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SUPER SIZE ME:
EXPERIMENTS WITH THE SHAPE AND SIZE
OF CONTEMPORARY SONNETS IN ENGLISH

Abstract. The paper discusses theoretical issues of the development of contemporary sonnets in English with special attention devoted to the size and shape of the poems. The sonnet's verbal space of fourteen decasyllabic lines arranged in quatrains and tercets undergoes a drastic re-arrangement in the texts of modern sonneteers. The most characteristic experiments with the form of the sonnet concern, among other things, expanding its structure by means of doubling the poem's length, redefining the concept of the line of verse and substituting a decasyllabic iambic pentameter line with a block of lines stripped off any metrical beat and often prosaic in rhythm or immuring the sonnet within other texts and thus multiplying its meanings. The other tendency operating in contemporary sonnets is hybridization of the form by means of amalgamating the verbal with the visual, a process which expands the sonnet generically and makes of it an inter-art form.

Key words: poetics; English literature; sonnet; experimental verse; space.

Since its creation by Giacomo da Lentini in the thirteenth century Italy the sonnet has always been a particularly bizarre literary form. For one thing, it is a relatively plain poetic form with its fourteen line verse, iambic pentameter rhythm, division into quatrains and sestet separated by a *volta* and a fixed rhyming pattern. Yet paradoxically, the sonnet's crystal clear rigidity of form is at the same time its greatest challenge and complication. This is so because the sonnet, unlike most literary forms, has a spatial DNA whose linguistic double helix disallowed for a long time any verbal or rhythmical mutations and kept its semantic puzzles locked in a rigid cage of fixed words. Edwin Morgan was right when he wrote his (mock)sonnet about

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poetry inspired by a famed phrase of John Cage: “I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry”:

I have to say poetry and is that nothing and am I saying it
 I am and I have poetry to say and is that nothing saying it
 I am nothing and I have poetry to say and that is saying it
 I that am saying poetry have nothing and it is I and to say
 And I say that I am to have poetry and saying it is nothing
 I am poetry and nothing and saying it is to say that I have
 To have nothing is poetry and I am saying that and I say it
 Poetry is saying I have nothing and I am to say that and it
 Saying nothing I am poetry and I have to say that and it is
 It is and I am and I have poetry saying say that to nothing
 It is saying poetry to nothing and I say I have and am that
 Poetry is saying I have it and I am nothing and to say that
 And that nothing is poetry I am saying and I have to say it
 Saying poetry is nothing and to that I say I am and have it¹

(Morgan, *Opening the Cage*, ll. 1–14)

The sonnet is a verbal cage which challenges the poet to fill in the box with a finite number of rhythmically ordered words, no more no less, and teases the reader into opening it of its meanings and connotations. Interestingly enough, the evolution of the sonnet over the ages has been a peculiar tug of war between those who feel comfortable within the confines of the fourteen-line iambic pentameter verbal cage and those who have always felt a need to explode the structure by means of experimentation with its sound, shape and size.² The present article is an attempt to investigate this tendency with greater detail and to observe possible consequences for the development of the sonnet as a poetic form with special attention paid to experimental innovations in the form and structure of the sonnet.

The size of the canonical sonnet was fixed by da Lentini and Petrarch and has always been a formal poetic axiom: fourteen lines of verse subdivided into two quatrains and two tercets. In English literature, however, the nomenclature was less precise and the sonnet acquired its standard meaning only after Elizabethan period.³ But with time, such a number of lines in the po-

¹ Edwin Morgan, *Collected Poems*, Carcanet Press, Manchester 1990, p. 178

² See for example such characteristic studies as Tom Chivers, *Adventures in Form: a Compendium of Poetic Forms, Rules and Constraints*, London: Penned in the Margins, 2012 or Annie Finch and Kathrine Varnes, *An Exaltation of Forms, Contemporary Poets Celebrate the Diversity of Their Art*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002.

³ The first and most important anthology of sonnets in English—*Tottel's Miscellany* (1557),

em turned out to be too limiting and many poets tried to expand the sonnet's boundaries. One of the famed examples comes from mid-twentieth century poet Anthony Hecht who opens his collection entitled *Stones* with a poem called "Double Sonnet." Here Hecht, in imitation of great composers like Mozart "writing a Sonata for two pianos"⁴, doubles his verbal instruments to bring out the total effect designed for the poem. Yet, his method is not a simple multiplication of lines but, if we scrutinize the poem's rhyming pattern, we notice that Hecht wants to emulate the sonnet's theme of "erotic conquest and failure"⁵ by the ebb and flow of rhymes both in double octaves and double sestets (abba abba abba abba, cde cde edc edc):

I recall everything, but more than all,
Words being nothing now, an ease that ever
Remembers her to my unfailing fever,
How she came forward to me, letting fall
Lamplight upon her dress till every small
Motion made visible seemed no mere endeavor
Of body to articulate its offer,
But more a grace won by the way from all
Striving in what is difficult, from all
Losses, so that she moved to discover
A practice of blood, as the gulls hover,
Winged with their life, above the harbor wall,
Tracing inflected silence in the tall
Air with a tilt of mastery and quiver
Against the light, as the light fell to favor
Her coming forth; this chiefly I recall.

It is part of pride, guiding the hand
At the piano in the splash and the passage
Of sacred dolphins, making numbers human
By sheer extravagance that can command
Pythagorean heavens to spell their message
Of some unlooked-for peace, out of the common;
Taking no thought at all that man and woman,
Lost in the trance of lamplight, felt the presage

as well as great collections like John Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* (1633) used the word sonnet to denote any short poem irrespective of its formal features of composition.

⁴ Jonathan F.S. Post, *A Thickness of Particulars: The Poetry of Anthony Hecht*, Oxford: OUP 2015, p. 21

⁵ Willard Spiegelman, *The Didactic Muse: Scenes of Instruction in Contemporary American Poetry*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 60

Of the unbidden terror and bone hand
 Of gracelessness, and the unspoken omen
 That yet shall render all, by its first usage,
 Speechless, inept, and totally unmanned.

(Hecht, Double Sonnet, ll. 1-28)

However a double sonnet is not the form of the sonnet which is the most extended in length. Admittedly, the poets today exceed virtually all limits of scope traditionally associated with the sonnet as a poetic form. Maurice Scully's "Sonnet," for example, runs for sixty nine lines of which some of them are not even finished. They are divided into fourteen block units of different syllable count, rhythmical design and semantic content. It seems that with such a structure Scully aims at reformulating the concept of a line of verse as a separate meaningful unit. In canonical Renaissance sonnets of William Shakespeare for example end-stopped lines dominate and enjambement is very rarely used. In Scully's experimental sonnets a block of lines becomes an equivalent of a single line of verse in the Renaissance sonnet. What is also characteristic, these units are not identical in length and sometimes run for seven lines like in line-block 4:

From your previous life you have brought
 to this life 502 catties of sesame oil
 & 100 copper coins. You are straightforward
 & talented. You will be able to acquire
 a lot of money from many sources but will
 have a minor accident.

Dig down : root haze. Look up: blue
 fibre. It's wonderful to hear the leaves
 on the trees again though. To get into
 bed beside you as excited as this.
 Years of grinding technique roll back
 to be imploded through one or two pages
 of pure fire. Never thought...

The clutter of yr shed is different
 from yr English language, no? Yes.
 Down on that track I definitely tried
 to get a glimpse of what I thought
 effable: crossing the dateline into
 a clock. Rip.

Child whimpering, adapt, tangible flanges
 of a language that held him in: you'll
 tell me, I said. Who did. You did. Nipped

in the bud. They said they might. Right.
Are nipples oak galls?

(Scully, Sonnet, ll. 1-4)

Postmodern literature abounds in all different forms of hybridization of texts. Therefore, several contemporary experimental sonneteers seem to try to blur the line between poetry and prose and expand their sonnets to extreme limits of practically infinite number of lines. Aaron Shurin's "Involuntary Lyric CXLVII" runs for forty nine lines which, like in Scully's sequence, are also organized into fourteen blocks but this time these are units of fragmented prose utterances. On face value, what makes such poems sonnets is the number of units (fourteen) and the authorial intention to label such poems as exactly the sonnet:

One wants love and assuaged desire, one wants the hair-breadth
spin of foptails, the sprouty droop of rattlesnake grass,
shuffling whire of the blue jay's thick flight, metallic hoot of
the *koukouvaya* owl predawn Crete still heat no other sound
except

small lap of the Libyan Sea. . . . One gets these and murder in

the first degree for killing an administrator, shit pile for

shoeshine, spare change for square foot, grainy lust of the 2

a.m. bar impenetrable hide bound, the dead letters in their

special nowhere office, the dead air quiet, still. . . .

One wants a first person tighter than betrayal, or a plural shiftier

than signage, one needs spectator heels for walking now

to balance the hump of should or finds pennies on the

sidewalk to play over eyes, take care!

One sees as if through tinted lenses elegant continuance and

perforating dis-ease,

hallucinogenic pine trees and swallows in loopy unrest. . . .

(Shurin, Involuntary Lyrics CXLVII, ll. 1-5)

The opening quatrain cited above retains elements of poetic organization in its consistent repetition of anaphoric “One wants” which alternates with “One gets” and “One sees” or “one needs.” The quatrain, however, does not even terminate with an end-stopped line to mark the unit but runs on to the next line which itself is unfinished in its structure. Yet, Shurin’s poem, like most contemporary sonnets, becomes more of a game with a reader who should be competent. The Roman numerals in the title of the poem are supposed to relate this sonnet to the most famous sequence of such lyrics ever written, the sonnets of William Shakespeare. As one reviewer of Shurin’s cycle aptly commented: “this collection experiments with an ambitious and intriguing constraint: the end-words of each ‘Involuntary Lyric’ mirrors (and sometimes refracts) the end-words of a correspondingly numbered Shakespeare sonnet.”⁶ An intertextual sophisticated game with the reader is one of the most fundamental strategies of contemporary sonnet writers today. It allows them to, as it were, validate their texts by incorporating them into time-honoured tradition and by redoubling the semantic complexity of the encoded senses.

Another variation of contemporary innovative sonnets is the so-called immured or walled-in sonnet created by a Russian-American poet Philip Nikolayev.⁷ The strategy used by Nikolayev in his poems is similar as he also tries to blend poetry and prose. But this time the two forms coexist and are meant to interact mutually in the formation of the final message. Paradoxically however, as Jack Alun notices in an interview with Nikolayev, the immured sonnet is an interesting manifestation of the specific tension between improvisation and poetic craft which we observe in contemporary poetry nowadays:

One of the most interesting ways you “bend and stretch” form, use it to surprise the reader, is in your use of the “immured sonnet.” By placing a poem (the rhyming sonnet) within a piece of continuous prose, you force a juxtaposition which alters the meanings in and of each of the forms,

⁶ <http://jacketmagazine.com/31/perez-shurin.html> (accessed 15 May 2016)

⁷ In the same interview Nikolayev explained this form and the context in which it came to being: “The idea of sonnet immurement occurred to me in a flash—it had something to do with musings about Malevich’s Black Square—I didn’t apply it right away, but the idea would recur and urge me, so eventually I went and made the first immured sonnet. I mean I not infrequently have ideas and some sense of direction when I write, so one thing leads to the next as it always used to. Sometimes I think that it would be interesting to write this or that kind of poem, dream up an idea for a text, which may or may not materialize eventually—but what’s there to preplan? This is merely what we call ‘the imagination at work’.”

and yet you offer a single form as meaning and as aesthetic experience. Surely, this is a much more preplanned exercise on your part, going beyond ear, spontaneity and inspiration, encompassing a greater element of calculation on your part. Otherwise, aren't we left with a kind of poetry of accident where one text, so to speak, is placed at random beside another?⁸

It is true however that the immured sonnets alert us to some of the most important questions of modern art namely to the perennial dilemma: what is poetry's value if it does not follow any rules of decorum? Is it just recycling the already used materials we know from literary tradition? Who or what is really essential in contemporary poetry, or is it only how the poems are made that truly matters? The immured sonnets of Nikolayev pose all kinds of questions as even the poet himself admits that spontaneity and randomness constitute an essential part of modern poet's artistic repertoire. His walled-in sonnets seem to be a clear confirmation of it:

Backchat backed, back out. Backset bagged, baked. Basked basket, beached. Beget begged, bequeath, beset biased bigot, big shot, booked & boozed bouquet boxed, bucked bucket, busied, buzzed-faced facet. Faggot, faked faucet, fished. *They say our sense of the absurd in life* Fixed, fogged, fused, fussed & paced. *stems from a backward step we all perform*, Packed packet, passed. { Pass out in our hesitant minds from time to time, peached! } Peaked, peak out! Pecked, *permitting thus ourselves to see ourself* peg out picked. Picket. Pick out piked, *from on objective distance. Finding no* pissed pocket (\$). Poised, poked, posed, *justification, reason butts a wall.* Posit. Pouched, puked, pushed. Viscid, vised *The mathematics that describe our fall* visit. Voiced, vouched. Carbon, carbon *from stable meaning through a vertigo* 12, carbon 13, carbon 14, carven Cervin, *of the absurd are eminently clear*, chaffiest, cheapest, chiefest, chippiest, Chop-*becoming clearer still by drawing nearer.* piest, chubbiest, chuffiest, cobbiest *Self-scrutiny with its magnifying glass* copyist! Corban, Cuban cubist. Cuppiest, *indicts each segment of the soul at issue.* Gabbiest gabfest: gappiest, goofiest... *But sense is simply sex, and when I kiss you*, safest! Sappiest, scabbiest, seepiest! *hot hallelujahs smother each alas!* Shabbiest scarfpin scorpion. Serbian, sharpen shearpin! Soapiest sophist, soppiest, soupiest, suavest, sweepiest, zippiest bigtoe. Busty facti, Fausta? Feisty feste, Fichte! Fie, fiesta! Fusty Pashto pasta paste, pasty pesto, pesty pigsty, piste Pistoia, poste Pushtu. Vasty vesta, vestee Vista, Maestro!

(Nikolayev, *The Cure*, ll. 1-14 (20))

⁸ <http://www.argotistonline.co.uk/Nikolayev%20interview.htm> (accessed 21 May 2016)

In some sense the sonnets written, or one should rather say, created by Jen Bervin are also submerged. To be more precise, they rather resurface on the page out of the verbal surge of Shakespeare's canonical sonnets and their combination of letters and phrases. Bervin reveals her palimpsestic technique already in the title of her sequence "Nets," which is a truncated title of Shakespeare's cycle "Sonnets." Although the practice of working with *used* or *found* object or texts has a long-running tradition in modern art,⁹ Bervin's attempt is especially interesting here as it points to one of the most fundamental features of contemporary sonnet writing: its foregrounding of the visual aspect of the poem, its pattern or shape:

Against my love shall be as **I am** now,
 With Time's injurious hand crushed and o'erworn;
 When hours have drained his blood and filled his brow
 With lines and wrinkles; when his youthful morn
 Hath travelled on to age's steepy night;
 And all those beauties whereof now he's king
 Are **vanishing, or vanished** out of sight,
 Stealing away the treasure of his spring;
 For such a time do I now fortify
 Against confounding age's cruel knife,
 That he shall never cut from memory
 My sweet love's beauty, though my lover's life:
 His beauty shall **in these black** lines be seen,
 And they shall live, and he in them still green.

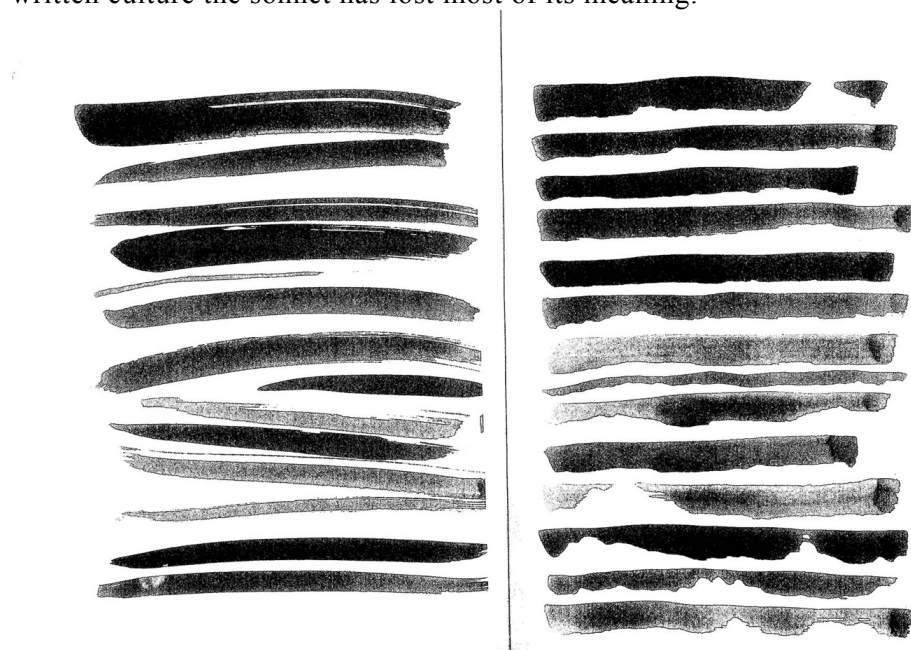
(Shakespeare/Bervin, Sonnet 63, ll. 1-14)

In her differentiation between the shades of words Bervin creates an apparently three dimensional effect of depth in which Shakespeare's text faded out,

⁹ In his review of Bervin's „Nets” Philip Metres discusses this problem stating that “one thinks of Jackson Mac Low’s and John Cage’s use of mesostics (a kind of “writing through”) of the modernists such as Stein, Barnes, Pound, Joyce, and others. Yet their techniques, often aleatory and chance in nature, don’t have the same intentionality, purpose, or look on the page as Bervin’s. There have been all sorts of modernist and postmodernist writings that use “found” language or even whole poems, such as: Kenneth Koch’s parodies of Robert Frost (“Mending Sump”) and William Carlos Williams (“Variations on a Theme by Dr. Williams”); Ted Berrigan’s long poem, “White-Out,” composed with typewriter correction to cover most of the words of an old novel; John Tranter’s “Blackout,” derived from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* blended with an essay by Joan Didion and portions of Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. Still, Bervin’s poems have a kind of gravity whose weight hefts closer to the works of Susan Howe, though Howe’s poems tend (though not exclusively) to work through forgotten—not ubercanonical—voices in history.” <http://jacketmagazine.com/25/metr-berv.html> (accessed 22 May 2016)

bleached by constant use or abuse of countless readers with their (mis)readings of the original sense: "I am vanishing or vanished in these black lines." Like a truly modern eco-poet Bervin recycles Shakespeare's words creating in this way her own texts out of a whitewashed sequence of the Bard.

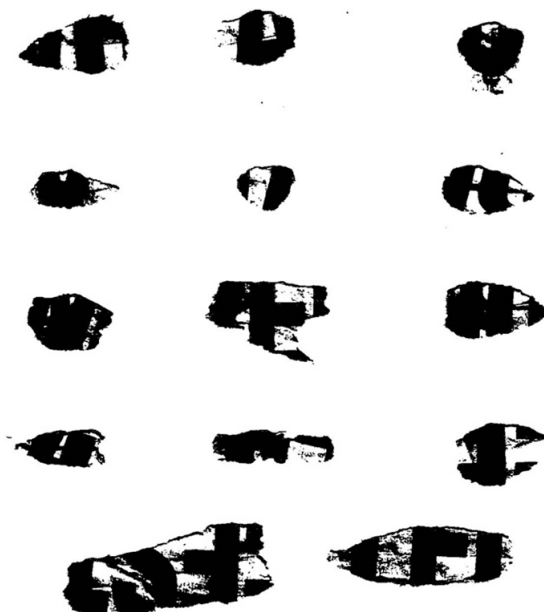
Another interesting method of crossing formal limitations of the sonnet is a tendency of contemporary experimental sonnet writers to merge or enhance the verbal with the visual. We can observe this process when predominantly sonic effects based on the phonetic sounds of words especially in their final position of rhyming pattern, cease to dominate the sonnet. In turn, they are sometimes replaced by shapes and patterns totally deprived of any sound and verbal sense as if to suggest that in our time and age of visual rather than written culture the sonnet has lost most of its meaning.



Of course, a motivated reader will be able to find in such poems some interpretative patterns like darker spots at the end of every line of David Miller's "Untitled (Visual Sonnet)" which possibly "allude" to the rhymes in traditional sonnets. Also, the fourteen brush strokes of Miller's poem reflect the axiomatic number of lines in a typical sonnet. However, the other elements of the text/pattern like the shades of gray of successive lines and their thickness and length are totally haphazard and, so it seems, eventually semantically meaningless.

A similar situation can be observed in Lawrence Upton's "Sonnet" which is a sonnet insofar as it contains fourteen holes ripped out from a sheet of paper which covers a text with a pattern hidden beneath it. But the palimpsestic technique employed by Upton offers not many clues to a meaningful interpretation. It seems that the only function of such sonnets is its autotelicity which draws the reader's attention to its form, its being a sonnet about the sonnet. In the long run, however, such sonnets might also suggest to us that the traditional sonnet based exclusively on language has lost all its meaningful potential and needs a new hybrid form yet to be discovered or created.

Sonnet



Linguistically innovative poetry of the past decades has boosted renewed interest in the re-creation of the sonnet as a poetic form. However, its canonical boundaries which limit its space to fourteen decasyllabic lines appear to be too confining for modern poets. A cursory overview of contemporary English sonnets clearly shows that the formal limitations have been

transcended by two major poetic strategies. The first strategy is to expand the form: to make the sonnet longer by redoubling its length (Hecht), or by redefining the concept of a line of verse, the basic unit of the sonnet and expanding it to a block of words consisting of several sentences (Scully), or by rarifying the dense poetic verbal substance with elements of prose (Shurin, Nikolayev), or still by submerging or immuring the sonnet within or beneath another text and thus redoubling its semantics by means of such intertextual interaction (Nikolayev). The other strategy for reviving the full potential of the sonnet today is to combine its verbal substance with the visual elements of modern art so potent and widespread in contemporary culture (Upton, Miller). Such inter-art experiments aim at the same artistic effect of expanding or multiplying the semantic fields of the two amalgamated text which are eventually integrated into a new hybrid form with combined meaning by means of superimposition or palimpsestic recovery.

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EKSPERYMENTY Z KSZTAŁTEM I ROZMIAREM
WSPÓŁCZESNEGO SONETU W ANGIELSKIM

Streszczenie

Artykuł podejmuje złożoną tematykę rozwoju gatunkowego współczesnego sonetu angielskiego ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem problematyki formalnego ukształtowania tego typu wierszy, przede wszystkim jego rozmiarów oraz interakcji, w jakie wchodzi z innymi formami sztuki. Najbardziej charakterystyczną tendencją, z jaką mamy obecnie do czynienia, jest między innymi wydłużanie struktury sonetu poprzez podwajanie liczby linijek, redefiniowanie pojęcia wersu ze struktury zbudowanej z pojedynczej linijki do blokowego układu nawet kilku zdań, często pozbawionego cech poetyckiego wyrażania, czy wreszcie zanurzenie sonetu w słownej substancji innego tekstu nierzadko stworzonego z dowolnie dobranych sekwencji słów bądź fragmentów prozy. Drugą istotną cechą jest łączenie sonetu jako utworu literackiego ze sztukami wizualnymi i wyzyskiwanie potencjału intertekstualnego wynikającego z takiej amalgamacji odległych sobie tekstów artystycznych.

Streścił Sławomir Wąciór

Słowa kluczowe: poetyka; poezja angielska; sonet; poezja eksperymentalna; przestrzeń w literaturze.