

Universität Stuttgart

Institut für Amerikanistik

G3: History of the Sonnet

Dr. Jessica Bundschuh

Wintersemester 2003/2004

February 2, 2004

Research Paper on  
*Reader Anticipation in Contemporary Sonnets*

Meaning in Modern Sonnets, anticipation into the void?

Yven Johannes Leist

Schwabstr. 78

70193 Stuttgart

Telefon: 0711/6209170

E-Mail: [leist@beldesign.de](mailto:leist@beldesign.de)

Subjects: Engl./Phil. (LA)

Semester: 4/3

# Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	3
2. The sonnets.....	5
2.1 Donald Justice "The Wall".....	5
2.2 T.R. Hummer "The Rural Carrier...".....	8
2.3 Hugh Seidman "14 First Sentences".....	9
2.4 Rafael Campo "The mental status exam".....	11
2.5 Weldon Kees "For my Daughter".....	12
3. Conclusion.....	13

## **1. Introduction**

In this essay I'm concerned with a specific aspect of reader anticipation in contemporary sonnets. I will start by trying to identify this particular

aspect of what readers will or might expect from the sonnet form in general. Then I will posit that on first sight this particular aspect of reader anticipation often seems to be thwarted in contemporary sonnets, but that, given closer analysis of such sonnets, we may find that this specific expectation of the reader actually *is* fulfilled, just on a different level, and maybe even fulfilled stronger exactly *because* of the shift to this different level.

What then is this aspect of reader anticipation I have chosen to analyze? I arrived at it by looking at one of the most, if not *the* most important aspect of the sonnet form in general. Namely its tremendous emphasis on form and following from that its emphasis on a highly structured intellectual coherence. Starting from this we may safely assume that one of the main things a reader usually anticipates and expects from a sonnet is a specific and cogent line of thought expressed in its fourteen lines. In this vein we find a lot of formal and structural criteria being wonderfully applicable to the sonnet form in general, such as the dialectic structure of thesis, antithesis, synthesis, to take but one example.

Now, a cursory look on many contemporary sonnets might lead us to the question whether such a coherent intellectual structure actually forms the basis of a lot of contemporary sonnets too. And further, superficial analysis might even lead us to the conclusion that modern sonnet writers have actually departed from this tradition of lucid intellectuality.

I posit that such a conclusion would indeed be only a superficial one, and that what might seem like a complete departure might even be a development. That is, that many modern sonnets, while seemingly unintelligible at first in fact even push the intellectuality of the sonnet to a new level, creating even more meaning than seemed to be substracted at first

Now, an objection to such an approach might be that an analysis based on a number of arbitrarily chosen sonnets cannot prove anything at all, at least as far as the sonnet as a poetic form is concerned, simply because one could always just choose such examples where after some analysis an intellectual structure actually does surface. This is a momentous objection

indeed, and I will come back to it towards the end of this essay, where a possible counter-argument to this objection shall be put forward. (The general direction here should already be clear though, that is, we of course need to show that we are performing our analysis according to a certain methodical structure, which may, at least in theory be extended to all contemporary sonnet in general.)

For the purpose of *this* essay, I will refrain from a closer analysis of classical sonnets with the potential aim to pinpoint their intellectual clarity. It seems not all too bold to simply take this as a given, since numerous examples could easily be put forward here (The Shakespearean sonnet cycle could be used as an extensive example for instance.)

## **2. The sonnets**

### ***2.1 Donald Justice "The Wall"***

The Wall

The walls surrounding them they never saw;  
The angels often, Angels were as common  
As birds or butterflies, but looked more human.  
As long as the wings were furled, they felt no awe.  
Beasts, too, were friendly. They could find no flaw  
In all of Eden: this was the first omen.  
The second was the dream which woke the woman.  
She dreamed she saw the lion sharpen his claw.  
As for the fruit, it had no taste at all.  
They had been warned of what was bound to happen.  
They had been told of something called the world.  
They had been told and told about the wall.  
They saw it now; the gate was standing open.  
As they advanced, the giant wings unfurled.

This sonnet is not a completely cryptic one, since we can quickly glean from the many hints given (like for instance the word "eden" in line 6 or the word "the fruit" in line 9) that it is concerned with the topic of the fall of mankind.

At least at first there seems to be no clearly formulated idea in this sonnet though. We encounter a number of rather cryptic remarks about the wall, for instance in line 1 and in line 12. At least at first the meaning of the last line seems unclear too.

We seem, however, to be able to get nearer to the meaning, if we start interpreting for instance the above mentioned lines on a metaphorical level, taking into account what they might be intended to mean in this "biblical" context.

A wall, for instance is something that limits what we can see, a perfect metaphor for the cognitive limitation that the biblical situation of mankind, which meant not yet really being aware of the "outer world", (compare "they had been told of something called the world" in line 11) entailed. Given such a reading the title seems to hint at the fact that the sonnet wants to draw our attention to the implications of this biblical state of mankind, that is, to the implications of a state of being shielded from the outer world, a state where beasts are still friendly (line 5) and men are still

near to the angels, which "looked more human". (As far as the comparative "more" here in line 6 is concerned we might probably understand this as being in reference to an unsaid "more human than they seem in our world now".).

It also makes us think about the effect of leaving the world surrounded by this wall, of eating the fruit of knowledge, metaphorically speaking.

What remains unresolved thus far is the last line though. The mere fact that it is the last line, coupled with the fact that it seems not immediately transparent concerning its potential meaning, should spur our interest, especially regarding the question of how it relates to the title of the sonnet. Now, where could we start in getting to the heart of this line? It seems that a good starting point might be provided by the connection to what is said about the wings of the angels in line 5. Namely, that "as long as the wings were furled they felt no awe". Now in the last line these wings actually unfurl, and whereas in line four the angels were initially seen as human-like (that is, we might interpret, seen as beings equipped with wings as well, but in a way that seemed still human), the wings are now described as giant. So, even though it is not explicitly repeated here, it seems we might say that the unfurling of these giant wings *now* is, at least implicitly depicted as being awe-inspiring. The angel, (or the angels) are now perceived by men in a different way. Just as the transformation of the lion, from a friendly beast into a wild (and potentially dangerous) beast is foreshadowed in the dream of the woman in line 7, the transformation from the friendly angel into an awe-inspiring being of far greater spiritual height than men is foreshadowed in the unfurling of the giant wings. Here we might take recourse to Rilke, as someone who so aptly expresses this aspect of human life in the non-paradisaical world, when he says in his *Duineser elegies*: "Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich" ("Every angel is terrifying"). And at that point we may try to establish another line of thought, concerning the title of the sonnet and its last line. We may start with the observation that when we leave a world surrounded by a wall, through a gate in this wall, we will find ourselves in a world that may have no outer walls, but which at least *contains* the original world we once lived in, that is the world surrounded by the wall that we now see from the outside. A world that was, among other things characterised by being one

with beings that we must now perceive as purely spiritual, because they do not enter our physical world. Reentering this world we left would only be possible if the gate was still open, but here the last line now becomes important, in so far, as it immediately follows the line that says "the gate was standing open", which gives the unfurling of the giant wing still another possible meaning: The angel whose wings seem suddenly giant as they unfurl might be interpreted as being the last thing they see when leaving this "inner world" through the gate into the outer world. The angel thus acquires the function of someone who both leads men out, but who also makes it impossible for them to simply reenter, this inner, paradisaical world through the gate. The wall has now become a wall shielding us from a spiritual world, the only gate being guarded by an angel, or the angels. This is perfectly in keeping with the notion that the normal angels, that is the lowest angels in the nine-fold hierarchy (as for instance described by Dionysius the Areopagite) are those who are still nearest to us, but who are in this function also the beings that guard the spiritual world, that is, whom we would have to learn to face again, now with their giant wings unfurled, in order to reenter this spiritual world.

It is clear that in undertaking such an interpretation we have made some assumptions that not everyone might follow, since they are at least not made explicit in the sonnet itself, and thus surely go beyond it. So one might for instance object that nothing is said about what kind of angel(s) the sonnet talks about, yes, the sonnet writer might not even have subscribed to the view of the angel hierarchy, or perhaps not even known it. From such an objection, which is in itself a valid one, we might deduce that among the implicit things mentioned in this sonnet, or in a (modern) sonnet in general, we may find aspects that still have a strong basis in the text itself but that we may also use these aspects to think even further, considering possible implications, even though we have no real chance of knowing to what extent they match the intentions of the author (in so far as we can actually presuppose such intentions to exist).

## **2.2 T.R. Hummer "The Rural Carrier..."**

The rural carrier stops to kill a nine-foot cottonmouth

Lord God, I saw the son-of-a-bitch uncoil  
In the road ahead of me, uncoil and squirm  
For the ditch, squirm a hell of a long time.  
Missed him with the car. When I got back to him, he was all  
But gone, and nothing left on the road but the tip-end  
Of his tail, and that disappearing into Johnson grass.  
I leaned over the ditch and saw him, balled up now, hiss.  
I aimed for the mouth and shot him. And shot him again.

Then I got a good strong stick and dragged him out.  
He was long and evil, thick as the top of my arm.  
There are things in this world a man can't look at without  
Wanting to kill. Don't ask me why. I was calm  
Enough, I thought. But I felt my spine  
Squirm suddenly. I admit it. It was mine.

I have chosen to briefly analyze this sonnet since on first sight it seems to simply describe a particular experience of an everyday men, a "rural carrier", depicted from the point of view of this person. But given slightly closer analysis, especially of the the last two lines we may come see it as dealing with a topic quite near to the biblical topic in the preceding sonnet. How is that?

As I said the last line seems to provide us with a carefully hidden clue, namely in the re-occurrence of the word squirm. This expression, together with the related verb uncoil is used in the first two lines of the sonnet, to describe how the rural carrier perceived the cotton-mouth (a kind of snake) and they referred to a quality of this snake that proved to be so disgusting to the rural carrier that he finally saw himself forced to kill the snake. Now, in the final line, it his *his spine* that squirms (and this is underlined by the last sentence "It was mine") and thus it seems as if the quality embodied by the snake had made its way into the rural carrier himself. And here it seems not all too bold to link this snake to the biblical



snake, the snake that is often also seen as a symbol of sexuality. The rural carrier is disgusted by this quality, so that he even kills its embodiment, the snake, but these qualities embodied by the snake are deeply rooted within his human self. The ambiguity of evil in the form of the snake, which, though evil in itself, leads (or seduces) men into the world of knowledge is a fundamental aspect of humanity, and cannot be simply be gotten rid of. Even though getting rid of it may seem like an easy way to escape the difficulties of a world where evil exists. At this point we may also see the name of the "rural carrier" in a different light, since rural, always tends to carry a strong connotation to a world being still in order and almost paradisaical with it. Thus we see that the title gets a different meaning, or can be seen from a different perspective at the end, the same pattern we observed in the preceding sonnet, "The Wall".

### ***2.3 Hugh Seidman "14 First Sentences"***

#### 14 First Sentences

He had never kept a journal.  
Sometimes he wanted to write prose about first love.  
Once he heard Auden lecture: Don't falsify history.  
He used to feel better if people in novels were rich.  
Williams wrote: Old woman, all this was for you.  
He was going to type: The form of life changes little.  
Reich said the Eskimos say: Don't thwart a child.  
Zukofsky taught: The poet makes one long poem.  
Mathematicians say: Notation is notion.  
The dream voice said: Imagination fails the dream.  
He read in the paper: the poor, mired in poverty.  
Sometimes he remembered the books forgotten in libraries.  
Do we sleep only because night falls?  
How shall one speak how another suffers?

This sonnet is quite a fascinating one, since in contrast to the two sonnets

interpreted thus far, no apparent theme, no topic seems to form the basis of it. At least if we only look at the fourteen lines of the sonnet itself we seem to encounter a semi-random collection of sentences. At that point it seems wise to take a closer look at the title, "14 first sentences". From it we may gather that each line of this sonnet contains a "first sentence"; a first sentence of what is not made explicit, but we may think of these lines being either the potential first lines of a poem, or even a sonnet, or of some other potential literary work. (They might of course even be the first lines of *actual* literary works, but in the absence of extensive research we cannot really be sure about that). Now, with this in mind, we are right in the middle of the topic of the sonnet form in general. As already said in the opening paragraph one of the most important aspects of the sonnet form is its intellectuality, which in turn stems to a large extent from the fact that the sonnet form is such an incredibly tight and compressed one. And what could be more indicative of utmost compression, of utmost compaction than a sonnet which by containing only the first sentences of potential other literary works, in a certain sense contains them all in an extracted form?

Analyzing how the individual sentences are now linked would be extremely worthwhile, especially as there seem to be not all too obscure connections between them (so for instance line three which might be seen as referring back to the previous line, with its "don't falsify history" statement, in so far as one might assume that, in writing about, potentially autobiographical, first love experiments it would be all too human to "falsify history", that is to for instance gloss over the embarrassing things in such a way that it resembles falsification of this personal history), but unfortunately time is running out on me, and so I am forced to skip such an extensive analysis, or at least to postpone it to a later version of this essay.

However, what we have seen so far, in the analysis of this particular sonnet is quite insightful already: A sonnet that at first might seem to almost epitomize the randomness and non-sensical nature of many contemporary sonnets, turns, under closer analysis guided by its title, out to actually epitomize the intellectuality, and the quality of cognitive compression of the very form it is written in!

## **2.4 Rafael Campo "The mental status exam"**

The mental status exam

What is the color of the mind? Beneath  
The cranium it's pinkish grey, with flecks  
Of white mixed in. What is the mind's motif?  
Depends on what you mean: it's either sex  
Or it's a box, release or pessimism.  
Remember these three things: ball, sorrow, red.  
Count backwards from one-hundred down by sevens.  
What is the color of the mind? It's said  
That love can conquer all – interpret please.  
And who's the President? What year is it?  
The mind is timeless, dizzy, unscrupulous;  
The mind is sometimes only dimly lit.  
Just two more silly questions: Can you sing  
For us? Do you remember those three things?

This sonnet is another very modern one, and here I will start right away with analyzing how the title relates to the sonnet itself, as I have done in the preceding sonnet. So, what could the title "mental status exam" actually tell us? A simple re-formulation might simply bring us to say that the status of the mind is being examined, or via the title promised to be examined in the sonnet itself. And in fact this is exactly what happens. Questions concerning the mind are posed (in line 1 and at the end of line 3) and are partially answered in line 1 and 2, and in line 4 and 5 respectively. These answers are not "clear" in any way, but in their

fuzziness they seem to perfectly capture a distinctive quality of our everyday thinking, which is associative, intuitive, often irrational. This purposeful reflection on the status of the "everyday mind", is continued even more clearly in line 11 and 12, where this condition is explicitly described. Although the last line in a certain sense returns to the three things mentioned in line 6 "ball, sorrow, red" and thus might seem to provide some sense of closure, the ambiguousness of these terms leaves the reader thinking, probably along similar fuzzy lines...

## **2.5 Weldon Kees "For my Daughter"**

### For my daughter

Looking into my daughter's eyes I read  
Beneath the innocence of morning flesh  
Concealed, hintings of death she does not heed.  
Coldest of winds have blown this hair, and mesh  
Of seaweed snarled these miniatures of hands;  
The night's slow poison, tolerant and bland,  
Has moved her blood. Parched years that I have seen  
That may be hers appear: foul, lingering  
Death in certain war, the slim legs green.  
Or, fed on hate, she relishes the sting  
Of others' agony; perhaps the cruel  
Bride of a syphilitic or a fool.  
These speculations sour in the sun.  
I have no daughter. I desire none.

This sonnet is quite insightful as far as the pattern of "title-guided" anticipation is concerned. Since, whereas in the three preceding sonnets the title seemed not to give rise to an anticipation that would have differed from the sonnets, or its ending, here we have a distinct anticipation, namely one of a personal kind of homage to a close person. And this anticipation is completely thwarted at the end. Now, it's clear though, that the ending does not come as a *total* surprise either, since the ten lines preceding the final couplet, are already quite different from what we might

have expected after reading the title. Again, the end forces us to reconsider all the points put forward in the lines above, much more than an ending we would have naturally anticipated could have done.

### **3. Conclusion**

It is fairly clear that the sonnets I have chosen to interpret will yield highly different interpretations if interpreted by different people, and surely these interpretations will differ to a much greater extent from each other than interpretations of the average classical sonnet. This fact might of course be used to construct an argument concerning the arbitrariness of meaning of these sonnets, but again, it needs to be stated that it was not my aim to show that an unanimous interpretation of a given sonnet can be reached, but that the process of interpreting is itself a meaningful one, or to phrase it even stronger, a meaning-generating one. To conclude: what was once contained within the Sonnet as a clearly laid out thought does no longer exist. What it has been replaced by is not a different meaning *within* the sonnet, but rather a process whereby the reader himself creates the meaning (on the *basis* of the text of course). To a certain extent, the latter is of course true for all sonnets, and poetic works in general, so the purpose of this essay is not to diagnose an absolute dichotomy, but rather to hint at a *gradual* shift in the receptive process of the poetic work. A shift away from a poetic work whose intellectual structure has been skilfully developed by the sonnet writer, which then undergoes a process of mental reproduction on the side of the reader (who may be greatly inspired in his own thinking through this act of "reproduction" of course!), and a shift *towards* a work where the true value created by the poet lies not in the presentation of a finished line of thought, but in a carefully constructed structure, that, if received actively by the reader will enable him to *produce* and not only to re-produce an intellectual structure and coherence, or simply put, a meaning. (One might argue about whether replacing the indefinite with the definite article might be possible here, but this would lead us into deep philosophical ramifications, and thus quite far, and at least for the time frame of this essay too far astray).

This meaning, this intellectual structure is merely guided by the poetic work, as I have tried to show in my interpretations, but not as much contained in it, as it has been once, thereby making room for even more intellectuality, namely those actively produced on the part of the reader.

## Bibliography:

Sonnets taken from:

Levin, Phillis. *The Penguin Book of the Sonnet*. (New York: Penguin Group, 2001.)