

An Inquiry into the Lovehood of Love:

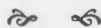
An Examination

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Abstract:

The sonnet is not merely defined by its formal structure: by its fourteen lines of ten syllables each, or by its rhyme scheme. In fact, a logical structure is also a touchstone of the tradition. Most sonnets of the traditional ilk begin with a problem and end with a solution (or, at least, a response). But, what seems to have made those of the tradition so highly esteem this particular form is the conceit, or the analogy with which the problem is addressed. How cleverly one could dress a sonnet in analogy was a major measurement of poetic worth. This research paper, however, does not seek to ferret out the merits of the sonneteer's use of any literary device, but rather serves to accompany a sequence written by the author with the goal of relaying the general motives behind each section, which correspond to major eras in sonnet history. In the sequence, the author exercises the conceit to comment on and engage the ideology behind it. This is done with the goal of capturing the evolution of the sonnet in form and idea, while also creating a unity with an implied commentary on the major conventions of the tradition itself.



viii

If you tried to answer the being of love
You'd set off like a whaler to the sea;
With nets of feeble words and language wove,
And in so trying be farther from me.

Then, seeing it in the waves half-breached, you
Try to capture it by its yokeless yoke.
It usurps the ship's control dragging you
This way and that. All captain's order broke.

The failure here is not in your method,
But rather in itself the sole attempt.
To catch it's not as simple as the cod;
From love's elusiveness you're not exempt.

I'm telling you, dear, love can't be enforced,
But only by two lovers love's performed

My ultimate goal in writing a sonnet sequence was to capture the general evolution of the sonnet, both in form and in idea, in a way that leaves open the possibility that someone who has little or no background in the sonnet tradition could still be satisfied with the sequence as a poetic work. This meant that the adaptation of form must not be gratuitous but must rather be suggestive of something in itself; the form, in being used, must *imply* something about the tradition itself. I write the following self-reflection on my sonnet sequence, with the aid of much research, to expose exactly how I capture the evolution of the sonnet. There are minimal examples from and analyses of my own sequence in the belief that it speaks for itself. Thus, having read the sequence is advisable for reading the companion essay, but not vice versa. For facility's sake, the

exposition is segmented into the corresponding eras of the sonnet's history. Each segment will reveal how aspects of the different eras were utilized in *An Inquiry into the Lovehood of Love*, beginning with the Elizabethan all the way to the modern, all to defend the "success" of the sequence in general—that it does indeed adequately capture the evolution of the sonnet both in idea and form.¹

Elizabethan (sonnets i-xiii)

In capturing the Elizabethan and Italian sonnet, I began with the idea of love being diametrically opposed to reason. The desire of the Elizabethan lover drives him away from reason, and the exercise of articulating that desire through the form of the sonnet often seems to be an effort to regain reason. The logic of the sonnet form balanced the allegedly illogical love that Elizabethan speakers experience in regard to their beloveds. We get this idea of love and reason as utterly separable throughout the period, where living in love is living in paradox (Samuel Daniel, *To Delia*, Sonnet 5; Drayton, *Idea*, 62; Constable, *Diana*, 12; Barnes, *Parthenophil & Parthenophe*, 36; Giles Fletcher the Elder, *Licia*, Sonnet 1; Shakespeare, 147; etc.).

I related the disparity between love and intellect to Plato's rendering of love in the *Symposium*, that the only proper object of "love" is love of virtue and wisdom (or philosophy). The pursuit of amorous love brings one's soul closer to Earth and thus further from the heavenly plane of forms. This I took to be why love is not only often juxtaposed to reason but is also described as a disease or a poison; the desire of a physical kind of love is deleterious to the soul. According to Plato, love is not the search for another half but is a search for what is good, and this search for love becomes toxic to the soul if it is mistakenly directed at fulfilling the desire of the senses—to feel—instead of fulfilling the desire of the intellect—to know (Plato 369-79). So love is, more or less, an ideal; there is a proper way in which to actualize or to best get at love. I impose this Platonic philosophy on Elizabethan sonnets in general, and this is portrayed in my sequence through the addressee². This idealism is primarily what I want to capture, and so the lady of my sequence, the addressee, envisages love as a perfection to be constantly sought, *where marriage, in the ceremonial sense, is the realization of the love ideal*.

Likewise, *idea* itself seemed to be something to be perfected in the Italian and Elizabethan sonnet; an ideal expression can be

¹ For facility, eleven original sonnets from my full sequence of twenty-nine are interspersed throughout the article, corresponding to their particular eras. The entire sequence can be found online:

<<http://glassforgodssake.wordpress.com/2012/03/11/an-inquiry-into-the-lovehood-of-love>>.

² In the sonnet tradition, the speaker almost always addresses another (usually a beloved). Thus, "addressee" will refer to the one whom the speaker addresses.

realized through the sonnet form. If love for the Elizabethan was diametrically opposed to reason, the sonnet form was a mode of expression meant to subdue the irrationality of love and to repossess rationality. The speaker of my sequence, being a contemporary voice, has the objective of persuading his lover that she is mistaken in thinking that marriage perfects love, and the first section is constructed strictly on argumentation by way of running conceits, lyric form, and logical organization. The imitation of the Elizabethan form here not only historically complements the concerns of the addressee, but metaphorically complements them. The form, being written by a contemporary, draws attention to itself where it seeks to perfect the argument to make it most palatable or most persuasive. Yet, the suggestion of the speaker is that formalism does not legitimate perfection, at least in regard to love. So, the speaker wants to say that his lover is mistaken in her admiration of “formalized” or married love in that she admires a construct of tradition rather than love for its own sake, while the speaker himself uses a construct of tradition to formalize this very argument.

Edna St. Vincent Millay does a similar thing with many of her sonnets, insofar as she uses the strict, antique form of the sonnet to indirectly comment on it. My speaker is not as caustic and does not share the free-love sentiments as Millay’s speaker, but both share similar methodology in implicitly down-casting the very form they’ve adopted. The form, for Millay, seems to be essential for her overall message, suggesting that she would rather spend more time on *how* she articulates her rejection of monogamy than on any particular relationship; she’d rather “perfect,” in the traditional sense, her expression than perfect any amorous relationship. She also shows her power and liberty by turning the form into a vow of promiscuity: the opposite of the intention in Italian and Elizabethan sonnets. Similarly, instead of writing a poem or an essay directly about how Elizabethan regard for form is misguided—how it fails to legitimize an argument—I want to use the form to convey this indirectly. By suggesting that marriage, or formalized love, does not legitimize or perfect love, the sequence, by the end, also hints that the form of the sonnet tradition has no influence in legitimizing or perfecting an idea.

Romantic (sonnets xiv-xvii)

Moving from the Elizabethan section to the Romantic, the content slowly begins to shift from the idea that marriage adds nothing more metaphysically to the love that was already there to an exploration or admiration of love, as primordial, natural, and reasonable (as in logical). The key difference between the object of admiration in the Romantic sonnets and the object of admiration in the Elizabethan sonnets is that the Romantics aren’t paying tribute with hopes of receiving gratification in return from the object. The sonnet, when it praises, becomes closer to an ode of the sublime or heroic, revering the beautiful and pastoral, honoring the honorable, and memorializing the past—all *without petition* (Burt 118). In a sense, the praise from the Romantic speaker provokes mutual recognition from the addressee instead of anything beneficial to him (the speaker). Likewise, the shift in my sequence moves from an argument against the essence of love to an exaltation of love in relation to nature, here the speaker does not expect his lover to concede his earlier points about love; rather, he expects only to be heard.

ii

Just by what aspect do you measure love?
You sound as though you qualify its form
Like a diamond’s that also yells above
That boy loves girl, or so says every norm:

*The diamond’s clarity is primeval;
With facets such an ideal look is cut;
And colorless is the most rare of all;
See better the weight of the gemstone’s gut?*

These aspects people value, it is true,
Like the shallow ones they do in marriage,
Yet forget to acclaim, where credit due
Is found, that diamonds are of some rare age.

Time and pressure hold love’s genuine key;
Neither weight, color, cut, nor clarity

iii

Showy marriage is not itself the bond;
No element makes marriage more than love—
What synthesizes love are two souls fond
Of each, founded by some mute unknown stuff.

The diamond is rarest from the ground but
Still people craft it to some showy taste:
Ask they “How is it colored, pure, and cut?”
Just sad attempts to dress the bond impressed.

And yet the pressing of our ease applies
The pressure to our bond, and so rare jewels
Are formed without some Mesozoic lies—
Arise from patterns of natural duals:

Graphite at times, at others diamonds made,
Yet of their purest element displayed

v

If water so necessitates all life,
What substance is it love requires? How stark,
My love, she thinks that marriage is hallmark;
That our love will be best when she’s my wife.

D’we drink when church or state call us avowed?
Or once we on some well-swept altar kissed?
Perhaps when old carbon adorns your fist.
Or must old friends as one, not ones, allow?

If water so necessitates all life,
Matrimony would be our love’s mirage,
Where in the bleak-seeming sands of life’s lodge,
You have such far’way visions of love’s drive.

Yet, show me where on love the change is wrought
From good to best, and I may change my thought

The addressee at this point is still analogous to the actual sonneteer from the period I want to re-enform, in the sense that Romantics like Wordsworth and Keats, in addition to whatever else they were lauding, were lauding and revitalizing the sonnet as a form. Likewise, my sweeping generalization of their era is still using that very form to praise love taken as natural instead of love taken as ideal. The addressee of my sequence embodies the Romantic poet ideologically, by exalting tradition just as the Romantic exalts history; the speaker, however, having attempted to prove that his lover is misguided, exalts true love (whatever it, in fact, *is*).

Admittedly, there are some Romantic values espoused by the speaker. I incorporate the Romantic hallmarks of reversion to nature and childhood nostalgia into the sonnets of this section. These aspects are made consistent with the discourse taking place within the whole sequence. The addressee thinks love is some metaphysical entity, like a Platonic form floating around, but the speaker hails love as some mysterious thing emergent in nature and memory.

Victorian (sonnets xviii-xxiii)

The Victorian sonnet, in terms of content, marks a return to amorous love. With the Victorian era came a resurgence of love as a main theme in the sonnet, as well as Platonism, in the form of neo-platonism (Campbell 204). In regard to love, Victorians seem to have assented to the loss of self through love, alleging a union where love makes one (a *we*) out of two (a *you* and *I*) (Campbell 212, 214). The speaker of my sequence, however, wants to maintain that each lover, though metaphorically unified, fully retains the autonomy each would have were they not in love. When the speaker acts for the sake of his love, he does not abdicate his “selfhood”—his autonomy—to a new entity or identity of selfhood. So in this sense, the speaker is still attacking the embodiment of the particular pigeon-hole of the sonnet tradition (here, Victorian) personified indirectly by the addressee.

For Victorian sonnets, in terms of style and form, I generalized the era as being exemplified by expressions of love and selfhood through two major techniques: narration and dramatic monologue. Each sonnet (again, in general), like many by George Meredith and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, is a short narrative story in itself. This narrative resort in poetry correlates with the popularity of the Victorian realist novel (Campbell 217). In my sequence, the speaker utilizes this kind of dramatic monologue and, in doing so, wants to suggest that such a narrative is indicative of how we craft the self, especially a self in love. Self *is* a narrative. In adopting the narrative style, my own sequence suggests that such narration better satisfies the expression of self because it mirrors the narrative of a past that comprises our sense of self.

Responding to the use of these techniques in Barrett Browning’s twenty-eighth sonnet, Stephen Burt insists that “a single character’s speech, depicted in real time, reveals by irony or indirection that character’s inmost thoughts, and makes him or her seem present, as if on stage” (162). In other words, dramatic monologue and narration are means of presenting a psychological autonomy—simulating self through character or persona. They

xiv

Oh atoms and the void! From you emerge!
A puzzle remains in the physics of
My heart: How so maintain relics of love
In the blandness of being?; how can diverge
One self from you? Midst total empty space
My love obeys moments in succession—
So many frames of mind compose its face,
And not just for its sake, but others dun.
By convention, sweet, by convention bitter;
By convention, hot, by convention cold;
Still ever sweetened and ever embittered;
Still through my atoms I move manifold,
And all loves in th’indestructible stew
Of atoms and void emerge—something new

xvii

As if pure love exists, floating in form,
I cannot gloat. Some earthy principle,
If even the gainsay of our little
Past, comprise the territory or
The open atrium of “the heart”—cull-
ing every uncle of my monkey’s past,
And of pure action tranquilly amassed,
Composing swift motions of all time’s toll.
I seek in nature what I seek in love—
The utterly sublime, entrancing depth,
As sign of self in primordial view;
And regardless whatever I may spew,
Whatever I *do* the self must approve,
And only use the mouth to speak unspeaking breath

xviii

My love: often it’s rushed after a storm,
And over hides until our backs are mossed—
Then, sudden, appears its red piebald form
That feeds on death it never truly caused.
You take from me my death, what gruesome growth,
And in that lovely death, love blooms to feed—
A fungus that absorbs mind and time both
And caps my moral mildews, I concede.
Some morbid angel from its mossy nest
Comes takes me to sojourn in other worlds,
Traveling in its mouth, a bolus guest;
Our bare heads like clouds of bombings swirled:
Such mushroom clouds for love are tell-tale signs
That foggy death is wrought from air-borne minds

create a compound of description that a reader can point to and reason “*That is what I am like: a self.*” In conjunction with the revealing of persona, my speaker, in adopting a similar style, espouses that narrative indeed realizes self—that self comes about out of a stream of immediate narrative in real life, not just in literature: Each memory of every moment lived comprises a psychological narrative. Whereas in the previous two sections love is argued for and then admired and appraised, the Victorian section marks a depiction of love via narrative style. And, in using this style, the speaker comes to better understand the nature of one’s regard to one’s own body and mind as a subjective unity *capable* of loving.

In “The Narrative of Persisting River,” although the river is never the same at any given moment, it still has the unity of a “river” because it has a constant flow, and this fluency, the essence of this unity, “speaks” for the river. Analogously, though one never has the same thoughts, and though one’s material body is always changing, the constant fluidity of thought and speech, like the “narrative” of the river, provide a unity of self. Its form is in constant flux, yet a body can still be a self, and flowing water still a river. And, like the river as a unit strives toward the greatness of the Great Lakes, one’s self strives toward the greatness of love. As will be seen in the final section, although the form of the sonnet fluctuates in history and in this sequence, the unity, or essence, of the sonnet remains identifiable, or so its use throughout my sequence suggests.

Modern (sonnets xxiv-xxix)

One purpose of the modernist section is to expand on the poet’s ability to better understand self through the speaker’s art form (or un-form, at this point). In content, the speaker swings back and forth from love to self, mirroring the liberties many modern sonneteers took, like Yeats, Louis Zukofsky, Ivor Gurney, and especially E. E. Cummings. The lyric form gets radical in that iambic pentameter is almost wholly deserted, strict end rhymes give way to slant rhymes, and the traditional stanzaic divisions as well as any formal indication of argument can seem obsolete. Also, the hallmark fragmentation of many modern sonnets allows the reader to make connections in ways previous sonnets do not, and so invites the reader, on a new and more intimate level, to share the struggle and effort in crafting the poem. In my sequence, this fragmentation and rough syntax—all to form one whole sonnet unit—is suggestive of the fragments of memories which form one whole unit of self.

The second purpose of the modernist section is to finalize the initial tension or argument between the speaker and addressee. With the sequence’s progression into this modernist section, the sonnets begin to resemble the “sonnets” of the new era, in all their avant-garde and experimental deformation. The deformation in the sequence is pivotal to the speaker’s initial endeavor: to persuade that form neither legitimates nor perfects content or idea. For the speaker, showing that the sonnet form in no way legitimates or perfects its content has by analogy shown that marriage, a particular form of recognizing love, in no way legitimates or perfects love. Marriage adds nothing metaphysical to the love that was already there and so in no objective way diversifies it from any other amorous love. The traditional sonnet

xxii

My love, my love, is a city at night.
 You vandalize my soul, tag graffiti
 On my heart—and in the seldom city
 Nefartiti’s bust pornographers excite.
 When you and I go to Berlin we will
 Replunder Egypt’s art where Berlin erred,
 Returning it its purer end, preferred
 To a home, a native, undead title.
 My love my love is a city at day.
 You go about my soul, transportation
 Of the heart—sidewalks, the rich at poor gnash—
Believe you me their cans of soup aren’t trash.
 There is nothing that you can write nor say
 To set this living dance apart from sun

The Narrative of Persisting River

Great thanks for Great Lakes and the fluency
 Into which waters snake, talking ounces,
 The same way that regime of flow announces—
 And nothing false... what the river, whence we
 Came, did. It spoke past, and we passive tramped.
 Lost, we were in the country of the bear
 And no one looked upon us, save the sheer
 Woods. Its actions were a compass north-cramped.
 Yet at every infinite interval
 Together, pine intercepting rain above,
 The flow took up the absence of the trail,
 Divorced from right direction—we, whereof,
 May have been lost in place, but not in love.
 We were knitting a confluence in love.
 I want to be as immortal with love
 As the waters in the river toward greatness strove

xxiii

This sonnet is the wedding of one soul
 To nothing in the end, only at truth
 To evoke some deep-traditioned love, soothe
 Ourselves and bear its most perfect essence.
 It’s firstly an experiential whole,
 However foundering in attendance,
 Offering, as night and day shall flinch, thence—
 Secondly—to fence in both of our ruths.
 But like th’intrepid vows shouted in dress,
 We’re brought into the limelight of love’s hell:
 The words will every time their referent fail—
 The idealist’s room proves a verbal mess....
 If muses of the past cannot excel
 Meaning, I must now well enough dispel

form adds nothing metaphysical to the ideas that exist in the poet's mind, and so, in no objective way diversifies it from any other form which his same ideas might take.

A relevant comparison to this use of form are the sonnets of E. E. Cummings. In David Mead's dissertation, he explores the inner connotations of Cummings' sonnets, at one point citing scholar Haskell Springer's article "The Poetics of E. E. Cummings," in which "[Haskell] notes that the sonnets show Cummings' 'desire to make the formal appear deceptively free and irregular,' that although his sonnets differ 'in various degrees from the sonnet of tradition, they can be recognized as containing the essence of sonnet'" (Mead 3). So, in the sonnets of Cummings, although the form is radically different, the "essence" of the sonnet remains. Adopting this outlook, the speaker of my sequence, in his dismissal of traditional form, completes the analogy his sequence suggests; just as the "essence of sonnet" remains in this radically different form, the essence of love remains no matter what form it takes.

xxix

Pulling into the blindness of a specious
excellence, standing before allinverted eyes—
piriform in tears and flames be specialized.

Lapping from the culture-broth delicious.

You. Mine—we are...existing as: we've been.
Always will be as we are!
Love so perfect in its feral form...
the only form to qualify the skin.

Good apples don't need spectators to grow,
nor a decorum of words to be thrown
at their cores. In a golden apple headlock of the orchards:

Marriage cannot petrify our change,
some magic potion if you stir up words,
stand properly and smooch, mouth so arranged

Conclusion

By adopting the strict traditional form and then abandoning it (or at least greatly altering it), the suggestion is that form neither perfects nor legitimates *idea*. This is only possible by analogy to the sequence's overt struggle between the speaker and addressee, and his assertion that marriage neither perfects nor legitimates love. The sequence ends as do Robert Sidney's and Barrett Browning's: in marriage, with my sonnet *xxix* as the wedding ceremony itself. This final image is of the speaker "standing before allinverted eyes," (Bisig *xxix.2*) "properly" with "mouth arranged" to kiss the bride (*xxix.14*), yet stubbornly maintaining that the grandiloquent vows are just magic potions, intoxicating all with words.

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