

'What are we not headed for?' The Constellatory Poetics of Bill Griffiths' *Binaries. Not Sonnets*

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on Bill Griffiths' poem-sequence *Binaries. Not Sonnets*, published in an Etruscan Reader in 1997. It considers how the text relates to the wider sonnet tradition given Griffiths' own hostility towards the form. Two earlier 'sonnets' by Griffiths prove purposeful interventions into inherited reading practices, a methodology employed more extensively in *Binaries* where Griffiths playfully activates the 'not sonnet', an impossible form which calls up the sonnet at the same time as denying it. A reading of the frontispiece to *Binaries* shows how the text relates to Eugen Gomringer's notion of the 'constellation' and Griffiths' peculiar use throughout the poem of the double equals-sign is considered in the light of Alfred Korzybski's *Science and Sanity* (1933), a work that resonates with many of *Binaries*' structural and ethical concerns.

KEYWORDS

constellation • Bill Griffiths • Korzybski • not sonnet • sonnet

I

As I tried to demonstrate in *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets*, the sonnet form has had a simultaneously active and invisible life in the history of twentieth- and twenty-first-century innovative poetic practice. The presence in the anthology of a broad swathe of international, English-speaking innovative poets (largely excluded by editors from other sonnet anthologies) has led one commentator to hold it responsible for 'the rediscovery of the sonnet and the extended sonnet sequence within contemporary "innovative poetry".' (Hampson, 2012: ix). If it has achieved

anything, my inclusion of such work demonstrates that contemporary experimental practitioners have as much 'right' to the sonnet as poets of so-called official verse culture, a right which the other anthologies (Boland and Hirsch, 2008; Fuller, 2000; Levin 2003; Paterson, 1999) have by their repeated acts of omission effectively denied. Moreover, focusing on achievement with form rather than having to valorize individual reputations as in a more conventionally assembled anthology enabled me, I hope, to sidestep the dangers of establishing any kind of canon of alternative practice.¹ In the introduction to *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets*, I speculate that the sonnet has become a synecdoche for the wider poetic tradition in the West, fiercely guarded by the poetic establishment for whom any incursion into its form beyond the merest tinkering signals a threat to the poetic tradition itself. In hindsight this may have been overstating the case but at the time of compiling the anthology the stakes seemed high. Needless to say, the book received no reviews in the mainstream press, unlike Eavan Boland and Edward Hirsch's *The Making of a Sonnet*, which was published in the same year, almost to the month. That a newspaper like the *Guardian* would favour an anthology by a big US publishing house (Norton) whose aim was to preserve, or conserve, the sonnet form, over a small press anthology whose intentions were as much to highlight discontinuities and ruptures, is perhaps unsurprising. Given a climate in which the poetry that sells is still principally poetry that consoles, what better consolation than the manifest persistence of form?

Indeed, the title of Boland and Hirsch's anthology, *The Making of a Sonnet*, is telling. Less about craft as it might lead a reader to think, it is more accurately a biography of the sonnet's advancement through the ranks to pre-eminent form, a record of its 'making' in the other sense, of how it 'got it made'. Beginning with a section of sonnets on sonnets called 'The Sonnet in the Mirror' (a title that announces a formal narcissism as much as its genuine history of self-reflexivity), the anthology settles into a chronological display of what its editors see as the sonnet's prominent and exemplary practitioners from the sixteenth through to the twentieth century. However, two further sections entitled 'The Sonnet Goes to Different Lengths' and 'The Sonnet Around the World' reveal a different aspect to the enterprise. Rather than demonstrating inclusivity, I wonder whether these sections do not instead indicate a mistrust of experimentation and the foreign. While conceding that the twentieth century produced 'masters of traditional form, such as James Merrill and Anthony Hecht, and committed improvisers such as John Ashbery and Ted Berrigan' (Boland and Hirsch, 2008: 182), Berrigan is omitted from the Twentieth Century section.² And while the 'Different Lengths' section does include Berrigan, as well as Bernadette Mayer, Robert Duncan and John

Wheelwright, it also includes poems by W.H. Auden, Billy Collins, Tony Harrison and Roy Fuller. The fiction perpetuated here is that the sonnet somehow papers over poetic divides, effortlessly accommodating ideological difference: *and Bernadette Mayer lies down with Billy Collins*. It also in effect questions the breaches announced by Modernism by suggesting that poets of any stripe can take the sonnet 'to different lengths', modernists and anti-modernists alike. But of course, what can be done to the sonnet is not simply a question of quantity, of adding or subtracting lines. Just because Tony Harrison's sonnets are 16 lines long does not make them automatically 'like' Ted Berrigan's. There are radical qualitative differences between what these two poets have done to the form (and that I do not have time to go into here) beyond mere addition or subtraction.

The obsession with length in *The Making of a Sonnet* can probably be attributed to the poet George Gascoigne who in his *Certain Notes of Instruction Concerning the Making of Verse or Rhyme in English* (1575) writes:

Then have you Sonnets: Some think that all poems (being short) may be called Sonnets, as indeed it is a diminutive word derived of *Sonare*, and yet I can best allow to call those sonnets which are of fourteen lines, every line containing ten syllables. The first twelve do rhyme in staves of four lines by cross meter, and the last two rhyming together do conclude the whole. (Boland and Hirsch, 2008: 383)

As Cathy Shrank remarks, Gascoigne's words here are 'not so much descriptive as prescriptive, seeking to restrict a looser and then more culturally-dominant use of the term [sonnet], which was assumed by most mid-Tudor authors to be a diminutive denoting any short poem' (Shrank, 2008: 30). That prescriptiveness, as Shrank further notes, became the 'orthodox aesthetic paradigm' of the form and Gascoigne's 'I can best allow' is still heard loud and clear 400 years later in John Fuller's *The Sonnet* which in places reads like a jeremiad against anything that deviates from what he calls the sonnet's 'legitimate' form. His chapter entitled 'Variants and Curiosities' ends with a characteristic refusal of sonnets that depart from the form which he deems 'impatient short cuts, simple misunderstandings, or overambitious extensions' (Fuller, 1972: 36). It is the sclerosis of form into law.

There is perhaps no better illustration of this sclerosis than the Don Paterson-edited Faber and Faber anthology, *101 Sonnets: From Shakespeare to Heaney* whose very subtitle is calculatedly misleading as the earliest poem in the book is not by Shakespeare but by Sir Thomas Wyatt.³ The anthology should of course have been subtitled 'from Wyatt to Heaney' (or more accurately 'from Wyatt to Duffy') but Shakespeare and Heaney are not being used as chronological markers but as guarantors of poetic cultural capital for a readership for whom the sonnet is also a guarantor of poetic cultural capital; Shakespeare is a name to reckon with in a way

that Wyatt simply is not. It is of course also an example of how Shakespeare is installed as the degree-zero of sonnet writers, with all trace of the form's murky Italian origins (which linger on in Wyatt) safely erased so that it becomes a form with a distinctively English pedigree (and with Heaney appointed its fortunate colonialist inheritor). These mendacious but culturally appealing manoeuvres are continued in the introduction where Paterson admits that while not all sonnets are fourteen lines long, he refuses to include any that are not: 'the only qualification for entry in this book is that the poem has 14 lines' (Paterson, 1999: xii). Of course this kind of logic was as likely imposed by Faber *diktat* and a glance at the permissions page of *101 Sonnets* reveals that of the thirty-two poets for whom it was necessary to seek permission (the other sixty-nine presumably being out of copyright), fifteen are themselves Faber poets, none of whom had in all probability written a sonnet that *wasn't* fourteen lines long. *101 Sonnets* is thus in truth little more than a vehicle for Faber poets.

II

In this opening detour via some of the available anthologies (about which much more could be written), I am pointing to various ideological issues that cluster round the sonnet form, issues that editors and publishers often try hard to hide, issues that might indeed have led Bill Griffiths to ask his now infamous question: 'What better disguise for evil/than sonnets?' (Griffiths, 1996: 31). In such a context, this question reads as more than an instance of rhetorical overstatement towards the received literary past as Robert Sheppard has suggested (Sheppard, 2005b), just as it is also more than simply an attack on the sonnet form as a prescribed set of restrictive literary devices (though it is this too which makes Griffiths part of a tradition of sonnet-suspicion going back to modernists like Williams and Pound).⁴ It is also an acknowledgement that forms are, to quote Lyn Hejinian, 'not merely shapes but forces' (Hejinian, 2000: 42), forces that have, as I have tried to intimate above, complex ideological histories. In the preface to 1994's *Star Fish Jail*, Griffiths refers to the sonnet again, as an instance of contemporary literature's privileging of bourgeois values which he suggests fulfils a similar function to the prison – to abuse, confine and dehumanize a sector of the population: 'The ratio', he concludes, 'is probably something like one lyric sonnet to every 3-day sentence in solitary confinement' (Griffiths, n.d.). As usual with Griffiths, there is an involved nexus of thinking going on here. What might be called Griffiths' 'ratio of hurt' posits the writing of sonnets as a wilful forgetting of a sector of the public the wider implications of which are a failure of writing to address social conditions.⁵ Or one might go further and envisage the ratio as a *magic* one whereby the writing of

lyric sonnets actively *conjures up* this confinement but of course it is precisely the invisibility of what occurs between the two poles of the ratio that requires uncovering, invariably exposing the hidden workings of the State with which, as Griffiths states in *A Note on Democracy*, 'only a tiny part of our emotional range is compatible.'⁶

Given his hostility to the form, his perception of its potential for social damage, it is not surprising that Griffiths did not write many sonnets. In fact it is surprising that he wrote any at all although the sonnets he did write are, unsurprisingly, very irregular. Before turning to the ostensible subject of this essay, *Binaries. Not Sonnets*, whose title flirts intriguingly with the form, I would like briefly to consider the only two poems in Griffiths' oeuvre that do actually call themselves sonnets.⁷ I included them both in *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets* and they appear in the recent *Collected Earlier Poems* as 'Sonnets' 1 and 2:

Sonnets

1
better sun
aptavit arcam – a pudding
per quam damnavit mundum
planted out his doves
fat, round like suns

Open uppart little huts of a head-house
To a lay:
Flat-chinate; showing
(Sun-hole/door)

2
Very whites very orange Goose
Block

White Goose Ocean (Griffiths, 2010: 57)

As Alan Halsey points out in his preface, Griffiths often modified poems over time with a section of one poem often later finding itself rhizomatically part of another, and the changes made to these two sonnets represent one such instance of this.⁸ In his notes to the poems, Halsey also points out that 'Sonnet 2' here was originally the first section of a poem called 'Sonnet-workings' with what is now the first section as the second and with the four lines beginning 'Open uppart little huts of a head-house' missing completely (Griffiths, 2010: 361). The title 'Sonnet-working' and the subsequent revisions to its structure indicate a process-oriented relation to form (as well as the more aggressive suggestion that the sonnet *as* a form is being worked out like a mine, its insides being brutally excavated and transformed).

In the first of the sonnets above, the formal outline of a Petrarchan or Italian sonnet is just about discernible with its five and then four lines

bearing the trace of the traditional octave and sestet. The second, however, looks nothing like a traditional sonnet, resembling if anything a haiku (though of course it doesn't operate like a haiku at all).⁹ If the *gestalt* of these two poems, then, both suggests and resists respectively the sonnet's form, their content is much more recalcitrant not least because of the radical disjunction and extreme compression of language.¹⁰ In the opening line of 'sonnet 1' it is unclear what the sun is better *than* unless Griffiths is commenting on a different way of sounding the first syllable of 'sonnet' ('son' pronounced as 'sun' if the word 'sonnet' is prised apart).¹¹ Line two provides little clarification with its switch into Latin, which is itself then immediately interrupted by the very English 'a pudding,' before its return in line three. Line four gives us a possessive 'his' but it lacks an obvious antecedent; *who* has 'planted out' these doves? And what might it mean to 'plant out' a bird? The repetition of 'sun' (though now a plural) in line five provides some lexical continuity with the opening line but the overall sense of this first section of the poem is of radical uncertainty. The second section of the poem further complicates things. The use of capitals at the beginning of each line distinguishes it from the opening five lines reminding us that it was not originally a part of this sonnet at all even if the word 'Sun-hole' of the final line does provide some semantic continuity with the first section and the use of Old English 'uppart' and (possibly) Italian 'chinate' continue the first section's use of different European languages. On the whole, however, a reader struggles to make the different sections work together. It is difficult, for example, to see how 'Flat-chinate' 'shows' '(Sun-hole/door)' when both 'Flat-chinate' and '(Sun-hole/door)' are so semantically opaque. The accumulation of uncertainties in the careening of syntax, lexis and image is disorienting (though of course by no means untypical of a Bill Griffiths poem) and the poem is certainly not operating like a traditional 'lyrical' sonnet with its pre-ordained formal devices (14 lines, volta, regularity of metre, etc). However, while we might be accustomed as readers to Griffiths' radically curtailed and fragmented syntax and imagistic leaps I do not think this stops us from wanting to know why he has called this poem a 'sonnet'.

Perhaps the Latin holds a clue? Google usefully leads us to the vulgate Bible and Hebrews 11, whose verses demonstrate the power of faith in works, showing 'what faith is. Its wonderful fruits and efficacies demonstrated in the fathers'. Verse 7, it turns out, concerns Noah:

Fide Noe responso accepto de his quae adhuc non videbantur metuens aptavit arcam in salutem domus suae per quam damnavit mundum et iustitiae quae per fidem est heres est institutus.

This translates (and the first translation Google offered up was the Douay-Rheims translation of 1582):

By faith, Noah, having received an answer concerning those things which as yet were not seen, moved with fear, framed the ark for the saving of his house: by the which he condemned the world and was instituted heir of the justice which is by faith.

Knowing that Griffiths is referencing the Noah story begins to bring together *some* of the indeterminacies of 'sonnet 1'. The 'his' of line 3 now has a possible referent, 'Better sun' might be Noah's own reaction to the end of forty days of rain and we have a context for the poem's doves. However, the selective quotation from Hebrews raises its own set of questions. The words '*aptavit arcam...per quam damnavit mundum*' ('he framed an ark...by the which he condemned the world') that Griffiths quotes omit Noah's name, which of course Griffiths doesn't mention in his sonnet either. The poem thus effectively renders anonymous the passage's prime agent. Griffiths also omits any reference to faith – the whole *point* of this particular chapter of Hebrews – instead 'framing' his version of the building of the ark as an act with entirely negative connotations. The received pieties of the Noah story, its Sunday-school connotations, are called into question and instead of presenting Noah as a world saviour, Griffiths casts him as world destroyer. There is also wonderful irreverence in comparing the ark to a huge floating pudding – a very English take on the story – and Noah is by implication full of pride for his similarly overfed, puddingy birds.¹² The myth is further collapsed in the second section of the poem where Latin gives way to the shifting and fragmented sound and image patterns of Old English: 'Open uppart little huts of a head-house/To a lay'. There are multiple sound and sense implications here in the dense, elusive language. In 'Open uppart' we can trace the release skywards of Noah's doves ('uppart' is Old English for 'upwards'), but there's also the echo of 'open apart', which is what Griffiths is doing with the myth. Seeing the birds as 'little huts of a head-house' casts them as outriders of a feudal or colonial estate, each answerable to the paternalistic centre of power. Rather than recourse to any moralising platitude, the sonnet ends simply by offering a pair of alternatives. Indeed, '(Sun-hole/door)' might be read as a radically condensed couplet, with the oblique as the conventional shorthand for a line break, in which case the whole thing might actually be a rhyming couplet as 'sun-hole' and 'door' are structural versions of each other. Either way the sonnet's exit strategy is merely to show us the way out, literally to show us the door.

Had Griffiths wanted a translation of '*aptavit arcam*', I suspect he might not have gone for the Douay-Rheims version and opted instead for John

Wycliffe's offering of 'schapide a schip' with its more forceful alliteration. However, I prefer the Douay-Rheims translation of Hebrews for its use of the word 'framed' to describe the building of the ark because effectively Griffiths has himself 'framed' the sonnet to reframe the Noah story and vice-versa. Both the Noah story and the sonnet are revealed to be leaky containers, incapable of further sustaining their own capacities as legends. As Griffiths goes on to say in *Binaries*: 'anything so certain/ is indeed a myth for a book' (Griffiths, 1997: 35). There is of course another way of thinking about this. By calling the poem a sonnet, Griffiths activates a whole repertoire of interpretive frameworks through which we try to make the content work (a number of which I have tried to demonstrate above), something that 'Sonnet 2' pushes to its limits because of its radical non-compliance with the form singularly dramatized by the central word 'Block'. As we shall see, *Binaries* proposes a not dissimilar staging of its relation to form.

III

If these two 'sonnets' attend to the form partly through extreme condensation, *Binaries*, published by Etruscan Books in 1997 and running to around thirty pages, does so via extension.¹³ Moreover, whereas 'Sonnet 1' and 'Sonnet 2' are overtly *called* sonnets, the subtitle of *Binaries*, 'Not Sonnets', seems explicitly to question the form. Of course, subtitling a sequence 'Not Sonnets' immediately brings the sonnet form into play (you cannot call something a 'Not Sonnet' and not *think* of it) so that we are immediately faced with an apparent binary – the sonnet and its denial or negation. However, Griffiths is too familiar with the limitations of 'either/or' (or binary) structures and *Binaries* itself is full of images that break into (or again, that 'open apart') simple oppositions in favour of what he calls playfully 'the mixiness' (Griffiths, 1997: 49), though this does not prevent him from playing with, for example, the two poles in a system of exchange whereby 'a bag of tomatoes is still worth a framed print' (Griffiths, 1997: 45). Indeed, this is a text that questions our willingness to label things, to give things names, to make one thing *equal* another, and thus to delimit both thereby closing them down experientially. Given the nature of the two sonnets I have already discussed, there is at the very least a playfulness at work in the subtling of *Binaries*, which is confirmed by the three-line frontispiece to the poem whereby the word 'quite' is added to the subtitle so that we are now also faced with 'Not *Quite* sonnets' (I'll return to this frontispiece later). 'Not *Quite*' immediately complicates the apparent binary of 'sonnet' and 'Not Sonnet'. It also, I think, ironizes the trophy-status of the sonnet form in all its alleged pre-eminence and perfection, with Griffiths further imply-

ing that his own work falls short of its requirements. The poem begins accordingly by raising the question of poetic value:

= =
'Fair trash
that is all I produce
suggestions of its genuineness
discount!' (Griffiths, 1997: 35)

The poet seems to rubbish his own output, instructing the reader to question its authenticity. However, something does not (again) *quite* sound right. The opening two words, 'fair trash' sit uncomfortably together and demand reconsideration. They sound oxymoronic, cancelling each other out with their opposed lexical fields of consequence and insignificance respectively. And what about the two equals signs floating above the two words? (I'll come back to these too). In 'fair trash' I hear a reduction, or rather a violent yoking, of two other pairs of words, namely 'fair trade' and 'white trash', which form a kind of 'not-kenning', a condensation functioning as a mode of naming that, like an Anglo-Saxon or Old-Norse kenning, offers us a new perception through active *combination*.¹⁴ As a pairing, 'fair trash' effectively mobilizes the kinds of violences implicit in naming as well as the kinds of violences that permit the emergence and perpetuation of economic and social categories like 'fair trade' and 'white trash', not to mention the economic and social conditions that serve to keep the two apart.¹⁵ And of course Griffiths implicates himself in this construction as a poet whose public image, it is no exaggeration to say, often made it difficult for outsiders to establish his own class origins.

The very first line of *Binaries* therefore raises social, political, economic, and ethical questions that the poem goes on to explore in detail. Many of these questions are also felt in the rest of the opening section:

the label of the stamp of the precise sum
with a swan or a sovereign
or a blue becquerel of special show,
an ox-head incandescent of the cow-trade,
anything so certain
is indeed a myth for a book. (Griffiths, 1997: 35)

After 'fair trash', Griffiths teasingly probes the question of the ascription of value through various acts of labelling which, he implies, are differently weighted according to economic circumstance and which can never be reduced absolutely. The word 'sovereign' will mean something different to a coin collector than to a working class (or even white trash) smoker though clearly the coin is implicated in the cigarette in more ways than one.¹⁶ Similarly with 'swan' which is both the white (or

'fair') bird of high cultural status and the manufacturer of smoking accessories – matches, filter papers and filter tips. 'Blue becquerel' is most probably a reference to Alexandre-Edmonde Becquerel whose early experiments with red and yellow light in daguerrotypy led to predominantly blue results – a 'special show' of sorts – though the reference to 'incandescence' in the next line might make us think of his son Henri Becquerel, one of the discoverers (with the Curies) of radiation whose name lives on in the SI unit of radioactivity, another, different, legacy of naming. It is not so certain, then, which 'Becquerel' is being referenced here, but whichever it is perhaps the name is not so 'special' after all (even if it is French) as it is emphatically lower case in Griffiths' poem. And how is incandescence operating in the line about ox-heads and the cow-trade? As a sign, the ox-head stands as the material beginning of the Western alphabet (the 'aleph' or 'alpha' designated by an inverted 'A' to represent the forward-facing head of an ox)¹⁷ and might thus be said historically to deserve illumination. However, typically Griffiths ascribes it another more humble function as little more than an advert for the buying and selling of cattle (and 'ox-head' and 'cow-trade' are insistently – and monosyllabically – Anglo-Saxon as opposed to multisyllabic French or Latin reminding us too of historically changing linguistic values). As Robert Sheppard suggests, Griffiths' mix of registers in his poetry serves to 'break through limitations of discourse' (Sheppard, 2005a: 55) with its exclusionary certainties, certainties that Griffiths parodies here in the opening to his own 'uncertain' book.

What 'fair trash' also does, I would argue, is raise questions about the way we read poems and the kinds of violences that often occur in reading them. Later in *Binaries* Griffiths refers to the 'tutor-agile', those readers who 'by sheer violence...unite in syntax' (Griffiths, 1997: 42). But of course the demand by some parties for syntactic regularity, or 'posh-sunny zion of ordered bliss' as he also calls it (Griffiths, 1997: 39), is only one kind of violence. As readers we are all complicit in interpretative manoeuvres that impose logics at the most basic levels (and I'm not necessarily talking about what might be called more 'higher-order' interpretation here, the kind that I might be said to have used on 'fair trash'). The basic assumptions, for instance, that contiguous lines of poetry should be read consecutively to produce 'meaning,' or that they should be read consecutively at all, or that a poem should in any way 'advance' or 'progress' towards a conclusion, are constantly challenged in Griffiths' writing. Indeed, I don't know of any other poet whose work so consistently, variously and inventively questions the assumptions of inherited reading practices.

Some of these assumptions are challenged on the very title page or frontispiece of *Binaries* in the Etruscan Reader which seems more than

and so on and so forth. So it was sort of a consensus there, a little constellation of individual poems within a theme all from the same period' (Rowe, 2007: 189). This recalls Gomringer's instruction that the constellation 'be ordered by the poet [who] determines the play area, the field or force and suggests its possibilities', which the reader grasps 'and joins in' (Cobbing and Mayer, 1978: 18). Gomringer's reference to the 'field of force' is of course also a reminder of the significance of the field in science, which was to play such a significant role in the development of Olson's non-linear and multi-directional page use.

The text of *Binaries*, I think, raises similar questions to the frontispiece about its formal status as a long (or longish) poem. Is it a sequence or a series of stand-alone but thematically linked poems?²⁰ Or might it be seen as an extended poem-constellation? One of its sections begins, 'What are we not headed for?' drawing attention to its lack of teleology as well as the fact that individual poems (or sections) literally *have no headings* (Griffiths, 1997: 39). Instead of titles (as in *Nomad Sense*, the book that immediately follows *Binaries* in 1998) or instead of ascending numbers (as in *Rousseau and the Wicked*, its immediate predecessor from 1996), *Binaries* announces its different sections with, as I have already mentioned, a double 'equals' sign. It is as if the units of mathematical ordering and counting, the numbers, have been replaced by its functional symbols. It is a curious and initially unsettling device not least because the sense of accretion obtained from an ascending number sequence (as in *Rousseau and the Wicked*), and the attendant sense of progression (which may as likely be false), has been removed. Instead of *sum*, there's a kind of generalized flatness of textual dispersal. And if this sounds pejorative it is only because of the ideological triumph of its opposites – crescendo, climax and conclusion. Joseph M. Conte sees these features as indicative of the epic as opposed to the serial poem. Whereas the epic goal is towards systematic totalities of encompassment and summation, the series is accumulative, 'desultory, radically incomplete and aleatory' (Conte, 1991: 37). While Griffiths' poem is not in the serial tradition of say Jack Spicer, many of his longer poems share Conte's serial urge. *Binaries*, for one, doesn't really end. It simply stops: 'in/in the book' Griffiths stutters, 'no K.O.' (Griffiths, 1997: 61)

IV

So what does this have to do with the sonnet? Readers coming to this poem will in all likelihood proceed asking themselves the same question. With the word 'sonnet' planted in their heads from the poem's title like Noah's fat doves, they will scan its pages looking for some kind of return: do the opening two sections, ten lines followed by four, not make

at least *quantitatively* a sonnet? On the second page, two sets of tercets together surely connote the subdivided sestet of a Petrarchan, just as the recurrence of couplets throughout *Binaries* must constantly intimate the discomposed final two lines of a Shakespearean sonnet. And at one point, two adjacent seven-line 'stanzas' do clearly 'equal' fourteen lines. And so on and so on. These metonymic parts of the traditional sonnet constantly swim before us in *Binaries* in a process of formation and deformation, never quite cohering or resolving into final shape. Roughly halfway through the poem, however, the reader encounters the following three lines:

= =

On beholding card 713
 'Charles Babbage's Difference Engine, 1833'
 I wondered how many sonnets the man knew.

= =

(Griffiths, 1997: 48)

This belated but explicit reference to the sonnet – the first (and last) in the poem – promises to bring the sonnet parts together through the concrete act of naming it, though again one can't help but feel that Griffiths is ahead of the game, provocatively ventriloquizing readers' suspicions (as with 'fair trash' earlier) of his competence as a poet. Though of course Griffiths is not 'the man' here Babbage is. Or is he? As we have already seen, in this constellatory text where contiguity is constantly tested can we necessarily assume that 'Charles Babbage' *is* this man just because being in adjacent lines implies it? The syntax at the very least might alert us to him not being, not to mention the word 'Difference Engine' which begins to sound like the perfect name for Griffiths' poem rather than Babbage's early computer.

My point is that the word 'sonnet' here is little more than a red herring. As with 'Sonnet 1' and 'Sonnet 2', *Binaries* plays on our desire for order and pattern, for the concretion of disparate elements into recognizable (poem) shapes. 'So we mould and knead ourselves/into something of a shape/what is like it?' Griffiths asks at one point in the poem (Griffiths, 1997: 41). Not 'what is it like?' which could be a question of genuine enquiry, and thus riskily prospective, but 'what is like it?' which is asking for safe and restrictive similarity that as we have already seen *Binaries* constantly refuses. I wonder whether we are not here in the territory mapped out by the German philosopher and scientist Alfred Korzybski in *Science & Sanity* (1933), his monumental system of General Semantics in which he called for the wholesale overthrow of assumed, and therefore damaging, neurological and linguistic structures, structures that Korzybski believed interposed and interfered with full and sane human interaction with the world. One of its premises was the rejection of Aris-

totalitarian metaphysics in favour of a system of non-Aristotelian, or *non-A*, thinking which included the abolition of, for instance, two-valued, either-or orientations, subject-predicate methods, all notions of objectivity and, perhaps most famously, the elimination of what Korzybski called the 'is of identity' – 'because identity is never found in this world' – in favour of 'negative *'is not'* premises', so accepting 'difference' and 'differentiation' as fundamental (Korzybski, 1933: 93). Griffiths is likely to have come across Korzybski's work via Eric Mottram who in turn encountered him in his conversations with, and writing about, William Burroughs. In *The Algebra of Need*, Mottram quotes Burroughs as identifying the 'IS of identity,' 'the categorical THE' and the 'EITHER/OR' formula as crippling 'virus mechanisms' that need to be 'deleted' (Mottram, 1977: 161). Griffiths' relation to Korzybski is less explicit (and certainly less apocalyptic) but can I think be felt throughout his writing. What Mottram called in 1983 'the new pleasure' (Rowe, 2007: 11) of Griffiths' involved language and syntax at the very least owes something to Korzybski's rejection of simple and misleading linguistic structures that close off experience. For instance, in *Binaries*, the 'either-or' set-up indicated by the obliques in 'for this is pain/this is not pain' and 'can be gainly/ungainly' is met with the call instead for a more surprising, ecstatic and conceivably Korzybskian: 'but oh echo in the openness' (Griffiths, 1997: 41).

Moreover, the option of a textual constellation instead of progression via argument is a distinctly Korzybskian operation, and I think it is signalled in *Binaries* by Griffiths' use of the double 'equals' sign which in mathematics introduces the *variable* into the equation. Rather than assigning a value to a variable as with a single equals sign, the double equals sign checks the variables on both sides of an equation to test their values. It is an infinitely more complex operation and forms the basis for computer programming where it is known as a Boolean operator (after the nineteenth-century scientist George Boole).²¹ Griffiths uses it, as I have already suggested, as a 'not-heading' for the different sections of these 'Not Sonnets' and in this text, which is constantly testing the values of its variables, as well as, as I have tried to signal, the variability of value, the double equals sign is a peculiarly fitting symbol. Ultimately, the system it has been used most intensively to build, namely the computer industry, is a closed one, not unlike the sonnet itself perhaps (at least the sonnet as envisaged by Griffiths). It seems oddly apt, therefore, that the 'notes to Binaries' appended by Griffiths to the end of the poem should form what might be seen as a sonnet lying outside of the text proper:

1. chiriclo – bird
2. clams – sticks
3. neb – nose
4. dawark – day's work

5. ling – heather
6. gan – go
7. goaf –abyss
8. thrawn oxter – strained shoulder
9. hoy – hoist

solutions to riddles:

- a. spoon
- b. toenail

*Bob Marley
†Einsten

This paratextual sonnet – or more accurately further ‘Not Sonnet’ – assembled out of surplus elements from *Binaries*, namely endnotes, and solutions to textual conundrums and quotes, shows its parts explicitly through the use of spacing, numbers, letters and symbols and as a series of lists is free from the inherited logics of the sonnet form. Whether Griffiths intended it to be conceived formally in this way is irrelevant as its (perhaps) aleatory convergence into a sonnet shape is entirely in keeping with the refusal of the rest of the text to do so. However, as a compendium of ‘answers’ it is tempting to read it as itself one more answer by Griffiths to the sonnet tradition, a rag-bag of textual remainders signifying nothing, serving little more purpose than to take us back into the main body of the text, an entirely dependent rather than independent ‘poem’. This is not to say that we cannot enjoy its own assortment of particulars; the materialities of ‘sticks’ and ‘toenail’, both in their own ways reminders of this surplus poem’s remnant status; the recognition of the efforts of labour in ‘dawark/day’s work’, ‘thrown oxter/sprained shoulder’ and ‘hoy/hoist’; and the glorious conjunction in the final ‘couplet’ of two very different giants of Twentieth Century culture who are ‘paired’ here not as equals to each other, nor as opposites – no postmodern relativism or binary thinking here – rather as ‘geminals’ that take us back to the frontispiece, just two names that find themselves attached to the end of a book by Bill Griffiths.

Notes

- 1 The argument here is from Alan Golding in his review of Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris’ *Poems for the Millennium*. See Golding (n.d.).
- 2 The phrase ‘committed improvisors’ is of course a loaded one figuring Ashbery and Berrigan as little more than persistent journeymen in contrast to innate genii of the form like Merrill and Hecht.
- 3 Historically, as Paterson himself notes in the introduction, the sonnet is intimately bound up with the question of number. The numerical assembling

of 101 sonnets in this anthology, therefore, shows a spectacular disregard for the form's historical as well as contemporary development.

- 4 Hilson (2008: 14).
- 5 Of course Griffiths actually refers to 'lyric sonnets', which does raise the possibility of other kinds of 'non-lyric' sonnets. In an interview with Will Rowe, Griffiths acknowledges that 'the sonnet has got potential in as much as you could redeploy it in interesting ways' but adds: 'there comes a point in which you are no longer interested in that, in simply writing in the framework that other people have considered acceptable and want to go beyond that' (Rowe, 2007: 182–3). The alignment of 'sonnet' and 'solitary' is also a reminder of sonnets which refer self-reflexively to their restricted space, for instance John Donne's 'I am a little world made cunningly' and 'We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms', William Wordsworth's 'Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room' (Curtis, 2009: 628) and the opening poem of Ted Berrigan's *Sonnets* with its oft-parodied line, 'is there room in the room that you room'd in?' There's probably a lot to be said about the changing nature of the rooms referred to in these poems and their relation to the sonnet form as historically understood. Berrigan's 'room'd in' room implies a temporary accommodation, the repetition of 'room' the sign of an anxiety about both formal and social stasis. Wordsworth of course famously yields to the pleasures of confinement with his, in hindsight, rather blithe remark that 'in truth the prison, into which we doom/Ourselves, no prison is.' Griffiths would at the very least have questioned the submission to a passive and fatalistic sense of agency as well as Wordsworth's sense of entitlement to speak for everyone else with the use of the first-person plural.
- 6 Cited in Bush (1997: 224).
- 7 In 2004, Griffiths also contributed a five-line poem to a small anthology entitled *Onsets: A Breviary (Synopticon?) of Poems 13 Lines and Under* edited by the Canadian poet and critic Nate Dorward. The word 'onset' implies the beginnings of something as well as being an incomplete anagram of the word 'sonnet.' Griffiths' submission of work to this anthology demonstrates, I think, his sporadic but persistent interest in the sonnet form.
- 8 In his introduction to the 2012 Colloquium on Bill Griffiths held at Northumbria University, Ian Davidson alluded to this aspect of Griffiths' practice as rhizomatic.
- 9 Clive Bush suggests that Griffiths' language often moves towards the haiku, 'not [in] an imitation of the Japanese form but an approximation which involves a short basic unit halfway between verse and prose allowing him to condense and relax at will, and to occupy several worlds and levels of meaning at once.' See Bush (1997: 227).
- 10 In his introduction to *A Book of Spilt Cities* entitled 'Diorama of the Fixed Eye-Ball', Iain Sinclair describes Griffiths' dissection of London thus: 'In stomping across Wordsworth's Westminster Bridge (sublime copywriting) Griffiths encourages amputated phrases to take flight. The sonnet is alarmed to find itself auditioning for an Objectivist anthology' (Griffiths, 1999: ix). There are of course no sonnets in *A Book of Spilt Cities* but the writing in its radically disjunctive economy and extreme syntactic dislocation explodes traditional formal paradigms such that the whole book is seeded with their ruins.

- 11 See, for instance, Bob Cobbing's visual sonnet, 'sunnet' from *bill jubobe* for a similar play on this pronunciation (Cobbing, 1976: unpaginated).
- 12 Though there may also be a reference here to the pudding made out of the ark's leftovers that Noah was supposed to have prepared on reaching Mount Ararat.
- 13 As part of the Etruscan Reader V, *Binaries* is 'sandwiched' between poems by Tom Raworth and Tom Leonard.
- 14 A kenning is an Old Norse, Icelandic and Anglo Saxon practice of combining two words to produce a figurative substitute for a single noun with a base word and a determinant, for example 'whale road' instead of 'sea'.
- 15 In a poem called 'Trade' from his later book *Nomad Sense*, Griffiths asks explicitly: 'But what is Fair Trade?' The answer is perhaps unsurprising: 'With some misadvantaging,/we all have our own level of living,/consumables, separables, and other competibles,/protectible with long prison sentences;/and durables;/and invisibles' (Griffiths, 1998: 16–18). Liberal laissez-faire shoulder shrugging leads (via deliberate misspelling) to the prison house where 'durables' are no longer consumer goods but the long term or 'hidden' detainees. To quote Foucault, the prison is: 'that darkest region in the apparatus of justice, is the place where the power to punish, which no longer dares to manifest itself openly, silently organises a field of objectivity in which punishment will be able to function openly as treatment and the sentence be inscribed among the discourses of knowledge' (Rabinow, 1991: 224). The dialectic of openness and concealment that Foucault describes is distinctly Griffithsian.
- 16 'Sovereign' is a 'value'- or 'discount' to use the word Griffiths employs two lines earlier as a verb - brand of cigarette in the UK manufactured and distributed by Benson and Hedges.
- 17 For further information on the development of the Western alphabet see Kallir (1961).
- 18 Griffiths' frontispiece would seem to owe something to the title-page of classical literature. As Gerard Genette explains: 'the classical title – generally more expanded than ours – often constituted a veritable description of the book, a summary of its action, a definition of its subject, a list of its appendices and so forth. The classical title could also contain its own illustration, or at least its own ornamentation, a sort of more or less monumental portico entrance called a frontispiece. Later, when the title page got rid of this decoration, the frontispiece took refuge on the left-hand page facing the title page, before disappearing almost completely in modern times' (Genette, 1997: 59). As I go on to suggest, Griffiths' frontispiece is in its own way a comment on the work that follows, though its adoption in the middle of a volume that is shared with two other authors makes its status distinctly less than 'monumental portico entrance'.
- 19 A 'geminal' is a term from chemistry denoting two atoms that are attached to another atom. The root is from the latin 'geminus' meaning a twin and it is probably being used here by Griffiths as roughly cognate with 'binaries'.

Interestingly, *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* states that 'geminal' is 'a spurious word' and it brackets it off 'accordingly.

- 20 The poems' 'themes' are hinted at on the blurb of the *Etruscan Reader*: 'Acts of creation, of survival, the order and regression of society is counterbalanced by an acute identification with the animal and plant kingdom, perceived as a more constant force than the human domain which always founders'.
- 21 The word 'binary' is of course intimately bound to computer programming and unsurprisingly Griffiths plays with this throughout *Binaries* by probing the capacity for language to deal with either/or structures. At one point he asks: 'Are you still on basic?' (Griffiths: 1997, 50), where 'basic' is both a reference to the minimum wage in the UK as well as to BASIC, the early computer programming language. In computer programming, binary code works by switching rapidly between ones and zeros, but is incapable of any higher order interpretation that would recognize, for instance, the politics of Griffiths' question where being on the former might prevent you from moving beyond the latter. The mid-1990s was, remember, a time in which replacing a personal computer was a very expensive business.

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