CHAPTER III

A POEM NONE KNOWS WELL

Shakespeare's poetic style, as a number of critics have recognized, characteristically enacts on its reader or auditor the natural fact of temporal process. His "intellectual action," as Coleridge described it, "is wholly unlike that of Ben Jonson . . . who sees the totality of a sentence or passage, and then projects it entire. Shakespeare goes on creating, and evolving B. out of A., and C. out of B., and so on, just as a serpent moves, which makes a fulcrum of its own body, and seems forever twisting and untwisting its own strength." This observation, which is especially pertinent to the sonnets, describes not only poems that are explicitly devoted to the particular effects of temporal process, such as those examined in the last chapter, but equally those in which the poet has attempted to establish statements of persistent general truth. The problem of coherence in such poems, with which this chapter is chiefly concerned, is necessarily greater than it is in those poems that openly acknowledge and confront the power of time. And Shakespeare's accomplishment in at least one case is correspondingly more remarkable. That case is Sonnet 129.

The first half-line of the couplet that concludes this remarkable poem, "All this the world well knows," refers to a kind of knowledge that is general both in its substance and in its dissemination. The last line-and-a-half, however, "yet none knows well / To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell," replaces such knowledge with a point of personally relevant understanding, a point so narrowly individual, indeed, that no one fully possesses it. The substance of particular wisdom is emphasized, moreover, in an impressive line-defined antithesis. To enforce this epistemological discrimination, Shakespeare has organized the whole couplet as a chiasmus — or what the Renaissance rhetorician, Thomas Wilson, would have called a "regression." Setting aside the subjects of the opposed statements, "world" and "none," both of which are normally placed, the antithesis unfolds: object . . . well knows . . . knows well / object. This pattern, which is emphasized by the "All this . . . this hell" chiasmic reflection in the extreme iambic, renders the point of personal knowledge, which is
enhanced by the grandeur of its diction, with tremendous force. The meaning of the couplet entire, as Laura Riding and Robert Graves have suggested, is that "No one really knows anything of lust except in personal experience." This explains why no one knows it well: each person learns well enough to shun lust only by not shunning it, achieving a sufficient understanding, that is to say, only when it is too late.

We may be inclined to complain that Shakespeare has settled for a narrowly witty conclusion here, as he did in 147; and he does seem to have replaced a knowledge that is too shallow ever to have any human value with a knowledge that always comes too late to be any human use. But the full effect of the couplet is more interesting than this and more complicated. "All this" and "this hell" both refer beyond themselves: "All this" to a body of wisdom, which we will soon examine, that is much richer and more problematical than such a dismissal as this suggests; "this hell" to something else. To understand what, we must recall what "hell" meant to Shakespeare in Sonnet 144, to young Hamlet in his denunciation of his mother’s sexual appetite, and to old Lear in his universal attack on female lechery.

Here is Lear’s argument:

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Behold yond simp'ring dame,
Whose face between her forks presageth snow;
That minces virtue, and does shake the head
To hear of pleasure’s name —
The fitchew nor the soiled horse goes to’t
With a more riotous appetite.
Down from the waist they are Centaurs,
Though women all above.
But to the girdle do the gods inherit,
Beneath is all the fiend’s: There’s hell, there’s darkness,
There is the sulphurous pit; burning, scalding,
Stench, consumption. Fie, fie, fie!
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In the last line of 129 “hell” obviously balances “heaven” so that the line as a whole provides a general opposition to “all this”: everybody acknowledges the truth of the first twelve lines; but nobody knows enough to apply it to his conduct. But “this hell,” coming at the end of a poem on lust, prompts the reader to recognize the very “hell” in which the poet—and how many other “men”?—shamefully expended his own “spirit,” the very “waste”—and the very waist—from which he learned the lesson he here proclaims. The pun on “hell,” which is foreshadowed by the carnal penumbra surrounding the second “knows,” directs the reader of 129 to the particular basis of the poet’s knowledge of lust and thus renders that knowledge itself particular. “This hell” infuses the couplet with the light of personal experience that Riding and Graves recognized, and illuminates the paradox—that no one can know well enough what the poet knows only too well—with which Shakespeare has concluded this poem.
Its first twelve lines, however, are abstract in diction and in argument throughout their course:

Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action; and, till action, lust
Is perjured, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;
Enjoyed no sooner but desipèd straight;
Past reason hunted, and no sooner had,
Past reason hated, as a swallowed bait
On purpose laid to make the taker mad;
Mad in pursuit, and in possession so;
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
A bliss in proof — and proved, a very woe;
Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.

No single intellectual being is designated at any point; neither the poetic voice nor its respondency is personalized, as in so many of the sonnets; nothing in these lines suggests any particular situation or event. In one tightly fused compound sentence, the poet develops a definition of lust before, during, and after "action.” The fact that lustful commerce is necessarily concrete and individual in nature, a fact that helps the poet activate second meanings in "expense," "spirit," and "waste" in the very first line, no doubt prompts the reader to reach toward personal applications, but the language presents a surface of abstract, ethical discussion from beginning to end. Barbara Herrnstein Smith has written that these twelve lines, in their tone, their vocabulary, and their moral observations, suggest a sermon.⁴

Shakespeare has, nevertheless, as must now be demonstrated, implied a concrete, personal basis for his final pronouncement, a basis of particular intellectual awareness, at every step in his discourse. He has done so by weaving together several poetic devices, each of which makes a special demand on the mind of the individual reader and indicates a special understanding in the mind of the poet. There are, first, rhetorical systems that force the reader to correct his understanding as he proceeds through the poem; second, metrical discriminations and emphases that suggest more precise and more substantial meanings than the language otherwise contains; and, third, an expansion in the scope of the diction from quatrain to quatrain—and in the last quatrain from line to line—that requires the reader continually to expand his notion of the subject. The poetic tissue entire constitutes a learning experience.⁵ Thus without ever mentioning the question of knowledge, Shakespeare dramatizes it, forcing the reader, as he advances toward a more adequate understanding of lust, to recognize his present reliance on a mind more exact, more profound, and more capacious than his own and his dependency upon the discoveries of temporal process for all he can ever know.
The chiasmic ordering of the first quatrain and, more narrowly, the inversion of the first statement immediately involve the reader in suspense and then, as he proceeds, in revision. In the belated light of "lust" he must reconsider both the general force of the first line and the meaning of almost every one of its terms. Prior to this substantival limitation, the focus of line one is extremely broad: some use of divine or intellectual substance in some kind of shameful extravagance; and the suggestion in the opening "Th'" that the poet has a specific use in his mind creates a puzzle for the reader. "Is lust" resolves this puzzle and narrows the reader's intellectual focus—if not down to just one meaning for "expense" or "spirit" or "waste"—to a much more pointed sense of line 1 entire; and it makes these terms crackle. We may notice, further, that the syntax of line 1 is transformed from a likely subject—and the subject, moreover, of a transitive verb—into a definitive predicate. Shakespeare's energetic handling of rhetoric and meter impels the reader forward, but even as he advances into further exposition and new interpretive puzzles, he must reassess line 1.

This line slants in syntax from a nominative ("expense") to an ablative ("waste") element, but it is balanced in meter and rhetoric, being divided between two apparently synonymous substantives each of which is modified by an of phrase. Because of this balance, "waste" at first means something like "prodigality." The possibility of a secondary meaning, "desert," seems to me, although it may be enforced by the syntactic slant of the line, to be rather remote (I wonder if Gray's famous line, "And waste its sweetness on the desert air," does not—even more than Shakespeare's own "wastes of time" in Sonnet 12—have something to do with our susceptibility to this figurative extension of "waste"). At any rate, "lust" activates a quite different geographical meaning of this term that must, among other things, replace "desert." Thus in the one term are focused two remarkably diverse meanings, first "prodigality" and then "waist," each one pertinent to lust, the first general and didactic, the second particular and experiential. "Expense," "spirit," and "shame" are correspondingly augmented; and even "in" is retrospectively endowed with a new concreteness.

The implied distinction between the understanding of the poet and that of his reader, which accompanies such an improvement of the reader's knowledge, is renewed again and again throughout the poem. At the end of line 13, for instance, the reader must briefly entertain a distinction between everybody's well knowing "All this" and nobody's knowing it well. This distinction is verified, as our present examination should show, by the intellectual processes indicated in the lines to which "All this" refers. The reader is nevertheless required by line 14 to replace it, turning his attention to a new distinction that is defined by the couplet as a whole. In line 2, again, the poet seems first to equate lust "in action" with lust "till action,"
both of these conditions, or so it seems for a moment, being defined by line 1. But the uncoiling chiasmus forces the reader to recognize that "and" coordinates not two substantives, but two clauses; it thus makes him relinquish the notion that these two phases of lust are alike and prepare to face a definitive or, as it turns out, a descriptive exposition of lust "till action," that is, of the earlier phase.

Lines 6-7 provide a quite different exercise, but one that is similarly surprising. In this case the reader begins with an apparent regression or, rather, with a regressive texture: "Enjoyed no sooner . . . no sooner had"; "Past reason hunted . . . had / Past reason." The first of these patterns helps him maintain his grasp on the complex interlocking of the three phases of lust; but he is forced as he advances to surrender the second, replacing it with the parallel "Past reason hunted . . . / Past reason hated." The correspondence between these two phrases in metrical placing and in rhythm validates the revision. We should notice, further, that the alliterating h first enforces the chiasmus and then assures its contradiction. The immediate effects of this practice are, of course, quite different from anything in the first quatrain. In line 2, the reader had to surrender a brief appearance of equivalence between two phases of lust in favor of an emphatic enunciation of their difference. In this case, however, there remains a trace of his first impression that lust in possession is in its irrationality, at least, similar to lust before and after possession. He comes to see, however, although not yet fully to see, that it is irrational in some different way: lust is irrationally "hunted" before possession and irrationally "hated" afterwards; but the reader must wait (until line 11) to learn the nature of the irrationality of lust in possession. The impression of the poet's knowledge and the reader's dependence is maintained in quatrain 2, then, but the details of this impression have been changed or, more truly, extended.

Sonnet 129 is a web of parallel and regressive antitheses. Line 5, for example, which stands between regressions that we have just analyzed, defines a parallel opposition between lust in action and lust completed. Line 12, another line-defined system, is also regular in disposition; whereas lines 9 and 11, although each of them is sharply defined, present regressive patterns. The "so" that ends line 9, however, asserts an identity between the chiasmically opposed elements; the poet thus cancels with diction the corrective indications of his rhetoric. Line 11, on the other hand, requires an even greater revision than the rhetoric alone would indicate. This line invites the reader briefly to entertain the pleasant thought that lust is a bliss both "in proof—and proved"; this would mean, first, both in its second and third phases and, second, both in particular experience and in general truth. The fact that it is "bliss" that the reader is prompted to take in this fuller way obviously baits the hook. But then lust "proved" turns into "a very woe." This reversal is rhetorically analogous to that practiced in line 2;
but the play on “proof” and “proved,” the line definition, and the terse switch from “bliss” to “woe” make it, like every rhetorical event in the poem, unique and surprising.

Yvor Winters’s complaint that 129 is “repetitious in structure” is wrong on two counts. In the first place, Shakespeare has woven together a tissue of regular and regressive antitheses; in the second, he has given each rhetorical strand a unique articulation. In responding to the whole system, the reader must contend with shifting modes of organization and expression, with modes that are especially challenging, moreover, because each one is deceptively similar to certain others. He must continuously struggle toward new understanding from a level somewhat below that of the poet and from a level, furthermore, that is always shifting in its relationship to the poet’s level. The reader is thus continuously reminded by Shakespeare’s rhetoric of the imperfection of his own intellectual awareness and his dependence on that of the poet.

Shakespeare’s handling of his meter, toward which we must now turn our chief attention, enriches and extends the effects of his rhetoric. The series of adjectives defined by lines 3-4 seems to Douglas Peterson “not to be particularly appropriate to the strict sonnet form”—despite the fact that it exactly fills a line-pair and is concluded with the first quatrain. This series “fails appreciably to advance or define the theme,” Peterson complains, because “its effects are essentially connotative.” A study of the metrical disposition of this material will counter such an opinion. In the full antithesis defined by quatrain 1, Shakespeare has opposed the substantive “expense” (with its modification) to a string of qualifiers. The repeated verb “is,” which governs this obviously inequivalent opposition, is thus wrenched from what Santayana would have described as a “definitive” to what he would have called a “predicative” link.

But the precision, both verbal and metrical, with which the poet has dignified the substance of the opposition to “expense” prompts the reader to establish a balance, substantive against substantive: recognizing the range and the variety of the misconduct displayed in lines 3-4, he may infer that, although lust in action is a single, easily expressed business (an expense of a certain kind), lust till action is a chaotically indefinable one, a frantic immersion in all kinds of vicious behavior—in any activity, no matter how far removed from the exercise of lust itself, no matter how vile—that may be required to achieve its goal. The expression “full of blame” and the energetic thrust of the series as a whole strongly imply that the listed items are merely a selection, a representative sample, from the variety of misconduct that characterizes lust till action. Thus the reader, without neglecting the diverse connotations of the actual adjectival list, derives from it a substantival value that refines the syntax of the first quatrain and balances its antithesis.

The connotations of the list are, moreover, more focused than they
may seem. The extreme items, "perjured" and "not to trust," are nearly synonymous and thus provide the series with a chiasmic envelope of sorts. The difference between these two expressions, however, suggests a more impressive ordering. Line 3, as its first term suggests, describes accomplished acts that may be specifically blamed and even tried in a court of law: the Latin root for "justice" is embedded, of course, in "perjured." The seemingly anomalous term "bloody" actually underscores this point of coherence, giving "murder" a shocking specificity. Prompted, perhaps, by the succeeding word, we may recall the "bloody blameful blade" with which bully Pyramus "bravely broach'd his boiling bloody breast" or, in a different vein, Lady Macbeth's horrified retrospection of Duncan's murder: "who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?" Line 3 of 129, at any rate, directs one's attention toward accomplished crimes that may be attributed to "lust . . . till action." Line 4, however, refers not to acts, but to states of being; not to specific misdeeds, but to generally vicious tendencies; not to crimes against the laws of God and man, finally, but to a general offensiveness to ethics and civility. "Not to trust," which the reader may understand to mean either "untrustworthy" or "suspicious," indicates not a hard lie, as "perjured" does, but an environment of falsehood. The term "extreme," again, placed here between "Savage" and "rude," recalls the chief ethical failure described by Aristotle, the failure to achieve the mean.16

The separate identity of each sub-series is enforced by the metrical division of the two lines, by the impressive alliteration of the bl sound which closes off the first, and by the climactic phrasal closure of both. Each line has its own metrical identity, moreover: the first half of 3, for instance, thrusts three successive trochaic terms against the prevailing iambic movement, and 4 opens with a striking trochaic inversion. Such metrical practices allow Shakespeare to dramatize the chaotic fury of lust till action, rendering its differences from lust in action with representative immediacy, without inflicting chaos on his discourse. The fact that a studious reader like Mr. Peterson became so involved in this representation that he missed its order and its definitive implications merely illustrates the divergence implicit in Shakespeare's metrical practice between the poet's understanding and that of his reader.

Throughout 129 Shakespeare has used the various emphases and definitions of meter to enforce and, as we have just seen, to create intellectual discriminations.11 Recognizing that he considers lust in three sequential phases, (a) before, (b) during, and (c) after action, we see that the first quatrain is divided into an opposition between b and a; that the second quatrain, although it acknowledges b (in the first half of line 5 and in the second half of 6) and takes vivid notice of a (in the first half of 6), is focused on c; and that the third, a highly analytical system, gives equal scope to each
of the three — a, b (line 9), c, b, a (10), b, c (11), and a, c (12). In proceeding from the first to the second quatrain, the poet follows the natural sequence, moving from a through b (“Enjoyed”) to c. In going between the second and third, however, he jumps, by means of the “mad/Mad” echo, from c to a. The poem generally, as it is a tissue of parallel and regressive antitheses, is also a tissue of normal and interrupted sequences. This practice augments the impression of an intellect that can observe or modify the chronological order of things in composing its own expository order and of an intellectually dependent readership.

To account for the expressive effects of the metrical definitions and connections of 129, we must train our attention on its diction and, more precisely, on the definitive and descriptive terms by which Shakespeare gradually explains to his reader what “is lust.” The terms used in the first quatrain focus the reader’s attention on masculine aggressiveness, on the male’s actual and preliminary expenses. The descriptive terms in the second quatrain, however, “Enjoyed,” “despised,” “hunted,” “had,” and “hated,” focus on the female or, at all events, on the sexual respondent. The awareness of aggression persists, but the aggressor is transformed during this quatrain from an active to an opinionative and emotional presence—to one, we may notice with an eye on the larger design, whose mental, rather than whose physical, involvement in lust is illuminated: the former aggressor here despises, hates, and is finally driven mad. The figure of speech that concludes the second quatrain enriches and complicates its expanded comprehension. The reader may take “bait” as a concrete equivalent of “lust.” In this case, the female respondent would constitute the purposive intelligence that lays the bait which seduces and maddens masculinity: the first stanza might seem to prompt the reader to choose this meaning, which is no doubt supported by many natural observations—see 147, for example—and many fixed prejudices. The reader may, however, take the female, who has just been described as a passive sufferer, to be herself the bait and blame nature for a general abuse of humanity, for a degradation of the female to entrap the male. In either case, the bait figure reverses the implications of hunted, implications that fit “Savage” and “cruel” in the first quatrain and are recalled by “quest” in the third: here the hunter has become the quarry, the aggressor a victim.

The expressive scope of the diction is further expanded in the third quatrain. “Pursuit” in line 9 covers both the pursuer and the pursued and thus unites the two aspects of lust; “possession” too, whether the reader thinks of a couple’s union with one another or their mutual subjection to nature, presents the aggressor and the respondent in conjunction. The sufferers are also united in line 10: “had,” partly by echoing “had” in 6, stresses sexual respondency; “quest” recalls the hunt and the hunter; “having” and the line as a whole—since all three of its terms share the concluding adjective
—strengthen the reader's awareness, not of the male nor the female, but of their union.

Sonnet 129 describes a remarkable intellectual advance, an advance punctuated by the separate quatrains, that reaches outward from a self-righteously masculine diatribe against lust toward a comprehension, not of lust in the abstract, but of the human involvement in lust. The masculine attitude, which is subjected to serious refinements even in its introduction, begins to give way in the second quatrain before Shakespeare's expanding vision; and in the third the poet infuses his exposition, as I must now show, with powerful signs of sympathy. The term "Mad," with which this quatrain begins, having been detached by the quatrain break from the figure of bait, indicates feelings not suggested by "Enjoyed" nor allowed by "Savage." "The lunatic, the lover and the poet / Are," as Duke Theseus explained, "of imagination all compact." The chivalric connotations of "quest" in line 10 are evident; and "extreme," which closes the line-pair, is a quite different word from the "extreme" of line 4; in this context, it indicates the extremities of love which may, according to Polonius, have driven Hamlet mad and which certainly possessed Romeo.

The terms balanced in lines 11 and 12, "bliss" and "woe," and "joy" and "dream," intensify the poet's sympathy and further extend his vision. With these terms Shakespeare returns to substantival equivalents of "lust" for the first time since he replaced "expense" around the turn of line 2. The qualifiers presented from line 3 through line 10 variously indicate definite substantives, as I have tried to suggest; but this return to actual syntactic equivalents for the prime substantive gives lines 11 and 12 special weight. "Bliss" and "woe," extremes that provide a preview of "heaven" and "hell," are rooted, moreover, in the immediate experience of lust and in its felt consequences. "Bliss" stretches between physical delight and spiritual ecstasy, opposing in both meaning and scope the univocal "woe." The refinement the reader must practice as he proceeds through "proved," the force of which we have already considered, is thus radical and startling. This antithesis as a stylistic system is itself strikingly opposed to that defined in line 12, the balanced terms of which, "joy" and "dream," do not in themselves constitute an opposition at all. The assurance of an antithesis in 12 depends, first, on the antithetical tendencies evident elsewhere in the poem and, second, on the present balance of "Before" and "behind." The opposed adverbs prick the reader's imagination, his memory, forcing him to test the reverberations of "joy" and "dream" until he himself makes good the indicated antithesis. Such a practice is not new in 129: we have studied several earlier cases of it; but in line 12, Shakespeare poses his demand upon his reader's imaginative connivance with a special intensity.

"A joy proposed," the fuller of the balanced expressions, recalls one of the most common proposals in Shakespearean drama, "God give you
joy!” the virtually automatic response of Elizabethan society to the announcement of a marriage. A form of this expression appears three times in one scene of *Much Ado*: Don Pedro announces the success of Claudio’s suit to Hero, a suit for which he acted as agent, “Name the day of marriage and God give thee joy”; earlier, when Claudio thought that Don Pedro had spoken for himself, he said bitterly, “I wish him joy of her”; and once things are straightened out, Beatrice, although rejecting Don Pedro as a suitor for herself, addresses the engaged couple, “Cousins, God give you joy!” The princess in *Love’s Labor’s Lost* responds with the same proposal to Rosaline’s merely mentioning that her lover has sworn “That he would wed me”; the Duke in *Measure for Measure* also wishes “joy” to Mariana upon her belated marriage; and Master Page in *Merry Wives*, although he dislikes his daughter’s choice of a husband, likewise wishes the lucky man “joy.” The proposal of “joy” was an appropriate wish to either spouse or both, and suitable to marriages of every sort. When Touchstone assures Audrey, “I will marry thee,” that poor country thing replies hopefully, “Well, the gods give us joy.” The “joy proposed” in line 12 of 129, then, would remind an Elizabethan reader, especially in such a context, of the legally approved and religiously sanctioned lust of the marriage bed and, more pointedly, perhaps, of what we call the honeymoon.

The “dream,” against which this “joy” is balanced, is less firmly definable. Because of the general context, its being placed, that is, between bliss-woe and heaven-hell, this “dream” carries the reader well beyond Puck’s juice or Mercutio’s jesting. It may suggest both the brief oblivion that follows lust “enjoyed” and, since marriage is the most ambitious and durable of human contracts—“Till death us do part”—the tenacity of all human joys, the dissolution of every person’s most persistent and ingrained experiences. The fact that the poet has jumped the event of lust in line 12 and balanced flickering memory against uncertain hope further prompts such a response to “dream,” foretelling, perhaps, Cleopatra’s dream of the dead Antony and, beyond this, Prospero’s vision of all human life. At the very end of these three quatrains of public denunciation, then, the poet leads his reader, by way of the emphatic but superficially imperfect antithesis between “joy” and “dream,” to the private recesses of the mind in which all knowledge of lust is found and lost.

The reader may not be ready to have the experience that he has endured in the first 12 lines of 129 dismissed in the casual fashion the poet has employed in the couplet. This off-hand dismissal of so intense and profound an intellectual exercise is, indeed, breathtaking. But the reader should be prepared for the explicitly epistemological discrimination the poet thus introduces to him and, further, for his final judgment of the matter. Throughout 129 Shakespeare has developed in his reader’s ticklish and giddy consciousness the difference between general knowledge and personal
understanding, forcing the reader to recognize—and to repair as fully as he can—an intellectual gap between himself, between Shakespeare’s readership at large, and the poet. If the reader has practiced the revisions, endured the discriminations, and followed the expansions indicated by Shakespeare’s art, he will be prepared to participate in the poet’s concluding distinction between the knowledge proclaimed in public places and that wrought by time and experience upon the individual mind.

There are two other expository essays among the sonnets, 116 and 124, which deserve particular attention:

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-fix’d mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand’ring 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.
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error, and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

If my dear love were but the child of state,
It might for Fortune’s bastard be unfathered,
As subject to Time’s love or to Time’s hate,
Weeds among weeds, or flowers with flowers gathered.
No, it was builded far from accident;
It suffers not in smiling pomp, nor falls
Under the blow of thralled discontent,
Whereto th’ inviting time our fashion calls.
It fears not Policy, that heretic
Which works on leases of short-numb’red hours,
But all alone stands hugely politic,
That it nor grows with heat nor drowns with show’rs.
To this I witness call the fools of Time,
Which die for goodness, who have lived for crime.

The couplets of both these poems open, like that of 129, with the compendious term “this.” In 129, however, “All this” is introduced, as we have just seen, to suffer the same kind of revision to which the whole discourse is subjected. In both 116 and 124, on the other hand, “this” represents an unalterable truth; not only this, but the unalterable truth in both cases is that the subject matter itself—that is, “love” in 116 and “my
dear love” in 124—is unalterable. Both couplets insist on the absolute reliability of “this” two-fold unalterableness: in 116 it is declared to be impervious to any proof of error; in 124 it is confidently submitted to public testimony. The suggestion of a formal argument at law in the first and the explicit legal figure in the second enforce the claim. Shakespeare’s style, however, which suits the design of revision and expansion in 129, seriously compromises “this” in these two poems.

The expository development of “love” in 116 reveals almost as many variations and quick changes as “lust” suffered in 129. The term “alteration” in the first quatrain, for example, may suggest a change in nature or in society; a shift in the beloved’s attitude or in either lover’s condition. And who is “the remover”? a hateful parent, a successful rival, a recalcitrant magistrate, an unpropitious star? Each reader may apparently make his own choices. The term “fool” in the third quatrain is also subject, as the plays show, to a variety of interpretations—a variety that is extended by the qualifying “not” to the verges of imagination. Or consider the syntactic connection of the clause, “Whose worth’s unknown,” in the second quatrain. It seems at first, because of proximity, to modify “bark.” And that would make good sense: the financial value of such an endangered cargo or the seaworthiness of such a storm-tossed vessel might well pose a question and a question, furthermore, which would enrich the figurative force of “bark.” The continuation of line 8, however, “although his height be taken,” withdraws this sensible connection and attaches “worth”—along with “height”—back to “star” despite the fact that this modification has a dubious meaning for the star itself and an even less substantial meaning for the love that this star represents. If the reader should take “to” in line 7 to mean related to, we may notice further, the “bark” would be augmented in dignity and the question of its imperilled worth would acquire considerable importance; if compared to, the “bark”—and, indeed, “every wand’ring bark”—will be reduced to a foil, important only because it sets off the mysterious fixity of “the star.”

The impression of love given at the turn of lines 5 and 6 by a “mark / That looks” also allows interpretive options. Since line 5 contains a statement that is apparently complete in grammar and sufficient in meaning, the reader may reach for some immediate understanding of “mark,” and there are several possibilities: a boundary stone, an archery target, a sea beacon, or any number of kinds of imprinted flesh. In each of these cases, despite their variety, “mark” indicates some visual object that is narrowly observed. The connection with “looks,” however, contradicts this, now presenting to the reader, no matter what particular image he may have been attending, a being who gazes from afar. Moreover, if the reader recognizes the sexual option in “an ever-fix’d mark” that a recollection of the archery scene in Love’s Labor’s Lost might enforce, and either a lighthouse
or the pole star as the figure "That looks on tempests and is never shaken," in advancing from line 5 into line 6 he faces a transformation in the sex of love from female to male and an accompanying shift from a comic absurdity lying on this side of Henry Miller to a mysterious grandeur stationed somewhere out beyond Virginia Woolf. The structure that supports all these definitive details, although orderly in its disposition, underlines the scope and the variety of Shakespeare's exposition. Line 3, which acknowledges the possibility that affection may alter under certain conditions, draws the reader's attention to the inner emotions of a lover; line 4, by considering a possible bending before some external force, focuses upon his conduct. This shift outward continues in line 5, in which love is equated with a "mark" and thus placed at some remove from any lover, but still accessible for close reference. Line 6, again, with its suggestion of a distant beacon, locates love near the outskirts of terrestrial apprehension; 7 and 8, finally, free it from the human world altogether and describe it, although it may be relevant to "every wand'ring bark," as essentially beyond human comprehension. The reader may thus select, as he encounters the third quatrain, a certain emotion, a kind of conduct, an object, an ideal, or some combination of these as the love that is not time's fool.

This whole tissue of vague, equivocal, and shifting predication allows the reader within extremely generous limits to conceive whatever forms and modes of love and whatever deterrents to it he must conceive in order to resolve each figure, every statement, and the whole course of the exposition in accordance with the poet's theme. Hence, or so I believe, the popular approval of this little treatise on "love." But the variety of the figures, the malleability of the definition, and the looseness of the interpretive governance Shakespeare has practiced in thus universalizing his argument deprive "love" of any identifiable outlines. Thus when he says in the couplet, "If this be error," the reader may respond, "If what be error?" And the substantial validity of the discourse is lost.

A similar response is indicated to the "this" in 124. It develops a tissue of figures equal in fluidity to those in 116—even its central expression, "my dear love," is equivocal;" it commences, likewise, in the subjunctive mood—although not in the same tone of voice; and it depends on similarly negative formulations. The second quatrain of both these sonnets begins with "no," and the third quatrain of both shifts from negative to positive description, the break in 124 coming after the second line and in 116 after the third. Although it is a memorable poem, however, 124 is demonstrably inferior to 116. Its discrimination between weeds and flowers, both of which stand opposed to "my dear love," is essentially irrelevant and thus concludes the first quatrain with a distraction, a distraction that is repeated, moreover, in line 12. Line 12 of 116 ended just where the poet wanted to be, presenting "love" in an impressively positive attitude; whereas in 124 he
achieves his climactic formulation at line 11; and line 12 discriminates, like line 4, between two things which are alike irrelevant to "my dear love."

Neither of these two poems is satisfactorily concluded. The introduction of writing into the couplet of 116 is improper and, indeed, arbitrary. This poem is in tone something of a psalm or a rhapsody—not a written piece, that is, but a spoken or a sung piece\textsuperscript{1}: so that, in a sense, the poet of 116—even if writing were relevant to loving—"never writ."

But the argument of the couplet is at least focused upon its subject. By referring to himself, moreover, the poet has attempted to comprehend both the individual and the universal truth of "love" and thus to accommodate in the last line of his poem the full scope of his discussion. Summoning "the fools of Time" in 124, on the other hand, which leads finally to a focus on "crime," forces the reader once again to study what the poet's "dear love" is \textit{not}. How could courtiers, whose attention is fixed on pomp and whose fear is fixed on policy, as the poem has already explained, give witness to the isolated phenomenon of the poet's unique affection, which "was builded far from accident"? In 124, the persistent ambivalence of focus and the repeated confusion of emphasis augment the unsteadiness evident in the figures and undermine the general validity of "this."

In Sonnet 129, on the other hand, Shakespeare was able to apply the characteristic quick changes of his style to a lasting human truth. He accomplished this, as I have attempted to show, by submitting both his general concern and his reader to the processes of particular human experience and by joining his reader, as it were, in what these processes discovered. He has thus achieved and dramatized a truth—that no accumulated general wisdom can preserve individual mankind or womankind from the particular temptations, exertions, and disillusions yet to come—which is consonant both with his style and with human life.

\section*{NOTES}

I am grateful to the editors of \textit{Language and Style} for their willingness to release a substantial portion of this chapter, which they had planned to publish, for publication in the present monograph.


3. A friend has reminded me of the story in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, III, 10, about putting the devil in hell.


5. In his essay on "Shakespeare's Sonnets" in *Explorations* (New York: Stewart, 1947), p. 78, L. C. Knights suggests that "the Sonnets, like the plays, are experiences to be lived"; and in *An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven: Yale, 1969), p. 59, Stephen Booth argues that experiencing a Shakespeare sonnet means "participating in an actual experience of mutability." Such statements apply generally both to the reader of 104 and to the reader of 129 (as well, of course, as to the reader of 64, 65, 15, and other poems)—although the reader experiences mutability very differently in the two poems. In "Appearances and Verbal Paradox in Sonnets 129 and 138," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 25 (1974): 105, J. Bunselmeyer has noticed the "atmosphere of continual revision" in 129, the nature and the expressive value of which I have herein attempted to explicate.

6. In their booklet, *Shakespeare's Verbal Art in 'Th' Expense of Spirit'* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), p. 15, Roman Jakobson and Lawrence G. Jones argue that "shame" suggests the "parts of shame... or genitalia." Such a suggestion, although the word order suppresses it, no doubt strengthens the second meanings of "expense," "spirit," and "waste."


11. Oddly enough, Riding and Graves, who have given a fine account of the discrimination enforced by the rhetoric and the meter of the couplet, have denied those discriminations articulated in a style similar both in nature and emphasis throughout the quatrains: "lust," they repeatedly insist (pp. 68, 69, 71), "is all things at all times." Their blind rejection of Shakespeare's own indubitable metrical and rhetorical punctuations may be due to these critics' obsessive concern with the punctuation marks imposed on 129 by modern editors and their desire to restore the generally lighter marks of the 1609 edition.

12. The classical term for this figure—see Vickers, p. 162—is anadiplosis. It is the apparent self-consciousness with which Shakespeare has practiced it—not only here, but in sonnets 90 (repeating "now") and 104 ("yet")—that inclines me to accept the modern emendation of "Made" to "Mad." The 1609 form of 129 presents several other textual problems. Another substantial one in line 11 has led modern scholars, on similarly rhetorical grounds, to change "and" to "a."

13. In *I. A. Richards*, p. 193, Helen Vendler has described this whole tissue of normal and interrupted sequences with great precision. But her psychological notion of the speaker as a man writhing in the throes of repentance has prompted her to describe the whole procedure with such words as "grotesque," "violent," and "monstrous"—although she has acknowledged, on the other hand, that it seems at certain moments to be "too elegantly said to be quite human"—and to judge the whole movement of the discourse to be "truly irrational zigzagging." In truth, however, Shakespeare's exposition, if not always elegant, is con-
tinuously luminous. The irrationality it discovers or—to use Professor Vendler’s words—its “tone of frenzied illogic” is what it inspires in the overwrought mind of the reader, that is, of course, in Ms. Vendler’s mind and in mine.

14. Richard Levin, in “Sonnet CXXIX as a ‘Dramatic’ Poem,” has preceded me in the recognition of an expanding focus in this poem—although his supposition of a “dramatic” context for it leads him to describe and to explain this expansion very differently from me.

15. For other examples of this proposal in Shakespeare’s plays, see: Merchant of Venice, III, ii, 188-190; Midsummer Night’s Dream, II, i, 73 and V, i, 28-31; Pericles, II, v, 87; Taming of the Shrew, II, i, 319 and IV, ii, 52; Tempest, V, i, 215. The marital flavor of “propose,” by the way, is of recent date; it is the proposal of “Joy . . . before” that would have reminded an Elizabethan reader of marriage. The expression is also common in Restoration plays, in The Country Wife, for example.


18. In Shakespeare’s Sonnets, pp. 391-392, Booth has noted the sexual implications that invest 116: “mark” has, as he recognizes, a possible sexual meaning, in which case “an ever-fixed mark” would constitute an impossibility and, indeed, a joke.

19. In Shakespeare’s Sonnets, pp. 388-389, Booth provides a fine explication of this figure.

20. This has been demonstrated by Arthur Mizener, “The Structure of Figurative Language in Shakespeare’s Sonnets,” in Discussions of Shakespeare’s Sonnets, ed. Barbara Herrnstein (Boston: Heath, 1964), pp. 137-151, and especially 141-151.

21. In Shakespeare’s Sonnets, p. 384, Booth has shown that the opening of 116 is formally similar to Psalms 31: 17-18. The opening of the poem, of course, and the close of the third quatrain recall the spoken marriage service.

22. A number of the sonnets, 71 and 77, for instance, are presented as written pieces—a poetic fact that was no doubt emphasized by their being transmitted in the poet’s hand. Sonnet 116, admittedly, was, very probably, also so transmitted.