Michael Hanke (ed.)

Fourteen English Sonnets
Critical Essays

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Heinz Bergner, Raimund Borgmeier,
Matthias Hutz, Eckart Voigts-Virchow (Hg.)

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MICHAEL HANKE

Introduction

The essays on fourteen English sonnets in this volume testify to the vitality of the oldest and most popular verse-form of European poetry. In England its history might have begun in the late fourteenth century, when Chaucer included an imitation of one of Petrarch's sonnets in his chivalric poem *Troilus and Criseyde* (I.400-420).[1] But Chaucer chose to align the original with a stanza form he had specially designed for his narrative masterpiece and which, two centuries later, would become known as *rime royal* (consisting of seven iambic pentameters with three end-rhymes). Thus the most versatile poet in English before Shakespeare leaves us wondering how he would have come to grips with a genre which only a few of his successors managed to handle at a first go.

The birthplace of the sonnet is the court of Frederick II in Sicily in the early thirteenth century. In order to broaden the minds of his jurists the king encouraged them to exercise their intellects by composing sonnets, and he managed to institute this healthy habit by supplementing knightly tournaments with poetry contests.[2] Considering the varied opportunities the emperor offered young men with an artistic turn of mind, one cannot help feeling that the most skilful early practitioner of the sonnet in England, the soldier, poet and courtier Sir Philip Sidney, might well have spent a happy life as one of Frederick's retainers.

The honorary title of Father of the English sonnet, however, goes to Sir Thomas Wyatt, who in the early sixteenth century travelled the continent as cultural ambassador of Henry VIII, and it was in Italy that he came across this poetic form. By that time the sonnet had, in the hands of Dante and Petrarch, received a formal perfection and spiritual refinement that would never be topped. It had also by then been taken over by major Spanish, Portuguese and French poets, the best of whom proved to be on a par with their Italian masters. Wyatt arrived somewhat late in the day. He relished the genre's elegance and divined its potential for a country in which poets, since the death of Chaucer, had not felt fit to rival the achievements of their continental colleagues.

In accordance with humanist practice and its principle of rivalry via imitation Wyatt began to pay homage to Petrarch as soon as he returned to the English court. But the laurels scholars have bestowed on Wyatt as sonneteer have failed

to stay in place, and their endeavours must be regarded as a misguided attempt to endow him with achievements he never laid claim to himself. Left to his own stylistic devices, Wyatt's metrical roughness with its tang of the vernacular enabled him to compose searing love poems of permanent value, but it was beyond even his considerable gifts to handle the sonnet with any fraction of the skill of his Italian forerunners. There is an awkward eloquence about his imitations which puts them out of tune with the originals. Considering the linguistic and technical means, the abundance of rhyme words and the ingrained musicality at the disposal of Italian poets, it is not difficult to see why his effort to keep his galley in the wake of Petrarch's *Canzoniere* was bound to fail.[3]

It was left to Wyatt's younger friend Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, with different and less demanding inclinations, favouring a more mellifluous style, to cut down the demands of the Italian, or Petrarchan, form by devising a type which would later be known as the English, or Shakespearean, variant. Surrey broke down the original contours (the Italian octet-sestet division with its corresponding rhyme scheme *abba abba—cde cde*, or some other variant for the sestet) into three cross-rhymed four-line stanzas (*abab cdcd efef*) and a concluding couplet (*gg*).

A pleasurable way of picking up the basic principles of the Petrarchan form with its two units, is to read John Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer", the sonnet which inaugurated his career at the age of twenty. The subject matter dovetails neatly with the two-part structure of the Italian sonnet. Keats had been fleetingly acquainted with Alexander Pope's polished neoclassical translation of Homer which failed to elicit more than a mild admiration for the ancient writer. This biographical background, metaphorically referred to in the octet ("Oft have I travelled . . ."), is followed by the volta, the turn between octet and sestet, Keats's rejuvenating shock of coming upon Homer *viva voce* in George Chapman's exuberantly vital Elizabethan version, which leaves the young Romantic breathless, but, as the sestet proves, by no means speechless ("Then felt I . . .").

The cleavage between past and present, Pope and Chapman, between dutifully expressed admiration from various *points de vue* in the octet, and involvement in the real thing in the sestet, is given sense and shape to by Keats's brilliant handling of the Italian form, which no English poet had mastered in the same way.[4] The two-part structure also shines through not only in Keats's choice of rhyme words in the octet (*abba abba*) and sestet (*cdc dcd*), but also in his subtle modulation from fairly conventional images in the octet to striking similes in the sestet. His predilection for sharp contours, finely chiselled periods and metrical elegance (not as far from Pope as he might have thought) enabled him to put the Italian form at the service of his personal designs.

In the English variant, invented by Surrey and advocated by the majority of Elizabethans, the two units of the Italian form give way to four. Three stanzas are now followed by an epigram, so that the sonnet may be said to have its sting in the tail, as it does, for instance, in Shakespeare's Sonnet 30 and Michael Drayton's "Since there's no help, come let us kiss and part", or, in the twentieth century, in Causley's "I Am the Great Sun". Generally speaking, the more adaptable English form has been favoured by writers of sequences (Shakespeare, Drayton, Auden), while writers of individual sonnets (Milton, Wordsworth, Hopkins, Yeats, Campbell) have preferred the Italian form. An exception to the rule is Donne in choosing the Italian form for the octet and the English for the sestet.

In Italy the sonnet had been the vehicle of virtually all subjects and sentiments, running the gamut from the religious and devotional to the heroical, the sentimental and the lascivious. In England, the majority of the sonnets up to Donne were, in Petrarch's tradition, devoted to love, though Surrey, also inspired by Petrarch, wrote the first nature sonnet in the English language ("The soote season, that bud and bloom forth brings").[5] Though Sidney spiced his *Astrophel and Stella* sequence with an astonishing variety of subjects (including far-flung allusions to politics, war and religion), it was left to Shakespeare, in his *Sonnets* (published in 1609, written sometime between 1592 and 1598), to deepen the emotional content of the form.

Within only six years, from 1592 to 1597, about two thousand love sonnets were printed in England,[6] and even where there is the occasional glance into the realms of religion, aesthetics and politics, nowhere do the poets allow us to lose sight of their lady. Nowhere—except in Spenser's *Amoretti* and Shakespeare's *Sonnets*—is there any reason to assume that the poets are dealing with a factual or seriously desired love relationship. As with troubadour poetry and that of the later *Minnesänger*, these often monotonous effusions of desire are best regarded as responses to an artistic convention, based on the traditional gap between the courtly lover and a lady of such lofty social and ethical status that sexual consummation was quite beyond reach.

Sidney is a case in point. His Stella, Penelope Devereux, Lady Rich, was married by the time he elected to address her in his sequence. A love relationship, to say nothing of a socially sanctioned affair, was out of the question—unless we assume that he and Lady Rich might have taken a perverse pleasure in being made the subject of gossip at court. Besides, Sidney had by then also been in safe hands, and there is no reason to suppose that he regretted it. Once the distance called for by poetic convention had been established, all that the inspired poet had to do, was put his pen to paper, which he did. Scholars have therefore regarded Elizabethan love poetry as part of a complicated, but enter-

taining "game of love", the rules of which will probably never be completely clarified.[7] The poets, however, found no difficulty in adapting to the well-established principle of imitative competition. Just as the epic poets following Homer had striven to surpass their forerunners in an Olympics of imitation and renewal, the sonneteers were engaged with their Italian masters, and they wrote for an audience of connoisseurs who relished this peculiar discourse.

Shakespeare's Sonnet 130, his famous homage to the mysterious dark lady (he never called her that himself), may serve as an example.[8] Does Shakespeare make fun of one of the Petrarchist stock-in-trades, the blazon, running down a detailed list of the physical merits of the singer's beloved? Certainly, but only up to a point. More important is his capacity of injecting life into an idealized woman figure whose identifiable traits had, over the decades, been lost beneath a load of clichés. Shakespeare struck out on a course of his own and improved on Sidney who, in the programmatic first sonnet of his sequence, had tentatively brooded over the potentialities ("fain . . . my love to show") and the dangers (spelt by an overpowering tradition, "others' leaves") of love poetry. In Sonnet 130 he offers one of a variety of possible embodiments of a lady by depriving her of her godlike attributes (Sidney's star) and investing her with the prerequisites of a loveable human being instead: "My mistress when she walks treads on the ground."

It would be absurd to hit the trail in order to search for the woman, or the women, Shakespeare may have had in mind when composing his poem. He is simply involved in the old game of poetic one-upmanship, and thus isn't writing about a specific lady at all but expanding the possibilities of the love sonnet.[9] By his imperious habit of dealing with trite conventions, Shakespeare has also added to the storehouse of metaphors, though his contribution has sometimes been overrated: metaphors of law, trade and war had, after all, been given their entrée into English poetry much earlier. But he was the first to extol the earthy aspects of human love while, at the same time, exposing with a dramatist's flourish, the disillusioned reflections of a lover after the act, in Sonnet 129.

There had been a religious component in the Italian sonnet. Petrarch's homage to Laura would be pointless and devoid of emotional depth had he not believed there were an afterlife and a unification, on a spiritual level, with his beloved. Yet his sonnets could not be called religious. Taking Christian doctrine for granted, he did not expound it. In the early English sonnets by Wyatt and Surrey, which took their inspiration from Petrarch and his followers, the religious element is hardly noticeable, and it is only with the arrival of Donne and Drummond that a firm, though not unbroken history of the religious sonnet is established. Donne's "Holy Sonnets" and his "La Corona" constitute, next to Hopkins's so-called 'Terrible Sonnets', the finest sequence of religious sonnets

in English. Cultivating a hysterical passion and never losing an opportunity to shock his readers' sensibilities, his sonnets prove, under analysis, to be admirably balanced and controlled.

Donne seems to be speaking in a matter of great urgency at the top of his voice. This fits in with his habitual play-acting, an artistic attitude which had already occasionally been seen in Shakespeare's sonnets (e.g. 30 and 129). A reading of the "Holy Sonnets" alongside the sermons is instructive. Donne is less interested in propagating a religious message than in sending shivers down the spines of his gullible flock. As a genius in fabricating images of purgatory and blazing hell-fire, it is unlikely that he could have composed his religious poetry without capitalizing on and, for the time of writing at least, relishing these terrors. His abrasive metrics are as clearly out of step with the conventions of religious poetry as are his sentiments, and he was proud of it: "I sing not, siren like, to tempt; for I / Am harsh."[10]

Donne, as a lapsed Catholic, was unable to rid himself of the scar of apostasy, and, in order to compensate for constantly rubbing salt into his wounds, rhapsodized his private sorrows in public. He considered it wise to lend this public stunt the semblance of Christian piety. When writing the "Holy Sonnets" he had almost reached the apex of his career by playing the role of Dean of St Paul's, and for obvious reasons tried hard to rid himself of the whiff of having been the rogue Jack Donne.[11] The easiest and, from an aesthetic point of view, most satisfying way out of hell was to ask God to penetrate his sinful stronghold. If it was a worldly ruler's right to enforce a particular denomination on his subjects for the country's welfare, as Donne had asserted in his early poetry, was it not even more God's due to use force on his faithful?

Instead of combating personal insufficiencies, Donne channelled his energy into poetic laments which it would be silly to discredit by applying the yardstick of personal honesty. In the end he seems to have been taken in by his own argufying. Consider the breath-taking self-assurance with which, in "Hymn to God my God, in my Sickness", Donne, piously laid out on his death-bed, assumes to be promptly elevated into the heavenly regions, as if this were the only destiny befitting a man of his talents. Judging from John Carey's brilliant study on Donne, there seems to have been little apart from his poetic genius to justify such preferential treatment. But then, as Milton shows, we don't read poets because of their saint-like bearing.

Milton curbed the lusciousness and occasional prolixity of the Elizabethans and Jacobeans, advocating classical restraint instead. He owes a good deal to the sixteenth-century Italian Giovanni Della Casa whose 'loftiness', according to a near-contemporary critic lay in the "wonderful skill he showed in breaking up the verses, and in separating the words which are commonly placed together".[12]

Milton used the Italian poet's technique of enjambement to good effect, dissociating syntax and metre, though he would effortlessly swing back to the Petrarchan scheme whenever the occasion called for it.[13] More than any English poet before, Milton put the sonnet at the service not only of his private affairs (his blindness, the death of his wife, his religious convictions), but he also uses it, in Michael Spiller's phrase, as "an instrument in the moral ordering of the commonwealth".[14] It may not always be easy, at a first reading, to follow his line of thought in every detail, for his syntax is more involved than that of either Shakespeare or Donne, which earned him a rebuke from Dr Johnson: "Milton was a genius that could cut a colossus from a rock, but he could not carve heads upon cherry-stones." Be that as it may, Milton's rehabilitation of the Italian form and his passionate intensity and bias proved to be a source of inspiration for the Romantic poets who rescued the genre from the neglect it had fallen into during the Augustan age.

Wordsworth's sonnet "Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour" may be motivated by nostalgia and admiration for past poetic grandeur, but it marks at the same time a new beginning. It is the first of countless English eulogies in sonnet form to poets and artists, among which Coleridge's homage "To the Author of *The Robbers*", Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer", Matthew Arnold's "Shakespeare", Hopkins's "Henry Purcell", Campbell's sonnets on San Juan de la Cruz and Luis de Camões, Auden's on Rimbaud, Housman and Edward Lear, Barker's on Hopkins, and Causley's "To a Poet who Has Never Travelled" are outstanding examples.

In Milton the Romantics found a paragon legitimizing their search for a sonnet form adaptable to the poet's slightest emotional or mental move, without forcing him to abandon the traditional verse form of fourteen intricately rhymed iambic pentameters.[15] Keats went as far as he could in his sonnet "If by dull rhymes our English must be chained": "Let us find out, if we must be constrained, / Sandals more interwoven and complete / To fit the naked foot of poesy."[16] The sonnet is here endowed with the capacity to mutate into the shape its momentary occasion requires (*abcabd cab cdede*). Paradoxically, however, the verses quoted also seem to be aware of the overpowering shadow of the old masters: it is hard not to hear the undertone of resentment in Keats's declaration of artistic independence. The Elizabethans, in contrast, felt perfectly at ease as far as formal conventions were concerned. Even in Shakespeare's days there were poets favouring sixteen-line sonnets or unrhymed sonnets without feeling compelled to go into print about their eccentric designs. Keats followed, as we have seen in case of his Chapman's Homer sonnet, first the Petrarchan, then, after a period of wavering, the Shakespearean scheme. Wordsworth, Miltonist that he was, preferred the Petrarchan form, while it was left to Shelley to com-