Shakespeare's Sonnets: Reading for Difference
Author(s): Helen Vendler
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A theory of critical reading might begin: *Know your texts for decades. Recite many of them to yourself so often that they seem your own speech. Type them out, teach them, annotate them.* A critical "reading" is the end product of an internalization so complete that the word *reading* is not the right word for what happens when a text is on your mind. The text is part of what has made you who you are.

My work on Shakespeare’s sonnets has led to my dissatisfaction with current critical accounts of these poems and with the procedures that have generated my (different) account of them. I began working on the sonnets by writing chapters of what I hoped would be a book on them. In my two abandoned chapters, I had wanted to take famous anthology pieces (e.g., sonnets 73, 116, 129) and explain why available critical accounts of them seemed to me on the whole so feeble, flat, and unsatisfactory, so foreign to Shakespeare’s ravishing performance. I had realized by then that I processed the sonnets differently from most other people. It seemed to me that others tended to read along a static axis of similarity (generally a thematic axis, but sometimes a rhetorical or linguistic one). They wanted to make each sonnet hang together as a statement or as a dramatic performance of an attitude. I too wanted to make the sonnet hang together, but along a dynamic curve of inner emotional evolution, so that if it began at point A, it ended, say, at point M. Critics who saw the sonnet as an

_Helen Vendler is A. Kingsley Porter University Professor of English at Harvard University and poetry critic of the New Yorker. Her communication was presented at the 1755th Stated Meeting, held at the House of the Academy on October 13, 1993. She has recently completed A Commentary on Shakespeare’s Sonnets._

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expository genre began by taking its opening statement as a topic sentence, then searching for logical or rhetorical resemblances among the four parts of a sonnet. They tended to produce an account of a sonnet that said (although in more exalted terminology), “Shakespeare says lust is bad. Shakespeare shows how bad lust is. Shakespeare says lust always ends badly. And it is bad for everyone always.” Those were the thematic readings. Rhetorical criticism collected many of Shakespeare’s examples of, say, hyperbole or polyptoton in order to assimilate some pieces of some sonnets to some pieces of other sonnets. These readings made generalizations about Shakespeare’s tropes. Dramatically minded critics treated the sonnets as soliloquies from a missing play; though they noticed (as they would in a soliloquy) changes of mind in some sonnets, they ascribed such changes more to the ongoing exterior “plot” of the sequence than to the inner dynamics of the poem itself. A yet more sophisticated criticism denied that one could do a reading of the sonnets at all, given the polysemy of all language, and so produced atoms of interpretation but refused to connect the pieces.

None of these, I realized, represented my way of reading. I did believe one could come to a satisfactory reading of these poems, since Shakespeare, for all his love of puns and wordplay, knew very well how to put contextual constraints on his language so as to guide interpretation. I am not of the school, for instance, that believes we read word by word. We normally wait to arrive at the period to know what we’ve read and what the sentence means; we control the possible “dictionary meanings” of the words along the way by their mutual interrelation. Meaning is not the problem in the sonnets (nor indeed in lyric poetry in general). The problem is why poems with such very banal apparent meanings (“I love you; do you love me?”; “Lust is bad”; “The world is evil”) should seem so inexhaustible.

My way of reading the sonnets (and other poems) is to read for difference. Not “How does quatrain 2 resemble quatrain 1?” but “How does quatrain 2 differ from quatrain
1?" Consider, for example, sonnets 73 and 129.

73

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.

In me thou seest the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.

In me thou seest the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the deathbed whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.

This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

129

Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action; and, till action, lust
Is perjur'd, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;
Enjoyed no sooner but despisèd straight;
Past reason hunted, and no sooner had,
Past reason hated as a swallowed bait
On purpose laid to make the taker mad;
Mad in pursuit, and in possession so;
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe,
Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.

All this the world well knows, yet none knows well
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

In Sonnet 73, what would make someone who has just said he is a ruined choir say he is a twilight, and then say he is a glowing? These betoken powerful changes of attitude. In Sonnet 129, why would someone define lust by nouns (expense, spirit, waste, shame, lust, action, action, lust) while talking about the act of lust, and then turn to adjectives (perjur'd, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame, savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust) when talking about the pursuit of lust? This seemed to me a linguistic token of an implied fictive change. And so on.

The intent to assimilate—to gather information along an axis of static similarity—is the
proper intent in reading expository material. This is how we are trained to read at school. This is also a “good enough” technique for reading the subliterary and dispossessed narrative prose on which children are (disgracefully) trained in their increasingly sociological “literary” indoctrination during the elementary years. But this technique will not do for genuinely literary narrative, where all the interest lies in how one of the pitifully few archetypal plots (the marriage plot, the status plot, the quest plot, the tragic plot) is being retold. And it certainly will not do for lyric poetry, where all the interest lies in how some recognizable emotion—love, grief, perplexity, rebellion—is being analytically re-presented in means accessible to its culture.

It is, in fact, the analytic function of lyric that is forgotten when one reads along an axis of thematic or rhetorical similarity, or along an axis of implied fictive plot. A Shakespearean sonnet is an ideal analytic vehicle, with its four movable parts (twice as many as the Italian octave-sestet sonnet). Though the rhyme scheme of the Shakespearean sonnet suggests one distribution of parts (4-4-4-2), and its Petrarchan inheritance another (8-6 or 8-4-2), in fact Shakespeare adapted it to any number of structural and logical schemata, such as the 1-11-2 scheme of Tired with all these (#66) or the 4-6-4 scheme of So are you to my thoughts (#75). These structures function as ways to embody several responses to the issue at hand, responses that cry out to be distinguished from each other.

I realize now that it was because I had possessed the sonnets thematically for many years that I tended naturally, as an adult, to read them aesthetically—that is, for difference. Because I had so long known everything they “said,” I was ready to ask, “What is Shakespeare doing now? And now what? What is diverting him in the way of invention in this line? in this couplet? in this quatrain?” I was writing about what had long since become utterable as my own speech and thoughts, and I could ask, “Why am I talking this way?” “What does it mean that these thoughts, and not the sort I was uttering five lines back, are coming out of my mouth?”

This oral model of discourse opens up
useful questions of rhetoric, speech acts, semantic and aural repetition, and so on (to which I will return), but by itself it can’t suffice. It tacitly agrees to forget that the Sonnets are a printed book (whatever their dramatic, oral, and aural dimensions). I found, when I turned away from the oral model and read the poems on the quarto page, that I saw things that uttering the sonnets as my own speech had not revealed. What I noticed on the page, especially in reading the quarto version of the Sonnets, were the many meaningful repetitions of identical or nearly identical words, syllables, and even letters.

On a larger scale, one perceives that many of the sonnets are visually or verbally organized by arbitrary rules that Shakespeare seems to have relished setting for himself. One such rule (apparent, by my count, in some twenty sonnets) is that each of the four parts of a sonnet had to exhibit one use of the same word. In Sonnet 7, for instance, the word is look (quatrain 1 has looks, Q2 looks, Q3 look; the couplet has unlooked on); in Sonnet 26 it is show. Shakespeare can enjoy playing games with his key word: in Sonnet 55 the key word is live—palpably there in Q1’s outlive, Q2’s living, and C’s live, but apparently “missing” in Q3, until one’s eye lights on “ob-livious”—and one is delighted by the secret play. Other kinds of secret play appear in the sequence. To mention only one example, Sonnet 87 secretes a king in “mistaking,” “mak-ing,” and “waking” in the body of the sonnet, thereby rendering true the closing couplet, “Thus have I had thee as a dream doth flat-ter, / In sleep a king, but waking no such matter.” Often, the reason for Shakespeare’s use of particular words (here, the -aking words) is not evident from letters alone; in this case one must hear “aching” in addition to having grasped Shakespeare’s scheme of written play. The sonnets, then, need to be read constantly both as written documents and as oral ones.

I discovered, too, that the sonnets need to be read as speech acts. This is slightly different from reading them, as we are often enjoined to do, “dramatically.” That injunction has been applied chiefly to those poems which
appear to be directly addressed to another person, such as *Then hate me when thou will'st, if ever, now* (#90). It has not been applied to sonnets that seem to be philosophical meditations, such as #116 (*Let me not to the marriage of true minds*) or #129 (*Th' expense of spirit*). Nor has it been applied to sonnets of apparently self-directed discourse, such as *Why is my verse so barren of new pride?* (#76). But error lies precisely in the prejudging of these sonnets as “philosophical meditations” or “soliloquies” because they do not immediately exhibit a direct address to another. The queries, “Why would someone be talking like this?” “What sort of speech act is this? a rebuttal? an apology? a homily? a boast?” lead to a closer generic definition of a sonnet, and to the revelation (in some cases) of an embedded anterior discourse to which the given sonnet is addressed. When the young man says, “Why do you always use the same old-fashioned form over and over? Why don’t you ever vary it and do something more modern?” Shakespeare replies by echoing the question: “Why, you ask, is my verse so barren?” and then replies, with a gentleness painful to read, “O know, sweet love, I always write of you....” We read the sonnet wrongly, I think, if we see it as Shakespeare asking himself “Why is my verse so barren of new pride?” and then answering the question in an address to another.

One is driven to the sort of speech-act query I have instanced by peculiarities in the surface of the poem. For example, Sonnet 116 exhibits a strange proliferation of negatives; this is the normal sign of a rebuttal.

116

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments; love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O, no, it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height
be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

Also, Shakespeare's iambic measure suggests that a normal reading of the opening line of #116 would emphasize the second word: “Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediments” (“You may, but I won’t”). If we read Sonnet 116 not as a serene definition of love but rather as a rebuttal to the embedded anterior discourse of another—the same way we necessarily read the sonnet that follows it, Accuse me thus—we hear, “inside the sonnet,” the anterior discourse that is being rebutted. The faithless young man, we might deduce, has said something like the following:

You would like the marriage of minds to have the same permanence as the marriage of bodies; but even the church admits impediments that are invoked to annul the marriage of bodies, and there are impediments to a lifelong marriage of minds, too. After all, things alter; and when love finds alteration, it alters in consequence; and things are removed; and love removes itself when it sees the removals. I did love you once, but now that is ended.

Shakespeare counters: “Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediments; love is not love / Which alters [etc.] / O, no . . . / [It] is never shaken . . . / Love’s not Time’s fool . . . / Love alters not . . . / I never writ, nor no man ever loved.” Any short poem with four nots, two nevers, two nos, and one nor is refuting something. Readers intent on what the sonnet seems to mean (“Love is eternal and immutable”) have for almost three hundred years missed the anger and scorn in the utterance, and the psychological implication of its chosen rhetorical form, the rebuttal (a rebuttal is neither serene nor unthreatened). Such astonishing critical blindness is to be found everywhere in existing criticism of the sonnets.

It is perhaps a modern impatience with rhetoric that leads to an inability to read the sonnets. In the highly diverting, if appalling, history of the reception of the sonnets, one of the most shocking episodes is provided by Ezra Pound. Wanting to wring the neck of
rhetoric, he instructed Basil Bunting, one of his students at the "Ezuniversity," to go through Shakespeare's Sonnets deleting all the "superfluous words." Massimo Bacigalupo, in his monograph Ezra Pound: Un Poeta a Rapallo, has reproduced a page from the edition "cleaned up" by Bunting under Pound's direction. What was produced by this process, however barbarous, certainly appears at first glance to preserve the theme or statement of any given sonnet. Are the deleted words then "superfluous?" Is their function thematic or other than thematic? Let us take Sonnet 105 as our test case here.

105

Let not my love be called idolatry,
Nor my beloved as an idol show,
Since all alike my songs and praises be
To one, of one, still such, and ever so.
Kind is my love today, tomorrow kind,
Still constant in a wondrous excellence;
Therefore my verse, to constancy confined,
One thing expressing, leaves out difference.
Fair, kind, and true is all my argument,
Fair, kind, and true, varying to other words;
And in this change is my invention spent,
Three themes in one, which wondrous scope affords.
Fair, kind, and true have often lived alone
Which three till now never kept seat in one.

Now, when Basil Bunting went through to remove the superfluous words, he was also supposed to avoid poetic inversions (deformations, according to Pound, who believed that in poetry one should follow a natural word order). Here is Bunting's version:

Let not my love be called idolatry, [the topic sentence is permitted to stand!]
Nor beloved show as an idol,
Since my songs and praises be all alike,
Kind is my love today, tomorrow kind.
Constant in excellence, therefore,
Fair, kind, and true is all my argument,
Fair, kind, and true, varying to other words;
Three themes in one,
Fair, kind, and true,
Which three till now never kept seat in one.

John Kerrigan, the most recent editor of the Sonnets (for the New Penguin Shakespeare) finds #105 a boring sonnet. Like Bunting and, presumably, Pound, he regards it as tautologous, as his commentary on it reveals:
A poem like 105 is scrupulously and Shakespearianly dull, but it is dull nonetheless. . . . The text is stripped of metaphor. . . . The result is a poem which, for all its charm [which Kerrigan does not specify] and integrity [the absence in it of what Kerrigan calls “false comparisons”], lacks the compelling excitement of a metaphoric sonnet such as 60, “Like as the waves make toward the pebbled shore.” In so far as Shakespeare . . . shun[s] “variation” for the sake of tautological recurrence, his verse palls.

Of course, if one is “excited” only by metaphor and can perceive no other figure at work, one might find #105 “dull,” its repetitions “superfluous” or “tautologous.” I believe such verdicts arise from considering as aesthetically desirable one thing only—unadorned statement in Pound’s case, metaphor in Kerrigan’s case.

Sonnet 105 is a poem that says, in mock refutation of an accusation, “You, a Christian worshiping one God in three persons, have called me an idolator for worshiping my beloved. But don’t you see that I worship exactly as you do? My object of worship is also a trinity; like yours, it combines oneness and threeness in a unique way.” The playful self-defense of the sonnet is framed in Trinitarian imitation: the octave is devoted to oneness, the next quatrain to threeness, and the couplet to three-in-oneness. The Platonic triad (the beautiful, the good, the true) is here translated into colloquial English—fair, kind, and true. Besides enacting, by its division into parts, the one, the three, and the three-in-one (an enactment entirely destroyed by Bunting’s deletion of “superfluities”), this sonnet plays in another way with oneness, repeating one in various literal and phonetic forms, two of them in each member of the sonnet (Q1, one, one; Q2, won-, one; Q3, one, won-; C, alone, one). The joking ubiquity of two ones in each member of a poem about a unique relation of one and three is one of Shakespeare’s private divertissements. So is the joke that the sonnet makes with respect to the young man’s complaint that Shakespeare’s verse, “one thing expressing, leaves out difference”: this highly ingenious sonnet, playing with one, two, and three, is full of “difference.”

It perplexes me that putatively competent
readers have not seen what Shakespeare is up to in this very accomplished jeu d'esprit, which responds (as does #76) to an implicit accusation (here, one of erotic idolatry, made by a Christian objector). By pairing the formula of Trinitarian theology (three in one) with the Platonic triadic formula for the Absolute (with the good [kind] placed foremost in the octave and the beautiful [fair] placed significantly foremost in the subsequent quatrain), Shakespeare detaches Trinitarian structure from its Christian significance (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) and wittily makes a rejoinder to the Christian, using the objector's own triune formula while detaching it from its divine dramatis personae. The Christian objector has of course wanted Shakespeare to worship the “true” Trinity, but the perfect structural similarity of the two objects of worship—Christian and erotic—is what Shakespeare alleges to defend his choice. It is outrageous (of course), blasphemous (of course), but it is a defense so clever that “even the ranks of Tuscany could scarce forbear to cheer.” Or so it seems to me, if not to Pound or Bunting or Kerrigan.

In the history of the sonnet, the Trinitarian allusion of the couplet has of course been remarked, as has the presence of the Platonic triad (with the good, the true, and the beautiful replaced by kind, true, and fair), but no one has noted the octave’s dedication to oneness, the third quatrain’s to threeness, and the couplet’s to three-in-oneness. Nor has anyone noticed the double presence of one (when one includes the aural pun in wondrous and the orthographical pun in alone) in each member of the sonnet. Even the most careful examination in print of #105, by Peter Szondi (who is concerned with Celan’s translation of the poem), does not mention any of these things, nor show how they are lost in translation. Can we say that Bunting or Kerrigan or Szondi—or for that matter Celan—has “read” the poem Shakespeare wrote? Can we still “read” Shakespeare’s rhetoric? I wonder. But it seems to me that at the very least, our working assumption should be that there are no “superfluous words” in the sonnets, that Shakespeare is the least likely of our poets to be “dull” or “tautologous,” and that it is our
own “estranged faces” rather than his dullness that we reveal when we disprage his invention.

When I first began with Shakespeare the intensive process of study that can lead to a book (memorizing, annotating, typing out the poems, reading editions and criticism), I hoped, as I said earlier, to write a critical book on the sonnets. But as I read the poems with close attention, I realized that anything I wrote about Shakespeare’s compositional processes in, for example, Let not my love be called idolatry (#105) had, strictly speaking, nothing to do with the sort of work he was up to in, say, That time of year thou mayst in me behold (#73). Remarks about one Shakespearean sonnet are, on the whole, not transferable to another unless they are of a level of generality that is totally banal. (This is the problem of theory as applied to complex art objects: of course one can sand down the Discus Thrower until it resembles the Venus de Milo, but any remark thereby made applicable to both statues is so broad that it illumines neither.)

Shakespeare, it is clear, must have been the most easily bored poet in the history of English lyric (closely followed by George Herbert). Herbert avoided boredom by (almost) never repeating himself prosodically; he invented a new stanza form for almost every poem he wrote, and his genius for stanzaic invention—matched, needless to say, by corresponding rhythmic invention—has never been equaled in English. Shakespeare, confined by choice (if we except a couple of anomalies in the sequence) to a single prosodic form—the iambic pentameter “Shakespearean” sonnet—decided to restrict his invention to things he could do within his “walls of glass”:

Then, were not summer’s distillation left,
A liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass,
Beauty’s effect with beauty were bereft,
Nor it nor no remembrance what it was.

(Sonnet 5)

The “walls of glass” were one of the many voluntary constraints he accepted for the sake of delight in inventing against the pressure of form. The “liquid prisoner” inside each son-
net demands individual description because, so far as I can see, Shakespeare has a horror of repeating himself.

An inventory of the very numerous means of literary representation—grammatical, syntactic, logical, metaphorical, rhetorical, poetic—that Shakespeare employed to do justice to human observation, perception, thought, feeling, speech, and imagination is, I think, the next critical step in gaining an accurate sense of his aesthetic work in the sonnets. But these means of representation are literally meaningless, even if inventoried, unless they are perceived and described as part of a functioning aesthetic dynamic generating the sonnets (as we have seen with respect to #105). The failure to view Shakespeare’s devices of language as functioning within such a dynamic accounts for the relative uselessness of such inventories as exist. The imagery in Shakespeare’s plays has generally (from Caroline Spurgeon on) been inserted into some such dynamic (the plays being obviously evolving entities). But imagery in poetry likewise cannot be investigated by itself; it is only one member of a functioning poetic system.

In deciding to write what I can only describe as an aesthetic commentary on each sonnet, I am hoping to show the meaningful and evolving relation of parts within each sonnet. I am assuming a reader who has passed beyond the need for the usual semantic or syntactic editorial annotation—a reader who is ready to ask not “What does this sonnet say?” but rather “What is Shakespeare the inventor-in-language up to here?” Reading in this sense asks not what the poem is saying but (as always in aesthetic criticism) what the poet is doing. What is the problem of representation here? How does the poet solve it? One must allow each sonnet to provoke the questions that, when answered, will show how it generates itself, by what laws of inner form. This version of the hermeneutic circle is aimed not at interpretation—a mistaken aim when predicated, as it usually is, on the paraphrasable cultural content of a poem—but rather at the probable function of observable and significant linguistic activity.

It is true that linguistic activity is theoretically infinite. The problem in “reading” is
choosing which linguistic activities manifest in the poem are significant ones. The objections voiced by me and by Michael Riffaterre, as well as by others, to Roman Jakobson’s discussion of Sonnet 129 (see Jakobson and Jones, *Shakespeare's Verbal Art in Th' Expense of Spirit*) are grounded on the randomness of his choice of things to compare. Jakobson chose (among other things) to compare line 1 of the sonnet with line 14, then line 2 with line 13, and so on, down to a comparison of line 6 with line 7. Such a procedure violates the “instructions for reading” encoded in the Shakespearean sonnet, which suggests by its structural form that we make comparisons among its four parts, to start with. It also suggests that we compare portions of the poem that repeat the same word, vary a common figure, or reiterate a syntactic pattern. It suggests that we compare the couplet (which often performs the function of summarizing, epitomizing, or epigrammatizing) with the body of the poem. There are many other “instructions” suggested in a given sonnet—that we should compare (contrastively as well as analogously) words that alliterate with each other, or words that pun together, or groups of words (like *never, not, nor, and no* in #116) that enact the same sort of refusal, or parts of speech (nouns versus adjectives in #129) that describe different phases of the same thing (in #129, sexual appetite).

These axioms of reading, however familiar, are often forgotten in practice. One of the clichés of critical discourse on the sonnets, for instance, is the apparent superfluity of the couplet. This criticism is sometimes phrased as the problem of the couplet’s tonal detachment from the body of the poem, or its logical inconsistency with the body of the poem, or its tautology of thematic content. I decided to see in how many cases the couplet included an explicit repetition, from the body of the poem, of a significant word or words (I excluded such words as *and* or *thee* or *I* [unless punned on with *eye* and thereby foregrounded]). I called this repeated word or words the couplet tie. It meant to me, when it was present, that Shakespeare was making a distinct effort to make an insistent verbal connection between the body and the “tail” of
his form. I discovered that only ten of the 154 sonnets (3, 34, 37, 65, 67, 126, 141, 142, 147, and 150) lack such a couplet tie. Even if one or two cases might be debatable, such a statistic means that in over 90 percent of his efforts, Shakespeare labored to make an identifiable and often insistent verbal connection of the body with the couplet. To explain why the articulation of the couplet has seemed unsuccessful to some readers requires a hypothesis other than that of verbal irrelevance or unintended tautology, especially since the couplet tie is usually a word or group of words with striking thematic significance within the given sonnet. Perhaps readers dissatisfied with Shakespeare’s couplets are reading not for functional activity (by which I mean linguistic play of all kinds) but for thematic statement, and so are unhappy when they find in the couplet reiteration “varying to other words” of what they have already found stated in the body of the poem. One’s method of reading powerfully determines one’s finding, or missing, aesthetic pleasure.

Though one is always tempted, in discussing competence in reading, to quote T. S. Eliot on the necessity of intelligence, the intelligence of a good reader is not only talented but trained. The discipline of “English” goes through repeated oscillations of extralinguistic and intralinguistic concerns: from *vue-et-oëuvre* to the New Criticism, from the New Criticism to the New Historicism. Equally, it goes through a set of master narratives (recently Marx, Freud, Wittgenstein, and Nietzsche, and even more recently Benjamin, Foucault, and Lacan) from which it derives the individual and social psychology and philosophy it employs to discuss experiential events and responses to them, whether in life or in art. It also veers to and fro between metaphysical notions of the literary object as unified (a view deriving ultimately from Aristotle) or as ecstatically ungovernable (a view deriving ultimately from Plato, visible most recently in deconstruction’s attachment to theories of uncontrollable linguistic events). Each of these strategies is only as good as the results it produces with respect to a given work. Because I believe Shakespeare’s aes-
thetic in the composition of each individual sonnet was an “Aristotelian” one of coherence along a dynamic curve, I have not usually been concerned, in individual commentaries, with forces of dispersal. The forces of dispersal that Shakespeare acknowledges in his sonnets are rather to be found—and the deconstructive certainty that they lurk everywhere has certainly helped to reveal them—in the troubling noncoherence of the psychological and linguistic intimations that go to make up the universe of the sequence. The persistent wish to reorder the sonnets testifies to their resistance to any conclusive ordering (the reorderings having failed to convince anyone but their originators), and the wish to identify the personae testifies to their unsatisfactory nonspecificity as narrative.

Once one has memorized many of the sonnets, even the quatrains begin to behave in a strangely autonomous fashion, linking themselves into new sonnets that never were on land or sea:

That thou has her, it is not all my grief,  
And yet it may be said I loved her dearly;  
That she hath thee is of my wailing chief,  
A loss in love that touches me more nearly.  
Gentle thou art, and therefore to be won;  
Beauteous thou art, therefore to be assailed;  
And when a woman woos, what woman's son  
Will sourly leave her till she have prevailed?  
Then if for my love thou my love receivest,  
I cannot blame thee for my love thou uses;  
But yet be blamed, if thou this self deceivest  
By willful taste of what thyself refusest.  
Ah, but those tears are pearl which thy love sheeds,  
And they are rich and ransom all ill deeds.  

This hybrid, composed of parts of sonnets 42, 41, 40, and 34, is the sort of new agglutination that breeds in the mind when pieces of many sonnets are floating around there. The sequence contains so many concerns breeding such a number of responses that what one finally possesses, in possessing the sequence by memory, is an artificially constructed total mind full of self-generating “thoughts,” “feelings,” “reactions,” “generalizations,” “reversals,” and so on. The dispersive and permutative and combinatorial forces of the sequence come fully into play only when one has internalized the sequence as a whole.
Earlier methods of reading the sonnets, on display in the Variorum and elsewhere, of course teach us a philosophical humility before our own. Biographical, allegorical, historical, and thematic methods of reading show a perpetual recrudescence, no matter the dubiousness of their results, and one can only conclude that something in literary response as it has evolved among us ensures that in every century some group of people will try to re-identify the sonnets’ personae, will allegorize (morally, historically, or dramatically) the import of the series, and will debate the psychology and sexuality of the intrigue.

It is not so much individual methods of “reading” that we should be attacking or defending, I think. Rather, we should be accounting for, and accepting, the phenomenon of the eternal return of habitual types of reading. The personal-interest type of reading (women reading women, blacks reading blacks, Roman Catholics reading Roman Catholics) has always been with us, as have methods of reading founded on adjunct disciplines (history, philosophy, religion). In fact, the simplest way to characterize methods of reading is to ask each reader, “In the light of what other discipline do you read literary texts?” The answers—“religion,” “history,” “linguistics,” “philosophy,” “women’s studies,” “philology,” “aesthetics,” “sociology,” “Marxism,” “psychology”—are in fact our methods. People rarely combine more than two of these in any serious way. And they tend to select the genre they write about by its fit with their favorite auxiliary discipline(s).

If one begins from a single genre (and stays with it, as I have done, being incompetent in other genres), one turns to the auxiliary disciplines most relevant to that genre. For poetry—the genre most concerned with formal experiments in language—the disciplines that seem to me most obviously useful are philology, linguistics, rhetoric, psychology, and aesthetics. There are, of course, critics of poetry whose interest is, for example, religion-based or woman-based; but criticism springing from such bases tends to be centrifugal with respect to the genre and centripetal with respect to the auxiliary discipline—which then becomes no longer auxiliary but dominant.
I am not confident that any set of common grids can be applied to secure "good" (or, if one prefers, "stimulating") readings. So often I have sat before an opaque poetic text (the simplest often being aesthetically the most opaque) as it resisted my intelligence "almost successfully," as Wallace Stevens said it should. I waited and waited to have it tell me what questions it would abide. Many questions were put; none fit. With each new lyric poet, I have had to learn to ask new questions. My usual response is to be struck by recurrent features of style peculiar to the author at hand—ways of arranging language that are not found (at least not in such profusion) in other texts. In that sense, I am always reading for difference. It is understandable that cultural historians assimilate many works of art into something that could be called the (normative) greater Romantic lyric or the representation of Venus in art. But this, to an aesthetic critic, is rather like describing to a parent a normative child or to an artist a normative product. Who could be interested in such a thing? One wants rather to look at the qualities in which one's child differs from his cohort, or how Michelangelo's Pietà differs from others. Whether or not the individual self is a fiction (it hardly matters, since if so the fiction is a necessary and indestructible one), the individual work of art certainly is not. Not one of the sonnets is superimposable without excess or defect on any other. Any category large enough to contain even two of these poems is already too broad and too banal to catch the unique aesthetic vector-resultant of either one.

Others are bound to continue grouping the sonnets in theoretical or generic or thematic clumps, if only because of that inveterate taxonomizing tendency—so inimical to aesthetic experience—in human mentality. Intellectually, we read the universe for similarity and come up with satisfying recursive behaviors, genetic materials, and the periodic table of elements. There is room though, for an intellectual method that represents the nonce quality of each aesthetic experience and that stubbornly claims a value in reading for difference. It urges that one remain serenely within the differences once one has found
them—"without any irritable reaching out" for generalization about a number of grouped experiences.

Finally, some word should be found for this process of understanding the individual literary work in place of the word reading. Reading implies a one-time effort. Such a word obscures the long foreground preceding any formal written "reading"—the forty years with the poems; the many incidental noticings; the efforts to learn by heart; the inner responses to others' books; the philological, historical, and cultural acquaintance with "English" that comes only from continued exposure to the historically evolving language; the possession not only of information but also of poetic form (in the ear as well as in the eye). The word reading does not represent the love of the object of study, the necessary leisure of many habitual aesthetic experiences with the same object. Perhaps a better title for any "reading" would be "my history with this text." Good reading never lacks a long and taxing history. Our authors are cleverer than we are, and improve on acquaintance. And tears water the soil of understanding.