

*Sweet love, renew thy force; be it not said  
 Thy edge should blunter be than appetite,  
 Which but today by feeding is allayed,  
 Tomorrow sharp'ned in his former might.  
 So, love, be thou, although today thou fill  
 Thy hungry eyes, ev'n till they wink with fullness,  
 Tomorrow see again, and do not kill  
 The spirit of love with a perpetual dullness:  
 Let this sad int'rim like the ocean be  
 Which parts the shore where two contracted new  
 Come daily to the banks, that when they see  
 Return of love, more blest may be the view;  
 As call it winter, which being full of care,  
 Makes summer's welcome, thrice more wished, more rare.*

The speaker's crescendo of praise for the youth has suddenly stopped. In the interval between sonnets something has happened; enthusiasm's edge has been blunted but how this came about we are not told. Perhaps the speaker does not know. In the first phrase he invokes "sweet love"—the force of eros, not a person, though the two may be blended. Desire has failed indeed, which is more of an affliction than the arrows of Cupid. However, the speaker hopes that the "spirit of love" will return "tomorrow," and the hunger of sight will not turn into "perpetual dullness." (ll. 7-8)

The figures of speech used by Shakespeare are ingenious variations on those employed in Sonnet 1, where they are inaugurated in the description of the youth, whom he describes as "contracted to [his] own bright eyes" (l. 5) and doomed to be a "glutton" by not marrying and procreating. In Sonnet 56, it is the speaker's "hungry eyes" (l. 6) that are endangered by gluttony. Subtly the synesthesia suggests that the sins of lust and gluttony have fused and become more deadly than they were in the beginning of the sequence.

In the sestet, the tone changes as sad despair (the prospect of love

killed by “perpetual dullness,” l. 8) fades and hope increases for the return of love. In the metaphor of the parting ocean, love is embodied in two persons newly contracted to each other (unlike the youth contracted to himself in Sonnet 1) who daily come to the opposite shores of the tidal waters that have separated them. Now nearer, they see the return of love, a view more blessed than before.

Rather abruptly, the couplet shifts the image from the ocean’s banks to the seasons, specifically the return of summer after winter. This might seem to pull the line of thought apart if it were not for the echo of the “gaudy spring” of Sonnet 1 (l. 10) associated with the youth who is its “herald.”

Sonnet 56 illustrates the wave-like motion of the sequence as a whole: the surges of emotion, the variations on recurring images established early on, the threads that tie the individual poems together but also move the narrative ahead.