



The Sonnets

Ted Berrigan , Alice Notley (Editor)

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Originally published in 1964, **The Sonnets** by Ted Berrigan is considered by many to be his most important and influential book. This new annotated edition, with an introduction by Alice Notley, includes seven previously uncollected works. Like Shakespeare's sonnets, Berrigan's poems involve friendship and love triangles, but while the former happen chronologically, Berrigan's happen in the moment, with the story buried beneath a surface of names, repetitions, and fragmented experience. Reflecting the new American sensibilities of the 1960's as well as timeless poetic themes, **The Sonnets** is both eclectic and classical — the poems are monumental riddles worth contemplating.

The Sonnets Details

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From Reader Review The Sonnets for online ebook

Laurie says

Alice Notley writes in this introduction that Ted Berrigan took inspiration from, among other things, John Cage and Alfred North Whitehead. Specifically, their thoughts on chance (your chance is not the same as my chance), order (using I-Ching and other devices to plot order into spontaneity) and time. For "time" in particular, Berrigan took the last line of some of these stanzas, used it as the first, then took the second to last, moved it to the top, and so on.

When I read this I had just put down one of the news weeklies we get in the mail. I'd also just read the news of the day online. At times like that my head swims because everything has already happened and the facts are laid out and they aren't going to change but there's going to be an endless amount of facts and news stories out there right after I finish reading that last one. It often feels overwhelming. And if I could just mess with linear time a little bit, that'd feel lovely. These poems do just that.

Bud Smith says

The first time through this slim book of sonnets, I had little idea what was going on. I enjoyed that though. The mystery and the puzzle of what the author was saying and what it was supposed to mean. They were big things, good things, over my head type things, but I liked it all none the less--in a way, I might enjoy looking at graphitti on a brick wall, something I don't understand but can appreciate and get lost in. Berrigan is writing, repeatedly about about life in a city, the many American archetypes and celebrities and books and films and The Sonnets has a total immersion of "everything all at once" that hums vibrantly.

Finished the first pass. Went back and read the intro to the collection. Some things are explained there, there are clues as to what is happening in the work. The intro is a map.

Perhaps this is a book to revisit every year or so, like a stretch of woods that was once easy to get lost in, but gets revealed over time, and before long, becomes startlingly revealed. Will return, I'm sure.

Also: Thanks to poet John Dorsey for pointing out this book to me.

Carrie Lorig says

FUCK YOU TED I WILL DO IT TO YOU WITH GREEN NOODLES. I LOVE YOU WHY CAN'T WE PEPSI TOGETHER. Don't just read this. Listen to this on Penn Sound while you eat red noodles.

Timothy Green says

I think there are two kinds of poetry readers -- those who want poetry to be an experience, and those who want it to be a puzzle. For the latter, this is going to be one of the greatest books of the last half-century. As

for me, though, I'd much rather get my pleasure directly from a poem than from analyzing it. *The Sonnets* are all cut-up poems -- Berrigan uses what he cryptically refers to as "The Process" to rearrange the lines according to a mathematical, syntactically random, pattern. A few of the sonnets are reproduced with the original line sequence, so you can see that they at least at one time made sense. And when the lines are jumbled, it is a bit of fun to try to makes sense out of what remains. When certain lines are repeated, or echo those from previous poems, the result is a the startling effect of "everything happening at once" that Berrigan seemed to be seeking. Yet in the end, the book reads more like an experiment than a book, and while I can appreciate it, I can't really say that I enjoyed it. And you have to wonder, would the poems have lose their value if they weren't cut up? Is the book all form and no substance? Well, probably.

Eddie Watkins says

One of the best examples I know of poetry that is simultaneously a spontaneous mind map of the moment and rigorously formal.

And they're funny

And they make you want to write

James Cook says

I'm a fan of the Sonnets, of the idea of the Sonnets, and I have no qualms with the method, and I like Alfred North Whitehead too, and its poetic blasphemy to say this, but...they're kind of boring here and there. Some of the repeated lines that become motifs are placed too near each other. I feel like the passage of time and the 'advance' of post-avant poetry has diminished their radicalism to a degree. That being said, they are fun, and you come across lines that blow you away, like say: "Max Jacob,/When I lie down to love you, I am one hundred times more/A ghost!", which is pretty brilliant. Maybe I'm just not a huge NY School reader. I do like these Sonnets, I'm just not as bowled over as I was when I was 22.

Erin Lyndal says

I had wanted to read this book for ages, and becoming such a huge Alice Notley fan in recent history just upped the ante.

I did not love this book as much as I had expected. If I were to read more about it or engage with scholarly perspectives on it, I think I'd get much more out of it. Unfortunately, I'm not excited enough by this book yet to do so and will most likely just move on to a different text.

I enjoyed the way Berrigan would repeat lines from one poem in another. That has some exciting possibilities. Ultimately is felt like a great idea in theory that fell flat in execution. I didn't feel as though he did anything with the text when it would appear for the second time, and I wanted to see more interactivity.

mwpm says

The definitive edition of Ted Berrigan's *Sonnets* is introduced with notes by Berrigan's widow, the poet Alive Motley. In the introduction, Motley stresses the important influence of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*; the profundity of Berrigan's transformation from being the poet of the commonplace *A Lily For My Love* to the poet of the experimental and unconventional *Sonnets*; an overview of the cast of allusive characters that includes friends, cultural figures, and literary influences; and perhaps most significantly the influence of the New York School poets, of whom at least three are referenced and two are quoted directly...

In my skin, writing *The Dwarf of Ticonderoga*. Icy girls
finger thighs bellies apples in my dream the big gunfire sequence
For the Jay Kenneth Koch movie, *Phooey!* I recall
My Aunt Annie and begin.
- Sonnet XL

"Grace to be born
and live as variously
as possible"
- Frank O'Hara, quoted in Sonnet LV

"The academy
of the future
is opening its doors"
- John Ashbery, quoted in Sonnet LXXIV

Allusions: Friends. Berrigan, in the vein of the confessional poets, inserts himself and his friends into *The Sonnets*. Among them, his friend and collaborator Joe Brainard, to whom the book is dedicated; Carol Clifford, to whom one of the sonnets is dedicated; Richard Gallup; David Bearden; among countless others. Along with friends who are only referenced by their first names: Margie, who is repeatedly greeted at 5:15 in the morning; Chris, to whom the "FINAL SONNET" is dedicated, who is repeatedly greeted at 3:17 and 5:15 in the morning; Henry; Dick; Bernie; Patsy; among others...

Whenever Richard Gallup is dissevered,
Fathers and teachers, and daemons down under the sea,
Audenesque Epithalamiums! She
Sends her driver home and she stays with me.
- Sonnet VII. POEM IN THE TRADITIONAL MANNER

Each tree stands alone in stillness
After many years still nothing
The wind's wish is the tree's demand
The tree stands still
The wind walks up and down
Scanning the long selves of the shore
Her aimlessness is the pulse of the tree
It beats in tiny blots
Its patternless pattern of excitement

Letters birds beggars books
There is no such thing as a breakdown
The tree the ground the wind these are
Dear, be the tree your sleep awaits
Sensual, solid, still, swaying alone in the wind
- Sonnet XVII *for Carol Clifford*

Dear Margie, hello. It is 5:15 a.m.
Andy Butt was drunk in the Parthenon
Harum-scarum haze on the Pollock streets
This excitement to be all of night, Henry!
Ah, Bernie, to think of you alone, suffering
- Sonnet XXX

I wonder if Jan or Helen or Babe
ever think about me. I wonder if David Bearden still
dislikes me. I wonder if people talk about me
secretly. I wonder if I'm too old. I wonder if I'm fooling
myself about pills. I wonder what's in the icebox. I wonder
if Ron or Pat bought any toilet paper this morning.
- Sonnet LXXVI

How strange to be gone in a minute
Bearden is dead Gallup is dead Margie is dead
Patsy awakens in head and ready to squabble
Dear Chris, hello. It is 5:15 a.m.

Allusions: Literary Influences. Aside from references to Shakespeare and the New York School poets, Berrigan crowds his *Sonnets* with literary influences including Arthur Rimbaud, W. H. Auden, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Henry Miller, among others. In other words, a lot of old white men...

More books! Rilke Stevens Pound Auden & Frank
- Sonnet LX

my poems gloat a little over new ballad quickly skip old
sonnets imitations of Shakespeare. Back to books. I read
poems by Auden Spenser Pound Stevens and Frank O'Hara.
- Sonnet LXXVI

Allusions: Cultural references. I suspect many of the reference of the time may be too idiosyncratic for me to identify. The relevance of references to outlaws such as Billy the Kid and Jesse James, for example. But I can identify the obvious cultural references that have remained in the cultural conscious, such as Marilyn Monroe; John Wayne; and Elvis Presley...

When need exceeds means,
I read the Evening World / the sports,

The funnies, the vital statistics, the news:
Okinawa was a John Wayne movie to me.
- Sonnet XXIX

This excitement to be all of night, Henry!
Elvis Peering-Eye danced with Carol Clifford, high
Contrived whose leaping herb edifies Kant! I'll bust!
Smile! "Got rye in this'n?"
Widow Dan sold an eye t'meander an X. Whee! Yum!
- Sonnet XXVI

I am truly horribly upset because Marilyn
Monroe died, so I went to a matinee B-movie
and ate King Korn popcorn," he wrote in his
Diary....
- Sonnet LIX

Repetition. Of the experimental devices utilized by Berrigan, the most conspicuous is the poet's use of repetition. The repetitions are too numerous to list. But here are a few examples...

"Dear Marge, hello. It is 5:15 a.m." (II, XVIII, XXX, XLII, ...)

"Andy Butt was drunk in the Parthenon" (XXVII, XXX)

"Harum-scarum haze on the Pollock streets" (XIX, XXX, XLVI. LINES FOR
LAUREN OWEN)

"This excitement to be all of night, Henry!" (XXVI, XXX, LXVIII)

"On the 15th day of November in the year of the motorcar" (XXIII, XXX)

"In a roomful of smoky man names burnished dull black" (XIV, XXIII)

"To cover the tracks of 'The Hammer'" (LXIV, LXVII)

"Out we go to the looney movie" (LVI, LXCII)

Repetition. Two sonnets, "XII. PENN STATION" and "XXI", appear to be more or less the same sonnet with the lines rearranged. Aside from the arrangement, the difference is in the context. Do these lines find a new meaning in a different context?

On the green a white boy goes
And he walks. Three ciphers and a faint fakir
No One Two Three Four Today
I thought about all those radio waves
Winds flip down the dark path of breath

Passages the treasure Gomangani I
 Forget bring the green boy white ways
 And the wind goes there
 Keats was a baiter of bears
 Who died of lust (You lie! You lie!)
 As so we all must in the green jungle
 Under a sky of burnt umber we bumble to
 The mien florist's to buy green nosegays
 For the fey Saint's parade Today
 We may read about all those radio waves
 - Sonnet XII. PENN STATION

On the green a white boy goes
 We may read about all those radio waves
 And he walks. Three ciphers and a faint fakir
 For the fey Saint's parade Today
 No One Two Three Four Today
 Under a sky of burnt umber we bumble to
 Forget Bring the green boy white ways
 As so we all must in the green jungle
 Winds flip down the dark path of breath
 The mien florist's to buy green nosegays
 Passage the treasure Gomangani
 I thought about all those radio waves
 Keats was a baiter of bears
 Who died of lust (You lie! You lie!)
 And the wind goes there
 - Sonnet XXI

Repetition. Two sonnets, "XV" and "LIX", that, like the sonnets quoted above, contain the same lines re-arranged, but, unlike the poems quoted above, about which neither can be said to be the more coherent than the other, the poem in its first incarnation is scrambled incoherent, whereas the second incarnation restores the sonnet to its coherent order...

In Joe Brainard's collage its white arrow
 He is not in it, the hungry dead doctor.
 Of Marilyn Monroe, her white teeth white-
 I am truly horribly upset because Marilyn
 and ate King Korn popcorn," he wrote in his
 of glass in Joe Brainard's collage
 Doctor, but the day, "I LOVE YOU"
 and the sonnet is not dead.
 takes the eye away from the gray words,
Diary. The black heart beside the fifteen pieces
 Monroe died, so I went to a matinee B-movie
 washed by Joe's throbbing hands. "Today
 What is in it is sixteen ripped pictures
 does not point to William Carlos Williams.

- Sonnet XV

In Joe Brainard's collage its white arrow
does not point to William Carlos Williams.
He is not in it, the hungry dead doctor.
What is in it is sixteen ripped pictures
Of Marilyn Monroe, her white teeth white-
washed by Joe's throbbing hands. "Today
I am truly horribly upset because Marilyn
Monroe died, so I went to a matinee B-movie
and ate King Korn popcorn," he wrote in his
Diary. The black heart beside the fifteen pieces
of glass in Joe Brainard's collage
takes the eye away from the gray words,
Doctor, but the day, "I LOVE YOU"
and the sonnet is not dead.

- Sonnet LIX

Repetition. Four consecutive sonnets - "LI", "LII", "LIII", and "LV" ("LIV" appears to be missing) - appear to bleed into each other. Unlike the pairings quoted above, they contain a sampling of the same lines, re-arranged and in some cases retooled, reworked, reimagined...

(...)
is not genuine it shines forth from the faces
(...)
sadness praying the faces of virgins aching
and everything comes before their eyes
to be fucked, we fondle their snatches but they
(...)
(...) gratuitously
(...)
Gus Cannon gulping, "I called myself Banjo Joe!"
- Sonnet LI

(...)
is not genuine it shines forth from the faces
The poem upon the page is as massive as Anne's thighs
Belly to hot belly we have laid
(...)
are everywhere praying faces of virgins
aching to be fucked we fondle their snatches
(...)
gratuitously like Gertrude Stein at Radcliffe
Gus Cannon to say, "I called myself Banjo Joe!"
O wet kisses, death on earth, lovely fucking in the poem upon the page
(...)
- Sonnet LII

The poem upon the page is as massive as
 Anne's thighs belly to hot belly we have laid
 Serene (...)
 in our whit heat hungered and tasted and
 Gone to the movies baffling combustions
 are everywhere like Gertrude Stein at Radcliffe
 (...)
 O wet kisses, the poem upon the page
 (...) Fucking is so very lovely
 (...)
 - Sonnet LIII

(...)
 Massive as Anne's thighs upon the page
 (...)
 Gratuitously (...)
 (...) belly
 To hot belly we have laid serenely white
 (...)
 Baffling combustions are everywhere! we hunger and taste
 And go to the movies (...)
 (...)
 - Sonnet LV

This is as opportune a time as any to call attention to the offensive aspects of Berrigan's *Sonnets*. The four sonnets quoted above contain various references to "Anne's thighs" and "fondling snatches" and "virgins aching to be fucked". These references betray a misogyny that is present throughout *The Sonnets*. Berrigan's misogyny contributes nothing to *The Sonnets*. On the contrary, the misogyny brings a sensationalism that is beneath the *The Sonnets*. One reads Berrigan's references to "virgins aching to be fucked" and imagines Berrigan in the early 1960s, writing *The Sonnets* in the aftermath of the obscenity trials against Howl (1957) and Lady Chatterly's Lover (1960), telling himself to "keep up with the times" (from "LII") and give the reading audience what they want. Or perhaps feeling a certain pressure, in the same vein of "keeping up with the times", the pressure to express oneself, and the only valid form of expression being the form that was previous forbidden. What I'm suggesting is that it doesn't read like a writer expressing himself obscenely because he is obscene, but a writer expressing himself obscenely because he's exercising his newly found freedom to be obscene. Presently, I'm writing at the risk of sounding "prudish". Not "keeping up the the times" one might say. Or perhaps "keeping up with the times" from the perspective of someone who knows the importance of combatting misogyny and racism in literature.

Further evidence to support my misogyny accusation: the poet's favourable reference to affirmed misogynist Henry Miller: "my dream a drink with Henry Miller" (Sonnet LXXI, LXXXII, and LXXXIV).

Further evidence to support my "keeping up with the times" argument: Berrigan's problematic race-related reference are reminiscent of John Berryman's *Dream Songs*. As I discussed in my

review of 77 Dream Songs, my opinion of the poet's race commentary is mixed because the line between subversive and exploitative is unclear. The influence of the confessional poets is apparent throughout *The Sonnets*, and although Berryman's Dream Songs had yet to be published, both poets seem to have been influenced by the racial climate. Indeed, Berryman and Berrigan were writing at a time of change. But, rather than reflect the progress of the emerging Civil Rights Movement, both poets chose instead to hark back to the racial tensions of the past...

O! Marster, being bound you do your best
versus we coons, spare now a cagey John
a whilom bits that whip:
who'll tell your fortune, when you have confessed
whose & whose woundings - against the innocent stars
& remorseless seas -
- John Berryman, Dream Song 51

We remove a hand . . .
In a roomful of smoky man names burnished dull black
And labelled "blue" the din drifted in . . .
Someone named "Blake-blues" and someone else "pill-head"
Meaning bloodhounds. Someone shovelled in some
Cotton-field money brave free beer and finally "Negroes!"
- Sonnet XIV

A few rape men or kill coons so I bat them!
Daughter prefers to lay 'em on a log and tear their hair.
Moaning Jimmy bats her!
- Sonnet XIL. MESS OCCUPATIONS

My favourite of *The Sonnets*...

"DEAR CHRIS

it is 3:17a.m. in New York city, yet, it is
1962, it is the year of parrot fever. In
Brandenburg, and by the granite gates, the
old come-all-ye's street into the streets. Yes, it is now,
the season of delight. I am writing to you to say that
I have gone mad. Now I am sowing seeds which shall,
when ripe, master the day, and
portion out the night. Be watching for me when blood
flows down the streets. Pineapples are a sign
that I am coming. My darling, it is nearly time. Dress
the snowmen in the Easter sonnet we made for him
when scissors were in style. For now, goodbye, and
all my love,
The Snake."

Rufussenex says

The Sonnets are one of the best examples of what I call "phantom limb" poetry; you read it, and feel the trace of some emotion so viscerally that you are convinced it must be real, but upon thought and concentration and meditation realize is nothing at all. But unlike other poets of this genre –the Ashberys, and Palmers, the Scalapinos– I find Berrigan's opus endlessly human and fascinating, a free verse koan that I can ponder forever, and from which I draw the most sincere inspiration.

Melany Dillon says

Really weird, but oddly enjoyable. It made me think.

Donald says

How come nobody has made me read this before? How come nobody has made me read Ted Berrigan?

You fuckers! You are all absolute fuckers!

Patrick Bella Gone says

The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry & Poetics lists three sonnet types: the Petrarchan, the Spenserian, and the Shakespearean. When will the Berriganian earn its rightful place amongst them? Fifty years after its original publication, Berrigan's "classical and eclectic" tone (as Alice Notley calls it in her Introduction), his balance of reverence and irreverence, as well as his composition methods, remain influential to 21st century verse. Berrigan pays homage to Shakespeare and these long-dead sonneteers, but reinvents their sonnet, creating his own constellation of poetic tradition, namedropping and leaning on heroes (Apollinaire, O'Hara) and friends (Joe Brainard, Ron Padgett).

In LXXVI, Berrigan gloats "a little over new ballad quickly skip old / sonnets imitations of Shakespeare. Back to books. I read / poems by Auden Spenser Pound Stevens and Frank O'Hara. / I hate books. / I wonder if Jan or Helen or Babe / ever think about me." Over the course of five lines Berrigan self-aggrandizes, self-deprecates, drops influences, dismisses the whole reading enterprise, and contemplates his crushes, somehow perfectly encapsulating how a bard spends an average afternoon.

Fittingly, the book opens in fragment: "His piercing pince-nez," glasses that stand as mark of a bygone stuffy intellectualism which Berrigan smashes. He composed the book by cutting and pasting, citing Ashbery's The Tennis Court Oath as a major influence. He tossed out other avant-garde modes such as Surrealist exquisite corpse collaborations or automatic writing, finding the truth of daily activity through disjunction and editing. Berrigan had a blueprint, the fourteen line form, and treated his word bank of notes and failed poems as

bricks from which to construct the poem. Each unit is “subject to breakage and reconstitution.” Everything is in play. With each line and phrase able to be used, re-used, and repurposed, Berrigan gave himself myriad possibilities of composition and recombination. Reading the poems in succession, the repeated fragments are welcome returns, building a world of Berrigan subconscious, at once disjunctive and personal, a place where the sky shifting to twilight and one’s own poems are described with the same adjectives: “feminine marvelous and rough.”

Gillian says

experimental contemporary sonnets that got me more stoked abt poetry than i'd been in while. ted's a hidden gem of the new york school.

Chris Schaeffer says

I like to think that when he says "DEAR CHRIS" he meant me.

Griffin Alexander says

When it hits, it really hits. When it doesn't, it still isn't bad. As far as the unavoidable coupling question goes: I still prefer Alice Notley, but I understand her affection for Ted.
