"Bid me discourse, I will enchant thine ear" Six reasons to love Shakespeare

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Most of what makes Shakespeare unique and relevant is to be found in the way he writes: the tensions he generates in the different genres he cultivates –always too small and restrictive for his needs–; the liberties he takes with the English language, and the multiplicities he unleashes inside each of his lines. Part of what makes his work irresistibly attractive resides in the intelligence and subtlety with which he overcomes the difficulties of his source texts; in the audacity of his systematically experimental approach to poetic and dramatic composition, and in the complexity and elegance of his aesthetic pronouncements, invariably in favour of a new, uninhibited kind of poetry. This brief article[1] aims to review those features in Shakespeare's style of composition that give him so much current interest. In this respect, the work of Italian writer Italo Calvino, *Six memos for the next millennium*, will be referred to as a useful set of criteria in the attempt to categorise the qualities that continue to make Shakespeare unforgettable.

I.

Italo Calvino was invited to deliver the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard University during the 1985-1986 academic term. He planned six lectures with the purpose of exploring the characteristics that literature should promote if it is to survive in the new millennium. In each of the lectures he was to discuss the qualities that were, in his view, recommendable to writers. Unfortunately, he died shortly before he was due to travel to the US to open the course, and he never completed his plan for the last discussion. The texts he wrote for the first five lectures were then published in 1988 –*Six memos for the next millennium*–, with the following declaration of purpose:

> Perhaps it is a sign of our millennium's end that we frequently wonder what will happen to literature and books in the so-called postindustrial era of technology. I don't much feel like indulging in this sort of speculation. My confidence in the future of literature consists in the knowledge that there are things that only literature can give us, by means specific to it. I would therefore like to devote these lectures to certain values, qualities or peculiarities of literature that are very close to my heart, trying to situate them within the perspective of the new millennium. (Preface)

A very brief explanation of these qualities –Lightness, Quickness, Exactitude, Visibility and Multiplicity– will reveal Calvino's interest in contributing guidelines –rather than prescriptions– for an aesthetic consideration. Beyond all speculations as to what he might have wanted to say

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1. The text of the present article is a polished transcription of the lecture "'Bid me discourse, I will enchant thine ear.' Six reasons to love Shakespeare", delivered on the occasion of the "IV JORNADAS DE LENGUA INGLESA. Cultura de los países de habla inglesa" (September 2015).

about Consistency –the sixth feature he was planning to discuss–, it might perhaps be more pertinent, for the purposes of exploring the qualities of Shakespeare's work, to complete Calvino's contribution with the search for any other possible feature, which remains as an open category, available for every coming generation to fill with its own significant content.

Calvino calls the first quality *Lightness*, which he describes as "weightless gravity" (19) and a "reaction to the weight of living" (26). It is a leap to be taken by a poet who holds "the secret of lightness" (12). Lightness also includes the "atomising of things" (9) for almost microscopic inspection, and three qualities that define it: it is "to the highest degree light"; it is "in motion", and it is "a vector of information" (13). The poet should "take the weight out of language, to the point that it resembles moonlight" (24). The second feature, *Quickness*, is defined as an expression of the relationship between physical and mental speed. It includes four subcategories: economy of expression –using narrative and verbal links to connect "events that rhyme" (35)–; relativity of time –the compression, expansion, continuity and discontinuity of a time sequence–; agility –the quick adjustment of thought and expression– and transformation. *Exactitude* is a "patient search for the *mot juste*" (48) and for a sentence in which every word is unalterable; the "most effective marriage of sounds and concepts" (49). It is the search for a unique expression which is "concise, concentrated and memorable" (49); the maximum concentration of poetry and thought, manifested as

> (1) a well-defined and well-calculated plan for the work in question;
> (2) an evocation of clear, incisive, memorable visual images; […]
> (3) a language as precise as possible both in choice of words and in expression of the subtleties of thought and imagination. (55-56)

By *Visibility* Calvino means the role of imagination, the visual aspect of the poet's fantasy; the skill in going from word to image and from image to word. Integrating the power of "thinking in terms of images" (92) means reclaiming for literary expression "the power of bringing visions into focus with our eyes shut, of bringing forth forms and colors from the lines of black letters on a white page" (92). *Multiplicity*, "a network of connections between the events, the people, and the things of the world" (105), is a feature that focuses on the centrifugal power of a work: "a plurality of languages as a guarantee of a truth that is not merely partial" (117). The message, Calvino argues, must be comprehensive enough to represent a universal diversity. The writer is a man but at the same time he is the voice of all men, working towards "a unified text that is written as the expression of a single voice, but that reveals itself as open to interpretation at several levels" (117). The literature of multiplicity is a literature that has absorbed "the taste for mental orderliness and exactitude, the intelligence of poetry, but at the same time that of science and of philosophy" (118).

Perhaps one of the fundamental points that must be understood from these considerations is the view of literature as a discipline in its own right rather than as just an "area" of language. Literary expression as Calvino conceives of it uses language as a tool and it also reshapes and reinvents language when that tool becomes too small or restrictive. Literature, if it is to survive into the new millennium –if it is to survive at all– must continue to claim its own independent disciplinary status, not as one more "sphere" of culture but as a discipline that shapes culture by naming it, as a form of expression that surveys the world from a privileged vantage point.

II.

An effective and attractive source of instances of Calvino's systematization can be found in Shakespeare's narrative poem *Venus and Adonis*. This poem belongs to the early period of Shakespeare's career. It was published in 1593 and reprinted 15 times during his lifetime, which attests to its immediate and continuing success. *Venus and Adonis* is usually classified as an *epyllion*, a brief erotic poem in the Ovidian mode. Shakespeare's generation of talented young writers were the first to contest and rebel against the Petrarchan aesthetic paradigm –still dominant at the Elizabethan court and the trademark of the older generation of the poetic establishment–, in favour of the Ovidian paradigm as a more representative form of poetic expression. As well as a

narrative poem, *Venus and Adonis* is a product of this poetic and aesthetic revolution: a powerful poetic manifesto which illustrates all of Calvino's guidelines.

The Ovidian myth of Venus and Adonis is very well known in Shakespeare's time, and especially popular among young intellectual enthusiasts of the Ovidian movement. Shakespeare's version of the story introduces a number of significant modifications concerning Adonis' age –Shakespeare's Adonis is a pubescent boy, not an adult male–; the nature of his response to Venus' advances and the overall duration of the story. In Shakespeare's poem there is also a parodic element which seems to contribute to his search for a definition of the art of poetry. The focus of the next sections is to discuss this aesthetic exploration by reference to two fragments of the poem, scrutinised through the lenses of Calvino's categories.

III.

'Bid me discourse, I will enchant thine ear,
Or, like a fairy, trip upon the green,
Or, like a nymph, with long dishevelled hair,
Dance on the sands, and yet no footing seen.
Love is a spirit all compact of fire,
Not gross to sink, but light, and will aspire.

'Witness this primrose bank whereon I lie;
These forceless flowers like sturdy trees support me;
Two strengthless doves will draw me through the sky
From morn till night, even where I list to sport me..
Is love so light", sweet boy, and may it be
That thou should think it heavy unto thee?

(145-156)

This fragment belongs to the first half of the poem. Venus has been trying to seduce Adonis but the boy has been unresponsive, and there have been a series of successive argumentative attempts on the part of the goddess to persuade him into a moment of sexual intercourse which of course will not take place. Her attempts at seduction are both physical and linguistic. Venus physically accosts Adonis as soon as she sees him and a careful reading of the poem will reveal that the characters adopt a sequence of pseudo-amatory positions. In the fumbling that results from her advances, they seem to explore nearly a dozen different positions, each change coupled with a change in Venus' seduction strategy and, most significantly, changes in her *poetic* strategy. In fact, the whole poem resembles a kind of process- writing portfolio that traces the development of Venus' poetic expression through a series of rhetorical exercises, very much like those practised by schoolboys in Shakespeare's day. A very gradual, subtle but quite visible process of metamorphosis can then be traced, from the initial adherence to a Petrarchan mode of poetic expression –signalled by Venus' use of stifled, bombastic, fossilized, black-and-white clichés- towards an Ovidian mode characterized by colour, freedom, instability, movement, constant change and the fusion of opposites.

The two stanzas comprise an exercise in *self-blazon*. The blazon, one of the fundamental devices in the sonneteering tradition so vigorously parodied and resisted by Shakespeare –his Sonnet 130 is an instance of this–, consists of poeticising the physical characteristics of an ideal woman. It is essentially heteronormative: the inventory of physical details is invariably dissected by a *male* voice and it invariably catalogues a stereotyped, unrealistic *female* with a pale complexion, blonde hair, blue or grey eyes, rosy cheeks, red lips, mincing steps and delicate movements. The Petrarchan blazon does not only reduce the female to an anatomical catalogue, a fragmented and fragmentary vision of woman; it also reduces all forms of human love to only one possibility –male adoring female–, and it may be safely speculated that to a great extent our culture is still struggling to break free from the ideology that sustains it. The Petrarchan paradigm has left lamentable casualties along centuries of history in terms of the

fatal efforts of young women trying to approximate the shape of their bodies to the physical stereotype –whatever shape it happens to take at different periods– of an ideal woman up on a pedestal. For the first time, Shakespeare and his generation take that woman down from the pedestal of poetic history in order to explore the *real* woman, but they also begin to explore *all* the possible forms of human love, all the possible gender combinations in the gamut of people's experience which are to be celebrated in their realistic, carnal, imperfect but very tangible humanity.

Venus' self-blazon is a beautiful illustration of Lightness. Her ethereal capacity to walk lightly and dance is compared to the dancing and walking of a fairy and a "nymph with long disheveled hair". These visual allusions evoke in the reader a quick succession of images of Venus –first as a fairy, then as a dishevelled nymph–, as if on these lines Venus were rhetorically turning into the creatures that she is comparing herself to, in a poetic instance of metamorphosis. The idea of weightlessness is emphasised in the next stanza, with the reference to flowers: these very weak, insignificant little flowers are like trees, and now, suddenly Venus becomes very small; small enough to be leaning on the "forceless flowers" that support her as if they were "sturdy trees". These lines also illustrate Quickness: this series of transformations –Venus as a fairy, Venus as a nymph, and then Venus as a microscopic creature– take place at a very fast speed that challenges the quickness of response of the reader's imagination. Again, the weightlessness of the "forceless flowers" connects to that of the "strengthless doves" on the next line –the white doves that traditionally draw her chariot– in that in both cases there is a restrictive suffix that stresses the idea of absence: the absence of weight in these stanzas is such that Venus –and Shakespeare– does not want to spoil it by using any other, heavier words.

The final couplets in both stanzas offer reflections on the theme of love which also seem, at first sight, to illustrate Lightness. The first one ("Love is a spirit all compact of fire/ Not gross to sink, nut light, and will aspire") refers to love as a delicate, weightless entity that "aspires" –a word etymologically related to fire–; it flies upwards, like fire. The presence of the four elements is immediately evident –something gross sinking in water, an airy spirit elevating like fire from the ground–, which is relevant considering that the figure of Venus, originally a natural deity, is also a symbol of nature, in harmony with the elements. However, there are certain words that have very specific meanings, all of them quite evident to Shakespeare's contemporary readers. In Elizabethan English –and even today–, the word "sink" has a sexual connotation. "Spirit" meant "semen" to the Elizabethans, and "fire" did not only refer to passion. To "fire someone out" was to transmit a *venereal* disease to someone during sexual intercourse. All of a sudden, in the midst of the lightness and the delicacy of Venus' attributes, there are three words whose secondary meanings are far from ethereal; words which allude to a different type of lightness, a quality that comes closer to another meaning of "light" –wanton, sexually licentious, lustful–. The second final couplet is a question ("Is love so light, dear boy, and may it be/ That thou shouldst think it heavy unto thee?") which can be rephrased in two ways: "Is love so ethereal?" but also: "Is love so wanton, so full of sexuality, that you find it heavy?" "Heavy", then, does not only mean "weighty" in the sense of "opposite to light", but also "problematic" or "conflictive". Venus, a sexually mature woman, is talking to a pubescent boy who clearly hasn't been sexually initiated yet, and she digresses on the idea that love should contain other ingredients which may be a little less easy to come to terms with.

This passage, with its extraordinary imagery, illustrates Lightness and Quickness, but at the same time it becomes clear that Venus –and, behind Venus, Shakespeare– is playing with the concept of Lightness and celebrating that other meaning, which is *sexual* lightness –after all, this is what Venus is interested in when she tries to seduce Adonis. The Lightness of Venus' bucolic flowers and doves, the weightlessness of her delicate impersonations as the fairy and the nymph dancing on the sands, are all extremely attractive components in her innovative self-portrait. But that other form of Lightness, the one that Venus is much more interested in, seems to be much more enticing, and –in terms of Shakespeare's poetic manifesto in the subtext of this poem– much worthier of exploration. It is this aspect of Lightness that nobody has dared invoke in the history of the Petrarchan paradigm.

IV.

'Fondling,' she saith, 'since I have hemmed thee here
Within the circuit of this ivory pale,
I'll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer;
Feed where thou wilt, on mountain or in dale;
Graze on my lips, and if those hills be dry,
Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie.

'Within this limit is relief enough,
Sweet bottom-grass and high delightful plain,
Round rising hillocks, brakes obscure and rough,
To shelter thee from tempest and from rain:
Then be my deer, since I am such a park;
No dog shall rouse thee, though a thousand bark.'

(229-240)

The "Park speech" is an even more complex example of the five qualities described by Calvino, all occurring simultaneously. This passage also belongs to the first half of the poem and it constitutes a second exercise in self-blazon on the part of Venus. At this moment the protagonists have changed their pseudo-amatory position for the fourth time. In keeping with the rising sexual tension at this stage, Venus generates a magnificent instance of "sexual topography" in the description of her body as territory, to which Shakespeare introduces a twist. Venus describes herself as a park and the first image –again, hinting at her poetic metamorphosis– is that of the ivory fence of her arms surrounding his neck. The "park" into which she turns is a hunting ground, fenced private property used for the purpose of hunting, and also a deer preserve where deer are allowed to breed freely with the ultimate aim of hunting them down and eating them. At the same time, Adonis being such a young boy, there is a very subtle allusion to another type of park: the playpen, for the boy/ hunter to play safely. The concept of the park brings together in a zone of ambivalence the ideas of *maternity* –with its interest in nourishing and protecting life–, *hunting* –predicated on destroying life with the ultimate aim of ingesting it, and also as a sexual metaphor: Venus is indeed "hunting" him down– and *sexuality* –with its sense of domination and possession, which seems to be part of the erotic repertoire of sexually mature females in Shakespeare.

What follows is an invitation to feed, for which Venus continues to develop a systematic trend of imagery connected to orality in the poem, with its funneling of significance on the mouth and its capacity to ingest, suck and kiss. What is offered to the deer/dear boy to feed on are the geographical features of this landscape that is her body: mountain, dale, lips where the deer can graze, and the "pleasant fountains" of her breasts that can be reached by straying "lower".

A careful re-reading of this first stanza, in particular of the order in which Venus enumerates her "geographical" features, reveals that she is following the convention of the blazon at the same time as she composes a highly unconventional blazon with the utmost degree of Exactitude, Visibility and Multiplicity. The direction of her descriptions traces a downward movement that concludes at the breast line –the "pleasant fountains"–, which is as far down as the conventional Petrarchan blazon will go: the inventory of physical features always has a boundary, a limit. Venus has now reached that limit at the "pleasant fountains"; indeed, the next stanza opens with a reference to limits. Within this boundary line there is relief of two kinds to be had: relief to hunger –the deer can find enough pasture within this portion of territory– and also sexual relief. The erotic undertones of these lines suggest the idea that the features surveyed by Venus so far are enough to satisfy the boy's sexual needs, but she is decidedly planning to go beyond that limit in every possible sense. The conventional Petrarchan blazon has always stopped dead at this boundary line, but poetry, Venus is saying, should venture forth beyond it to reach those other areas which have always lain hidden from poetic view. This new way of naming bodies and the way bodies can love each other does not only apply to the female body: poetry must transcend this and all other boundaries.

The second part of this self-blazon provides an insight into that which lies beyond. There is "sweet bottom grass" –the type of grass that grows in the valleys rather than in the mountains, in a clear reference to pubic hair–; "high delightful plain" and "round rising hillocks" –the genitalia and buttocks– and "brakes obscure and rough" –thickets, clumps of bushes, dense vegetation and Venus' awareness of the difference in colour and texture between the hair growing in that area and that growing in the head. The Petrarchan paradigm never gave information about these hidden zones; it only described the hairs on a lady's head and never concerned itself with any other type of hair on the human body. Now it seems, these "brakes obscure and rough" happen to provide "shelter" to anyone who can enter and hide in them and who will be safe from dogs "rousing". The verb "rouse" means "awaken", but in hunting terminology it refers to what hounds do when they scare the quarry away from its hiding place by barking, to force it to become visible to the hunters. There is a third meaning which is pertinent to this line, which is to arouse someone sexually. These last conclusive lines bring together the imagery of hunting, the imagery of maternity and profound sexual innuendo in a remarkable degree of Exactitude and Visibility: the readers have by now visualised the body of Venus with its different geographical accidents; in very few lines, with astounding economy and Quickness, she has metamorphosed into a park. Venus' metamorphosis is also the metamorphosis of poetry; the idea that poetry should break its bounds and expand, not only its expressive possibilities, but also the way it defines and names the multiple forms in which human beings look at each other, like each other, lust after each other and love each other. These very few lines open up different levels of interpretation and a universe of different meanings that Shakespeare very subtly and elegantly is offering his readers for consideration.

Shakespeare is the essential, vital literary reservoir of our culture and of all generations to come. A man of his time and of all times, he invents, transgresses, breaks, strains, questions, violates, revivifies and transcends each and every constriction upon the English language, the literary genres, the ways in which human beings can be and exist together and the poetics available to name these ways. He stands at the core of our culture in every possible way. Every generation has found, and will continue to find, that which it needs to discover about itself in his work. He will continue to be relevant because, as Calvino suggests, he has set himself the impossible tasks that only literature can dare imagine:

> Overambitious projects may be objectionable in many fields, but not in literature. Literature remains alive only if we set ourselves immeasurable goals, far beyond all hope of achievement. Only if poets and writers set themselves tasks that no one else dares imagine will literature continue to have a function. Since science has begun to distrust general explanations and solutions that are not sectorial and specialized, the grand challenge for literature is to be capable of weaving together the various branches of knowledge, the various "codes," into a manifold and multifaceted vision of the world. (Calvino, 1988, p. 112)

References

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