CHAPTER 2

Making Poems: The “method” of Ted Berrigan’s Sonnets

Within the present study of poetic form and its relation to labor, Ted Berrigan’s proceduralism represents one end of an ideological continuum, and thus serves as a useful point of departure. Unlike the work of David Antin, Ron Silliman, and Lyn Hejinian, Berrigan’s Sonnets (1964) manifests no obvious ideological commitment. This is not to say that the work is without political significance—far from it. But Berrigan’s own concern is primarily with the micropolitics of the New York poetry scene, and not with larger socioeconomic issues. This lack of visible class-consciousness makes Berrigan’s work an interesting limit case, in that one has to delve into formal analysis to reconstruct the relationship between Berrigan’s procedural form and the larger conditions of production within society as a whole.

Written in 1963, The Sonnets predates the Vietnam-era politicization of the avant-garde. And yet, in terms of form, Berrigan’s work can be read as a critique of labor conditions in the postindustrial United States. In his cutup-and-collage treatment of the sonnet form, he manifests a drive to reverse the processes of commodification and of alienation from language. As we will see, Berrigan’s proceduralism intuitively and repeatedly attempts to reconnect the poet to the poem, which is to say the laborer to the object of labor. His manipulation of readymade language manifests a desire to reverse the process of linguistic reification, and to re-encode the presence of the author in the writing itself. Thus, while the politics of labor is absent at the level of subject matter, it is always
implicit in the form of *The Sonnets*. In repeatedly assembling and reassembling units of language, Berrigan’s work can also be said to register the repetitive, mechanized conditions of intellectual labor in postindustrial society. In this sense, *The Sonnets* simultaneously instantiates cultural production and encodes the conditions of production that exist within the social totality.

In the last decade, Berrigan’s poetry has begun to receive renewed attention from publishers and critics alike. In 2000, Penguin issued a republication of *The Sonnets* that includes a valuable introduction and end notes by the poet Alice Notley, Berrigan’s second wife. In the notes, Notley transcribes many of Berrigan’s 1982 annotations to a 1963 manuscript of *The Sonnets*. These annotations provide new insights into the compositional method behind the sequence, and they also reveal much of the source material for Berrigan’s cutup and collage procedures. The new edition also includes thirteen poems that were absent from the original 1964 “C” Press publication, which included only sixty-six of the eighty-eight sonnets Berrigan originally wrote. Notley’s 2005 edition of *The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan* represents another significant development in Berrigan scholarship and in the continuing reception of his work. Featuring more than 600 pages of poetry, *The Collected Poems* lends shape and coherence to Berrigan’s ambitious but often uneven oeuvre. His poetry has also been the subject of several recent critical discussions. In *Career Moves: Olson, Creeley, Zukofsky, Berrigan, and the American Avant-Garde*, Libbie Rifkin examines *The Sonnets*—as well as Berrigan’s work as the editor of “C” magazine—in terms of his career as an avant-gardist. She argues that, within *The Sonnets*, one can observe “a largely unknown poet playing the field in an attempt to produce a self-legitimating career” (110). In her reading of Berrigan’s self-promotional efforts—a reading informed by the work of Pierre Bourdieu—Rifkin seeks to “articulate the intersection of individual ambition and collective production” and to examine Berrigan’s self-promotion and self-invention, his “self-canonizing maneuvers” (110–111). Tony Lopez’s article “‘Powder on a Little Table’: Ted Berrigan’s Sonnets and 1960s Poems” (2002) connects “Berrigan’s inventive appropriation of the sonnet sequence” to the “industrial image-reproduction processes” of pop artists Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol (281). And in *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s*, Daniel Kane offers an extensive discussion of Berrigan’s central role within the “Second Generation” of New York School poets. Taken as a whole, this recent body of work has created