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Luke Fidler with Anthony Opal



Anthony Opal

Anthony Opal has been exploring the sonnet for the last few years, sounding out the possibilities for innovation within a traditional poetic form. My interview with him, which took place in Chicago during April 2013, discusses the stakes of his project.

Luke Fidler: Why the sonnet? Why now?

Anthony Opal: I think that the choice is an existential one. There's a paradox inherent to fixed forms that I find reflective of lived reality. Arbitrary constraint (syllabic count, poem length, the need to volta) coupled with chaotic content (leaping images, uncertain syntax, ricocheted sounds) is a relationship that creates pressure, a sort of push and pull, which I feel energizes the work. The connection here is that people live within constraints, and it's these pressures (limitations, sicknesses, whatever) coupled with a person's counter-pressures that create an energized life. This same energy can be created by working in other fixed forms, too, I'm sure. And probably even the best kinds of free verse. But the sonnet seems to work best for me, for now, for my present purposes.

LF: Your poetry has a clear theological turn. In the past, we've talked about a proclivity among some theologians to construct their works *around* their subject. They decline to name it. There's something very seductive about this triangulation, and I want to use it to lean on your paradox of fixed form and chaotic content. Do you find your "leaping images," which sometimes crowd your poems furiously, pushing back at the sonnet's structure?

AO: I've come to understand submission to form (or semi-submission at least) as a freeing act. There's a strange grace inherent to the sonnet form. I came to the sonnet at a time when I was tired and bored with my own thoughts. I felt like my poems kept returning to the same places, and that I was only working out of limited parts of my mind and experience. So saying something to myself like, "Stop thinking so hard about what you want to *say* and just make this line ten syllables," was really freeing, and it opened me up. I think that there's a connection here with spiritual disciplines, like chanting the psalms, or praying the rosary or fasting. These disciplines tell us to stop thinking so hard about things and to just do something. And the result, ironically, is a more thoughtful life.

As far as the idea of triangulation that you mention, yes, I think that using language to gesture toward a thing can only ever be that: a gesture. This understanding is central to theology. Though, I often wonder if poetry has the ability to charge language beyond the "mere" gesture. This would require a jump in categories. The word here, I suppose, would be incarnation.

LF: Can we pursue this problem of language and "mereness"? One paradox about your poetry is the way a slight gesture (a "mere" gesture), made to comply with the sonnet's predetermined form, endows the words with whole worlds of meaning. This line break, for example: "that raindrops form within the body / of a dark cloud the same way."

AO: Sure. As far as the "mere-ness" of language, this is why I put the word in quotes. I love language! But like anything that one loves, one has to be honest about what that thing isn't in order to understand what it is. Language is mystical—near magical. And unlike some poets, I do not believe that language is broken. Again, I turn toward the theological: the Word became flesh. So yes, although words are not things themselves—not flesh—they have the uncanny ability to bring about animation, and to, as you put it, "endow words with whole worlds of meaning."

In the lines that you mention above ("that raindrops form. . .") I think that you're right to note the relationship between the form and the language itself—or the thought. This is to say that writing sonnets (counting syllables, lines, letting sound lead the poem, etc.) has changed the way that I think through the making of a poem. The act of writing sonnets has been, for me, an exercise in letting go and seeing what happens. Over time I've found that certain approaches such as removing punctuation and allowing the colloquial/quotidian to permeate the poems have helped with this letting go.

LF: Is there a point—ethically or aesthetically—when you have to stop letting go?

AO: I tend to collapse ethics and aesthetics into the same category—they're just too reliant on each other to exist separately. I agree with the poet Christian Wiman when he writes, "Formal decisions are ethical decisions." [1] Nonetheless, the answer to your question is yes, there is a point when complete abandon feels irresponsible to me. I can usually tell that I've crossed this threshold when reading my own writing starts to give me a headache. It's the same headache that I get when someone uses a lot of big words that don't connect in a way that sets my synapses sparking. In the end, the best indicator that I'm on the right track is dopamine release. I've found that the poems which excite me usually excite other people. This sounds trite, but it's a real part of my practice.

LF: I don't think that's trite at all. In a way, I think it gets at the very important question of why people have bothered to read and write poetry for millennia. In that spirit, how do you read the sonnets of the past? Do you find common points of departure between your own work and, say, the sonnets of Edmund Spenser or Kim Addonizio?

AO: Over the last couple years I've spent an obscene amount of time trying to trace the history of the sonnet, both its formal and its emotional development. And what I've found is that certain sonnets—some of the earliest, in fact—feel very familiar to me. An example would be something like “Whoso List to Hunt,” by Thomas Wyatt, or stuff by John Donne or George Herbert, and then a little later, Hopkins and Very. As far as more contemporary sonnets, I love Ted Berrigan. His book, aptly titled *The Sonnets*, really blew things open for me. Kim Addonizio, who you mentioned, is very good. M.A. Vizsolyi is also good. Really, I'm interested in any sonnet being written that explores the tradition in a fresh way while still remaining a part of the tradition. Commitment is best displayed through dissent, as Tillich would have it.

LF: Can you expand more on what you mean by the sonnet's emotional development? Are you talking about the kind of history of mentalities as evidenced by the sonnet, in the spirit of the Annales School? Or do you mean a kind of enlivening of dead poets through their writing? What I'm really getting at here is a broader question of how we read the poetry of the past, bringing my own baggage as an academic who tries to consider creative interventions in the historical record.

AO: This is an interesting question, although I feel skeptical about my ability to adequately address it. I'll give it a shot, though, with the preface that I approach all poems (including poems of the past) as someone who is interested in writing poems, which is to say that I approach poems with a personal attachment that I imagine skews, or at least colors, my objectivity. I don't know if this makes me a bad academic or not, but this my disclaimer.

Beyond this, I hold to the unpopular idea (unpopular in academic circles, but certainly not in artistic circles) that there is something inherently universal about the human condition. I won't venture to set out what these shared bonds are, as I believe that this is only possible through the work itself, but I would offer that all art, at a basic, elemental level, is working off of an understanding of shared-ness. Through this lens, I find that poems of the past become inextricably tangled with poems of the present. History folds onto itself. . .

And this is why I gave the disclaimer! I can imagine that a scholar, a historian or anyone seriously interested in studying the ways in which history informs our understanding of past artwork will find my explanation hopelessly inadequate. Either way, I don't want to give the impression that I support some sort of false-dichotomy between academics and artists. They are often one and the same. And both fields benefit from this.

LF: I agree. Maybe we could finish with a question about how time and history actually work in your writing. The sonnet “as snow falls from a foreboding syntax,” is a great example of your tendency to equivocate on questions of real and fictive, of presentness and atemporality. You don't just juxtapose images; you juxtapose modes of experience, of remembering, of anticipating. In this way, I think the poem “folds onto”—as you might say—Shakespeare's sonnets. Do you consider the way you write time into your poetry?

AO: “Consider” might be too strong of a word, implying that time is something that I think about when I write. And I don't—at least not overtly. Though, in retrospect, I think that time is central to my poems and what I'm trying to do by running images and sounds and chronologies together, reflecting the undefined borders that I often experience in lived reality. This is one of the main reasons why I've decided to forgo punctuation in my sonnets, to allow everything to exist in closer proximity, and to cause the line to function as a unit. In a sonnet like “as snow falls from a foreboding syntax,” I think that I'm exploring what it is to move freely between the present moment and the mythological, which is, in many people's minds, lodged in history. I'm interested in the anachronism of placing a word like “Pharisees” in a poem about walking through a suburban subdivision, nervous about what it means to be turning thirty years old. The interest

here, I suppose, is in understanding the past as familiar, not other. Which circles back around to this idea of commonality, shared-ness, empathy.

[i] Don Share and Christian Wiman, "Introduction," in *The Open Door: One Hundred Poems, One Hundred Years of Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 5.

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