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## Verse versus Story: Open versus Convergent Pattern

Brian Boyd

Literature has two main, often intertwined, strands: narrative and verse. What unites and what distinguishes them? What can we learn from disentangling them?

Shakespeare offers an especially fruitful test case. In much of his work he weaves together narrative and verse more memorably than any other writer, while his *Sonnets* form the most successful collection of Western literary lyrics. The Scottish poet Don Paterson, in his ebullient *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets*, recently asserted that the sonnets too “have to be read as a narrative of the progress of love.”<sup>1</sup> I argue, on the contrary, that we need to read the sonnets as lyrics, as verse *without* narrative, and to appreciate the deep differences between, say, the love lyricism in the dramatic narrative of *Twelfth Night* and the love lyrics in the *Sonnets*.

In *On the Origin of Stories* (2009), focusing evolutionary and cognitive lenses on art in general, I proposed that we can find the common features of all the arts if we understand art as cognitive play with pattern; I then focused more tightly on narrative, and on the art of fiction in particular.<sup>2</sup> In *Why Lyrics Last* (2012) I focused on verse, especially lyric in its strictest sense, as verse without narrative.<sup>3</sup> Now I'd like to build on the difference between these two books to contrast the almost automatic convergence of patterns in fiction, or narrative more generally, and the compounding of patterns upon patterns—patterns athwart or concealed behind other patterns—in verse, especially in lyric.

The world swarms with information, which animals and even plants can interpret in order to respond appropriately to threats and opportunities in their environment. But analyzing information is costly in time and effort. Slowly evolved modes of pattern recognition—like, in vertebrate visual systems, recognizing outlines, shapes, movement and direction—reduce the cost of interpreting information and allow animals to respond to it quickly, in real time. Brains therefore operate, observes neuroscientist Gerald Edelman, “not by logic but rather by pattern recognition”; “pattern recognition” is the “primary mode” of thought.<sup>4</sup>

We humans depend for our survival especially on our superior handling of information, and hence on our capacity to recognize—and to find new ways of recognizing—pattern. We therefore have a natural appetite for pattern. If we glimpse out of the corner of our eye a long slithery-sinuous thing in the grass, we will recoil with alarm: that’s enough of a pattern to identify a snake, and to trigger instantly an evolved emotional warning signal. Yet because identifying objects, actions, processes and events as patterns allows us such good clear information, and such rapid responses, we treasure pattern. We may see a snake, and identify it as such, but if we know we’re not at risk, we can respond to the other patterns it forms, and see them as beautiful: not simply the body shape that identifies the animal suborder, but the pattern of the curves its body forms, and the pattern of designs on its skin.

Cognition evolved to guide action. At its everyday richest in event comprehension, cognition integrates the most salient information patterns around us, allowing us to understand where we have come from and where we are so that we can predict where to move next. Narrative therefore shapes much

of our thought and much of our literature. Indeed narrative seems highly likely to be the default task orientation of the human mind. By that I mean that if our minds can process information in narrative terms, if they can interpret what they experience as events, they will—and they will do so through a more or less automatic convergence of pattern-recognition processes.

The neuroscientists Antonio Damasio and Joseph LeDoux propose convergence zones in the brain, where, say, the distinct *what* and *where* pathways in our visual processing converge to allow us to understand both the nature of objects and their location.<sup>5</sup> These convergent information pathways feed in turn into higher-level convergence zones, where information from still more different kinds of pathways, like visual and aural and emotional, meet. The pressure to understand events, especially involving one's own species, has produced *superconvergence* zones in the brain.

In everyday event comprehension and in narratives like gossip, history, fiction and drama, information naturally salient to members of our ultrasocial, highly cooperative, and highly competitive species naturally converges in many kinds of pattern: character (patterns of [appearance and age](#), personality, role, affiliations and allegiances, status, beliefs, [desires and goals](#)), plot (strategic social information, expectations, intentions, actions, reactions, outcomes), and setting (physical and social). We can see all these even in the bare flat world of a classic 1944 experiment, where the psychologists Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel demonstrated how we almost automatically process even the most meager information as narrative if we can.<sup>6</sup> Without cuing their students, except to ask them to write down what they had seen, they showed them an animated black-and-white silent film, a minute-and a half long, featuring four geometrical

shapes—one, a stationary outline, and three, solid and motile. In response all but one student recounted a story involving characters. Similar experiments have recently been run with similar results;<sup>7</sup> you can now replicate the original experiment on yourself via YouTube.<sup>8</sup>

Like almost all Heider and Simmel's initial subjects, I cannot help reading their film as a story of a couple, male and female, threatened and chased by an aggressive male, who traps the female, until she escapes with her partner. But how do we infer that much, uncued otherwise, from simply the silent ninety-second movement of black geometric shapes about a white plane?

We process patterns in all sorts of default ways. We naturally associate self-propelled movement with agency: our default tendency therefore is to see the shapes as agents. We identify patterns of similarity and difference in the triangles (one bigger than another), and in the triangles versus the circle. If we see agents in two morphs interacting more or less as equals we naturally think of the human two morphs, male and female. We also register patterns of distance—the initial proximity of the circle and the smaller triangle—and movement: the coordinated initial progress of the circle (the beauty) and the smaller triangle (the beau); the patterns of changing distance that we cannot help seeing as confrontation, aggression, chase and conflict between the beau and the beast; patterns of motion in which we see feelings like fear, happiness, surprise, and anger. All these patterns of shape and movement, resemblance and difference effortlessly converge thanks to the clear lines of inferable cause and effect, and to the shape of the narrative from exposition to complication, climax, resolution and closure.

Now let us turn from a psychological to a literary classic, *Twelfth Night*.<sup>9</sup>

In everyday life we understand our world in terms of relevance to our needs. Someone seeking a toilet will look at the streets of a new city very differently from someone seeking a pastry. As Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson have shown, we also understand language in terms of the relevance to ourselves and others, who will usually be in the same place and/or time.<sup>10</sup> Stories earn their special hold over attention by providing their own internal sense of relevance in the characters and their aims.

From the first speech in *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare foregrounds Orsino's prime aim—to woo Olivia—and the special personality of this man that would make him ready to love at a distance, to feel confident of ultimately winning a woman despite her firm rebuffs, and sufficiently sanguine and in control to keep sending envoys to her on his behalf. The dramatist establishes character as the cause of the ensuing effects, and the relevance of almost everything that follows to Orsino's initial aim of winning Olivia. He then launches what seems to be another plot line, and in another mood. After introducing Orsino indulgently languid in the first scene, he presents Viola, shipwrecked in a strange land but resolute and decisive. As soon as she hears Duke Orsino named as the ruler of the region, she comments that she has heard her father mention him, and adds "He was a bachelor then." "And so is now," she is told. Aha: a possible line of complication looms already.

She hears that Orsino woos Countess Olivia, and wishes she could serve the countess, but when she hears Olivia "will admit no kind of suit, / No, not the duke's," she decides to travel to the duke in disguise as a male, to be "an eunuch to him." The problem *she* sees ahead of her, merely surviving and finding support in foreign parts, *we* suspect may soon be no longer the problem she actually

faces. Indeed in her next scene we find that Orsino not only has taken her on, but feels an unusual emotional closeness toward this sensitive young “man,” and wants to share his intimate feelings with “Cesario”—who in return, being in fact a woman, feels even more unreservedly for him.

Romantic comedy thrives on the distance between frustration and fulfilment in love. Shakespeare rapidly sets up a classic comedic pattern of frustrated love: Orsino loves Olivia (1.1), who loves Viola (1.5), who loves Orsino (1.4).

One of the most famous, most “lyrical,” as we say, most poetic, imaginative and emotional speeches in *Twelfth Night* is the “willow cabin” speech, purportedly limning Orsino’s love for Olivia, obliquely expressing Viola’s love for Orsino, inadvertently awakening Olivia’s love for “Cesario.” If it were a lyric, it would have an open emotional resonance, relevant to writer and reader, to anyone at all. But here, although it has explosive eloquence, it first fits tightly into patterns of character and cause and effect within the forward movement of the narrative.

Shakespeare needs to have Olivia fall in love promptly with Viola-as-Cesario, even if, because Olivia is in mourning, she has said she will forswear the whole world for seven years. The quick-wittedness of Viola-Cesario as envoy for Orsino’s love, as she is about to be turned away from Olivia’s gate, piques the Countess’s interest and earns “Cesario” an audience. Olivia insists to the envoy, all the same, that despite her knowing Orsino’s noble qualities “I cannot love him. / He might have took his answer long ago.” Viola replies to this that “If I did love you in my master’s flame . . . In your denial I would find no sense.” Olivia asks “Cesario”: “Why, what would you?” (what would you do?). Viola answers:

Make me a willow cabin at your gate  
And call upon my soul within the house,  
Write loyal cantons of contemnèd love,  
And sing them loud even in the dead of night;  
Hallow your name to the reverberate hills,  
And make the babbling gossip of the air  
Cry out 'Olivia!' O, you should not rest  
Between the elements of air and earth  
But you should pity me. (1.5.257-65)

To which Olivia replies: "You might do much." Because of the context of romantic comedy, because of the criteria of relevance to the details of the narrative, because of the promise of complications implicit in cross-dressing, we can infer from Olivia's four plain words—even before quick-witted Viola can—that the Countess has already started to fall for the envoy.

But looking just at Viola's speech, we can see also, from our knowledge of 1) the patterns of fiction in general, and 2) the patterns of romantic comedy in particular, and 3) the emotional pattern of Viola's intense and frustrated love for Orsino, and 4) the patterns of Orsino's and Viola's responsiveness of character, and 5) the pattern of Olivia's responsiveness too (first to Feste, then to reports of the envoy, then to "Cesario" in person), little though we've seen her—we can see from all these converging patterns that that startling little counterfactual narrative inset expresses the intensity of Viola's love for Orsino, both in the vignette she invents and the yearning she expresses, and that its emotional heat



will fire Olivia. Viola loves Orsino so purely that she is prepared to use her secret love for him as the imaginative impetus for her utmost eloquence on his behalf. She will give everything she has, all her considerable heart and mind, to serve the man she loves, even if her success in winning Olivia's attention to Orsino's suit would ruin forever her own faint chance of winning his love for herself. And the imaginative sensitivity she shows instantly and comically wins Olivia not for Orsino but for her poor self, his envoy.

Because the narrative patterns converge in this way, we understand the dramatic import of this speech instantly, even if we might be hard pressed to say exactly what some of these lines *mean*. We understand their "lyrical" eloquence better than their exact meaning; but we understand their role within the story effortlessly, because Shakespeare has prefocused our understanding and expectations through so many different kinds of pattern, of genre, conventions, characters, beliefs, desires, aims, intentions, causes and effects. For all this set speech's detachability and "lyrical" intensity, its resonance is not expansively open as in lyric but tightly channelled into its narrative context.

Now let's switch from narrative to lyric verse, verse characterized by its not depending on narrative and, at its purest, excluding it altogether.

In *Why Lyrics Last*, I note that the only common feature of verse across languages is that in verse, poets determine where lines end: they control our attention by making us focus on particular strings of words in one mental moment. (The poet Rachel Blau du Plessis takes verse's parceling out of attention a step further: poetry "is just selected words arranged by segmentation on various scales," "the creation of meaningful sequence by the negotiation of gap

(line break, stanza break, page space).”<sup>11</sup> Poets may not know it, or barely intuit it, but their verse lines shape language to fit a human cognitive constraint, the capacity of working memory, and therefore the duration of the human auditory present. Focusing audience attention a line at a time, poets invite close scrutiny of each line, and repay it by satisfying our appetite for pattern.<sup>12</sup> Patterns such as rhythm, rhyme, and syntactic or sonic parallelism, independently or together, serve to demarcate and integrate lines of verse in diverse traditions. So too does the patterning of imagery, juxtaposing not just words but one facet of life and another, or abstraction, compressing multiple observations into a single statement.

Narrative organizes experience as automatically as a magnet organizes iron filings, and it still does this in verse form. But precisely because lyric at its purest eschews narrative, it can turn the absence of story to advantage. It allows us the illusion of access to another’s thought at its least constrained by circumstance, in the very act of appealing to others regardless of *their* circumstances. Liberation from narrative allows lyric thought to shape its own contexts and prompts—and indeed to shape itself to the hilt, even when it chooses set forms, but at its best only to offset new-found freedoms.

Lyrics also invite an expansively resonating response. Since they forfeit the supplied circumstances of a story, they need to appeal to *our* circumstances whatever these might be—and this usually means appealing to concerns connected with *any* reader’s life or with human experience in general. Where narrative automatically channels implications to flow down the gradients of the story, lyric allows them to radiate out.

While neither rhymes nor stanzas are necessary to verse, they saturate it,

in lyric even more than in narrative verse. As the New Zealand poet Vincent O’Sullivan writes, “We do not dance to get anywhere. We just dance for its own sake; that is what poetry is after all, that is the dance of language, the delight in patterns.”<sup>13</sup> In European literatures the sonnet has been by far the most successful of lyric forms (although it can of course also be deployed for narrative): short enough to attend to as a whole without losing focus, it sets up expectations that then switch, offering a momentary instability recovered from by a different kind of pattern. It ensures variation *within* each sonnet and from sonnet to sonnet.<sup>14</sup>

Shakespeare chose to write not just sonnets but a sonnet sequence. Why? Poets seeking a larger scale almost invariably resort to narrative to hold attention. Lyrics can engage our attention, can even do so with a special intensity, as I note in *Why Lyrics Last*,

but they cannot easily sustain it long-term without resorting to the appeal of narrative and therefore ceasing to be lyrics. This poses a problem for the ambitious lyric poet. Sheer scale matters in art: great epics weigh more than great lyrics not just in pages but also in artistic value.

Individual Pushkin lyrics may be glorious, even perfect, but *Eugene Onegin*—a novel in fourteen-line stanzas like complexified sonnets—will always rate as his masterpiece. Lyric collections rarely become much more than, at most, the sum of their disparate parts. But by appealing to something so humanly central as the logic of sexual difference in love Petrarch could sustain an almost purely lyric sequence over hundreds of poems.<sup>15</sup>

What do I mean here by the “logic of sexual difference”? “Every man and woman alive today,” Paul Seabright observes, “has emotions and perceptions that are shaped by the simple and natural asymmetry between sperm and eggs.”<sup>16</sup> In most animal species, males, with almost endless sperm to spare, compete to be selected by females, with their limited supply of eggs and therefore with much more reason than males to be choosy. In many monogamous species, where male assistance in the rearing of offspring regularly raises their survival rates, females become still more selective in choosing long-term mates. In such species females seek, and males need to provide, proof of commitment. Females can test male commitment best by resistance, by making would-be partners demonstrate their persistence.

“It’s a spiral,” Seabright explains: “the selectivity of the women encourages the persistence of men, and the more persistent are the men, the more selective the women have to be.”<sup>17</sup> That biological logic underlies the sonnet sequence Petrarch labored over from the 1320s to the 1370s: that, and its local cultural elaboration in the particularly high Christian valuation of female chastity. The Petrarchan pattern influenced many other poets and had a particular vogue in England through the 1580s and 1590s and just after.

New evidence shows that Shakespeare began writing his *Sonnets* in 1594-1595, not earlier in the 1590s, at the height of the Elizabethan sonnet sequence vogue, as previously supposed.<sup>18</sup> By this time he had already proved himself in the current modes of dramatic narrative—tragedy, comedy, history—and in comic and tragic narrative verse. As I show in *Why Lyrics Last*, this ambitious writer then turned to the most highly valued lyric form of his day, the sonnet

sequence, to show what he could do in a lyric vein, pointedly excluding narrative within and between his sonnets to a degree that other sonnet sequence poets had not. He made even more than other sonneteers of the emotional intensities we associate with narrative, while still excluding narrative itself and relying instead on non-narrative pattern.

Attention is the lifeblood of art, and attention bleeds away with habituation, with the fading of response of neural tissue to a repeated or prolonged stimulus. Sonnet sequences were fashionable, an attention plus; but they risked two attention minuses. There had been so many of them in England from the mid-1580s to the mid-1590s, from *Aurora* to *Zephyria*, all the same in structure: the poet persisting in sonnet after sonnet in wooing an ideally resistant beloved. And while each sonnet sequence reflects the logic of sexual difference, and so appeals to our fascination with “reproductive” or romantic choice, it also protracts the sexual standoff to the point of sexual stalemate. As a form, the sonnet sequence therefore chafes under its constraints. It has to appeal by varying the rhetoric of panegyric—the Poet’s expressing his love for the beloved’s unrivaled merits, as proof of his unmatched persistence and commitment—and by whatever psychological complexity can be wrung from the Poet’s being torn between adoration and frustration.

Recent evidence shows that Shakespeare began his own sonnet sequence with what are known as the Dark Lady sonnets, which I will call simply the Mistress sonnets, echoing the poet’s own term. With the ambition and inventiveness he shows elsewhere, Shakespeare, as has long been recognized, rethought the conventions deeply. “Instead of writing sonnets for a woman as fair, unattainable and chaste as Petrarch’s Laura and the beloveds of Petrarch’s

imitators," I observe in *Why Lyrics Last*, "he introduces a Mistress who is not fair—though she is beautiful, in at least some of the poems—but dark in coloration. More strikingly she is not only *not* unattainable but *has been attained* by many: she is the 'bay where all men ride.'" <sup>19</sup> Far from resisting males, she persistently invites them with her wicked glances as well her winsome looks.

With their disenchantments of desire, the Mistress sonnets offered a radical, attention-catching reversal of sonnet-sequence conventions, but as a group they also proved to be emotionally rather un compelling, for all the Poet's expressed compulsiveness, and insufficient in themselves for a whole sequence. At some point near the mid-1590s, I suggest, Shakespeare then found another way to take the expectations of sonnet readers by surprise, another way to earn, and this time to hold, their attention, by challenging, from an even more unexpected direction, the sonnet-sequence norm of male persistence and female resistance. What if he were to introduce not a female beauty, unfair and foul and all too attainable, but a male beauty, fair but resisting all, and indeed, in contrast to the Mistress, fair in all senses? As so often, Shakespeare reverses the existing pattern and then reverses or rotates it another way. And this time the surprise was enough to sustain a sequence of 126 sonnets that, in conjunction with the 28 Mistress sonnets, would form the longest Elizabethan sonnet sequence.

Although Shakespeare creates an intense emotional engagement with the Mistress and especially the Youth, he does not tell a story. He maximizes the openness of lyric, its freedom from the linearity of story. He offers each new poem as an unpredictable challenge, not least in the unpredictability of its relation to the poems before and after. He exploits the tension between the autonomy of each sonnet and the variety of its potential relations to its

neighbors—emotional, thematic, verbal, rhyming, imagistic, structural; continuation, contrast, echo, variation, reversal.

Rather than trying to read the sonnets as a narrative, as a kind of verse journal, I propose in *Why Lyrics Last* that we should see Shakespeare's art in the *Sonnets* as in some ways like a kaleidoscope: "A kaleidoscope continually taps or shakes its colored chips into new configurations, often strangely similar from tap to tap, yet with eye- and mind-teasing similarities to recent configurations, or perhaps, after a more vigorous shake, suddenly quite different, yet even then within a recognizable range of combinatorial possibilities defined by the free elements and the fixed mirrors."<sup>20</sup> Shakespeare tries out, as it were, "small taps or larger jolts from poem to poem, so that themes, moods, or patterns can persist for a time in slight reconfigurations or suddenly drop out of sight behind other themes, moods, or patterns."<sup>21</sup>

For all his challenges to Petrarchan convention, Shakespeare still focuses on love, but complicates its psychology and attention-earning power by adding elements of hate, or by mingling desire with dislike, in the Mistress sonnets, and idealization in the Youth sonnets with undertones of disenchantment.

Meanwhile, he also ramps up the appeal of patterns other than the amatory.

Helen Vendler has argued eloquently for the centrality of pattern within individual sonnets;<sup>22</sup> I echo and extend her emphasis, but I also stress how Shakespeare amplifies the appeal and surprise of the patterns *between* sonnet and sonnet.

Some sonnets stand by themselves, except as they form part of the sub-sequence of 126 focused on the Youth if on anyone, or the sub-sequence of 28

focused on the Mistress. Others form sub-sub-sequences, up to seventeen at a time, in the opening cluster, or smaller groups. Let's focus on one such sub-sub-sequence, starting with sonnet 33.

Full many a glorious morning have I seen  
Flatter the mountain tops with sovereign eye,  
Kissing with golden face the meadows green,  
Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy,  
Anon permit the basest clouds to ride  
With ugly rack on his celestial face,  
And from the forlorn world his visage hide,  
Stealing unseen to west with this disgrace:  
Even so my sun one early morn did shine,  
With all triumphant splendour on my brow;  
But out alack, he was but one hour mine,  
The region cloud hath masked him from me now.  
Yet him for this my love no whit disdaineth:  
Suns of the world may stain, when heaven's sun staineth.<sup>23</sup>

Unusually, Shakespeare structures this sonnet around a single image. Images themselves are patterns: patterns of experience, at their simplest—here, a day that begins in glorious morning but turns to dark cloud, a pattern familiar to us all, and one that effortlessly evokes memories by means of automatic mental pattern-matching. Repeatedly throughout the *Sonnets* Shakespeare draws on the most familiar natural patterns by which we make sense of experience: the



life cycle, the seasonal cycle, the cycle of day and night. Here, he also draws on the perennial association of the shifting emotions and shifting weather.

Of course he freshens the overall image in diction and imagery. In the first two lines, the implicit sun becomes “a sovereign eye,” flattering the mountaintops with the prolonged attention of the monarch of the sky. Shakespeare lays the pattern of human hierarchy in general, and royalty in particular, over the pattern of a brilliant early morning. As Colin Burrow notes in the Oxford edition of the *Sonnets*, while courtiers usually flatter the monarch, here the monarch of the sky “elevates the mountains by deigning to gaze at them”;<sup>24</sup> and we could add that while prostration was often expected at a monarch’s gaze, these subjects graced by the sovereign eye are flattered but do not become flatter: the exaltation of the mountain tops stands out all the more in the morning sun.

In line 3, “kissing with golden face the meadows green,” the metaphor of kissing extends into “with golden face,” at this point the sun’s, but with a characteristic Shakespearean doublesidedness, as the green meadow, at first in shadow in our minds, looks back at us “with a golden face” in the sunlight. An additional pattern of alliteration links the two color adjectives, *golden* and *green*, one before and one after its noun. In line 4 *gilding* continues the g-alliteration, and links tightly in sound, sense, etymology and evocation with *golden*, but the imagery, still focused on the same scene and sun, moves all the way from kissing to alchemy.

As so often, Shakespeare uses patterns of structure as units of sense and strategy, in this case in the setup in this first quatrain: the pattern of the brilliant sun persists, but in three consecutively different images, the royal look, the

kissing face, the alchemical transformation, on mountain and meadow and streams. As so often, he also varies the patterns as much as he can: in lines 2-4, three verbs with *with*, one late in the line, another early, the third late again; one with a finite verb, then two with participles; two with face imagery, then one without.

Then he follows the shift to the second quatrain with a shift to clouds covering the sun and the bright day, and a sense of corruption or shame (*basest, ugly, hide, steal, disgrace*) besetting the radiant morning, but still linking with the language of the first quatrain (*face*, l.3, l. 6; *heavenly*, l.4, *celestial*, l.6).

Shakespeare extends the glorious morning-beclouded day image through the first two quatrains, as if it were the octave of a Petrarchan sonnet. He often complicates the pattern of the Elizabethan sonnet, with its three quatrains plus couplet, by overlaying, as here, the pattern of the Italian sonnet: an octave, then the *volta*, the shift of thought into what would be the sestet of the Italian sonnet.

All Shakespeare's sonnets are love poems, but exceptionally here he has offered for the entire octave only a purely visual image that keeps love unmentioned for more than half the sonnet. He has conjured up, evocatively, the visually vivid vehicle of the image, but only right where the *volta* comes, with the "Even so" of line 9, does he start to introduce its tenor.

He pays us the compliment of trusting us to infer from "my sun" that he means the Youth who has been the focus of all the other 32 sonnets so far (and often associated with the splendor of the sun, as in "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?")—an implication strengthened but still far from explicit in the *he* and *him* of lines 11 and 12. He uses the structural patterns of the sonnet to perfection: just as the first two quatrains of the image's vehicle are compressed

into the one quatrain of the tenor, so the four lines describing the glorious morning compact into two on the initial radiance of his relationship with the Youth, and the onset of gloom likewise contracts from four lines to two.

For the first time in the sequence, Shakespeare suggests that something has troubled the love of Poet and Youth. Something has come between them, the Youth's radiance no longer shines on the Poet. This could *become* narrative, were it to become specific enough; and in the context of the previous radiance, the shift certainly has emotional overtones, matching those that we know ourselves when the exhilaration of a perfect morning turns to a dark and threatening day, or a cloudless love turns to foul emotional weather. But Shakespeare is not aiming for narrative specificity: we have no idea what the change involves, except disappointment in a love that had seemed ideal. But the patterns of day and disappointed love resonate with us precisely because they lack narrative specificity, because we can instantly link them to our own experience.

Then comes the couplet. A Shakespearean sonnet sets up expectations in its three quatrains, three units of four lines of alternating rhymes, *abab*, which it often overturns with the shift to the couplet, a single unit of adjacent rhymes, *gg*. That shift allows the poet to condense the rest of the sonnet, as it were, from twelve lines into two, into an emphatic closing epigram; or to advance just one stage further, to a clinching argument; or to take the thought to a new plane; or to turn the tables suddenly on the rest. On a first encounter we can never be sure whether the couplet will repeat, condense, advance, divert or reverse.

The couplet of Sonnet 33 takes us by a double surprise. Whatever has come between the Poet and the beloved, it has not affected the Poet's love. Whatever gloom has been cast over the Poet's emotional sky, the radiance of the

Youth persists in his eyes: he is still a sun of the world, still lights up the Poet's life. Or so the couplet professes. But *stain* and *staineth* pull another way, echoing the notes of moral corruption in the second quatrain—*basest, ugly, stealing, disgrace*—as if the Poet wants to be heard to excuse the Youth but cannot help feeling that his behavior deserves reproach. Other Elizabethan sonnet sequences do not include this degree of psychological complexity in the love relationship: the sudden darkening of the relationship in something shameful, or the love persisting despite the recognition of some “stain.” The Poet is disappointed but besotted, covertly reproachful yet still overtly idealizing. Despite his cause for complaint, he wants to affirm his love as emphatically as ever.

A few words more on Sonnet 33's patterns. The whole sonnet is about love, but love, as the tenor of the glorious morning image, does not enter explicitly until past half way. The whole sonnet uses the vehicle of the sunny morning beclouded, but although the image of the sun quite dominates the octave, the word *sun* never in fact occurs there. It enters only with the tenor, the Poet's love, in the sestet: “Even so my sun.” The poem is about the disappearance of the emotional sun that lights up the Poet's life, yet in this tour de force the literal sun itself remains concealed by the sonneteer. And after that single appearance of the word *sun* at the start of the sestet, the word recurs again only in the last line, twice, linking tenor sun and vehicle sun explicitly within the one line. But if the word *sun* hides throughout the octave, the word *seen* occurs in its first line (meaning “I have *seen* such glorious sunny mornings”), and *unseen* in its last (the sun *unseen* behind cloud), a deliberate formal bracketing, and with the three letters of *sun* scrambled or obscured in “*unseen*.” And the *s-n* consonance of *sun* and *seen* recurs in a different key in the last line, *suns . . . stain . . . sun . .*

*staineth*. The sun also reappears in a different mode in the linking of *heavenly* and *celestial* in the first two quatrains with *heaven's* in the couplet. These are the kinds of things both Vendler and I have in mind when we stress the pleasure of pattern, the invitation to discovery, and the rewards for controlled attention in the *Sonnets*.

Sonnet 34 appears to link closely with its predecessor in occasion and imagery, but it also compresses, alters and complicates the mood, yet still ends by expressing the forgiveness of devoted love.

Why didst thou promise such a beauteous day,  
And make me travel forth without my cloak,  
To let base clouds o'ertake me in my way,  
Hiding thy brav'ry in their rotten smoke?  
'Tis not enough that through the cloud thou break,  
To dry the rain on my storm-beaten face,  
For no man well of such a salve can speak,  
That heals the wound, and cures not the disgrace;  
Nor can thy shame give physic to my grief;  
Though thou repent, yet I have still the loss.  
Th'offender's sorrow lends but weak relief  
To him that bears the strong offence's cross.  
  
Ah, but those tears are pearl which thy love sheds,  
And they are rich, and ransom all ill deeds.

Here Shakespeare seems to give his kaleidoscope the tiniest tap, while showing

how even that slightest touch can reconfigure so much. He retains the imagery of a promising day dimly dulled by cloud, but this time makes it instantly personal. Whereas Sonnet 33's octave describes a perfect morning marred by a stormy sequel in concrete but universal terms, and introduces the beloved only obliquely, only in the third person and not until the start of the sestet, Sonnet 34 turns *immediately* to the beloved, in the second person and the first line, and to the Poet's own experience of this initially flawless morning: "Why didst *thou* promise such a beauteous day, / And make *me* travel forth without my cloak . . . ?" The "cloak" adds a note of almost novelistic realism, yet this sonnet remains a metaphor about the relationship, not a narrative. The two opening quatrains of Sonnet 33, fine weather and foul, condense again into the opening quatrain here, as they had condensed in the third quatrain of Sonnet 33, and the "basest clouds" of 33 fly back as "base clouds."

The personalization applies a new force to the cloud-sun imagery in the opening of the second quatrain, "'Tis not enough that through the cloud thou break / To dry the rain on my storm-beaten face": the lines imply the Poet's tears, dried by the beloved's showing again a sunny face. Where the Poet forgave the Youth at the end of the previous poem, here he seems unready to forgive, and after this "'Tis not enough" shifts from meteorological metaphor to direct if unspecific reproach: a barrage of negatives (*not, no, not, nor*), and then *wound, disgrace, shame, grief, repent, loss, offender's sorrow, weak relief, the strong offence's cross*. Again Shakespeare evokes the emotional shift from blithe love to wounded feelings, without specifying at all what has happened.

But once again the sonnet shifts, in a different way, in the couplet. The reproaches of the last six lines seem to have caused the Youth to show his sorrow

vividly enough and fetchingly enough to soften the Poet's apparently firm anger: "Ah, but those tears are pearl which thy love sheds, / And they are rich, and ransom all ill deeds." The imagery of the *Poet's* tears implied in line 6, "To dry the rain on my storm-beaten face," recurs as tears on the *Youth's* face, which immediately win back the Poet who had determined to hold out in anger. As in Sonnet 33, but with a very different emotional contour, even if with the same sense of besottedness, Sonnet 34 ends by forgiving the Youth for some strong personal offense against their love.

Sonnet 35 draws on the two previous poems but compresses still further and shifts in a new direction.

No more be grieved at that which thou hast done:  
Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud,  
Clouds and eclipses stain both moon and sun,  
And loathsome canker lives in sweetest bud.  
All men make faults, and even I in this,  
Authorizing thy trespass with compare,  
Myself corrupting, salving thy amiss,  
Excusing thy sins more than thy sins are:  
For to thy sensual fault I bring in sense—  
Thy adverse party is thy advocate—  
And 'gainst myself a lawful plea commence:  
Such civil war is in my love and hate,  
That I an accessory needs must be  
To that sweet thief which sourly robs from me.

Where for much of Sonnet 34 the emotion had felt raw, here Shakespeare begins with a generalization and four swift, almost glibly proverbial, images. He expands and distances the phenomenologically felt sun-cloud image of the earlier sonnets into the cool impersonal assurance of “Clouds and eclipses stain both sun and moon” (notice “stain” here echoing the repeated *stain* in the last line of Sonnet 33).

But the note of calm, resigned, wise forgiveness in the first line of the second quatrain, “All men make faults,” itself turns into another sting, another rebuke: “and even I in this, / Authorizing thy trespass with compare.” In earlier sonnets (18, 21) the Poet has spoken of comparisons only in terms that extol the Youth; now he acknowledges that the comparisons he introduces here to allay the Youth’s offense actually corrupt *him* in excusing a foul fault in the one he loves. The notes of easy besotted forgiveness in Sonnet 33 and besotted forgiveness after rankling resentment in Sonnet 34 change here to a sense of inextricable ambivalence, reproach of the other and of himself, that lingers through the last ten lines of the sonnet. This time the couplet offers no switch in the complex emotion but simply compresses the complicity and the irony: “That I an accessory needs must be / To that sweet thief which sourly robs from me.”

Sonnets 33-35 offer a succession of shifts of highly personalized and far from idealized or conventionalized emotions, that seem to suggest a vividly personal sequence of feelings. But Shakespeare takes great care to specify no events to dampen down the resonance that any of these sonnets might have with our own experiences of emotional disenchantment and ambivalence. As always in his sonnets, he evokes the immediacy of emotion in intense personal



relationships that he had also mastered in drama, and at least the illusion of his particular personal feelings—the sense that here in the tight focus of lyric we eavesdrop on him at his most intimate—but without the specificity of narrative.

At the same time, Sonnet 35 amplifies pattern in a way typical of lyric, both within itself and in relation to its predecessors: the compressed analogies of the first quatrain, two of them only three words each; a series of abstract restatements in quatrain 2 after the concrete analogies of quatrain 1, and ringing the changes of terms of moral error (*faults, trespass, corrupting, amiss, sins*); in the sestet, the antitheses and consonances (*sensual, sense; adverse, advocate; love, hate; sweet, sourly*) and the imagery of law, war, and theft; the verbal echoes of *sun* and *stain* from Sonnet 33 and *salve* from Sonnet 34, and an anticipation of *steal* in Sonnet 36; and the contrast in the close *link* here between quatrain 3 and couplet after the sudden *shift* in moving to the couplet in each of the previous two sonnets.

Sonnet 33 introduces an emotional cloud in a hitherto sunny relationship, which becomes in Sonnet 34 not just an emotional darkening but some emotional wound or offense. Yet in both sonnets the Poet dismisses the felt shadow or offense, easily in Sonnet 33, with difficulty in Sonnet 34. Sonnet 35 tries another angle, showing the Poet complicit in the beloved's offense by his very wish to excuse it more than it deserves. Sonnet 36 then offers one further tap on the emotional and relational kaleidoscope: a new thought, a new imaginative opportunity. Shakespeare flips the situation over: What if the fault is not the beloved's but the Poet's, what if the Poet's mere complicity in the beloved's guilt in 35 were expanded into the Poet as the sole source of guilt? What if not the beloved other but the speaking self is the guilty one, while the

postulate of intense love remains the same? In that case, given his love *and* his guilt, the Poet urges the beloved not to associate with him, lest he become tainted by association:

Let me confess that we two must be twain,  
Although our undivided loves are one:  
So shall those blots that do with me remain,  
Without thy help by me be borne alone.  
In our two loves there is but one respect,  
Though in our lives a separable spite,  
Which though it alter not love's sole effect,  
Yet doth it steal sweet hours from love's delight.  
I may not evermore acknowledge thee,  
Lest my bewailed guilt should do thee shame,  
Nor thou with public kindness honour me,  
Unless thou take that honour from thy name:  
But do not so; I love thee in such sort  
As thou being mine, mine is thy good report.

In all of these sonnets Shakespeare takes the postulate of an absolute, idealized love, but showing its first flaws: an emotional dimming (33); an actual offense by the other (34); an offense shared by the poet in seeking to excuse it (35); an offense or shame on the Poet's part that he wants the other not to have to share (36). Not only does this gloom or guilt start up suddenly in Sonnet 33, and vary itself with different intensities within the sub-sub-sequence, then

transfer itself to the opposite party, but it has no consequences in the sonnets that follow, which easily return to the primary postulate of the beloved's perfections (Sonnet 53 ends: "But you like none, none you, for constant heart"). Sonnet 36, the last of the sub-sub-sequence, pairs tightly with 39, outside the sub-sub-sequence, in all sorts of patterns that play on two being one and indivisible (and yet Shakespeare has, perhaps wryly, divided these sonnets by inserting two others between). Sonnet 39, though later in the overall sequence, has nothing but panegyric, not the faintest hint of the stains, faults, trespasses, corruptings, amisses, and sins of Sonnet 35:

O, how thy worth with manners may I sing,  
When thou art all the better part of me?  
What can mine own praise to mine own self bring,  
And what is't but mine own when I praise thee?  
Even for this, let us divided live,  
And our dear love lose name of single one,  
That by this separation I may give  
That due to thee which thou deserv'st alone.  
O absence, what a torment wouldst thou prove,  
Were it not thy sour leisure gave sweet leave,  
To entertain the time with thoughts of love,  
Which time and thoughts so sweetly doth deceive;  
And that thou teachest how to make one twain,  
By praising him here who doth hence remain.

Take your time to discover all the hide-and-seek patterns of similarity and dissimilarity that Shakespeare weaves into Sonnets 36 and 39. And reflect on how different this experience of reading is from that of his narrative and dramatic verse. Narrative and its constraining and instantly apprehended patterns do not shape the *Sonnets*: lyric and its plethora of open but delayed patterns do.

Narrative, especially literary narrative, rarely ignores the opportunities of enriched attention to language and pattern that are central to verse. Verse rarely ignores the additional interest, the supplied relevance, the forward impetus, and the ease of processing that are central to story. But when verse unwinds itself from narrative, in lyric, the mind's processing of pattern changes from effortless to effortful.

Narrative, like a samurai sword, can cut a swift swathe through experience. Lyric, like a Japanese puzzle-box, stands rich with inlaid pattern upon pattern, inviting us to open it, in a sequence of steps that shift the patterns back and forth, up and down. Once we have learned to open and reclose the box, it remains there, prompting us to open it again and again, marvelling at the fit and click and design, as we aim for the still space within, where we can store what matters most.

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- <sup>1</sup> Don Paterson, *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets: A New Commentary* (London: Faber, 2010), 14.
- <sup>2</sup> Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).
- <sup>3</sup> Brian Boyd, *Why Lyrics Last: Evolution, Cognition, and Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).
- <sup>4</sup> Gerald Edelman, *Second Nature: Brain Science and Human Knowledge* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 58, 103.
- <sup>5</sup> Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body, Emotion, and the Making of Consciousness*. London: Vintage, 2000); Joseph Le Doux, *The Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are* (New York: Viking, 2002).
- <sup>6</sup> Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel, "An experimental study of apparent behavior," *American Journal of Psychology* 57 (1944): 243–259.
- <sup>7</sup> David Premack and Ann James Premack, "Afterword," in Dan Sperber, David Premack, and Ann James Premack, eds., *Causal Cognition: A Multidisciplinary Debate* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 651–654; Paul Bloom and C. Veres, "The perceived intentionality of groups," *Cognition* 71 (1999): B1–B9.
- <sup>8</sup> At for instance <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZBKer6PMtM>.
- <sup>9</sup> *Twelfth Night, Or What You Will*, ed. Roger Warren and Stanley Wells (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).
- <sup>10</sup> Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (1988; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996).
- <sup>11</sup> Rachel Blau du Plessis, "Manifests," *Diacritics*, 26: 3-4 (1996), 31-53, pp. 36, 51.
- <sup>12</sup> Boyd, *Lyrics* 17-18; see also Frederick Turner and Ernst Pöppel, "Metered Poetry, the Brain, and Time," in *Beauty and the Brain: Biological Aspects of Aesthetics*, ed. I. Rentschler, B. Hertzberger, and D. Epstein (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1988), 71– 90; Patrick

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Colm Hogan, *The Mind and Its Stories: Narrative Universals and Human Emotion*

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> In Anne Mounic, "Entretien avec Vincent O'Sullivan," *Temporel*, 4 (2006), 2-23, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Boyd, *Lyrics* 32, 34.

<sup>15</sup> Boyd, *Lyrics* 65-66.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Seabright, *The War of the Sexes: How Conflict and Cooperation Have Shaped Men and Women from Prehistory to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 15.

<sup>17</sup> Seabright, *War* 13; Boyd, *Lyrics* 64.

<sup>18</sup> MacDonald P. Jackson, "Rhymes in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*: Evidence of Date of Composition," *Notes and Queries*, June 1999, 213- 219; "Aspects of Organisation in *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1609)," *Parergon*, 17 (1999), 109-134; "Vocabulary and Chronology: The Case of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*," *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 52 (2001), 59-75; "Dating Shakespeare's *Sonnets*: Some Old Evidence Revisited," *Notes and Queries*, June 2002, 237- 241; "The Distribution of Pronouns in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*," *AUMLA*, 97 (2002), 22- 38.

<sup>19</sup> Boyd, *Lyrics* 71-72.

<sup>20</sup> Boyd, *Lyrics* 78-79.

<sup>21</sup> Boyd, *Lyrics* 101.

<sup>22</sup> Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>23</sup> Colin Burrow, ed., William Shakespeare, *Complete Sonnets and Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Burrow 446.