

An older poet friend of mine, John Montague, signed a book of his for me and wrote: 'For a fellow in the craft.' If asked to sign a book of my own for another poet, I like to pass on this simple message adding one further Germanic word: 'For a fellow in the beloved craft'. What a wonderful word 'craft' is! It is both Germanic and English. The German word for 'power' or 'strength' is *Kraft*. The stretching of the idea of 'power' to mean 'skill', 'art' or 'occupation' is particular to English. The meanings of 'craft' can be stretched even further but here I want to concentrate on the use of skill to give power to a poem. What do we mean when we speak of 'crafting' a poem or of a poem being 'well-crafted' and how is this craft worth loving?

Ecology of Meaning and Form

For many of us reared in a tradition imbued with certain Romantic notions about art, to stress the crafting of a poem can seem crass. The expression of feeling, the venting of emotion was what art was about. Even those of us who were young adults in the nineteen-sixties, when what Charles Taylor in his book *A Secular Age* calls 'the age of authenticity' was in full swing, may still baulk at attention to form. But even the Latinate word 'art' itself, which we borrow in English, originally meant both method and skill and is ultimately connected with the words 'order' and 'harmony'.

On the other hand, as poetry workshops and talk of 'technique' became fashionable, you could easily get the impression that poetry was all skill and no heart – just a matter of choosing the right set of words and effects. A further risk of this process is that it tends to fix one particular mode of writing as a norm. It becomes a flattening out, a sameness, which curbs the endless variety of approaches.

Both of these extremes, the over emphasis on affect and excessive attention to technique were addressed by R. G. Collingwood in his classic work, *The Principles of Art*. However, Collingwood uses somewhat different terms. He vehemently distinguishes between 'art as amusement', 'art as craft', and 'art proper'.

Art as amusement in essence is what 'is designed to stimulate a certain emotion', which is 'not intended for discharge into the occupations of ordinary life, but for enjoyment as something of value in itself'. In other

words its 'function is to amuse or entertain'. There is make-believe – a cleft between art and reality.

Art as craft is where there is a fundamental split between the means and the end. In simple terms, to make a table or a basket is a craft. You use certain means so you succeed in making a table or a basket. But, clearly, you know beforehand what a table or a basket is.

On the other hand in 'art proper', artists work out for themselves, and others, in an imaginative creative act, whatever is weighing on them that they feel the urge to express. It is very much connected with reality and the particularity of lives. There is no completely preconceived end like a table or basket. Art becomes what it is in the making.

I myself have always gone for the classical combination of meaning and form. It seems to me that in the case of poetry, or indeed of any other art, the most exciting thing of all is when the meaning and the form come seamlessly together. Even the word combination falls short. I am thinking of something dynamic and interwoven where the meaning affects the form and the form in turn shapes the meaning. I opt again for ecology as my image. Ecology conjures up a shifting interdependence of meaning and form which can also, if mishandled, get out of kilter. This ecology of meaning and form is a dynamic of a particular reality which is deeply rooted in real living and only becomes what it is in the making.

Collingwood uses the word craft in the more limited and, for him, negative sense of the skill involved in making, say, a table or basket, where the end and the means are separate. I, on the other hand, use craft to speak of the skill that shapes the form of a poem which is in turn inseparable from the meaning. So now that I have so stressed the interplay of meaning and form, I am about to do something very risky. I want to go on to talk a little about form in poetry. I will begin by looking at how the history of a particular form, the sonnet, relates to a changing society.

Form and Society

It is fascinating how poetic form reflects different societies and the mood of different times. This could be an endless source of comparisons and examples but let us just glance at one form, the sonnet, and watch how, through the lens of Shakespeare, Donne and Milton, four separate forms of the sonnet resonate with four contrasting moods.

The sonnet, with two quatrains and a sestet, came to English from Italy. However, to give a 'perfect' example of the original Italian sonnet

in English, handbook writers have to resort to writing one themselves! Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503–1542), who seems to have been the first to introduce the sonnet into English, both studied and translated Petrarch's sonnets. All the same, Wyatt had already begun to play around with variations on the strict *abba* rhyme scheme in the octave of the Italian sonnet. More significantly, he retains the sestet but instead of the slower gradually sinking Italian *cde, cde* scheme, he ends his sonnets⁴⁹ with a rhyming couplet:

But thus return to leap in to the fire?
And where it was at wish, could not remain?
Such mocks of dreams do turn to deadly pain.

'Unstable
Dream'

This was probably an echo of the final two rhyming lines of the Chaucerian rime royal. One way or the other, while he still retains an almost court Italian feel, the first big step towards the English sonnet has been taken. The final forceful summing up couplet will become such a characteristic of the English sonnet. The next move is to use three quatrains instead of two. Then, if we allow the first and third, and the second and fourth lines in each quatrain to rhyme independently, (which some of the early Italian sonneteers had in fact also done) we have a full English or Shakespearean sonnet. Sidney, Drayton and Shakespeare were soon to make those two moves.

You can hardly imagine how any other form could capture the swagger and excitement, the danger, the explorations, the jewel and dagger feel, the drunkenness⁵⁰ of Elizabethan England:

They that have power to hurt and will do none,
That do not do the thing they most do show,
Who, moving others, are themselves as stone,
Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow –
They rightly do inherit Heaven's graces
And husband nature's riches from expense;
They are the lords and owners of their faces,
Others but stewards of their excellence.
The summer's flow'r is to the summer sweet

'Sonnet 94'

⁴⁹ Sir Thomas Wyatt, *Unstable Dream* at http://www.gutenberg.org/files/27450/27450-h/27450-h.htm#CHAPTER_I accessed 16 September 2014

⁵⁰ p1377, *Collins Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, Glasgow, 1994

Though to itself it only live and die;
 But if flow'r with base infection meet,
 The basest weed outbraves his dignity.
 For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds:
 Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.

A meditation on power, and what a Shakespearean sonnet! But then comes the darker, questioning, introverted Jacobean mood with its wit and complex metaphysical use of language and conceits. Donne's *Holy Sonnets* often take up again the Italian *abba* rhyme scheme in the first two quatrains but mostly follow⁵¹ the English sonnet's *abab* in the third quatrain:

'Holy Sonnets
 XIV'
 Batter my heart, three-person'd God; for, you
 As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;
 That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow mee, and bend
 Your force, to breake, blowe, burn, and make me new.
 I, like an usurpt towne, to'another due,
 Labour to'admit you, but Oh, to no end,
 Reason your viceroy in mee, mee should defend,
 but is captiv'd, and proves weake or untrue.
 Yet dearly 'I love you,' and would be loved fain,
 But am betrothed unto your enemy:
 Divorce mee,'untie or breake that knot againe;
 Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I,
 Except you'enthral me, never shall be free,
 Nor even chaste, except you ravish mee.

By the time we reach John Milton the sonnet yet again has re-adapted. Gone the airborne, drunken Elizabethan excitement or the complex witty Jacobean temper. Now it is the sober, Puritan, reasonable mindset. The Miltonic sonnet⁵² has reverted to the Italian sonnet with its octave and sestet but marks the rational age by allowing the traditional break between the octave and the sestet to occur anywhere between the middle of the eighth line to the end of the ninth line. This lent a sense of weight to the argument:

⁵¹ *John Donne: Complete Poetry & Selected Prose*, ed. John Hayward, The Nonesuch Press, London, 1990
⁵² p501, 'Sonnet xvi', John Milton, *The Oxford Book of Seventeenth Century Verse*, Grierson & Bullough, Oxford, 1934

When I consider how my light is spent
 Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
 And that one Talent which is death to hide
 Lodg'd with me useless, though my Soul more bent
 To serve therewith my Maker, and present
 My true account, lest he returning chide,
 Doth God exact day-labour, light deny'd,
 I fondly ask. But patience, to prevent
 That murmur, soon replies, God doth not need
 Either man's work or his own gifts, who best
 Bear his milde yoaik, they serve him best, his State
 Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
 And post o'er Land and Ocean without rest:
 They also serve who only stand and waite.

'Sonnet xvi'

After a gap, the Romantics returned to the sonnet. Wordsworth uses the Italian form but with almost every possible combination of rhyme scheme in the sestet, even at times allowing the final couplet to rhyme.

The tradition goes on and many great poets – right down to our day – still turn to the sonnet in various forms, even with broken rhyme. All I want to stress here is how a form can adapt so its tone resonates with different times. But now I want to ask the question; why does the sonnet as a form have such an appeal for poets?

The Appeal of the Sonnet

I have always found the sonnet an extraordinary creative instrument. Kim Bridgford in three collections *Undone*, *Instead of Maps* and *In the Extreme: Sonnets about World Records* is an extraordinary practitioner of the art of the sonnet. Indeed, some years ago I was very privileged to discover that she had written a chapter on my own sonnets in *Musics of Belonging*⁵³, a book about my work.

What is the lasting appeal of the sonnet? How can this form which thrived in Italian, French, English, Spanish and German have such a widespread and lasting attraction?

I can only answer this as best I can from my own experience and I want to come at an answer from different angles.

⁵³ *Musics of Belonging: The Poetry of Micheal O'Siadhail*, eds. Marc Caball and David F. Ford, Carysfort Press, Dublin, 2007

Firstly it seems to me that it is the ultimate classic form. I wonder do others remember the old school formula which certainly was current in my childhood? It was always trotted out when we were being taught to write essays: 'you must have a beginning, a middle and an end'! This is the core and simple reason why the sonnet is the supreme form it is. This is borne out if we ask ourselves what the equivalent in music is. Surely it is the sonata, which is fundamentally the same word as sonnet. Even though, just as in the case of the sonnet, we find many variations, in the sonata form there are basically three parts: the exposition of the theme, the developments of the theme and the recapitulation.

It is not difficult to think of a Shakespeare sonnet as a sonata. Just think of Sonnet 94, the meditation on power I quoted. The first quatrain is the exposition of the theme: 'they who have power to hurt and will do none'. The second and third quatrains can be thought of as first and second developments in the sonata. The first development is 'they rightly do inherit heaven's grace' and the second development introduces the metaphor of flowers and asks what 'if that flower with base infection meet?' The real punch is in the pithy recapitulating final couplet, which is the Shakespearian equivalent of the Latin proverb 'the corruption of the best is the worst':

'Sonnet 94' For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds,
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.

Another way to think of a sonnet is that it is a form, which is a kind of acid test. It is sometimes said that a poet can be so easily found out in a sonnet. No phony depth will work here. The simple logic of the form will find you out if you have nothing to say. No shimmying or dodging allowed. No clever or empty talk will wash.

Yet that is just the negative side of what I find so wonderful about the sonnet. What is so extraordinary is how the nature of the form almost ensures that, in R. G. Collingwood's terms, you work through for yourself and others the emotional pressure, which craves creative expression. The demands of the sonnet force you to think and feel in such a way that the poem becomes itself in the making. This is the jazz of creation, the surprise riff, the perpetual unexpected. By a strange irony, the form which requires so much of you, is also the one which insists on the deeper freedom of creation. But then why should that be surprising when we know from jazz the precision of freedom?

Say but the Word

A third angle for me is the effect of the sonnet form not only as a creative instrument but also as a container. There is a containment factor. What do I mean by containment? I suppose I want to say that when things go deepest in me, I feel myself overwhelmed by emotion and often unable to get any grip at all. David Ford in his book *The Shape of Living*⁵⁴, a book which makes copious use of my poetry, speaks of being ‘multiply overwhelmed’. I certainly have known that feeling. It is precisely then that I reach for the sonnet to contain what is spiralling out of control.

Let me give an example or two. In *The Chosen Garden* when I reach the part I name ‘Re-rooting’ I know it has to be a series of love poems. How do I approach a theme, which is everywhere in our culture, longed for, stimulated, sung about, abused, sentimentalised and the core of all stories and desires? After thousands of years of love poems what possibly could I add? And yet it is *my* particular life and love that wells up and wants out. How do I harness feelings of wonder, gratitude, inadequacy, regret, sensuousness, homing and sheer joy? I find myself absolutely instinctively working in the sonnet form⁵⁵ which offers me a shape to word at least a fraction of the amazement which sweeps over me.

Nothing can explain this adventure – let’s say a quirk
of fortune steered us together – we made our covenants,
began this odyssey of ours, by hunch and guesswork,
a blind date where foolish love consented in advance.
No, my beloved, neither knew what lay behind the frontiers.
You told me once you hesitated: *A needle can waver,*
Then fix on its pole; I am still after many years
baffled that the needle’s gift dipped in my favour.
Should I dare to be so lucky? Is this a dream?
Suddenly in the commonplace that first amazement seizes
me all over again – a freak twist to the theme,
subtle jazz of the new familiar, trip of surprises.
Gratuitous, beyond our fathom, both binding and freeing,
This love re-invades us, shifts the boundaries of our being.

‘Out of the
Blue’

Then again when writing *The Gossamer Wall: poems in witness to the Holocaust*, I found myself struggling and I devoted four years to thinking

⁵⁴ David Ford, *The Shape of Living*, Fount Paperbacks, London, 1997

⁵⁵ p228, Micheal O’Siadhail, *Collected Poems*, Tarsset, 2013

and reading about it. There is such a literature about the historical background and an equally large amount on the aftermath. But at the heart of this attempt to distil the story were the concentration camps. How to enter into the belly of the beast? How to remember those who suffered when you yourself had not been there? How could I name such pain without appropriating someone else's agony, without feeding 'on another man's wounds'? Intuitively, I moved⁵⁶ into sonnets.

'Summons' A summons to *try to look, to try to see*.
A muted dead demand their debt of memory.

Some years ago it was pointed out in an essay on my poetry that there seemed to be a thematic pattern in my published works. The poetry alternated between public concerns and intensely personal journeys. I do not think I had been aware of this when writing. Suddenly it came home to me that I had moved from *The Gossamer Wall*, where I had entirely avoided the word 'I', in so far as I never allowed my persona to enter into the story, to *Love Life*, the most vulnerable and personal of all my books where I literally put my wife and myself on the line.

Yet the sonnet had served in both books to shape some of the most deeply emotional moments. It is almost as though I had turned the early traditional use of the sonnet upside down by channelling into that form the inhumanity of the Holocaust. Yet this enriched me in a way, which permitted me to return to the sonnet to capture the intimacies of *Love Life*. In the final poem of *Love Life*, I echo again your 'lips are like a crimson thread, and your mouth is lovely' from the Song of Songs. But 'crimson' has other resonances, as Rahab in the Book of Joshua hung out a crimson thread to identify her house. A further allusion is to a previous book *Our Double Time*, where the parting crimson of the sumac's leaves signifies the completeness of a life ending. So here⁵⁷ it is:

'Crimson
Thread' Dew, spice, honey, wine and milk,
Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh
Wear again for me the damson silk
I take as given and still begin afresh.
Awake o north wind, come south wind...
Never enough just to have rubbed along,

⁵⁶ p432, Micheal O'Siadhail, *Collected Poems*, Tarsset, 2013

⁵⁷ p552, Micheal O'Siadhail, *Collected Poems*, Tarsset, 2013

Promise of promises nothing can rescind.
 All or nothing. All is Solomon's Song.
I come to my garden, my sister, my bride.
Eat friend, drink and be drunk with love
 And every moment I think I'm satisfied
 Wakes me to desires I'm dreaming of.
 In Solomon's blue curtain a cord of covenant,
 A crimson thread until the crimson moment.

I have been thinking about the sonnet, partly because it is one most people know and recognise and partly because of my own particular love of the form. I have been considering the sonnet as coloured by society and looking at the appeal of the sonnet.

However, clearly the sonnet is just one form. There are, of course, a myriad of forms and variations. I want to consider for a moment the endless variety of forms and variations of forms.

Variety of Forms

I have enjoyed allowing poems to find their way into all kinds of other forms with a tradition, but also yielding to the inherent inventiveness of poems that seem to fall into patterns of their own or indeed into a coherence, which shows no particular pattern.

As I have stressed, the creativity of meaning and form are inseparably interwoven. The whole poem needs to grow organically. Richard Wilbur puts this well. When asked in an interview about being traditional, he replied: 'it's undoubtedly traditional to have recourse to tetrameter and pentameter and to use rhymes. But I don't very much follow established forms such as the sonnet. I have *written* them but I don't tirelessly turn out sonnets, villanelles, *ballades*. Often the forms I choose (the stanza forms say) are arrived at rather intuitively or by luck. The line lengths will be chosen much as a free verse writer chooses his line lengths, according to the way the words want to fall. And rhymes will occur if they do occur.'⁵⁸

I have been talking about forms which involve rhyme. It's often seen as a sophistication to eschew rhyme. Yet the delight in rhyme is deep in us from our earliest childhood:

⁵⁸ Richard Wilbur, *New and Collected Poems*, Faber and Faber, London, 1989