

Shakespeare and Philosophical Criticism*

Tzachi Zamir

1.

Shakespeare's poems and plays frequently offer sententious speculations about life, its meaning (or lack of it); about love, friendship, trust, pain; language (or speechlessness); action (or the inability to act); about the meaning of being a parent, or a friend; or the loss of self-respect; about honour and reputation; about the theatricality that imbues action. Philosophy is the reflective activity whereby such existential spheres and processes are rigorously examined. Pithy articulations of such experiential kernels would, accordingly, appear to be natural candidates for Shakespeare's 'relevance' to philosophers.

While such lofty speculations immediately come to mind when thinking of Shakespeare and philosophy, when one actually attempts to think through such a linkage in a specific textual moment, one comes up with very little. Consider, for example, Macbeth's equating life with a poor player who "struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more", or Hamlet's "to be or not to be" soliloquy, debating the pros and cons of existence, or Ulysses and his reflections on value in the eyes of others, or Falstaff's philosophizing about honour emptying into a mere word, or Timon's insights regarding the corrupting power of money. All of these are surely deep moments in the plays. Such moving speeches suggest the philosopher's capacity to rise above the quotidian hustle and bustle, coolly and dispassionately apprehending a facet of life and issuing its succinct articulation.

* Extract (c. 5000 w) from pp. 623-40, ch. 34 "Philosophy" from *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare*, edited by Arthur Kinney (2012), www.oup.com. Free permission Author's own material.

But suppose now that such claims are removed from their context and introduced as proposed truths in a gathering of philosophers. "I can perhaps see why Hamlet might believe that he should either live and suffer life's humiliations or die and risk afterlife punishment, but why should one hold that this disjunction is applicable to the lives of other individuals?" would ask one puzzled philosopher. "May we know what necessary and sufficient conditions are being presupposed with regard to 'life' and 'acting' when Macbeth identifies 'life' with a poor player?" demands another philosopher. "Why should one hold that 'honour travels in a strait so narrow where one but goes abreast'?" wonders a third, upon pondering Ulysses' remark, "Does Ulysses ground this claim regarding honour's limited distribution on empirical fact or on conceptual necessity?". The problem is obvious: such claims about life or honour, moving and effective as they are in their dramatic contexts, are partial, vague, and unsupported when examined as proposed truths. Furthermore, since such generalizations are (thankfully) not being argued for in their fictional context, they are not even candidates for philosophical scrutiny. Such statements can, at best, embellish an independent philosophical argument. They add spice that might appeal to the bookish. No more.

2.

A second unpromising route through which Shakespeare's philosophical import may be established is to place his work in dialogue with themes developed more systematically by his contemporaries. Thinkers such as Montaigne, Bodin, Hooker, More, or Calvin have formulated elaborate ideas regarding the limits of knowledge, the illusiveness of free will, or the nature of salvation. Why not examine the explicit and implicit interplay between Shakespeare's work and such an established philosophical corpus? There are three reasons that advise against this. Firstly, we are either faced with the daunting and ultimately thankless task of attempting to distill Shakespeare's own thoughts from his plays, or the equally unappealing project of hounding implied philosophical positions in the plays. The problem with implied positions is that the plays offer too many varied and conflicting ideas and attitudes. One would have to flatten the numerous incoherent and ad hoc reflections found in them into some coherent 'idea'. "Reason and love keep little

company together" says Bottom, and it will not be hard to find a critic capable of interweaving this observation into debates regarding the place of the passions in the good life in early modern England. But how to square this remark with the opposite process at work in some of the plays or particularly in the sonnets, whereby love occasions a privileged access to reality, a sharper penetration into it, rather than mere insulation?

Secondly, even when philosophical positions can genuinely be discerned, they are formulated by characters with whom we sympathize to a limited degree or not at all. What, for example, is the significance of Shakespeare's allocating the remark above to Bottom? Does Bottom's low status undermine the statement? Or perhaps, on the contrary, it being uttered by a fool strengthens it? Both options are interpretively viable. Moreover, how should one approach the complex, sometimes contradictory relations between asserted content and overall effect? Hamlet's dismissals of life are rendered through powerful images that energize both language and actor to an extraordinary degree. Such lines constitute a celebration of life even when life is being disparaged. Which idea is unfolded at such moments? Are we witnessing an articulation of nihilism or its opposite? Jaques finds nothing but theatricality in the lives he dispassionately views around him. In old age – the last of the seven ages of man – he sees no more than disability and dependency. But it is often unnoted that just after the famous speech, Shakespeare has Orlando entering carrying an old loyal servant, frantically looking for scraps of food through which Orlando can nourish him. Is Jaques a mouthpiece for Shakespeare's own view of life as nothing more than a stage? Is Shakespeare alternatively, subtly criticizing Jaques's lugubrious and reductive stance by showing how old age can become an opportunity to give and receive?

Finally, to historicize Shakespeare's philosophical relevance means to relegate his philosophical significance to the history of philosophy (and not to one of its grander moments at that) rather than making him a partner to contemporary thought. Granted, for some philosophers philosophy *is just* its history. But even for such philosophers, one would have to demonstrate that Shakespeare is an important player in the evolution and refinement of some concepts or themes. Yet it seems strained to claim that Rosalind's jolly disregard of Jaques's cynicism plays a similar role to, say, Locke's criticism of the theory of innate ideas. After Locke's critique, it was no

longer possible merely to iterate the idea that universally accepted propositions imply innateness. In what sense is Rosalind's sprightly dismissal of Jaques's morbid stance a substantive critique? In what way does our sympathy for her constitute an argument that should counteract nihilism? Does the exchange truly advance our sense of the shortcomings of nihilism? Can it be reapplied? Does it expose nihilism's limitations in the same way in which, say, Kant exposes a possible error in Anselm's ontological argument by undermining the presupposition that existence is a predicate?

If not the memorable contemplative statements or the interplay between such statements and ideas, what can philosophers qua philosophers achieve by immersing themselves in Shakespeare's works? And what can literary critics gain if they eavesdrop on (or risk undertaking) such philosophically-oriented readings of Shakespeare?

3.

No longer mourn for me when I am dead
 Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell
 Give warning to the world that I am fled
 From this vile world with vilest worms to dwell.
 Nay, if you read this line, remember not
 The hand that writ it; for I love you so
 That I in your sweet thoughts would be forgot
 If thinking on me then should make you woe.
 O, if, I say, you look upon this verse
 When I perhaps compounded am with clay,
 Do not so much as my poor name rehearse,
 But let your love even with my life decay,
 Lest the wise world should look into your moan
 And mock you with me after I am gone.

The 'world' opens and closes *Sonnet 71*¹. It is introduced as the unimpressed abstract recipient of the news concerning the speaker's death. Then it becomes a detested, 'vile' context, acoustically and

¹ I reproduce the sonnet's text and punctuation as given in William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, eds Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, The Oxford Shakespeare, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989, p. 759. Other editions give a slightly different punctuation that will not modify my claims.

graphically resonating in the world-worm reverse rhyme. Finally, the “wise world” poses the threat of external ridicule. Shakespeare’s sonnet thus construes the poem’s intimacy – the poem as an enactment of intimacy with a projected recipient and an eavesdropping reader – as a private space, predicated on the positing (or invention) of an opposing and externalized ‘world’.

But what does the speaker infuse into this loving space upon insulating it from the world? Surprisingly, what we hear are thoughts of death. The sonnet catalogues prescriptions to the beloved, forbidding the latter to mourn over the speaker once he is gone. The speaker offers to spare the beloved the pain and scorn such grief would inevitably evoke. A profoundly selfless loving gesture seems to be extended. We note, though, that the mere verbalization of the possibility (not to say the wish) to be forgotten by the beloved amounts to conjuring up a nightmare. The injunction to forget becomes particularly poignant if the sonnet is read (as Joseph Pequigney reads the entire sequence) as a homoerotic disclosure. Following such reading, the world will “mock you with me after I am gone” reveals the maddening loneliness of same-sex grief in Shakespeare’s cultural context². The plea to be forgotten comes to entail an earnest wish that the beloved will move on, thereby sparing himself additional suffering.

But we are also aware of an unmistakable counter-movement: the self-reinstatement paradoxically constituted by this repetitive command to be erased from consciousness. We might also glimpse the attempt to control the beloved’s thoughts after the poet is gone. Should he read this line, the beloved is asked to perform the impossible – to disremember the very hand that wrote it. The ostensibly selfless, other-oriented surface of the argument thus gives way to an opposing self-centred refusal to be erased from thought. The beloved is not really allowed to move on. He is, rather, being cleverly manipulated into grief when the speaker can no longer wring a binding attachment in person.

² “The character of the relationship between the speaker and his beloved [in *Sonnet 71*] is not greatly changed whether the beloved was a man or a woman”, Jack M. Davis and J. E. Grant assert in “A Critical Dialogue on Shakespeare’s *Sonnet 71*”, *Texas Studies in Language and Literature*, 1:2 (Summer 1959), pp. 214-32; p. 215. Yet the nature of the ‘mock’ alluded to does depend heavily on the kind of eroticism one imagines to be articulated and, in this particular sonnet, renders the homoerotic reading far more moving. For Pequigney’s argument, see *Such Is My Love: A Study of Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1985.

The combination of selflessness and aggression is not being merely described, disclosed, or expressed. The relations between emotion and language are more complex than implied by these categories. A sonnet is not merely a linguistic formulation of a pre-existing sentiment. A Shakespearean sonnet (to follow Helen Vendler) is an action performed in language whereby a distinct thread of love is being created. The speaker evolves through this action, allowing the reader not merely to comprehend a state or grasp a truth, but to follow sympathetically the temporal steps through which a distinct and personal sentiment is being crystallized. The sonnet allows its reader to eavesdrop into this private process. It also invites the reader to partake in the temporality entailed in following a creative act. The sonnet thereby forms an unstable mixture of descriptive, expressive, and generative elements. Each of these elements can turn out to be a mere façade, momentarily assumed by the speaker, only to conceal the fact that another aspect is being mobilized.

Once a sonnet ceases to be regarded as a linguistic construction which simply mediates between an independently existing emotion and the real/imagined beloved or the real/imagined reader, once a sonnet is regarded as, in part, a performative *creation* of a distinct strand of love, its reader accesses an experiential configuration that, if aesthetically persuasive, does not constitute a stylized mimetic copy of reality or some elaborate formal description of it, but is a feature of emotional reality directly encountered. The reality unveiled is not the material one of sticks and stones. It encompasses, rather, intricately subtle states made up of a dynamic interplay between feeling, image, and words. These states are fictional; they are proposed as experiences of the fictional speaker who may or may not mirror the thoughts and feelings of the living poet. But if the sonnet is aesthetically successful, it convinces its reader of its plausibility as the articulation of a mindscape in love.

4.

With this view of poetic language, let us return to *Sonnet 71*, this time with an eye for detail. I claimed that we are not relating to the sonnet as an expression or a description. Instead, we regard it as the means whereby an evolving sentiment is being progressively created before

us, different from the experiences that precede and follow it in the sonnet sequence as a whole.

The first four lines could be read in one breath³: “No longer mourn for me when I am dead / Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell / Give warning to the world that I am fled / From this vile world, with vilest worms to dwell”. The scene of the speaker’s imagined funeral, evoked as the very last event in which he asks to be moaned for by the beloved, then gives way to an articulation of the moment of reading: “Nay, if you read this line, remember not / The hand that writ it”. Collin Burrow notes how the complex ‘you’ of the love sonnets, which aligns the sonnet’s reader with the real/imagined beloved, also occasions a metafictional unification of the speaker/poet⁴. The beloved reads the speaker’s line; the reader reads the poet’s line. The sonnet is thus able to question its status as mere fictional or stylized disclosure, exhorting the reader to ponder on the identity of the addressee. The poet is not here speaking to the reader over the beloved’s head (as he does in *Sonnet 18*, for example), but draws on the first-person pronoun and on the invocation of the non-fictional moment of reading ‘this line’ to fuse rhetorically the beloved and the reader in the same posthumous action and moment.

The rhetorical objective of this ploy is, I think, to originate the broaching of a critical distance between reader and beloved. The self-humbling prescriptions generated by the speaker to the beloved might suit the latter. But once the reader is subtly united with the beloved, the nature of such a plea potentially encourages readers to refrain from following such implausibly self-abnegating demands. Why this request to be forgotten so quickly? Why this plea to go on after you die, as if nothing had happened? The more the beloved is construed as someone who might actually abide by a prescription of this kind, the more the reader is likely to withdraw from sharing such a cold stance. Rhetorically positioned as implied addressees, readers can thus perceive and resent more acutely the beloved’s flippant and carefree mindset, one that can occasion such words of parting in the first place.

³ In “Breath, Today: Celan’s Translation of *Sonnet 71*” (*Comparative Literature*, 57:4 [2005], pp. 328-51) Sara Guyer interestingly suggests that the reading of the first sentence effects a thematically-relevant effect of *breathlessness*.

⁴ Collin Burrow, “Introduction” to the Oxford edition of Shakespeare’s *The Complete Poems and Plays*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 122.

The sonnet's counter-theme is now introduced through a reversed chronology: the speaker invites the beloved to place himself in the position of loss and to then relate to him afresh. It is now revealed that under the guise of a poem about death and the relations between the living and the deceased, there hides a poem about life and the present bond between the living lovers. The sonnet thus mobilizes a familiar manoeuvre in erotic psychology (which will be rendered explicit in *Sonnet 73*): an intensification of feelings by way of imagining the death of the beloved. This thematic counterpoint – the introduction of life while referring to death – is reflected in word choice. The repetitive injunctions *not* to imagine the hand that is writing, or to *forget* the speaker's name, are being beautifully undercut by an obsessive iteration of the first person 'I,' 'me' and 'my' that permeate the sonnet's remaining lines.

Line 6 provides the transitional point between the imagined future moment of grief and the present: "for I love you so / That I in your sweet thoughts would be forgot, / If thinking on me then should make you woe". The simple, unadorned "for I love you so", its shift from future to present tense, reinforce the naked, non-stylized sentiment that presses itself into the sonnet's figuratively dense surface. The disturbing request to forget the departed loved one betrays love's contradictions. Disappearance from memory through the imagined burial in the beloved's "sweet thoughts" acts as a mental analogue for the material decomposition evoked at the sonnet's opening (one hears echoes of *hearse* in "do not so much as my poor name rehearse", affiliating the beloved's verbalization of the poet's name with a burial). The "make you woe" which closes line 8 gives way to the expressive 'O' that opens line 9, thus uniting through acoustics and performed action ('woe'/'o') the speaker and the beloved. The speaker's exclamation not only audibly and semantically duplicates the beloved's 'woe' but also rhymes with "love you so", echoing, as it were, the loving sentiment conveyed by that suspended sentence in the following lines, carrying on the same contradictory sentiment: prescribing forgetting while soliciting remembrance.

Detectable too, is the hurtful imbalance – reiterated time and again in the sonnet sequence as a whole – between the loving speaker and the betraying and evasive youth. Your 'woe' is conditional and uncertain ("If thinking on me then should make you woe"). The speaker's 'O', on the other hand, is unconditional. As commentators

have repeatedly noted, behind this disturbing expression of utmost self-negation there lies the gnawing suspicion that the speaker will hardly be mourned at all⁵. One facet constituting the richness of the evolving sentiment is thus the speaker's attempt to reinterpret the beloved's potentially wounding future disregard of his death. By *not* moaning for him, the beloved would be dutifully *complying* with the speaker's death wish! The process, which the speaker undergoes in the sonnet, thus also includes an attempt to make peace with a loved one moving on.

The speaker is thereby able to combine, on the one hand, loving sacrifice which is conditioned by the limitations of same-sex grief and the – to my mind authentic – benevolent willingness to release the youth from the obligation to grieve. On the other hand, one may sense a tacit yet marked complaint that the speaker will not be sufficiently mourned; that he is already disappearing from the beloved's carefree heart. The request not to be mourned would render bearable the inevitable prediction that the speaker will soon be forgotten by this lover anyway. The speaker is, accordingly, compelled to recreate his fading presence in a mind already forgoing and forgetting. This contradictory (but emotionally consistent) combination of egocentric and selfless attitudes, tinged with the pain that issues from thoughts of loss, of a mocked beloved, of envy and, even, rage upon being already forgotten concludes the sonnet.

5.

How does *Sonnet 71* inform philosophy? Arguments, striking generalizations, or memorable sententious statements about life or love are not being offered by the sonnet. Moreover, unlike some other forms of literature, the Shakespearean sonnet (like the Shakespearean play) is not designed to instruct, demonstrate a point, or improve us. At the same time, it is insightful. How?

The sonnet extends an invitation to share a significant moment in the poet/speaker's experience. The wish to establish connection with

⁵ Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 329. For similar impressions, see Shakespeare, *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, p. 122; and Joseph Pequigney's "*Sonnets 71-74: Texts and Contexts*", in *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Critical Essays*, ed. James Schiffer, New York, Garland, 1999, p. 287.

another may account for our need to read poetry in the first place. When the poetry is of superior quality, the connection also yields valuable insights, leading to a refined understanding of (in the case of the Shakespearean sonnets) love and its surprising modalities. Though non-general, highly contextual and private, the descriptions of such modalities remain potentially applicable to other contexts. Such renderings thereby become *truth claims*, potential truths. The fictional and artificial nature of the sonnet form does not undermine its capacity to adequately capture and convey a truth. On the contrary, stylization enables a slowing down of perception, hampering and thereby de-automatizing smooth processing.

The core of the response regarding a literary work's contribution to philosophy lies in this combination: an articulated potential truth taken in as part of an attuned state of mind created in the reader by a well-written text. Literature at its best offers evasive and nuanced truth-claims. It does so in a way that makes these claims resonate meaningfully within the reader. This reply is loosely satisfactory. To appease a philosopher it would need to establish further both the epistemic and the rhetorical components. Philosophers would wish to understand how poetic claims become upgraded into *truth-claims*. They would also like to know more about the responsive state created in the reader, and how such engaged suasion contributes to (rather than undermines) knowledge.

6.

How do we know that a particular poetic articulation is a *truth-claim* (which is not to be confused with a true *proposition*) rather than merely an idiosyncratic assertion? Defenders of literature's philosophical import often respond by arguing that literary insights can be poetically compelling because they cohere with the reader's sense of the depicted experience. Not that readers already know what Shakespeare is about to unravel. But they do relate to the articulated sentiment as a *successful* rendering of what they have already vaguely experienced. Yet the question remains: How do we know that a proposed poetic articulation of what we already independently fuzzily sense constitutes an enhanced rendering in the progressive mapping of our internal lives? How can we distinguish between successful ar-

tulations that we ought to embrace and unsuccessful ones that we are unable to reject precisely because of our own unclarity regarding inner states?

While we are not utterly helpless regarding such matters (I have elsewhere investigated this problem in greater detail⁶), the answer is that we do not have at our disposal conceptual tools that can fully satisfy us on this score. This inability accounts for the sceptical, hesitant and suggestive quality of literary interpretation — as in the cautious nature of the claims above regarding *Sonnet 71*. Successful poetic articulations are *potentially* true (hence: truth-claims). Surprisingly, we are willing to allow them to *remain* in this state. We ascribe explanatory power to such claims, without turning them into demonstrable truths (whatever ‘demonstrable’ can mean in the context of contingent truths). This is to take a step beyond a highly fruitful insight offered by Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen whereby they claim that ‘thematic statements’ can be understood without being construed as assertions⁷. One can agree with Lamarque’s and Olsen’s view that literary or literary interpretive statements should not be regarded as *assertions*. At the same time, such statements are also not merely comprehended. They are articulated as potential truths, as truth-claims.

Since anything can be ‘potentially’ true, philosophers might wonder how meaningful such an ascription ultimately is. Even when recognizing the contingent nature of claims regarding, for instance, the uneasy connections between generosity and control in a love relation, as formulated in *Sonnet 71*, and the implication which such contingent status entails vis-à-vis the unavailability of ‘proof’, the philosopher would strive to know what makes the successfully poetic articulation a *potential* truth. If the sonnet does not constitute an argument, if it does not merely fancifully recreate an experience akin to that which the reader has independently already sensed, in what other way can it support the soundness, the potential re-applicability, of its proposed observations? I, for one, have neither experienced myself nor detected in others the precise unstable combination of self-marginalization and self-reinstatement that I have just postu-

⁶ Tzachi Zamir, *Double Vision: Moral Philosophy and Shakespearean Drama*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2007, pp. 35-38.

⁷ Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1994, p. 328.

lated as the leading sentiment developed in *Sonnet 71*. On what basis, then, am I willing to accept the sonnet as deeply informing my sense of what love might involve?

7.

The response to the above question begins by denying that the 'plausibility' in question relates merely or primarily to *descriptive* adequacy. The disanalogy between material reality and mindscapes dissuades a brash acceptance of the 'inner' as some pre-existing immaterial correlate to material objects. We thus arrive at a more nuanced and interesting position: the poetic articulation is only *partly* a description that conforms to what one imprecisely senses to be the case in another's love. The apprehension of such conformity is not based on some arbitrary intuition. It rests, rather, upon familiarity with other lives, sensitivities, difficulties, and forms of attraction and erotic dependency. Thus, even if I do not possess first-hand familiarity with the experience portrayed, the patterns I have been discussing harmonize with my previous sense of the plausible scope of erotic dependency and manipulation.

At the same time, and beyond its status as a description of experience, the poetic articulation is also partly a proposed *intensification* of that experience. Richard Shusterman aptly formulates such a thought in his attempt to articulate art as dramatization in the following way: "Art distinguishes itself from ordinary reality not by its fictional frame of action but by its greater vividness of experience and action, through which art is opposed not to the concept of *life* but rather to that which is lifeless and humdrum"⁸. The precision we attribute to successful art and literature involves both ingredients: the descriptive *and* the intensifying. The poet – at least this kind of poet – convinces us with his eye for lived detail even when we have not undergone such experience ourselves, as well as with his capacity to offer a distilled expression of a vivid experience which readers are invited to sense.

What characterizes this 'intensity'? Take, for example, the discussion of the speaker's transition in *Sonnet 71* from (your conditional)

⁸ Richard Shusterman, *Surface and Depth: Dialectics of Criticism and Culture*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2002, p. 234.

'woe' to (the speaker's unconditional) 'O'. This linkage between unification in voice/action and complaint does not merely entail a description regarding how some pre-existing love happens to operate; nor is it some stylistically pleasing way of dressing up an independently existing sentiment. It constitutes 'intensification' in the sense of capturing in miniature, in the movement between two words, an emotional world encompassing several (three) distinct strands: utmost, genuine sympathy extended to the beloved's future pain (captured by the acoustic unification); the opposite, i.e. selfish concern that the beloved's future pain over the speaker's death would be insufficient (captured by the contrast between the beloved's conditional woe and the speaker's unconditional 'O'); and (thirdly) the dreadful thought that one will truly disappear from the beloved's world.

'Intensification' can take the form of this capacity to encapsulate into a detail numerous distinct *descriptively plausible* strands. It is opposed to what Shusterman calls "humdrum" reality because the humdrum entails precisely the deflation of content, the act of seeing and experiencing very little. By contrast, the best works of art and literature often attain their status by inviting absorption in a detail. The detail becomes 'intense' because so many distinct threads are woven into it.

Such quantitative concentration of independently valued, descriptively plausible components that are distilled into a condensed stylized form is what provides some art at some moments with the energized quality of a presentation of *heightened* experience. Rather than a set of descriptively correct observations on actual loves, poetic articulations operate modally: they suggest that life *could* attain the precise blend of precision and richness that we perceive in the work. When 'accepting' such articulations as plausible and rewarding, we do not merely regard them as adequately capturing a pre-existing complex state of affairs, but as a plausible intensification of experience as opposed to the 'humdrum', a rendering explicit of what a single moment can hold, when allowing ourselves to step back from homogenizing simplifications.

Apart from the dense richness, in which independently valued insights are crowded into the space of a detail, intensity also often denotes a quality marking the details themselves. Note, for instance, the bitter-sweet mood through which the speaker imagines his dissipation in the beloved's thoughts in "for I love you so / that I in your sweet thoughts would be forgot". Surrounded as this image is by two dis-

comforting glimpses into material decomposition – the subterranean aggression in this seemingly soft-spoken line, turns the beloved's mind (should he comply and forget the speaker as the latter supposedly requests) into a grave. The images thus militate against the mellifluous surface meaning, in which the speaker is pleading to spare the beloved pain. This is not 'irony' in the sense of asserting X and meaning Y. *Both* meanings, the selfless and the hostile, are being genuinely endorsed, and this contrapuntal movement of meaning lends a qualitative intensity to the line.

Such use of language is, again, opposed to the 'humdrum' and is, in this sense, 'intense'. This time, though, the contrast is not between quantitative richness of detail encountered in poetry as opposed to some watered-down version of reality which we ordinarily experience. Intensity, here, denotes a quality of the language: the planned organization of sense in a manner able to capture and voice the shades of emotion that are at work in a lived context. The 'voicing' is sometimes an amplifying. To tacitly present the beloved's mind as a grave transmits rage. The speaker does not curse or blame the future forgetful beloved. He is, rather, subliminally turning him into a sarcophagus, a locus of decomposition in which death takes place. The beloved becomes 'death' not in its abstract, conceptual sense but in its material and terrifying one. The *quality* of the line lies in this mixture: the powerful contrast between the genuine caring consideration extended to the beloved, and the underlying anger that cannot be fully repressed. Perhaps this is a sharper form of resentment than what people actually feel when imagining themselves being forgotten by their lovers. But the equation carries expressive precision, since it brings out and conveys an aspect of this state. The 'humdrum' is the opposite of this: it consists of the obtuseness involved in the inability to register such subtle ripples. Intensity thus entails both the weaving of many observations in a detail and a dimension pertaining to the formulation of the details themselves, an amplification of that which quietly throbs beside the louder, more noticeable movements of the inner life.

Return now to the question of what 'accepting' a poetic articulation means. Literary works offer various forms of experiential extension. These are accepted not only because they are descriptively accurate. Such articulations become opportunities for imaginative participation. Readers participate with a planned organization of experience in which far more takes place (in contrast to non-fictional

life) and in which minor inner movements are played up. Accordingly, when 'accepting' a poetic articulation as a potential truth, we grant it both descriptive force *and* the capacity to enable imaginative identification with an intense experience. Intensity itself relates both to descriptive richness and amplification. It is, accordingly, on the one hand an experience of an imagined state, and, on the other, an experience that is not divorced from, and is in fact intimately tied up with, truth. Such is the route whereby poetry is able to generate not truth, but a *potential* truth.

8.

While the discussion above is pertinent to art and literature in general in their relationship with philosophy, it is particularly apt to the particular merits characterizing Shakespeare's works; specifically, the fascinating quality of his language. I have suggested that the intensity of a work is predicated on its descriptive density and on its power to metamorphose weak and marginal movements of thought and feeling into moments of heightened awareness. We admire works that repay scrutiny of details and reveal more upon further perusal. But we are also moved by them because they enable imaginatively accessing an intensified state. This linkage is not universally applicable to all major works of poetry. Spenser's allegorical poetry, for example, is morally illuminating and intellectually profound at its best, yet its emotional appeal revolves around charged mental images and the transition between them, and is less attuned to the kind of intensity described above. But this linkage does hold true for Shakespeare's poetry, whether dramatized or not, possessing, as his work does, an experiential precision in its descriptive and expressive modes, coupled with a capacity to move its reader/audience powerfully – and even sometimes to effect a transformation in inner experience when verbalized and acted.

Such an effect on the reader/audience constitutes a second, additional source for Shakespeare's particular relevance to philosophy. Apart from the intensity of his language – and perhaps because of it – the reader/audience often undergoes unique experiences when engaging with Shakespeare's works. When Helena reminds Hermia about the meaning of friendship, when Coriolanus banishes Rome,

when Lorenzo woos Jessica through a disquisition over music, when Lear denounces filial betrayal, Hamlet philosophizes about replacing one's lover, Shylock about Judaism, Lady Macbeth contemplates murder, Claudius probes the meaning of prayer, or Isabella explicates justice – we are moved. What renders such experiences unique is not the strength of the effect (a well-made horror movie can shock us to a greater extent). What Shakespeare offers is, rather, the combination of the depth in which a state is explored by the character (to employ the terms above, the 'intensity' of the character's language) and the experience this creates within the reader/audience.

9.

What are these experiences? How do they differ from ordinary, non-literary experiences? How do they lead to knowledge? Let us respond to these in turn. The first question as to the nature of these experiences cannot be answered by appealing to some incontestable established experience that a literary work universally generates in every reader/audience. If the experience of a work was of such nature, we would have no need of literary critics. However, a thoughtful criticism of a work is not a report, but is, in part, a proposal, opening up fruitful and rewarding ways of experiencing the text. We need critics precisely because we sense that the more rewarding experiences are often not immediately accessible. In *Sonnet 71*, for example, I *suggested* that the reader's experience includes a sense of amused sympathy for the speaker's capacity to transform a painful forgetting into the loving compliance with a death wish. I have also *proposed* that the speaker succeeds in involving us in his state, suspended as he is between painful alternatives, which unfold in their indissmissible force as the sonnet progresses. These feelings intertwine with the more immediate experience of attending another (the lover), who is disclosing a painfully torn inner state.

How do such literary experiences differ from non-literary ones? They do not. True, some experiences are distinctly literary; pitying a fictional character, while it certainly takes place as part of experienced reading, is never simply the same as feeling sorry for a non-fictional person. But this does not necessitate upholding a belief in some unique 'aesthetic experience' that characterizes all valued en-

gagements with art. All of the elements that I have catalogued can be encountered in a living exchange, unmediated by art or literature. The problem with lived experience is that life too rarely offers the kind of experiences that are the focus of literary works. When it does, we are usually belaboured by pragmatic concerns. Some action usually needs to be undertaken in response to what is being disclosed. We are also typically overwhelmed by the strength of such experiences (whereas experiences in art or literature are heightened and vivid, not strong).

Finally, how are such experiences connected with knowledge? Gary Iseminger has usefully distinguished between two different ways in which experiences as part of art have been traditionally associated with knowledge. The first – which Iseminger calls “phenomenological” – refers to experiencing what something is like. The second – labelled by him as “epistemic” – relates to non-inferential knowledge, “a non-inferential way of coming to know something – comparable, say, to seeing that something is a chair”⁹. Iseminger’s terms are, I think, confusing (since the ‘phenomenological’ – the knowing what some state is like – is itself a mode of non-inferential knowledge). Yet we can still relate to the distinction as offering two distinct routes through which experiences act as non-inferential knowledge. The first of these relies on empathy, whereas the second relates to a state akin to witnessing or perceiving. Both modes of associating the experiences created by art and literature (with or without invoking the problematic construction of ‘aesthetic experience’) can illuminate the unique ways through which literature informs philosophy in a manner that philosophy on its own cannot access. Literature enables us to relate to its insights while undergoing an experience created by the work. According to the reading above, for example, *Sonnet 71* offers a plausible articulation of what it might be like to come to terms with the additional pain of secrecy in grief as part of homoerotic love in a hostile cultural context. This would be the *phenomenological* linkage between experience and knowledge.

The *epistemic* formulation of the claim for the knowledge-yielding capacities of literature asserts that the experience of a powerful literary work is never an argument that supports the insights the poem presents,

⁹ Gary Iseminger, “Aesthetic Experience”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, chapter 3.

but rather functions as what I have elsewhere called a “ground”¹⁰. The ‘ground’ is an element relating to justification in the sense of correcting beliefs (or modifying conduct or decision-making) because one is exposed to some new experience. Such experiences (literary or non-literary) have the power to turn some claims from formulations that are cerebrally acknowledged as potentially plausible, into accepted vivid truth-claims. In *Sonnet 71* we move from knowing that lovers are possessive to a specific and direct presentation of such possessiveness: the sonnet turns the dread of being forgotten by a beloved into an elaborate and anxious manipulation, in which one seemingly releases the beloved only to keep asserting control over his future once the speaker is dead. The sonnet allows us to *experience* erotic possessiveness by witnessing its unfolding, by following its temporal evolving from generosity to anger. Our familiarity with erotic possessiveness has not changed in terms of new propositions that we are accepting now and which we rejected before (even if such changes occur, new beliefs of this kind could easily be paraphrased and removed from the context of the literary work). Rather, literary experiences modify the *relation* between agents and beliefs, qualitatively enhancing the beliefs and thereby changing their place and import for the reader.

10.

Martha Nussbaum opens her *Love's Knowledge* with the following question: “How should one write, what words should one select, what forms and structures and organization, if one is pursuing understanding? (Which is to say, if one is, in that sense, a philosopher?)”¹¹. The bracketed sentence, identifying philosophers with those who seek understanding, is difficult to reject: no philosopher would endorse a self-characterization that does not involve the pursuit of understanding. The controversy would relate to what philosophers mean by the term ‘understanding’.

I have been advocating the following: Shakespeare advances our understanding in several distinct ways. Firstly, his poetic insights

¹⁰ Zamir, pp. 11-14.

¹¹ Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 3.

constitute descriptively accurate statements of inner reality. Secondly, these insights are often condensed into a narrow textual space, creating 'intensity', a term denoting both a denser and richer experience of reality than what one ordinarily undergoes, and a qualitative amplification of understudied, weak inner structures. Such intensity offers itself to the philosopher both as an opportunity for studying reality and also as an experiential invitation. When probed, such moments enable a slowing down of perception and intake of the complexities within seemingly simple, one-dimensional processes. When embraced as an invitation to be moved, such moments enable the philosopher to undergo an interpenetration of descriptive insight and experience (to invoke the terms of Aristotelian rhetoric: to merge *logos* and *pathos*). 'Understanding' is both the broadening of accessible potential truths and the modification in one's experience of particular truth-claims.

Such a position holds for art and literature in general, not just for Shakespeare's work. But it is exceptionally suited to the merits characterizing his dramatized and non-dramatized poetic language. Other virtues of his work – such as characterization, an eye for dialogue and emotional development, a sensitivity to images (spoken or staged), multifaceted humour, a gendered-specific attunement to affective shades, and political sophistication in which the conservative is played against the subversive – might relate to philosophy in other ways. Here I have confined myself to the distinctiveness of the most salient feature of his art – his language and how it can contribute to understanding. A meaningful response to Shakespeare's works promotes understanding in both senses spelled out above. After writing this essay and spending time with *Sonnet 71*, I know more about seemingly generous erotic gestures. This understanding is couched both in what the sonnet conveys, at least what I take it to mean, and how it makes me relate to such content.

If the above is correct, philosophers access important insights by engaging in dialogue with Shakespeare's works. Should literary critics be concerned with philosophical criticism of this kind? The following five reasons suggest that they should. Firstly, the idea that a literary work may offer knowledge and anchor it in unique ways creates a powerful bridge between literary studies and philosophy. We read Shakespeare's works not only because they provide pleasure, or enable us to access the implicit ideological formations in early modern England, or because of their canonical status and poetic merits. Such

works can become pivotal in promoting understanding, and examining them can become a facet of the examined life.

Secondly, as shown in the above analysis, a philosophical reading is always attentive to the specific contribution that the literary work makes *as* literature. The philosopher will always be concerned with justifying the detour to knowledge by way of literature. What accordingly ensues is an examination of the features that make up literariness (in the analysis above, 'intensity'). Far from being an instrumentalization of literature as some might fear, philosophical criticism reopens the question of the literary, and provides a range of answers that relate to the specific contributions of literature to knowledge or to moral attunement.

Thirdly, by specifying such contributions, philosophical criticism is able to advance the political objectives of much contemporary work undertaken in literary studies. The focus in the last decades on forms of marginalization and ideology formation as these operate in literary works, is complemented and sharpened once one is also equipped with a reasoned position regarding the specific ways by which literature can articulate suffering, or the specific ways by which it recreates a power nexus. A sophisticated and nuanced version of the 'cultural turn' cannot mean flattening all practices to some all-enveloping discursive network, in which the distinct rhetoric of literature is ignored. One must attend the actual contours of specific formations – specifically, literary formations – and the particular ways in which they can promote or undermine power. Philosophical readings of literary works pinpoint the uniqueness of specifically literary depictions in their relation to knowledge, thereby contributing to the understanding of such representations as constituents of power.

Fourthly, philosophical criticism's focus on understanding enables justifying the non-arbitrary attribution of aesthetic value to a literary work. A 'great' or 'canonical' literary work is one that, among other virtues, provides and promotes understanding. Since such understanding is not merely reducible to paraphrasable content, but is rooted in forging an experiential connection with that content, a work attains high merit if it invites visitation and revisitation. Philosophical readings elucidate this content and the contact with it, thereby justifying the return to the specific work and its high valuation. While such merit can be ideologically exploited in various ways and harnessed to various non-aesthetic goals, the attributing of aesthetic merit, if based

on the rich understanding provided by the work, also recognizes an intrinsically valuable aspect inherent in the work as such.

Fifthly, critical schemes in literary studies are never evaluated solely in relation to their defensibility. What ultimately matters is whether they can mobilize interesting and rewarding readings. Philosophical criticism facilitates such readings. It justifies approaching a work not by evaluating it on its own terms (whatever that may mean), or as a prism through which one studies its formative culture, but by attending to how the work and its close-reading informs our own autonomous engagement and interest in a particular dimension of life (love in *Sonnet 71*). The close-reading becomes concept-oriented, in the sense of asking what the work might tell us about an important concept, one that underlies many of our concerns. The reading also becomes rhetorically oriented, in the sense of examining the nature of the experience created by the work. The dialogue with the work – a reading – thereby becomes an interplay between what a text might be saying about life, and literature's particular way of making such claims. Philosophical readings thereby turn literature into a contemporary guide and partner in an examined life.

11.

Where would philosophical studies of Shakespeare go in the future? Books on Shakespeare and philosophy are published all the time (I count six of them in the last three years). This growing interest need not imply a distinct orientation within Shakespeare studies. Much of this work searches for abstract thoughts in Shakespeare's plays or suggests tacit links between Shakespeare and the philosophical concerns explicitly voiced in the theology, philosophy, law, or political thought of his time. Such scholarship can obviously be profound and rewarding to read; but it does not differ significantly from other forms of contextualization routinely performed by literary critics.

The challenge facing work on Shakespeare and philosophy is whether it can amount to a fruitful, theoretically distinct approach to Shakespeare. From the standpoint of philosophers, the test for such fruitfulness is whether scrutinizing Shakespeare's works promotes the pressurizing of one's vocabulary, which is what philosophy ultimately is. For literary critics, fruitfulness would consist in the interpretive

payoffs that a concept-oriented reading yields. The disciplines need not be united in their verdict: philosophers might benefit from engagement with Shakespeare, while literary critics find that they gain little. Alternatively, literary critics might welcome readings by philosophers in a way that strikes other philosophers as intellectually shallow. Literary critics frequently cite and rely upon philosophers in their readings, often without the familiarity with the underlying philosophical motivations that philosophers bring to their enquiries. Philosophers might hesitate advocating practicing philosophy when, once it is exported into the context of a literary interpretation, it is unhappily liberated from the restrictions posed by a rigorous conceptual analysis. Such philosophizing can deteriorate into the production of seemingly profound, yet ultimately vague statements being applauded by practitioners of another discipline who lack the training enabling them to sift the wheat from the chaff.

Disciplinary labels aside, if the argument above regarding the different epistemologies underlying philosophy and literature is correct, literary interpretations (good ones) will often be philosophical – without mentioning it – by virtue of the unique interpenetration of insight and reader positioning that they explain and promote. An explicitly philosophical criticism would complement such interpretation with an examination of the epistemological state itself, what it includes or omits, and why it cannot be established by argumentation alone. The problem facing philosophical criticism here is the current disinterest in interpretation and close-reading within Shakespeare studies, and the preference for literary-oriented anthropology of various kinds. Shakespeareans, it seems, now restrict close-reading to their classrooms, allowing very little of it to trickle into their talks and publications. Accordingly, any reading-oriented, text-oriented (rather than culture-oriented) approach is likely to be suspected of a regressive agenda, a return to ‘new criticism’ and its latent conservative politics. Would developments within literary studies such as ‘new aestheticism’ or philosophical criticism recentralize the literary work? It is too early to tell.

By contrast to Shakespeare studies, the shifts within moral philosophy suggest a more optimistic future for philosophical criticism. The epistemic limitations of proposition-based, argument-based accounts regarding what it means to know are increasingly recognized. Alternatives to argument-based accounts are being sought. Literary works are being read with an eye to one compensatory thesis or another, in

which literature is seen as able to bypass limitations built into standard philosophical argumentation or into its default modes of moral reflection. There is a perceptible stream of work by philosophers who have not been daunted by Shakespeare or by the fear of being off-courted by Shakespeareans. Most of this work is anecdotal, in the sense of producing an insightful reading of one play or another. Rich and engaging as such interpretations often are, the greater philosophical challenge is to come up with a theoretically comprehensive project, in the sense of interpretations that are not haphazardly collected, but are rooted in an overarching position regarding the relations between philosophy and literature.

Since experience-based epistemological frameworks are proposed with growing refinement and sophistication within aesthetics, one can expect these to inform future philosophically-oriented readings of Shakespeare. I will risk a more specific guess (or hope) as to the contours of the next significant contribution to work done on the philosophy/Shakespeare trajectory. Philosophers in the Anglo-American tradition (such as Shaun Gallagher, Mark Johnson, and Richard Shusterman) are very recently rethinking the body and the role of embodiment in world-processing (Continentalists have been doing this longer). This development could prove important to Shakespeare's philosophical critics. It could mean that Shakespeare's appeal as an author of *dramatic* poetry might begin to be focalized by aestheticians who are willing to experiment with the *enactment* of a poetically intense text and how theatricalizing words modifies understanding¹². If the grasp of meaning is more than comprehension of a statement, if it can be significant to process propositional meaning when one's state is modified as well, if imaginative response to fictional characters qualitatively shapes and deepens what one understands, how would the dramatic acting of a text – its fuller embodiment – augment and consolidate what one knows? For example, what would a Stanley Cavell know, say, about the meaning of shame, if after completing his *Lear* interpretation, he acts (however amateurishly, but in earnest) in a performance of the play? I have recently watched a brilliant ageing actor remain naked before a large audience in the "off, off you lendings" scene. How does

¹² Philosophical criticism would thereby reach out to include recent developments within performance studies regarding the unique status of the dramatic text. On this issue see William B. Worthen, *Drama: Between Poetry and Performance*, Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

an experience of this kind affect one's sense and grasp of shame? The Shakespearean text is obviously pushing the actor further into exposure by enforcing partial or complete nakedness before others. What can such fuller imaginative embodiment teach?

Shakespeare is obviously not the only playwright whose work facilitates such enquiry in the context of dramatized poetry (not to mention non-poetic drama). But which other author furnishes a more fertile ground through which such a study can be undertaken?