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## **A Doubtful Freedom: Untidy sonnets and a contemporary poetics**

### Abstract

What is it about the sonnet that contemporary poets feel compelled to revisit, while also deviating from its conventional attributes? Even as the sonnet was first being adapted from the Italian language into English it immediately sounded different from its Italian models. Thomas Wyatt translated Petrarch in ways that were somewhat idiosyncratic, and that suited his particular aims as a poet. He did not always write in what we now think of as conventional poetic metre or rhythms. His sonnets indicate a reluctance to find easy solutions to the problem of writing truthfully, and a recognition that poetic form often has to give way to various kinds of awkwardness if it is to register the sometimes messy travails of thought and feeling. Almost five centuries later, in the age of so-called ‘free verse’, the sonnet retains a particular allure – and continues to invite what one may call discrepancy. The ongoing experiment with the form may suggest that it has a close relationship to certain fundamental poetic compulsions. It asserts itself persistently and is, more than a set of explicitly identifiable properties, a poetic centre of gravity that draws in even the untidiest of its relations. Two poets here investigate the untidiness of English sonnets in their earliest manifestations, and explore how – in their own recent work – they have used and adapted the form for their own purposes.

### Biographical notes

Paul Munden is Postdoctoral Research Fellow (Poetry & Creative Practice) at the University of Canberra. He is General Editor of *Writing in Education* and *Writing in Practice*, both published by the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE), of which he is Director. He has worked as conference poet for the British Council and edited *Feeling the Pressure: Poetry and science of climate change. Analogue/Digital*, a volume of his new and selected poems, was published in 2015, and a new collection, *The Bulmer Murder* will be published by Recent Work Press in April 2017.

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poetry, including *Burnt Umber* (UWAP, 2016) and *Gallery of Antique Art* (Recent Work Press, 2016) and five poetry chapbooks. His collection, *Six Different Windows* won the 2014 Western Australian Premier's Book Awards (poetry) and he was a finalist in the 2014 international *Aesthetica* Creative Writing Competition. He was also shortlisted for the 2013 Montreal International Poetry Prize and commended in the 2016 Newcastle Poetry Prize. In 2015-16 he undertook an Australia Council for the Arts Residency in the BR Whiting Studio in Rome.

Keywords

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## 1. Free verse and the untidy sonnet

Contemporary English language poetry all around the world is now predominantly written in so-called ‘free verse’. Free verse comes in such a vast multiplicity of forms that the 100-year-old debate about whether the term means anything very specific for English-language poetry continues. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century TS Eliot helped inaugurate this debate by commenting that *Vers libre* ‘does not exist’ (1991: 183) and that ‘there is no freedom in art’ (1991: 184). More recently, in 1933, William Carlos Williams – one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s finest exponents of free verse – stated that ‘there is no such thing ... It is a contradiction in terms’ (2015: 104), and he repeated this comment in 1961 (see Beyers 2001: 14).

Even advocates of the term ‘free verse’ often use it, as Chris Beyers observes, so that it ‘merely designates what a poem is not’ (2001: 15). For example, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics and Poetry* begins its definition of the form by stating that it ‘is poetry without a combination of a regular metrical pattern and a consistent line length’ before observing that ‘the exact denotation of the term has long been disputed’ (2012: 522). And, as perhaps every contemporary poet knows, free verse is also usually characterised by the absence of a regular rhyming pattern and frequently makes use of vernacular speech rhythms, as opposed to the more artificially stressed rhythms of formal poetry. Free verse may, in the final determination, be ‘free’ only because every such poem has the potential for its author to make it in its own separate image rather than adopting a predetermined form.

However, the differences and similarities between the rhythms and shapes of free verse and formal poetry are not always cut and dried. With this observation in mind, we decided to begin a project called ‘Untidy Sonnets’. We agreed that we would each write 28 ‘sonnets’ for the project (and perhaps more, depending on our success), all of which poems, while being potentially identifiable as sonnets, would depart from the traditional form in one way or another – or in a multiplicity of ways at once – employing a combination of formalist and free verse poetic techniques.

We decided to do this because we both write poetry in a considerable variety of forms – including prose poetry, a form that is very ‘free’ indeed, requiring as it does no metre, rhyme or line breaks. We wished to extend our exploration of poetry’s formal resources, and to expand our conceptualisation of what a sonnet might be. The challenge of using the traditional poetic form of the sonnet appealed to us because it involved returning to the idea of poetry not only as a formal but, to some extent, a conventional mode of writing, and we wanted to play with and, where necessary, subvert these conventions in order to make new work. And we wished to have an escape route. We wanted to be able to make our sonnets fit our own contemporary conceptions of what that form might do and look like, rather than being corralled by preconceptions.

Experiments with the sonnet have been legion in English, particularly in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, and our project claims to break new ground only insofar as we produce new and original poetic works that to some extent illuminate what the sonnet form may be and mean. In devising our project, we were also cognisant of how flexibly the

sonnet form was treated by its most early exponent in the English language, Thomas Wyatt.

## 2. Wyatt's untidy sonnets

One of the English language's finest early poets, Thomas Wyatt (1503-42), is commonly credited with introducing the sonnet into the English language. His translations of Petrarch's Italian sonnets helped to establish a new literary language in England, which would soon be taken up by the likes of Sidney, Marlowe and Shakespeare. As Stanley Wells observes, 'Petrarch exerted a colossal influence on the English sonnet in general, and on Shakespeare in particular, if indirectly' (2004: 40), yet Wyatt translated Petrarch in ways that were somewhat idiosyncratic, and that suited his particular aims as a poet. And he did not always write in what we now think of as conventional poetic metre or rhythms.

Susan Brigden writes of his well-known translation, 'My galy charged with forgetfulness', that 'Wyatt transmutes his source, and tellingly. Where in Petrarch's allegory an endless wind, "*di sospir, di speranze et di desio*" [of sighs, hopes and desire] rips the sail, Wyatt imagines an oxymoronic "trusty ferefulness"' (2012: 3). The sonnet opens:

My galy charged with forgetfulness,  
Thorough sharpe sees, in wynter nyghtes doeth pas,  
Twene Rock and Rock : and eke myn enemy, alas,  
That is my Lorde, sterith with cruelnes.  
And every owre a thought in redines :  
As tho that deth were light in suche a case:  
An endles wynd doeth tere the sayll a pase,  
Of forced sightes and trusty ferefulness. (1964: 26)

This marvellous sonnet is more rhythmical and conventional in its use of recognisable metre than many of Wyatt's other works, but even so the long third line, 'Twene Rock and Rock : and eke myn enemy, alas,' betrays Wyatt's interest in rhythmic affects that are not dictated by the iambic pentameter that governs – in a loose and untidy way – most of the other lines in this poem. Overall, both in his translations of Petrarch and his original poetry, he demonstrated what Nicola Shulman refers to as a 'customary disdain for metrical smoothness' (2013: 74). Shulman also writes of how Wyatt 'wrote brilliantly about being stuck ... enjoy[ing] the opportunities for wit that a world of paralysing contradictions could bring' (84), and such contradictions are evident in his metrical forms and sometimes obdurate-seeming poetic language.

In considering Wyatt's poetry and his translations, it is not just Wyatt's capacity to be disdainful of 'metrical smoothness' that is significant. There is a deeper issue at stake, which is the way in which established literary forms and conventions often contain within them the seeds of their own dismantling. Accepted literary forms and genres, such as the sonnet, are typically regularised through use – but they have histories that speak of less regular beginnings, of poetic experimentation and of unauthorised texts.

Even the sonnets of William Shakespeare, authoritative and exemplary as they appear to be in the English-language sonnet tradition, were, as Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells comment, printed from ‘a transcript made by someone other than the author’ (Shakespeare 2004: 10).

In Wyatt’s case, Chris Stamatakis writes of ‘this mutability ... by which verbal forms give way to verbal transformations’ (2012: 5). An example of such a transformation is Wyatt’s sonnet, ‘Behold love thy power’. The Egerton manuscript, which preserves the most authoritative versions of 123 of Wyatt’s poems, some of them in his own hand, includes this poem. By the time it was published in 1557 – more than a decade after Wyatt’s death, in the first anthology of English poetry, generally known as *Tottel’s Miscellany* – it had been significantly transformed, probably by an editor who worked without Wyatt’s authority.

The history of the different renditions of the poem – as Stamatakis points out (2012:197), the poem is a version of Petrarch’s *Rima* 121 – is complex, and we will not delve into that history in any detail. However, in the Egerton manuscript’s version it is what Stamatakis refers to as ‘in a polysemous, plural, and undecided state’. It is also in the 15-line rondeau form, derived from the French, rather than the sonnet form, and begins:

Behold love thy power how she dispiseth,  
my great payne how litle she regardeth  
the holy oth whereof she taketh no cure  
broken she hath and yet she bideth sure  
right at her ease & litle she dredeth  
Wepened thou art and she vnarmed sitteth  
to the disdaynfull her liff she ledeth  
To me spitefull w<sup>th</sup>oute cause or mesur  
Behold love

(quoted in Stamatakis 2012: 197)

By the time the poem is printed in *Tottels’ Miscellany* it has been transformed into a more conventional, normalised and decided poem, and has become a 14-line sonnet entitled ‘Request to Cupide, for reuenge of his vnkinde loue’. The first five lines of the revised version demonstrate the nature of changes throughout:

Behold, Love, thy power how she despiseth:  
My grieuous payn how little she regardeth.  
The solemn othe, whereof she takes no cure,  
Broken she hath: and yet, she bydeth sure,  
Right at her ease, and litle thee she dredeth.

(Wyatt 1557: 69-70)

Many of Wyatt’s poems as originally written retain a tensile, sinewy sense of still-coming-into-being. They grapple overtly with formal issues and frequently eschew metrical neatness, partly in order to register the shocks of the experiences his poems address – issues around love, desire, loss, loneliness and powerlessness feature prominently. They indicate a reluctance to find easy solutions to the problem of

writing truthfully, and a recognition that poetic form often has to give way to various kinds of awkwardness if it is to register the sometimes messy travails of thought and feeling.

Wyatt's early sonnets insist on the protean nature of the sonnet form and they also emphasise the undecidability of a form that so often appears fixed and regularised. His poems demonstrate that even as the sonnet was first being adapted from the Italian language into English it immediately sounded different from its Italian models. It was also inherently untidy in its beginnings, to the extent that not all sonnets were 14 lines in length (even Shakespeare's playful Sonnet XCIX has 15 lines) and it has remained a form which invites what one may call discrepancy – which is to say that the sonnet form has been adapted by many poets to their own ends throughout its long history.

### 3. The contemporary context

It is difficult to say precisely why, in the age of free verse, the sonnet retains its particular allure. It is partly because the form has been so widely used in English and has produced so many fine poems, and it is partly due to the form's economy and elegance. A tightly-constructed 14-line poem that divides neatly into a first section of eight lines and a second section of six lines has an allure of approachability, and even of simplicity, however hard it may be to bring off in practice. And the difficulty of writing a very good sonnet is also part of this allure. Every individual sonnet represents a particular formal challenge.

Many contemporary poets have re-energised the sonnet in recent decades, so that it is a form that neither Wyatt nor Shakespeare would always recognise. As a result, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is once again in flux, no less than it was in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. The use of the sonnet by women has been of crucial importance in this respect. Jade Craddock points out that 'the twentieth and twenty-first century female-authored sonnet represents a vital and genuine countertradition' and contends that '[i]n the narrative of the female-authored sonnet tradition, the twentieth and twenty first centuries stand as the equivalent of the sixteenth century to the Anglophone male sonnet' (2013: 287-88).

One contemporary poet who has made extended use of the sonnet, and of sonnet sequences, is Moira Egan, an American poet resident in Rome. Her work often turns on its head the tradition of male amorousness and desire so much associated with the sonnet in its early years. One of her sonnets begins:

Imagine that he's never had a wife,  
that these illicit kisses are our own,  
that, all right, if we're neither of us home  
we are invisible despite the lights  
that glimmer on our half-clad bodies, white  
with winter's boredom.

(2010: 87)

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This is characteristic of Egan's work in being serious, involved and slightly detached all at once, and in it the female protagonist is wholly her own person. The strategically imperfect rhyming does not disguise the technical brilliance and ease of this poem (and, in fact, contributes to it), and while it is, in technical terms, a fairly traditional sonnet, its tonality and manner of speaking define it as embedded in the new century.

Paul Muldoon, too, has made much use of the sonnet form, using an elastic sonnet structure, where his preference for a highly variable line length and his particular, semi-observed use of half-rhyme has become one of his poetic signatures. He has settled on his chosen, adapted sonnet elements and overall form (two four-line stanzas followed by two of six), and uses it all as a seemingly natural mode of thought. Seamus Heaney's 'Glanmore Sonnets' (1979) are among his many conventional forays into the form, but notable too is the series of 12-line poems called 'Squarings' in his 1991 volume *Seeing Things*, referred to by Dan Chiasson as 'not-quite-sonnets' (2013: n.pag.).

Some contemporary poets have used the sonnet sequence to contain a variety of voices. Examples include Richard Murphy's *The Price of Stone* (1985), where each sonnet is 'spoken' by a different building, and Iggy McGovern's *A Mystic Dream of 4* (2013), where individual sonnets, based on the life of William Rowan Hamilton, are in the voices of Hamilton's relatives, colleagues and friends. In both of these cases, the sonnets are all of a type, with their chosen structure strictly adhered to throughout.

While it is hard to generalise about the contemporary sonnet from a handful of examples, there is no doubt that the English-language sonnet is once more under investigation by poets of all kinds.

#### **4. The 'Untidy Sonnets' project**

In devising our 'Untidy Sonnets' project we decided that we would adhere to a few rules in writing these works. They were to be between 12 and 16 lines, for example, and each would have some form of the sonnet's conventional 'turn' or volta – although not necessarily in line nine. Additionally, we agreed that we would employ the iambic pentameter in some of our poems, although not necessarily in all of them or throughout all of a poem that used the metre. We also agreed that we might write all or parts of some poems in 'free verse'. And we agreed that some of the poems would explore the themes of love and desire so closely associated with the sonnet.

Six months into the project, some 68 sonnets have already been written and we have already broken our agreed rules (perhaps these 'rules' were destined to be untidy themselves.) One of us has made repeated use of iambic pentameter (a line of mostly ten syllables with occasionally truncated iambic feet, a varied pattern of casual rhyme, and a fragmentation of lines in order to make use of particular rhythmic and spatial effects and to 'spread' the rhyme). The other has made little use of this metre, finding it too far removed from the rhythms of contemporary expression. His favoured

approach has been to relax the sonnet in terms of line length and rhyme, and to retain a sense of cohesion by carefully tuning in to certain patterns of thought. The definitions of other rules have been stretched, most notably the idea that each of our poems would be 12 to 16 lines.

In many of the poems, lines are fragmented so that two or more short lines need to be counted together in order to comprise the mandated, more general line-length of the poem. The effect of this fragmentation is to render the sonnet form less immediately visible and, to some extent, to break it apart. The same is true when a radical variety of line lengths is used within a poem. In 'He marvels – ' there is a line of just one word, used for particular effect – not least in the placing of rhyming syllables as close to one another as possible, and also to enact the speed and movement of the moment the poem evokes:

he can feel  
her flex again and vanish  
fish-  
like into the night.

In pursuing a form as short as the sonnet, the challenge is frequently to compress or contract one's thoughts or mode of expression. We have sometimes taken this to an extreme, as a way of manipulating the form. In re-reading certain contemporary sonneteers, we were intrigued in particular by Oliver Reynolds' 'Seven little sonnets on Frederick the Great' (1987), where the line-length – and number of lines – is radically reduced. Heaney's contracted 'Squarings' were also a general influence on some of our 'miniature sonnets', which typically have only nine lines. In the sequence, 'Sightings', each diminutive poem glimpses rather than studies an Australian bird (an authentic reflection on how birds are often encountered). It nevertheless contains an element of surprise, a movement – either by the bird, or within the poet's understanding – that functions as a volta:

*Superb Lyrebird*

You shy away, trek deeper  
into the forest, scratching  
for scratchings in the mulch  
of twigs, echoing  
your own progress –

rustling up a dusty music  
from every scuff of dirt  
and giving voice  
to the skiffle of your feet.

(Barrington Tops, December 2013)

Untidiness has led to an unruliness, too. To repeat words (e.g. 'scratching') within poems so small might seem perverse, but it became a feature of the sequence. And while this extreme poetic compression began as a one-off solution to a poetic

problem, it quickly became a structure that worked repeatedly as particular mode of thought and expression – much as in any sonnet sequence.

Increasingly, these compressed sonnets revert to a kind of (imperfect) rhyme, though never to regular iambic feet or even to a regular syllabic count. With only nine lines in play, the title is sometimes incorporated as a tenth line within the rhyme scheme. The line structure is 5/4, with the volta – or shift in focus – tending to straddle the stanza break. In several, it is a physical *snagging* that demands some pause for thought.

His deceptive memory  
has it as Good Friday  
when he pulled up outside  
the reserve and saw  
how a kangaroo  
had jumped the wire but  
somehow caught its foot  
and hung there like a hide.  
The vision is still raw.  
That much at least is true.

For one of us, a personal rule became that rhyme, if used, had to inhabit the whole poem. However, much else was allowed to give in such poems – although the ‘give’ is typically driven by a formal compulsion of its own. In ‘Carnarvon Gorge’, for instance, where the poet/persona recounts a challenging hike, he begins by having it ‘all worked out: the mileage of adventure/ and the necessary weight of water/ that would metamorphose from pure burden/ into relief.’ Then doubt sets in, with a fragmentation of structure to match:

Was I half-way there?  
Half way home?  
Either  
way, I was exhausted,  
panicked.  
I scooped  
a hatful of water from the river  
over my head.  
Was this it?  
My limit?

These fragmented ‘lines’ represent only four of the sonnet’s 14. Its appearance as a sonnet, apart from anything else, is decidedly untidy.

If, in mathematical terms, these poems were analysed for their resemblance to traditional sonnets, many would fare badly. ‘Heron Island’, which is a single poem, has 56 lines, the shortest of which is only three syllables. It is constructed in four 14-line sections, each section using a single rhyme for every line, albeit loosely. The volta takes place in the shift from one section to another in what is in effect a quad-sonnet.



As the above poem makes clear, ‘love’ is one of our prominent tropes, reflecting the way in which sonnets have so often been connected to the themes of love and loss. This raises an interesting question: some of our poems may emphasise or imply a desire for honesty and truthfulness, but what kind of priority is this within a project where technical matters are to the fore? A calculated decision to explore the themes of love and loss is different from the way in which such personal material might otherwise emerge in poetry. What do we have here? History re-explored, prompted by the sonnet experiment? A touch of Hardy’s *veteris vestigia flammae*? (There are poems that apparently court such a position, with a semi-archaic feel to match: ‘even this late foray/ could not re-petal that bruised, regathered bloom.’) Fiction? We are not sure, even as collaborative partners in the project.

What is telling, however, is the way that rules are dissolved at crucial moments. In one untitled poem, the iambic pentameter fails in a revealing manner:

What it was is hard to summarise:  
‘love’? Perhaps. And yet,  
on any ordinary day I’d call it failure –

Whether consciously or not, the project has produced poems in which highly wrought language co-exists with a contemporary vernacular:

I stop the car and see that too much driving  
has truly addled me – it’s a storm arriving  
in a blue and purple, lustrous gown of air.

In some circumstances such juggling of tonality may seem questionable, but in the context of the ‘untidy sonnet’ the poetic strategy makes sense.

## 5. Conclusion

It is too early to make a decisive statement about our relationship with our ‘untidy’ sonnets; questions remain as to why they already seem such a persuasive way of approaching (and reformulating) poetry. More generally, we are still pondering what it is about the sonnet form that contemporary poets feel compelled to revisit, while stretching and, to some extent, even alienating it.

The poet Pete Morgan first became known in the early 1970s for his inventive structures and idiosyncratic rhythmic flair. He closed his final collection, *Autumn Light* (2005), with a highly traditional sonnet, ‘Afterthought’. It is similar in some respects to Hardy’s ‘Afterwards’ in modestly yet poignantly drawing attention to the poet’s particular strengths. Its stated desire is for the reader not to be overly aware of its construction, but the effort is nevertheless in beguiling full view:

I wouldn’t want the shape I make to show  
the muscle of the work, the way I cut  
each leader to its height. The touch and go  
of what to prune, and when, was painful but

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all that is best forgotten by those made  
to judge the makar's labour with the blade.

Our untidiness takes a different stance, although perhaps with the same broad objective. Our sonnets sometimes obscure their relation to their originating form by their untidiness, yet that form haunts each of our works. Our contention is that the untidiness, far from undermining the sonnet status, is a purposeful poetic stance, not a pose or a deficiency. As another untitled poem states: 'I knew myself a ragged person'; and 'Even my words contained a sense of fraying'. The poem concludes:

Yet I thought redemption lay in words –  
to hold them like a body in the instant  
when sensation understands its joy –  
and so I tried, and found this pleasure in it.

For all the reference to untidiness, the poem here firmly announces itself as sonnet-like. As with poetry in translation, on which subject Paul Muldoon (2006: 195) talks persuasively about the idea of an *ur poem* to which an 'original' poem and its translated version both relate – it would seem that the sonnet has some essential relationship to certain fundamental poetic compulsions. It asserts itself persistently and is, more than a set of explicitly identifiable properties, a poetic centre of gravity that draws in even the untidiest of its relations.

The English sonnet has its origins in translation, and it is no accident that translations feature in these untidy sonnets too: one ('After Shakespeare's Sonnet 39') rewrites that well-known poem in contemporary language; and another reworks the sonnets included in Vivaldi's score of 'The Four Seasons' (part of Opus 8, composed c. 1723). While attempting to capture the detail of the original writing, this version is refracted through Vivaldi's music, specifically as interpreted by Nigel Kennedy in recent performances (Sony, 2015). A wilfully contemporary idiom is brought into play, and it is 'play' that characterises the overall project just as much as the search for authentic emotional affect.

There is a risk, perhaps, of some of the poems becoming meta-poems. Our hope is that any artifice we use is no more than a heightened way of registering and exploring existing preoccupations (our own, and those attending to sonnets in general). A voltaic movement, for instance, has often been a feature of our various other work – here it is sometimes even the subject of the poem. 'And when –' reflects on the recent shift in the earth's magnetic poles, turning the sonnet's traditional 8/6 structure on its head to match the magnetic poles' projected reversal. The 'narrative' of the poem is one of transgression and it may even be read as a statement about the 'Untidy Sonnets' project as a whole.

And when –

after his lifelong draw  
to the north –

he veered so far  
and wildly south  
that his night  
became day (and *vice*

*versa*),

it seemed a betrayal, but  
the molten core –  
the magnetic field

beneath his feet –

was revealed

as the traitor.

He had followed the law.

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