

All poetry is experimental, observed Wallace Stevens, with an implicit admonition: if it isn't experimental, it's not really poetry. Could the same be said for criticism? That would depend, to start, on what we mean by 'experimental.' We might take the word to borrow the rigor of scientific method, implying that criticism should be objective, detached from its object, no more like a poem than geology is like a rock. Or we might honor the word's old, etymological friendship with 'experience,' in which case criticism should not insulate or mediate, but expose, entangling you with its object (be you reader or writer). I propose here an experiment of the latter kind. In particular, to write about a Shakespeare sonnet using not the technical language of poetics, past or present, but the words of the sonnet itself, and only those words. Such a peculiar enterprise is probably best demonstrated before it is discussed, so here is a famous sonnet, followed by a short essay of exactly the same length, one hundred and sixteen words.

Jeff Dolven

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought  
 I summon up remembrance of things past,  
 I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought  
 And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste:  
 Then can I drown an eye, unused to flow,  
 For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,  
 And weep afresh love's long since cancelled woe,  
 And moan th'expense of many a vanished sight:  
 Then can I grieve at grievances foregone,  
 And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er  
 The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan,  
 Which I new pay as if not paid before.  
 But if the while I think on you, dear friend,  
 All losses are restored and sorrows end.

SESSIONS OF SWEET THOUGHT

If 'sought' is the past of 'sigh,' then 'summon' is 'moan,' afresh: 'sigh' and 'summon' are the new woes which restore old grievances. Restore, but not end or cancel. The *I* expends old woes as new, 'as if not paid afore,' as if the *I* can grieve datelessly. For the *I* cannot remember before loss, cannot remember un-grief. The thing the *I* remembers, and the thing the *I* accounts lost, is weeping. If all loss is paid with grieving, if all accounts are cancelled with moans, the *I* loses lack—grief, woe, and moan all vanish—and lack is precious, for lack is the past. (Remember, the *I* sought things, but things hid then, too.)

The constraints could be tighter: I could have obliged myself to use each one of the sonnet's words (only rearranging them); I could have used only the given forms (instead of freely conjugating, nominalizing, pluralizing and so on, as I do here, as well as using a couple of adventitious homonyms). But it probably sounds eccentric enough, and the looser rules are enough to pose a challenge. You can't do this sort of thing without getting all the language in working memory. And then you have to get yourself to think in its terms, until those terms start to shape what you mean as they shape what the poem means. It was in the course of this acclimatization that I came to believe that the poem knows no past before the experience of loss, that what it remembers is not a fall from contentment into bereavement, but from weeping into numb, dry quiet. Fashioning these last phrases of my own—I confess, I like 'dry quiet' especially—has its pleasures, but I don't think I would have come up with them had I not first made myself tell over Shakespeare's sonnet using only his words of woe.

Such a game—for all the weeping, it's fair enough to call it that—falls somewhere between Erasmian imitation and the systematic perversions of Oulipo. Further variations are easy to imagine. What about a similar little essay on 'When to the sessions' using the words of another, later sonnet, say, 'Two loves I have'? What might you learn about how language changes over the sequence? Or using the words of Keats's 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer'—Keats looking into Chapman, looking into Shakespeare? You could inhabit the lexis of another critic, too, adopting a page of William Empson or Paul de Man or Stephen Greenblatt as your repertory. (Concordance software makes it easy enough to produce word lists, and to rank the words by frequency, too.) This is partly criticism as impersonation, an experiment in thinking like someone else. Nor need the alternative persona (or place, or time—however you want to define your source) be constructed only by its words. You could take the syntax of another critic, too, filling in the sentence structures. Or even the first letters of each word—though here the game may start to tell us less about its pretext, enough less that we would be wary of calling it criticism.

Whatever these permutations may yield, the result will never be mistaken for objectivity. Would you want to read a book of such experiments? Possibly not, though that does not

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necessarily count against the enterprise. They are exercises, ways of spending time with a poem, of getting to know it—not so much a way *in* (as we sometimes say about interpretation), but a way *with*, in a double sense of companionship and skill. If teachers of literature are trying to give their students a sense of a writer's verbal resources and motions of mind, such exercises will have a pedagogical usefulness at least the equal of the five-paragraph analysis. Perhaps they also propose a habitus well beyond the classroom. What would you know if you made such rewriting part of your reading? They sit somewhere in the considerable imaginative territory between making a poem and writing about a poem, a territory which is lightly traveled, and ripe for experiment.

SESSIONS OF SWEET THOUGHT