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## SONNET IN STITCHES: PATCHWORK VARIATIONS OF MODERN RELIGIOUS SONNETS IN ENGLISH

The sonnet, as a poetic form, has held a place of prominence in literary traditions for centuries, spanning continents and cultures, and continues to be celebrated as one of the most versatile and enduring forms of poetry. The sonnet's structured framework and strict adherence to meter and rhyme, provide a disciplined arena for poets to showcase their craftsmanship and creativity, while its ability to encapsulate and express complex emotions and themes within a confined space, speaks to its continued relevance in contemporary poetic discourse. Across time and geography, the sonnet has served as a vehicle for poets to explore a diverse range of subjects, from personal love and loss, to political and social issues, and to meditate on the human condition itself. With its profound influence on poetic traditions worldwide, the sonnet continues to inspire poets to push the boundaries of formal constraints and to use language to capture the beauty and complexity of the human experience. In this paper, we will explore the patchwork variations of some modern religious sonnets in English, examining how contemporary poets are using the sonnet form to explore faith, doubt, and spirituality in new and innovative ways. Through an analysis of several representative works, we will demonstrate how these poets are breathing new life into this versatile form, creating works that are both timeless and timely. Thus, this paper will be an attempt to demonstrate the postulated above versatility, with particular emphasis on religious “patches”, “fibres” and “yarns” in the works of contemporary English-language poets of the twentieth century.

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The sonnet, a poetic form recognized for its strict structure, has its origins dating back to the Renaissance period in Europe, particularly the early 13th century.<sup>1</sup> Geographically, Italy, and Sicily in particular, are recognized as the cradle of the sonnet. It is commonly believed that Francesco Petrarch was the creator of the sonnet, however, recent literary scholarship suggests that the true originator of the form was a less prominent poet from southern Italy named Giacomo (Iacopo) da Lentini. He was a court official of Emperor Frederick II and an ambitious poet, who created verses modelled after the extremely popular Provençal poetry of the time, which served eventually as an unparalleled artistic model to imitate. Over the centuries, the sonnet has undergone numerous modifications under the pen of European writers from practically all literary periods. It was least popular during the Enlightenment, for which the tribulations of lovers' passions, recounted in overly emotional language, did not constitute a very attractive subject matter. However, Baroque and Romantic writers, as well as contemporary poets, fully appreciated the versatility of this poetic form, which, paradoxically, in itself is so miniature in its structure. The sonnet's versatility as a miniature form of poetic expression makes it truly timeless and universal in its themes, structure, and form. In brief, one might venture to say that its origins and future development resembles a "poetic patchwork quilt" of sounds, words, and lines of verse grouped variously in stanzaic patterns in order to reconstruct the desired state of thoughts and feelings.

It should be noted at the outset, however, that the domain of *sacrum* with its diverse spiritual themes is not among the most popular topics undertaken by sonneteers of the modern times.<sup>2</sup> This tendency, however, is more a consequence of the progressing secularization of contemporary life, including artistic activities, than a symptom of the exploitation of such themes or the inability to find for them a "sufficiently contemporary" artistic form of expression. Hence, the present context offers a propitious opportunity to study this seemingly obscure domain, which presents an engaging research chal-

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<sup>1</sup> There are numerous studies of the development of the sonnet of which these three are most fundamental: Richard Dutton and Alison Findlay's *The Sonnet* (2010), A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth's (editors) *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet* (2011), Michele M. Przybylski's *The Origins of the Sonnet: A Study in Poetic Creativity* (2012).

<sup>2</sup> The following scholars wrote papers pertaining to our study which discussed contemporary religious sonnets in English: Jill Baumgaertner, "Sounding Heaven and Earth: New Voices in the Religious Sonnet Tradition" (2013); Peter Robinson, "The Religious Sonnet in Contemporary British Poetry" (2006); Mark Jarman, "The Religious Sonnet in Contemporary American Poetry" (1994).

lenge, and promises significant revelations on the function of the sonnet in contemporary literary discourse. Historically, the first sonnets created by English Tudor poets during the Renaissance period, such as Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard Earl of Surrey, imitated Petrarchan sonnets based on the Italian model, consisting of two quatrains, followed by a *volta*, and two concluding tercets (8 + 6). The rhyme scheme was limited to only four variants (predominantly grouped *abba abba cdc dcd*) and, like Petrarchan lyrics, they focused on love themes, employing a range of conventional devices and motifs classified today as Petrarchism. Religious themes appeared on a wider scale mainly during the Baroque period and reached their peak in the works of the undisputed master of seventeenth-century lyric poetry, John Donne. Most scholars would not, therefore, object to consider him and his famed *Holy Sonnets* cycle as a reference sonnet sequence which could be treated here as a distinct poetic touchstone. From a formal perspective, many sonnets he wrote deviate from the Petrarchan model and are based instead upon the specific structure of English poetry, in which three quatrains are crowned with a couplet, and the concluding *volta* occurs not in the middle of the poem between *octave* and *sestet*, but at its end, just before the couplet (12 + 2). This type of sonnet is called the *English* or *Shakespearean* sonnet due to the fact that this particular stanzaic arrangement was used by the Bard. In addition, the English (or Shakespearean) sonnet expanded the range of rhyme schemes from four (a-b-c-d) to seven (a-b-c-d-e-f-g) and codified it in the pattern *abab cdcd efef gg*. Donne's poem, written in iambic pentameter, features a slightly modified rhyme scheme of *abba abba cdcd ee*, which preserves the Petrarchan rhyme scheme of the first two quatrains, while also adhering to the Shakespearean structure of three quatrains and a concluding couplet. Thematically, these sonnets are typical Baroque metaphysical poems that aim to convey a great deal of meaning through intricate poetic concepts (conceits) and a minimal use of carefully chosen words (cf. Gardner). These miniature confessional treatises embody all the best qualities of metaphysical poetry, from its shocking and forceful opening, to its complete subversion of our expectations for a predictable conclusion, and its strict adherence to logical argumentation despite its highly emotional expression. Furthermore, the poems interlace the stanzas with intense semantically charged concepts that draw associations from most unusual fields of life.

Contemporary poets approach religious themes in a way that is just as intriguing in terms of form and content while also attempting to break free from the sonnet's constraints, which some find too restrictive, while still

maintaining the conciseness and precision of expression that is specific to this genre. They draw inspiration for their poems from both everyday life in the contemporary world and from traditional sources, such as the Bible with its inexhaustible supply of stories and personae. Anthony Hecht's poem, "Naming the Animals" (cf. Hirsch and Boland 240) demonstrates to us the first pattern of the "poetic shroud". Thematically, it is based on the biblical story from the Book of Genesis, in which Adam gives "names" to the newly created animals in the Garden of Eden. Hecht was an American poet who mainly wrote about his traumatic experiences in World War II in Europe during the second half of the twentieth century. In contrast to John Donne's sonnets, the "poetic fabric" of Hecht's poem has a different texture as it lacks the pathos and fervour of the discourse, and its tone is **ironic** with elements of bitter self-reflection. It is as if the "thread and stitches" used for its poetic patterns were lighter and more synthetic as the sonnet explores overtly contemporary themes of **power and the human relationship with nature**. In its essence the poem is an allegory for the human desire to control the natural world through the imposition of language and categorization. The poem is a retelling of the story of Adam, who was given the task of naming all of the creatures. The speaker notes that God withdrew after commanding Adam to bestow names upon the creatures, implying that the act of naming was a way for God to relinquish control over creation. In this sonnet, we see Adam—the first man and the creator of language—as a confused and frightened human being, left by the Creator with a task that surpasses his intellectual abilities. The act of naming, as depicted in the poem, is a means of exerting power over the natural world. The repetition of words such as "labelled", "dubbed", "yelept", and "indexed" emphasizes the objectification of the creatures and the reduction of their complexity to simple labels. Despite this reductionism, the act of naming is shown to be a difficult and burdensome task. Adam is depicted as struggling to find the right words to describe the creatures, with an "addled mind and puddled brow". This depiction of the naming process suggests that the desire for control over the natural world is often accompanied by a sense of inadequacy and confusion. The final lines of the poem, in which Adam shyly names the first cow "Fred", add a touch of humour to the allegory. This naming seems incongruous with the weight of the task given to Adam, emphasizing the absurdity of human attempts to impose order on the natural world:

Having commanded Adam to bestow  
Names upon All the creatures,  
God withdrew To empyrean palaces of blue  
That warm and windless morning long ago,  
And seemed to take no notice of the vexed  
Look on the young man's face as he took thought  
Of all the miracles the Lord had wrought,  
Now to be labelled, dubbed, yecept, indexed.  
(“Naming the Animals” ll. 1–8)

The comedy resulting from the deheroization of the first man is intensified by the choice of the common name “Fred” for the first cow in the Garden of Eden. Humour is combined here with the tragedy of the cows’ fate through a poignant allusion to the millions of animals of this species that are ritually slaughtered to glorify the Creator in Jewish and Muslim traditions.

Before an addled mind and puddle brow,  
The feathered nation and the finny prey  
Passed by; there went biped and quadruped.  
Adam looked forth with bottomless dismay  
Into the tragic eyes of his first cow,  
And shyly ventured, “Thou shalt be called ‘Fred’.”  
(“Naming the Animals” ll. 9–14)

The sonnet by Hecht is equally intriguing in terms of its formal composition. The traditional (Petrarchan) division into an octave and a sestet (8 + 6) is maintained, although the rhyme scheme is unusually experimental: *abba cddc aef eaf*. From a metrical perspective, most lines adhere to the iambic pentameter beat, which is the basic rhythmic pattern of English sonnets since their emergence in the Renaissance period. All in all, Anthony Hecht’s poem has an interesting motley design, which is a mixture of tradition and innovation in preserving some elements of the referential religious sonnet, such as iambic meter, stanzaic arrangement, and the tradition of biblical thematic references, while introducing innovative elements in the distribution of rhymes and, above all, in the shift of tone from serious to ironic-grotesque.

Another characteristic variant of the contemporary religious Anglophone sonnet is represented by the poem written by Countee Cullen, an African-American poet and a key representative of the cultural movement known as the Harlem Renaissance, whose popularity flourished in the 1920s. Christi-

anity, in addition to racial and social issues, was one of several issues which the adherents of the movement dealt with in their works.<sup>3</sup> Cullen's sonnet, titled "Yet Do I Marvel" (Bender and Squier 314) is one of the more interesting examples of their views on religious beliefs and practices. Particularly noteworthy is their innovative focus on **social issues**, and in particular the issue of the poet's **racial identity** as an outsider, seeking to articulate fundamental and universal truths. In this sonnet, with a tone similar to that of a "typical" religious poem, the speaker is full of faith in Providence, sensing His presence in Creation and accepting with faith the logic behind even the most incomprehensible acts of God. And although God is unfathomable and incomprehensible in His actions to the petty human mind, the speaker remains hopeful with one exception:

Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:  
To make a poet black, and bid him sing!  
(“Yet Do I Marvel” ll. 13–14)

This final couplet, like most of Shakespeare's sonnets, introduces controversy and prompts a disparate look at most of the previously expressed statements. The question remains paradoxical: how can a good God call a black person to be a poet in a racially and ideologically alien world, thereby depriving him of a voice and taking away the language that is the very substance of poetry? This situation goes beyond the paradox of the mortality of a body created in God's image, the suffering of Sisyphus and Tantalus, or the absurdity of the blindness of the mole altogether.

I doubt not God is good, well-meaning, kind,  
And did he stoop to quibble could tell why  
The little buried mole continues blind,  
Why flesh that mirrors Him must some day die,  
Make plain the reason tortured Tantalus  
Is baited by the fickle fruit, declare  
If merely brute caprice dooms Sisyphus  
To struggle up a never-ending stair.  
(“Yet Do I Marvel” ll. 1–8)

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<sup>3</sup> See in particular Cary D. Wintz, "Countee Cullen and the Harlem Renaissance" (1988); Joshua M. Hall, "Revisiting Countee Cullen: A New Look at a Harlem Renaissance Poet" (2012).

The speaker marvels at the curious nature of God's creative powers, which allow Him to create a black poet and command him to sing. The speaker's identity as a black poet is significant in the context of the poem, as it suggests that even in the face of oppression and discrimination, there is still room for beauty and creativity. The final lines of the sonnet are particularly poignant, as they suggest that God's ability to create a black poet and command him to sing is a sign of His power and wisdom. The act of creating a black poet challenges the traditional hierarchies of power and disrupts the notion of a God who is solely concerned with the welfare of the dominant group of "the chosen ones". In its essence, "Yet Do I Marvel" is a powerful meditation on the nature of God and the human experience of suffering. The poem expresses a sense of bewilderment at the paradoxical nature of God's actions and the arbitrary distribution of blessings and curses in the world, while also celebrating the resilience and creativity of the human spirit. In doing so the sonnet becomes a metaphorically vibrant patch of darker shades of black and white. Moreover, from the formal perspective, we are dealing in this sonnet with moderate experimentation by Cullen. He maintains the traditional iambic pentameter beat, seeking instead innovation in the arrangement of rhymes. The graphic layout on the page does not separate individual stanzas (similarly to John Milton's block sonnets), however, the rhymes indicate two quatrains and—what is a completely new feature—three couplets: abba cddc ee ff gg. It is important to note that the unusual three couplets form a complete thought in the manner of the typical two tercets of a classical sonnet, whose task is to provide commentary on the examples contained in the first part (the octave or three quatrains) of the traditional sonnet.

Another case in point of how contemporary religious sonnet manifests its modernity of design and thought is to be observed in the sonnet "33 is the year that Jesus Christ" (Bender and Squier 387) by Julia Alvarez, an American poet of Dominican origin. This poem is from her debut collection of verse titled *Homecoming*, and is part of a cycle of thirty-three sonnets aptly titled 33.<sup>4</sup> Upon first reading, this sonnet strikes the reader with its **colloquialism**, consisting of five sentences rather than stanzas connected by intricate rhyme schemes. Interestingly, there are no such rhymes in this particular sonnet—it is a sonnet without rhymes! Such formal **depoetization** of the

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<sup>4</sup> The most relevant papers which argue that the Alvarez's sonnets offer a complex and nuanced exploration of the ways in which identity is shaped by language, culture, and politics are: Lilia D. Monzó, "Julia Alvarez's Sonnet Cycle 33 and the Poetics of Identity" (2016); Adina Cimet, "Julia Alvarez's Sonnet 33 and the Narrative of Undocumented Migration" (2015); Stephanie R. Hawkins, "Julia Alvarez's Sonnet Cycle 33: Poetry as an Act of Witnessing" (2016).

sonnet is another characteristic of the contemporary sonnet, which is increasingly to be noticed in the works of those poets who contest the formal conventions of the genre, placing emphasis on the meanings encoded in the very speech.<sup>5</sup> The conversational character of the poem, based on the exchange of sentences between the lyrical subject and his interlocutor, is not something new in the sonnet. In fact, it is a typical element found in both Donne's poetry and even Petrarch's. The difference is that in their sonnets, the dialogues take place between the poet and his beloved (or God in religious sonnets), rather than between random individuals.

Wasn't he crucified at 33,  
 I ask, depressed, deserted by his friends,  
 divorced from God, subject to human laws?  
 Wasn't he the most single finally  
 at 33, meeting his lonely end?  
 ("33 is the year that Jesus Christ" ll. 9–13)

Furthermore, Alvarez's sonnet represents still another patchwork motif of modern sonnets, its progressive **desacralization** of the sacred realm. Its fading pattern of the fabric brings out the *hic et nunc* reality as the sufficient and comprehensive scope of human existence. In Alvarez's quasi-autobiographical poem, the conversation with a priest about the death of Christ in His thirty-third year of life is rather a pretext for her own reminiscences regarding the sense of loneliness in relation to the lack of husband and family, depression manifested through overweight, and the banality of daily existence. In this world, "God" becomes "god", and the bread and fish from the parable of the miraculous multiplication of bread turn into a mundane snack, a tuna sandwich.

I've come to take the edge off loneliness  
 by being convinced that maybe god exists,  
 is with me in the empty bed, with  
 me when I can't do up my dress, with me  
 for bread and tuna fish since recipes  
 depress me with leftovers, and just Is.  
 ("33 is the year that Jesus Christ" ll. 3–8)

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<sup>5</sup> We can find a wide range of such experimental sonnets in the most comprehensive anthology of contemporary English sonnets compiled by Jeff Hilson in *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets* (2008).



The motley design of modern religious poetic quilt is enriched by their variegated threads of **intertextuality**. The concept of “intertextuality” itself has its roots in the works of the French literary and cultural researcher Julia Kristeva, and earlier of the Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin.<sup>6</sup> With the enormous popularity of studies on the connections between literary texts or more broadly—between literature and other arts such as music, art, or architecture, it has found numerous manifestations especially in postmodernist literature. A good example of such cross referential interweaving of different strands is the sonnet by the American poet X. J. Kennedy, provocatively titled “Nothing in Heaven Functions as it Ought” (Bender and Squier, *The Sonnet. An Anthology* 369). This seemingly iconoclastic poem from the collection *Cross Ties* uses two direct intertextual references to classic texts of English literature: the first is *Paradise Lost* by the genius of the Restoration period—John Milton, and *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* by the English monk of the medieval period, commonly known as The Venerable Bede. Both references are quite casual here, and since the entire sonnet has an ironic tone, their function is also more humorous.

Nothing In Heaven functions as it ought:  
 Peter’s bifocals, blindly sat on, crack;  
 His gates lurch wide with the cackle of a cock,  
 Not turning with a hush of gold as Milton had thought;  
 Gangs of the slaughtered innocents keep huffing  
 The nimbus off the Venerable Bede  
 Like that of an old dandelion gone to seed;  
 And the beatific choir keep breaking up, coughing.  
 (“Nothing in Heaven” ll. 1–8)

Kennedy’s sonnet highlights yet another typical element of contemporary sonnet, namely the strong coupling of the formal framework of the sonnet with its layer of meaning. In general, this feature in particular seems to be a universal marker of any outstanding poetry, although contemporary poets who are creating sonnets attach special importance to this peculiar “poetic osmosis”. The sonnet discussed here is a perverse in its meaning hymn, honouring imperfection and chaos that are supposed to characterize celestial ex-

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<sup>6</sup> Most prominent early studies of the concept of literary intertextuality are to be found in: Mikhail Bakhtin, “The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays” (1981); Julia Kristeva, “Word, Dialogue, and Novel” (1966); and “Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art” (1969).

istence in Heaven. Hell, on the other hand, is perfect in its construction, like a modern business corporation or an automated factory for modern electronic components.

But Hell, sleek Hell hath no freewheeling part:  
 None takes his own sweet time, none quickens pace.  
 Ask anyone, How come you here, poor heart?—  
 And he will slot a quarter through his face,  
 You'll hear an instant click, a tear will start  
 Imprinted with an abstract of his case.  
 ("Nothing in Heaven" ll. 9–14)

In its own way, this sonnet resembles the sonnet by the Jesuit poet G. M. Hopkins, a genius of the Victorian and modernist era, and his poem "Pied Beauty" (Kermode and Hollander 1469).

Glory be to God for dappled things—  
 For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;  
 For rose-moles all in steeple upon trout that swim;  
 Fresh-firecole chestnut-falls; finches' wings;  
 Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;  
 And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.  
 ("Pied Beauty" ll. 1–6)

Similarly to Kennedy's work, Hopkins' sonnet is a celebration of the diversity of God's creation, which imbues everything with individual qualities, making it unique and exceptional. Hopkins' views, reflected in this poem, have a deep foundation in his fascination with the philosophy of Duns Scotus, particularly his concept of *haecceitas*, while Kennedy writes from the perspective of a contemporary person who understands the importance of freedom, even if it is imperfect and prone to error. The problem of formal and thematic synergy that interests us here is realized in two ways by both poets. Hopkins chooses to mirror the essence of *haecceitas* by creating a unique sonnet, which does not have the required fourteen lines, but only ten and a half; he even invents the term "curtal sonnet" for such a construction. Kennedy, on the other hand, contrasts the opposing natures of Heaven and Hell, especially the heavenly imperfection and hellish discipline, through the organization of rhymes in the octave and sestet. The imperfect reality of Heaven, characterized by the octave, has inaccurate rhymes, such as "huff-

ing—coughing” or consonant rhymes, such as “crack—cock”. All the rhymes related to Hell and its sterile structure are exact and perfect in their monosyllabic precision: “part—heart—start”, “pace—face—case”.

In their attempts to poetically mirror religious themes, contemporary sonnet writers also do not bypass **public** or **ideological** accents, which are gaining increasing popularity today. An interesting example of such a combination is the sonnet by the contemporary British poet Jo Shapcott, titled “Mrs Noah: Taken after the Flood” (Padel 60). The title itself indicates a characteristic change of perspective in today’s sonnets, from the “patriarchal” optic—to use feminist nomenclature—to the “excluded” optic—to use post-colonial terminology. The lyrical subject of this poem, which refers to the biblical story of the flood in the Book of Genesis, is not Noah building his Ark to save humanity, but his nameless wife. Unlike the traditional sonnet, which always gave voice to a male poet telling of his passionate struggle for female/divine recognition, this sonnet allows us to hear the voice of a person somewhere in the background. Furthermore, her statement does not concern the dramatic situation from the period of the flood, but is an extremely emotional and at the same time very private statement of an aging woman (“I’m middle-aged and plump”) for whom the whole experience has a completely different dimension. From the perspective of time, she realizes her physicality and its “animal” nature, which will make it possible for her, however, to save the human race from destruction. The thought of this and memories from the past are the source of anxiety (“I can’t sit still these days”) and the awareness of the difference between male “animality” and female mysterious power of emotions and feelings.

...If you touch my lips,  
with salt water I would tell you such words,  
words to crack the sky and launch the ark again.  
(“Mrs Noah” ll. 12–14)

Assessing its formal qualities, Jo Shapcott’s sonnet perfectly mirrors the emotional turmoil of the lyrical subject, full of fear and uncertainty, through the abandonment of the harmonious stanzaic structure and skilled rhyming scheme typical of English sonnets. Interestingly, this sonnet “disrupts” the typical regularity of the iambic pentameter, the dominant metric foot of the English sonnet, relying instead on a strikingly irregular number of syllables

per line (9-15-10-11-9-10-10-11-8-13-9-11-10-11) and avoiding the iambic metrical pattern altogether.<sup>7</sup>

The final “poetic stitch in the patchwork design of contemporary religious sonnets is to be noticed in a superb cycle of *Unholy Sonnets* by a New Formalist American poet Mark Jarman.<sup>8</sup> His religious sonnet sequence follows the metaphysical tradition of investigating the problems of the ultimate nature of being and knowing by means of cerebral imagery and strong lines. It is a very fine, though quite rare instance of a refined cycle of poems which tackles most intimate spiritual dilemmas in a form of language which reflects its internal complexity. A superb example of such a modern “thread” where a **mundane theme** is expressed in **unpoetic diction**, is to be observed in Jarman’s starkly physical, if not even anatomical, “Sonnet 9” (Jarman, *Unholy Sonnets* 23). In it Jarman’s speaker dissects human body, exposes its parts and parcels to God’s scrutiny and realizes how He “touch[es] the working parts and track[s] the thought”:

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open,  
All throats, all voice boxes, all inner ears,  
All pupils, all tear ducts, all cavities  
Inside the skull inside the trick of flesh.  
To you the face is like a picture window,  
The body is a door of molded glass,  
All lengths of gut are pasture, all membrane  
Peels back and off like ripe persimmon skin.  
And every wrinkle folded in the brain  
Runs smoothly through your fingers and snaps back  
Into its convolution. Even the blood  
Is naked as a bolt of oilcloth.  
 (“Sonnet 9” ll. 1–12 )

The clinical sterility of the poem, its anatomical nakedness is intensified by stripping the sonnet off its poetic attire, the elaborate rhyming pattern: once again the sonnet is rhymeless [!]. Like in many other sonnets in this cycle, Jarman follows the metaphysical tradition of poetic representation of

<sup>7</sup> Ruth Padel discusses this sonnet in great detail and with meticulous precision in *52 Ways of Looking At a Poem* (2004).

<sup>8</sup> A more detailed analysis of Jarman’s sonnet sequence of *Unholy Sonnets* is to be found in my paper “The Dark Side of the Sun, Discovered – Mark Jarman’s Contemporary Metaphysical Sonnet Cycle of ‘Unholy Sonnets’” (2014).

spiritual and abstract concepts in terms of technical or physical imagery. In one of the recent studies of Donne's sermons we read how he "speaks of the soul as having blood and bones, of the 'bowells' of the spirit, and of sin as a whole organic bodily system" (Selleck 149). Another critic points to the fact "that Donne is after the materiality of language ('its capacity to mime. And perhaps eventually acquire, the actual weight of what it describes'), because he wants to carry 'language into body' and thereby make that body 'volitional, and 'noncontingent'" (Selleck 149). Such is also Jarman's "Sonnet 9" with its anatomical imagery of: hearts, throats, voice boxes, inner ears, pupils, tear ducts, cavities, guts, membranes, wrinkles, blood, skull and brain. The continuation of metaphysical tradition of Donne's rite is most visible in the final couplet of Jarman's sonnet which gives meaning to the entire poem:

You touch the working parts and track the thought,  
A comet on your fingertip, and squint.  
(“Sonnet 9” ll. 13–14)

The conceit here is built on the same principle of bringing together two very distant images which belong to most unrelated domains. The irreverent speaker of Donne's poem "The Sun Rising", for instance, belittles the power of the beams of the sun by stating arrogantly: "I could eclipse and cloud them with a wink." In a manner akin to Donne's poetic technique, Jarman uses imagery derived from astronomy and juxtaposes it with a selected part of human body. In Donne "eclipse" of the sun is set side by side with a "wink", in Jarman a "comet" with a "squint".

Admittedly, **technological imagery** is not uncommon in Jarman's sequence of *Unholy Sonnets*. We can notice it in "Sonnet 10" in which the poet attempts to comprehend the nature of his poetic inspiration by comparing it to the operation of the advanced digital technology of laser reproduction of music by compact discs:

My soul, a little like a compact disc,  
Slides into place, a laser plays upon  
Its surface,... when I am alone  
And waiting for the coming of the ghost  
Whose flame-tongue like a blow-torch, sharp and lean,  
Writes things that no one ever could have guessed.  
(“Sonnet 10” ll. 1–12 )

By juxtaposing the high-tech language of lasers and compact discs with the more mystical language of ghosts and flame-tongues, Jarman blurs the lines between the material and the spiritual, suggesting that both are necessary for a full understanding of the human experience. His use of technological imagery serves to reinforce the themes of innovation and experimentation that run throughout the *Unholy Sonnets*, and demonstrates his skill at weaving together disparate elements to create a rich and complex textual tapestry of meaning. The contemporary English-language sonnet on religious themes, in its motley pattern of varied poetic stitches, is experiencing a resurgence, with a range of poets grappling with the difficult form and pushing its boundaries in exciting new ways. While many contemporary sonnets depart from the traditional structure of rhyme and meter, they still adhere to a set of self-imposed rules and limitations. This allows poets to experiment with new forms of expression and to explore religious themes in a more relatable and accessible way. Humour, colloquialism, and self-irony are all common features of contemporary religious sonnets, which often depict the sacred in the context of everyday life. By using this highly flexible form, poets are able to comment on cultural and social issues in a subtle and nuanced way. Like their Renaissance predecessors, contemporary sonnets attempt to convey the ineffable mystery of religious experience through language, but they are more self-aware of their own structure and the ways in which they depart from tradition. This systematic deconstruction is a significant element of the contemporary sonnet, reflecting the fragmented and chaotic nature of modern existence. It is no wonder, therefore, that the contemporary sonnet on religious themes is an exciting and diverse form that continues to evolve and adapt to the needs of modern poets and readers.

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SONNET IN STITCHES: PATCHWORK VARIATIONS  
OF MODERN RELIGIOUS SONNETS IN ENGLISH

Summary

Across time and geography, the sonnet has served as a vehicle for poets to explore a diverse range of subjects, from personal love and loss, to political and social issues, and to meditate on the human condition itself. This paper will explore the patchwork variations of some modern religious sonnets in English, examining how contemporary poets are using the sonnet form to explore faith, doubt, and spirituality in new and innovative ways. Through an analysis of several representative works, we will demonstrate how these poets are breathing new life into this versatile form, creating works that are both timeless and timely. While many contemporary sonnets depart from the traditional structure of rhyme and meter, they still adhere to a set of self-

imposed rules and limitations. This allows poets to experiment with new forms of expression and to explore religious themes in a more relatable and accessible way. Humour, colloquialism, and self-irony are all common features of contemporary religious sonnets, which often depict the sacred in the context of everyday life. Contemporary sonnets attempt to convey the ineffable mystery of religious experience through language, but they are more self-aware of their own structure and the ways in which they depart from tradition. This systematic deconstruction is a significant element of the contemporary sonnet, reflecting the fragmented and chaotic nature of modern existence.

**Keywords:** sonnet; religion and poetry; modern Anglophone poetry

#### SONET W SPLOTACH – PATCHWORKOWE WARIACJE WSPÓŁCZESNYCH ANGLOJĘZYCZNYCH SONETÓW RELIGIJNYCH

##### Streszczenie

W różnych okresach i na różnych szerokościach geograficznych sonet służył poetom jako narzędzie do odzworowania różnorodnych tematów, od osobistych uniesień i tragedii, poprzez kwestie natury społecznej i polityczne, po medytacje nad kondycją człowieka. Niniejsza praca bada patchworkowe wariacje niektórych współczesnych religijnych sonetów w języku angielskim, analizując, w jaki sposób współcześni poeci wykorzystują formę sonetu do badania wiary, wątpliwości i duchowości w nowatorski i innowacyjny sposób. Poprzez analizę kilku reprezentatywnych dzieł, pokażemy, jak ci poeci starają się tchnąć nowe życie w tę wszechstronną formę poetycką, tworząc dzieła zarówno ponadczasowe, jak i aktualne. Choć wiele współczesnych sonetów odbiega od tradycyjnej struktury rymu i metrum, wciąż przestrzegają one pewnego zestawu narzuconych przez tę formę zasad i ograniczeń. Pozwala to poetom eksperymentować z nowymi formami wyrazu i badać tematy religijne w bardziej przystępny i zrozumiały sposób. Humor, kolokwializm i autoironia są powszechnymi cechami współczesnych sonetów religijnych, które często przedstawiają to, co święte, w kontekście codziennego życia. Współczesne sonety próbują przekazać nieuchwytną tajemnicę religijnego doświadczenia za pomocą języka, ale są bardziej samoświadome swojej własnej struktury i sposobów, w jakie odbiegają od tradycji. Ta systematyczna dekonstrukcja jest istotnym elementem współczesnego sonetu, odzwierciedlającym rozproszoną i chaotyczną naturę współczesnego istnienia.

**Słowa kluczowe:** sonet; poezja i religia; współczesna poezja anglojęzyczna