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THE POET AS FOOL AND PRIEST

BY SIGURD BURCKHARDT

Feste: But indeed words are very rascals
since bonds disgraced them.

Viola: Thy reason, man?

Feste: Troth, sir, I can yield you none
without words; and words are
proven so false, I am loath to
prove reason with them.

(*Twelfth Night*, III, 1)

We know of Goethe that he was prompted to resume work on his “tragedy of the poet”—*Torquato Tasso*—while he was modelling a foot in a sculptor’s studio in Rome. Following this evidently potent impulse, he recast the unfinished play into blank verse and painfully completed it, with what he called “scarcely justifiable transfusions of my own blood.” What the connection was between modelling and the decision to take up again a long abandoned and extraordinarily difficult project, he did not say; but perhaps one may speculate. While his hands shaped the formless, malleable clay, may he not have wondered about the radical and dismaying difference between the sculptor’s medium and his own: between clay—or marble, pigment, tones—and words?

For the difference is radical. All other artists have for their medium what Aristotle called a material cause: more or less shapeless, always meaningless matter, upon which they can imprint form and meaning. Their media become media proper only under their hands; through shaping they communicate. As artists they are uniquely sovereign, minting unminted bullion into currency, stamping their image upon it. The poet is denied this creative sovereignty. His “material cause” is a medium before he starts to fashion it; he must deal in an already current and largely defaced coinage. In fact it is not even a coinage, but rather a paper currency. Words, as the poet finds them, are tokens for “real” things, which they are

supposed to signify—drafts upon a hoard of reality which it would be too cumbersome to put into circulation. Not merely is the poet denied the creative privilege of coining his own medium; his medium lacks all corporeality, is a system of signs which have only a secondary, referential substance.

A painter paints a tree or a triangle—and there it is. He may be representational, but he need not; whether he paints trees or triangles, they are corporeally there for us to respond to. There can be no non-representational poetry; the very medium forbids. MacLeish's "A poem should not mean but be" points to an important truth; but as it stands it is nonsense, because the medium of poetry is unlike any other. Words must mean; if they don't they are gibberish. The painter's tree *is* an image; but if the poet writes "tree," he does not create an image. He *uses* one; the poetic "image" is one only in a metaphorical sense. Actually it is something that evokes an image, a sign pointing to a certain preestablished configuration in our visual memory. The man who first "imagined" a unicorn could paint it; the poet could use the word only after the image had been created and seen (or else he would have had to describe it, i. e., to establish it as a composite of other preexistent images). The so-called poetic image achieves its effect only by denying its essence; it *is* a word, but it functions by making us aware of something other than it is. If many key terms of literary analysis—"color," "texture" and "image," for example—are in fact metaphors borrowed from the other arts, this is the reason: poetry has no-material cause. Words already have what the artist first wants to give them—meaning—and fatally lack what he needs in order to shape them—body.

I propose that the nature and primary function of the most important poetic devices—especially rhyme, meter and metaphor—is to release words in some measure from their bondage to meaning, their purely referential role, and to give or restore to them the corporeality which a true medium needs. To attain the position of creative sovereignty over matter, the poet must first of all reduce language to something resembling a material. He can never do so completely, only proximately. But he can—and that is his first task—drive a wedge between words and their meanings, lessen as much as possible their designatory

force and thereby inhibit our all too ready flight from them to the things they point to. Briefly put, the function of poetic devices is dissociative, or divestive.

The pun is one—I would say the second most primitive—way of divesting a word of its meaning. Where writers find so primitive a method especially appealing, we may suspect that they feel the need to create a true medium, and so to rebel against a token language, with particular intensity. When Shakespeare concludes his 138th sonnet, which explores the very complicated inversions of truth and falsehood between him and his mistress, with the couplet:

Therefore I lie with her and she with me,
And in our faults by lies we flattered be,

the pun is more than a joke, however bitter. It is the creation of a semantic identity between words whose phonetic identity is, for ordinary language, the merest coincidence. That is to say, it is an act of verbal violence, designed to tear the close bond between a word and its meaning. It asserts that mere phonetic—i. e. material, corporeal—likeness establishes likeness of meaning. The pun gives the word as entity primacy over the word as sign.

In doing so it gives the lie direct to the social convention that is language. Punning fell into disrepute in the 18th century and has only recently recovered its poetic respectability. Is not perhaps the reason that it is, by its very directness, revolutionary and anarchic? It denies the meaningfulness of words and so calls into question the genuineness of the linguistic currency on which the social order depends. It makes us aware that words may be counterfeits. When Adam asked Eve why she called that huge, flapeared, trunknosed beast an elephant, she is said to have answered: “Because it *looks* like one.” Somehow, insofar as we are good, law-abiding linguistic citizens, we all share this feeling of our common mother: that there is an inherent propriety in the sounds we make, a preestablished harmony between them and the things they designate. The pun shatters it. In an age which was determined to create and affirm a purely human order, to awaken and strengthen in men a sense of the fitness of things here and now—in such an age it was scarcely an accident that the no-nonsense critic

Dennis classed punsters with pick-pockets, and the gentle Addison was “desirous to get out of [their] world of magic, which had almost turned my brain” (*Spectator* 63). The covertly rebellious Pope was partial to the pun’s tamer brother, the zeugma; and Swift, anarchic idealist *malgré soi*, remained a privately passionate practitioner of this kind of subversion.

But the dilemma which the pun seeks to solve by violence confronts all poets; in a sense all poetic devices are more civilized forms of punning. That rhymes are partial puns is obvious. It is not often that they do their dissociative business as perfectly as at times with Pope:

Receive, great Empress! thy accomplished Son:
Thine from the birth, and sacred from the rod,
A dauntless infant! never scared with God.

(*Dunciad* IV),

where, interacting with “Son” and “sacred” (and its impious anagram “scared”), the words “rod” and “God” create the blasphemous identity schoolmaster’s birchrod = Holy Cross. But at least rhymes do one thing: they call attention to the purely sonant nature of words. Though they rarely shatter the unity of sound and meaning, as the pun does, they aid the poet in weighting the balance on the side of sound and thus giving the words body, which simply as signs they lack. To the degree that rhyme becomes a virtually mandatory convention of poetry, it necessarily loses a great deal of this force; the poet may then—as G. M. Hopkins does almost systematically—revitalize it by using it where it is not conventionally expected and so discounted: internally. But even in its faded form it serves its purpose.

Metaphors act analogously. When Octavius Caesar says of Antony and Cleopatra: “No grave upon the earth shall clip in it a pair so famous,” he is doing more than comparing two disparate things. By saying “clip” he makes of the grave a nuptial bed and beyond that of the bed one of the partners to the nuptials. As the bridegroom clips the bride, so the grave will embrace the now finally united and inseparable pair. In this way analysis transforms the metaphor into a conceptual simile, but the word “clip” does not invite comparison; rather it fuses separate and distinct meanings into a new verbal

identity, a trinity. And thereby it does something also to language. A grave which is likewise a bed and a bridegroom is, in fact, no longer a grave; neither are a pair of bodies corpses, who are at the same time a bride. The metaphor does not only fuse, it dissociates words from their meanings.

Ideally the language of social intercourse should be as windowglass; we should not notice that it stands between us and the meanings "behind" it. But when chemists recently developed a plastic coating which made the glass it was spread on fully invisible, the results were far from satisfactory: people bumped into the glass. If there were a language pure enough to transmit all human experience without distortion, there would be no need for poetry. But such a language not only does not, it cannot exist. Language can no more do justice to all human truth than law can to all human wishes. In its very nature as a social instrument it must be a convention, must arbitrarily order the chaos of experiences, allowing expression to some, denying it to others. It must provide common denominators, and so it necessarily falsifies, just as the law necessarily inflicts injustice. And these falsifications will be the more dangerous, the more "transparent" language seems to become, the more unquestioningly it is accepted as an undistorting medium. It is not windowglass, but rather a system of lenses which focus and refract the rays of an hypothetical unmediated vision. The first purpose of poetic language, and of metaphors in particular, is the very opposite of making language more transparent. Metaphors increase our awareness of the distortions of language by increasing the thickness and curvature of the lenses and so exaggerating the angles of refraction. They shake us loose from the comfortable conviction that a grave is a grave is a grave. They are semantic puns, just as puns are phonetic metaphors; though they leave words as sounds intact, they break their semantic identity.

Metaphors, then, like puns and rhyme, corporealize language, because any device which interposes itself between words and their supposedly simple meanings calls attention to the words as things. Meter has the same function; it is most like rhyme in that it also is a conventional means of stressing the purely phonetic matter which words without meanings are. It does

not merely establish a mood; that can be done in thousands of other ways. If it serves to channel the chaotic emotions of the poet into a manageable flow, that has nothing to do with us as readers or listeners. Insofar as it becomes, like rhyme, a binding convention of poetry, it loses its dissociative force; and so it is used by poets like, again, Hopkins in a special way. What internal rhyme does in a conventionally rhyming poetry, syncopated rhythms do in a prosody which conventionally demands a regular beat; Hopkins' "sprung rhythm" is the exact metrical analogue to his internal rhyme. But even in less systematically syncopated poetry the counterpoint of metrical and speech rhythms results in a dissociation. Since the words of a poem function simultaneously in two rhythmic systems, they belong fully to neither, just as the metaphorical word and the pun belong fully to neither of the two semantic systems they fuse.

Primarily all these devices do what the sea does in the song from *The Tempest*:

Full fathom five thy father lies,
Of his bones are corals made:
Those are pearls that were his eyes,
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell.
Burthen: ding dong
Heark, now I hear them; ding-dong bell.

These lines state so perfectly what poetry does to ordinary language, that one can hardly resist reading them allegorically; as the play is the poet-magician's testament to the world, so this song is the glance he grants us into his "bag of tricks." The word, which in prose fades into a sign, yielding its original invocative power to the thing which, by having named, it has in a manner created—the word is transformed into something rich and strange by poetry. But to become rich it must first become strange. Bones and eyes—purely functional things in the living organism—no sooner are divorced from it than they become macabre and grotesque. Yet if the poet allows his words no more than their functional identity in the body of the "living language," he surrenders his sovereignty as an

artist; he creates nothing, says nothing that is true beyond the partial and distorted truths this language has seen fit to grant us. He must tear the words out of their living matrix, so that they may not merely mean, but be. Perhaps I did Gertrude Stein an injustice just now when I paraphrased her to instance the comfortable conviction that words are of course what they mean, neither more nor less. For an even more primitive way than punning to strip words of their meanings is repetition. Say “a rose is a rose is a rose” a few more times, and what you have is a meaningless sound, because you have torn the word out of its living linguistic matrix and so are left with nothing but a vile phonetic jelly. This first step toward becoming poets we all can take, even if we are not clever enough to think of puns. And again it is often the greatest poets who avail themselves of repetition:

They that have power to hurt, and will do none,
That do not do the thing they most do show.

So Shakespeare opens his 94th sonnet. The fourfold repetition of *do* is of course not clumsiness; Shakespeare takes this seemingly most transparent, most purely functional of words and makes it gain body by repetition. A word we have been accustomed to look through as a mere auxiliary and expletive, having not even the referential substantiality of a proper verb or noun, becomes something in its own right, a dimension of existence, by repetition; so that when we read at the end: “For sweetest things turn sourest by their *deeds*,” we are prepared for the frightening force of the act merely as act. And if here repetition is used to give a “meaningless” word meaning, the fact nowise invalidates my argument, but rather enforces it; it is precisely the initial meaninglessness which makes this kind of change possible. Where there is a meaning already, as in:

So shalt thou feed on death, that feeds on men,
And death once dead, there's no more dying then.

the effect is, initially at least, the opposite (though basically the same): the word “death” and its derivatives come close to losing their signatory force. Repetition—and it would be easy to cite instances from other poets, especially those of the

17th Century and of our time—makes the word malleable, ready to take the imprint the poet wants to give it. It might not be bad pedagogy, in a course devoted to the teaching of poetry, to make the student repeat a poem's key words over and over, until they lose all semblance of meaning. He may then get a sense of what is the essence of poetry: the making such a vile jelly into a pearl.

What I have said of words holds true also of their combinations and relations: phrases and syntactical patterns. Empson has called attention to the frequency and efficacy of syntactical ambiguities; I need only to add that through them the meanings of syntactical relations are again called into question. A word which can function simultaneously as two or more different parts of speech, a phrase which can be parsed in two or more ways—to the despair of all grammar teachers—simply extends the pervasive incertitude of poetry from words to their connections into statements. And inversions and similar poetic “licenses” are after all not merely allowances made to compensate for the self-imposed handicaps of rhyme and meter—as though the poet were a golfer who engages to use only one hand if we allow him two extra strokes on every hole. They tend to become that, it is true; but it is just this tendency of theirs which causes the periodic rebellions against them and everything that bears the stigma of “poetic diction.” For poetic words and phrasings are not exempt from the fading process which bleaches ordinary language; they soon come to be felt as having an inherent “poeticalness,” which relieves the poet of the responsibility to make them strange. They too acquire a designatory function; only instead of meaning a thing or relation of things they mean: “This is poetry.” It is not surprising, therefore, that poets often feel impelled to do the very opposite of what, by my analysis, they ought to be doing—that they use the phrasings of the most ordinary speech and reject the built-in dissociations of “elevated” language. Once a generally accepted “poetic” idiom has developed, it is precisely by the return to the “Hurry up, please; it's time” kind of diction that the effect of dissociation may be achieved and we are made to attend once more to words *as* words. As the “pastoral” sentimentality of certain people's

poets shows, a return to common speech which is motivated by the will to "regain contact with the common man" yields poetry of a very low order. The true poetic meaning of such a return is almost the opposite: when the common reader has learned to accept the "unnatural" as natural—"because it's poetry, you know"—the poet may take to the "natural." The real motive remains the same: to wrest from a functionalized idiom the material which the artist needs for a true medium.

Under the headings pun, rhyme, metaphor and meter I have in fact already been discussing an aspect of poetic language which, since Empson, no treatment of poetics can afford to ignore: ambiguity. For Empson, ambiguity became all but synonymous with the essential quality of poetry; it meant complexity, associative and connotative richness, texture, and the possibility of irony. The ambiguous word proliferated like a vine, wove or revealed hidden strands between the most various and distinct spheres of our prosaically ordered world. By exploiting the ambiguity of words the poet could ironically undercut the surface meanings of his statements, could avail himself fully of the entire field of meanings which a word has and is. I want to shift the stress of Empson's analysis a little. He made us aware that one word can—and in great poetry commonly does—have *many meanings*; I would rather insist on the converse, that many meanings can have *one word*. For the poet, the ambiguous word is the crux of the problem of creating a medium for him to work in. If meanings are primary and words only their signs, then ambiguous words are false; each meaning should have its word, as each sound should have its letter. But if the reverse is true and words are primary—if, that is, they are the corporeal entities the poet requires—then ambiguity is something quite different: it is the fracturing of a pristine unity by the analytic conceptualizations of prose. The poet must assume that where there is one word there must, in some sense, be unity of meaning, no matter what prose usage may have done to break it. The pun is the extreme form of this assumption, positing unity of meaning even for purely accidental homophones, such as the sound shifts of a language will happen to produce.

Ambiguity, then, becomes a test case for the poet; insofar as he can vanquish it—not by splitting the word, but by fusing

its meanings—he has succeeded in making language into a true medium; insofar as it vanquishes him, he must abdicate his position as a “maker.” I would say, therefore, that he does not primarily exploit the plurisignations of words, as though they were a fortunate accident; rather he accepts, even seeks out their challenge, because he knows that in his encounter with them the issue of his claim is finally joined and decided. A pun may be a mere play, a rhyme a mere jingle, even a metaphor only an invitation to conceptual comparisons; true ambiguities are another matter. With them it is not a question of taking two words or meanings and showing how, in some sense, they are one, but rather of taking one word and showing that it is more than a potpourri of the meanings we have a mind to attach to it. Since the poet’s credo must be the opening of St. John: “In the beginning was the Word,” he meets the temptation of meaning ultimately in ambiguity.

Empson takes ambiguity in the widest sense; of his seven types it is the last which is of special interest here. It is the ambiguity of contradiction, or to take it more narrowly, of negation. If the preceding argument is valid, negation poses for the poet a crucial problem: it denies the existence of something which, simply by mentioning, it affirms, almost creates. The problem is not, of course, confined to poetry; if I say, “There is no God,” I am caught in something of a contradiction. But in prose I have a way out; I can interpret my statement to mean: “The word ‘God’ refers to nothing that exists and therefore has no true meaning”; or more cautiously: “‘God’ is only a notion in the heads of some unenlightened people and cannot be said to ‘be’.” This way out is not available to the poet, since even the negated word is corporeally there and so demonstrates its reality. Nietzsche said: “God is dead.”

There is a passage in the *Aeneid* in which Jupiter foretells the future achievements of Rome and the Julian family; it ends thus:

“Then shall war cease, and the iron ages soften . . . The dreadful steel-clenched gates of War shall be shut fast; inhuman Fury, his hands bound behind him with an hundred rivets of brass, shall sit within on murderous weapons, shrieking with ghastly blood-stained lips.”

This is rather like the allegorical sculptures in which a triumphant main figure has its foot firmly planted on the neck of a now impotent, teeth-gnashing figure of War (or perhaps Disease, or Hunger). It is evident that the sculptor—or painter, or musician—cannot negate; he cannot express “There is no war,” since War, even to be negated, must be physically there. In prose, a negative particle or pronoun is a sign that what follows is to be ignored or discounted; if I say “Nothing pleases him,” I expect my listener to discount the word “pleases.” But it can, and in poetry often must, be taken differently, as “He is pleased by nothingness.” The classical instance of this ambiguity is the story of Ulysses and Polyphemos; Ulysses exploits it by giving his name as “Nobody.” Polyphemos, having visible proof of the corporeality of this “nobody,” accepts the word in its poetic sense; his fellows later, lacking such proof, take the word in its prose sense; it is through this split in human discourse that crafty Ulysses escapes. But the poet’s purpose is to tell truths—truths which escape the confines of discursive speech. And to do so, he is committed to the word, even the negative, as in some sense physically present. How, then, can he express negations?

I believe that one of the more puzzling of Shakespeare’s sonnets poses this problem sharply and so may yield an answer—the 116th:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
 Admit impediments. Love is not love,
 Which alters when it alteration finds
 Or bends with the remover to remove.
 O no! It is an ever fixèd mark
 That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
 It is the star to every wandring bark,
 Whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken.
 Love’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
 Within his bending sickle’s compass come;
 It alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
 But bears it out e’en to the edge of doom.
 If this be error and upon me proved,
 I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

Shakespeare here tries to define the core word of the entire sonnet sequence in a series of negative and positive equations.

The rhetorical structure implies a debate; the disputatious dare of the couplet is almost strident. We can do no less than accept the challenge.

There is no arguing about definitions; but this one of love is more than commonly wilful. Shakespeare is more of a "high-flyer" even than Plato; where Plato wisely excepted Eros from his Ideas so that he might have some means of bridging the chasm between them and the world of appearances, Shakespeare Platonizes this very force. The definition he proposes removes love completely from the sphere of human feeling, even puts it into explicit contrast with the sole plainly human element in the sonnet: "rosy lips and cheeks." Love is the Pole Star, fixed in timeless immobility infinitely far above the sublunary world of change and decay; it is incommensurable to human understanding, let alone attainable by human striving. A word which in ordinary usage is warm, intimate and caressing, Shakespeare makes cold, hard and precise. Not even Dante managed to live up to standards as rigorous as the sonnet prescribes; ordinary men could claim to have loved only if the definition were lowered a good deal. What we should expect Shakespeare to say at the end is the opposite of what he does say: not "If this be error," but rather "If this be *true*, no man ever loved." (I am leaving aside, for the moment, the equally startling other conclusion: "I never writ.") We may not be able to dispute his definition, but his conclusion is another matter. On the face of it it seems nonsense.

There are two ways out of the dilemma; or to put it differently, the dilemma results from the sonnet's being read partly as if it were prose, partly as if it were poetry. If I read the second line ("Love is not love") as a discursive proposition—"Love is not a feeling which . . ." or "That love is not true love which . . ."—I must read the double negative of the last line in the same way, "so that [as Feste says], conclusions to be as kisses, if your [two] negatives make your [one] affirmative, why then"—everybody has always loved. Unless, that is, the poet's definition is the true one, anybody's claim to the feeling is as good as anybody else's; brutal lust and sophomoric sentimentality, sordid calculation and disguised hatred—whatever feeling man has seen fit to baptize "love" is then entitled

to the name. If we read "love" as we do in prose—as a sign for a feeling—the first negation must be in some manner rephrased in order to make sense at all; the simplest way is to rewrite it so that within a larger genus of feelings love is the species which has immutability as its differentia. This logical rewording—which I think we do almost without being conscious of it—compels us to a logical reading of the double negative, so that the sonnet concludes: If this definition is erroneous, if the differentia is not applicable, then love is not a separate species but returns into the chaos of meanings which men, deceiving or self-deceived, have called "love"; that is, every man who ever said he loved did so.

But in poetry two negatives do not make an affirmative. To the poetic reading of the last line—in which one negative reinforces the other—corresponds a poetic reading also of the earlier negation. Then, since it is the word *itself* which is negated, the word is annulled, struck from the language. "On any terms less than mine," so Shakespeare says, "the word 'love' is expunged." The corporeal entity he put there was cancellable by nothing less than an absolute negation, the negation of the word itself. He could not say: "Love which alters is only lust (or some other feeling)," because one real entity does not cancel another. He could not say: "Love which alters is not real love," because entities are real simply by being there. He could not equate negatively in the ordinary way, because a negative equation always implies that the word is used differently on the two sides. If I say: "Your love is no love," I mean: "You are using the wrong word for the thing (feeling) in question." One of the two loves stands in quotation marks, or else the statement is nonsense. But the poet does not have this out, since his universe is a verbal one; every one of his words has quotation marks around it. His negations therefore are absolute—they are destructions. Love which alters is not-love, its own negation; it cancels itself into non-existence. This reading likewise makes sense: with the word "love" struck out—as it is if the poet is in error—no man can ever have loved.

Now the first conclusion ("I never writ") reveals itself as no mere hyperbolic reaffirmation, but an equally rigorous

consequence. Shakespeare defines love as a superhuman, transcendent constancy and offers, as the only alternative to his definition, not any change or reduction of criteria, but the annulment of the word, and with it of whatever it may stand for. It is as though one were to define light and then claim that if one's definition were proved false, light did not exist. The claim is as arrogant as it is, for the poet, necessary; it can, in fact, be justified by nothing less than his staking his existence as poet on it. If the word has not the absolute constancy assigned it by the poet, it is nothing; and then the words he has been writing are meaningless doodles. If the word is a sign drawing for its substance upon the multifarious and ever shifting meanings given it in the intercourse of men, the poet's business is at an end—and really also that of ordinary language, which rests on the faith that words are fixed and determinable. If "love" receives its semantic content from what I happen to be feeling at the moment I say it, it is not a word any longer but an emotional grunt. Or, to put the matter again in terms of the other reading of the ambiguous double negative: If everyone has true title to saying "love" when he feels like it—to coin the word without regard to what it "means" by itself—everyone is in effect a poet, using words with creative sovereignty. Every fleeting utterance is then poetry, and the claim to more than momentary validity which the poet "proper" has entered and symbolized by the act of writing is a vain pretension. It all comes to the same thing: there is no real difference between All and Nothing, since both deny the possibility of differentiation. If all speech is poetry, no speech is; if we all have always loved, none of us has ever loved.

What I have done amounts to substituting the term "word" for "love" in the sonnet; I believe we are meant to. I would even propose as a working hypothesis that a great many puzzles—and not only in Shakespeare—might be solved by such a substitution. To stay with the 116th sonnet: what is the marriage of true minds? How is it to be consecrated and consummated? In the already quoted 138th sonnet the mere sexual act is equated with lying; the marriage of true minds must be its polar opposite. I do not see how it can be consummated except verbally; *speech* is the marriage of true minds. And

the impediments to it are the infinite possibilities of deception which words, in their ambiguity, contain. Unless words are constant, union of minds is impossible, even if these minds can be assumed to be individually and severally true.

But insofar as words are signs for meanings, they cannot be constant, for meanings are necessarily private and may shift from moment to moment, from person to person. The problem does not become acute in the crude approximations of everyday life, to be sure; as the laws of Newton are still very adequate to describe the behavior of the gross physical bodies about us, so ordinary language will serve for the gross needs of social intercourse. But none of us need rack his memory long for instances where it did not serve—where one cannot be sure that the meanings one clothes in words are also the meanings these words will convey to the person addressed. Occasions of saying “love” will be the most signal examples. The laws of verbal gravitation are operative as long as we can rely on an absolute frame of social reference; but when it comes to determining the relationship of two bodies in absolute isolation and no longer referable to a system of social coordinates which posits a pre-established harmony—when, in other words, the need of communion becomes most insistent, the problem of language most acute—precisely then these laws break down and we are cast into a time-space continuum of verbal relativity which seems to deny all possibility of relation, because none of our terms are meaningful except as we arbitrarily assume a reference point—which can be only ourselves.

The syntax of the sonnet does not determine whether “love” is to be considered as synonymous with “marriage of true minds” or as an instance of a possible impediment to such a marriage. But I do not think this ambiguity matters. Unlike ordinary marriage, that of true minds can be consecrated and consummated only verbally; it has no sacrament, nor ring, nor ritual cohabitation to give it body. The impediments people are invited to bring forth when the banns are published are therefore not impediments to this kind of marriage; there is no physical fact, such as consanguinity, which could invalidate it, since it is of minds. The only possible impediment lies in the danger that the words by which the marriage is consecrated

and consummated are not valid—as, for example, the words “I now pronounce you . . .” would not be, if the speaker were not a true priest. It is the absence of this third party to the sacrament—this bodily representative of both the social and the divine coordinates—which makes the question of the validity of the words themselves so extraordinarily urgent. The Oxford philosophers have recently called attention to a class of statements called “operative,” which do not describe but rather perform by statement. The sacramental statements are the readiest instances. But what makes them possible, or “operative,” is the entire order and authority, human and divine, which the speaker represents, the sanctions and penalties it commands. A marriage of true minds is without benefit of clergy and consequently has no other sanction and sanctity than what is contained in the words themselves which seal it. If words are ambiguous, such a marriage is a farce.

It can, therefore, be challenged simply by the question: “What do you mean by love?” (Indeed, what do you mean by anything you say to another person?) It is this challenge, and the implied impediment, which the sonnet is written to meet. But it cannot meet it by saying: “By love I mean. . . .” Feelings, and consequently meanings, can never be enough here; what is wanted is an *operative* word, not a meaning—a sacramental word, which carries its sacramental force within it, as an immanent meaning. And that means: a word no longer a sign; a word removed from the mutability of things, the infinitely greater mutability of feelings, of which ordinary words are the signs. This kind of word does not *have* meanings, but rather *gives* them.

Of course there is a paradox here: such a word is empty sound. In order to rescue it from the tempestuous chaos of meaning, the poet, so it seems, has had to remove it to a height so great, to reduce it to a point so without area, that its “worth’s unknown.” The gyrating planets and signs of the zodiac have a known worth—i. e., determinable astrological meaning; but they have it only, the language of the Heavens is intelligible only, because their gyrations are referable to the Pole Star, which could not give meaning if it had any itself. Words are infinitely “meaningful”; they are man’s cry for

union and the answering cry. But more than a cry is required, if a word is to be more than mere animal sound; in order that a marriage of minds may be celebrated, not only the pathetic, inarticulate "bark" of the dog baying at the stars is needed, but likewise the sacramental sign—the "mark." Both sign and sound are meaningless, taken by themselves; hence the syntactic ambiguity of "whose" in line 8, which has for possible antecedents both "star" and "bark." (The ambiguity of "bark" itself, as drifting ship and aimless animal sound is a relatively simple one.)

What Shakespeare is saying, then, is something like this: "You have raised an impediment, challenged the possibility of human communion, called into question the legitimacy and sanctity of speech, where its meaning is not authorized by church and state. This challenge I will not—as poet cannot—admit. If you ask: 'What do you mean by . . . ?,' I answer: 'I mean what I say.' As poet I pledge myself to use words with a constancy so inhuman and remote from the chaotic meanings you attach to them that they would, taken by themselves, be empty signs. You may rely on it that when I say 'love' or any other word, I do not mean by it whatever vaporous feelings or notions may be agitating my viscera or brain. I shall be the priest to this marriage; that is, I shall forego human love so that your love may be sanctified. I will be celibate and renounce self-expression, so that you may speak truly or, what is the same thing, truly speak. But there is meaning in what I say, because without me you are merely making emotional grunts. The meanings of your words can never be just what you have in mind when you say them; to have anything like meaning they must have an external pole. Meaning is the product of what you 'mean' and of the word as an absolute constant independent of your private thoughts, just as marriage is the product of your human intentions and the sacramental act. Where there is no social and religious authority to guarantee and compel validity and constancy, there I am and speak. If I am heretical in making this claim, then I have done nothing but made doodles on a sheet of paper; but likewise no man has ever talked meaningfully, except where he spoke for or answered to authority."

It is tempting to trace, in its minute precision, the sonnet's verbal structure and thereby to show how Shakespeare, in this reply, also refutes the traditional, common-sense method of fixing meanings by definitions. From line 2 through line 11 he ironically demonstrates that definitions, instead of fixing words, split them. In the first quatrain, identity is denied—"love is not love"—but denied through a monotonous sequence of verbal identities: love-love, alter-alteration, remover-remove. In the second quatrain identity is affirmed—love is something—but affirmed through equations with two terms completely different from the term to be defined. Lines 9-11 involve in their negation not only man, the fool of time, nor only the terms "alter" and "bend" of the first quatrain, but also—through "bending sickle" (= moon) and "compass"—the hitherto positive celestial-navigation metaphor of the second. In other words, as long as Shakespeare tries to define by the traditional method of predication, he gets only into a muddle of self-contradictions: the word is not what it is; it is what it is not; it is not what it is not. When Sir Toby Belch greets the disguised Feste as "Master Parson," Feste accepts the honor thus: "As the old hermit of Prague, that never saw pen and ink, very wittily said to a niece of King Gorboduc, 'That that is is'; so I, being master Parson, am master Parson; for what is 'that' but 'that,' and 'is' but 'is'?" The point is, of course, that he is *not* a parson, but Feste the Fool, the "corrupter of words." As soon as a real word is set for the hermit's pronoun, the most unchallengeable of all tautologies—the principle of identity—turns into a falsehood. (Not a complete one, however; in taking on a parson's appearance, Feste in a sense becomes one.) The poet must always be half fool, the corrupter of words; but he has seen pen and ink, has written, and must therefore be a parson in a much more serious sense than Feste; else he "never writ."

All these paradoxes and contradictions are resolved—insofar as words can ever resolve them—in line 12. Already in line 11 an *action* has been predicated of 'love,' but only a negated one; now finally, after all the contradictory attempts to say what love *is*, we are told that it does something. "But bears it out" is the poet's final and unequivocal answer to the challenge.

The word ("love") is not an entity, but rather an act; this is the first time in the sonnet that the subject is not directly followed by its predicate, but stands removed from it by a whole line. Moreover, whereas action necessarily involves change, *this* action is duration, the opposite of change. Yet it is not passive and intransitive, as duration normally would be; it has no subject in a sense, but it does have an object: "it," which hitherto has always stood for "love," but now stands not really for anything. The word is an act which is neither subject to time nor transcends it, but is time's coequal. But beyond all this the word is pregnant and fruitful, it "bears" and so serves the true purpose of all marriages.

These few notes must do to show how aware Shakespeare is of the ironies of his enterprise, the paradoxes of his medium, and with what almost desperate precision he seeks to overcome them. As a poet he cannot negate, though that must again and again be his impulse toward false words; the limitation upon omnipotence is that it cannot say "no"; it can only destroy. The poet's negations are destructions; "love is not love." But he cannot affirm either; that is, he cannot predicate by equations; for to say of a word that it is something other than itself is to lie. The definitions of logic are monstrous confusions if we hold words sacred, as the poet must. Indeed, the poet hardly dare write words; ambiguity always threatens. The poet's undertaking—to make words into a material cause—draws with it such formidable dangers that he is constantly teetering on the edge between the lie and silence: between tyranny and abdication. (Shakespeare's repeated treatment of this theme—*King Lear*, *Measure for Measure* and *The Tempest* are not the only instances—suggests that it is a besetting and lasting problem for him, demanding again and again to be solved.)

What sustains him in this perilous balance is the love of the Word in its absolute integrity. As *Othello* demonstrates, that is no easy matter; the most sacred thing is also the most vulnerable. The poet would be much safer if he did not commit himself to the Word, but in ironic detachment exploited the infinite ambiguities of speech. Or he could retreat to the safety of a socio-religious order, give up his claim to verbal priesthood

and turn "mouthpiece." Both roads have been taken; but they lead to self-abnegation. The poet as a fool must be a corrupter of words, a punster, rhymster, verbal trickster, for there is no other way to break the disgraceful bonds into which words have fallen. But if he is not also, and ultimately, priest—if he is not a parson disguised as a fool rather than a fool disguised as a parson—speech will be "wanton" rather than sacramental: "Why, sir, her name's a word; and to dally with that word might make my sister wanton."

Our Empsonian delight in the poet's play with ambiguities, our Richardsian mistrust of a critical mystique ought not to dissolve our awareness that, when all is "said and done," the poet *acts* by *speaking*. The bawdy of his fools is necessary; poetic devices must be dissociative, for the commonlaw marriage between meaning and sound—ordinary language—is a denial both of sanctity and freedom. But lust is not the last word; it is an expense of spirit in a waste of shame. In the end the poet must commit himself unequivocally; the last word is love. It is the poet's minimum indefinable (in Russell's sense); the word without which not only all other words, but the very act of speech, the very attempt to enter into a marriage of minds, would be meaningless. When Shakespeare equates it with the star, the equation is not reductive, as in logic, but transformative: "love" is both itself and the star, both the inarticulate sound and the empty sign. Where the philosopher seeks certitude in the sign—the 'p' of propositional calculus—and the mystic in the ineffable—the "OM" of the Hindoos—the poet takes upon himself the paradox of the human word, which is both and neither and which he creatively transforms in his "powerful rhyme." This rhyme is his deed; it dissociates, dissolves the word into its components—mark and bark—but simultaneously fuses it into a new and now sacramental union.

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