



# Narrative strategies in Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

### Narrative strategies in Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*

*In this article I suggest that historically lyric and narrative are not mutually exclusive categories. Focusing on the case of Sir Philip Sidney's sonnet sequence, "Astrophil and Stella", I argue that the fundamentally lyric form of the sonnet functions rhetorically and contextually in such a way as to invite narrative construal. I suggest that this is the norm in pre-Enlightenment poetic practice and theory, something which was perhaps occluded by the decline of interest in rhetoric.*

## Opsomming

### Narratiewe strategieë in Sir Philip Sidney se *Astrophil and Stella*

*Die artikel gaan van die standpunt uit dat, histories gesien, liriek en narratief nie wederkerig-uitsluitende kategorieë is nie. Met die klem op Sir Philip Sidney se sonnetreeks "Astrophil and Stella", argumenteer ek dat die hoofsaaklik liriese vorm van die sonnet retories sowel as kontekstueel só funksioneer dat dit die moontlikheid van 'n narratiewe rekonstruksie en interpretasie aanmoedig. Ek argumenteer verder dat dit die norm in die poëtiese praktyk en teorie voor die Verligting was – aspekte wat miskien uit die oog verloor is vanweë die kwynende belangstelling in die retoriek.*

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1 Despite the similarities of title, the present article develops the insight of Gouws (1991) along very different lines.

## 1. Sidney and early modern theories of poetry

Sir Philip Sidney, like any other poet of the English Renaissance, would not have understood our distinction between the modes of lyric and narrative, and I am not sure that we understand it either. If we did, we would not now be exploring the relationship between them. Early modern poets were brought up on a diet of Plato and Aristotle within a rhetorical tradition which had its origins in classical antiquity, and which continued to flourish through the mediaeval period, and experienced an efflorescence with the spread of the humanist learning of what we readily refer to as the Renaissance. The complex and minute, not to say acute, distinctions they could make between genres rivalled those of any scholastic philosopher debating about the number of angels that could dance upon the point of a needle. For them, however, narrative and lyric did not constitute the binary polarity which we post-everythingists are sometimes tempted to think in terms of.

We tend to think of narrative as prose, and lyric as poetic forms, but for Sidney the term *poetry* – or more correctly, *poesy* – covered the whole range of imaginative literature (as opposed to philosophy or history), and so prose romance, epic and sonnet were all forms of poesy. Epic and ballad were recognised poetic genres, but they were not held to be in opposition to non-narrative forms such as song, sonnet and epigram; and prose narratives such as Sidney's own *The countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* (written between 1577 and 1585; first published 1590 and 1593) straddled epic (heroic poem), romance and pastoral which included songs, sonnets, epigrams, and satirical and didactic poems.

This does not mean that Sidney and his contemporaries had an explicit, coherent, systematic theoretical understanding of what they were doing as poets. Far from it. Sidney's *Defence of poesy* (written probably 1580; first published 1591), for all its glamour, insightfulness and deeply moving moments, is also a bewildered and bewildering attempt to defend poetry against Plato's indictment of poets as misleaders of the youth by using an Aristotelian notion of *mimesis* (but with a late mannerist nuance) coupled with Horace's amiable edification. This syncretic approach constituted a summation of past thought in an invigorating amalgam with the innovative idealism and individualistic self-confidence we now think of as characteristic of the English Renaissance. The purpose of poetry was to teach through the delightful representation of virtue and nobility, and the delightful yet cautionary representation of their opposites. Such ideas easily accommodate representational forms

such as drama, epic and fictional prose, but run into trouble with the forms we often think of as lyrical in the broadest possible sense: religious poetry, hymns and above all love poetry. Sidney appears to have no difficulty in saying that “divine” poems “imitate the unconceivable excellencies of God” (Sidney, 1989:217), but when he cites the Psalms as exemplary in this, it is clear that he cannot make sense of the psalmist’s spiritual engagement with his Maker. When, however, in the course of a digressive discussion of the then current state of poetry and its potential, he finds a way of accommodating both religious and erotic verse: he shifts grounds entirely, and simply abandons the mimetic paradigm by switching to a rhetorical one.

Other sort of poetry almost have we none, but that lyrical kinds of song and sonnets: which, Lord, if He gave us so good minds, how well it might be employed, and with how heavenly fruit, both private and public, in singing the praises of the immortal beauty: the immortal goodness of that God who giveth us hands to write and wits to conceive; of which we might well want words, but never matter; of which we could turn our eyes to nothing, but we should ever have new-budding occasions. But truly many of such writings as come under the banner of unresistible love, if I were a mistress, would never persuade me they were in love: so coldly they apply fiery speeches, as men that had rather read lovers’ writings ... than that in truth they feel those passions, which as easily (I think) may be bewrayed by that same forcibleness or *energia* (as the Greeks call it) of the writer. But let this be a sufficient though short note, that we miss the right use of the material point of poesy. (Sidney, 1989:246.)

In order to obtain a better purchase on what Sidney and his contemporaries would have meant by the “material point of poesy”, we need to move to a consideration of some of the particular poems for which Sidney’s *Defence* may be considered a manifesto. As a heuristic point of entry I want to begin with an assumption that underlies the majority of twentieth-century literary exegetical and hermeneutic approaches to texts. My purpose in doing so is part of a strategy of allowing earlier literary practices unencumbered with anxieties about the incompatibility of lyric and narrative to engage with belated theoretical assumptions so as to reveal the nature of theoretically induced astigmatism in respect of literary figuration and genres.

## 2. Context is all

“Il n’y a pas de hors-texte”, could be understood as meaning “There is nothing outside the text”, and would require that we read the following poem in the limbo of our present condition, as many

readers of anthologies do, as at least some readers of manuscript miscellanies would have in the seventeenth century. The common understanding of Derrida's often repeated and notoriously distorted aphorism has quite rightly been challenged by Attridge (1992:102) and by McDonald (2006:222-223), but in this article I am deliberately using the popular translation to reveal, perhaps by absurdity, what Derrida might really have intended.

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer's lease hath all too short a date;  
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;  
And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
By chance, or nature's changing course untrimmed:  
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,  
Nor shall Death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,  
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.  
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.  
(Shakespeare, 1996:41, sonnet 18.)

The poem is a quintessentially lyrical expression of intense love, and reading the poem only in this way has its own legitimacy. It allows readers to appropriate it to their own needs and experiences, and there is a long history of such appropriation, especially for adolescents encountering the poem in school anthologies. However, it is a naive and impoverished reading. The majority of readers encountering this poem for the first time in isolation would assume that the object of this powerfully expressed love is a woman (since it is without justification, perhaps, assumed that the author is a man), and that the love is unqualifiedly heterosexual. They would be wrong. In the context of the Sonnets, the poem is addressed to a man (of course, this does not necessarily mean that the poem or Shakespeare is homosexual), and a more sophisticated, historically nuanced reading is required, one which will allow the lyric poem to breathe in narrative air. Context is everything.

In what follows, I want to look at the case of Sir Philip Sidney's sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella*, composed at least twenty years, and published ten years before Shakespeare's sonnets. Sidney can be described as the instigator of the English Literary Renaissance, and because we know more about him and his work we are likely to make better-informed judgements as to how he

worked and how he understood both himself and his own literary conduct.

### 3. *Astrophil and Stella* as narrative

On its own, the opening sonnet of *Astrophil and Stella* presents us with a lover agonising over his inability to articulate not only the seething emotions within, but in such a way as to cajole the object of his desire into a consummation of his passion.

Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,  
That she (dear she) might take some pleasure of my pain;  
Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know;  
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain;

I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,  
Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertain;  
Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow  
Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sun-burnt brain.

But words came halting forth, wanting invention's stay,  
Invention, nature's child, fled step-dame study's blows;  
And others' feet still seemed but strangers in my way.

Thus, great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes,

Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,

'Fool', said my Muse to me; 'look in thy heart and write'.

(Sidney, 1989:153.)<sup>2</sup>

The poem, as one would expect from a sonnet, has the features conventionally associated with lyric: "a fairly short, nonnarrative poem presenting a single speaker who expresses a state of mind or a process of thought and feeling" (Abrams, 1971:89). Johnson is more accommodatingly cautious about the requirement on length (the sequence, after all, has as much right to be considered as a poem as each of its constituent sonnets and songs), and provides a circumspect, insightful and complexly nuanced categorisation of lyric, one which reaffirms the connection with music:

lyric is a type of poetry which is mechanically representational of a music architecture and which is thematically representational of the poet's sensibility as evidenced in a fusion of conception and image (Johnson, 1975:462).

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2 All other quotations from Sidney will use the 1989 edition. The standard edition, *The poems of Sir Philip Sidney* edited by Ringler (1962), presents an old-spelling text and has slightly variant readings.

From the very beginning, however, the 108 sonnets and eleven interspersed "songs" in *Astrophil and Stella* were treated as a narrative. Thomas Nashe (1591) in his preface to the first pirated edition of the sequence characterised it as a dramatic narrative: "The argument cruell chastitie, the Prologue hope, the Epilogue dispaire." (Nashe, 1904-1910, 3:329.) Nashe was an acute reader, well aware of the tradition the sonnet sequence valorised by the work of Dante and Petrarch. He would have known that he was not dealing with an arbitrary collocation of discrete lyric moments, but a purposely arranged series, arranged not according to the rationale of the liaison of ideas of the *silva* tradition (cf. e.g. Fowler, 1982:163-180), but in an open-ended way so as to invite the reader to complete the *gestalt* of a narrative: the initiation and pursuit of a courtship and the prolonged agonies of frustration and doubtful requital leading to eventual rejection and disconsolate closure. It is, therefore, surprising that Lewis (1954:327) should be so adamant in maintaining that

... the first thing to grasp about the sonnet sequence is that it is not a way of telling a story. It is a form which exists for the sake of a prolonged lyric meditation, chiefly on love, but relieved from time to time by incursions into public affairs, literary criticism, compliment, or what you will. External events – a quarrel, a parting, an illness, a stolen kiss – are every now and then mentioned to provide themes for the meditation. Thus you get an island, or (if the event gives matter for more than one piece) an archipelago, of narrative in the lyrical sea.

It is almost as if Lewis is seduced by his own metaphor. If anything, Lewis might well want to say that there are islands or archipelagos in a sea of actuality or of (implicit) narrative. It is quite clear that there is a deliberate sequence to the events and occasions selected for reference by Sidney.

In suggesting that the presentation of the narrative functions in terms of a *gestalt*, I am not proposing anything new about the mode of poetic narrative presentation. Ballad, for example, and more specifically traditional or folk ballad – a truly narrative lyric form, since it presupposes musical performance – has long been realised as operating according to a mode known as "leaping and lingering": the narrative omits much intervening detail while focusing on selected, almost iconic moments. In a parallel fashion, each sonnet or song functions as a stanza or group of stanza within an extended narrative structure by focusing on a particular lyrically conceived critical moment, without necessarily being narrative itself.

The readerly impulse to complete the narrative so as to induce closure is so great that, following some of Sidney's nineteenth-century biographers, certain editors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries cobbled on as a conclusion two poems from an earlier series of poems by Sidney, *Certain sonnets* 31 and 32 – these poems of worldly renunciation and divine consolation being seen as resolving the narrative impasse of the sequence as it stands (cf. Ringler, 1962:423; for the text of *Certain sonnets* 31 and 32, see Appendix). More recently, Roche (1982:139-148) has attempted to account for the unresolved ending by characterising the sequence as a whole as a cautionary tale on the consequences of adulterous love.

Important though the ordering of the poems is, it will not on its own enable the narrative reading of the poems of the sequence. Given that each poem instantiates an occasion or predicament of stasis, something is required to impel the narrative. Perhaps what supplies this momentum more than anything else is the reader's appetite for what by some would be regarded as illegitimate extra-literary concerns: in the case of *Astrophil and Stella*, this is largely biographical curiosity. Despite the fictional names of the work's title, the reader is teased into seeing the play on Philip Sidney's name (*Philip*) in that of the male protagonist, Astrophil, the star lover of the unattainable star, Stella, who is married. More importantly, throughout the sequence, frequent reference is made to recognisable events and persons in Sidney's life. For example, Sidney's family entered into negotiations for a marriage with Penelope Devereux (daughter of the Earl of Essex) at a time when Sidney showed no interest in her (Sidney, 1989:2, 33) and later Penelope was married to Lord Rich (Sidney, 1989:24). The details are never precise, but drive the reader through titillating expectations of fuller, more explicit revelation, as well as through a forlorn hope that somehow, despite all the obstacles and moral barriers, a mutual love might be accomplished. It also helps to know that Penelope Devereux (1563-1607) was not above adulterous relationships: she married Robert, Lord Rich, later Earl of Warwick (1559?-1619), in 1581, and had five children with him. Scandalously, by 1590 she had become involved with Charles Blount, later Baron Mountjoy and subsequently Earl of Devonshire, had six children with him and married him in 1605, before the death of her first husband. (For a succinct discussion of the relationship of the sonnet sequence to Sidney's biography, cf. Ringler, 1962:433-447.)

Elsewhere, I have explored how *Astrophil and Stella*, as a form of coterie literature, becomes the site of a highly sophisticated ludic interplay, on the one hand, between the author and the actual, immediate readership of his circle, and on the other, between the shadowing, *Doppelgänger*, virtual figures of the narrative and all other "outsider" and belated readers (Gouws, 1991). In this way the narrative interwoven with lyric conceals as much as it reveals, and part of the enjoyment of reading is the delight of the suspension of commitment, a kind of a ludic aporia – a rhetorical figure described by Sidney's contemporary Puttenham (1936:226) as "the *doubtfull*, because oftentimes we will seeme to cast perils, and make doubt of things when by a plaine manner of speech wee might affirme or deny him".<sup>3</sup> The figural matrix in terms of which both the sequence and the discrete poems are conducted is thus what enables the polyvalent intersection of lyric and narrative.

The names of the protagonists of the sequence serve a complex function. Not only does "Astrophil" invite attention to the biographical, it simultaneously distances the author, Sidney, from the protagonist. At the same time, it gives content to the "I" of the poems and so moves away from the anonymous subjectivity so often a central feature of lyric, and provides a focalising character or character figure through whom the discrete events are presented. In this respect, *Astrophil and Stella* is very different from Shakespeare's sonnets, which present only an unmediated first person, though there are of course a series of poems which play on "will". And yet, in a contrary way, in the very process of anchoring and focusing the protagonists, the names not only deliberately suspend identification with actual historical figures, but simultaneously expand in rhetorically figurative ways. Thus, we are always aware that Stella might or might not be a real person, a character, that she is a luminary object of attention, beautiful, attractive and unattainable, but also the object of rapt attention which occasions the tumble of the philosopher into the pit:

For though she pass all things, yet what is all  
That unto me, who fare like him that both

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3 It is, therefore, not surprising that Edmund Spenser, clearly an outsider, identified Stella as shadowing Sidney's wife, Frances (cf. Spenser, "Astrophel" line 55; 1989:572 ff.).



Looks to the skies, and in a ditch doth fall?  
 (Sidney, 1989:19, 9-11.)<sup>4</sup>

This polyvalent figural deployment of names is characteristic of Early Modern English rhetoric and is central to the period's literary practices. It is also one reason why it is always safer to talk about "figures" rather than "characters", since not even in Shakespeare's plays do we find characters of the kind we have been trained to take for granted in realistic fiction dating from the eighteenth century onwards.

#### 4. *Astrophil and Stella* and rhetorical figuration

Individual poems function within the ludic indeterminacy enabled by the sequence. The form of the opening sonnet, for example, arouses the expectation of lyric, and so does the first person pronoun, but instead of proceeding in the present tense or in the exclamatory mode as we would unthinkingly expect from lyric poems, the speaker provides the reader with a narrative past tense vignette of poetic self-consciousness and the need for both sincerity and authenticity in courtship. Lyric poetry is conventionally associated with the poetry of praise and blame, in other words epideictic rhetoric, but this poem is not one of those sonnets in praise of the mistress's eyebrow. Instead, we have an aetiological narrative for the poems to follow. In the first stanza, the speaker, whom readers would assume is Astrophil, provides a fantasy sequence (itself a projected narrative) of his sexual ambition. This is followed by a narrative of how he sought to ingratiate himself by borrowing from other writers, but eloquence does not come his way and he is left (like Wallace Stevens's figure of the archetypal Romantic poet in his garret) to

withe and press  
 A bitter utterance from [his] writhing, dumb,  
 Yet voluble of dumb violence ...  
 (Stevens, 1997:332.)

Finally, Astrophil's Muse appears, as befits an opening poem, but instead of inspiring him berates the poet-as-perplexed-adolescent, and peremptorily tells him to look within himself.<sup>5</sup>

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4 The reference is to the commonplace anecdote about Thales, who fell into a well while intently gazing at the stars (cf. Plato, *Theaetetus* 174A.)

Because of the dialogue, the poem is suddenly shifted out of the sphere of the subjective interior monologue, the quintessential meditative lyric mode, by once again introducing a further narrative dimension. We suddenly see Astrophil-as-narrator from another, ironic, point of view: he has assumed a possibly self-conscious posture of ingenuous awkwardness that transparently disguises an ulterior motive. We are also reminded of the indeterminacy of the rhetorical situation. The words of the poem are not those of Astrophil, and they are not directed at us. They are the words of the poet, Sidney, inflected through Astrophil, at an immediate audience which may or may not include Stella, who might be Penelope Devereux, at members of the Sidney circle, and finally at readers outside the circle (including the present readers) who, as it were, overheard the conversation and observed the ludic manoeuvres.

Whatever the audience and whatever the purpose, the sonnet presents a narrative or story, one which Astrophil/Sidney is consciously telling about himself as a way of establishing an ingratiating identity, not necessarily a remorselessly honest one. This is made explicit in *Astrophil and Stella* (Sidney, 1989:45).

Stella oft sees the very face of woe  
Painted in my beclouded stormy face;  
But cannot skill to pity my disgrace,  
Not though thereof the cause herself she know;  
Yet hearing late a fable, which did show  
Of lovers never known a grievous case,  
Pity thereof gat in her breast such place  
That, from that sea derived, tears' spring did flow.  
Alas, if fancy drawn by imaged things,  
Though false, yet with free scope more grace doth breed  
Than servant's wrack, where new doubts honours brings;  
Then think, my dear, that you in me do read  
Of lovers' ruin some sad tragedy:  
I am not I, pity the tale of me.

And being the poet he is, Sidney does not avoid the indecent pun in the last line.

While the narrative of most of the poems eschews the strategies of epideictic rhetoric, there is a sense that it is indirectly a form of praise, since it assumes an object of adoration. The sequence, as a

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5 The Muse's advice alludes to Persius, *Satires* 1,7: *nec te quæsiveris extra*, "do not seek yourself outside [yourself]".

whole, however, contains many poems which are much more explicit in their praises and even the dispraise and vituperation at the cruel fair Stella. However, for the most part the rhetoric is that of deliberative and forensic oratory: either designed to influence a course of action or to achieve a particular judgement or assessment. Often it is both of these, since Stella will accede to Astrophil's importunate demands only if she can be persuaded to think well of him, or "pity" him.

One of the resources shared by forensic and deliberative rhetoric is narrative as a means of persuasion, either by way of establishing the grounds of a case, or as an exemplum. The opening poem of the sequence can be seen as a covert instance of both these strategies. More explicit uses of narrative can be found elsewhere in the sequence. *Astrophil and Stella* for example, takes the form of allegorical narratives.

Love, born in Greece, of late fled from his native place,  
 Forc'd by a tedious proof, that Turkish hardened heart  
 Is no fit mark to pierce with his fine pointed dart;  
 And pleased with our soft peace, stayed here his flying race.  
 But finding these North climes too coldly him embrace,  
 Not used to frozen clips, he strave to find some part  
 Where with most ease and warmth he might employ his art.  
 At length he perched himself in Stella's joyful face,  
 Whose fair skin, beamy eyes, like morning sun on snow,  
 Deceived the quaking boy, who thought from so pure light  
 Effects of lively heat must needs in nature grow.  
 But she, most fair, most cold, made him thence take his flight  
 To my close heart, where while some firebrands he did lay,  
 He burnt unwares his wings, and cannot fly away.  
 (Sidney, 1989:8.)

Phoebus was judge between Jove, Mars, and Love,  
 Of those three gods, whose arms the fairest were.  
 Jove's golden shield did eagle sables bear,  
 Whose talons held young Ganymede above:  
 But in vert field Mars bare a golden spear  
 Which through a bleeding heart his point did shove.  
 Each had his crest: Mars carried Venus' glove,  
 Jove in his helm the thunderbolt did rear.  
 Cupid then smiles, for on his crest there lies  
 Stella's fair hair, her face he makes his shield,

Where roses gules are borne in silver field.<sup>6</sup>  
Phoebus drew wide the curtains of the skies  
To blaze these last, and sware devoutly then,  
The first, thus matched, were scarcely gentlemen.  
(Sidney, 1989:13.)

An even more interesting use of narrative is to be found in the eighth song. This third-person narration recounts a meeting of the now mutually passionate lovers, and leads to an apostrophic address by Astrophil.

In a grove most rich of shade,  
Where birds wanton music made,  
May then young, his pied weeds showing,  
New perfumed with flowers growing,

Astrophil with Stella sweet  
Did for mutual comfort meet;  
Both within themselves oppressed,  
But each in the other blessed.

Him great harms had taught much care:  
Her fair neck a foul yoke bare:  
But her sight his cares did banish,  
In his sight her yoke did vanish.

Wept they had, alas the while;  
But now tears themselves did smile,  
While their eyes, by love directed,  
Interchangeably reflected.

Sigh they did; but now betwixt  
Sighs of woes were glad sighs mixed,  
With arms crossed, yet testifying  
Restless rest, and living dying.

Their ears hungry of each word,  
Which the dear tongue would afford,  
But their tongues restrained from walking  
Till their hearts had ended talking,

But when their tongues could not speak,  
Love itself did silence break;

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6 This is possibly a reference to the Devereux arms: three red disks on a silver background.

Love did set his lips asunder,  
Thus to speak in love and wonder:

‘Stella, sovereign of my joy,  
Fair triumpher of annoy,  
Stella star of heavenly fire,  
Stella lodestone of desire ...’

Astrophil’s impassioned declaration is matched by Stella’s complex response.

Then she spake; her speech was such  
As not ears, but heart did touch;  
While such wise she love denied,  
As yet love she signified.

‘Astrophil,’ said she, ‘my love,  
Cease in these effects to prove:  
Now be still; yet still believe me,  
Thy grief more than death would grieve me.

If that any thought in me  
Can taste comfort but of thee,  
Let me, fed with hellish anguish,  
Joyless, hopeless, endless languish.

If those eyes you praised be  
Half so dear as you to me,  
Let me home return, stark blinded  
Of those eyes, and blinder minded.

If to secret of my heart  
I do any wish impart  
Where thou art not foremost placed,  
Be both wish and I defaced.

If more may be said, I say:  
All my bliss in thee I lay;  
If thou love, my love content thee,  
For all love, all faith is meant thee.

Trust me, while I thee deny,  
In myself the smart I try;  
Tyrant honour thus doth use thee  
Stella’s self might not refuse thee.

Therefore, dear, this no more move,  
Lest, though I leave not thy love,

Which too deep in me is framed,  
I should blush when thou art named.'

This complex interweaving of lyric and narrative is interesting and moving in its own right, but it is the final stanza of the poem that is the master-stroke, in the way it cuts across all the expectations in terms of which the poem has been operating, to produce a heart-rending climax.

Therewithal away she went,  
Leaving him so passion-rent  
With what she had done and spoken,  
That therewith my song is broken.

Until this point the entire poem has been presented in the third person with quotations of dialogue. However, in the very last line, the narrator suddenly shatters conventions by appearing in the first person. Who is the narrator? The Sidney who is also Astrophil? Suddenly the mask drops and the protective shelter of narrative and lyric is shattered. The pathos is rendered that much more powerful by the rhythmic faltering of the last two lines.

## **5. Conclusion: early modern use of schematic rhetorical figures**

The aporetic catastrophe of the sequence in the last line of the eighth song, should bring us to the realisation that the inextricable embedding of narrative in lyric and lyric in narrative is enabled and sustained by the figuration of the poems. For the most part, we tend to think of figures as consisting of the more obvious tropes such as metaphor and simile, ones which happen not to be foregrounded in *Astrophil and Stella*. Far more obtrusive is Sidney's deployment of schematic figures, such as climax in the first four lines of the opening poem, or the oxymoron of the second line, or the more extended figures of reasoning such as *paromologia* or *concessio* in sonnet 5. All of these tropes and schemes may be characterised as tactical figures, but it is Sidney's engagement of figures with a strategic function, ones such as *aporia*, irony and the assemblage of related figures of substitution (*metonymy*, *synecdoche* and *metalepsis*); and the strategies for *ethos* (the plausibility of the speaker) and *pathos* (the appeals to emotion), that most obviously cut across the lyric/narrative divide.

The reason for this is that the rhetorical assumptions of the early modern period are fundamentally teleological or, more accurately,

polytelic, being concerned with the intentional conduct of an agent to gain and direct the attention, assent, commitment and compliance of another agent or agents. Everything is understood as dynamically purposive (and so complex), not as ontologically discrete and static. The rise of science as paradigmatic of knowledge, coupled with a necessarily concomitant occlusion of agency and the assumption of largely Cartesian notions of the self, saw the withering of the rhetorical tradition by the end of the eighteenth century. This post-Enlightenment positivism presented challenges to the Romantics and their modernist and postmodernist heirs by its reductive objectification, reification, even commodification of the human and of human artifacts, but simultaneously gave prominence to the new criticism, the neo-aristotelianism and the structuralism of the twentieth century which dominated thinking about literature and all the fields of humane learning until challenged, but not put to rout, by poststructuralists.

It seems to me that anxiety about the compatibility of lyric and narrative arise only when we attempt to comprehend those generic terms in what is fundamentally a reductive, positivist paradigm. In historical practice, however, the complex, polyvalent imbrication of the two has never been an issue. We have only to recall the *incipit* of one of the greatest of narrative poems, “The Aeneid: arma virumque cano” (*Arms and the man I sing*), and to take note that one of the great watersheds of English poetry is a volume entitled *Lyrical ballads*. The rule of thumb should be that if theory and experience are at variance, and we find ourselves painted into a corner, then the theory should be reconsidered, rather than that the experience should be brought into line with the theory.

The experience of reading the poetry at the centre of the rhetorical tradition in the English Renaissance, poets such as Edmund Spenser, John Donne and George Herbert certainly led some scholars at least to revise their assumptions about the function of figurative language. One of the pioneers in this project of recuperation was Rosemond Tuve, whose *Elizabethan and metaphysical imagery: Renaissance poetic and twentieth-century critics* (1947) should be required reading for anyone interested in rhetorical deployment of figures.<sup>7</sup> As a trained mediaevalist, she realised that the critical

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7 In the works which followed this ground-breaking study, Tuve further extended and refined her original insights (cf. *A reading of George Herbert* (1952); *Images and themes in five poems by Milton* (1957); *Allegorical imagery: some mediae-*

practices of the mid-twentieth century failed to do justice to the poetry of the English Renaissance, to the extent that some poets such as Spenser and Milton, suffered an eclipse. What she taught us was that rhetorical assumptions require an unremitting awareness of the end or purpose of literary conduct, and that the author is something of an indiscriminate opportunist who seizes upon all resources as means for accomplishing his ends, while the critically alert reader needs always to bear this in mind. When this happens the mesmerising or blinkering effect of distinctions between the lyric and narrative are put in their proper perspective.

## Appendix

### Certain sonnets

31

Thou blind man's mark, thou fool's self-chosen snare,  
Fond fancy's scum, and dregs of scattered thought,  
Band of all evils, cradle of causeless care,  
Thou web of will, whose end is never wrought;  
Desire, desire, I have too dearly bought,  
With price of mangled mind, thy worthless ware;  
Too long, too long, asleep thou hast me brought,  
Who should my mind to higher things prepare.  
But yet in vain thou hast my ruin sought:  
In vain thou madest me to vain things aspire,  
In vain thou kindlest all thy smoky fire;  
For virtue hath this better lesson taught,  
Within myself to seek my only hire,  
Desiring nought but how to kill desire.

32

Leave me, O love which reachest but to dust,  
And thou, my mind, aspire to higher things;  
Grow rich in that which never taketh rust;  
Whatever fades but fading pleasure brings.  
Draw in thy beams, and humble all thy might  
To that sweet yoke where lasting freedoms be,  
Which breaks the clouds, and opens forth the light  
That doth both shine, and give us sight to see.  
O take fast hold, let that light be thy guide

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*val books and their posterity* (1966); and *Essays by Rosemond Tuve: Spenser, Herbert, Milton* (1970).



In this small course which birth draws out to death,  
 And think how evil becometh him to slide,  
 Who seeketh heaven, and comes of heavenly breath:  
     Then farewell, world; thy uttermost I see;  
     Eternal Love, maintain thy life in me.

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**Key concepts:**

*Astrophil and Stella*

mimesis

rhetorical figures

Sidney, Sir Philip

Tuve, Rosemond

**Kernbegriffe:**

*Astrophil and Stella*

mimese

retorische figure

Sidney, Sir Philip

Tuve, Rosemond