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SCHOOL OF ADVANCED STUDY
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Ways into Shakespeare's Sonnets

Helen Vendler

Hilda Hulme Memorial Lecture 1990

Hilda M Hulme

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Published in PDF format 2018

ISBN 978-0-9927257-3-0

DOI: 10.14296/818.9780992725730

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Institute of English Studies
School of Advanced Study
University of London
Senate House
Malet Street
London WC1E 7HU

www.ies.sas.ac.uk

Cover image: William Shakespeare - Shake-Speare's Sonnets, quarto published by Thomas Thorpe, London, 1609.

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The Hilda Hulme Memorial Lecture 1990

Ways into Shakespeare's Sonnets

Professor Helen Vendler

(*A.Kingsley Porter University Professor at Harvard University and Poetry Critic for The New Yorker*)

Chairman: Professor Barbara Hardy

Chairman's Introduction

Vice-Chancellor, Professor Helen Vendler, and Fellow-Students: it is a pleasure indeed to be here as Chairperson of the fifth Hilda Hulme Lecture. Hilda Hulme was a distinguished teacher and scholar of this university and I had the very great privilege of being taught Anglo-Saxon, Anglo-Saxon poetry is what I most strongly remember, by her. Hilda was quite a severe teacher of language but she never forgot, when teaching 'The Dream of the Rood' or 'The Fall of the Angels', that she was teaching poetry. The lecture tonight is on Shakespeare, one of three fields in which Dr. Hulme was distinguished, the others being the language of Elizabethan drama, and Victorian fiction. Her work on Shakespeare was remarkable for its close scrutiny of words, texts, and contexts. She was learned not only in drama but in non-literary records, which she studied with zeal. I remember her also as a friend, wonderfully pugnacious, marvellous to argue and quarrel with.

Helen Vendler is also a friend. I can remember – I don't know whether she does – at least two arguments we had at the Yeats School in Sligo. One was on a subject which is inflammatory, though I think we both kept our heads – the representation of women in Yeats's poetry, and the other was about puns. On several occasions I certainly argued with Hilda Hulme – usually coming off worse – about meanings of words, phrases, and sentences.

It's a particularly appropriate choice, and wonderful to have Helen Vendler with us tonight. She is the A. Kingsley Porter University Professor at Harvard, and a distinguished critic and reviewer of poetry. She reviews for *the New Yorker,* and brings together the liveliness of the best kind of reviewing with impeccable scholarship. What I admire in her work would take too long to explain and illustrate, so I will just say, very briefly that she is a critic with an individual voice. It's a dangerous thing now to say this about a critic, but insofar as we may be allowed to speak and write with individual voices, she has one. She shows in all her work something which is most valuable, intellectual and emotional continuity. She also has – and needs this to be a great reviewer

– the courage and confidence to be a judge. I invite her now to talk to us on the subject of Shakespeare's sonnets, to show us 'Ways into Shakespeare's Sonnets': Professor Helen Vendler.

Ways into Shakespeare's Sonnets

I AM HONOURED TO HAVE been asked to give this lecture in memory of Hilda Hulme, whose bold investigative work into Shakespeare's language has illuminated Shakespeare's mind for many readers, proving the benefits conferred on us by those trained in historical linguistics.

I should mention too – since my topic is Shakespeare's sonnets – the debt I owe to the work of Winifred Nowottny, whose essays on the sonnets are of such permanent value.

We can see in the criticism of Shakespeare's sonnets the tendency of the criticism of poetry to fall into two camps. On the one hand, there are the thematic critics, with whom, in the case of the sonnets, I group genre- critics (who tend, in this case, to define genres thematically, as poetry of love, or friendship, or praise). The concerns of thematic or content- oriented studies of the sonnets have varied over time: there were the 1640 attempts at psychological titles which would unambiguously state the occasion or matter of the sonnet; there were biographical and historical tetherings of the themes; later, there were attempts to make a more coherent thematic order in the sequence; and there were comparative studies of Shakespeare's themes against those of Petrarch or Ronsard, or of the themes of the sonnets against those of the plays. A generation ago, psychological themes began to dominate, supplementing the long history of ethical commentary on the sonnets.

On the other hand, though they are far fewer in number, there have been form-critics, interested either in the sonnet form or in the rhetoric of Shakespeare as sonneteer. Their work has tended to confine itself chiefly to one or the other aspect of form: Giorgio Melchiori interested himself in the dramatic patterning of the impersonal sonnets, creating visual diagrams that are really graphic representations of wordplay; Rosalie Colie called attention to the way Shakespeare's sonnets include the sharpness of epigram as well as the sweetness of the sonnet form; Caroline Spurgeon was followed by others interested in Shakespeare's imagery, and William Empson's inventiveness, we

may say, in finding examples of ambiguity has been carried to its extreme by Stephen Booth. Among linguistically trained critics, the most successful writer on the sonnets has been Winifred Nowottny, whose work has the great virtue of keeping literary considerations in view; but Roman Jakobson himself could not resist applying his binary analysis to Shakespeare, with unhappy results. Most recently, Brian Vickers has applied his interest in the figures and schemes of classical rhetoric to the sonnets. These form-critics, in one way or another, isolate one question for investigation, as I have said; and though they may pay lip service to other concerns, it is for their single overriding interest that they are remembered.

Between the thematic critics and the formal critics, there is a middle ground of criticism of the *Sonnets* that has been left relatively unoccupied (the notable exceptions are Blackmur and Nowottny), and that I want to take up here. I would call it the aesthetic dynamics of the sonnets. The Shakespearean sonnet is a fluent form modified in each of its active appearances. Each instance of the form is an instance of an aesthetic problem solved: how will the form take on new life? Almost all potential aspects of the form thus appear in the group of sonnets composed by Shakespeare over time; and to me, this is the most satisfying way to see these poems: as a series of individual poems, small sequences, and perhaps two large sequences, in which several forms native to lyric in general and the Shakespearean sonnet in particular exhibit over and over their aesthetic potential.

I take my base, then, the forms – generic, rhetorical, expressive, linguistic, and prosodic – which seem to me to underlie, and create the dynamics, of a given sonnet: these forms account for its individual exfoliation and motivate its structure. I here conceive of structure as the solution to an aesthetic problem-the problem of how to unpack a form or forms in a representationally accurate and aesthetically satisfying way. I place representational invention and aesthetic conclusiveness, rather than, say, propositional meaning or rhetorical figuration (which are natural to all language and not simply to poetry or aesthetically motivated language) as the poet's aim. The chief point, for the artist, about the theme is that it should be one susceptible to formal variation and development (not all notions are equally rich in themselves or in their cultural potential). Shakespeare (it is no news to say so) excels his continental and English predecessors in both depth and fertility of dynamic invention. To speak about this aesthetic fertility and what it accomplishes in the way of ascribed emotional or intellectual depth in verse means that one cannot remain, in discussing a sonnet, at the level of occasional ornament (logical or linguistic) alone, but must enter into the constitutive problem-solving labour of

the artist, realizing the constant fluidity of his enterprise. From the conception of the problem he puts to himself, we can reasonably speak of the cooperation and resistance of the elements of the poem in their aesthetic function. These means cannot be thought of as isolated from each other, atomistic ornamental sparks of language, but must be conceived of as a self-constructing, self-exhausting dynamic system. An inert criticism is content to rest in a linear model, rehearsing the events or statements of a poem without asking for the motivating forces behind the changes the poem displays in genre, rhetoric, figuration, syntax, or prosodic form; it is preferable, 1 think, to see these sonnets as active around centres of aesthetic concern, centres generating their linear changes.

We all, I think, believe in the existence of superior and inferior readings, while recognizing that since readings arise from different centres of concern they can never entirely overlap. I have been troubled by the flatness, in aesthetic quality, of readings of the sonnets. In such readings, the sonnets are chiefly seen as reiterative structures, in which the first quatrain stands as thesis for several following quatrains and a summary couplet; or as structures of simple contrast of octave and sestet, where eight mutually reiterative lines are followed by four or six contrastive lines, lines enunciating a propositional opposition to the proposition of the first set. Since the themes which are reiterated or contrasted are familiar ones ('Time will come and take my love away'; 'Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds'; 'I have sworn thee fair and thought thee bright / That art as black as hell, as dark as night'), it is hard to make much of them critically. Interest in the narrative of the sonnets (a very thin narrative) has also been hard to elaborate in a critical way. The most ingenious criticism of the sonnets has been done by linguists, historical rhetoricians, and semioticians, but their emphasis on the *mere presence* of tropes, *the presence* of puns, *the presence of* ambiguities, *the presence* of phonic complexity, has worked to obliterate the functional dynamics of the characteristics they isolate.

All of these lines of criticism-thematic, linguistic, rhetorical-guide their readings along axes of similarity. They say, respectively, 'Here are many X'-where X can be 'alliterative words,' 'uses of synecdoche,' 'remarks about time,' or 'puns on 'Will.' This fashion of synthetic reading groups members of a sonnet-its words, its lines, its figures, its sounds – into syntheses of resemblances. I believe it thereby flattens out the aesthetic dynamics of the poems, seeing the sonnets generating themselves by repetition and reiteration rather than by self-contradiction and difference. Any two quatrains of a Shakespeare sonnet will tend to exhibit resemblances, it is true; but those two quatrains will also exhibit differences from each other. If our powerful will-to-assimilation has so

far caused us to notice mainly the similarities, I think it is time that we began to scrutinize the differences. And, once we notice the differences, we have to formulate a hypothesis explaining the swerve away, on the part of the second quatrain, from the system enunciated by the first quatrain.

I want to propose here two chief models of aesthetic construction of difference. In the first, subsequent quatrains are perceptibly different from earlier ones (which they may also distinctly resemble). The incremental pieces of a sonnet, roughly speaking, re-do their predecessors; we are to consider earlier moments as repudiated and corrected by later ones. The change of mind involved is irreversible; one cannot go backwards. I will use for my example of this self-correcting aesthetic form both 'Th' expense of spirit' and 'That time of year.'

And the second model I want to propose is the model of re-inscription. In a re-inscription, words which have appeared earlier in a sonnet reappear in a later portion: a second 'identical' text is inscribed over the first, on the same ground, deepening the first, making it more legible. The second use of the same word or words elaborates, or inscribes more deeply, or brings out latent meaning in, the first use, making its significance, hitherto occluded, unmistakable. My text for this model is 'Let me not to the marriage of true minds.' Both of the structural models of difference I propose here are primarily temporal ones-something is done over better, or done again deeper – but they are at the same time visual ones, in that one finds traces, in the later quatrain, of the first effort that has been the prompting of the second.

To reveal the ways in which the will-to-form which we presuppose in the artist distributes itself in the work of art is to reveal something more basic than to follow out a single critical preoccupation with, for instance, imagery or ambiguity. To make a hermeneutic postulate of the artist's will-to-form enables us to see the poem as a representation, and temporary solution, of an aesthetic problem of representation which the writer has set himself. His various aesthetic resources (including generic opportunities, speech acts, ornament, imagery, syntax, focus of vision, and so on) can interact interestingly only because they are mustered in the service of an imaginative aim. To try out, in reading the sonnets, the intuition that each is an aesthetic problem of representation displayed, put in motion, and exhausted, is to grant them their most decisive power-the power to convert an *a priori* aesthetic inquiry on the part of the writer into a satisfactory linguistic shape. I hope these principles of treatment will become evident as I look at particular sonnets.

My first example of self-correction is Shakespeare's sonnet on lust, and I will repeat briefly here an argument I made about it some years ago – that

the sonnet, though impersonally phrased, is best accounted for by seeing it as a representation of decisive changes of mind about the experience it treats, changes predicated of a single sensibility: that is, the text encourages us to invent such a sensibility and its changes of heart. But if we treat it, as I want to here, as a problem of construction for the artist, we see that the artist's first choice must be whether to represent his psychological narrative of submission to lust passionally and chronologically, as it sequentially happened from excitement to shame and analysis, or analytically and retrospectively, as one looks back on that submission in later evaluation. Shakespeare at first rejects the chronological account – attraction, appetite, enjoyment, disgust, repentance, excuse, analysis – in favour of the more explosive possibilities of the retrospective vision – the awaking to shame, blame, and self-reproach, in a judgemental, 'morning-after' account of the experience.

Shakespeare chose as his aesthetic problem the representation of changing responses to lust, and decided to enact the changes by showing three different sorts of retrospection: personal-judgemental, personal-chronological, and universal-analytic. He did this rather than demonstrate, about lust, solely a chronological memory, solely a judgemental self-blame, solely an analytical totalisation, or any other possible model (for example, a rapid alteration from blame to excuse and back again, a binary model). Shakespeare also had the choice in this sonnet of using a first-person model (his usual one for sonnets) but chose, unusually, to speak in an impersonal voice which, though it initially mimics a philosophical or homiletic tone, soon loses its initial defensive distance and becomes uncontrolled in its spate of adjectives of social trespass. By the third quatrain, any pretence of the homiletic has been discarded; a cleric might be conceived of as pronouncing the octave, but not what follows, which certifies lust as a 'bliss in proof,' 'a dream,' and a 'heaven.'

Reading along an axis of similarity, as most critics have done, one can see similarity displayed in the persistence, throughout the sonnet, of the definitional syntactic matrix 'Lust is X,' which continues throughout the three quatrains, from 'expense of spirit' to 'joy' and 'dream.' Reading for difference, however, we note the contrasts among the definitions of lust, and therefore see the position of the poem as one that changes over time. The wish to define – represented by the syntax and by the master- trope of concatenation – does not change. The substance of the definition, however, *does* change – from disgusting act to dream. It is the axis of difference that drives us to postulate a change of heart; the axis of similarity ('Lust is ... lust is ... lust is ...') could belong to an impersonal treatise. I should add that Shakespeare also chooses in the sonnet an analytic rather than a descriptive model of definition; his is a mathematical

and materialist model of the mean and the extremes, of cause and effect, of before and after, of relations to self and to others. There are of course reasons that we can suggest for such aesthetic choices, as I will now suggest.

To choose a retrospective judgemental view with which to begin the sonnet is, as I have said, more dramatic than to choose a chronological reverie. However, chronological reverie eventually *supplants* the retrospective judgement (only to be supplanted inits turn by a totalising view encompassing both the chronological re-enactment of the act and one's retrospective judgement on it). Shakespeare may also have chosen the retrospective judgemental view as his beginning because it is the only angle of vision from which an analytic perspective becomes plausible. The speaker's choice of definition and division into parts in the deceptively scholastic beginning ('Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame / Is lust in action, and till action lust / is perjured,' etc.) shows us the first defence of the speaker: to divide his unsettling topic into three apparently rational parts, to distinguish its phases along a temporal axis-lust until action, lust in action, and lust after action. The ego has here a vested interest in distinguishing the present self-in-repentance from the former self-in-sin (the model representing the common conversion schema), and therefore it launches itself, after its putatively tripartite beginning (in which 'after action' remains a ghost part) into its rigid binary antitheses of before and after, tending more and more to obliterate its initial postulated division into three. We soon move into the binary schemes of enjoyed and despised, hunted and hated (the latter retaining a semantic and prosodic overtone of the original tripartite scheme by including 'had' in its triplet of 'hunted, had, hated,' while the syntax reinforces the binary model, reinforced as well by the double repetition of 'past reason').

Of course both schemata – the 'scholastic' one of the tripartite division along a temporal axis, and the subsequent 'repentant' conversion scheme of binary form – disappear in the double knot where the poem is aesthetically knitted together, in which all divisions collapse and in which the original dramatic passion of self-reproach is itself at last judged: lust has made 'the *takemad/ Mad* in pursuit, and in possession *[mad]*-, lust is *'had, having,* and *in quest to have, extreme.'* After this has been said, nothing can be the same. While the first adverse totalising judgement has been made on a psychological basis – the subject *isnad* before, during, and after taking the bait-the second adverse totalising judgement – *extreme* – *has* been made on a geometric or classical base of means and extremes, rather than on the social or religious or psychological objections earlier displayed in the poem. Socially, lust is of course savage in its pursuit of its object, perjuring itself, untrustworthy, and so on; religiously, it may

be an expense of spirit on base matter; psychologically, it may be the occasion of shame and madness. But geometrically it is extreme, going past the mean of reason in all directions. I call this final totalising judgement geometric rather than ethical (though the norm is the norm of reason) because the vocabulary of purely ethical judgement includes words far less neutral than Shakespeare's carefully chosen word 'extreme.' (He might have said 'bestial,' or 'ungoverned,' or 'childish,' for instance, and still remained within an ethical vocabulary.)

In running through the whole gamut of retrospective experience – from apparent detachment to violent self-blame and blaming of the other (who laid the swallowed bait on purpose) – and knitting it up finally under the single rubric 'extreme' – the word itself remembered, or rather retrieved, as the only aesthetically productive word from the early adjectival torrent of self-accusation-the poem is able to set out, in little, what it is to have an extreme experience and to emerge from it full of self-hatred and hatred of the temptress-other.

Then the poem can move on to its moment of aesthetic difference-to a different view of lust, representing *itas it was felt at the time.* It can move, in the couplet, to a totalising encompassing of its previous differentiations.

Let me explain. The word 'extreme,' knitting the three temporal phases together under a neutral rubric, enables the second part of the poem to reverse the retrospective model of the first part. The correction proper can now take place (though it has been in itself already a reconceiving to see the action of lust geometrically instead of homiletically or socially). The poem now sees the action of lust (11.11-12) not from the perspective of an aftermath of shame, in an alienated fashion, but rather chronologically and affectively – how the action seem*edwhile it was being lived.* First it seemed like a joy, later it seemed unreal. This correction – as affective chronology corrects judgemental alienation from one's own past, as *bow it felt* corrects *what was done*-is, roughly speaking, the major aesthetic choice of the writer. The poem gives us, in short, two absolutely incompatible and yet two absolutely reliable retrospective accounts of lust – the earlier alienated judgemental nominal and adjectival inventory (expense, waste, savage, extreme), and the late chronological nominal affective tale (bliss, woe, joy, dream). It thus presents us with two models of experience, both of which we know intimately: the model of 'What I think of it now that I look back' and the model of 'How it felt while it was happening.' Usually, in simpler poems, one of these models fires the other out. To keep both in suspension, as Shakespeare does here by his cyclical couplet thematizing the preceding two models, is to say that both are equally true. The poem corrects its first telling by a second one, but does not, unlike an overpainted painting, entirely

obliterate the first sketch. The couplet sums up the incompatibility between chronologically lived affective life – the heaven that leads to hell – and the retrospective analytical life – what the world well knows.

We see now the necessity of the authorial choice of the impersonal mode for the purposes of this sonnet. Any existential subject would have to represent himself at the moment of utterance – the 'now' of the poem – as living his retrospection either chronologically or judgementally, and this would privilege one point of view over the other. The impersonal mode allows for the habitual incompatibility and the perpetual sequentiality of both models. The couplet ironizes both models, ultimately, putting both their mutual incongruity and repetitive sequentiality in a larger cyclical totalisation in which one is only the obverse of the other, both existing in a mutual temporal dependency, represented formally by the chiastic 'well knows' and 'knows well.' (The poem also comes full circle in its deictic '*this* hell,' indicating that the speaker is back where he started in line 1.) For all that, the major aesthetic move of the sonnet is to paint over our first impression – the shame and blame of lust – with a second, the joy and sorrow and unreality of lust; and then to paint over that with the ironizing and totalising third. Through the third layer of ironic knowledge we see still the two underpaintings-the *pentimenti* – the first of a post-erotic hell, the second of a brief erotic heaven. Thus, reading for difference provides for a far more interesting-and I could say more 'worthy'-shape for this poem than the shape-an unvaried condemnation of lust – offered, even by Shakespeare's latest editors, by reading along the axis of similarity.

A superior aesthetic value is normally ascribed to the last stage of a painting exhibiting *pentimento;* and we do perhaps tend to ascribe a higher epistemological value to the most comprehensive account in a poem of the phases of experience that it treats. But we must recall that in aesthetic terms we ascribe final value not to any one set of lines, but rather to the entire sonnet. The aim of this sonnet has been to solve the problem of representing the various mental phases aesthetically deployed here: judgemental disgust, affective memory, and the ironic totalising of both. We value its success in each, and we admire as well the successive motivations by which each believably replaces its predecessor stage(s). We are drawn to notice the three models because the first careens into adjectives, the second reverts to nouns, and the third retreats into proverbial diction (among other differences). It is these grammatical and discursive differences that warn us that we must read along an axis of difference, if we are to understand the poem at all. An account of sonnet 129 that never asks why its initial contained scholastic and individual definition hurtles into a spate of adjectives of social trespass; or why the initial

static nouns and adjectives suddenly are displaced by past participles; or why the past participles are then displaced by a pointed return to four nouns ('bliss,' 'woe,' 'joy,' 'dream') as much unlike the opening's four nouns ('expense,' 'spirit,' 'waste,' and 'shame') as possible;-an account not following the conspicuous signals afforded by the poem concerning its own phases of difference will never see the functional aesthetic dynamic of the poem.

The most interesting example of self-correction in the sonnets occurs in the famous 'That time of year.' Three ascribed perceptions, self-descriptions on the poet's part postulated as being felt by the young man, make up the quatrains; these have usually been seen, because readers read along an axis of similarity, simply as variations on the single theme of age. (Ascribed sentiments are in themselves an interesting fictional problem in the sonnets. But here I am concerned with the poet's successive invention of figures for his condition and how we, together with the supposed youth, are to read them.) Everyone has noticed that the last figure – that of fire – does not follow logically from those of the season and the day. In general, however, an accommodated criticism has absorbed the likeness without balking very much at the difference. The reading generated by the powerful axis of similarity sees no important change occurring in the poem. And it is true that the figures are parallel insofar as the span of time spoken of shrinks as we pass from one figure to the next; but this undeniable parallelism has been used to mask an equally undeniable re-thinking in the sonnet of what it means to come to the end of life. It is this reconceiving of the mortality of the person that I want to empathize as the aesthetic problem generating the sonnet. What figures, the artist asks, will serve to convey my successive changes of mind about mortality, and how must they be managed? He decides on three figures, the first two of which will become, by the decisive change of mind so central to the poem *pentimenti,* rejected sketches.

The figure dominating the opening of the sonnet is a contrastive one, in which almost every word is generated by difference. The leaves, once green, are now yellow; once many, are now few; the choirs, once populated and entire, are now ruined and bare; the present silence is defined by the absence of the sweet birds' song. This sort of definition by difference is one produced by nostalgia; the backward glance to birdsong at the close of the quatrain is in fact the motivating force of the poem as it opens, and generates the small myth of the villain cold who bears responsibility for the ruin and the subsequent departure of the birds by making the boughs shake and lose their leaves. This figure reads the text of the aging body realistically, as one shaken by palsy, stripped bare, and deprived of voice.

In the second figure, a 'villain' causing deprivation is still present in the form of black night who takes away the fading day. But the text of the aging body is read more emblematically than realistically in this second scanning: 'black night' is 'Death's second self.' And this figure is less backward-looking than the first; it glances back momentarily, but not to the dawn corresponding to spring, but rather to a fading sunset; and it has turned its glance willingly toward a future rest, a position impossible to the first figure.

At this point in the poem something changes radically. Shakespeare decides to abandon the diachronic or linear model representing the passage of time from 'before' to 'now' to 'later.' He adopts instead-in the most powerful change in the poem – a vertical or synchronic model of strata. By that change he reduces the two previous figures to *pentimenti.* In the new model, the 'now' and the future are visually superimposed on the 'then.' Youth is the underbed, the ashes of past embers; 'now' is the glowing embers; the future will be the ashes of those glowing embers. In this model, the present state of the protagonist-previously called 'ruin' and 'twilight' by difference-is named for the first time by continuity, and phrased in positive terms: 'In me thou seest the *glowing* of such *fire*.' This is to read the text of the aging self entirely on the level of the unseen – the aged countenance is read in *its inner condition* rather that by its exterior appearance, as in the first figure, or its emblematic value, as in the second. To call oneself a *glowing* is different from calling oneself *a ruin* or a *twilight,* and conclusively repudiates the earlier differential or contrastive conceptions. Here, the past is not remembered nostalgically as a place of sweet singing birds; rather, it is truthfully named as what it now is, ashes. The life-spirit dwells not in the past with green foliage, nor in the future with a wished-for 'rest,' but rather in the present – which, though it may be short, is still 'glowing.' The future is seen accurately as a deathbed, rather than as a rest. But there is no villain in this last 'reading.' The ruining cold, the black night, have no counterpart in this third figure; Shakespeare has decided that no malign fate robs man of life. In the remarkable analytic re-conceiving which closes the third quatrain, Shakespeare abandons both his earlier extreme sweetness of natural description, and his later satisfying drama of emblematic robbery, in favour of an epigrammatic law of life: everything that lives, he says, himself most of all, is 'consumed with that which it was nourished by.' The ego, in this last model, is not something that is changed linearly by circumstance, as a tree changes from full foliage to bare boughs under the malign influence of the cold; rather, it is something that is a self-sustaining, self-destroying process, something layered inevitably on itself. The fulcrum of Shakespeare's analytic law is the central 'that which' – balanced on the one side by 'consum'd with' and on the other side by 'nourish'd

by' – as the syntax enacts (since both verbs participate in the 'that which') the inseparability of nourishment and consumption. This ultimate analytic model is logically incompatible with its descriptive and emblematic predecessors, in which an innocent and flourishing entity (a tree, a sunset) is sinisterly deprived of its beauty by an intrusive external force like cold or black night. The analytic mode represents textually the author's preferring of meditation on the governing laws of life over simple self-descriptions – whether those generated by analogy with material images or those generated by emblematic allegorizing, his now discarded *pentimenti.*

We can see here, more clearly I think than anywhere else in the sonnets, what is gained and lost in the technique of self-correction. What is gained here is at once a sterner formulation ('All things contain in their very vitality the seeds of their own destruction') and a grateful relief (life can be properly called, even in its last phase, *glowing* – not a ruin, not a fading-and there is no external villain waiting to do us harm). What is lost is the first feeling-pang of nostalgia, the pathos of self-contemplation against a happier past. Because the reconceivings visible in literature leave, as I have said, the *pentimenti,* the previous less satisfactory sketches, on the page, we see very vividly the Shakespearean attempt to give a full description of nostalgic perceptual sentiment as well as his subsequent resolute gaze at the truth of the matter, analytically considered. What we see most of all as we gaze at the entire sonnet is Shakespeare's wish (represented by the axis of similarity) to give full aesthetic value to all conceivings of existence; and his equal wish (represented by the axis of difference) to leave sentimental or incomplete models behind.

The 'more strong' love ascribed to the young man reading this text of the aged self follows, I think, from the final 'glowing' ascribed to the text. And the substitution of 'leave' for 'lose' in the last line follows not only from the poet's with to elide his own death in order to emphasize his present 'glowing,' but also from the need to express in a pun what the analytic law had already expressed in a line. If things are 'consumed with that which they are nourished by,' then to love is to leave; 'loving' engenders 'leaving' almost as by the invention of a new verb, of which 'loving, leaving, leafless,' might be the conjugation.

There are innumerable instances of self-correction in the sonnets. An active re-evaluating of the initial premise often motivates the second or third quatrains of the Shakespearean sonnet; sometimes a last re-conceiving, as in the closing couplet in the sonnet on lust, makes *pentimenti* of all preceding sketches. By and large, critics have read Shakespeare's sonnets as expansions and variations on the initial premise, rather than as changes of mind about it; I think this is a mistake. Far more often – even while a syntactic or imagistic

similarity is maintained as an armature or 'spine' – the initial premise is put in doubt, and even destroyed. A Shakespearean sonnet is a fluid object; it is not for nothing that Shakespeare thought of it (as one of the self-reflexive moments of the sonnets suggests) as 'a liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass.' The prosodic walls are fixed, but the contents are labile, even volatile.

I pass now to my second model which, like the first, is both spatial and temporal – that of the re-inscription. Unlike self-correction, the figure of re-inscription, as I define it here, does not change its mind. However, in this procedure, Shakespeare finds it necessary to restate *exactly the same word or words* what has already been said in a hazier form. The fact that the second passage is a re-inscription and not a new inscription or a contradictory inscription is proved (as in the case I am about to propose, the sonnet on the marriage of true minds) by the direct repetition of identical words. When we see the same thing said twice over in a single sonnet, not varying to other words but re-employing the same words, we are justified, as I hope to show, in thinking of the second instance as a re-inscription over the first, in an effort to bring out latent meaning obscured in the first transmission. We have already encountered one example of re-inscription, in the reappearance, in the climactic position knitting up the whole experience of lust, of the word 'extreme' – retrieved from its modest and relatively colourless position in the earlier line 'Savage, *extreme,* rude, cruel, not to trust.' In the cohort of colourful adjectives of social trespass, 'extreme' seems like a failure of imagination on the part of the speaker. Yet it lingers from line 4 to reappear triumphantly at the end of line 10 – 'Had, having, and in the quest to have, *extreme*' – *as* the only aesthetically productive adjective, the single one by which the whole experience of lust can be objectively, not psychologically, characterized.

But my central instance of re-inscription is that famous near-impersonal sonnet on the marriage of true minds, which re-inscribes in quatrain 3 two crucial words from quatrain 1, 'alter' and 'bend.' Sonnet 116 is usually read as a definition-poem, defining true love. That is, most critics decide to see the poem (guided by its beginning) as an example of the genre of definition, and this initial genre-decision generates their interpretation. Let me begin by saying that I read this poem as an example, not of definition, but of dramatic refutation or rebuttal. The aesthetic motivation governing it springs, (as I hope to show) from the fiction of an anterior utterance by another which the sonnet is concerned to repudiate. My interpretation – against the traditional impersonal interpretation, which I believe to be untrue, and not simply incomplete-springs from reading along a line of difference; the quatrains differ powerfully from one another. Also, there are too many 'no's' and 'nor's,' 'never's'

and 'not's' in this poem – one 'nor,' two 'no's,' two 'never's,' and four 'not's.' The prevalence of negation suggests that this poem is not a definition, but rather a rebuttal-and all rebuttals encapsulate the argument they refute. As we can deduce the prior utterance being rebutted, (made, it seems reasonable to assert, by the young man), it has gone roughly as follows:

> 'You would like the marriage of minds to have the
> same permanence as the sacramental marriage of
> bodies. But this is unreasonable; there are impediments
> to such constancy. After all, persons alter; and when
> one finds alteration one is himself bound to alter as
> well; and also, people leave, and one's love is bound to
> remove itself when one's lover removes. I did love you
> once; but you have altered, and so there is a consequent
> natural alteration in me. '

It is the iambic prosody that first brings the pressure of rhetorical refutation into Shakespeare's line: 'Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediments.' Shakespeare says these lines schematically, mimicking, as in reported discourse, his interlocutor's original iron laws of expediency in human intercourse: 'To find alteration is to alter; to see a removal is to remove.' (This law is, on the part of the young man, a self-exculpating move; we see in it a grim parody of the laws of true reciprocity proposed throughout the sonnets.) And yet we are struck by the dreadful plausibility of the young man's laws: they read like laws of mathematics. Alter the left side of the equation, you will alter the right; remove X from the left, and of course it must vanish from the right. Alteration causes altering; removers cause removing.

On the other hand, it is not very clear what the young man has had in mind in framing his laws: what is all this vague talk of altering and removing? Of course one who argues as the young man does has something specific in mind, but prefers to cloud it under large self-excusing generalizations. And the one who disingenuously argues for 'impediments' must have some of his own in mental reserve.

Shakespeare's first aesthetic technique in the sonnet has been to replicate the dishonest discourse of his interlocutor by mimicking it, even quoting it:

> Let me not to the marriage of true minds
> Admit 'impediments': love is not love
> Which 'alters when it alteration finds, '
> And 'bends with the remover to remove, '
> O no!

However, the speaker's own denial, using the given schematic terms of his opponent, is unsatisfactory, because it simply accepts the terms ('altering,' 'removing,') already established by the young man, giving them the lie direct. Shakespeare therefore makes his speaker move (in agreement with well-known oratorical principles) away from the negative refutation of an opponent to a positive refutation couched in new terms, apparently his own – 'O no, it is [rather] X.' The speaker leaves behind the as-yet-unclarified abstractions of vague 'alterations' and 'removers' in favour of his own emblematic North Star, a navigational fixed mark, but we can see that even that symbol has itself been conjured up by his opponent's terms. 'Alteration' has engendered 'ever fixed;' and against the linear 'remove,' the speaker sets a circular 'wandering' that may err but cannot, thanks to the star, ever be permanently lost. Love, in terms of this positive refutation, is said to be able to look unshaken not only on those vaguely euphemized 'alterations' and 'removes' but on very tempests; and it does not fall within those grimly calculable materialist laws invoked by the young man; though it is describable, it is inestimable.

We now come, pursuing a reading for difference, to our re-inscription. The third quatrain repeats, in briefer form, the rhetorical pattern of negative refutation followed by positive assertion which the preceding two quatrains had initiated. In this way, as rhetorical re-inscription, this quatrain initiates our sense of the poem as repetitive-as something that is reinscribing a structure (in this case one of negative refutation followed by positive refutation) which it has already used. The poem says yet again, 'Love is not X, but rather Y.' But the third quatrain is not simply a restating of those two threatening words 'alter' and 'bend' (so undefined in the young man's utilitarian laws). The two words are now unpacked in their full significance as they are re-inscribed in the poem, this time in emblematic form. The 'remover' who 'bends' turns out to be the grim reaper, Time, with his 'bending' sickle. What 'alters' are time's 'brief hours and weeks.' (The indignant speaker will not dignify time with seasons and years, not to speak of epochs and ages; time, so important to the young man, is to be denigrated, to be denied all majesty and power.) Only the Day of Judgement (invoked from the sacramental liturgy of marriage) is the proper measure of love's time. The speaker calls on St. Paul as witness that love bears all things. What then is this talk of removal?

The third quatrain had begun by keeping up the vehemence of refutation, remaining within the debater's genre; but suddenly, a second concessive appears. Just as the speaker had conceded that the star's height could be taken, so he now concedes that the young man is accurate on one point. Something in fact, it is true, *is* removed; something, it is granted, comes into the bending

compass of the sickle. The thing that the young man values, that he has in mind with his occluded talk of 'alteration' and 'removes,' turns out to be physical beauty, 'rosy lips and cheeks.' The speaker cannot deny the actual truth of those removals, but the concession is a painful one. The young man, even though concealing his motives behind his euphemizing vagueness, has been exposed (by this unpacking-by-reinscription of his very words) as a man in thrall to the sensual bloom of youth; when he sees the sickle bend, he must, he has said, bend with it, remove himself when he sees beauty removed, and find another as-yet-unreaped beauty.

Once Shakespeare has admitted the tragic law of the destruction of physical beauty by mortality, he cannot forget it. Love can now no longer be the superlunary fixed star contemplating from above even tempests unmoved; it becomes instead, in the second positive refutation, the human endurer, bearing it out, in the same horizontal plane in which life is lived, even to the edge of doom. In changing its mind about the proper description of love, this sonnet of re-inscription, (wherein the early impediments cited by the vague young man are re-summoned and made explicit in their specific reference to time and physical aging) also exhibits a self-correction by its speaker; a love first described in transcendent vertical terms as a fixed star subsequently takes on the immanent horizontal form of stoic fidelity in endurance.

The couplet of this sonnet is at once a legal challenge in equity and a last refutation (and implicit condemnation) of the position of the young man. The young man has, after all, said, 'I did love you once, but now impediments have arisen through alterations and removes.' The speaker argues by means of the couplet that the performative speech-act of Platonic fidelity in quasi-marital mental love cannot be qualified; if it is qualified it does not represent love. Therefore, if he himself is in error on the subject of what true love is, then no man has ever loved; certainly the young man (it is implied) has not loved, if he has not loved after the fashion urged by the speaker, without alteration, removals, or impediments. The poem entertains, in the couplet, the deconstructive notion of its own self-dissolution; the impossibility of error is proved by the contrary-to-fact hypothesis, 'I never writ.' The triple negative here ('Never, nor, no') is the last signal of the refutational rhetoric of the poem, linking the couplet to all the 'O no's', 'never's' and 'not's' that precede it.

I think it important that we see Shakespeare savagely clarifying, with his rewriting into pictorial emblematic form, the vague 'alter' and 'bend' of the disingenuous young man. But of course the hyperbolic, transcendent, and paradigmatic Petrarchan star is the casualty of the refutational réinscription contained in the third quatrain. The vertically-conceived star cannot be

reinscribed in the matrix of the metonymic hours and weeks of linear sublunary mortality. Stars are not present at the edges of doom; the burdened pilgrimage to that utmost verge is human, stoic, and linear. The star lingers, semi-effaced, a Petrarchan icon forsaken in favour of a Pauline love.

Without the differential model of refutation, re-inscription, and self-correction, Sonnet 116 is imperfectly seen; we cannot judge its representational aim. No reader, to my knowledge, has seen 'Let me not to the marriage of true minds' as a coherent refutation of the implied argument of an opponent, and this represents an astonishing history of critical blindness, a paradigmatic case of how a reading which treats a poem as though it were an essay governed by an initial topic sentence can miss its entire aesthetic dynamic. Because many readers still seek, in the anxiety of reading, a reassuring similarity of parts rather than a perplexing difference, and prefer to think of poetry as a discursive propositional statement rather than as a motivated speech-act, we are condemned to a static view of any given sonnet. It is as useful to ask of each sonnet what form of speech-act it performs as to ask what aesthetic problems generated the poem as their exfoliated display; but these are not the same question, though they are often related. Here, the speech-act we call refutation could equally well, for instance, have been carried out entirely in the first person, as it is in the following sonnet ('Accuse me thus'). To discuss the aesthetic problems set by Shakespeare in writing the sonnet, we must ask the reason in decorum first for the use of the impersonal definition-form governing the middle ten lines; and next for the necessity of doubling the definition-form, so as to offer negative as well as positive ones; and thirdly, why the negative-positive arrangement had to be done twice, so as to make two negative and two positive refutations in lieu of one of each. There are various answers to these problems: I am concerned only that they should be named as problems. We can perhaps see the indecorum of insisting entirely in the first-person singular on the superior worth of one's own fashion of loving (though Shakespeare resorts to that move in the couplet); but the problem of the two refutations doubled is a more interesting one, as is the necessity for the re-inscription (as I have called it) of the young man's vague words 'alter' and 'bend' in the full clarity of their exposure as they are given, in the person of the Grim Reaper, emblematic form.

The chilling impersonality of the hideous implied 'law of alteration and removal' gives a clue to the sort of language used by the young man which is here being refuted, just as Shakespeare's first refutational metaphor, the star-metaphor of transcendent worth, establishes another form of diction wholly opposed to the young man's sordid algebraic diction of proportional alteration.

The second refutational passage, in the third quatrain, proposes indirectly a valuable alternative law, one approved by Shakespeare, which we may label 'the law of inverse constancy': the more inconstant are time's alterations (one an hour, one a week), the more constant is love's endurance, even to the edge of doom. The impersonal phraseology of law, at first a euphemistic screen for the young man's infidelity, is triumphantly but tragically modified by the speaker into the law of constancy in trial. That is, the emblematic reinscription (reusing 'alters' and 'bending,' adapted from 'alters,' 'alteration,' and 'bends'), not only brings out the significance latent in these euphemistically disguising words, but also (by proposing a different 'universal' law) reinscribes with new significance the very structural form (an invariant law) of the young man's objections. The model which I call 're-inscription,' then, consists here of a first negative-and-positive refutation of a message about alteration and bending inscribed in the implied form of a self-serving law, and a second negative-and-positive refutation of a message about alteration and bending, the refutation inscribed in the form of a constancy-law. We can now see why the transcendent metaphorical star alone could not refute the young man: he had to be refuted in his own temporal and metonymic terms, as the identical form of the re-inscribed message indicates.

The sketch I have been offering of some Shakespearean aesthetic strategies – strategies of grammar and syntax, imitations of speech-acts like refutation, imitations of the genres of definition or rebuttal, self-correction, re-inscription – helps, I hope, to present the sonnets as far more interesting because each one seems to propose for itself a well-defined aesthetic problem of representation and inner evolution. The extreme local ingenuity of the sonnets (brought to our attention by Empson and Jakobson and Booth) should not blind us to how well that embellishing ingenuity is bent to the realizing of the emotional and aesthetic dynamic of the evolving poem. Our delight in the verbal play of these poems has sometimes led us to describe their ornament only as ornament, without referring it to the drive towards the problematizing of form present always in Shakespeare.

In presenting these models, I cannot fail to mention the epistemological effect of being exposed to the representation of successive differing mental perspectives. We have seen them, embodied a*pentimenti,* offer themselves with equal brilliance and persuasiveness; or, as re-inscription, bring to light (by re-inscribing a position in identical but newly-exposed language) covert meanings previously concealed in a euphemizing diction. These models – of self-correction and re-inscription – as I see them, argue implicitly against any 'natural' reality extrinsic to the mind's conceiving. Language, as we know it,

can be arranged into successive models of reality; and although Shakespeare does not affirm the equal value of all models, he does imply that different subjects, and different motives, and even different moments in the same subject, engender new models in constant self-replacement, each one either correcting, repudiating, or elucidating an earlier one. Though this may be the final epistemological implication of these models, it is not their ultimate interest for Shakespeare. He needs to see how mental states can be convincingly represented in language, and how their evolution can be enacted in a formal dynamic: when he has brought that about, he rests, satisfied.

Institute of English Studies
Senate House
Malet Street
London
WC1E 7HU

Email: iesevents@sas.ac.uk

The Hilda Hulme Memorial Lectures were established in 1985 following a donation from Mr Mohamed Aslam in memory of his wife, Dr Hilda Hulme. The lectures are on the subject of English literature and relate to one of 'the three fields in which Dr Hulme specialised, namely Shakespeare, language in Elizabethan drama, and the nineteenth-century novel'.

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