I

THE PLAY OF CRITICISM
The Innocent Insinuations of Wit:
The Strategy of Language in Shakespeare's Sonnets

This essay is intended as a postscript to my book *A Window to Criticism: Shakespeare's Sonnets and Modern Poetics* (Princeton, 1964). There I tried to maneuver Shakespeare's language in the *Sonnets* into a typological system of metaphor, a system that would express the substantive union of discrete entities made possible first by love and then by poetry as love's unique discourse. But in my pursuit of the direction and constellation of the metaphors, I did not generalize upon the strategy in accordance with which these manipulations of metaphor were managed, the method—the unique syntactical dispositions—which controlled their farthest reaches. I propose here to stand aside from my more substantive work and to try to do just this. In the course of this essay I shall occasionally have to echo a few observations on individual sonnets from my book and make some fresh ones. But here these observations are to serve a totally different purpose since, I repeat, it is the method or strategy, and not the substance or thematic range, of Shakespeare's language that concerns me.

If I were to use a single phrase to characterize Shakespeare's strategy at its best, I would term it "the innocent insinuations of wit"—and if "innocent insinuations" suggests an oxymoron, this is precisely to my purpose. The "innocent" is apparent only: on the face of it there is no guile in the words as they marshal themselves into syntax. But at their best the undercurrents in the sonnets seem to wind themselves about into unforeseen unions of meaning that create constant surprises for us and—we almost allow ourselves to believe—for their poet. What artfulness there is, is artless, though its subtlety demands our endless search—and admiration. For, as the word *wit* assures us, everything has been under a shrewd aesthetic control all along.

This strategy is perhaps best seen by contrast to another, and my use of
the overused term *wit* permits me to draw this contrast. Some time back my friend and former colleague Leonard Unger, borrowing terms from Freud, proposed to establish a scale along which poetry could be measured, a scale extending from the extreme of "dream-work" to the extreme of "wit-work." As I understood it, at the "wit" end of the scale he would place the self-consciously metaphysical poem, whose metaphorical development is traceably explicit in a strategy that borders on the exhibitionist. Whatever unpredictable accretions the dialectic may achieve, it achieves through a mastery of manipulation that is everywhere observable—indeed that shouts to be observed. At the "dream" end of the scale he would place the poem that appears to be controlled by little more than random association. If a poem by John Donne reflects the "wit" strategy, the Shakespearean sonnet reflects the "dream" strategy. But the word *strategy* is all-important, as is the word *appears* in the claim that the "dream-work" "appears to be controlled by little more than random association." For surely Unger did not mean that the one kind had art while the other left all to chance. It is not a choice between strategy and no strategy but a choice between strategies, between a strategy of explicit wit and an apparent strategy of dream which, after all, has its own wit, however innocently it seems to insinuate it and, thus, to entwine and capture, as it enraptures, us.

This contrast between the strategies of Donne and Shakespeare is not dissimilar to an earlier one drawn by John Crowe Ransom, except that Ransom's was far less sympathetic—indeed it was positively disrespectful—to Shakespeare. In his by now nearly infamous "Shakespeare at Sonnets" Ransom accuses Shakespeare of having, in effect, insufficient strategy, of failing to have what Ransom elsewhere terms "the courage of [his] metaphors"—which is the very courage that he sees Donne as having. For Ransom seems to have fallen into the error—which I have rejected—of claiming that the metaphysical is the only strategy that wit may employ, so that if the poet does not indulge it, he is turning from wit altogether: he is giving over the reins from the intellect, which critics in the line from Eliot have assured us is the ruling faculty for poetry as wit, to mere emotion ruled by little more than the rushes of chance. And heaven pity the clumsy, inconsistent structure of language, little better than careless prose, that arises

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1 To my knowledge he has never developed this proposal in his published writings beyond the epigraph to, and the hints lurking in the background of, his essay "Deception and Self-Deception in Shakespeare's *Henry IV*," *The Man in the Name* (Minneapolis, 1956), pp. 3–17.

from such indulgence, such abdication of rule. Heaven pity it, for the
Ransomian critic will not!

It is by reason of the multiple strategies allowed by the Unger formulate-
tion that I prefer it and see it as a capacious alternative to Ransom’s. (So, I
suspect, would Ransom for many years now—indeed from a period not long
after his early and narrowly polemic, if then necessary, way of positing his
doctrine.) It was in part for this reason also that I saw in the subtler,
dreamlike play of wit of poems like Shakespeare’s Sonnets challenges to
critical method in the Renaissance lyric far more pressing than the intricate,
but more clearly patterned, lines of the metaphysicals. Between the golden
and the drab poets that C. S. Lewis too conveniently speaks of in his history
of sixteenth-century literature in England are poets whose wit need not lead
to the open skepticism, open paradox, and open cacophony that deny the
golden voice of poetry, poets who produce not the shock of open clash, but
the ever-renewed wonder at the surprises to which soft and cherished words
can—almost on their own and by accident—lead us. But only almost, of
course. And of no poet more than Shakespeare in his Sonnets can we make
this claim. This is why he becomes the greatest challenge, and the delinea-
tion of his strategy the greatest necessity, to a disciplined criticism of the
lyric.

I

I shall propose here just two of the ways in which Shakespeare
produces his deceptive effects, ways in which a seeming looseness works its
dialectical path into the tightest of aesthetic traps. The first I term associa-
tion as dialectic. Instead of the common metaphysical tactic of working
carefully through an image, allowing it to expand into the constitutive
symbol that becomes the poem, the poet shifts rapidly and with a seeming
abandon from image to image. Yet there seems to be no way of our
justifying the selections and movements aesthetically; that is, we can neither
claim a principle in terms of which they are exhaustive possibilities that
together comprehend a whole, nor can we even justify a principle of
inclusion for those we have or of exclusion for those we have not. The
choice rather seems quite arbitrary: the poet seems to choose those that
occur to him as they occur to him, and he stops when he has enough to
satisfy the externally imposed limits of the sonnet form. The individual
image is hardly developed but is mentioned and dropped, and the next one
picked up with no sense of inevitability even tried for.
We can relate this habit causally to the commonly acknowledged weakness of the Shakespearean sonnet form, in contrast to the Italian: that three prosodically independent quatrains and the epigrammatic couplet are too many semi-autonomous units for so brief and powerful a lyric as the sonnet. And in making this relation a general observation, we have further struck at the aesthetic firmness of Shakespeare's frequent practice. We seem to be taking dead aim at the "when . . . when . . . then" sonnet as typically unsatisfying. The poet chooses at random two or three examples—just about any two or three will do—in the natural and the human world of some universal process, say mutability, devoting a couple of lines or at most a quatrains, beginning with "When," to each example; he adds, for contrast, the painful consequence of these observations, prefixed by an expressed or implied "Then"; and he closes with a generalizing couplet that expresses the poet's sadness at, and struggle against, the inevitability as it touches him and his love. Here is hardly a formula that promises much more than the obvious, though prettily and wistfully dressed up, hardly a formula that can hope to transform conventional materials into a unique aesthetic form and symbolic statement. Nor was it, in the hands of many lesser poets.

How does Shakespeare, despite this seeming relaxedness of attitude toward his materials, subdue the passivity of dream through the strategy of wit? Sonnet 12 would seem to be a typically uncontrolled example of this flabby form—and typically devoted to the poet's sentimental regrets at the ruinous passage of time. Possible instances of the universal process are everywhere, to be found as soon as looked for; nor do the ones chosen at first appear especially ingenious in their selection or combination.

When I do count the clock that tells the time,
And see the brave day sunk in hideous night;
When I behold the violet past prime,
And sable curls all silver'd o'er with white;
When lofty trees I see barren of leaves
Which erst from heat did canopy the herd,
And summer's green, all girded up in sheaves,
Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard;
Then of thy beauty do I question make,
That thou among the wastes of time must go,
Since sweets and beauties do themselves forsake
And die as fast as they see others grow;
And nothing 'gainst Time's scythe can make defence
Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence.

The octave begins with the painfully simple reference to the clock, which is further weakened by the redundancy of the first line and the obvious
opposition of “brave day” and “hideous night.” Then the symbols of summer’s death: the fading flower of line 3 juxtaposed to the fading hair of line 4, followed by the leafless trees of lines 5–6 and “summer’s green” which has been cut down (lines 7–8). These are the random examples cited in the octave from which the personal application of the sestet is to follow.

But is there not a structure to these as Shakespeare deploys them? There is—and, as is often the case in these sonnets, it arises out of the way in which he builds, gradually and almost imperceptibly, to the finally total union of nature and man, out of the metaphorical reduction of the human world to the natural or rather the reading of the natural world in terms of its human consequences. The violets and the human hair are juxtaposed, as if by association; they are analogous coordinates, but only that, since no relation between them is suggested. But in the next two lines nature is brought into explicit relation with animal life. The trees are related to the herd as its former protector from summer’s heat. Or is the herd human too by extension, the humanity of pastoral convention, humanity in its natural—its communal, its herd—aspect? And is this not the herd which is under nature’s protection, the nature in whose fruitfulness, mirror of its own, it must trust? But this is only the merest suggestion, only the faint glimpse of possibility—we can hardly be sure. The two lines that follow make us certain, even as they make the union of man and nature total—which is to say, substantive: “And summer’s green all girded up in sheaves/ Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard.” The funeral of “summer’s green” is transformed as we watch from merely personified nature to the literally human in nature. It is, of course, the “bier” and its crucial echo in “beard” which manage this utter transformation. Unquestionably “beard” is brilliant: in its vegetative meaning it is true to the grain, the now lifeless “green,” even as, in combination with the almost homonymous “bier” which makes it possible for “beard” to work its double way, it humanizes the ritual procession. “Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard.” Exeunt as natural man is inevitably borne from the stage.

In three two-line units, then, we have moved from analogy to relation to identity between nature and man. Although this poem, as a “when . . . when . . . then” sonnet, seems to promise only a series of undeveloped, alternative analogies drawn from an apparently random association and designed to illustrate a single general claim, it has gradually grown into a full, total, and even substantive union of its varied elements. For it has been a seemingly random movement from chance analogy to a two-faced, single-bodied metaphor.
How proper that only now has Shakespeare earned his logical conclusion beginning on line 9; only now can he justly say that consequential word "then": "Then of thy beauty do I question make/That thou among the wastes of time must go." The vision to which he has built in the octave has been too inclusive and conclusive for anything less mandatory than "must go"—even for nature's fairest flower, the loveliest of men. And the generality with which the couplet begins ("And nothing 'gainst Time's scythe can make defence") is given fearful specificity as "Time's scythe" returns us to the earlier described harvest that awaits us all as we move toward the "white and bristly beard" that will place us, like spent grain, on the bier to be borne as all exequies. "Time's scythe" cuts several precise ways by cutting its one universal way in line 13. How fully Shakespeare has refreshed, has given new substance to, the conceit of the grim reaper that grows naturally out of the analogy of the life of man to the seasons of vegetable life.

Still there is more than this. For the escape from the scythe that cuts at all levels must spring from the poem, whose materials seem to build toward a destruction that is escape-proof. And, as if by accident, these materials will provide the poet-Monte Cristo the tools he needs, even out of the carelessly weak opening two lines we have observed ("When I do count the clock that tells the time/And see the brave day sunk in hideous night"). For in the couplet the hopelessness of the penultimate line ("And nothing 'gainst Time's scythe can make defence") is taken back at the last moment by that remarkably polysemous word—here a mere preposition (or is it?)—"Save" ("Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence"). The way to resurrection is the universal way that is the way of "breed," always the answer to the "barren," the always newly won "canopy" for "the herd." But why, in terms of the poem? Because this way is the "brave" way. We recall that in line 2 it was the "brave day" that was lost as symbol for all that time destroys ("When I do count the clock that tells the time/And see the brave day sunk in hideous night"). This phrase, "brave day," reasserts itself in the "brave" of the last line ("Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence"). In this line "brave" is an echo, a reflection of the "breed" with which it alliterates: it is the breeding which is the braving of time. But as an echo also of line 2, "brave" is at the same time a kind of equivalent for day, that which the "hideous night" has replaced. By braving time through breed, the friend in effect restores the bravery which is day, overcoming night (and the destructive cycle of the natural process), which is hideous in the extinction it threatens.
In the octave, in the relation of the octave to the conclusive third quatrain, and in the relation of all these to the couplet, to the stopping short of total defeat, the naivété of apparent association has become the witty strategy of dialectic. The poet has (I shall not say unwittingly) made available to himself the very materials he needs. The very process of the poem has seemed to be a dreamlike search that has led us (and, the illusion persuades us, has led the poet) to discover, to come upon, almost to trip upon an aesthetically sound resolution whose inevitability has been fed by all that he has uttered.

Let me cite more briefly several other examples of association become dialectic. We can observe a similar movement to a similar fusion of man and nature in the considerably more brilliant “when” sonnet, Sonnet 64:

*When I have seen by Time's fell hand defaced*
*The rich proud cost of outworn buried age;*
*When sometime lofty towers I see down-razed,*
*And brass eternal slave to mortal rage:*
*When I have seen the hungry ocean gain*
*Advantage on the kingdom of the shore,*
*And the firm soil win of the watery main,
Increasing store with loss and loss with store:*
*When I have seen such interchange of state,*
*Or state itself confounded to decay;*
*Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminate—*
*That Time will come and take my love away.*

*This thought is as a death, which cannot choose*
*But weep to have that which it fears to lose.*

In moving from the first to the second quatrain, we move from the world of man to the world of nature, from the succession of political states to the succession of unending cycles in the rhythmic heart of the universe. Shakespeare begins by observing the destruction of the noblest and most ambitious of human productions, with the ironic use of “eternal” (“brass eternal”) the clue to his scornful view of human claims to immortality. Even more insulting to the “eternal” is its being at the mercy of a rage that is itself “mortal.” Thus the contrast between these “mortal agents,” in the first quatrain, who have undone their victims, the would-be “eternal” who are themselves to be undone in turn, and the natural, seemingly immortal agents who face a mutual undoing in the second quatrain. As if to prove the claim that the human political state is a microcosmic reflection of the universal state under time, the antagonists of the second quatrain, the ocean and the shore, are rendered totally in human terms, as they act in accordance with
political motives. Thus the apparent distinction between the human and the natural in the two quatrains comes to be methodically blurred. All the realms of "state" have been identified and reduced to the extreme consequences of its narrowest meaning, that of human politics. The word "state," despite its range of meanings, from narrow to broad, from politics to the general condition of being (or rather of becoming), is shown to be a single reductive entity that can contain and unite them all even within its narrowest confines. For these confines can be extended unlimitedly without losing their more precise limitations. The ocean, seen as "hungry" for the acquisition of another's, reduces "the kingdom of the shore," only later to be forced to give back what it has gained along with some of its own. Thus the inconclusive (even as it is the most conclusive and inclusive) "interchange of state" or, in terms that suggest the first quatrain, "state itself confounded to decay," as the political sense of state achieves its universal sway under time, incorporating the other senses. The many politic antagonists can only interchange their states, as his metaphor enables Shakespeare's human and natural antagonists to interchange their states. And all, mutually aided or mutually impeded, must eventually face the reduction to identity, the obliteration which is the obliteration of "state" itself as an entity, as a static concept. (The redundancy is intended.)

A similar reduction to the indifferent sameness of mutability and decline is emphasized as the uniting force of yet another "when . . . when . . . then" sonnet, Sonnet 15.

*When I consider everything that grows*
*Holds in perfection but a little moment,*
*That this huge stage presenteth naught but shows*
*Whereon the stars in secret influence comment;*
*When I perceive that men as plants increase,*
*Cheered and check'd even by the self-same sky,*
*Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease,*
*And wear their brave state out of memory;*
*Then the conceit of this inconstant stay*
*Sets you most rich in youth before my sight,*
*Where wasteful Time debateth with Decay,*
*To change your day of youth to sullied night;*
*And, all in war with Time for love of you,*
*As he takes from you, I engraft you new.*

The universality of time's process begins in the first line with the "everything" that permits of no exceptions. Its all-inclusiveness is echoed by the unqualified "naught but" of line 3, the "selfsame" of line 6; and as a most
constant "conceit" it sharply underlines the "inconstant stay" (line 9) which characterizes man's feeble role in the natural process. It is the utterly contingent, "inconstant stay" of man, thrown against the "conceit" of the uncontingent single law of time, that justifies the use of the theatrical figure that reduces "everything" to helpless, insubstantial puppetry. An indifferent, pagan nature that is pure process and thus absolute in its transience controls completely. It is the nature of the influencing stars and the maddeningly "selfsame sky" that equally cheer and check (and how effective the alliteration that proves the identity, from the perspective of nature's indifference, of blessing and curse). Further, they indifferently cheer and check men and plants, or rather, more extremely, "men as plants." In the face of his nature, what hope can there be for man to command his "brave state" (the state associated with day, we recall from Sonnet 12) but most inconstantly? The total leveling in the sonnet is impressive. It reminds us that the "when . . . when . . . then" poem, as we saw with Sonnet 12, moves in its seemingly random way from example to example in part to show the unrestricted universality—indeed the absolute oneness, whether in nature or in man—of the process.

Sonnet 73, though not a "when" sonnet, has the same quatrain organization as the "when" sonnets we have examined, and again the movement is from annual ruin in nature to permanent death in man.

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin'd choirs where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset faileth in the west,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire,
Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by.

This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

Each of the metaphors is seen as if occurring in the poet, but how much less metaphorical (or rather, how much more than just metaphorical, how substantive) they become: from the bare boughs, the "sweet birds'" "ruin'd choirs," with their many subtly probing implications for the aging poet, to the twilight and its bleak promise of darkness. But in this second quatrain a
THE PLAY OF CRITICISM

metaphor within metaphor carries us closer to what most concerns the poet, even as we remain with nature; for “black night,” which overcomes the last of twilight, is “death’s second self, that seals up all in rest.” It is for the third quatrains to bring us to death’s first self, now seen in the expiring of another fire than the sun’s, the modest flame of life in its last glow:

*In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire*  
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,  
As the death-bed whereon it must expire,  
Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by.

We can use the three-quatrains arrangement of Sonnet 60 as a grand reprise to all these poems, as the total (and totally brilliant) confounding of nature and man: the endless fluidity of tides and the immeasurable flux of human time, the beauties of human features transformed to nature’s plowed and blooming field awaiting the reaper.

*Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,*  
*So do our minutes hasten to their end,*  
*Each changing place with that which goes before,*  
*In sequent toil all forwards do contend.*  
*Nativity, once in the main of light,*  
*Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crownd,*  
*Crooked eclipses 'gainst his glory fight,*  
*And Time that gave, doth now his gift confound.*  
*Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth*  
*And delves the parallels in beauty's brow,*  
*Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,*  
*And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow;*  
*And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand*  
*Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand.*

Once more, and perhaps with the most impressive maestro flourishes yet, the several, seemingly parallel and coordinate images fuse into one. Still the synthesis, as it is won, is subtly won, is won in the process of winning it without seeming to.

There is yet another purpose which this unmethodical method, in the hands of Shakespeare, can serve: the solving of an insoluble problem at the end of a search for a metaphorical way out. There is a throwing up of metaphors that will not quite work on the path to one that will. But again the path is less random than the projected psychology of the speaker would suggest. Sonnet 34, the second in a sequence of sonnets on guilt and innocence in the poet and his beloved friend, is a helpful example. After a quatrains that summarizes the effect upon him of his awareness of the
friend’s guilty act dwelt upon in Sonnet 33, the rest of the poem seeks a way for the poet to excuse an irrevocable, seemingly inexcusable act. With the friend seen in Sonnet 33 and the first quatrain of Sonnet 34 as the heavily clouded sun, the poet must in the next two quatrains reject several metaphorical ways to dissolve the offense:

’Tis not enough that through the cloud thou break,  
To dry the rain on my storm-beaten face,  
For no man well of such a salve can speak  
That heals the wound and cures not the disgrace.  
Nor can thy shame give physic to my grief;  
Though thou repent, yet I have still the loss:  
Th’ offender’s sorrow lends but weak relief  
To him that bears the strong offence’s cross.

From the rain as "salve" to heal the "wound" to "shame" as "physic" for "grief" to repentance as relief for the poet's burden, none will work. But the last may open the way for the poet—or rather the friend—to find an escape: "Th' offender's sorrow lends but weak relief/To him that bears the strong offence's cross." The final word, “cross,” promises more than we should have expected from the negative force of these lines which in this seem to resemble those that preceded it. With this word we have not only the prospect of the poet, as innocent, taking the sin upon himself, but also the introduction of hope, of the chance for ransom, for redemption. We are ready for the couplet which fulfills that hope, if with too much abandon and too little resistance: "Ah, but those tears are pearl which thy love sheds/And they are rich and ransom all ill deeds." Finally this metaphor works the trick, if only by fiat. The "ah" suggests the sudden, surprising discovery of the specious opening that the metaphor in the couplet offers him. The poet leaps to grasp the unearned transfer from "tears" to "pearl" to "ransom" which appears to solve his problem at an unsubstantive level of language only. Are we to see him as permitting himself to be deceived by his language in his desperation to exonerate his friend? May this not be the poet's sin whose consequences he willingly accepts in the following sonnets? And is this not the "ransom" which does fulfill the expectations of "cross"? The poet has ended by joining the friend in a search to evade the consequences of sin. The parade of rejected metaphors has not after all been pointless, has finally led to one which has worked at least verbally as the poet, in grasping at it as a miraculous transformation—"tears" into "pearl"—opens himself to the ransom that he, in taking on the sin, must pay. Thus the weaving dialectic and its further unpredictable consequences.
The Play of Criticism

In Sonnet 65 a more desperate search for escape from a more inescapable trap leads to a less affirmative consequence, one that keeps us still in the box. The universal and indifferent reduction to "ruin" which we witnessed in Sonnet 64 ("When I have seen by Time's fell hand defaced") has been dramatically extended to the small helplessness of the poet's love in 65. If not the mightiest and most powerful, human or natural, can retain its "state," what chance for the poet's love? The poet searches for a metaphor:

> O fearful meditation! Where, alack,
> Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?
> Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
> Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?

But this time the poet seems to give up: "O, none!" He seems not to have come upon his discovery. Still, however it may appear, the dialectic is not really done with. For immediately after "O, none!" the poet takes it back with "unless": "O, none! unless this miracle have might/That in black ink my love may still shine bright." So the impossibilities have led to affirmation after all, through the bold appeal to miracle where less daring metaphors failed. But what is this miracle ("that in black ink my love may still shine bright") except a yet more daring metaphor, one which discards the material and worldly character of the rejected metaphors for the spiritual motive of the appeal to miracle, an appeal which is given to us in the absurd, even impossible, paradox of its material reflection—the brightness of love in the blackness of ink. Thus the rejection not only of the discarded metaphors but of the very strategy of making the desperate attempt in this futile direction, in accepting Time and his material world on his own terms. And again the dialectic has tightly controlled, even where it seems to have been ignored for less planned, more emotionally spontaneous methods.

In all poetic dialectic we are surprised. In the dialectic of wit we expect eventual surprise. We feel it has been well plotted in the very tissue of the seeming logic—very like the Aristotelian peripety in drama, distinguished by its combining of surprise with probability. But in the deceptive sort I am tracing here, the apparent dreamlike association suddenly become dialectic, we are surprised to be surprised; and so is the poet, we are convinced during our own double surprise, even if this conviction only attests to the greater perfection of the illusion of artlessness.

II

The second of the devices I shall mention of Shakespeare's deceptive dialectic, of the casual procedure turned inevitable, we have already ob-
Language in Shakespeare's Sonnets

served repeatedly in passing. We may term it pun as argument, using _pun_ most broadly as coincidence of meaning and seeing it as the ground for the self-effacing, smuggled conceit. Not only does Shakespeare use his extra dimensions of meaning where he finds them ready-made in certain words; he also creates unique semantic dimensions for his language out of his construction of a unique syntax. And the critic working with this language must create—out of its internal relations—a special glossary for it.

We have repeatedly observed Shakespeare creating the added dimensions that make a word a nucleus of meanings from which his special dialectic can emerge. Remember what happened to "brave" in Sonnet 12 as it was used, first to characterize "day" in opposition to "hideous night," then in an alliterative relation to "breed" to borrow some of breed's strength in its heroic struggle with death's night. This combination of juxtapositions gives it a union of meanings which it can carry to its use in Sonnet 15 (man's "brave state") or even to Sonnet 33 (day's "bravery"). We have seen similar phonetic borrowings of meaning in Sonnet 12 in "bier" and "beard" and in "cheer'd and check'd even by the self-same sky" in Sonnet 15.

And we may find these borrowings at the two ends of the climactic line of Sonnet 64, "Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminate": "ruin," echoed in "ruminate," is _in_ the rumination, becomes its cause and its subject, its formative principle, even as its continuous process keeps the rumination from ever being complete. Or in Sonnet 6 the "self-kill'd" friend who refuses marriage becomes the "self-will'd" friend, as the rhyme allows identity to arise in the verbs despite the transfer of initial consonants—and of crucial meanings.

There are also many other juxtapositions that create new accretions of meaning as Shakespeare works up his unique glossary. We can look briefly and inadequately at the complex relations between "world" and "worms" in several sonnets, especially 71.

_No longer mourn for me when I am dead_  
_Than you shall bear the surly sullen bell_  
_Give warning to the world that I am fled_  
_From this vile world with vilest worms to dwell._

_Nay, if you read this line, remember not_  
_The hand that writ it, for I love you so_  
_That I in your sweet thoughts would be forgot_  
_If thinking on me then should make you woe._

_O if, I say, you look upon this verse_  
_When I perhaps compounded am with clay,_  
_Do not so much as my poor name rehearse,_  
_But let your love even with my life decay._

31
THE PLAY OF CRITICISM

Lest the wise world should look into your moan
And mock you with me after I am gone.

The poet, looking toward his death, asks his friend to be a wise enough worldly man not to mourn him. But notice: he speaks, not of his death, but of his fleeing from this vile world to dwell with vilest worms, "vile world" and "vilest worms" occurring as echoes in one line. And in the couplet the friend is warned that if he insists on honoring dead love, he risks the scorn of the "wise world." Here once more is a remarkable collision of juxtapositions, of worms and world and their adjectives, "vile," "vilest," and "wise." The movement from the positive to the superlative degree of the adjective, "vile" to "vilest," in moving from "world" to "worms," is crucial: the worms are the furthest extension of the very tendency that makes the world "vile." The world as practical time-server that takes material truth as its total reality has the quality that is most purely represented in the activity of the worms. The vile world is a lesser worm. The friend's love, then, is to be permitted to "decay" even as the poet's "life" does; he is to feed on the body of love as the worms do on the body of life, since he is to see both bodies as suffering the identical limitation of the flesh. And the shift from the "vile world" of line 4 to the "wise world" of line 13 is the final evidence of Shakespeare's irony. For this world is wise—that is, shrewd, prudential—only as it is vile, only as it exercises those characteristics which ape the destructive perfection, the absolute cooperation with time, of the "vilest worms." The human impact Shakespeare packs into the earthy gluttony of the worms gives new force to their use elsewhere: in Sonnet 74 ("So then thou hast but lost the dregs of life,/The prey of worms, my body being dead"), in the anti-material address to the soul in 146 ("Shall worms, inheritors of this excess,/Eat up thy charge? Is this thy body's end?"), in Sonnet 6 ("... thou art much too fair/To be death's conquest and make worms thine heir"), and, by implication, in the marriage plea to the narcissistic friend in Sonnet 1 ("Pity the world, or else this glutton be,/To eat the world's due, by the grave and thee") and in the "all-eating shame" that follows in Sonnet 2. The same charges and pleas fill Sonnet 9, although wormy self-consumption is related more insistently to the "world," a word that occurs with increasing force four times.

Sonnet 9 also marks the climactic joining of the several senses given the words "use" and "unuse" as a consequence of their earlier connection with "abuse" and "usury" in Sonnets 4 and 6. In Sonnet 4 ("Then, beauteous niggard, why dost thou abuse/The bounteous largess . . . /Profitless usurer,
Language in Shakespeare's Sonnets

why dost thou use/So great a sum of sums.../Thy unus'd beauty must be tomb'd with thee./Which, us'ld, lives th' executor to be”), in Sonnet 6 (“That use is not forbidden usury”), and in the climactic Sonnet 9 (beauty "kept unus'ld, the user so destroys it"). In these Shakespeare creates new possibilities for punning—creating the paradoxical possibility of a use that is a saving with interest and an unuse that is a using up—by forcing the relation of “use” to “usury,” of finding “use” in “usury.”

Here we move toward his creation of a new semantic out of already existing coincidences of sound and meaning. There are innumerable examples of the use of double meaning to enclose narrow dimensions within broad, all-inclusive ones. We have observed in Sonnet 64 the effective manipulation of “state” that unites the narrowly political condition with the universal human condition, which proves in the end, alas, to be no more than political. Sonnet 124 (“If my true love were but the child of state”) is an even more dramatic use of this maneuver, with its shockingly paradoxical turn, in which the great affirmation is that the poet’s uncontingent, unpolitical love “all alone stands hugely politic,” that is, as its own body politic. I could point also to the implicit reference to biblical typology under the more obvious uses of figure in Sonnet 6 (“Ten times thyself were happier than thou art,/If ten of thine ten times refugir'd thee”) and 106, in which the praises of historical personages become “but prophecies/Of this our time, all you prefiguring” (and we can note the alliterative echoes as well among “praises,” “prophecies,” “prefiguring”). I could point to the forced union of three worlds in one by the pun on husband in Sonnet 3 (“For where is she so fair whose unear'd womb/Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry”)—the pastoral, the domestic, and the world of proper management and conservation. Only by accepting the need to act as pastoral husband encouraging nature’s yield and as sexual husband in the home can he husband—that is, conserve, keep from expending—the value that is himself. But, as I have said, the examples seem innumerable.

A more clustered use of the double meaning in a single poem leads to the kind of conceit that Shakespeare manages most effectively in the Sonnets, what I have called the smuggled conceit. It is not, of course, the self-conscious, witty sort that calls attention to itself as the organizing principle of the poem. Rather it arises, seemingly without pressure or even guidance, under our very eyes. It grows, in the background, out of the narrow range within which the secondary meanings are contained. Sonnet 30 is a splendid, if obvious, example.
THE PLAY OF CRITICISM

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes new wail my dear time’s waste:
Then can I drown an eye, unus’d to flow,
For precious friends hid in death’s dateless night,
And weep afresh love’s long since cancell’d woe,
And moan the expense of many a vanish’d sight:
Than can I grieve at grievances foregone,
And heavily from woe to woe tell o’er
The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan,
Which I new pay as if not paid before.

But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
All losses are restor’d and sorrows end.

As in many of the sonnets, the protestations of love come strangely trailing
the language of crass finance. Such bits of soft sentiment as “sweet silent
thought,” sighs, wails, drowning eyes, grievings and moans, are held in the
businesslike framework of “sessions,” to which one is harshly summoned up,
of woes that are “cancell’d,” of “expense,” accounts, and payments. We must
be puzzled by “precious friends” or by “losses,” which can be read into either
world, or both; or by the telling over the “sad account,” which can refer to
the narrating of his sentimental tale or to the “telling” activity of the
auditor. But it is just this language which has a foot in both worlds that
seems to prove how thoroughly the poet has proved their union. Yet this
union should be a shocking one, a yoking of elements that are surely most
heterogeneous. And it is this union that aggravates the poet’s losses since it
emphasizes their immeasurability, their resistance to being balanced out,
cancelled. It calls for nothing less than the total leap of love in the couplet.

Sonnet 87 is a more spectacular example of the effective mingling of
matters of money and affection.

Farewell! thou art too dear for my possessing,
And like enough thou know’st thy estimate.
The charter of thy worth gives thee releasing;
My bonds in thee are all determinate.
For how do I hold thee but by thy granting?
And for that riches where is my deserving?
The cause of this fair gift in me is wanting,
And so my patent back again is swerving.
Thyself thou gav’st, thy own worth then not knowing,
Or me, to whom thou gav’st it, else mistaking;
So thy great gift, upon misprision growing,
Comes home again, on better judgement making.
Language in Shakespeare's Sonnets

Thus have I had thee, as a dream doth flatter,
In sleep a king, but waking no such matter.

With the word “dear” in the first line, and the related “possessing” (“thou art too dear for my possessing”), the two poles of meaning that create the dialectic and the unity of the poem are sent forth. The unbroken multiplication of legal and financial terms shouts almost too loudly the poet’s bitterness at having love’s “dear” reduced to the merchant’s “dear,” to mere price. But the poem does so reduce it. Material reality will not permit love to be assigned where worths are so unequal. Only in the dream, from which the poet has been rudely awakened, can the beggar deserve a kingly love. This would appear to be an indictment of the shrewdness of the intellect, of the rational judgment of equivalence. But may we not see in this indictment a defense of the very strategy of language I have been tracing here? It is the controlled wit, under the service of the directing intelligence, that is being disdained for the seeming abandonment to an almost dreamlike associationism, with the bizarre equations and identities it produces. Why not, then, beggar and king in defiance of the world’s rational denial?

III

There are, to be sure, sonnets in the sequence which do tumble in a more orderly manner out of an initially proposed and imposed conceit, whether it be the four elements in Sonnets 44–45 (“If the dull substance of my flesh were thought”) or the careful comparison of love to food in 75 (“So are you to my thoughts as food to life”). How different this latter from the juxtapositions which we witnessed earlier, which, in discovering themselves, discovered the oneness of worminess and gluttony. The predetermined wit of the more obviously planned conceits is not the strategy Shakespeare handles well—or characteristically. It is rather out of the seeming abandonment to dream that, as in dream, unexpected, even unaccounted for, identities may arise—out of the accidents and miracles of a language that has been newly, and fully, empowered, even if by a masterful control that everywhere disguises itself as chance. The meanderings of dream, with the impossible reappearances, disappearances, and unions of contradictory identities, these meanderings at last discover themselves under the firm direction of art. The dream is yielded to as it is captured, flows even as it is frozen. Caprice is transformed, while indulging its capriciousness,

3 I call attention to the extensive development of this metaphor in “The Ekphrastic Principle and the Still Movement of Poetry,” below.
into the inevitability of pattern. The logos affirms its hegemony by absorbing all that is wayward into the firm teleology of the word.

We have seen the double-reaching language of Sonnet 87 destroying the very judgment it seems intent on making, as the final lines establish the richness and beauty that, as dream, have been exploded ("Thus have I had thee as a dream doth flatter,/In sleep a king, but waking no such matter"), richness and beauty established only in the act of their vanishing, existing only in the discovery of their impossibility. We are reminded of the stubborn, if desperate, postulation of love's and poetry's miracle at the close of the universal ruin of Sonnets 64–65 (What chance? "O, none! unless this miracle have might,/That in black ink my love may still shine bright"), miracle in the teeth of rational impossibility. Without impossibility, no miracle; without reality, no awareness of the magic unrea lity of dream. The miracle, then, as dream, and poetry and love as the mutually enabling agents of both miracle and dream, in the teeth of the wise world's prose. We are beyond the limiting and limited world of wit—but not beyond the world of art and its breakthrough. We are rather following the words of Theseus, in the play appropriately for us called A Midsummer Night's Dream, who appreciates the "shaping fantasies" in which "the lunatic, the lover, and the poet/Are of imagination all compact." We follow his words to Prospero, that magician-poet-god of The Tempest, who transforms reality and knows of the dreamlike "stuff" of man. And we have a new sense of Prospero as Shakespeare's archetypal poet-as-maker—vision of his own best self; a new sense of Prospero's magical metaphysic as Shakespeare's magical poetic. In no one more than Shakespeare, and nowhere more than in his Sonnets, can we know and cherish the magic unpredictability of poetry's spell. The wisely sensitive critic can try only to pass it on as a noble contagion; he must treat it tentatively; he dare not try to capture it lest he loosen its hold on him.