

BILL SHAKESPEARE ATTENDS A POETRY MASTER CLASS CONDUCTED
BY DON PATERSON

Don Paterson. *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets. A New Commentary.* London: Faber and Faber, 2010. 500 pp.

Okay, cut to the chase: this is a great book, and everything that follows is commentary.

Don Paterson (DP) starts out by warning, "The Sonnets are next-to-impossible to read at one sitting." One can say the same for his glosses on each. Perhaps Adam Mars Jones, the *Guardian/Observer's* puckered-mouth critic, tried to read the book in one go to make a deadline. (1) He didn't understand that Paterson, the poet, was holding a weekly master class that included a promising student named Bill Shakespeare (BS). Bill has brought a portfolio of 154 sonnets; if three to four sonnets were reviewed each time, and with Christmas week off, they'd have been done in about a year. That DP thinks of himself as conducting a workshop is suggested by his statement at S24, "A contemporary diagnosis – or at least mine, if this were a class I was teaching – might say this poem has lost control of its dietic centre."

Workshop or no, DP is unhesitant about rating the sonnets, tuning his poetic ear (and eye) both on the prosody, but also on what his bullshit detector senses of each poem's emotional honesty and force. Based on DP's unambiguous adjectives I decided to calculate BS's grade point average (GPA) from a five-point scale. I gave a score of five to what DP considered a peerless gem; one to a real clunker; three for a just average poem; two and four for the in-betweeners. The GPA turned out at 2.97 – Average! Coleridge, DP tells us, had a 1-4 rating scheme, but only eight sonnets attained top marks. DP, by my count, gave the high-five to twenty-four sonnets. Different horses. (Even with the twenty-eight 'Dark Lady' (DL) poems omitted – and Wordsworth hated them all – the GPA hardly improved, to 3.1.)

Is DP comparing the Sonnets on some absolute scale of poesy? He claims not: "Whenever I say anything like 'this is boring', or 'this sucks the chrome off a trailer-hitch', please be reassured that I'm *always* adding, under my breath, 'for Shakespeare'... I'd still take the least of WS's poems over just about anyone else's best." (At S2.) I find this a bit disingenuous, as if DP feared to tread on sacred ground by saying that Shakespeare's work could be flawed by any comparison. Clunkers are clunkers no matter who wrote them. Regard, for instance, some of the pejorative terms DP uses: "Yawn... I was half asleep when I read this, or fell asleep while reading it... Anyhoo... I mean this as a diss to WS." (At S27.) "Rather insipid effort..." (At S31.) "I'd cheerfully send this one into the unanthologised dark." (At S68.) "Dear me: this is a mess in a dress, this one.... For Will, this is D-minus stuff." (At S70.)

The critic in the *Guardian* took exception to DP's laddish language, as if we must regard Shakespeare with reverential humility; Urban Dictionary words like *Argh! It's*

*too much! feelin' the love We've all been there She treads on your dreams, dude
Not much to see here, folks Group hug! OK I'll get my coat Go figure done and
dusted Is he on something? I love this guy Hey, it's a hobby So sue me.*

The critic concludes sniffily, “No reader of this book could guess at the fastidiousness of Paterson's poetry.” But that’s precisely the point: DP *the poet-tutor* sounds like some of the great poetry mentors I’ve had – loving, cruel, funny, bawdy, but deeply attentive to my work as deserved; I became a better poet for those experiences.

If Shakespeare ‘dissed’ rival poets in some of the Sonnets, DP does the same to rival Sonnet interpreters in many of the glosses: Stephen Booth, John Kerrigan, Katherine Duncan Jones, Colin Burrow, Helen Vendler; and regularly beats up on them, with but a few grudging kudos. At S90: “I’ve just realized how few *laughs* there are in SB. And HV. And CB. And KDJ. JK at least has a go, occasionally....” Vendler, the Kabbalist, gets the worst of it because she engages her own code-breaking mind, not Shakespeare’s – the New Critic assumption of the disembodied text – not appreciating the flawed human behind any great poem, expressed precisely by the poem. DP puts the matter beautifully at S71:

It all depends on whether you care enough, whether your sympathies are strongly engaged enough by the human voice of the poet to go to the trouble of giving the poem a psychological as well as a literary reading. Our literary readings, for all their apparent sophistication, are often just too literal... If we just read the poem, we read half the poem; we should also read the author – with whose lying and dissembling, faltering and fluffing, flailing acts of self-preservation and self-delusion we are as likely to identify with, and be moved by, as anything the poem alone appears to be saying.

Thus Shakespeare comes alive as a person in DP’s interpretations of the whole work. For instance, these perceptive analyses of Shakespeare’s persona:

The Dark Lady sonnets are remarkable testament to how little an intelligent man can know about himself... [M]ost of the DL sonnets are fuelled primarily by WS’S own incomprehension at the dissonance between his desire and his aesthetic sense. (At S127)... It should be no surprise to anyone that WS – capable of entering the minds of monsters, of ventriloquising individuals we’d rather not even *think* about – is shaky when it comes to knowing himself. (WS had the ability, I suspect, to *vanish* his ego like a magician, to render it virtually negligible through his almost infinite capacity for human empathy. If ever a man had overactive mirror neurons, it was WS.) (At S34.)

Such ability may be found in certain great actors who can step into almost any role. Peter Sellers once remarked, “There is no me. I do not exist. There used to be a me but I had it surgically removed.” But critically, Shakespeare also had that virtuoso ear for language, rhyme, metre.

I'm convinced by DP's assertion that the 154 Sonnets make up a memoir of the poet written in real time when he was in love with a young nobleman. Yes, Shakespeare was gay – it boggles why people still find that either strange or offensive. Shakespeare, the Young Man (YM) and the Dark Lady (DL) shared each other sexually, but Shakespeare hated doing it with DL. Some of the DL sonnets are cruelly misogynistic, which DP finds abhorrent.

I also find the assertion reasonable that Shakespeare not only approved of the publication of the Sonnets (in what is known as the Quarto), but also organized the sequence, thematically if not always chronologically. Sonnets 1-17, the 'stop hacking around, go forth and multiply' ones, were likely first commissioned, perhaps by the YM's parents. From S18-S125 (108 sonnets – a sonneteers' round of the time emulating Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*) Shakespeare limns his oft-frustrated love for the YM. S126 is the 12-liner epilogue allegorically omitting the final couplet, thus memorializing the end of the relationship. Thereon follow the 26 DL poems, plus the final two on the ecstasy and agony of sexual love.

A successful poetry workshop deals not only with poems brought, but as well teaches essentials of prosody. DP conducts a master class on how a poem is built, where it threatens to collapse, or goes wrong altogether. Thus one could go to school on his endnotes on the sonnet form and metre, and his discussions throughout on metaphor. Most useful to any poet in DP's class, however, are the deep truths of how great poetry succeeds, beyond prosody. Let me quote DP at length:

The poem may take on a crystalline and even algebraic appearance at the end, but for all its ferocious technique, that final poem was reached through a dynamic process with feeling and instinct at its heart.... I'm all for putting the poem into dry dock, so we can see what's going on beneath the surface, find what keeps it afloat, and marvel at its construction. But to talk as if that's where the deeper or *larger* truth of the poem might reside is wrong. To find that, we need to set it back in the water. The truth of a poem is in the cut of its jib, the breath in its sails, the clever route it charts to its new port, and the skill and speed and grace with which it moves. (At S148.)

And on the poem as an enactment of interiority:

What I like about this poem [S92] is the fact that it shows WS's mind changing in relation to his problem; indeed he's using poetry as a means of *exploring* that problem. Too often poems tell you what poets have thought. Most of these poems are bad, as poets think the same rubbish as everyone else. My preference is strongly for poems that show you the poets *thinking*, as they're much more exciting. Here, the poet is using the formal resistance of the poem as a means of hammering a bad, received, or lazy idea into a good one. The first kind of poem usually means the poet has decided what to write in advance; the second shows you the poet's excitement in *not* knowing what they are writing about, exactly – only their commitment to use the weird procedure of poetic composition to lever out the truth from their own minds. In other words, the true poem leaves you with documentary evidence of the

epiphany that took place *while* the poet was writing, not a record of something that happened before pen was set to paper. This way the reader can re-enact the poet's own journey.

As Harold Bloom averred, Shakespeare 'invented' the human. (2)

(1) Adam Mars Jones. Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets: A New Commentary by Don Paterson. The Observer, 7 October 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/nov/07/reading-shakespeares-sonnets-don-paterson-review>.

(2) Harold Bloom. Shakespeare. The Invention of the Human. New York: Riverhead Books, 1998.

Todd Swift Eyewear Blog, 2011: <http://toddsswift.blogspot.com/search?q=hirschhorn>