

# A Master's Monument Shakespeare's Sonnets in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats

by *Charles I. Armstrong*

IN Nicholson Baker's recent novel *The Anthologist*, the protagonist—a middle-aged American poet, Paul Chowder, who experiences an existential failure of sorts while struggling to write the preface for an anthology—has a dream that encapsulates a peculiarly troubled vision of literary history. Chowder dreams of an “infinitely tall ladder,”<sup>1</sup> on which all living and dead poets are climbing. Far above him, he sees some of the major poets: “Auden, Kunitz. Whoa, way up there. Samuel Daniel. Sara Teasdale. Herrick. Tiny figures, clambering, clinging.” Below him, Chowder nervously catches a glimpse of others “hurrying up to where I am. They're twenty-three-year-old energetic climbing creatures in their anoraks and goggles.” This paranoid, but light-heartedly Felliniesque view of literary history takes a more surprising turn when it allows an alien intruder into this enclosed poetic universe: the critic. There is only one critic in this dream: “The wind comes over, *whsssen*, and it's cold, and the ladder vibrates, and I feel very exposed and high up. Off to one side there's Helen Vendler, in her trusty dirigible, filming our ascent.”

As a vision of literary history, the limitations of this dream sequence are evident in the linearity and straightforward hierarchy of its scheme. Such limitations are of course excusable given the fictional nature of this account, which certainly works marvellously in terms of the internal motivation of its plot and as a humorous sidelight on the protagonist's personal crisis. This essay will try to address literary history in a critical manner that is, hopefully, more capable of accounting for nuance and complexity. Yet here, too, Helen Vendler will function as the critic of choice. Where Baker's use of Vendler as a representative critic is, presumably, motivated by her rare combination of general celebrity and academic renown, my own turning to her has a different, more particular cause. I want to approach the relationship between the poetry of W. B. Yeats and Shakespeare's sonnets. As a connecting link between these two—who for some or another reason are not sighted in Paul Chowder's dream (perhaps they are too far up the ladder?)—I will be utilising Vendler, who has—if not literally filmed their “ascent,” as in Chowder's dream—recently written quite weighty studies of both authors. It is perhaps fitting, given my

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<sup>1</sup> All of the quotations from this novel are from page 197 of Nicholson Baker, *The Anthologist* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2009).

topic, that I will be engaging in a rather complex *menage à trois*, where the internal force field of relations is seldom reducible to any simple linear traffic. Indeed, Vendler might be playfully identified as the “Dark Lady” of this essay, insofar as her criticism will be both be criticized and praised. On the one hand, I admire Vendler’s thoroughness and the inventiveness with which she points to surprising and, as far as I know, previously unknown connections between Yeats and Shakespeare. On the other hand, though, I take exception to some of the underlying premises of her approach: particularly its somewhat self-contradictory formalism and use of teleology in describing authorial development.

While approaching Yeats’ relation to Shakespeare via Vendler will provide a fascinating and enriching Chinese box-like spectacle of successive acts of interpretation, a critical focus on these acts of mediation will make it necessary to question some underlying premises. This essay will start off with a brief look at Vendler’s view on Shakespeare’s sonnets, giving special focus to her methodology. It will then go on to confront her reading of Yeats, singling out features that relate that reading back to Shakespeare. It will be demonstrated that Yeats’ sonnets and sonnet-like poems relate less exclusively to a Shakespearean foundation than Vendler claims. Furthermore, it will be shown that when Yeats did relate to Shakespeare, he did in a more complex and affirmative way than that for which she allows. In short, even if Vendler sketches a helpful context in which to understand the link between Shakespeare and Yeats in terms of poetic genre, her readings nevertheless need further supplementation and elaboration for justice to be done to the complexity and vitality of this relation.

In 1997 Vendler published *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, a blow-by-blow reading of all 154 of the sonnets over more than 650 pages. The introduction spells out some of the most important premises for her approach. The most prominent and controversial of these premises is the degree to which she stresses textual autonomy—thus self-consciously distancing herself from the more dominant modes of contemporary criticism. In her own words: “Contemporary emphasis on the participation of literature in a social matrix balks at acknowledging how lyric, though it may refer to the social, remains the genre that directs its *mimesis* toward the performance of the mind in *solitary* speech.”<sup>2</sup> Vendler also remarks that Shakespeareans tend to misread the sonnets for a related reason: they project the play’s contextual investments and dramatic qualities onto a kind of writing that is generically heterogeneous to such concerns. When she stresses that “a poem is not an essay” and its “paraphrasable propositional content” is not “merely the jumping-off place for its

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<sup>2</sup> Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1997), 1-2. Compare this to Scott Brewster’s claim that “lyric, far from presenting the unmediated thoughts and feelings of an isolated individual, centres on the relationship between the self and others, the self and history, and the self and language” (Scott Brewster, *Lyric* [London and New York: Routledge, 2009], 14).

real work,”<sup>3</sup> we recognise the survival of New Critical beliefs. A version of New Criticism might also be assumed to be lurking behind Vendler’s stress on poetry as a psychological spectacle: for her the important questions are “‘How well does the structure of this poem mimic the structure of thinking?’ and ‘How well does the linguistic play of the poem embody that structural mimesis?’”<sup>4</sup>

With regard to Shakespeare’s sonnets, the evident structure of thinking is manifest in the poems’ formal architecture. For Vendler, these sonnets exist in basic opposition to the precedent of the earlier Italian, or Petrarchan, sonnet. Whereas the Italian form is dual, through its linking octave and sestet together via a transitional *volta*, the Shakespearean is more manifold and unpredictable. Take for instance sonnet number 8, “Music to hear, why hear’st thou music sadly?” Interpreting this poem, Vendler defends the poet’s many variations of a conceit whereby the addressee’s reluctance to fall in love is compared to the concord and discord of music. She utilises a diagram in order to make an inventory of “Shakespeare’s strategies for unifying sonnet-parts into a true *concord... by unions married*.”<sup>5</sup> Underlying this fanciful plurality is what she calls an “aesthetic principle”: “the resolution of many part in one unison,” in the vehicle of the musical metaphor, “is of obvious relevance as an aesthetic principle for the Shakespearean sonnet, which, because of its four discrete parts, runs an inherently greater risk of disunity than does the Italian sonnet.”<sup>6</sup>

For readers familiar with the basic architecture and history of the sonnet, Vendler’s distinction between Shakespeare’s aesthetic principle and that of the Italian sonnet may come as something of a surprise: the conventional wisdom would be that both of these forms can both be seen as either divisible into two or four. Traditionally, the English form has been seen as limited by the temptation to use the closing couplet as a vehicle for aphoristic *sententiae*, a kind of closure that invites our conceiving of the whole poem as primarily an argumentative vehicle—something which is at odds with the open-ended structures of meaning cultivated in modern poetry. Vendler, however, insists that because the Shakespearean sonnet, in her view, “has four parts—three isomorphic ones (the quatrains) and one anomalous one (the couplet), it is far more flexible than the two-part Italian sonnet.”<sup>7</sup> This claim would have been more convincing were it backed up actual readings of Petrarch or other representative instances of the Italian form. In any case, the fairly exhaustive nature of Vendler’s close readings has the virtue of highlighting the diversity of her chosen texts: the thesis underlying and justifying her study as

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3 Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, xiii.

4 *Ibid.*, 3.

5 *Ibid.*, 81.

6 *Ibid.*, 80.

7 *Ibid.*, 22.

a whole – namely, that Shakespeare's *Sonnets* “deserve detailed and particular commentary because they comprise a virtual anthology of lyric possibility” – is convincingly borne out.<sup>8</sup>

The relationship with the Italian precedent is also important for Vendler, due to the way in which it relates to the poet's self-conscious positioning of himself in relation to literary tradition. She sees this positioning as an act of active differentiation, claiming that:

Because he is especially occupied with literary consolidation (resuming the topics, the images, the consecrated adjectives, and the repertoire of tones of previous sonneteers), one can miss his subversive moves: the “shocking” elements of the sonnets in both subsequences: the parodies, by indirect quotation, of Petrarchan praise in sonnets 21 and 130 [...].<sup>9</sup>

Vendler is keen to stress the excellence of Shakespeare's sonnets, at one point calling him “a master of aesthetic strategy.”<sup>10</sup> As a result, she tends to reprimand any attempt from other critics to identify shortcomings or limitations in the sonnets' discourse or unfolding. For her, these poems are the finished article, and there cannot be any question of mistaking their speaker's frequent bewilderment, hesitation or inconstancy of opinion as indicative of any authorial lapse. In a way that brings to mind the typical retrospective, first person narration of the modern *Bildungsroman*, she insists that

the author, who is arranging the whole poem, has from the moment of conception a relation of irony to his fictive persona. The persona lives in the “real time” of the poem, in which he feels, thinks, and changes his mind; the author has planned the whole evolution of the poem before writing the first line, and “knows” conceptually the gyrations which he plans to represent taking place over time in his fictive speaker.<sup>11</sup>

Given this view, one would expect Vendler to revel in the ironic and developmental possibilities provided by the sonnet sequence as a whole. After all, as John Kerrigan has pointed out, it is the “subtle modulation of material from poem to poem into the form of the whole which makes reading Shakespeare's *Sonnets* such a concentrated yet essentially cumulative experience.”<sup>12</sup> As a matter of fact, though, Vendler tends to only register sequential structures in passing: apart from some no-

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8 *Ibid.*, 12.

9 *Ibid.*, 28.

10 *Ibid.*, xiv.

11 *Ibid.*, 26.

12 John Kerrigan, “Introduction,” xii, in William Shakespeare, *The Sonnets' and 'A Lover's Complaint'*, ed. John Kerrigan (London: Penguin, 2009 [1995]).

table summaries, her main concern is usually the individual poem as an autonomous verbal and psychological structure.

That act of aesthetic delimitation requires some vigilance. Despite having some common points with the interpretive practice of Paul De Man, Vendler is for instance very far removed from his insistence upon pursuing the effects of poetry's connotative connections. In a critique of Hans-Robert Jauss, De Man once noted the potentially vertiginous effects were one to pursue all the dissonant connotations of the name "Boucher" in Baudelaire's "Spleen II," insisting that "it becomes very hard to stop."<sup>13</sup> For Vendler, it is very important to stop – for the poem needs an external border, if one is to prevent it from spilling over into its surrounding frameworks. Thus she is adamant that Shakespeare's use of seasonal imagery is not to be over-interpreted. Commenting on sonnet number 5 and its claim that "never-resting time leads summer on / To hideous winter and confounds him there" (lines 5-6), she makes a more general point:

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that nothing can be said to happen in a poem which is not there suggested. If *summer is confounded in hideous winter*, one is not permitted to add, irrelevantly, "But can spring be far behind?" If the poet had wanted to provoke such an extrapolation, he would by some means have suggested it.<sup>14</sup>

"[N]othing can be said to happen in a poem which is not there suggested": this ascetic injunction is one of the means by which Vendler defends her own approach to the sonnets against the claims of other alternatives—particularly Joel Fineman's psychoanalytic reading is singled out as deserving a rebuttal.<sup>15</sup> Yet one might doubt whether Vendler always follows this rule herself.

Indeed, if we turn from Vendler's study of Shakespeare to her reading of Yeats, we will soon enough find her ignoring it pretty blatantly. Much of her book *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form*—published in 2007—was written while she was also at work on the study of Shakespeare. The book on Yeats shares with the earlier study an intense and unmitigated interest in lyric form, but it focuses mainly on the structures and developments of *genres*, rather than on specific poems. Its sixth chapter, entitled "Troubling the Tradition: Yeats at Sonnets," is of particular interest here.

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13 Paul de Man, "Lyrical Voice in Contemporary Theory: Riffaterre and Jauss," 66, in Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker (eds.), *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985).

14 Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 69.

15 Cf. Joel Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

Vendler sees Yeats' relation to the sonnet as one of continuous maturation from an early state of uncertain apprenticeship. Written when he was almost seventy, "Meru" is the great culmination of this process. After this bravado performance, Vendler implies that the only possibility was to question or parody the form: with the 1938 poem "High Talk," she sees Yeats as effectively deconstructing the entire genre. Before that, though, she sees the series of Yeats' sonnets and sonnet-related poems as basically negotiating with both the Italian and English forms of the genre. Interestingly, she identifies the sonnet form as being latently present in Yeats' *oeuvre*, even in texts where one would not obviously look for it. Yeats, she claims, was innately attracted to the sonnet, but frequently tended to stray away from it in the final version of his poems, frequently using the *douzain* form, consisting of three rhyming quatrains, instead. Thus her chapter on Yeats' sonnets not only looks at obvious candidates such as "Leda and the Swan," "Meru," and "High Talk," but it also takes the time to argue relatively convincingly for the presence of sonnet-like structures in less obvious places, like "When You are Old" and "The Sorrows of Love."

Vendler's analysis claims that Yeats' associated the sonnet with certain values: it was (a) a distinctively written (rather than oral) form, (b) unabashedly artificial, (c) acutely self-conscious, and (d) expressly English. With regard to the Englishness, she claims that precisely "because of its centrality to English literature, the sonnet compelled from Yeats both his literary allegiance and his nationalist disobedience."<sup>16</sup> She goes on to state that when "we wonder why Yeats wrote so few 'proper' sonnets, we can find the answer, I think, in his distinctive mixture of that allegiance and that disobedience."<sup>17</sup> Vendler's interpolation of the words "I think" here indicates, I think, that she has had to go beyond the textual evidence of the sonnets themselves in order to find her explanation. She is, in other words, trespassing against the injunction she placed against extra-textual evidence in her book on Shakespeare's sonnets.

Where would she find grounds for the conjecture in question? One way of justifying this reading would be to follow up Vendler's fascinating hint about the *douzain* form. The latter is obviously a French genre—utilised by figures such as Ronsard, Hugo, and de Vigny, and frequently by Verlaine and other Symbolists whom were important for the early Yeats—and is as such rarely found in English poetry. The use of the sonnet's fourteen-line form can, then, more easily be interpreted as fitting in with English literary tradition than the alternative utilisation of the twelve-line form imported from France. The manner in which a tetrameter version of the *douzain* was favoured in the early poetry of Yeats' compatriot and close

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16 Helen Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 147.

17 *Ibid.*

friend A. E. (i.e., George Russell) might be interpreted as a parallel case, which probably also involved an element of emulation and competition.

Still, this far from proves Vendler's thesis. Not only does the Frenchness of the *douzain* not decisively establish the Englishness of Yeats' conception of the sonnet, further it does not provide any basis at all for establishing the reason why Yeats might be tempted to avoid artistic links with Shakespeare and Englishness in the first place. One possible source for establishing such an aversion or repulsion would be Yeats' 1937 introduction to Scribner's planned version of his complete works. There Yeats describes his ambivalence towards England, a feeling in which, he says, "my hatred tortures me with love, my love with hate."<sup>18</sup> He also famously states: "I owe my soul to Shakespeare, to Spenser and to Blake, perhaps to William Morris, and to the English language in which I think, speak and write."<sup>19</sup> So, strong emotions and ambivalence are certainly there. Yet one might notice that Yeats does not express any kind of reservation with regard to the literary tradition embodied by Shakespeare, nor is there any evidence that Yeats saw his work as marked by British imperial views on Ireland. The same goes for the sonnet: Yeats nowhere expressly identifies the genre as an English one. Take for instance a letter to Dorothy Wellesley, dated 8 January 1937, where Yeats makes, in passing, a principled pronouncement about this genre in the context of passing on some paternal advice: "Your son wants a framework of action," he writes, "much as a man who feels that his poetry is vague & loose will take to writing sonnets."<sup>20</sup> Notice that although the value of the sonnet might be construed of as being circumscribed here—as a mere means to sharpen poetic craftsmanship, rather than a worthy end in itself—there is no hint of any kind of inherent, national orientation. Rather than seeing the sonnet as an instrument of nationalism, Clive Scott has claimed that "national and international traditions [...] have increasingly interfered with each other and the structure of the sonnet has acquired a peculiarly 'esperanto' flavour."<sup>21</sup> There is no indication that Yeats—writing at a time when English poets, for instance, frequently favoured the Petrarchan form—is a particular exception to this trend.

In more recent times, another Irish poet, Seamus Heaney, *has* in fact made an associative link between the sonnet and English imperial history, and explained that this link was the cause of his feeling less than at home in the genre—but Heaney is not Yeats.<sup>22</sup> The latter never denounces Shakespeare for any alleged imperial

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18 W. B. Yeats, *Later Essays*, ed. William H. O'Donnell with assistance from Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994), 211.

19 *Ibid.*

20 The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats, Accession letter #6771, Oxford University Press (InteLex Electronic Edition) 2002.

21 Clive Scott, *French Verse-Art: A Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 172.

22 For a critical view on Heaney's stance, see Jason David Hall, "Form and Process:

affiliations. As Rupin W. Desai has shown, there is instead a career-long process of influence and interpretation.<sup>23</sup> Early on in his career, Yeats writes mythological drama in blank verse in a conscious effort to transport his idiom to an Irish context. Thus Yeats' early essay, "At Stratford on Avon" (1901), is very much a celebration. Written at a period when Yeats, in his own words, spent "hours reading the plays, and the wise and foolish things men have said of them,"<sup>24</sup> this essay puts not only Shakespeare on a pedestal, but does the same with his England: an England "made by her adventurers, by her people of wildness and imagination and eccentricity."<sup>25</sup> Further, Yeats contrasts this past era of Merry England with the present's "imperialistic enthusiasm" embodied in "the practical ideals of the modern age."<sup>26</sup> Also later, in the use of Shakespearean's heroes in some of his late poetry, for instance, Yeats constantly finds constructive precedent for his own writing, causing T. McAlindon to claim that Yeats "managed to achieve a remarkable degree of identification with Shakespeare."<sup>27</sup> Thus Vendler's simple equation between sonnet form, Shakespeare, and the ideology of empire in Yeats' mind seems to cut many corners far too fast.

Vendler also seems to essentialise the historical forms of the sonnet in her reading. The Italian and the English sonnet forms may be useful taxonomic tools, and rough guides to determine some of the more basic workings of the genre, but like all genres the sonnet is subject to historical variation. By not seeing this, Vendler is in line with an old, classic study like Walter Mönch's *Das Sonnet*, but even he—along with Paul Fussell—at least admits the added nuance of allowing for three rather than two basic forms.<sup>28</sup> A more historically attuned approach is needed: the sonnet genre is not a mere given and static vehicle, but rather an active framing device that itself is framed by outside contingencies and emphases. Stuart Curran has encapsulated this nicely: "However extensive the generic line or obvious its pressure," he writes,

the poetic genres are never mere abstractions: they are always individually recreated in a particularized time and place, and to discuss that recreation attentively requires both immersion in its historical setting and sensitivity to the ways in which great literature spans time.<sup>29</sup>

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Seamus Heaney's 'A New Life' into 'Act of Union,'" in Frank Beardow and Alison O'Malley-Younger (eds.), *Representing Ireland: Past, Present and Future* (Sunderland: University of Sunderland Press, 2005), 153-164.

23 Rupin W. Desai, *Yeats's Shakespeare* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971).

24 W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 96.

25 *Ibid.*, 104.

26 *Ibid.*, 104 and 106.

27 T. McAlindon, "Yeats and the English Renaissance," in *PMLA*, vol. 82, no. 2 (May, 1967), 164.

28 See Walter Mönch, *Das Sonett: Gestalt und Geschichte* (Kerle: Heidelberg, 1955) and Paul Fussell, *Poetic Metre and Poetic Form* (London: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

29 Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University



The ahistoric nature of Vendler's understanding of genre is particularly evident when she writes of the "true sonnet," which she links to a textual structure being characterised by a strong sense of antithetical conflict.

A related problem with Vendler's approach is the seemingly immediate nature of the connection between Shakespeare and Yeats posited in her reading. Born roughly three hundred years after Shakespeare, Yeats could not but approach his writings via the accounts and interpretations given of his work by others. Thus, in another context, Wayne Chapman has claimed that Yeats' "regard for the Renaissance and its multi-faceted personalities ('Renaissance men')" was "derived initially and substantially from influential others"—specifically Victorian others—"such as Arnold, Pater, and the elder Yeats."<sup>30</sup> Though we know William Butler Yeats dismissed Edward Dowden's as his own "legitimate enemy" and as someone who was representative of what he called "the middle class movement," another close friend of Yeats' Thomas Sturge Moore – edited an edition of Shakespeare's sonnets in 1899. In addition, the whole nineteenth century development of the sonnet is relevant here, making it problematical to see Yeats' work as engaged in an exclusive interaction with Shakespearean and Petrarchan essences established long before. For instance, Vendler's interesting claim of there being shortened forms of the sonnet in Yeats' writings could be productively linked with the explorations of caudate and curtailed forms of the sonnet in the writings of poets such as Hopkins and Meredith. Beyond that, Yeats was a close reader of a figure such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the editor of the Victorian anthology *Sonnets of this Century*, William Sharp, was an important ally early on.

In Vendler's account, Yeats became a better sonnet writer the more distant he got from the Victorians. We have a rigorously linear narrative of maturation, whereby the early Yeats basically does not understand the true nature of the form. Gradually, Yeats will approach the nature of the "true sonnet," and in "Meru" we finally find an instantiation of it. After that, only "High Talk" remains as a late deconstruction of the entire form. While this narrative has much to say for it in terms of transparency and unity, it is less than closely attuned to historical nuance. As such it closely echoes Vendler's book titled *Coming of Age as a Poet*, where the careers of Milton, Keats, T. S. Eliot and Plath were similarly read in terms of straightforwardly teleological narratives.<sup>31</sup>

If we inspect closer Vendler's analysis of Yeats the sonneteer, we find that her basic premise is that in opposition to the "true sonnet" discovered late in his career, Yeats' early Victorian work built on a conception of the form that was simplistically unified. Thus the 1886 Petrarchan sonnet "Remembrance" is described

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Press, 1990), 8.

30 Wayne K. Chapman, *Yeats and English Renaissance Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1991), 32.

31 Helen Vendler, *Coming of Age as a Poet: Milton, Keats, Eliot, Plath* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

as a “dreamy early sonnet” which has “almost no thought-content.”<sup>32</sup> For Vendler, such a “creation of coherent emotion ‘atmosphere,’ rising, climaxing, and falling [...] continues to be Yeats’s aim in the nineties.”<sup>33</sup> She acknowledges that unity was Yeats’ aim, but understands this aim to be an aberration, as it does not agree with what she stipulates to be the true form of the sonnet. Thus it is implied that Yeats seeks the alternative form out of weakness:

The true inner quarrel of the binary Petrarchan sonnet is too much for him, as are the conflicting perspectives of the four-part Shakespearean sonnet. He therefore continues with the more manageably unifiable pentameter douzain, a form to which he returns (with variable rhyming) all his life, down to the year before his death.<sup>34</sup>

Here Vendler offers us not only an essentialist account of literary history, but also what one might call a monotheistic one. Yeats is not to have any other gods than Shakespeare, and Vendler – it is implied – has seen the single form in which Shakespeare’s sonnets have their essence.

If one casts an eye back at the sonnet’s nineteenth century history, the parochial character of this view becomes evident. Jennifer Ann Wagner’s history of the 19<sup>th</sup> century sonnet starts off with Wordsworth’s rediscovery of Milton’s political sonnets in 1802. Wagner shows that this discovery entails the emergence of what she calls

a third possibility for a model of form—the ‘unitary’ model. [...] the Miltonic sonnet, with its tendency toward enjambment and toward overrunning the sonnet’s turn, offers the possibility of a unitary model that allows for an opposition or turn but subordinates that opposition to a final assertion of completeness. This assertion overrides any internal divisions not only formally but also—and this is the crucial matter—conceptually.<sup>35</sup>

Joseph Phelan’s more recent study of the 19<sup>th</sup> century sonnet shows how the political and almost phallic values of the Miltonic-Wordsworthian sonnet were displaced by the amatory values espoused by writers like Dante Gabriel Rossetti.<sup>36</sup> What he does not account for, however, is the surprising and significant confluence in structure between Wordsworth’s spherically unified ideal and Yeats’ nine-

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32 Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, 149 and 148.

33 *Ibid.*, 154.

34 *Ibid.*

35 Jennifer Ann Wagner, *A Moment's Monument: Revisionary Poetics and the Nineteenth-Century Sonnet* (London: Associated University Presses, 1996), 14.

36 Joseph Phelan: *The Nineteenth-Century Sonnet* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

ties, symbolist efforts. Wagner's account has the advantage of showing that history itself is fluid, multiple and rich—in fact, as such it is much like the Shakespearean sonnet itself.

If Vendler's account of the beginnings of Yeats' sonnetteering comes across as overly prejudiced, her interpretation of its ending is no less problematical. In this latter case, the problem is not the inability to acknowledge the validity of the aesthetic models different from the Shakespearean one, but rather a neglecting of the inherent similarities between a sceptical, modern use of the sonnet and what we find happening in the 1609 quarto edition. If one resists reducing Shakespeare's sonnets to a monolithic and given context, and rather allows for how it provides a later poet such as Yeats with a poetic framework of some heterogeneity, then a different reading becomes possible. Take for instance Yeats' "High Talk":

Processions that lack high stilts have nothing that catches the eye,  
What if my great-granddad had a pair that were twenty foot high,  
And mine were but fifteen foot, no mortal stalks upon higher,  
Some rogue of the world stole them to patch up a fence or a fire.

Because piebald ponies, led bears, caged lions, make but poor shows,  
Because children demand Daddy-long-legs upon his timber toes,  
Because women in the upper stories demand a face at the pane  
That patching old heels they may shriek, I take to chisel and plane.

Malachi Stilt-Jack am I, whatever I learned has run wild,  
From collar to collar, from stilt to stilt, from father to child.

All metaphor, Malachi, stilts and all. A barnacle-goose  
Far up in the stretches of the night; night splits and the dawn breaks  
loose;  
I, through the terrible novelty of light, stalk on, stalk on;  
Those great sea-horses bare their teeth and laugh at the dawn.

Vendler points out that this poem "belongs thematically to the conventional sonnet-tradition because its topic is its own aesthetic," and claims that Yeats developed this self-conscious stance "with the example of Sidney and Shakespeare" before him.<sup>37</sup> She nevertheless quickly brands "High Talk" an anomaly. Its "rough hexameters" and wildness of tone effectively place Yeats beyond the pale of sonnet tradition. This is, in her view, the result of a willed transgression that makes a very specific statement within literary history:

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37 Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 150 and 152.

“High Talk,” by means of its forms “run wild,” voices Yeats’s view that the “high” rhetoric of the sonnet tradition had collapsed with the rest of European culture in the interwar period. We understand Yeats’s cultural commentary here only if we see Malachi’s apocalyptic images, his primitive couplets, his aberrant prosody, and his exultant despair as the formal ruination of the courtly European sonnet by a new primitivism.<sup>38</sup>

Here, again, Vendler seems to be going beyond the remit allowed by her New critical precepts. The contextual evidence necessary to convert this poem into an apocalyptic parody of contemporary history is not readily available, unless one, say, stipulates that Yeats’ draft version of “The Second Coming,” written many years earlier, is also effectively a draft version of “High Talk.” Further, one might question why Vendler, in such a poem, is less prone to see “a relation of irony” to the poet’s “fictive persona,” than what’s the case when she interprets Shakespeare’s sonnets.

Setting aside the cultural content of Vendler’s reading, the generic dimension of her interpretation seems equally, if not even more, forced. For does this poem really spell the “formal ruination” of the sonnet tradition? Certainly, Romantic forerunners such as Keats and Shelley provide a significant precedent for the manner in which this poem reassembles the constituent elements of the sonnet. Perhaps, though, the earlier, august example of Shakespeare might be also justly seen as belonging to a tradition that is not essentially alien to Yeats’ *modus operandi* in “High Talk”? An inclusive sense of exactly what the preceding example involves would, however, seem to imply otherwise. For even if Vendler tends to operate with a monolithic understanding of what a Shakespearean sonnet is, the 1609 quarto edition includes several poems that markedly depart from the standard template. Sonnet number 145, for instance, is written in tetrameters rather than pentameters. Number ninety-nine errs in being expansive rather than elliptical: it consists of fifteen lines. A more important forerunner for “High Talk” is Shakespeare’s 126<sup>th</sup> sonnet, which similarly consists solely of rhyming couplets – though six rather than seven of them. In addition, number 126 – “O thou my lovely boy, who in thy power” – also deviates rhythmically: as Vendler points out, “the poem falls into a trochaic and amphibracic rather than an iambic pattern.”<sup>39</sup>

Given his documented familiarity with the sonnets,<sup>40</sup> we can be sure Yeats knew of all these deviations from Shakespeare’s norm. Further, we also know that another singular sonnet held a special importance for him. Writing to Dorothy Wellesley on 21 January 1937, during what was a difficult time for Yeats, he stressed

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38 *Ibid.*, 152.

39 Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, 535.

40 Desai’s *Yeats’s Shakespeare* includes an appendix that lists in detail all of Yeats’ references to Shakespeare’s works. For the various editions that were in Yeats’ possession, see Edward O’Shea, *A Descriptive Catalog of W. B. Yeats’s Library* (New York and London: Garland, 1985).

how important a particular sonnet of Shakespeare's was for him: "Everything seems exaggerated — I had not a symptom of illness yet I had to take to my bed. I kept repeating that Sonnet of Shakespeare's about 'Captive good' — I felt I was in an utter solitude."<sup>41</sup> The sonnet in question here is number 66, "Tired with all these, for restful death I cry," a poem which Yeats had quoted in its entirety in his "At Stratford-on-Avon" essay thirty-six years earlier. Interestingly, Yeats' seeking comfort at this time was at least partially caused by the controversy around Roger Casement's diaries, a source of considerable acrimony in Anglo-Irish relations at the time.<sup>42</sup> While he was driven to one of his most outspokenly anti-Empire utterances in "The Ghost of Roger Casement" by this contentious issue, this letter of Yeats' shows that he also sought—and found—solace in a particular Shakespearean sonnet.

Shakespeare's sonnet number 66 contains a paratactic catalogue of wrongs that have driven the speaker to the brink. Vendler describes the poem as "wearily reiterative and syntactically poverty-stricken [...]. It is so tired, and so tongue-tied, that it sounds repetitive and anticlimactic."<sup>43</sup> She acknowledges, though, that this poem cannot be interpreted as a failure: its faults are intended, supplied to emphasize its underlying message. The same is of course the case with regard to Yeats' poem. If "High Talk" is more histrionic than sonnet 66, both are poems of dejection and disgust. In another context Yeats claimed that, for him, the "strength and weight of Shakespeare" came from his "preoccupation with evil,"<sup>44</sup> and certainly these poems show the two writers in question sharing a sense of defiant opposition in the face of almost crippling adversity. Whereas Yeats' Malachi chooses theatrical exaggeration as a defence, Shakespeare's speaker can only keep going out of love for his interlocutor: "Tired with all these, from these would I be gone, / Save that to die, I leave my love alone." Despite such a difference, it seems evident that Yeats is not all that far from Elizabethan forerunner here, after all. Combining the shared, hyperbolic dejection of number 66 with the unconventional couplet form of sonnet 126, the Irishman has certainly made a unique poem all of his own—but not, for all that, one that is a fundamental negation of the Shakespearean precedent. As mentioned earlier, Vendler insists upon Shakespeare's "subversive moves" with regard to the sonnet tradition: insofar as Yeats makes subversive moves of his own, he is actually reinforcing the validity of that precedent, rather than simply attempting to tear it down.

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41 The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats, Accession letter #6785, Oxford University Press (InteLex Electronic Edition) 2002.

42 For an account of how the controversy affected Yeats, see R. F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life, II. The Arch-Poet 1915-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 568-575.

43 Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 310.

44 Yeats, *Later Essays*, 42.

It is easier to agree with Vendler when she claims that the final lines of “Meru” – “That day brings round the night, that before dawn / His glory and monuments are gone” – are very much in line with the author of the 1609 *Sonnets*. Here we have a “Shakespearean couplet,” and here too, the “dynastic word ‘monuments’ [...] is conspicuously Shakespearean.” One might add that the contrast between form and content in “Meru” is also conspicuously Shakespearean, at least if we permit ourselves to see Shakespeare as Yeats saw him. For in *A Vision*, Yeats writes: “Shakespeare showed through a style, full of joy, a melancholy vision sought from afar.”<sup>45</sup> Yeats’ hermits have also found their tragic irony, their “melancholy vision,” at a solitary place – far from home – and their vision, too, is compensatingly embodied in a style that is “full of joy.” So, yes, the monument is indeed Shakespearean. One might also add, with such a powerful Victorian poem such as “A Sonnet is a moment’s monument” in mind, that it is also in part, for instance, Rossetian.<sup>46</sup> Yeats neither negates Shakespeare, nor ignores the weight of the sonnet tradition between him and his most elevated forerunner. A true master’s monument does not just exist in solitude, doing one thing and the same, but rather it is able to play in ten thousand places. A true master’s monument need neither, one might add, be devoid of elements that are bit skewed—nor is it wrong to show an awareness, from the very first, of its own potential destruction.

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45 Yeats, *A Vision*, 1925 version, 81. Although Yeats found much to disagree with in Edward Dowden’s view on Shakespeare, on this particular point he seems to concur with parts of the interpretation developed by his father’s friend. Interestingly, Dowden’s reads Shakespeare’s sonnets as developing an artistic credo of distance through suffering. In his introduction to the sonnets, Dowden writes of “a time in his life when the springs of faith and hope had almost cease to flow; and he recovered these not by flying from reality and life, but by driving his shafts deeper towards the centre of things” (*The Sonnets of William Shakespeare*, ed. Edward Dowden [London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1883], xxv). He also presents a similar view in a monograph on Shakespeare: in the sonnets, he claims, “we may perhaps discover the sorrow which first roused his heart and imagination to their long inquisition of evil and grief, and which, sinking down into his great soul, and remaining there until all bitterness had passed away, bore fruit in the most mature of Shakespeare’s writings” (*Shakespeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art* [London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1889], 394).

46 Compare Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “A Sonnet is a Moment’s Monument,” which is given an useful analysis in chapter five of Wagner, *A Moment’s Monument*.