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Desire is Pattern

Matthew Harrison

Mapping and meaning

Early modern studies has turned away from narrativizing, teleological accounts of the past and its textual artifacts. Many terms theorize and locate such resistance to teleologies and sequence – queer theory, teleoskepticism, weird reading, material philology, medium-close reading and so forth.¹ Likewise, digital humanist critics such as Johanna Drucker, Jerome McGann and Lisa Samuels have advocated for critical approaches that ‘reveal interpretive practices’ by imagining them as ‘performative and constitutive’, relating the processes of knowing to our objects of study.² What these different approaches share is a powerful sense of the importance of relation: the way one detail sparkles in the light cast by another. In ‘Weird Reading’, medievalist Eileen Joy describes this insight beautifully:



Any given moment in a literary work (all the way down to specific words [...] and [...] up to the work as a whole), like any object of thing, is ‘fatally torn’ between its deeper reality and its ‘accidents, relations, and qualities: a set of

tensions that makes everything in the universe possible, including space and time', and literary criticism might repurpose itself as the mapping of these [. . .] tensions and rifts, as well as of the excess of meanings that might pour out of these crevasses, or wormholes.³

Weird reading continually re-maps surface to substance, essence to accident, allowing new streams of 'excess [. . .] meanings' to flow forth. This remapping is at the heart of recent approaches to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, from Miriam Jacobson's 'reorientation' of canonical texts to consider the classical and Ottoman Mediterranean to *Six Degrees of Francis Bacon's* network topologies.⁴ The relatively narrow, traditional field of sonnet studies offers a model, I argue, for reading by rearranging. Shakespeare's sonnets are forever mapped and remapped, in rearrangements that create as many 'wormholes' as they do coherent clusters. From Benson's grouped sonnets to the dizzying array of commentary in the Variorum, an excess of meaning pours forth from efforts to control and contain. Caught between the infinite interpretability of a poem and our awareness that the patterns we find refract our own desires back to us, Shakespeare's sonnets have long invited us to confront our own methodologies and to reflect on which connections we are justified in making. Always at stake is the status of literary argument itself: how do the patterns critics observe – or make – come to mean? From the efflorescence of glosses in Stephen Booth's edition through the tremendous mass of secondary criticism, we confront an overabundance of significance at every level. We have, as F.T. Prince writes, 'far more evidence than we can hope to exhaust the meaning of'.⁵

The essay that follows considers Shakespeare's sonnets in three ways: first, as objects of perpetual reorganization from Benson in 1640 through to today; second, as instances of a poetics that itself makes meaning by rearranging; and finally as objects of editorial activity that reimagines how form can be arranged and deranged. In so doing, it traces lines of affiliation among interpretive practices often treated as separated by

rifts. If our methods and tools shape the questions we ask, so too might the history of our practice help us to think through the affordances of our methods. What emerges is a weird-critical genealogy that navigates and transforms the topology of Shakespeare's sonnets in reckoning with the poems' tension between linearity and distant relations, sequence and association.

Reading surfaces: from sonnets to screens

I begin by comparing two scenes of reading. First, a methodological proposal by Arthur Acheson in his 1922 volume, *Shakespeare's Sonnet Story*, which seeks to restore Shakespeare's sequence to its original order.⁶ Explaining his method to an imagined sceptical reader, Acheson proposes an experiment:

[T]ake two copies of the *Sonnets* in Thorpe's order [. . .] cut out the leaves and spread the sonnets out from one to one hundred and twenty-six, and for the present forgetting [. . .] Thorpe's sequential order, move the sonnets here and there, grouping them according to subject or theme, [and] they will be found to divide naturally into seven groups.⁷

Having found these groups, 'any intelligent student' will be able to cluster the sonnets within them, and then 'a working knowledge of [. . .] the progressive development of Shakespeare's style' will suffice to arrange the groups chronologically.⁸ And voila! The first 126 sonnets, reorganized.

Yet Acheson cannot quite stick to his rhetoric of ease, determined as he is to prove his knowledge and labour. He reveals that when a student spent a few weeks spreading out the poems according to this method, he, 'not having as intimate a knowledge of the sonnet story, failed to give the

sequences the same consecutive order, and having considered the subject for a very much shorter time, his order within the sequences differed somewhat from mine'.⁹ When Acheson describes this method again, sixty pages later, he adds that he has spent two decades re-evaluating and reconsidering. Rather than a reliable map, he produces a shifting surface that makes new rifts visible. A story that intends to demonstrate, immediately and clearly, the manifest rightness of a given order becomes instead a prescription for a lifetime of reading and constant evaluation, appealing to many types of knowledge and tempered by subjective 'preconception and obsession'.¹⁰

Compare Bruce Andrews, writing in 2003 about the practice of reading electronic poetry:

We can think of the textual surface as an instrument panel, the screen as a flat & opaque workspace, given enormous fluidity, activating the user's body. Action replaces both the passive representation of conventional literature & the passive spectacle of animated, programmed work. It embraces navigation, micro-evaluations, conceptual animation, freeze-framing, editing, blending, filtering, subliminal cut & paste, time compressions & expansions, frame resizing: practically everything we need to sidetrack closure.¹¹

The field has rotated 90 degrees, transforming the flat surface on which Acheson 'spread out' and then 'moved' the sonnets into a different sort of desktop.¹² But the set of operations Andrews describes mirror those of Acheson's hypothetical rearranger: navigating and evaluating, animating and compressing, sorting and blending.

This juxtaposition relates recent questions about digital readings and digital editions to traditional ones about Shakespeare's sonnets, their order, and the connections among them. Lev Manovich has proposed that the database has replaced narrative as the defining form of 'the computer age'.¹³ Where narrative draws a privileged line through disparate

events, the database offers multiple orders, mediated by user and interface, with temporal sequence only one option among many. Database forms – the list, the matrix, the catalogue, the encyclopaedia – offer not cause-and-effect or other sequential forms but rather a multiply traversable topology. As such, databases lend themselves to what Alan Liu describes in contemporary criticism as ‘micro-, hetero-, and poly-ism’: attention to the motility of the detail within a matrix of larger forces.¹⁴ Both Manovich and Liu attend to what I call the digital surface, theorizing granular, local, hyper-detailed and highly mobile forms of attention that have long been critical to literary study. What Shakespeare’s sonnets, in particular, teach is that sequence is always both found and created, that it is ‘invented’ in both its early modern and contemporary senses.

In all the cases surveyed above, what is at stake is how to close-read a field, a network, a database. Acheson and Andrews imagine reading as an active, evaluative and even creative engagement with a world of almost infinitely recombinable texts. Against sequential organization of the individual textual element – left to right, top to bottom, beginning to end – the work surface maps a terrain of association and adjustment, visual hierarchy and serendipitous connection that constantly shifts under us. A series of critical turns (New Historical, rhetorical, sociological, digital) has put new pressures on the shapes of textual argument: we think now less in terms of adjacency and sequence than in terms of distributed intensities and networks of association. Laying out tabs on laptop screens like sonnets on the desk, we trawl through *EEBO*, the *MLA Bibliography* and the *OED* tracing and inventing the connections that make meaning. Yet to think about our scholarly procedures demands that we look for continuities as well as disjunctions, for predecessors of the modes of critical assemblage that make up ‘the way we read now’. Constantly reordered and reconsidered, Shakespeare’s sonnets help us to map a new topology of critical reading.

Lyrics in sequence: intensity and extensivity

The sonnet is among the most architectural of lyric forms: well-shaped, with familiar furniture and clearly articulated functions. To read a sonnet is to think through the relationship between artifactuality and the perceived immediacy of lyric, as the vivid turn and the gathering or exhausting force of the couplet seem to escape the conventions that contain them. Stefano Boselli calls the sonnet ‘a tiny chamber black-box theatre whose essential walls are its limited verses’.¹⁵ A theatre whose plot, walls and script are made of the same verbal materials.

And its curtain. As soon as a sonnet ends, there is another sonnet. Another room, another utterance, and we begin again the process of reading. As A.C. Hamilton writes, ‘A sonnet shines brilliantly for the moment that it is read, only to fade entirely before the next sonnet’.¹⁶ Sonnet sequences are like ‘stars against a black sky rather than related points on a narrative line’.¹⁷ And yet in fading, sonnets do not vanish: to read a whole sonnet sequence is to be faced with the constant return of things half-forgotten. Even reading two or three together, one sees in these stars the beginning of a constellation, imagined lines of connection that give shaping form to isolated objects. For Hamilton too, then, what is conventionally called a sequence is more accurately a shifting topology. Reading sonnet criticism, one finds this insight repeatedly: Bernadette Mayer describes spreading her sonnets out on the floor to survey them; Samuel Butler lays Shakespeare’s out on a desktop, ‘shifting them again and again tentatively’; Katherine Duncan-Jones and Tom Stoppard both describe a shuffled deck of cards.¹⁸

This encounter between local intensity and distant relations encourages two contradictory strategies of attention: the unfolding of the carefully staged moment of the particular poem, rife with what Lyn Hejinian refers to as ‘vertical

intensity', as well as the slow, haphazard sense of repetition and association that animates and alienates what we have already read (Hejinian's 'horizontal extensivity').¹⁹ The first timeline is that of the complicated, enjambed tease of the first lines of Shakespeare's Sonnet 13:

O that you were yourself! But, love, you are
No longer yours, than you yourself here live;
Against this coming end you should prepare [. . .]

The speaker lingers with the hope that 'you' are 'love', for as long as he can, hoping to hold off that deadly predicate. Over the break, 'love' collapses into a mere vocative, as a reminder of the inevitability of death replaces the longed-for identity. The lines are not about self-possession at all, until they are, and the realization jars in face of the 'coming end'.

In the second timeline, we hear something else, the radical charge with which this first 'you' bursts into the sequence, transforming the series' erotic intensity. With it, 'love' reaches new heights: what was empty 'self-love' in 3, the purely visual 'loveliness' and 'lovely' of 4 and 5, and kind affection in 9 and 10's 'love towards others' and 'love to any' becomes the deeply personal vocatives that bookend this poem (in lines 1 and 13). Reading a poem does not necessitate comparing the semantic range of each lexical item against all prior ones. Yet this effect, however dimly felt, is very much part of the radical surprise of this poem's first line. In Thorpe's ordering, it is here that the young man becomes beloved. We need both readings to hear what is ventured at this moment and what is lost.

Other words, images and conceits similarly become laden with meaning, though the particulars change with every reading and reader. Richard Blackmur describes a 'constant interflow of new relations, of new reticulations – as if the inner order were always on the move'.²⁰ Arguments about the sonnet order continually appeal to our sense of such connections, whether in defence of the current order – Don Paterson detects

the ‘meticulously careful, sensitive and playful way that can only indicate the author’s hand’ – or opposition to it.²¹

Indeed, reading rearrangements, however sceptically, one is struck with such connections. Bringing together Sonnets 62 and 22, Bray’s 1925 edition teases out the dialectic of ‘self-love’ and difference in these two poems about looking in the mirror, letting their interest in beauty and comparison transform Sonnet 18, which here follows them. So, too, Clara de Chambrun has Sonnet 43 delightfully repair 113: in the latter of these (according to Thorpe), absence distorts the features of the waking world, turning every object into the form of the beloved. Its new sequel, 43, reflects on the eye’s best sight at night, when dreams portray the beloved.²² Its couplet now resolves the tensions evoked by the earlier poem as well: ‘All days are nights to see till I see thee, / And nights bright days when dreams do show thee me’. Such resonances have a strange status. We are right to be sceptical that they are signals to some hidden, final order, right to doubt that they are intentional at all. Yet the slow accumulation of such effects, even more than any narrative, is what makes reading Shakespeare’s sonnets so rich. These moments of constellated rationality are a defining feature of sonnet sequences more broadly. Alice Notley refers to it as a ‘relational tension’ (describing *The Sonnets* by Ted Berrigan): ‘The pieces of the self are allowed to separate and reform: one is not chronology but its parts and the real organism they create.’²³

We might therefore imagine the turn towards relation in early modern studies as a shift from vertical intensity to horizontal extensivity – in the study of *The Sonnets* itself and in our treatment of the volume’s engagement with the outer world. Alongside modes of analysis, critics have turned to assemblage: we limn networks of association, juxtapose compelling intertexts, meditate on the matrices of forces within which a poem swirls.

It is time to engage this history of weird sonnet readings, not for their rhetoric but for their topology, for the sparks that fly from the grinding of brains against poems. Doing so reveals the contiguity of these projects with contemporary work on

reading digital poetry. The ‘links’ between poems – associative, imagistic, rhyme, narrative – can be productively read beside Susana Pajares Tosca’s work on the ‘lyrical quality of hyperlinks’ and Peter Whalley’s account of the ‘rhetoric of hypertext’.²⁴ As earlier scholars trace the thin affiliations between lyrics, these later ones propose a lyrical aesthetics of hypertext. So, too, as traced above, the project of shoring up narrative through order speaks to Lyn Hejinian’s account of poetic closure. As I will show in the next sections, the continued possibilities of their strategies of rearrangement, erasure and association, as found in contemporary poets’ engagements with the sonnets, might help us to rethink the potential of digital editions. The vibrating relationality that animates Shakespeare’s sequence becomes a poetic principle itself in the work of Ross Goodwin, Paul Hoover and Jen Bervin. Where before I asked how the affiliations between poems rewrites the order as we read, I now turn to ask: how does order itself double back and inflect, or rewrite, the sonnet?

Revising poetics

18.

This verse distills your trespass now
 Becomes a tyrant have devised what is best make
 Eternity which borrowed from this sums
 Themselves be bevel by sweet that partake
 If now approve desire is pattern
 That shall will in others works in like see
 The judgment that arise yourself saturn
 Returned from thee for nimble thought story
 Compare them with the time removed from thee
 The canopy with that muse that thou style
 This sorrow comes in the praise wrongfully
 Be good slander doth prepare the beguile
 It no it is but mutual render
 A worthier pen him in thy splendor ²⁵

The eighteenth sonnet of Ross Goodwin's collection meditates on the idea of sequence, 'distill[ing]' the tyranny of its 'trespass' on Shakespeare's *Sonnets* into the startling observation that 'desire is pattern': that we 'shall/will' (with the customary pun on 'Will') 'in others' works [. . .] see / the judgment that arise[s]' from ourselves. We interpret the material through the bevelled lens of our own desires. But rather than rejecting such fantastic interpretation – our 'nimble thought story' – the poem courts it, describing a sort of 'good slander'. Not least in its pun on 'render' – both to transform and to represent – the sonnet imagines readers and texts might improve each other, making both 'worthier' and more splendid.

To offer this reading is partially to indulge myself: Goodwin's sonnet is among ten thousand written by a computer program, Sonnetizer.py, that rearranges the language of a textual corpus – here, Shakespeare's *Sonnets* – into poems of fourteen lines of ten syllables, rhyming in the traditional pattern. The patterns I trace are not authorial, not even intentional, save in the play of my mind against the algorithm, a nimble thought story of my own creation. Bits and pieces of Shakespeare's text have drifted together, billowing up into dunes of association. The very volatility of Shakespeare's text infuses this poem with meaning against its Will.

After all, Shakespeare's sequence does interrogate the relation of desire to pattern, repeatedly finding a type of loving anachronism in which desire transforms the meanings we make of the world. Goodwin's (or Sonnetizer's, or Shakespeare's) sonnet asks to be read with the same loving eyes that enable the speaker of Shakespeare's Sonnet 98 to find all of nature 'but figures of delight, / Drawn after you, you pattern of all those' (ll. 11–12). We find that same type of loving reading in 114, where the beloved's 'love' teaches the speaker's eye to 'creat[e] every bad a perfect best' (ll. 4, 8). Goodwin's sonnet weaves together several strands of Shakespeare's lyric and prompts reading them together: the sonnet speaker's idolatrous reading of his beloved melds with the sequence's visions of loving interpretation. Rearranging

sense (and even syntax), we invent a pattern that precedes our making.

From their first printings, Shakespeare's sonnets have sparked this desire to rearrange them, to find in and make of them what we want to hear. The poems' earliest editors (Jaggard in 1599, Benson in 1640, perhaps Thorpe in 1609) move, combine and change them. Subsequent anthologizers wrest the poems into new contexts, while a long line of rearrangers search out the true order of the sonnet sequence. Nor are contemporary critics free of this urge: the clusters by which we understand the poems (both the division between young man and dark lady and the more tentative splitting that forms groups like the 'rival poet' series) are distinctly modern ways of threading our minds through the text. So too, many poets repurpose and rearrange Shakespeare's text, including Goodwin, K. Silem Mohammed (who writes new sonnets anagrammatically from the letters of Shakespeare's), and two I will discuss below: Paul Hoover and Jen Bervin.

To be sure, reordering Shakespeare's sonnets now seems old-fashioned and misguided. Annemarie Jagose (in *Lesbian Utopics*) has shown that efforts to defend or revise the sonnet sequence have been 'structured by the closet', positing a true (and inevitably sexual) meaning at the heart of the sequence only made visible by reading right.²⁶ The very notion of a 'true' or 'secret' meaning seems outdated: after Manovich, Liu and Andrews (among others), scholars conceive of texts as distributed networks of significance that shift under the weight of interpretation. But Goodwin's example proposes considering such revisionary strategies as experiments in bringing out the dynamics of an interpretive field. How different, I wonder, is building a reading of one of Sonnetizer's sonnets from developing an argument from the results of a 'full-text search'? Or, for that matter, from Acheson's assembly (and subsequent reading) of a group of poems containing 'mine eye'? In what follows, I read a pair of contemporary poets' engagements with the sonnets as a means of thinking about critical practice, juxtaposition and associative reading.

Paul Hoover's *Sonnet 56* riffs on Shakespeare's poem through a variety of forms, from experiments in the inventive genres of Oulippo poets (noun plus seven, homosyntactic) through the traditional (villanelle, sestina, limerick, haiku). Most interesting are those in which tight constraints transpose Shakespeare's imagistic and conceptual density into a thick linguistic materiality, as here in 'Alphabetical I':

kill
 love let love like love love
 more might more may makes more
 not new
 of oceans of
 perpetual parts²⁷

Here in compressed form is the insistent pleading of the 'young man' sonnets, the potentiality those sonnets conjure up to figure desire as abundance ('more might', 'more may' – 'makes more'), and their omnipresent worry about death and time. Against the pretence of novelty implicit in the sonnet form, with its constant new beginnings and metaphors, the reader is reminded that this is 'not new', rather a swirling sea that recombines the same fragments. Like Goodwin's lines on desire and pattern, this work gathers together broken fragments of Shakespeare's whole.

The poetics of fragmentation, parody and distortion are now familiar. Goodwin's work offers instead the prospect of a criticism (even a poetics) of reassembly and recuperation, of trawling through the 'oceans of perpetual parts'. What is crucial about the sonnet sequence, as a genre, are the constantly shifting affiliations that let one poem reappear momentarily in another. But to read such affiliations, to trace such connections and hold them up to the light, is always partially creative, picking and choosing among many possibilities. It is 'invention', finding what may or may not be already there.

One image for such reassembly comes in Jen Bervin's volume *Nets*, which erases words from Shakespeare's sonnets

to create new poems. The original text is printed in a light grey, with a few words emboldened to make a new poem. Sonnet 8 thus turns into a lyric meditation about this fragmentary volume itself:

In singleness the parts
Strike each in each
speechless song, being many, seeming one.²⁸

Where Goodwin's algorithmic sonnets maximize the horizontal extensivity of Shakespeare's sequence, stretching it out into a vast landscape of perpetually rearranging parts, Bervin maximizes their vertical intensity, finding in each a single composed moment. As her Sonnet 134 asserts:

I
use
the whole, and yet I am not

Here, too, poetic history is engaged, including Ronald Johnson's beautiful erasure of *Paradise Lost*, concrete poetry, and early work on cyberpoetics.²⁹ But equally striking is the way these poems resonate with recent work on digital editing.

The web versions of Bervin's poems look similar to the book's, until you move your cursor over them and make the greyed text disappear, leaving only the bolded words.³⁰ As such, they resemble the visualizations constructed by Alan Galey for his *Visualizing Variation* project: animated text boxes that allow readers to encounter multiple versions of Shakespearean cruces, like Hamlet's 'Oh that this too, too sullied/solid/sallied flesh would melt'. Drawing on many traditions that influenced Bervin, Galey proposes that digital techniques enable readers to encounter textual variation 'not as a problem to solve, but as a field of interpretive possibility'.³¹ We need not limit ourselves to textual variation: Bervin's animations open up a broader field of possibilities, within the 'interpretive field' of Shakespeare's sonnets. Among the

affordances of digital editions is their availability for sequence-breaking, for deformative reading, and data-mining. These contemporary poets help us to think through what such strategies can tell us about Shakespeare and ourselves.

Textual surfaces

To speak of an interpretive field in this way is to conflate two different senses of the term. First, the imagined (and constantly shifting) plane of meanings that surrounds a given text: as readers, Galey suggests, we navigate this field of variations. But the metaphor evokes a second tradition, considering the poem as a ‘field of action’ (to use William Carlos Williams’ term) or of ‘composition by field’ (as Charles Olson puts it).³² These poets reimagine stable structure as a kinetics on the page, in which the relation of words to words (and ideas to ideas) is one of movement. The ‘interpretive fields’ we encounter as scholars are those we create: the ‘high-energy constructs’ (Olson) invented and arranged on the scholar’s desk or screen. It is well within this tradition that we should read our engagements with the form of digital editions of Shakespeare’s sonnets. Such editions do more than enable us to visualize alternative possibilities; in making possible new types of rearrangement, they offer a new kinetics of meaning.

Take a moment from one such edition.

```
<body>
<div1 xml:id='Son'>
<div2 xml:id='Son-001' n='1'>
<ab>
<milestone unit='line' xml:id='Son-001-01' n='1' corresp=
'#w0000010 #c0000020 #w0000030 #c0000040 #w0000050
#c0000060 #w0000070 #c0000080 #w0000090 #c0000100
#w0000110 #p0000120'/>
<w xml:id='w0000010' n='1.1'>From</w>
<c xml:id='c0000020' n='1.1'> </c>
```

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<w xml:id='w0000030' n='1.1'>fairest</w>
<c xml:id='c0000040' n='1.1'> </c>
<w xml:id='w0000050' n='1.1'>creatures</w>
<c xml:id='c0000060' n='1.1'> </c>
<w xml:id='w0000070' n='1.1'>we</w>
<c xml:id='c0000080' n='1.1'> </c>
<w xml:id='w0000090' n='1.1'>desire</w>
<c xml:id='c0000100' n='1.1'> </c>
<w xml:id='w0000110' n='1.1'>increase</w>
<pc xml:id='p0000120' n='1.1'>,</pc>33

```

This is a snippet of the XML code that organizes the Folger Digital Texts edition of *The Sonnets*, encoding the beginning of Shakespeare's sequence. Even without experience with encoded texts, one can make out a careful structure here in the patterns of anaphora and parenthesis. The code marks the beginning of the 'document', of the 'Sonnets' text, and of the first 'sonnet', each enclosing the next like nested baskets. Then, it defines a new unit, a 'line', and lists the units that comprise it. Finally, each 'word', 'punctuation character' and 'space' is given its own address. The code carefully models a book composed of poems themselves composed of lines and so forth.

The resulting website text bears a close resemblance to the paper Folger edition on which it is based: 'From fairest creatures we desire increase', in familiar Times New Roman. Yet for this purpose, all that structuring hierarchy was unnecessary: one need not name every comma and space to display a line of text on screen. Rather, structuring information is encoded into the *Sonnets* so that we can read against and around it: we might ask for every 'line' containing the 'word' 'desire', the first 'word' of every 'line' that isn't preceded by a comma (a 'punctuation character'), or a list of the 'words' in the 'document' organized by frequency. We might readily display the poems in reverse, or in the orders suggested by Bray or Acheson. Or, imitating Raymond Queneau, we might explore the billions of poems emerging when the first line of one poem is combined with the second of another, and so forth.

The object here – the Folger Digital Texts edition of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* – enfolds into form a host of possibilities already present in the sequence. What we realize, looking at this encoded sonnet sequence, is that structure (or form) is not the opposite of deformation, distortion and rearrangement – it is its precondition. Without identifying what a line is, implicitly or explicitly, we can’t refer to a certain line and certainly cannot rearrange it. Imagine a second encoding scheme organized not around the units of the Folger text (sonnet, line, word, character, punctuation) but some other constructs that offers totally different affordances: say, ‘syllable’, ‘phrase’, ‘quatrain’ or ‘couplet’, and poetic ‘grouping’. We could then algorithmically call up the closing *phrase* of each *quatrain* of the ‘rival poet’ poems. Or substitute the closing *couplets* of the ‘young man’ sonnets into the ‘dark lady’ poems. Again, the categories that order the code enable what can be done with it. Someone interested in the material book might prefer a third schema – say, ‘edition’, ‘copy’, ‘gathering’, ‘page’, ‘line’, ‘mark’ – and its own possibilities for reference and rearrangement. A given text admits many potential organizational schemas; in structuring a text, these models allow for its manipulation. As Michael Witmore argues in ‘Text: A Massively Addressable Object’, what is fundamental about our conceptual engagement with texts is the ability to formulate many such schemas and to use them to engage with textual specifics at many levels of scale.³⁴

For Witmore, what is useful here is the way that massive computational power will allow us to use our encoded structures to test our concepts against the data. Claude Willan writes, similarly, that the digital humanities offer ‘extraordinary supplements and methodological improvements through durable and measurable principles of selection’.³⁵ But recent monographs and journals offer another sort of argument informed by digital humanities, one not at all concerned with ‘methodology’ as something that can be improved or ‘principles of selection’ that can endure. Rather, such digital humanists are developing a type of argument by juxtaposition,

comparison, analogy and suggestion, made possible by deep databases and long lists of searches. Some of our best critics work by collage, holding up fragments in a web of their own making that transforms the ‘objects’ of study as much as it illuminates them. They offer handwritten maps of impossible locales, detailing possibilities that were not or that are not yet.

In returning to Joy’s image of weird reading, I am also rehearsing a long history of scholars of electronic textuality thinking less about knowledge-as-important-fact than how we choose to arrange and derange the infinitely arrangeable text:

[A] cybertext is not a static artefact. The conditions of its existence are tenuous, a feature that can be exploited for aesthetic purposes through continual morphing. If a text is in a profound sense produced in each reading, and if no text is ever fully self-identical, then cybertexts embody those premises with even greater flexibility.³⁶

Always becoming, cyberpoems are emergent, heterological and heterogeneous in their constant spooling, transferences, hyperlinking and recomposition. The poem has shifted from bricolage to morphosis [. . .] Made of textual typographic fragments constantly moving into and out of focus, resolution and degrees of proximity, the cyberpoem is more like an installation or event than a document etched in metal or printed on paper. The reader navigates through a sea of signs visiting information ports. There is no horizon line and any scratched in reference to one is nostalgic since we see beyond what the naked eye can see via satellites, microscopes, cable and data mirrors.³⁷

Drucker’s ‘cybertext’ and Brereton’s ‘cyberpoem’ both demand to be read like Acheson reads Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*: as a ‘sea of signs’, an ‘ocean of perpetual parts’, less ‘static artifact’ than an ‘event’ or environment to be navigated. We might say that the affordances of the medium – the ease with which words on the screen can be rearranged – indulge and support our sense

of reading as transformative and productive. More so than page or plaque, the screen for these writers makes clear the temporary and contingent nature of our readerly experience, becoming a work surface that holds the objects of our attention. So, too, our scholarly *inventio* and *dispositio*, at this moment, at least, is mirrored in our artifacts: arrangement is both arbitrary and essential, an attempt to model in flat text our glimpses of morphosis. We read less the text than the work surface that we assemble around and with the text. Or rather: we make surfaces about surfaces.

If we follow this line of thought backwards, from electronic text to cybertext to cyberpoem, we end up not with computers at all, but with form, that precondition of all disruption.

Writing's forms are not merely shapes but forces; formal questions are about dynamics – they ask how, where, and why the writing moves, what are the types, directions, number, and velocities of a work's motion.³⁸

The unity of a work is not a closed symmetrical whole, but an unfolding dynamic integrity [. . .] The sensation of form in such a situation is always the sensation of flow (and therefore of change) [. . .] Art exists by means of this interaction or struggle.³⁹

Today's criticism is always a scrambling and rearranging of yesterday's. Here, an account of the unfolding of a text's form in time becomes spatialized in Hejinian, who (like Olson) is interested in the dynamics of field composition. Brereton allegorizes, turning the movement of characters on screen into a figure for such dynamics. And Drucker abstracts this move once more, from typography to identity. All these accounts understand reading as navigating a constantly shifting field of significance, simultaneously prompted by the text and invented by the reader. This sense is a fair shorthand for many of our critical practices now. We have searches open in tabs, database queries, poems, all arrayed on the darkling plains of our minds

and we start to draw connections, start to assemble not objects exactly but fields of meaningful relation that we can sketch out again for others. Blackmur's 'constant interflow of new relations, of new reticulations', is the great pleasure and achievement both of the sonnets and of criticism itself. From a twenty-first-century perspective, Blackmur's is just about the final word on Shakespeare studies' own critical history of rearranging and restructuring, distorting and deforming, morphosis and bricolage.

Reading descriptions of sonnet rearrangers' processes – spreading the poems out on a desk or table or floor and tracing connections – I see shades of Brereton's cyber-reader, trying to bring order to a constantly shifting morphosis. I see Andrews's active electronic reader. I see myself, cutting and pasting to see how one poem sparkles in the light of another. I see the invention and arrangement of an endlessly productive surface. The sonnet sequence – and Shakespeare's in particular – juxtaposes moments of brilliant local intensity with the tenuous, shifting, faint connections of extensivity, prompting us to trace our own constellations in the night sky. These rearranging critics seem to have fallen short from our perspective, unable to convince us of their evidence, much less their claims. Their names (Acheson, Butler, de Chambrun and so forth) seldom appear in our editions. The work itself seems outdated, responsive to historical speculation we find absurd and ethical concerns we no longer share. In the absence of evidence, we have largely given up the questions they have tackled as impossible (when we're feeling charitable) or uninteresting (when we're not). But, then, this will happen to most of us, too.

What remains, what attracts my eye when I am reading their work and what I am laying out on the table for you is this: their misguided work of ingenuity truly ignites the poems with new possibilities. Their criticism, by all standards of contemporary discourse, is flawed, suspect, unreadable, unimportant.

And yet it moves.

Notes

- 1 What these diverse schools of thought share is their sense that critical acts of assemblage offer a mode of resisting, complicating or correcting too-simple historical narratives. Methodological approaches originating from the ‘temporal turn’ in sexuality studies have become invaluable to scholars working on a broad range of other questions. For discussion of these issues, see Valerie Traub’s ‘The New Unhistoricism’, *PMLA* 128:1 (Jan 2013), 21–39, and the replies by Carla Freccero and Madhavi Menon in the ‘Forum’ in *PMLA* 128:3 (May 2013), 781–6. See also Freccero’s ‘Queer Times’, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100:3 (2007), 485–94, and Menon’s *Unhistorical Shakespeare* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). ‘Teleoskepticism’ is Traub’s term. For ‘weird reading’, see Eileen Joy, ‘Weird Reading’, *Speculations* 4 (2013), 28–34. ‘Material philology’ is Miriam Jacobson’s term for the tracking of symbolic networks around material objects to approach poetic meaning, in *Barbarous Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 285. For ‘medium-close reading’, see Matthew Zarnowiecki, *Fair Copies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 7. I am grateful to Laura Kolb, Tim Turner, Erin Julian, Elizabeth Scott-Baumann and Clare Whitehead for comments on earlier drafts of this essay.
- 2 Quotations drawn from Drucker, ‘Reading Interface’, *PMLA* 128:1 (Jan 2013), 219. For McGann and Samuels, see ‘Deformance and Interpretation’, *New Literary History* 30:1 (Winter 1999), 25–56.
- 3 ‘Weird Reading’, 30. Joy’s quotations are from Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism* (Ropley: Zero Books, 2010), 150.
- 4 For ‘reorientation’, see *Barbarous Antiquity*, particularly the introduction. *Six Degrees of Francis Bacon* maps early modern social networks – see sixdegreesoffrancisbacon.com.
- 5 F.T. Prince, reviewing Hyder Rollins’ Variorum edition in the *Review of English Studies* 1:3 (1950), 255–8.
- 6 Arthur Acheson, *Shakespeare’s Sonnet Story* (London: Quaritch, 1922).
- 7 Ibid, xxi. Two copies are necessary, presumably, because sonnets are printed on both sides of the page.

- 8 Ibid, xxii.
- 9 Ibid, xx.
- 10 Ibid, 45.
- 11 Bruce Andrews, 'Electronic Poetry', *Cybertext Yearbook 2002–2003*, ed. John Cayley and Loss Pequeño Glazier (Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 2003), 32.
- 12 Acheson, *Shakespeare's Sonnet Story*, 44.
- 13 Lev Manovich, 'Database as Symbolic Form', *Convergence* 5:2 (1999), 81.
- 14 Alan Liu, *Local Transcendence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 113.
- 15 Stefano Boselli, 'Virtual Theaters in Miniature Rooms: The Early Italian Dialogic Sonnets', *Italica* 88:4 (Winter 2011), 500.
- 16 A.C. Hamilton, 'Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* as a Sonnet Sequence', *ELH* 36:1 (Mar 1969), 61.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Bernadette Mayer, 'Note on *Sonnets*', in *Sonnets* (Berkeley, CA: Tender Buttons, 2004), 83; Samuel Butler, *Shakespeare's Sonnets Reconsidered* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1899), iv; Katherine Duncan-Jones, 'Was the 1609 *Shake-Speare's Sonnets* Really Unauthorized?', *Review of English Studies* 34:134 (May 1983), 151–71; Tom Stoppard, *Travesties* (New York, 1984), 35.
- 19 Lyn Hejinian, 'The Rejection of Closure', in *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 55.
- 20 Richard Blackmur, 'A Poetics for Infatuation', in Shakespeare (with interpretive essays by Edward Hubler et al.), *The Riddle of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (London: Routledge, 1962), 131.
- 21 Don Paterson, 'Shakespeare's Sonnets', *Guardian*, 16 October 2010. www.theguardian.com/books/2010/oct/16/shakespeare-sonnets-don-paterson [accessed 15 December 2015].
- 22 Clara de Chambrun, *The Sonnets of William Shakespeare* (London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1913).
- 23 Ted Berrigan, *Collected Poems*, ed. Alice Notley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 667, 4.
- 24 Susana Pajares Tosca, 'The Lyrical Quality of Links', in *Hypertext 99*, ed. Klaus Tochtermann et al. (New York: ACM,

- 2009), 217–8; Peter Whalley, ‘An Alternative Rhetoric for Hypertext’, in *Hypertext: A Psychological Perspective*, ed. C. McKnight, A. Dillon and J. Richardson (Chichester: Ellis Horwood Limited, 2009), 7–18.
- 25 Ross Goodwin, *Ten Thousand Sonnets by William Shakespeare*. <http://rossgoodwin.com/10000sonnets.pdf> [accessed 15 December 2010]. I have capitalized the initial letter of each line. The Sonnetizer program is available to download from Goodwin’s website: <http://rossgoodwin.com/sonnetizer>.
- 26 Annemarie Jagose, *Lesbian Utopics* (London: Routledge, 1994), 89.
- 27 Paul Hoover, *Sonnet 56* (Los Angeles: Les Figues, 2009), 46.
- 28 Jen Bervin, *Nets* (New York: Ugly Duckling, 2004).
- 29 See Ronald Johnson, *Radi os* (Berkeley, CA: Sand Dollar Press, 1977). The cyberpoetics tradition is discussed below.
- 30 Jen Bervin, ‘From *Nets*’, *Conjunctions*. www.conjunctions.com/webcon/bervin.htm. [accessed 15 December 2015].
- 31 Alan Galey, ‘Overview’, *Visualizing Variation*. <http://individual.utoronto.ca/alangaley/visualizingvariation/> [accessed 15 December 2015].
- 32 William Carlos Williams, ‘The Poem as a Field of Action’, in *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1969), 280, and Charles Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, in *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
- 33 XML code from the Folger Digital Texts’s edition of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*. www.folgerdigitaltexts.org/?chapter=5&play=Son&loc=Son-001 [accessed 15 December 2015]. Folger Digital Texts is licensed the following Creative Commons license: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/deed.en_US. No changes have been made in our reproduction of their code.
- 34 Michael Whitmore, ‘Text: A Massively Addressable Object’, *Wine Dark Sea*, 31 December 2010. <http://winedarksea.org/?p=926> [accessed 15 December 2015].
- 35 Claude Willan, ‘We Write Sentences. About Sentences’, Claude Willan personal blog. <https://claudewillan.wordpress.com/>

2015/08/19/we-write-sentences-about-sentences/ [accessed 15 December 2015].

- 36 Johanna Drucker, 'Theory as Praxis: The Poetics of Electronic Textuality', *Modernism/Modernity* 9:4 (Nov 2002), 688.
- 37 Kurt Brereton, 'The CyberPoetics of Typography', *Jacket Magazine* 1 (Oct 1997). <http://jacketmagazine.com/01/cyberpoetics.html> [accessed 15 December 2015].
- 38 Hejinian, 'The Rejection of Closure', 42.
- 39 Yurii Tynianov, 'Rhythm as the Constructive Factor of Verse', cited in Hejinian, 'The Rejection of Closure', 48.