Shakespeare in an Age of Incongruity

Malachi Black

Malachi Black

SHAKESPEARE IN AN AGE OF INCONGRUITY

Sonnet 24 contains what might well be the single most extrava-
gant conceit in all of Shakespeare's sonnets. Using painting as a
vehicle for rendering the vulnerable position of an adoring lover
in relation to his beloved, the poem asks us to attend not only to criti-
cal distinctions between internal and external, subjective and objective,
interpretation and representation, but also, through its somewhat con-
voluted elaborations, to consider the means by which poetic meaning
is constructed in itself:

> Mine eye hath played the painter and hath stelled
> Thy beauty's form in table of my heart,
> My body is the frame wherein 'tis held,
> And pérspective it is best painter's art.
> For through the painter must you see his skill,
> To find where your true Image pictured lies,
> Which in my bosom's shop is hanging still,
> That hath his windows glazéd with thine eyes:
> Now see what good turns eyes for eyes have done,
> Mine eyes have drawn thy shape, and thine for me
> Are windows to my breast, wherethrough the sun
> Delights to peep, to gaze therein on thee
>   Yet eyes this cunning want to grace their art;
>   They draw but what they see, know not the heart.

Here, we find the instigating agent to be the speaker's "eye," which
serves as a richly conspicuous homophone for both "I" and "aye,"
alternately the vocalization of affirmation, consent, and, perhaps less
commonly in English, pain or discomfort (as in "Ay, Dios mío"). This
compound *eye-I-aye*—all senses understood at once—has "played"

or acted as an internal painter, "steel[ing]" or creating a representation of the beloved upon the flat "table" or board of the lover's heart. The simultaneous painting-heart is itself "framed" by the body that surrounds and contains it, and is displayed in the storefront of the speaker's "bosom." But because this painting-heart remains at once an internal organ (the seat of emotion) and an internal representation (the distillation of ideation and perception), it can only be accessed by the beloved by peering through the lover's eyes. As a result, the beloved's eyes are in fact reflected in the "windows" of the storefront (which are also, one imagines, the lover's eyes). This is already a tremendously intricate figure at octave's end, but in the final quatrain it takes an even more indulgent—even climactic—"turn" (an event very self-consciously signified by the phrase "good turns," which is itself highly suggestive of sexual reciprocity). The poem moves toward what, at first, seems to be mere recapitulation—a reflection, as it were, of what has preceded it—but which, on further consideration, "appears" (pun intended) to comment on the very circuitry of meaning. What we have is a circularity of reference, an ouroboros that manages to keep the reader as far from the actual image of the beloved—an entity invoked but never depicted—as the lover himself is kept from knowledge of the "heart" of the beloved. We know already that the lover's eyes have formed the beloved's shape, but we are meant to register a further complication (lines 10–11), wherein the beloved's gaze is returning that of the lover and thus reflecting the speaker back to himself, along with the image he has constructed of the beloved. In brief, we have a mirror reflecting into a mirror: the lover sees only a reflection of the image of his own creation on an endlessly self-replicating and self-referential cycle.

The apparent congestion of this conceit goes a long way in figuring the obsessive subjectivity of the smitten lover, for whom ideation almost involuntarily revolves around the object of his or her preoccupation. But it also serves to underscore its own virtuosic development,

placing readers in the position of the admiring lover, at least insofar as we are invited to appreciate the enchanting wit and felicity of a perfectly wrought conceit. Indeed, sonnet 24 nearly insists that we peer through the speaker's "eyes" to attend to the conceit's incremental logic and the sometimes less-than-intuitive means by which each lavish brushstroke, as it were, collaborates both with its partners and with its conceptual frame to create figurative meaning. It is in this sense, of course, that we are sensitized to the "perspective" through which we experience or "see [the artist's] skill," and it is exactly this kind of meaning-generation, moreover, that the poem proposes as the foundation of poetic meaning-making—the production of "True image[s]," which are nevertheless constitutive of fictions or "lies." Though the text retains a certain inaccessible interiority—we never do see the beloved—the poem makes itself and its core point-of-view accessible through elaborate figuration. By demonstrating the construction of "perspective," sonnet 24 attunes us to the means by which poems posit meaning.

All poetry, of course, operates suggestively, accruing significance in accordance with what the late philosopher and sometime New Critic Monroe C. Beardsley terms the "Principle of Plentitude." This rather Newtonian formulation asserts that "all the connotations that can be found to fit [a given poem] are to be attributed to [it]: it means all it *can* mean." While possible meanings are of course infinite in theory, they are in practice restricted by what Beardsley terms the "Principle of Congruence," which asserts that all meanings constituent of "logical and physical [im]possibilities" are canceled by virtue of explanatory weakness or irrelevancy. That is to say, any given text can sustain as many meanings as its details will allow, but viable meanings must be supported by the text's demonstrable particulars. (Not all readings are created equal, of course; they can be arranged in hierarchies according to relevance and explanatory comprehensiveness.) Beardsley's "laws" have long been useful both on theoretical grounds and in help-

ing students to approach literary analysis. Beardsley, however, never endeavored to expand his frame, neither to classify the various *kinds* of meaning literary texts can sustain, nor to consider the *means* by which these meanings are amassed and accommodated. The task of classification seems, at different times, to be either painfully straightforward or utterly impossible, and so one might well be relieved to consider the *means* alone, as I hope to do now.

It may be useful, conceptually speaking, to consider the structure of poetic meaning in geometric terms, and, specifically, in terms of two co-present axes. Each of these axes represents a scale on which a given text will accommodate meaning and sustain its complexity. The first such axis can be conceived as verticality. Vertical complexity accounts for meanings that accrue in accordance with the structure of symbolic meaning; that is to say, synchronous meaning. ("Symbolic" meaning is constituted by materials—textual or otherwise—that maintain simultaneously literal and figurative values, as with a flag, an icon, or Dante's "dark wood.") Vertical complexity is commonly but not categorically associated with hypotactic forms, and it represents the concurrence of meanings that, even if not mutually supported or reinforced, at least allow space for one another by not canceling each other out. In sonnet 24, for example, we have a literal surface that proposes an explicit comparison between perception and creative or interpretive representation, but we have at the same time several layers of connotation that coordinate, complement, or cohabitate with the central literal developments; at a minimum, these include the sexual, relational (who's doing the lying?), and metatextual elements mentioned above. All of these meanings constellate in and above the text *at the same time*; they are synchronous, and, like puns, they seem to suspend time as their meanings expand and arrange themselves above the various components of the literal and rhetorical details to which they correspond.

Many of the most exciting poems being written today, however, work very differently than sonnet 24 does, taking other tacks to the

dual projects of figuration and "perspective." In surveying the broad "popular" landscape of contemporary American poetry (if that's not an oxymoron), one finds relatively few poems that invest in the sort of conceptual machinery that we see in Shakespeare's sonnets. Instead, one finds a great many texts that work much as do the poems of the late James Tate, who in his later years especially came to be one of the foremost promulgators and practitioners of an aesthetic "school" that doesn't yet seem to have been decisively named. Charles Simic might describe it as "anti-poetry," while others characterize it as the "American Surreal." However it might be termed, the aesthetic stance to which these designations refer is prevalent to the extent that it is surely known to almost all readers of contemporary poetry; it is commonly characterized by a cultivated affectlessness the effect of which is usually comic. In Tate's later works especially—those poems of unremarkable, nearly amorphous form; prolix verse paragraphs whose long lines closely approach the margins of the prose-formatted page— considered incongruities and irony are employed as major engines for the generation of meaning, often in service of the absurd. In Tate's "The Ice Cream Man," for example, taken from the 2008 collection *The Ghost Soldiers*, we find a speaker dispassionately recounting an unlikely job interview:

> I answered the ad in the paper. I had been unemployed for nine months and was desperate. At the interview, the man said, "Do you have much experience climbing tall mountains?" "Absolutely. I climb them all the time. If I see a tall mountain, I have to climb it immediately," I said. "What about swimming long distances in rough ocean waters, perhaps in a storm?" he said. "I'm like a fish, you can't stop me. I just keep going in all kinds of weather," I said. "Could you fly a glider at night and land in a wheat field, possibly under enemy fire?" he said. "Nothing could come more naturally to me," I said. "How are you with explosives? Would a large building, say, twenty stories high present you with much difficulty?" he said. "Certainly not. I pride myself on a certain expertise," I said. "And I take it you are fully acquainted with the latest in rocket launchers and land-mines?"

he said. "I even own a few myself for personal use. They're defi-
nitely no problem for me," I said. "Now, Mr. Strafford, or may I
call you Stephen, what you'll be doing is driving one of our ice
cream trucks, selling ice cream to all the little kids in the
neighborhood . . .

There is much more of this text to enjoy, but, in the interests of space, it
is reasonable to end the excerpt here. As can already be seen, the prin-
cipal charisma of Tate's poem—its wonderful sense of humor—derives
from its invention and pursuit of incongruous relationships that enable
its constant subversion of readerly expectation (as informed by the nar-
rative situation). Specifically, the terms of the narrative as it develops
escalate to degrees increasingly incommensurate with the situation
that contains them, and the language remains hilariously impervious
to the escalation it describes. Part of the pure fun of this poem derives
from our knowledge of the human capacity for disingenuousness—for
anxious overstatement and dishonesty—particularly in the artificial
social space of a job interview, and all the more so when the interview
subject is "desperate," as we are told. We delight in the speaker's
duplicitous aplomb, responding to the ironic distance between what
he affirms in his interview and what we have been primed to assume
is his strictly minimal experience.

 It doesn't take long, however, for Tate's text to step from the realm
of the feasible into that of the cartoonishly nonliteral. The poem asks
us to attend to a growing incongruity and to recognize its exaggera-
tions as fundamentally figurative values—specifically, as instances of
implied social commentary. This, it would seem, is the primary means
by which Tate's text creates meaning: when the interviewer later lists
among the driver's occupational hazards "fathers . . . [who are] quite
irate if you are out of their kid's favorite flavor or if their kid drops the
cone," we register the satirization of overbearing parental behavior.
When the interviewer indicates that there are "certain neighborhoods
where you're under / advisement to expect the worst, sneak attacks,
gang tactics, / bodies dropping from trees or rising out of manholes,

blockades, / machine gun fire, launched explosives, flamethrowers and that kind / of thing," we register at once a sharp appraisal of the exaggerated middle-class fear of impoverished communities and an indirect critique of the militarization of law enforcement and its often lethal interventions.

At least, that *seems* to be what the text wants us to register; there is, of course, a very real possibility that the text is offering itself strictly as a deliciously absurdist fantasy whose primary end is to thwart and thus to satirize the very search for nonliteral meaning—any text depicting a desire for ice cream so intense that it gives rise to guerrilla military tactics leaves that possibility open. But since the latter reading decisively cancels any further attributions of figurative value to Tate's poem (a text taken as a whole can't be meaningless and meaning-ful at once), it is more cautious and even, perhaps, more rewarding to err toward the former, wherein "The Ice Cream Man" is regarded as a work of comic irony whose most overt figurative tendency is to highlight the human capacities for dishonesty, cruelty, and irrationally disproportionate response.

In stark contrast to the proliferating stylistics of sonnet 24, Tate's text uses a pronounced absence of style—a rhetorical flatness—to meaningful ends, subverting its own deadpan by positing implicitly that such a tone is not only incommensurate, but utterly inappropri-ate to the circumstances it describes (just as the escalation is increas-ingly inappropriate the dramatic situation). This is its ultimate ironical value: the text performs an inappropriate response to an inappropri-ate response, and thus has the conceptual effect of a category error, a hallmark of the absurdist tradition. Among the many things worth observing about this rhetorical strategy (i.e., its pointed leverage of incongruity) is its relative containment by its own conceptual param-eters. While Tate's text certainly seems to reach beyond its discrete rhetorical figures, it's interesting to note that the poem consists of only minimal vertical complexity. Tate's text is not exactly paratactic, but it

does stack a series of variably disjunctive questions and answers. Each step forward, in other words, entails the formulation of a discretely incongruous relationship that signifies an independent figurative equivalent. While each of these offers individual rewards, the apparent disconnection between such parts limits the text's ability to sustain mutually inclusive layers of suggestiveness. In fact, there is very little in the way of unified synchronous meaning. "The Ice Cream Man" dramatizes disparity, but it does so serially. This kind of diachronic figuration—where meanings are not co-present in a given text *at the same time*, in vertical array, but rather appear in shifting, essentially unrelated, or even mutually exclusive terms *over time*, as in many texts reliant upon incongruous, disjunctive, or paratactic structures (one thinks of Whitman and Ashbery, for example)—constitutes our second axis: horizontality. Poems of great horizontal complexity tend to measure time, to inhabit it, collecting and then relinquishing meanings from one space of association or equivalency to another. This happens often in non-allegorical poems that are nevertheless driven in part or in full by chronology or narrative (as in Tate's text, or in O'Hara's "I-do-this, I-do-that" poems), by disjunction, and by the proliferation of discrete figures in the service of impressionistic lyricism.

These axes of complexity owe something to Wyatt Prunty's *Fallen from the Symboled World*, a text that offers a wonderfully lucid examination of what Prunty frames as the divergence of a discrete contemporary sensibility from its perhaps more controlled modern predecessor. Specifically, Prunty contends not only that there has been a demonstrable shift in poetic meaning-making and figuration between the modern and postmodern periods, but that the shift itself consists of "the replacement of symbol and allegory with simile-like tropes" and a related departure from poetic assertions of largescale or poem-level "equivalence" (such as symbol and allegory provide) toward smaller-scale assertions of "similitude." In brief, Prunty contrasts an "unsystematic" deployment of tropes in the contemporary sensibility

with a more programmatic use of tropes in modern poetry, suggesting that the contemporary orientation typically results in a "poetry whose language signifies but cannot symbolize." Agents of the more current poetics, Prunty argues, rely on frames of reference that are essentially individual, local, and subjective, whereas modern poets tend toward tropes and image systems that are more generally resonant and even, he suggests, objective. While it would seem that there is indeed a growing preponderance of texts that conform to Prunty's sense of the contemporary, there may yet be some value in dissociating Prunty's useful points of reference from the historical determinism within which they are, in his volume, framed.

The difference between these poles can be construed as a matter of figurativeness as such: extended, poem-level assertions of equivalence (e.g., allegory), so prevalent in what Prunty associates with the modern sensibility, constitute a form of extended figuration whereby an entire poem may be regarded as a metaphor for a corresponding external complex or situation. This is the very essence of allegorical operation— the presentation of simultaneously literal and figurative valences (of which the symbol is a local case)—and characterizes so many of the parable-like poems of, say, Robert Frost, where whole texts can be construed as "vehicles," to use I. A. Richards's terms, for typically unspecified "tenors." Such poems-as-figures naturally vary in their complexity, but in generating and sustaining a wide array of possible simultaneous figurative values they are most active on what has been characterized here as the vertical axis of complexity. As is the case of sonnet 24, these texts signify more than the sum of their parts, reaching beyond their sometimes inaccessible interiors. The poems that Prunty would most associate with the contemporary sensibility, however, eschew extended figuration in favor of a more incremental series of line-level or trope-level assertions of likeness, and thus are most active on the horizontal axis. While these latter texts are invigorated by their dynamic unfolding, they nevertheless tend only to support the most

literal of possible poem-level meanings. By signifying so much in every line or stanza, these poems symbolize, in toto, very little, rarely "adding up" to a sum that exceeds their very noticeable, energized parts.

In the way of brief illustration, Shakespeare's sonnet 53 rather neatly demonstrates what Prunty posits as the modern tendency:

> What is your substance, whereof are you made,
> That millions of strange shadows on you tend?
> Since every one hath, every one, one shade,
> And you, but one, can every shadow lend.
> Describe Adonis, and the counterfeit
> Is poorly imitated after you;
> On Helen's cheek all art of beauty set,
> And you in Grecian tires are painted new.
> Speak of the spring and foison of the year;
> The one doth shadow of your beauty show,
> The other as your bounty doth appear,
> And you in every blesséd shape we know.
>   In all external grace you have some part,
>   But you like none, none you, for constant heart.

In maintaining a considerably literal surface, a stable, hypotactic rhetorical structure, and a single addressee (the sun), sonnet 53 supports a wide array of equally viable poem-level interpretations, each of which can be scaffolded by the text's constellation of albeit loaded particulars. Almost equal cases can be made that the sun points (as a symbol) to any number of figurative values, from a beloved to Plato's analogy of the sun in the *Republic* and far beyond. A somewhat less freighted modern analogy might be "The Red Wheelbarrow," which also illustrates the vertical axis, though with somewhat less complexity. Containing only a single rhetorical figure ("glazed," a relatively dead metaphor), the poem supports a wide array of equally viable interpretations. The "wheel / barrow," "rain / water" and "white / chickens" may each be read as symbols of any number of larger abstract concepts, and the particulars of the text itself—its line endings, its white space—can accommodate any number of compatible and/or parallel values. Ted

Berrigan's 14-line poem "Unconditional Release at 38," however, signals horizontal complexity:

> like carrying a gun
> like ringing a doorbell
> like kidnapping Hitler
> like just a little walk in the warm Italian sun . . .
> like, "a piece of cake."
> like a broken Magnavox
> like the refrigerator on acid
> like a rope bridge across the Amazon in the rain
> like looking at her for a few long seconds
> like going to the store for a newspaper
> like a chair in a dingy waiting-room
> like marriage
> like bleak morning in a rented room in a pleasant, new city
> like nothing in the world now or ever

Here, the "programmatic assertion of likeness," to use Paul Lake's phrase, undermines any possible large-scale figurative equivalencies, insisting instead on strict parataxis in the development of a series of small-scale, individual comparisons. Although we are left to wonder what exactly "Unconditional Release" means (from prison? from a contract? from a relationship?), the poem provides us with 14 essentially unrelated and incompatible figures for what this "release" is "like." As with "The Ice Cream Man," Berrigan's poem dramatizes disparity, embedding itself within an incongruous frame.

What makes the axes of vertical and horizontal complexity useful is that they reveal the extent to which the core structural and figurative effects of texts as diverse Shakespeare's and Williams's on one hand, and Tate's and Berrigan's on the other, are the same. But one can add a further dimension to this discussion, suggested by a wonderful essay by the South African rhetorician Catherine Addison, "From Literal to Figurative: An Introduction to the Study of the Simile." While an exhaustive account of Addison's methodology for evaluating the figurativeness of similes would be impractical here, the basic machinery

depends on the categorical distance between compared items in a given context. The literal extreme is occupied by similes consisting of comparisons between a given item and itself (e.g., "a cat is like a cat"); every degree of abstract deviation from that basic comparison constitutes a new level of figurativeness ("a cat is like a dog" would be less abstract than "a cat is like a cloud"). While Addison's continuum offers itself as a metric for charting the figurativeness of individual topes, it can also be expanded to reflect the figurativeness of texts in whole. Poems of high vertical complexity, which tend to support longer, coherent, extended assertions of equivalence (such as Williams's text and the two sonnets) would be described as highly figurative, since they are the poems to which the most continuous, coherent figurative readings may be applied. Poems like Tate's and Berrigan's would reside at the opposite pole—the literal. These poems are literal insofar as they point to their own surfaces, thriving on incongruity in conjunction with the incremental figures they contain. These texts thus confound meaningful wholesale coalescence beyond whatever rationale for co-presence can be found in the literal circumstance. In the absence of a clear literal circumstance—as in the ambiguous "Unconditional Release" to which Berrigan's poem refers—texts of great horizontal complexity can even confound coherent wholesale figures altogether. In fact, laying Addison's original continuum (reflecting the figurativeness of specific similes or tropes) over this newer continuum (concerning the figurativeness of poems) makes it possible to observe two remarkable tendencies within structures of poetic meaning: firstly, that works which contain relatively literal tropes are more likely to support or coalesce with larger, implicit or explicit poem-level assertions of symbolic equivalence than are works incorporating highly figurative tropes; and, secondly, that there is an inverse relationship between the frequency of highly figurative tropes and the extent to which the poems in which they appear can be understood as coherent, sustained arguments for allegorical or symbolic equivalence. Poems

like sonnet 53 or "The Red Wheel Barrow," in other words, remain available to large-scale meaning precisely because they contain so few highly figurative tropes. Moreover, since symbolic meaning depends on simultaneously literal and figurative valences, a relatively low level of horizontal complexity is required in order to maintain vertical complexity, and vice versa. Every instance of individual figuration in a poem to some degree disrupts and undermines the possibility of a unified figurative understanding.

A great many of the most exciting poems of the past quarter-century derive their energy and indeed much of their power from thrilling acts of disparity, whether through the provocative yoking together of disjunctive units or through the invigorating expressive deployment of trope upon trope. These texts "play the painter," to return to language of sonnet 24, by using more and less disjunctive procedures to achieve complexity through a dynamic unfolding whose meaningfulness is established in large part by the proliferation of discrete units of non-literal value *over time*—in acts of horizontal complexity. But we live in age in which the exercise of this axis—intoxicating as it is—threatens to feel mannered, or worse, without revitalization by additionally constructive means. Shakespeare's texts have long been and indeed remain instructive in innumerable ways, and among the lessons they offer poets practicing today is that vertical complexity can yield poetic fields every bit as textured, "rich and strange," as Ariel would say, as its horizontal counterpart. But, perhaps all the more critically, they also demonstrate that it is possible for poets to work in both modes simultaneously, rationalizing and enriching the meaningfulness of one axis by means of the other. One need look no farther than sonnet 130, a text that deconstructs the rhetorical strategy of the blazon—and thus revitalizes as it remakes what was then an almost hackneyed literary commonplace—in order to construct at once a "true image" of the beloved and to assert a new poetics:

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun—
Coral is far more red than her lips' red—
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun—
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head:
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks,
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound.
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground:
  And yet by heav'n I think my love as rare
  As any she belied with false compare.

It shouldn't surprise us that a writer as various and virtuosic as Shakespeare could unify the planes of vertical and horizontal complexity, putting them to reciprocal, mutually reinforcing use. Not at all. It should, instead, instruct us.