Et Ego in Academia

kirby farrell, Prof
Et Ego in Academia

They say miracles are past, and we have our philosophical persons, to make modern and familiar, things supernatural and causeless. Hence it is that we make trifles of terror, ensconcing ourselves into seeming knowledge, when we should submit ourselves to an unknown fear.

--All's Well that Ends Well (2.3.1-6)

At an academic dinner in the early 1990s, at a time when postmodernism and New Historicism were terms to conjure with, I stumbled into a debate with an up-and-coming cultural historian who assured me that not only do humans have no fixed nature, but in fact all identity is constructed. While agreeing, I tried to qualify the claim by reminding us that all human beings face some fundamental creaturely limits that compel us to eat, defecate, produce babies, create habitat, and devise psychic defenses against death. While cultures cope with those creaturely limits in historically particular ways, the limits are inescapable and we are hardly free to reinvent ourselves at will. To my surprise, my dinner companion responded with an irate denial, thrusting his jaw over the dead chicken on his plate and rebutting me so vehemently that conversation up and down the dinner table stopped.

For me this instructive incident confirmed Ernest Becker's central insight: that as a uniquely paradoxical, symbol-making animal destined to decay and disappear forever like all the other animals and yet aware of that doom, we are continually trying to overcome or deny creaturely limits. Every culture, says Becker, is a particular symbolic action system that reassures people that their lives have enduring significance that transcends weakness, aging, and the prospect of ultimate human futility. Whatever else they do, cultural practices from love to law compensate for survival anxiety by projecting fantasies of symbolic immortality.

Even genteel academic dinners may be graced by immortality-striving, since as Otto Rank observes, all humans feel that their own rightness about the world has special permanence and in turn profoundly substantiates them. "Every conflict over truth," says Rank, "is in the last analysis just the same old struggle over . . . immortality." "If anyone doubts this," adds Becker, "let him try to explain in any other way the life-and-death viciousness of all ideological disputes. . . . If your adversary wins the argument about truth, you die. Your immortality system has been shown to be fallible, your life becomes fallible. History, then, can be understood as the succession of ideologies that console for death." A new generation of research has empirically verified the way we unconsciously rely on our particular world view to defend self-esteem against death-anxiety. Expose subjects to "mortality salience," as the experimenters call it, and they will...
consistently--and unwittingly--reinforce their patriotism, ethnic identification, religious convictions, and the like.

The academic dinner is especially pertinent because the communal meal is a ritual symbolizing civilization's triumph over the terrors of scarcity and violent competition. The decorum of the occasion not only masks contentious career ambitions that Rank would view as immortality ideologies, but also promotes an illusion of serene stability, since humanistic tradition and Ivy League gentility dramatize "intellectual" or even spiritual roles--that is, faculties superior to the mortal bodies which just happened to be chewing up the cooked corpses of recently slaughtered animals in order to digest and later excrete them as that shameful and foul-smelling waste that also symbolizes worthlessness, aggression, humiliation, despair ("I feel like shit"), and death. More deliciously still, the claim that all identity is "constructed" perfectly expresses the human wish to transcend our creaturely fate: as if we are mythic spirits in a pastoral glade, unique, free to create ourselves and be, at least in theory, supremely meaningful.

Let me put this incident to more particular use by pointing out that in some ways the emphasis on "constructedness" did help free up academic imaginations to explore neglected areas of the past. New Historicism, histories of everyday life, and women's studies have given us a fuller understanding of Early modern cultures. Like any new tool, however, overuse can dull them into blunt-edged nostrums such as "subversion and containment" or "patriarchal fears of women's power." In this brief space I want to consider an example of how radical existential perspectives might be useful in thinking about historical behavior. Specifically I want to revisit the puzzling language that first drew me to write about Shakespeare.

Since I love only you, says Sonnet 76, "all my best is dressing old words new." This self-effacing gesture is of course a gallant poetic convention, but it is also part of a comprehensive paradox. Rather than repeat or rephrase "I love you," which raises the spectre of anticlimax or deadening habit and exposes our dependence on pitiful formulas ("I really and truly love you very, very, very much"), the poet pushes the Sonnets to the edge of expressivity. He compounds ambiguities through wordplay, shifty syntax and punctuation, paradoxes, and riddling ironies within ironies--among other devices. Seen this way, the poet's ironical humility (merely "dressing old words new") actually intensifies his explosively energized reformulation of love. Imagination struggles to grasp--in its root sense, com-prehend--all the ambiguities sparked by Will Shakespeare's wordplay in a statement such as "Will, will fulfill the treasure of thy love, / I, fill it full with wills, and my will one" (Sonnet 136). One result of this multiplicity is the poems' critical history of apparently endless reinterpretation and mystification.

In 1968 Stephen Booth's An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets seemed to confront this multiplicity head-on, demonstrating the poems' systematic creation of surplus meanings. Yet Booth was content to show that the Sonnets' ambiguities were real and not to be swept aside. By contrast, in a provocative, dazzling essay, "The Poet as Fool and Priest," Sigurd Burckhardt saw the overplus of meaning
playing out a deliberate cognitive strategy in Shakespeare's art. Burckhardt argued that the strenuously overdetermined meanings of Sonnet 116 reflect the poet's effort to create meanings that can resist the deadening effects of habit and, in the emotionally coherent yet practically undefinable statement that results, renew the authenticity of words. This passionate, riddling language, then, is the behavior of an artist struggling to maintain the sharpness of his tools so that he will "not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediments."

Burckhardt showed that the Sonnets worked by "making strange"—putting words under such pressure that they baffle imagination in order to refresh our appreciation of particular words and experiences. Although he was not trying to supply a historical context, Burckhardt was drawing on Aristotle's notion that wonder stimulates reason to comprehend or tame mystery. Playing the fool with wordplay and paradox, Shakespeare exploded trivialized, dead words and then, in the speeches of "priest-figures" such as Cordelia and the women of the late romances, or in the sonnet's final couplet, he renewed meanings—or spurred listeners to renewal. (Think of the sonnets such as 116 that operate as redefinitions: "Love is not love which . . ."). Insofar as he emphasized a superior restoration of meaning as the outcome the poet's art, Burckhardt was proceeding as a kind of formalist, invoking the poet's motives but effectively confining his analysis within the framework of the poems.

Intrigued by Burckhardt but more curious about behavior, I took the phenomenon of supercharged language to be organized around the renaissance fascination with wonder. Yes, the poet did disrupt stale meanings to refresh them. But in deliberately inducing cognitive overload or, in the wisdom of slang blowing the reader's mind, the poet could imply an ineffable meaning--"I love you"--that could resist formulaic paraphrase. Imagination cannot process at once--cannot grasp or exhaust--the full significance of the ambiguities interacting in these poems. Intuitively or tacitly a reader knows that the words mean "I love you," but the experience is akin to music—another marker for the wondrous in Shakespeare—in being orderly but beyond the "grasp" or manipulation of verbal reasoning. The amazement may stimulate the reader to problem-solving efforts, as generations of critics have shown. But that process potentially requires a lifetime of exegesis. And in resisting reason's grasping, this sort of language leaves room for the transcendent possibilities Plato attributed to wonder and love in the Symposium. In this state of cognitive arousal the sonnet makes it possible to defy everyday reality and vow that “Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, / But bears it out even to the edge of doom.”

In this literally mystifying art I saw a systematic exploration of what developmental psychology calls magical thinking, or in Freudian parlance, "omnipotence of thought." Magical thinking presupposes that inner experience such as wishes, fears, ideas, and visions may be as real as external phenomena and be able to influence them. Ordinary wishful thinking is magical to the extent that it is purposive or—consciously or not--believed able to affect the physical world. Worried about a hospital patient, you may fervently say to yourself, "Get well!" or
"Don't die!" The ambiguities of psychosomatic experience encourage the popular belief that the sick can use a “positive attitude” or “faith” to influence or even heal illness.

Sonnet 18, for example, conjures a conviction of ineffable love that can animate or immortalize the mortal beloved like a magical elixir. In the culminating vow, "so long as men can breath or eyes can see," the "this" which "gives life to thee" is love as mysteriously enacted in the "breath" of the poet-lover, the reader, and the poem's incantatory words. The poem, that is, not only "sustains" multiple meanings, it puts imagination in the position of performing them in the service of love and praise, vowing to create (or recreate) an endless bounty of tacit "I love yous." If you speak the poem, you are enacting it. If you enact it in the right spirit, with proper conviction, your vows are overcoming creaturely limits. In effect, you are carrying out, and ideally absorbed in, a ritual. Cognitively, you and the poem combine to create a trancelike or dissociated experience. Draw on metaphors of psychic topography, and the experience can be understood as a “play space.” Identifying with the poem and its intoxicating poetry, surrendering self-control, you may feel “beside yourself” or momentarily “out of your mind.”

On a larger scale the same dynamics characterize Shakespearean drama. To some extent every play, even the most didactic, creates an overplus of meanings. As a concatenation of meanings, with deliberately maximized ambiguity and implication, a Shakespeare play is like an expanded sonnet: impossible to sum up. When characters exit needing "leisurely / Each one [to] demand, and answer to his part" (WT 5.3.153), the closure is frankly provisional. It implies that through "interrogatories" a community can at least accommodate if not grasp the ineffable meanings they have just experienced. In effect, the plays model cognitive tolerance. The model is significant because it systematically balances an openness to belief or credulity against self-examining skepticism.

But magical thinking is always equivocal. Conjuring may produce a conviction of mastery and raise morale, but in the end lovers die and cloud-capped towers leave not a wrack behind. As the tragic Othello illustrates ("Be thus when thou art dead and I will kill thee and love after"), the drive toward transcendence may be homicidally delusory. Othello chooses to strangle Desdemona in the marriage bed as a form of magical undoing that makes the execution an uncanny "justice" (4.1.200-10). Sonnet 129 invokes negative conjuration as a curse to drive out and demolish lust. In The Winter's Tale, Paulina and "art" call for magical thinking to restore Hermione to life and dispel for good the self-intoxicating rage that triggered her persecution in the first place. But then, in the resolution of Shakespeare's plots there is nearly always a strong element of magical undoing, which implies that the rigidities of ordinary life are a kind of enchantment that needs not rational demystification but an experience of "truer"--and by definition open-ended--wonder. Virtually all the plays culminate in wondrous concatenations of puzzles and ironies, however gleeful, rapturous, or catastrophic.
Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic* catalogs a host of magical practices in the Early modern period, from belief in the protective powers of charms to the voodoo-like menace of the wax figurine found on a trash heap and taken for a likeness of the Queen. Thomas's study makes it possible to think about the behavior implied by the renaissance fascination with wonder and monstrous delusion which criticism has customarily considered as themes in a formalist frame. But even Thomas's assessment of magical belief leaves room for a deeper exploration of the behavior implied.

Lynn White, Jr opens a window onto the radical existential dimension of magical thinking in his stark proposal that the Renaissance was "the most psychically disturbed era in European history." He holds that the era's abnormal anxiety "rose from an ever increasing velocity of cultural change compounded by a series of fearful disasters," and that "this spiritual trauma was healed by the emergence, in the minds of ordinary people, of an absolutely novel and relaxed attitude toward change." Psychic disturbance is plain enough in horrors such as religious and witchcraft persecutions, which mixed magical and religious ideation in the service of cold-blooded rage against the Devil and the terror of death that the Devil stood for. Like spectacular killing in the Roman amphitheater, regimes staged ghastly public deaths to dramatize a ruler's authority, but also ritual executions invoked superhuman powers and the eschatological horizon. As Pliny the Younger said of the amphitheater, the horrors were supposed to "prepare[e] the spectators for death and suffering," desensitizing them to terror, pain, and engulfing mystery. Epidemic and famine were no less traumatic. In consoling widows and bereaved mothers, the astrologer-physician Dr. Forman acted as a shaman and pastoral therapist. But in his "Discourse of the Plague" (1593), after surviving the epidemic of 1593, Forman's own death-anxiety erupted in a widely-shared sense of impending cosmic doom which he managed by turning his terror into homiletic rage against his sinful countrymen, especially "dirty" women. Queen Elizabeth was openly phobic about returning to Hampton Court, the scene of her near-fatal bout of smallpox.

Renaissance art reflected psychic disturbances in the real world, but also worked to tame them. As in vaccination, art exposed audiences to vicarious, tamed terror that could be shared, comprehended, and reflected upon. At the same time, retrospectively, narrative enables imagination to synthesize and integrate chaotic, potentially overwhelming experience. C. L. Barber associated festive comedy with an effort to master psychic disorder, but the same process applies to the tragic suffering of *King Lear*'s mad beggar and the naked, howling king. One way of conceiving the process is to contrast the immediacy of traumatic stress, in which symptoms are overwhelming and intrusive, with the control over nervous system arousal that comes with mediation, distance, and a socially corroborated response. This is the central premise psychiatry brings to the treatment of traumatic stress, as in Jonathan Shay's formulation: "Severe trauma explodes the cohesion of consciousness. When a survivor creates a fully realized narrative that brings together the shattered knowledge of what happened, the emotions that were
aroused by the meanings of the events, and the bodily sensations that the physical events created, the survivor pieces back together the fragmentation of consciousness that trauma has caused. Where the pressure of panic and rage in real life drives toward the berserk state and impulsive desperation, narratives onstage or on the page provide mediation that can make art a source of the healing that White sees in the Renaissance.

In the enormously popular history plays, for example, dramatists and their audiences were groping toward the healthier "relaxed attitude toward change" that White discerns. Histories framed experience, promising to sort out verities from contingencies. In widening the conventional cognitive scale of time, they put change in a less threatening perspective. And not least of all, they substantiated group identity. Through personal and collective mythologies such as the genealogies through which Elizabethan aristocrats traced their ancestry back to the Garden of Eden and the cosmic Father, histories supplied a fantasized ground for identity.

And what, then, of the Sonnets? For all their rhapsodic, witty poise, poem after poem shows the poet aroused by--and struggling to overcome--decay, disorder, and death. As consoling as it may be, the poems' immortality-striving is disquietingly obsessive. When immortality-striving proves evanescent, as it always does, the poet sublimates survival-anxiety in the more manageable vicissitudes of love and art. Futility and death are insoluble, but the poet--and reader--can dispel their menace for a time by concentrating on the troubled but absorbing love relationship at hand. At this boundary, where ultimate concerns and conventional reality intersect --where imagination tries to reintegrate passion and panic into ordinary life--we could expect to find signs of psychocultural disintegration and healing. Magical thinking in the Sonnets operates on that psychic boundary, embodying irrational experience in sophisticated artistic forms. The mind-boggling result can only be ephemeral, an ecstasy of conviction that in sober moments is, after all, a concatenation of riddles and ironies. So long as future readers can enact the poet's vow of love, for example--"so long as men can breathe or eyes can see"--so long will the ineffable "this" live, "and this gives life to thee" (Sonnet 18). To generate "this," the poet conjures up furious passion--but he also relies on technique--art. Focusing intoxicating emotion on an indefinable ideal, using strategies such as riddling paradox and negation, the Sonnet tries to create a moment of experience without context. "Shall I compare thee?" No, thou art beyond conventional techniques: in the wisdom of slang, "out of this world," on the edge of meaning, just beyond our grasp. Likewise, the failure of magical love produces equally ineffable chaos and madness, as in Sonnet 129. Yet both of these extremes are mediated by the poet's strenuously controlled poetic form.

This technical and emotional virtuosity creates a space that to some extent can accommodate the psychic extremes to which Lynn White refers. In some respects Shakespeare's practice merely updates ancient techniques for managing morale and psychic boundaries. Most religions have evolved contemplative or mystical disciplines that manipulate cognition in an effort to accommodate
conventional reality to a cosmic frame. Like the shaman, even the lowly jongleur uses illusionistic tricks to enlarge the confines of everyday reality and open up access to superhuman power. In different ways these uses of wonder can stimulate hope even as they console for futility and death.

That said, in Shakespeare's magical language we are also looking at early signs of a new development in psychological thinking: a style of representing mental life that uses aggressive self-awareness and hyper-rational art to give form-to make real--irrational dimensions of experience. In this respect the process has something in common with much later developments such as psychoanalysis, which also uses hyper-analytical technique to illuminate extra-rational psychic life. In a distinctly modern manner the poet knows he relies on sleight of hand, as in Sonnet 76, where "all my best is dressing old words new."

I am not proposing that Shakespeare devised a brilliant therapy that subdued all the virulence in the mental world about him. On the contrary, the techniques of the Sonnets are nerve-wrackingly equivocal and indeterminate, and flirt with reckless passion even as they impose form on it. The poet and the reader vicariously live through and leave suspended, in overcharged awareness, the hopes and fears, aspirations and deadly failures of love, as in the beautiful, irreducible equilibrium of Sonnet 138, "When my love swears that she is made of truth." In this respect, like Shakespearean drama, the poems lure us into sharing an experience of self-loss and self-recovery. If we choose to play, we cannot engage their riddling potentiality without exposing our own deep biases--the unconscious wellsprings of hope and terror--that shape us. The process, however, finally moves toward aesthetic contemplation.

To put it another way, the poems' magical thinking shows us a renaissance voice devising an imaginative apparatus for thinking about the unthinkable: the chaos and futility that threaten morale, and the equally ineffable hope and creativity that moves imagination on to the next poem. While the Sonnets presumably reached only an elite coterie audience, the psychodynamics they embody turn up again and again in the plays. In their resemblance to liturgy, some of the poet's vows of transcendent love echo Richard II's conjuration of protecting angels and rhapsodic prayers for deliverance. Like Othello, the poet associates loss of love with the "hate" and "killing spite" of "foes" (40). Change is not simply fickleness but betrayal, the fragility of identity under stress makes the reaction potentially explosive: outwardly against the inconstant beloved, inwardly against the self. Hence the insistent sadomasochism in the Sonnets' imagery of knives, poison, daggers, the grave, and the like. In Sonnet 32, not unlike Cleopatra, the poet plays dead, using his prospective demise to pressure the beloved, to recognize his love's worth. Here and elsewhere in the sequence self-sacrifice has a coercive quality, euphemizing the poet's aggressive feelings toward the supremely powerful other. In Sonnet 129's description of lust, magical thinking turns violent, acting out on a small scale the berserk frenzy that overtakes Othello--projecting a potential for fury evident in today's headline accounts of the rampage slaying of lovers or spouses or entire estranged families.
In Death, Desire, and Loss in Western Culture (1998), Jonathan Dollimore has approached the radical existential material in the Sonnets by focusing on mutability and death in desire. Using Freud's notion of a death-instinct, Dollimore sees Early modern imaginations drawn to abnegation and death as a release from the shackles of consciousness. In the self-loss of erotic ecstasy is the shadow of death, as in the period's notorious wordplay on "dying" as orgasm. Dollimore's argument is persuasive, but it also usefully illustrates some of the limitations I have been trying to clarify.

Dollimore's eloquence and critical sophistication obscure the prescriptive drive of his thesis. Not by accident perhaps, he faces up to the pressure of mortality in Shakespeare because he is writing in response to the AIDS epidemic, our own era's version of catastrophic plague. But the philosophical vision he proposes turns out to be a self-protective apologia for gay eros in which abnegation tames death through a selfless, promiscuous embrace of ephemerality in love. Relinquishment, he maintains, can counter the anguish of individualistic possessiveness and survival greed. Dollimore is much indebted to Norman O. Brown's Life against Death, which resonated with the mood of the 1960s ("let it all hang out") by transvaluing Freud's notion of the polymorphous perverse, giving intellectual coherence and respectability to the idea of living life out so fully that no residual regrets would remain to sharpen death-anxiety. The problem with this strategy of course is that nobody can live out a perfect life. As Becker might say, everybody needs some form of symbolic immortality, and abnegation is an honorable strategy in many of the world's religions. If it works, all well and good.

No less crucially, in a euphoric embrace of "constructedness," Dollimore takes no account of our evolutionary, genetic inheritance. We are designed to reproduce, and while our remarkable brains enable us to live in a highly symbolic, psychocultural environment, we are rarely if ever free of the bodily compulsions associated with reproductive imperatives, as witnessed, for example, by energetic political lobbying in recent years for the civil legitimation of gay marriages and gay couples' adoption of children.

The drawback for the historian is that Dollimore's vision takes no account of the particular distress that Lynn White observes in the Renaissance. And in that context, abnegation reveals complexities and complicities that need analysis. To what extent, for example, is self-surrender suicidal? Is Romeo and Juliet, among other things, a sign of a culture momentarily fascinated by exalted self-destruction and trying to objectify and master that fascination? Dollimore writes out of humane concern to protect morale, with the result that his long traversal of western culture minimizes or even sidesteps the terror foregrounded by Becker, Rank, and the social psychologists who dub their work "terror management theory."

There is no easy way to arbitrate between these different views--to speak of pathology or disturbance is to appeal to a measure that is by no means self-evident in the present, let alone in the streets of Shakespeare's London. That said, we can make the case that criticism has consistently and comfortably underestimated the peculiarities of renaissance reactions to severe stress. In this respect the best New
Historicism has only modestly advanced beyond the melioristic, humanist Shakespeares imagined by Theodore Spencer and others in the mid-twentieth century. The point is not that people were radically unlike us, but rather that circumstances were especially challenging and therefore invite us to approach them with more imaginative courage and sympathy.

---

i One sign that the pendulum is shifting back toward acknowledgment of our creatureliness is Steven Pinker's The Blank Slate: the Modern Denial of **Human Nature** (New York: Viking, 2002).


iv These fantasies combine in the sublime meals of renaissance neoplatonism and in the ancient world, from the symposium to Etruscan tombs representing the deceased reunited with departed friends and family at the dinner table. As Barbara Ravelhofer beautifully phrased it in a comment on this essay, “Etruscan tumuli are essentially eternal dining tables.”


xi Citations are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).


xv As a source of magical power, body hair was shorn from the malefactor (cf. Sampson); the executioner could cut off a woman's breasts. One of the most fully realized accounts of the mentalities at work in witchcraft persecution is Michael Kunze's *Highroad to the Stake* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987), which recounts a horrific--and politic--prosecution of witchcraft in Munich in 1600 that sent an entire family of vagrant odd-jobs laborers--grandparents, two sons, and grandson--to unspeakably atrocious public deaths. The behavior
of executioners, religious and civil authorities, and onlookers implies a psychopathic quality that strains psychiatric classifications. Body hair was shorn.

In his sensible but circumscribed *Power on Display* (New York: Methuen, 1986), Leonard Tennenhouse follows Foucault in emphasizing the political uses of official killing and the role of gender in it (102-46).


Barbara Freedman,