"Let me (not) read you": Countersigning Shakespeare's Sonnet 116

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Abstract

This is an attempt to carry out a reading of Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 ("Let me not to the marriage of true minds") by following the complex movement of the '*pas*' (step/stop) that both invites and limits interpretation. Not only does Shakespeare's sonnet demand such a reading, thus prospectively and retroactively entering a dialogue with Blanchot and Derrida's writing, but the sonnet also enacts the iterable logic of the signature and countersignature by reading itself in terms of the (im)possibility of reading. Exploring the possibility of defining love through various forms of negation and slippery metaphors, Sonnet 116 is always already implicated in a discourse on singularity and the general law, the proper and the common, the mark and the re-mark that invites further countersignatures despite the impression that the numerous commentaries on the sonnet through the ages might have exhausted the poem's openness to new readings.

Keywords: *Shakespeare, Sonnet 116, Derrida, Blanchot, reading, signature, love*

> *Literature [...] needs the response of the other*.
> (Jaques Derrida, *A Taste for the Secret*)

> *Whoever bears witness [...] does not provide proof.*
> (Jaques Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question…*)

The Impertinence of Reading

SONNET 116
Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come:
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
  If this be error and upon me proved,
  I never writ, nor no man ever loved.
(Shakespeare, 1999, 172)

Critical accounts of William Shakespeare's Sonnet 116, "Let me not to the marriage of true minds", are often marked by a rather familiar feature. They tend to commence by

acknowledging the widespread popularity of this poem with readers and critics alike and then proceed to offer what seems like a justification not so much of the strength of the case they will be making in their reading but of their own existence as commentary. It is as if trying to respond once again to what Stephen Booth rightly describes as the "most universally admired of Shakespeare's sonnets" is an impertinence for which the critic must apologise, even if indirectly. Thus, critics may speak of their readings as addressing a perceived lack in already existing criticism. For instance, Booth proposes his detailed commentary on the sonnet as an antidote to the unfortunate fact that the sonnet's "virtues…are more than usually susceptible to dehydration in critical comment" (2000, 287). Similarly, Jane Roessner juxtaposes her opening statement – "Sonnet 116 is the best known of all of Shakespeare's sonnets" – with the claim that "[a]t times, it also seems to be the worst known", a contention that, in turn, serves to validate her own reading that will seek to offer "a comprehensive understanding of the sonnet" by combining "context" with a "careful reading of the sonnet itself" (1982, 331-332).

Admittedly, such opening moves are conventional strategies in academic discourse as the critic or theorist seeks to create a space for intervention by identifying a gap in previous readings of the work being discussed. The implied assumption, of course, is that what is missing or lacking is to be located in the criticism itself that fails to do justice to the poem, either because particular readings are not as comprehensive or perceptive as they might be or because the poem itself, almost like a sacred object, defies transposition into commentary. However, it is possible to trace the necessity of returning again and again to Sonnet 116 directly to the sonnet itself, not in an attempt to settle critical debate around it once and for all but to respond to an always open demand that is constitutive of the poem itself. Indeed, Sonnet 116 specifically engages a kind of hesitation that is inherent in critical commentary not only by inviting approaches that are at one and the same time assured of their own necessity and deferent with respect to the singularity of the work but also by performing a self-reading that preserves the 'indecision' that, as Jacques Derrida writes in an essay on Paul Celan, makes of reading an "infinite process" (2005, 157).

Shakespeare's sonnet, anticipating and enacting the logic of Derrida's "re-mark", marks itself in reading itself and, in so doing, calls for further "re-marks" or "remarks". However, as Margaret Davies puts it in her reading of Derrida's "The Law of Genre", the "mark is…"remarkable" for its absence from the category which it defines" (2001, 220). While the sonnet may be said to re-mark itself as literature or, more precisely, as a poem that defines love – thus calling for further re-marks or countersignatures – that which marks or delimits what is within a genre or a law can never itself be completely contained by that genre or law. The mark is therefore also always already present in the poem as an absence. In other words, as Derrida puts it, "the re-mark of belonging does not belong"; it leaves its trace within the poem but also remains as an outer edge (2011, 228). This complicates the relationship between literary text and commentary and it makes it difficult to conceive them as absolutely separate discourses. What the logic of the re-mark and demarcation brings into view is, at one and the same time, the ineluctable demand for reading and the limits to the same reading.

Pursuing these initial thoughts, I would like to approach Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 through the work of Derrida, in particular, his reading of Blanchot in *Parages*, a collection of essays which Derrida writes in the margins of Blanchot and which wavers in, on and around borders, laws and limits. This reading will be concerned, among other

things, with time, in the sense of chronology – or lack of it – in the relationship between text and commentary. It will also be concerned with the contamination of distinctions between text and commentary brought about by the law of genre that, paradoxically, is also a "law of impurity" (Derrida, 2011, 219). Signatures too will play a part in terms of their singularity, their ineluctable iteration, and the logic of their interplay with countersignatures that opens the text to more readings. As Timothy Clark writes, in "Derrida's idiom, the signature of a text does not take place "until" that text is read" which means that "a text is always "open", its sense always both in arrival, to come (*à venir*) and in a process of retroactive constitution by the accidents of its "future"" (1992, 134). Reading, from this perspective, is not an impertinence that needs to be justified but a response to a demand that is always already constitutive of any text. Thinking of the relationship between work and reader through Blanchot, one might speak of a paradoxical anachrony within which the poem and the reader come into being: "It is not true that poetry can do without being read, and that the poem must haughtily ignore the reader; yet previous to any reader, it is exactly the role of the poem to prepare, to put into the world the one who has to read it" (1995, 98). The reader or the countersignatory does not have an independent cognitive existence which then approaches the text as an object of consumption to be deciphered and dissected. On the contrary, his existence depends on the work for which his reading, in turn, is essential to bring into being. The reader is always already inscribed within the ontological structure of the poem rather than being a parasite feeding on an anterior original. Blanchot describes this internal necessity of reading as a "work of redoubling", and he shows that in texts like Franz Kafka's *The Castle*, this necessity for reading may be at work "within the work itself" in the sense that the text may perform its own reading, even if unsuccessfully and not completely (1993, 390). Such internal commentary, which is also inscribed within Shakespeare's Sonnet 116, does not have the function of invalidating further commentary or of making it unnecessary and impertinent. On the contrary, as Blanchot writes, "the more a work comments upon itself, the more it calls for commentary". Rather than closing the text unto itself through a form of self-reflexivity that would be all-encompassing, "the more it [the internal commentary] carries on relations of "reflection" (of redoubling) with its centre, the more this duality renders it enigmatic" and hence open to reading (1993, 391).

Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 reflects on itself, countersigns itself, reads itself, and, in so doing, it opens itself up to the indecision of future readings, future countersignatures that are always already demanded in an infinite process of signing and countersigning. Despite the very rich tradition of commentaries that Shakespeare's sonnets have triggered, there is no limit to the number of readings that this sonnet can take. On the contrary, rather than being impertinent, the reader who would read Sonnet 116 again is retroactively engaged with the sonnet in a structure whereby the poem and the reader are indebted to each other in like manner. This puts into question what Paul de Man describes as the "usual distinctions between expository writing *on* literature and the "purely" literary language *of* poetry or fiction" (1983, viii). The re-mark is both present and absent within the sonnet in ways that blur the distinction between the sonnet and the critical readings that would respond to it.

The Singularity of Love

Sonnet 116 has a peculiar status among Shakespeare's first one hundred and twenty-six sonnets, which are addressed to a "fair friend" (Shakespeare, 1999, 166). Apart from being Shakespeare's most well-known sonnet, unlike many of the other sonnets in this sequence addressed to the male friend, the words of this sonnet do not include any of the pronouns 'you', 'thou', 'thy', 'thine' or 'thee' that would confirm the address mode used in most of Shakespeare's other love sonnets[1]. The first quatrain of Sonnet 26 is arguably paradigmatic of this form of address:

> Lord of my love, to whom in vassalage
> Thy merit hath my duty strongly knit,
> To thee I send this written ambassage,
> To witness duty, not to show my wit   (1999, 127).

Indeed, the address to the other, to the friend as addressee and inspiration, is the prevalent *raison d'être* of the sonnets, their justification, in the sense that it is assumed that these sonnets exist as a 'written ambassage', an embassy in writing (almost epistolary) addressed to the beloved. On the other hand, it may seem that, to use Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells's words, Sonnet 116 is "a withdrawal from the particular to the general" by departing from the intimate address mode of other sonnets in the sequence towards what can be called a definitional mode that seeks to generalise its claims about love (2004, 35). Dympna Callaghan concurs and she argues that "this sonnet constitutes a proposition about the nature of love rather than a declaration of love to another person" (2007, 60). The sonnet seems to be more of an attempt to delimit by describing the essential nature of love than an opening of a dialogue with the addressed other. In this respect, one may be tempted to compare Sonnet 116 to Sonnet 60, "Like the waves make towards the pebbled shore". While, like Sonnet 116, Sonnet 60 is generally definitional – dealing with the great enemy of 'Love' in the sonnet sequence, 'Time' – the final couplet is addressed to the youth in a way which makes the relation between poet and friend fundamental in defeating Time through poetry: "And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand, / Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand" (1999, 144). Writing *about/for* the friend thus appears as both theme and function of the poem.

From this perspective, therefore, Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 may be read as laying down the law of love in a way that goes beyond the relationship between poet and addressee that often structures love lyrics. What Shakespeare seems to be interested in here is the universal and the general, that which is applicable in all times and contexts. This interpretation is strengthened by the sonnet's heavy reliance on juridical language. For instance, the word 'impediments' recalls both the marriage rites of the Anglican Church and legal terminology. An 'impediment', in legal terms, is an obstruction that prevents an individual from entering into a contract; in Canon Law, an impediment is that which forbids a sacrament (such as marriage) from being performed validly and legally. '[D]oom' is also occasionally used in a legal context as in the phrase "the dooms of law" while, as in Macbeth's "th' crack of Doom" (4.1.117), 'doom' also refers

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[1] The dedication to "Mr. W. H" claiming that he is "the only begetter" of these sonnets opens a complex discourse of margins, insides, outsides and signatures that there is no space to explore in this paper. However, it is possible to envisage an investigation of dedications in the mode of Derrida's focusing on the liminality of the dedication page included in the 1609 quarto entitled *Shake-speares Sonnets* and published by Thomas Thorpe.

to the Judgment Day at the end of time. The legal terminology spread throughout the sonnet becomes even more concentrated in the final couplet: "If this be error and upon me provéd, / I never writ, nor no man ever loved." In British Law, a 'writ of error', deriving from the Latin *de errore corrigendo*, is a legal order for a case to be re-examined when an error may have been made or allowed by the judge in the proceedings. In the sonnet's couplet, the speaker stands behind his definition of love and challenges anyone to prove his 'error', as if in a trial at court. What he provides us with is thus his definition of love, what love 'is' and what it 'is not', a law offered in the form of a wager, and, as Derrida writes in "The Law of Genre", "when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind" (2011, 218). Indeed, the speaker highlights what he sees as the essence of love by defining it in terms of what love always 'is' and by refusing the 'impediments' that may disturb "the marriage of true minds".

However, the definitional impetus of the sonnet, its attempt to formulate a general law of love is not unchallenged within the sonnet itself, and it would arguably be simplistic to think of the sonnet in monolithic terms. Along with Derrida, the sonnet urges us to ask: "What if there were, lodged within the heart of the law itself, a law of impurity or a principle of contamination?" After all, how could a law ever be formulated if there were not "*a priori*…a counter-law, an axiom of impossibility that would confound its sense, order, and reason?" (2011, 219-220). One of the recurrent movements of thought in Derrida's writing is to show how for a law to exist, the possibility of it being broken and its borders trespassed must always already exist. True to the dominant thematic trait in the sequence, the speaker believes in love as that which transcends mutability, but, in formulating his definition of love, he has to accommodate in his words, if only to refuse it, a counter-argument or 'counter-law'. The interjection 'O no!' and the wager to have it 'proved' upon him that his definition of love is an 'error' are significant because, as Helen Vendler argues, they operate within "a clear skeleton of refutation or rebuttal" (1997, 46). It is as if the speaker's definition of love is a response to other definitions, either already existing or that may eventually be proposed. The rhetoric of an internal dialogue in the poem splits and doubles the poetic voice at its origin with the consequence that not only does the law appear with its concomitant refutation but also that an addressee is projected as a constitutive foil of the speaker's voice. Therefore, while the words of this particular sonnet are not ostensibly addressed to a 'you' or a 'thou', they presuppose an interlocutor that is being rebuffed ("O no!") or challenged ("upon me proved"). The signature both demands and acts as a counter-signature in the form of a counter-argument.

This inherent doubling of the poetic voice and of the law it seeks to establish can also be traced to the recurrent use of negative terms in the sonnet, as in "Let me *not*", "Love is *not* love", "O *no*!" "Love is *not* Time's fool", "Love alters *not*", "I *never* writ, nor *no* man ever loved" (my emphasis). The use of negatives for the purpose of defining love – a strategy that recalls the well-known first letter by St Paul to the Corinthians – is used frequently by Shakespeare[2]. Sonnet 124, another sonnet which seeks to define love without direct appeal to an addressee but with the proviso (unlike Sonnet 116) that what is being discussed is "my dear love" rather than 'Love' in general, also uses negation for

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[2] I Corinthians 13. 4-8: "Love is patient, love is kind and is *not* jealous; love does *not* brag and is *not* arrogant, does *not* act unbecomingly; it does *not* seek its own, is *not* provoked, does *not* take into account a wrong suffered, does *not* rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love *never* fails" (my emphasis).

definition. The speaker's love "suffers *not* in smiling pomp", "fears *not* policy" and "*nor* grows with heat *nor* drowns with showers" (1999, 176). Similarly, *King Lear*'s France offers a counter-law to King Lear's arithmetic reasoning – "Which of you shall we say doth love us most? / That we our largest bounty may extend / Where nature doth with merit challenge" (1. 1. 51-53) – with his own definition of love by what it is not: "Love's not love / When it is mingled with regards that stand / Aloof from the entire point" (1. 1 246-249).

How to account for the proliferation of negatives in such an enthusiastic affirmation of unchangeable love? Booth interprets negation in Sonnet 116 as working dialectically in the sense that the 'positiveness' of the "definition […] is achieved in negative assertions" (2000, 387). In other words, Booth sees negation in the sonnet as functioning in terms of what classical logic would call "double negation", that is, a formulation of the type *A is not not-A* ("Love (*A*) is not love which… (*not-A*)") which returns us to the original term, 'Love'. However, as Clark writes in relation to the word "not" (*pas*) in Derrida's *Pas*, to "say the word "not" (*pas*) of anything is still to speak and to leave in language that trace or footprint (*pas*) of one's approach (through negation)" (1992, 137). In Shakespeare's Sonnet 116, what love "is not" does not simply disappear in a return to the fullness of what love "is" but lingers, if only in being always negated. Vendler's account of negation in Sonnet 116 is antithetical to Booth's but still engaged within a dialectical framework. She argues that the "prevalence of negation suggests that this poem is not a definition, but rather a rebuttal – and all rebuttals encapsulate the argument they refute" (1997, 488). However, one might say that just as "all rebuttals encapsulate the argument they refute", so do all definitions or laws encapsulate their rebuttals or counter-laws. The poem is not simply a rebuttal but, at one and the same time, a step of definition and a stop of refutation.

In view of the originary doubling of law and counter-law, definition and rebuttal at work in Sonnet 116, it is not surprising that all affirmative formulations about love in the sonnet are metaphorical, thus, like the negatives, always already slipping away from the possibility of the fullness of definitional presence, if this were even possible in the first place:

> [Love] is an ever-fixéd mark
> That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
> It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
> Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken

The nautical metaphors of the 'mark' and the 'star' are significant. The 'mark', a shortened form of 'sea-mark' (a beacon or lighthouse), is 'ever-fixéd' and, from its location on a sturdy rock on shore, it shows the right way to the returning sailor. It is meant to attract attention and, in the words of Othello, the "sea-mark of [one's] utmost sail" signals one's "journey's end" (*Othello*, 5.2 275). However, the 'mark', meant to always give a sense of direction, can not be touched by the boat that would avoid being extinguished by the rocks. The 'mark' can only work as a navigational aid if it always remains in the distance, announcing proximity to shore by, paradoxically, remaining untouched. The 'star', a clear reference to the 'Northern star' to which Julius Caesar compares his 'constant' character (*Julius Caesar*, 3.1.60), is also 'ever-fixéd' but it must remain so, from a different angle of vision, "to every wandering bark" dotting the vast oceans. Again, the 'star' guides the 'wandering bark' only if it remains at a distance, unreachable. As a navigational aid, the star allows for the calculation of distances and

directions but remains, in itself, unattainable. As Murray Krieger points out, "when Shakespeare does introduce a positive definition [of love], he insists on a value for the star before the futile measurability of fact" (1964, 148-9). One might measure the distance or 'height' of the star but its 'worth's unknown'.

The distance regulating the 'wandering bark' and the 'star' or 'mark' that direct it can be described as the (non)space of a relation of 'fascination', a simultaneous attraction to and rebuttal by the other, a form of *'pas d'é-loignement'*, that is, simultaneously, a 'step' of distancing and a 'stop' to this separation. Derrida's reading of Blanchot and, in particular, his reflections on the French word *'pas'* are pertinent here. Derrida speaks of his relation to Blanchot's texts in terms of this distant proximity, a paradoxical relation that Blanchot describes in terms of being "seize[d] and ceaselessly draw[n] close, even though" one is left "absolutely at a distance" (1982, 33). At stake in Derrida's "Pas" is the relation to the other: the relation between interlocutors, between Derrida and Blanchot, between text and commentary. In a language heavily marked or contaminated by Blanchot's distinctive idiom, Derrida writes how in "every *récit*, in every *récit* of Blanchot, this *pas* is at stake", and in this essay he is interested in '"*la demarche d'un pas*", the (dis)approach of a no/pace" (2011, 21). The word 'pas', whose double meaning John P. Leavey translates as 'no' and 'pace' to keep the sonorous associations in translation, but which can also be translated as 'stop' and 'step', indicates the Heideggerian *Entfernung* – which Derrida translates as *é-loignement* – the 'de-distancing' or 'dis-tancing' of the near and the far. Derrida explains, while the "thing certainly can be near", "the near or proximity is not near" in the sense that the "essence of the near is not any more near than the essence of red is of the colour red" (25). The more one tries to come close to the "proximity of what approaches", the more is one pushed back by the "completely other – and therefore the infinitely distant" – of proximity. The same paradoxical logic is at work in the relation to the 'far' and this posits the near and the far in a 'double-bind' that "affects *all*, all that *is*, that is, all that presents itself, *is present*" (25). The other can only approach us 'as other' in 'distancing itself' while it can appear as an "infinite alterity only in drawing near". In Derrida's words, "[i]n its double *pas* [step/not], the other dislocates the opposition of the near and the far, without however confusing them" (26). Similarly, through metaphor and negation, love comes across in Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 as definable only as a constant indefinable, something 'anti-scientific', as Krieger puts it. Love is describable, approachable through hopeful steps of definition but also immeasurable, incalculable and a stop to any illusions of mastery. As such, it escapes concrete definition that would fix it according to pre-established or externally verifiable criteria.

Sonnet 116 enacts a movement towards love as an absolute value that cannot be grasped fully by definition. To use a Derridian term, love functions within the dynamics of the 'secret', that is, of that which, in Clark's words, "shows itself as something that also holds itself back" (Clark, 2005, 143). Arguably, this is not simply what Sonnet 116 is 'about', what the 'theme' or 'content' of the poem is. The 'fascination' with love as a secret, an absolute that attracts and yet keeps us at a distance is, at one and the same time, what engenders the poem and what the poem itself performs to the extent that "the readability of the text is structured by the unreadability of the secret" (Derrida, 1992, 152). Sonnet 116 describes and enacts language's (non)encounter with love through negation and slippery metaphors. What is being suggested here is not that love is absolutely beyond description to the extent that it would invalidate any steps ('*pas*') in

its direction. If it were that which like 'the [absolutely] sacred' defies 'translation' (both intra- and inter-lingual) into any other language or modality, then love would be "the limit on translation" and thus beyond the system of language (Derrida, 1988, 150). However, the sonnet exists as a performance of the impossible definition of love. In this respect, it can be said that the poem performs what Derrida, in "*Che cos'è la poesia?*", sees as "the origin of the poetic", that is, "the infinite resistance to the transfer of the letter which the animal, in its name, nevertheless calls for" (1995, 295). While poetry [like the hedgehog in Derrida's texts and, arguably, love in Shakespeare's] "can roll itself up in a ball […] it is still in order to turn its pointed signs toward the outside" (1995, 299). Sonnet 116 does not treat love as that which should not be touched or seen as if it were sacrilegious to do so, but it handles it delicately, touching it only fleetingly, indirectly and through veils while also remaining, respectfully, at a distance.

It is possible to read Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 as a performance, an enactment of what Derrida calls "the event of an untranslatable text":

> every time there is a text that is not totally translatable, in other words, every time there is a proper name in the language that does not let itself become totally common, that cannot be translated, one is dealing with a text that is beginning to be sacralised. One is dealing with poetry…if there is something untranslatable in literature (and, in a certain way, literature is the untranslatable), then it is sacred…(1988, 148)

The fact that Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 is 'not totally translatable' into commentary would explain the perplexity expressed by Booth about the sonnet when he argues that "the more one thinks about this grand, noble, absolute, convincing, and moving gesture, the less there seems to be to it" (2000, 387). For Booth, therefore, there is something in Sonnet 116 that resists transposition into commentary. However, one can say that this Sonnet engages the translatability or otherwise of love into language also as a more immediate concern. If we were to momentarily propagate a system of rigid borders and limits that the poem itself, through the logic of the re-mark and demarcation, dissolves, we would say that translatability is also an *internal* issue, that is, not only a matter of *external* translatability into commentary. However, as it will be shown, the *internal* engagement with translatability seems to collapse the inside/outside, text/commentary borders that are often taken as given in literary criticism.

As a 'not totally translatable' word, 'Love', in Shakespeare's sonnet, oscillates between the status of a proper name and a common noun. Apart from its frequent capitalization (three out of four instances of 'Love' appear at the beginning of a sentence or a line starting with a capital letter), it is also personified in lines such as "Love…bears it out even to the edge of doom", and it arises as a character engaged with and refusing to be the 'fool' or victim of a formidable adversary, 'Time'. And yet, in presenting itself as a sonnet that seeks to define love or to formulate a general law of what 'Love is', the sonnet also turns 'Love' into a common noun, into something whose meaning is 'ever-fixéd' and applicable to 'every wandering bark' and not just to 'my dear love'. As Derrida writes, "iterability" is actually what makes the proper name possible. The name gives "the possibility of repeating the same, but each time to name another or to name the same otherwise. It is with the same name that I designate the same in a new way each time" (2001, 68). 'Love', in Shakespeare's sonnet, refers to the iterable experience of 'every wandering bark' in relation to the 'ever-fixéd star'. It is precisely this interplay of the individual and the general that can be noticed in the

speaker's attempt to generalise the meaning of 'Love' by, paradoxically, giving a highly personal experience in the couplet as a guarantee of reliability.

(Poetry as) Bearing Witness to Love (and Poetry)

The co-implication of the singular and the general in the poem can be read in terms of Derrida's late work on testimony.[3] In Sonnet 116, the validity of the general law of love is made to rest on the fact that a poet who wrote the poem has 'writ' and 'loved'. As Krieger rightly points out, this "pseudo-syllogism" functions "beyond logic"(1964, 149). While the rhetorical structure of the couplet, "If this be error and upon me proved, / I never writ nor no man ever loved", follows the grammatical format of an 'if-then' conditional proposition, as Lars Eagle points out, the "proposition cannot be true unless the premise is also false" (1989, 840-841). Thus, the final couplet is 'self-validating' and, once we read it, we realise that no 'error' can ever be proven upon the poet once we read the poem. In Krieger's words, in the sonnet "[t]he testament of love is the embassy of poetry." In other words, the poet appears as a witness in front of the reader and that is the only guarantee that the previous general definition of love is true. To appropriate Derrida's words about Paul Celan's lyrics, one could say that Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 institutes "poetics as bearing witness", poetry as that which comes into being as testimony. While on the one hand there is a move towards a general definition of love, a law that would be valid universally and beyond the passing of time, the poem presents this truth as a form of testimony.

In his essays on Celan and elsewhere, Derrida speaks of the literary as something whose truth cannot ever be verified or, as Herman Rapaport puts its, "be held to standards of *droit* (uprightness, reason, right, law)" (2003, 59). As such, the literary is a form of testimony or of bearing witness which, as Derrida reminds us, "is not proving" (2005, 75). Just as testimony is always an appeal that exceeds scientific proof, an appeal to the other to believe one's account of a singular, individual experience – what Clark describes as "the irreducible singularity of what happens to me" – the appeal of the literary to the reader cannot depend on any external validation that would give it authority. As Clark puts it, "the only warrant for what it [the literary] says is what it says" (2005, 143). Shakespeare's concluding couplet engages this discourse on witnessing directly in that the reader is asked to believe the speaker's definition of love without being given any logical or scientific proof of its validity. What acts as a guarantee of truthfulness or, more accurately, a 'promise' of truthfulness are a (counter) signature and the existence of the poem itself. As Derrida reminds us, even the witness himself, in giving witness, is not present to the thing itself. Love, as the thing itself, cannot be present in the poem because to speak about it is already to be detached from it, absent from it in order to name it. Thus, in witnessing, the witness says "you have to believe me", not in the sense that what he says forces us to "subscribe to the conclusion

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[3] See *Without Alibi*. Peggy Kamuf (ed. and trans.). Stanford. Stanford University Press. 2002.; *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*. Elizabeth Rottenberg (trans.) Stanford. Stanford University Press. 2000; Derrida, Jacques and Ferraris, Maurizio. *A Taste for the Secret*. Giacomo Donis (trans.). Giacomo Donis and David Webb (ed.). Cambridge and Oxford. Polity Press and Blackwell Publishers. 2001.; and *Sovreignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (ed.). New York. Fordham University Press. 2005.

of a syllogism, to the chain of an argumentation, or, indeed, to the display of a thing present", but in the sense of a 'promise' of being truthful (Derrida, 2005, 76). Shakespeare's sonnet does not use foolproof logic and neither can it bring love in front of the reader as an exhibit at court, but it strongly appeals to the reader to believe it, as it promises to be truthful and faithful.

It is clear that this guarantee or promise is not dependent on William Shakespeare in a way that should encourage the hunt for the identity of and the bard's relationship with the "Fair Youth" of the sonnets. While Shakespeare's sonnet ultimately ends with what seems like the signature of the poet as witness, the reference to "this" in the penultimate verse reminds us of the 're-mark' that is always at work in poetry and that destabilizes any attempt to ground the poem's truth into some kind of externally verifiable reality or author as origin. As Geoffrey Bennington argues in relation to a sentence from Mallarmé's *Les mots anglais* – « Lecteur, vous avez sous les yeux ceci, un écrit… » [Reader, you have before you this, a writing…] – the re-mark (signaled by "ceci" [this]) is not a simple form of self-referentiality:

> The mark ("ceci") is re-marked as itself ("ceci") by a ghostly doubling whereby the mark marks itself as marking, refers to itself referring to itself, only by the fact f separating itself enough from itself to open the gap across which reference can function: but the 'end' of that reference, the referent to which that reference is supposed to refer, is nothing other than the fact of reference or referring itself (2000, 51).

The poem's re-mark, rather than enhancing the poem's truth value, 'remarks' the fact of the poem being a form of bearing witness to the act of bearing witness to love which, in turn, the reader is asked to bear witness to through his own reading and countersignature. Indeed, while the 'this' and the 'me' of the couplet at the end of the poem implicitly 'date' Shakespeare's poem into a singular now, as Derrida shows in his reading of dates in Celan's poetry, paradoxically, a singular date "[i]nstead of walling up the poem and reducing it to the silence of singularity, […] gives it its chance, the chance to speak to the other". The poem speaks of the 'this' as its 'signature' and 'date' by acquitting itself of the 'date' and resonating "beyond a singularity that might otherwise remain undecidable, mute, and immured in its date – in the unrepeatable" (2005, 8-9).

The re-mark, then, calls for the reader to read the poem as another witness whose singular experience of reading cannot be the application of a previously established program. The reader, as the "addressee of the testimony, the witness of the witness, does not see what the first witness says she or he saw" and thus must believe in the testimony of the speaker-witness (2005, 75). However, the reader is also posited as a judge because in bearing witness, one is always in front of another "as in front of a judge, before the law or the representative of the law" (2005, 86). The kind of judgment called for from the reader as a witness-judge is open to what Derrida calls "a zone of emptiness". Indeed, reading cannot completely master what is read:

> If something is given to be read that is totally intelligible, that can be totally saturated by sense, it is not given to the other to be read. Giving to the other to be read is also a *leaving to be desired*, or a leaving the other room for intervention by which she will be able to write her own interpretation: the other will have to be able to sign in my text. (2001, 31)

Thus, rather than outdoing previous critical commentaries on the sonnet, what Sonnet 116 asks us to do is to share, as witnesses, the (im)possible experience of love

and poetry as an absolute. As such, Sonnet 116 is not simply an example that would confirm the generalisability of Derrida's theory but a poem that, before Derrida, goes after Derrida's thought, anticipating and demanding a Derridian countersignature.

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„(Nu)-i piedică să te interpretez": Contrasemnând Sonetul 116 al lui Shakespeare

Acest articol este o încercare de a citi Sonetul 116 al lui Shakespeare („Nu-i piedică să rupă cununia"), urmărind mişcarea complexă a lui *pas* (pas/oprire, negaţie) care invită, dar totodată limitează interpretarea. Putem spune nu doar că sonetul lui Shakespeare incită la o asemenea interpretare, intrând astfel în dialog cu scrierile lui Blanchot şi Derrida atât prospectiv, cât şi retroactiv, dar şi că sonetul legiferează în acelaşi timp o logică repetată a semnăturii şi a contrasemnăturii, datorită posibilităţii de a fi lecturat ca (im)posibilitate a interpretării. Explorare a posibilităţii de a defini iubirea prin diverse forme ale negării şi prin metafore ambigue, Sonetul 116 este întodeauna implicat într-un discurs al singularităţii şi într-o legiferare generală, trecând de la propriu la comun, de la distinctiv la re-distinctiv care invită la noi revalorizări (contrasemnături), în ciuda impresiei că numeroasele comentarii asupra sonetului de-a lungul timpului ar fi putut să epuizeze deschiderea poemului către alte posibile interpretări.