

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, PhD

Poetry and Poetics; The *Delia* Sonnets 1620

Samuel Daniel. 1563-1619.

Daniel's setting in the history of literature

Born in Somerset in 1563, but little known in his early life, Daniel in fact first truly enters the historical record in 1581, upon his matriculation to Magdalen College, Oxford. Subsequently poet, playwright, historian, Samuel Daniel was to become one of the preeminent literary voices of Elizabethan and early Jacobean England, a voice of such eminence that his and Shakespeare's most admired dramatic work significantly influenced each other; that eminent modern British writers--Wordsworth, Coleridge, C.S.Lewis-- have seen him as one of the primary intellectual forces of Elizabethan culture.

Daniel was an indefatigable writer, best known and most admired for his verse dialogue, *Musophilus*, 'a general defense of learning,' for his *History of the Civil Wars between the Houses of Lancaster and York*, for his sonnet sequence *Delia*, 1620, dedicated to Lady Mary Countess of Pembroke, and for his *A Defense of Rhyme*. This variegated achievement in the skills of language rendered Daniel virtually unique in his time.

In addition to these influential literary achievements, and in fact part and parcel of them, we need to consider the presence of Daniel to his time as a social figure, a traveler, a man of letters. (Starting out fast from the gate was essential for a similar highly tuned literary career in the England of the time) At Oxford Daniel had formed a warm and lasting friendship with John Florio, an Italian student who was to become an eminent translator of Montaigne's *Essays*, and who was to travel widely in Europe with Daniel. Through Florio Daniel made the acquaintances of European intellectuals and political figures. In among these travels came such instructive experiences as a period as resident guest at the British Ambassador's residence in Paris, travels abroad with his patron Lord Dymoke, and regular presence at the social and intellectual gathering venues of the city of London

Dedicatory. Delia Sonnet

We will take the liberty of devoting the opening of our examples to the poetry of Daniel, specifically to a dedicatory sonnet addressed to the Countess of Pembroke. And then we will go on to review Daniel's creative process, comparing it as we go with pieces of the work of several more modern poets. Would we feel comfortable with creating such work as Daniel's today? Could we learn by drawing from his bag of tricks? And to answer just that question we need to draw our attention to the playing field from which Daniel and his fellow writers--Shakespeare included-- set off on such work as Daniel's journey of making a sonnet. That will involve feeling our way back into creations made five hundred years ago--and more recently. Can we still rhyme today? Follow the formal outline of a sonnet? Do we *want* to do things like that? Are we trying to acquire new skills, as we read the history of literature? Do we make literature in order to learn how to make literature?

To the Right Honorable, The Lady, Mary Countess of Pembroke
(First and dedicatory sonnet in Daniels' *Delia* sequence, 1620)

*Wonder of these, glory of other times,
O Thou, whom envy ev'n is forced t'admire!
Great Patronness of these my humble rhymes,
Which thou from out thy greatness dost inspire!
Since only thou has deigned to raise them higher,
Vouchsafe now to accept them as thine own
Begotten by thy hand and my desire.
Where to my zeal and thy great might is shown.*

*And seeing this unto the world is known
O leave not still to grace thy work in me.
Let not the quickening seed be overthrown
Of that which may be born to honor thee
Whereof the travail may challenge mine
But yet the glory, Madam, must be thine.*

Feeling our way back to Rhyme and Formal Frame

Writing and reading older English poetry is not easy today. Think of the final tonality you take home from the reading of this fourteen line sixteenth century sonnet. It is as though with each couplet you complete an assignment--an assignment of verbal working through. That is simply to speak of the dimension of the couplet, a pair of rhyming lines of which there are seven in the poem. Each couplet is a marked experience of its own, postulating in its own completeness the formal completeness of the whole sonnet. In a fourteen line sonnet like the present we are talking about an aggregate of six couplets topped off by a final couplet which serves to top off the entire assemblage, which constitutes the sonnet.

All of which brings us to the structure we have learned to schematize as *abab/ baba/cdcd/ ee*. Of course as our experience of the Elizabethan era sonnet grows, so does our repertoire of ever more intricate sonnet forms--the variety is wide, but the challenge, for us the modern reader, will remain the same, to reconcile our fascination for highly disciplined language structures--which were once the norm of the poetic craft--with structures which resemble the condition of speech, as Wordsworth put it. Since the advent of Romanticism we have been seduced into valorizing poetry that approaches the condition of speech. It is, however, not that hard to ease down into ourselves and to begin to make real what it is that rhyme and formal shape do within a poem.

Formal language and speech

The advent of Romanticism is an important turning point, which arguably heralds in a new relationship of poetry, and the other arts of language, to language itself, and to the role language plays in literature and the other expressive arts. Wordsworth is a key figure in the awareness of this change. In his *Lyrical Ballad (1798)*, and in the critical theory embedded in *Biographia Literaria (1817)*, Wordsworth speaks out for a shift in the language of poetry, which he would like to bring closer to that of the man on the street--or, to speak to Wordsworth's case-- of the Wye Valley shepherds and farmers of northern England.

Was Wordsworth touching some crucial historical nerve in arguing for a more inclusive poetry, especially for one --and this is a corollary to Wordsworth's argument--divorced from elitist social settings? (Wordsworth's life time (1770-1850) was conspicuously one of revolution, in Western Europe and America, where a newly populist aesthetic was in the making, on the ground level of society.)

Where do we stand today in the cultural evolution of poetry? Can we anticipate a return, someday and for some reason, of a return to the precepts of aesthetic value which prevailed at the time of Samuel Daniel? Or, for that matter, can we anticipate an eventual regression, in poetry, to the primal setting of poetic art? Has a literary genetic, like poetry or drama, a life curve of its own?

Rhyme and Form Today

For the contemporary poet, the question might seem to be, where can I best find creative nourishment from the present retrospect, from these historical-literary notes? Can I still nourish myself on the pre Romantic tradition? Can I read sonnets of Shakespeare, or Daniel, and both enjoy, understand, and use them? Can I employ them as a stimulus to my own work? How? Above all, can I write, expressing myself today, in the verse furnishings that offered themselves to Samuel Daniel? If I wish to express to you, in poetry, my unbounded gratitude for your inspiration, can I do so in the formal fashion worked out by Samuel Daniel in his dedicatory sonnet to the Countess of Pembroke? And if not, why not? Let's ask that puzzling question first of rhyme (abab), then of outer form (say, three quatrains followed by a couplet), as we survey the issue of 'rejoining the creative past.'

Rhyming today

A serious young American writer, with a bent to express himself in poetry, might of course gravitate to romantic poetry, thinking it represents a certified expression of feelings--hearts and flowers, perhaps--- but that outdated assumption is likely to backfire in his face, when his hip chick brings him up short.

Will he find that rhyme is a friendly adjunct to the expression of feelings on the campus of High School X in America 2024?

1 Rhyme as reinforcer

Rhyme sets up a semantic thickening and a short term anticipation, and in most cases, in one way or another, it satisfies that anticipation. We get:

*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
Lodged with me useless...*

Milton, Sonnet on his Blindness (1673)

Wide and hide feed into one another semantically (wide spaces are both difficult to hide in and invitations to hiding) reinforcing the senses of both the noun and the adjective.

2 Rhyme as emphasis

*The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold...*

Lord Byron. The Destruction of Sennacherib (1816)

Fold and *gold* have no semantic brotherhood, at least in the present case, yet they have a power to reinforce one another. Coming as they do, at adjacent line-endings, the rhyme of *fold* and *gold* is a self-reinforcer, which brings both power and innocence to the fore.

3 Rhyme as sharpener of the address of the writer to the reader.

*Ah did you once see Shelley plain?
And did he stop and speak to you?
And did you speak to him again?
How strange it seems and new!*

Browning, Memorabilia. (1855)

The interlacing of three uses of 'you' with 'true,' levels the finger of the poet Sharply at the hearer of the poem.

4

Sketch of a conclusion to this chat on the uses of rhyme; though rhyme, central to the Elizabethan sonnet, can be dismissed as corny, in contemporary poetic practice, the actual application of rhyme, in a deft contemporary poem, can prove its usefulness as a graft or reuse of dated poetic techniques.

Formal Shaping Today

Can the formal framing structure of a sonnet--Daniel's form In his Delia dedication-- graft onto the literary tradition--for instance onto an Elizabethan tradition?--to generate a new language of 'modern poetry?' Take a look at the following sonnet, written in our time by the British poet, W H.Auden.

Sonnets from China XIII

*Far from a cultural centre he was used:
Abandoned by his general and his lice,
Under a padded quilt he turned to ice
And vanished. He will never be perused*

*When this campaign is tidied into books:
No vital knowledge perished in that skull;
His jokes were stale; like wartime, he was dull;
His name is lost forever like his looks.*

*Though runeless, to instructions from headquarters
He added meaning like a comma when
He joined the dust of China, that our daughters*

*Might keep their upright carriage, not again
Be shamed before the dogs, that, where are waters,
Mountains, and houses, may be also men*

W.H. Auden. (1939. Sino Japanese War)

The formal traits of the sonnet are easy enough to list: *iambic pentameter lines--though runeless, instructions from headquarters*--press the flexibility allowed by the schema; the metrical pattern *abba, cddc, efe, ghg*; a formal enough sonnet, the kind of evidence we might want, that the toolbox of the classical sonnet can construct contemporary work of high craftsmanship. Tough as nails, you might say of this sonnet. And built, because it is a sonnet.