry wars" on both sides of the Atlantic (and elsewhere) are largely unresolved and ongoing. A question I'd like to pose, however, is why these major publishing houses seem in recent years to have put out what is effectively the same anthology. Sure,

some of the poets differ from book to book, but the overall impetus is unchanging: to present a survey of the sonnet from its beginnings to the present-day. The “commonsense” answer is that they are all jostling in a free market for market domination of an ever-popular form. Each anthology hopes to trump its forbears though none of them acknowledges the existence of any of the others. In some ways it’s a wholly laughable state of affairs, though also one to be taken very seriously. I would argue that there is a politics of form at work here and that the sonnet has become a focal point for some of the issues surrounding the so-called poetry wars. As a form the sonnet is fiercely guarded, as a read-through of the introductions to many of these anthologies testifies. Just as its varied structural features – 14 lines, octave and sestet, rhyming couplet, volta, etc – are metonymic of the whole form and can’t be disturbed without destroying its integrity, so the sonnet itself stands as a metonym for the kind of poetry published by the big publishing houses. To disturb the sonnet’s form too radically therefore is not just to disturb the sonnet itself, or the sonnet tradition, but to endanger the foundations of the wider poetic tradition. I wonder whether this doesn’t also go some way towards explaining the recent spate of mainstream sonnet anthologies. At a time when linguistically innovative poetry has been making inroads into the public consciousness – in spite of fierce opposition from some quarters – these anthologies appear, one after the other, to shore up the ruin that such a move threatens.

John Fuller’s 1972 study of the form, *The Sonnet*, “essential reading for anyone interested in the form” according to Phillis Levin, is actually a good indication of the mainstream suspicion of tampering with the sonnet’s mechanics.² The chapter on structural alternatives is tellingly entitled “Variants and Curiosities” and though the relationship between “variant” and “curiosity” is not entirely apparent, Fuller’s use of the word “curiosity” shows that some sonnets clearly belong behind glass as objects of fear and wonder. It also goes to show just how far behind the mainstream had fallen by the early 1970s. Whilst Fuller does rather begrudgingly accept that “variants do comment constructively on the sonnet-form and of course become successful poems in their own right” (with the exception of purely visual sonnets which he dismisses out of hand) they have to do so “through a desire to explore legitimate possibilities and to provide genuine extensions of its capabilities”. That word “legitimate” stalks Fuller’s text and it’s clear that he is suffering from his very own legitimisation crisis. However, he exempts selected poets from his schema, notably Milton, Wordsworth and Gerard Manley Hopkins, all of whom are permitted to stray from “genuine” form. Milton “cultivates” the Italian sonnet rather than violates it and Wordsworth similarly gives the form “organic life”. In both cases natural metaphors override cultural mandates. To accommodate Hopkins, Fuller as good as avoids mentioning form, instead substituting it for a consideration of content.³ “After Hopkins,” he states, “few modern poets have paid great attention to the legitimate sonnet” – but by this stage it’s obvious neither to me nor I think to Fuller what a “legitimate” sonnet is.

At the end of “Variants and Curiosities”, Fuller writes that there is not “very much left to do with [the sonnet] that has permanent significance for the form”, suggesting that it had had everything done to it that could be done. His example of then-recent “innovation” was a love sonnet by, of all people, John Updike, which dispenses with words altogether instead scattering letters across the poem’s 14 lines. Might Fuller’s words, like Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion’s now infamous claim in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* that nothing much happened in English poetry in the 60s and 70s, be another albeit earlier attempt by the mainstream to “paint whole areas of poetic activity out of the picture”⁴ – namely the linguistically innovative sonnet?

II

I LEAVE it up to others to decide why in 1972 Fuller would refer to John Updike rather than to Ted Berrigan, whose sonnets came out in separate editions in 1964 and 1966. Omitting them from his later anthology, however, is unforgivable. It’s no exaggeration to say that Berrigan’s poems have been responsible for something of a latter-day sonnet renaissance amongst linguistically innovative poets. Certainly Berrigan gave these poets a kind of permission to use the form again after it had lain largely neglected for decades, although Berrigan himself had the example of Edwin Denby, whose *In Public, In Private* appeared in 1948 and can thus be seen as an important precursor.⁵ Denby is in many ways the right place to begin an anthology of linguistically innovative sonnets, not least because he rarely wrote using any other form. His achievement was also realised without fanfare, the poems being radically misunderstood on initial publication. Reviewers were unprepared for their “compressed, quirky, big-city stop-and-go rhythms”⁶ and criticised them for their lack of “control”. The poems’ elliptical syntax and sudden shifts in direction appealed to Berrigan, however, who published them in a special edition of his “C” Magazine though in many ways Berrigan’s own sonnets have obscured Denby’s considerable accomplishment with the form. Berrigan himself, however, was responsible for a flurry of sonnet writing amongst his immediate contemporaries such as Dick Gallup and Ron Padgett – see Padgett’s “Nothing left in that drawer” and “Sonnet/Homage to Andy Warhol” in this anthology, both witty proclamations *à la* “The sonnet is dead! Long live the sonnet!”⁷ – not to mention Alice Notley’s remarkable *165 Meeting House Lane* which can be read fruitfully in relation to Berrigan’s own poems.

Indeed, Notley’s is one of a number of important sequences by women included in this anthology. As commentators have long pointed out, the sonnet has been a form traditionally dominated by men. A while back a debate ensued in the online women’s journal *HOW(ever)* over an article called “The Sonnet Transfigured” by

the mainstream poet Annie Finch, who claimed to be reviving the sonnet as a form women might inhabit after years of male domination.⁸ However, instead of keying into a liberatory tradition of formal innovation, Finch revealed herself to be overwhelmed by the weight both of the traditional sonnet and the sonnet tradition. In the “postcards” section of the journal’s subsequent issue, a number of innovative women poets responded to some of Finch’s assumptions.⁹ As Kathleen Fraser pointed out, instead of interrogating form or engaging with a counter-tradition of transgressive writing by women, Finch envisaged “a sonnet-trophy, which could help women build [their] consciousness alive and [their] dreams real as the old sonnet helped the men to do.” “Our sonnet,” she continued, “seems different; it has a small i in it instead of a big one. But perhaps any sonnet at all is a big i. That’s something I have to fear...” The notion of a “sonnet trophy” merely redeployed the masculine tradition from which Finch was trying to escape and as other respondents pointed out, her aligning of poetry and fear needed unpacking. For Finch, one of the purposes of poetry was “to stop fear”, the sonnet being particularly well suited to achieve this because its structure was a way of “organizing, channelling and making familiar.” Beverly Dahlen disagreed. Poetry might focus fear but it couldn’t stop it. And surely poetry was about “making strange”, said Dahlen, for whom the sonnet form was “a kind of padded cell in which I go mad”, itself a comment on the old trope of the sonnet envisaged as a “room”, another male constraint fantasy which Dahlen rightly sees as a form of incarceration. Rachel Blau DuPlessis added that the sonnet would have to be “ruptured before being recuperated, and recuperated only within the terms of a full analysis of lyric ideology, beauty, and pleasure”.

The sonnets written by women in this anthology are variously engaged in this act of rupture. One of the major figures here is Bernadette Mayer, whose *Sonnets* was published in 1989 by Tender Buttons Press. The association with Gertrude Stein is perhaps fortuitous but powerful nonetheless. Stein herself has an 18-line sonnet in the middle of “Patriarchal Poetry” which sends up the sonnet as a male-dominated praise-poem. Mayer’s sonnets are a sustained and complex version of this, a skewed take, as Juliana Spahr has shown, on lyric intimacy.¹⁰ By turns fierce and tender, Mayer constantly pulls apart form and content to interrogate the gaping personal and social hypocrisies we inflict on others and that are in turn inflicted on us, especially in the name of desire. Like desire, Mayer’s sonnets come in all shapes and sizes and refuse to be bound by conventional form. An exception to this is her repeated use of the couplet which ends a significant number of the poems. In Freudian terms this is the return of the repressed, only Mayer knows it and it becomes instead a glorious, almost masochistic, repetition compulsion. I can’t get enough of these poems, though regrettably *Sonnets* has been out of print for some time now. Many poets, however, a good few of them in this anthology, have managed to track down copies and continue to find within its pages a template for what can be done with, and indeed, to, the form.

With the example of women writing necessarily inside and against the form, it is perhaps better to talk of different “traditions”, plural, of the linguistically innovative sonnet. This is also important when thinking about the sonnet in other cultures, and I have tried to include in the anthology a selection of poets from English-speaking countries other than the UK and the US, such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, which the traditional anthologies have by and large failed to do. In Australia, the “Generation of ’68” – among others, Robert Adamson, Pam Brown, Laurie Duggan, John Forbes, John A Scott and John Tranter – all wrote sonnets influenced by the likes of O’Hara and Berrigan, though they brought to it the particular nuances of the culture. For instance, Robert Adamson’s “Sonnets to Be Written from Prison” can be seen as part of a tradition of convict literature – Adamson himself draws on this in the sequence whilst at the same time ironising it. He dreams of being banged up for an unnamed crime which gets him “in the news”. Perhaps his crime is to write “almost experimental sonnets” or to write sonnets at all. Indeed, in an Australian context, how suited is this traditionally genteel, contrived and most closed of forms to this wild, natural and most open of continents? We have to be careful of course not to produce a reductionist version of Australia. Adamson’s sequence is ultimately a fantasy about the poet as romantic outlaw but it also asks important questions about whether poetry can be an effective political tool and considers the role of Australian poetry in a wider global context.

Australian poets, then, found in American poetry, specifically the poets in Donald Allen’s *The New American Poetry*, an answer to the prevailing conservatism in Australian poetry and the linguistically innovative sonnet flourished though again the mainstream anthologies tell a different story.¹¹ Younger Australian poets such as Peter Minter and Michael Farrell have gone on to use the sonnet to extend and consolidate many of the questions posed by their forbears. In Britain the American example was also a powerful one and the sonnet was taken up by a number of poets associated with Cambridge – the late Andrew Crozier, JH Prynne, Peter Riley – who have historically favoured the practice of innovating with inherited forms. Poets in London on the other hand, and especially those associated with Eric Mottram, have tended to prefer more open forms. As is always the case, however, there are exceptions. London poets such as Adrian Clarke and Robert Sheppard, not to mention Ken Edwards, the late Bill Griffiths, Robert Hampson, Gavin Selerie and Johan de Wit – have all gone on to write sonnets though in the case of Clarke, and especially Griffiths, out of suspicion of the form. “What better disguise for evil/ than sonnets?” asks Griffiths in *Rousseau and the Wicked*. His “sonnet 1” and “sonnet 2” in this anthology demonstrate an undisguised freedom from the form, and though “sonnet 1” has at least the look of a sonnet, “sonnet 2” has more the look and feel of a haiku.

III

GRIFFITHS' MISTRUST of the form has its antecedents. The sonnet had been declared as good as dead by the pioneering modernists, most famously Pound and Williams. Pound considered it little more than a mistake, a form invented "when some chap got stuck in the effort to make a canzone", and held it responsible for a subsequent decline in metric invention.¹² Williams rejected it on the grounds that it offered nothing new. "All sonnets mean the same thing", he wrote, because the configuration of the words, the way a sonnet is organised, negates the possibility of any original movement within it.¹³ This dismissal of the form, however, was also a reaction against its specifically English history as well as a criticism of the way it was being used by contemporaries. Williams damned what he called "apt use" of the sonnet as practised by parlour-room sonneteers who stultified the form "by making pleasurable that which should be removed". "Apt use", and by extension "apt users" had turned the sonnet's formal properties into bourgeois proprieties. "Making it pleasurable" was getting in the way of "making it new".

Very little seems to have changed since. The anthologies are still full of sonnets demonstrating "apt use", sonnets which it is claimed add meaningfully to the tradition but which in reality do little more than ring very limited changes on Williams' "pleasurable" indicators. In *Reading the Illegible*, Craig Dworkin has spoken of how poetic form "must always necessarily signify" adding that "any particular signification is historically contingent and never inherently meaningful or a-priori".¹⁴ This is especially the case with the sonnet, which as Michael Spiller reminds us is a prescribed form, "one whose duration and shape are determined before the poet begins to write".¹⁵ The problem with Williams' "apt users", and by extension sonnets written within the mainstream, is their refusal to submit the form to historical change. The number of poets who continue to use iambic pentameter on a consistent basis is alarming and after a while the persistent rhythm washing through their poems induces a kind of nausea akin to sea-sickness. For these poets the sonnet is so "inherently meaningful and a-priori" that it effectively obscures the sonnet. Dworkin's book is about how to read poetic texts which foreground illegibility, but I think we can usefully reverse the poles of his thesis and suggest that certain forms also become illegible through their very legibility. The sonnet is a case in point. Because it is such a well known form – its form *qua* form can after all be taken in at a glance – it is overdetermined and its very recognisability makes it impossible to read.

What is needed is a radical defamiliarisation of the form. If the linguistically innovative sonnet can be said to have a "story" it is precisely this, the constant, purposeful intervention into the state of affairs I've just outlined above. Two important precursors who used the sonnet in the face of Pound and Williams' hostility, and specifically in order to "make it new", were EE Cummings and Louis

Zukofsky.¹⁶ “It is time someone resurrected the sonnet from a form that has become an exercise,” Zukofsky wrote in his essay “American Poetry: 1920-1930”.¹⁷ That “someone” was Cummings, though Zukofsky thought his diction too “Shakespearean” in places, preferring a cadence more in tune with what he called the “actuality” of the time. It is more than probable that Zukofsky was also thinking of his own attempt at the form. Between 1928 and 1930 the 7th section of his long poem “*A*” took the shape of a 7-poem sonnet sequence which went some way towards removing most of what Williams held in contempt. Although Zukofsky retains the formal vestiges of a traditional sonnet, they are made to undergo a process of radical defamiliarisation. Thus in the first sonnet there is a rhyme scheme but it moves from Shakespearean (abab, cdcd) in the first two quatrains to a Petrarchan ‘envelope’ rhyme (effe) in the third before reverting to a Shakespearean rhyming couplet. There is no overall meter, though the fairly strict 10-syllable count retains the skeleton of iambic pentameter. In the course of the rest of the sequence the rhyme scheme of the octave remains solidly Shakespearean whereas the final six lines alternate between Shakespearean and a kind of bastardised Petrarchan until in the final two sonnets it breaks down completely.

What also breaks down is the poems’ syntax which becomes increasingly disjunctive, disturbed by the full panoply of interruptive punctuation – hyphens, dashes, question and exclamation marks, italics, parentheses, ellipses, colons, semi-colons etc. The overall effect is the opening up of a traditionally closed form. Content is led not by the traditional lyric subject but by letting language go. In places Zukofsky deliberately mocks the English sonnet’s traditional iambics: “Not in the say but in the sound’s – hey-hey –/ The way today, Die, die, die, die, tap, slow,” go two lines from sonnet 5. Too many poets have tended to privilege “the say” over “the sound’s – hey-hey –” to the extent that “the say” is still very much “the way to-day.” One of the reasons for this is that “apt users” have been reluctant to question or relinquish the lyric subject or ego, which still has too much of itself to impart. Indeed, Zukofsky seems to be playing with the lyric “I”, keeping it at bay completely in the first sonnet, punning with it in the second (the “I” is missing from the sign he sees – “LAUNDRY TO-LET” – with the implication that this is where the lyric subject belongs) before reluctantly including it in a stuttering refrain – “Then I” – which is never really allowed to get going. Much of the awkwardness in “*A*”-7 is felt in this missing letter which is overrun by “they”s and “we”s.

In a letter to Pound, Zukofsky claimed to have revolutionized the sonnet with “*A*”-7, though the effects of this revolution were not felt by his contemporaries (true to form, Pound was less than impressed, accusing Zukofsky of having written a canzone instead).¹⁸ What marks Zukofsky out, what is revolutionary about him, is his insistent formalism which recognises that form is a heightening of poetic artifice in which the lyric subject is not natural or given but a performance. This radical formalism links Zukofsky to many of the New York School poets and also

to many of the poets in this anthology. In his *The Development of the Sonnet*, Michael Spiller discusses the origins of the form, showing the varieties it took before it solidified, or indeed petrified, into what we are now over-familiar with. Yet even Spiller begins to insist on prescriptions – proportion, extension and duration – which, although he admits are observed only “by custom”, invalidate the sonnet if infringed. I’d like to think that the poets in this anthology are the true inheritors of the sonnet, returning it to the potentialities outlined by Spiller before the long process of petrification set in. Whilst mainstream commentators do permit alteration to the form, they often do so in the most limited of ways in spite of sanctioning, for instance, Hopkins’ curtal and caudated sonnets. Surely it’s time the formal innovations of the Twentieth Century were also registered within the sonnet’s lines, formal innovations which are not pursued for their own sakes but which are historically situated. Here I turn again to Berrigan. One of his techniques in *The Sonnets* is to use the line as a separate unit instead of as part of a narrative continuum. No longer is the sonnet about the tracing of an “argument” through its lines, an argument which also registers the passing of linear time. Instead, the discrete interchangeable line disrupts the passing of time within the poem as it also does the model of space the traditional sonnet represents. Berrigan’s sonnets are an example of poetry seriously attempting to take on board the changes ushered in by the scientific revolutions of the last century, changes that question fundamentally categories such as Spiller’s proportion, extension and duration, which belong to an older Newtonian universe. Charles Olson attempted the like using open field techniques. Berrigan’s use of closed form to achieve a similar end is a radical move. It also registers something of a paradox, announcing the sonnet as an impossibility whilst demonstrating its continued vitality, not unlike Beckett’s “I can’t go on, I’ll go on.”

IV

IN A DIFFERENT vein, the urge to “go on” with the sonnet also accounts for the popularity of the sonnet sequence. In this anthology I admit to favouring poems which are part of longer sequences and I have where possible been as generous as space has allowed with my selections (something which also marks this anthology off from many of the others). Linguistically innovative poets seem on the whole to opt for the sequence over the stand-alone sonnet and I think this can be explained by their historical preference for the accumulative and speculative poetic “project” as opposed to the singularity and poise of discrete lyric. The majority of the sonnets I have gathered are also written in free verse, Frost’s imaginary tennis net having been shredded long ago. Within this remit the anthology offers up a wide range of responses. Beverly Dahlen and Johan de Wit,

for instance, write prose sonnets, as does John Clarke whose extraordinary and largely unknown book, *In the Analogy*, presents us with sonnets which are a unique hybrid of poem and expository prose. They can also be seen as a very particular take on the tradition of the double sonnet as is also the case with Jonathan Brannen's *Deaccessioned Landscapes*, Allen Fisher's *Apocalyptic Sonnets* and Peter Jaeger's "Eckhart Cars." Indeed, many of the contributors engage with traditional aspects of the form. Spiller mentions how early sonnets often structured themselves around the list, which Stephen Rodefer's "Mon Canard" takes to an extreme in an obsessively extended *adnominatio* of address to a lover. A number of the contributors have returned to Shakespeare as a vehicle for innovation. Jackson Mac Low and Harryette Mullen both apply Oulipean S+7 techniques to the most well-known Shakespeare sonnets to very different effect, whilst Aaron Shurin and Steve McCaffery use the end words of Shakespeare's lines as prompts for new, again very diverse, work. Jen Bervin, on the other hand, constructs her own minimal poems out of a fading Shakespearean text.

Many of the poets in the anthology respond to the sonnet's characteristic shape. Jeremy Adler, Bob Cobbing, Mary Ellen Solt and Lawrence Upton do so through their involvement with concrete poetry, whilst David Miller's work here has affinities with Chinese brush painting. However, as I have already suggested, the sonnet is one of the most recognisable of poetic forms and many of the poets in the anthology seem to be deliberately distorting its familiar shape. Thus Piers Hugill's sonnets have a primarily vertical pull, whilst those of Ian Davidson and Mac Low are overwhelmingly horizontal. Lyn Hejinian's are baggy and capacious. This playing with the "look" of the traditional sonnet is also a challenge to its fabled elegance. Critics often talk of the sonnet's unique and beautiful asymmetry – the traditional octave and sestet of the Italian sonnet being just off kilter – but with too much "apt use" this fundamental instability at the form's heart has become blithely accepted and the form itself blandly "beautiful". The sonnets I have gathered are, I hope, beautiful but rather in the way Gertrude Stein defined it, as things "irritating annoying stimulating."¹⁹ I should also add that although this is an anthology of English language sonnets I have included a number of "translations", though a glance at Tim Atkins' Petrarch poems or Harry Gilonis' "North Hills" shows how far from normative translation we are. In a way, of course, all the poems in this anthology are translations. And some of the poems are not sonnets at all.

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2008

Footnotes

- 1 “Linguistically innovative”, awkward as it is, has for some time been preferred to terms like “avant-garde”, “experimental”, “neo-modernist” and even “post-avant”, though it is roughly cognate with them.
- 2 John Fuller, *The Sonnet* (London: Methuen, 1972)
- 3 This seems to be a common ploy in many discussions of Hopkins and the sonnet.
- 4 This phrase is from Peter Barry and Robert Hampson’s introduction to *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993) 5.
- 5 In a review of Tony Lopez’s *False Memory*, the late Andrew Crozier refers to Berrigan’s sonnets as if they were a new starting point, a kind of writing degree zero of the form. (See <http://jacketmagazine.com/11/lopez-by-crozier.html>) However, other first generation New York School poets also wrote sonnets. The first half of O’Hara’s *Collected Poems* is punctuated by them. Kenneth Koch wrote a number of sequences, including “The Railway Stationery” from *Thank You* and “Our Hearts” from *The Burning Mystery of Anna* in 1951. The three sections of John Ashbery’s “The Picture of Little J A in a Prospect of Flowers” from *Some Trees* can also be seen as distorted sonnets with their use of quatrains and off-rhyming couplets.
- 6 Ron Padgett, “On Edwin Denby” in *The Straight Line: Writings on Poetry and Poets* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000) 81.
- 7 See my comments on Berrigan towards the end of this introduction.
- 8 See *HOW(ever)*, Vol. 6, no. 2 (October 1990)
- 9 *HOW(ever)*, Vol. 6, no. 3 (Summer 1991)
- 10 Juliana Spahr, “Love Scattered, Not Concentrated Love” in *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 12:2 (2001) 98-120.
- 11 See for instance *The Indigo Book of Modern Australian Sonnets* ed. Geoff Page (Charwood, ACT: Ginnindera Press, 2003)
- 12 Ezra Pound, “Cavalcanti” in *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. TS Eliot, (London: Faber and Faber, 1985) 168.
- 13 William Carlos Williams, “The Modern Primer” in *The Embodiment of Knowledge* (New York: New Directions, 1974) 17.
- 14 Craig Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2003), xix-xx.
- 15 Michael Spiller, *The Development of the Sonnet* (London: Routledge, 1992) 2.
- 16 To Cummings and Zukofsky I’d add John Wheelwright, whose *Mirrors of Venus: A Novel in Sonnets* (1938) is a clarion call for the formally disruptive sequence: “When, with habitual knack in versifying or with superstitious shunning of all but conventional thoughts or notions, a poet comes across with ‘perfect’ sonnet after ‘perfect’ sonnet for any length of time, a sonnet sequence is a bore.” *Collected Poems of John Wheelwright*, ed. Alvin H. Rosenfeld (New York: New Directions, 1983), 63. Wheelwright’s “habitual knack” has echoes of Williams’ “apt use”.
- 17 Louis Zukofsky, “American Poetry: 1920-1930” in *Prepositions +: The Collected Critical Essays* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England; Wesleyan University Press, 2000) 143-144.
- 18 Zukofsky in a letter to Pound dated September 8, 1930. Pound’s reply is dated November 27. See *POUND/ZUKOFSKY: Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky*, ed. Barry Ahearn (London: Faber & Faber, 1987) 42 and 75.
- 19 Gertrude Stein, “Composition as Explanation” in *Writings and Lectures: 1909-1945*, ed. Patricia Meyerowitz (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971) 23.