

Géza Kállay

“The eye of man hath not heard...”

Fundamental Measurements and Perception from St Paul to
Shakespeare’s Bottom

The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen man’s hand is
not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my
dream was

(IV, 1; 209-212)¹

— Bottom, a Weaver by profession says, after his deep slumber in the arms of
beautiful Titania. “It must be accepted” – Frank Kermode wrote in his essay called
“The Mature Comedies” –

that this is a parody of 1 Corinthians 2:9-10 [...]: ‘Eye hath not seen, nor ear
heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God hath
prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed *them* unto us by his
Spirit: for the Spirit searches all things, yea, the deep things of God.’²

¹ References to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* are from Harold Brooks, ed., *The Arden Shakespeare. A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. (London and New York: Methuen, 1979, 1990). Citations from other plays by Shakespeare also follow the Arden edition of the respective works.

² Frank Kermode, “The Mature Comedies” In *Early Shakespeare*. (New York: St Martin’s Press, (1961), pp. 214-220, here p. 214 and p. 220.

Kermode, as Jan Kott points out in his "*The Bottom Translation*,"³ quotes the King James version (1611). Tyndale (1534) and the *Geneva Bible* (1557) render the last verse in the following way: "the Spirite searcheth all thinges, ye the botome of Goddes secrettes."⁴ It is, indeed, more than likely that, as Kott also argues, Bottom got his name "from Paul's letter in old versions of Scripture," and that "the spirit which reaches to 'the botome' of all mysteries haunts Bottom."⁵ Thus, to take Professor Kott's observation a little further, Bottom, with his long, pricking ears of an ass and in his earthly, well-meaning clumsiness and foolishness, would himself be, from "top to bottom," the 'Bottom-translation' of God's secrets.

How far Shakespeare actually ventured into what we may at first hearing call downright blasphemy is difficult to tell. Was he, for example, also aware of the possible pun on *ass* ('a well-known quadruped of the horse kind, distinguished from the horse by its smaller size, long ears, tuft at end of tail, and black stripe across the shoulders'),⁶ and *arse* ('the posteriors of an animal', 'the bottom, the lower or hinder end')?⁷ From the point of view of rhetoric, exchanging *arse* for *ass* ("translating" one into the other) would just be a form of the well-known *epenthesis* ("the addition of a syllable or letter in the middle of a word").⁸ The *Oxford English Dictionary* mentions *ass* in the meaning of 'bottom' as a "vulgar and dialectal spelling and pronunciation" of the notorious word, *arse*, yet the confusion – though wide-spread now in contemporary informal American English – does not seem to occur before 1860.⁹ However, it is hard to conceive that the playwright who so readily quibbled on *son* and *sun* (as in *Hamlet*, I,2,64,67) and on

³ Jan Kott, *The Bottom Translation. Marlowe and Shakespeare and the Carnival Tradition*. Translated by Daniel Miedzyrocka and Lillian Vallee. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1987).

⁴ Cf. Kott, p.37. The 1560-edition of the Geneva Bible already has: "for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deepe things of God." (See *The Geneva Bible*, A facsimile of the 1560 edition. With an Introduction by Lloyd E. Berry. (Madison, Milwaukee and London: The University of Wisconsin Press); *The King James version*, [without date]. The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testament. Translated out of the original tongues and with the former translations diligently compared and revised by His Majesty's special command. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode Limited [originally in 1611]; *The Tyndale Bible*. Ed. David Daniell. [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990]).

⁵ Kott, p. 37. Cf. also Brooks, p. cxvii, Note 3, and p.99.

⁶ *The Oxford English Dictionary* (The Compact Edition. Complete text reproduced micrographically. New York, etc.: Oxford University Press, 1971)

⁷ *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁸ Cf. Sister Miriam Joseph, *Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language*. (London and New York: Methuen, 1947, 1962), p. 293.

⁹ *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

the closeness – or identity – of the pronunciation of *nothing* and *noting* (as in *Much Ado About Nothing*; III, 3; 56-57) – to quote only two examples – would have remained ignorant of such a wonderful chance for foolery (horseplay, “ass-arseplay”?), especially in an age when, as A. R. Humphreys puts it, “regional and plebeian speech” was more than common on the London stage¹⁰ and the varied spellings and pronunciations in emerging “Early Modern English” served as a rich storehouse for both poets and playwrights to multiply meanings and to further ambiguities.

Yet this additional association would only contribute to the shock solidly established by Shakespeare already and so sensitively hinted at by Kermode and Kott: it is Bottom’s very self which serves as the “bottom translation” of Paul’s words; the Weaver both “overwrites” and “underwrites” the text of *Corinthians*; he weaves a new actor’s garment from the old texture and thus he becomes an awesome, disturbing and profane “translation,” i.e. the transformation, the metamorphosis, and, thereby, the scandalous “incarnation” of the Scripture, of the Word of God. Are we, watching Bottom, participating in a sacrilegious “imitatio Christi”?¹¹ Did Shakespeare go a bit too far here in paraphrase and distortion?

This question, indeed, brings no lesser an issue into play than the age-old problem of “how far is the-too-far,” namely: is there a point when we have sufficient grounds to claim that the “overwriting,” the “translation” of the “original” text already amounts to “damaging” the “original”? Do we reach a stage when we can safely say that the “interpretation” has gone too far and the gesture of it has become a mere jest, debasing the text rather than helping to understand it? Still further, and to ask an even more “radical” question: does it make sense to talk about the “original” at all if it seems that the “source,” the “object” on which our “translation” operates, disappears in, and gets “digested” into, the act of interpretation? (In fact we have, as it will become clearer below, touched upon a problem pertaining to “fundamental measurements” already.) After all, the very words Bottom transforms are not the “original” ones, either; they are one of the English translations of Paul’s Greek text, who, in turn, – as his

¹⁰ Cf. A. R. Humphreys, ed., *The Arden Shakespeare. Much Ado About Nothing* (London and New York: Methuen, 1981), pp. 134-135.

¹¹ Tom Snout, the Tinker, who will have to get “transformed” into a Wall in the performance of the handicraftsmen, tells Bottom with the ass-head: “(O Bottom, thou art changed” (III,1;109) and Peter Quince, the Carpenter, gives the “bottom-line”: “Bless thee, Bottom, bless thee! Thou art translated.” (III,1;113-114). In the Arden-edition – from which I quote the whole play – Brooks glosses *translated* as ‘transformed’ (Brooks p.58), and Kott says: “‘Translation’ was the word used by Ben Jonson for metaphor” (Kott, p.30).

“philologically” correct introductory clause, “But as it is written” (2:9) indicates – is working with a “subtext” himself, namely with *Isaiah* 64:4: “For since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, beside thee, what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him” (King James version), and, of course, this crux, too, is “only” and again the rendering of an “original” in Hebrew.

I take the question of the “original” and of the “source” to be a markedly relevant question, and especially so *apropos* of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, where, on the one hand, the play as a whole is acclaimed to have no direct source (like *The Tempest*, and as opposed to e.g. *As You Like It*, built out of Lodge’s *Rosalind*, or *The Winter’s Tale* out of Greene’s *Pandosto*),¹² while, on the other hand – as Jan Kott has brilliantly shown¹³ – there are a host of “subtexts” and traditions at work at the play’s “bottom.” Shakespeare’s comedy itself seems to be, from the point of view of “intertextuality” and of “originals,” a paradoxical weaving together of creation “ex nihilo” and of re-creation (both in the sense of ‘restoration’ and of ‘leisure’). I will return to the above nagging questions at the end of this essay. Here, by way of a starting point, I first wish to call attention to the “extensions” Bottom performs on St Paul’s text, as seldom mentioned in the critical literature of the play as it is zealous in pointing out the parallels.

Whereas Paul mentions only three “organs” – the eye, the ear and the heart – in Bottom’s monologue we have, besides these three the *hand* and the *tongue*: altogether five. Now since all the *noun + verb* (*subject-predicate*) constructions seem to be *malapropisms*¹⁴ (eye – heard; ear – seen; hand – taste; tongue – conceive; heart – report), it is immediately obvious that no absolutely symmetrical exchange is possible between the five subjects and their corresponding predicates. The first two pairs are perfectly symmetrical with respect to exchange (the eye should hear, while the ear should see): here the malapropism rests on the predicates expressing the most straightforward functions of the bodily organs respectively, so much so that Bottom’s distortions almost amount to violating “analytic” statements, where the content of the predicate is, so to speak, included in the subject in advance. After all, the eyes do primarily see and the ears do, first and foremost, hear. So far, Bottom has only swapped Paul’s verbs after the nouns.

¹² Cf. e.g. David Daniell, *The Tempest*. The Critics’ Debate Series. (London : Macmillan, 1989), p. 70.

¹³ Cf. Kott, pp. 31-33.

¹⁴ Cf. Joseph, p. 304.

Yet from now on we may be witness to a more subtle and complex deviation. First of all, Bottom dissents from the syntax of the English translation of Paul's words: while both the King James version and the *Tyndale Bible* have an active present perfect construction introduced by the conjunction *neither* ("neither entered into the heart of man": King James; "nether have entered into the hert of man": Tyndale),¹⁵ Bottom switches over into *be + (not) able to* structures: "not able to taste," "to conceive," "to report." Bottom spells out the inability of the human being more emphatically, while bringing into play the *hand*, which is unable to taste, and the *tongue*, which cannot conceive. And it is here that the symmetry is broken: after the malapropism of *hand* and *taste* we would expect, with the *tongue*, something like *touch* or *clutch* or *grasp*. *Conceive*, on the other hand, would, under normal circumstances, most readily take *mind* or, even more "literally," the *womb*, the former also being able to *grasp*, as the *hand* does. So, since *hand* and *conceive* by no means form an "original" pair of the "eye – see" or "ear – hear" sort, we must either conclude that *hand* remains without the glory of lending a malapropism to any other organ mentioned, or that it is rather *tongue* and *heart* which create a new pair. But there are difficulties with symmetry this way, too. Though the tongue can indeed "report" and the heart is able to "conceive," these "originals" are by far less straightforward than the "eye – see"-type. Besides, then *tongue* would be a strange "Janus"-term, looking backwards to *hand* through *taste* and peeping forward to *heart* through *report*.

However, two disturbing features will still remain. One is that whereas there is no ordinary sense in which the *eye* could *hear*, or the *ear* could *see*, or the *hand* could *taste*, it seems that there was a sense in Shakespeare's time in which the *tongue* could indeed *conceive*: the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists this now obsolete meaning as the fifth one and defines it as "To take on (any state or condition: e.g. *fire, moisture, disease, putrefaction*, or the like)."¹⁶ One of the examples the *Dictionary* quotes is from 1695, where the word is used with a bodily organ: "Dipping your Finger in it [Spirit], and touching it with the Flame of a Candle ... it immediately conceives Flame." The other, even more disturbing feature is that to say that the *heart* is (unable) to *report* is – at least according to my non-native English competence – not a misapplication at all; it rather seems to me to be an apt and attractive metaphor. Here we are welcome to suppose already that Bottom is exploiting the traditional semantic extension of *heart*¹⁷ in the direction of this vital

¹⁵ Cf. Diana Akers Rhoads, *Shakespeare's Defense of Poetry. A Midsummer Night's Dream and The Tempest*. (Iaaham: University Press of America, 1985), p.82.

¹⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*.

¹⁷ Cf. David Daniell, ed., *The Tyndale Bible*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p.xi.

'organ' also being the 'seat' of some kind of (secret, or even mystical) *knowledge*. What should we make, then, of Bottom's more and more asymmetrical confusions of semantic fields, a territory any philosopher, especially in the footsteps of Wittgenstein, would find to be an ideal hunting ground?

First of all we may note that Bottom refers to four of the five human senses – seeing; hearing; touching through *hand*; and tasting through *tongue*, while his fifth "organ," as we have seen, is Paul's *heart*. This way he goes much further than most philosophers, who, when giving examples of perception, almost exclusively discuss only seeing and hearing, even the latter being a "poor relative."¹⁸ Thus, maybe it is not too far-fetched to read the marked absence of *mind* in the connotational environment of *conceive* as a covert message to philosophy: "the human being is more than a head with a mind and a pair of eyes in it." This seems to corroborate our suspicion concerning Bottom's implied emphasis on the *heart* as an 'organ' of *knowing*.

Yet *smelling* or *nose* are missing even from Bottom's list, while they seem to enjoy a significant position in other Shakespearean pieces, most notably perhaps in *King Lear*.

In *Lear's* tragedy amidst the overall chaos of sensing and making sense, the only trustworthy mode of human perception seems precisely to be smelling, with its single reliable organ, the nose. I have such passages in mind as the Fool's question to *Lear* about why one's nose stands in the middle of one's face (cf. I,5;19), or *Regan's* proposition that the blind Gloucester should "smell / His way to Dover" (III, 7; 92), or *Lear's* memories of the storm, as he relates them to Edgar and Gloucester:

When the rain came to wet me once and the wind to make me chatter, when
the thunder would not peace at my bidding, there I found'em, there I
smelt'em out.

(IV,6;100-103)

¹⁸ This is true not only of such "empiricists" as Locke (cf., for example, Book 2, Chapters 3 and 9 of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, [*The Works of John Locke in Ten Volumes*. Volume I. Darmstadt: Scientia Verlag, 1963. Reprint of the 1823 edition in London], p. 104 and pp. 129-136), but also of such "idealists" like Hegel; cf., for instance: "The force of [...] truth thus lies now in the 'I', in the immediacy of my *seeing*, *bearing*, and so on; the vanishing of the single Now and Here that we mean is presented by the fact that I hold them fast" (G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A. V. Miller, with analysis of the text and foreword by J. N. Findlay. [Oxford: Clarendon Press.1977], p. 61, my emphasis; see also pp. 62-103.) It is the "and so on" which is especially symptomatic in Hegel's text.

Should we say that, under the “ontological” interpretation of some sensory, “empirical” categories Shakespeare provides us with, one of the reasons for our human tragedies is that, as Gloucester puts it, we cannot “smell a fault” (I,1;15)? Is it possible that the *hand* – which is so ready to clutch a dagger in *Macbeth* – “smells,” in Lear’s words, “of mortality” (IV,6;132) too much? What would the “metaphysical nose” look like which could smell our “faults” at the bottom of our existence? Is the *nose* absent from Bottom’s blasphemous inventory because, according to Shakespearean “metaphysics,” fault-smelling in this “ontological” and “tragic” sense is reserved exclusively for God, or Christ, even in the sacrilegious presence of a “bottom”-incarnation of The Word? Shall we take a further hint from the fact that, on Bottom’s list, it is the *heart* which seems to fill the void left behind by the *nose*? The series of my “rhetorical questions” above may at least, if they do nothing else, call attention to an absence I am fascinated by: the fifth human sense missing from Bottom’s catalogue (perhaps really meant in the divine sense).

However, this absence is all the more interesting in view of the fact that smells do play an eminent role in the overall pattern of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The fairy-world exudes the powerful scent of flowers: it is enough to think of the “odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds” (II,1;110) Titania mentions, or of Oberon’s “sweet musk-roses” (II,2;252), “large, rambling white roses, so called from their fragrance,”¹⁹ which Titania will later “stick” into Bottom’s “sleek smooth head” (IV,1;3) to wreath him in a “coronet of fresh and fragrant flowers” (IV,1;51). On the other hand Bottom warns his fellow-actors to “eat no onions nor garlic, for we are to utter sweet breath” in order to produce a *sweet comedy* (IV,2;40-42). Of course the sweet comedy is the “very tragical mirth” of Pyramus and Thisbe (V,1;57), the rehearsal of which in the woods starts as follows:

Bottom: Thisbe, the flowers of odious savours sweet –

Quince: ‘Odorous!’ ‘odorous!’

Bottom: Odorous savours sweet;

So hath thy breath, my dearest Thisbe dear.

(III,1;78-80)

¹⁹ Brooks, p. 42.

Sweet, which, in the play, is applied not only to “savours” and “breath” but to “melody,” to “voice,” to “look,” to “sight,” to “honeysuckle,” and even to persons,²⁰ is able to connect, through its outstanding polysemous power, the whole range of our perceptive potentials. Thus, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* does become, to borrow Bottom's words, a “sweet comedy,” where the fragrance of odorous flowers mixes with the “odious” stench of garlicky breath. The fibres of the “airy nothing” (V,1;16) are as much woven from the sweaty efforts of the handicraftsmen, who “now have toil'd their unbreath'd memories” (V,1;74), as from the “gait” of “every fairy,” who should “each several chamber bless / Through this palace with sweet peace” (V,1;402-404). After all, *scent* and *sense* are united etymologically forever, in their common Latin root, *sentire* (“to feel, to perceive”), to emphasise, as it were, that all human sensation and feeling starts with the nose.

So one more of my rhetorical questions seems to be in place: if smelling even “historically” seems to be so fundamental and if it is true that the play as a whole is so sensitive to smells, connecting, through *sweet*, practically the whole range of human feelings, has it not become almost symptomatic by now that it is precisely the *nose* which cannot be found in Bottom's inventory?

Yet there is something even more important to be noted concerning Bottom's monologue. His comedy, throughout his speech, is triggered by what we may call the “constant metaphorisation and back-literalisation of the negative”: on the one hand, Bottom, in line with St Paul, provides us with an implied criticism of the limits of human perception and knowledge, tacitly suggesting that one would need new organs, in fact an almost total transformation (“translation”) of sensation and thinking to apprehend and comprehend what he has been through, while, on the other hand, he is also absolutely and, therefore, fatally right from the point of view of his words taken literally, because, true enough, the eyes will never be able to hear and the ears will never be able to see. If there is, indeed, a play which is prepared to go to all lengths to point out the bankruptcy of human sensation in general, then it is *A Midsummer Night's*

²⁰ “My tongue should catch your tongue's sweet melody” (I,1;189); “he [Bottom] is a very paramour for a sweet voice” (IV,2;11); “I did never, no, never can / Deserve a sweet look from Demetrius' eye” (II,2;125-126); “Seest thou this sweet sight?” (IV,1;45); “So doth the woodbine the sweet honeysuckle / Gently entwist” (IV,1;41); “O take the sense, sweet, of my innocencel” (II,2;44); “Sweet, do not scorn her so” (III,2;247); “And run through fire I will for thy sweet sake!” (II,2;103).

Dream. It is especially *sight* which gets a detailed treatment, the *eye* being – as is well-known and widely discussed²¹ – the central metaphor of the play.

In the very first scene, for instance, Hermia expresses her disapproval of those who “choose love by another’s eyes” (I,1;140), providing us with the root of all further complications. Helena thinks that she could “sway the motion of Demetrius’ heart” (I,1;193) if she were like “fair Hermia”: “My ear should catch your voice, my eye your eye, / My tongue should catch your tongue’s sweet melody” (I,1;187-189). Expanding the list by *ear* and *tongue* seems to allude to Bottom’s *crux* significantly, especially in the context of the notorious word, “translated,” since Helena continues: “Were the world mine, Demetrius being bated, / The rest I’d give to be to you translated” (I,1;190-191).

In a certain sense, the whole play can indeed be said to be a challenge to some of Helena’s central theses, especially to: “Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind” (I,2;234).²² Yet the whole passage is worth quoting:

How happy some o’er other some can be!
Through Athens I am thought as fair as she.[i.e. Hermia]
But what of that? Demetrius thinks not so;
He will not know what all but he do know;
And as he errs, doting on Hermia’s eyes,
So I, admiring of his qualities.
Things base and vile, holding no quantity,
Love can transpose to form and dignity:
Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind,
And therefore is wing’d Cupid painted blind;
Nor hath Love’s mind of any judgement taste:
Wings, and no eyes, figure unheedy haste.

(I,2;226-237)

It is primarily the juxtaposition of “quality” and “quantity” which will prove important in my future discussion of the relationship between perception and, as the title of this essay goes, fundamental measurements, the latter having a lot to do with qualities and quantities. Helena’s central thesis will, of course, prove blatantly false: Lysander, Demetrius and even Titania will all fall prey to looking with the eyes instead of the mind. Lysander, for example, insists in vain, dazzled by the juice of the love-in-

²¹ Cf., for example, Cecil S. Emden’s detailed study, “Shakespeare and the Eye” in *Shakespeare Survey* 26 (1973), pp. 130-141, especially p. 135.

²² Cf. Brooks, pp. xcii-xciv.

idleness flower upon looking at Helena, that “the will of man is by his reason sway’d, / And reason says you are the worthier maid” (II,2;114-115) – it is his very condition which falsifies his claim.

As it has also frequently been observed, the play even offers, especially in the context of the performance of the artisans, (where a Wall is a human being and a Lion should not be taken as “real”), an eye-test for the theatrical perception of the audience as well.²³ Theseus, for instance will not only contend that the “shadows” of both eminent and poor performances should be “amend”-ed by the “imagination”²⁴ but he will also unabashedly discuss theatrical illusion in the context of love and madness: “The lunatic, the lover, and the poet / Are of imagination all compact” (V,1;7-8). Thus, as generations of critics have argued before me, Bottom’s points about the inadequacy of human sensation concerning certain “most rare vision”-s (cf. IV,1;203) perfectly fit into the overall concern of the play as a whole.

But, having dealt with the lacks in Bottom’s speech at large, how are we to interpret now his “extensions,” namely the mentioning of the *hand* and the *tongue*, in addition to St Paul’s *eye*, *ear* and *heart*? Should we argue that more “down-to-the-earth” Bottom, after his revels and revelations in Titania’s arms, has to complement St Paul’s catalogue to hint at the ineffable, and, paradoxically, “airy” and “ethereal” sexual experience with the Queen of the Fairies? We know from Bakhtin’s and from Kott’s explorations that in the polysemy of the figure of the ass one important element is its exceptional sexual potential.²⁵ From this we can only infer what happened between Bottom and Titania. Here – as deconstruction would most probably put the matter – we never get the “thing,” the “meaning” itself: if there is, indeed, a climax, it takes place in the realm of “shadows” and Titania only leaves “traces” behind, precisely and especially – it seems – on Bottom’s tongue and hands, and, most significantly, within the texture of a *dream*. Here, again, Bottom successfully employs, in more than one way, the principle of “metaphorisation and back-literalisation of the negative” mentioned above. For a dream is a notorious thing: since Freud we know that we do not have direct access to it at all; we rather remember our “translations” of it into thoughts or speech, and part of the analyst’s work consists precisely in trying to get to the “original” through deciphering the “dream-meaning” (“*Traumdeutung*”) in an – as Paul

²³ Cf. Brooks, pp. cxxxvii–cxlili

²⁴ “The best in this kind are but shadows; and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them” (V,1;208–209).

²⁵ Cf. Kott, pp. 43–52.

Ricoeur would argue²⁶ – ultimately hermeneutical process. The inability of communication Bottom so sensitively and sensually gives voice to thus belongs not only to “sensational or exceptional” dreams (like an encounter with a fairy) but to the very nature of any dream, too. The further complication – the “complication of the complication” – is, of course, that Bottom’s dream is already within *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Another complication – as a further application of the games with the negative²⁷ – is that it would indeed be hard to conceive what the tongue and hands might feel on a fairy. Is a fairy not “airy,” “celestial,” “ethereal” by definition? Is it not a misapplication (a “category mistake”) of the “eye - hear”- type already to speak of, or at least entail, the *body* of a fairy?

Here we may once more get a glimpse of how the theatre works, a “miniature portrait,” operating over the “microcosm” of Bottom’s few lines. For, in my reading, what Bottom is doing amounts to this: he is chastising human sensation and sense-making for not being able to go beyond themselves and to perform the impossible tasks he would like to prescribe them, he complains about the ineffability of dreams and about the limits of language trying to give voice to the experience of a fairy-body, while everything he implies as a lack, as a negative feature is, on the strictly literal level, straightforwardly and trivially true: eyes will not hear, ears will not see, etc., fairies do not have bodies and we are unable to give a direct account of any of our dreams. The yoking together of contradictory terms like *eye* and *hear* starts a metaphorical process and, as I pointed out above, by the time Bottom gets to “heart to report” (which I dared to take to be a handsome metaphor), he even seems to learn that the tension a “real” metaphor carries does not simply flow from putting contradictory or mutually exclusive words together, but from a “milder” juxtaposition, where the semantic content of one term finds at least as much in common with the other term as it also finds itself at odds with it. We might even say that Bottom slowly learns “translation” in the sense of Ben Jonson, who used this enigmatic word for *metaphor*.²⁸

Yet Bottom’s gradual metaphorisation, through its inevitable anchorage, and, thereby, its constant participation, in the literal has a counter-effect on the literal too, and the inherent lack and negativity detected as straightforwardly and trivially existing

²⁶ Cf. Paul Ricoeur, “The Question of Proof in Psychoanalysis” In *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. An Anthology of His Work*. Eds., Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), pp. 184-210.

²⁷ On the problem of metaphors which are negative in form (e.g. “Life is not a bed of roses” or “The work of art is not an egg”) see David Cooper’s witty discussion, *Metaphor*. Aristotelian Society Series, Volume 5. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 232-236.

²⁸ Cf. Kott, p. 30.

on the literal level begins to be read and “translated” in at least two ways. On the one hand, the trivial lack and negativity on the literal plane will forever trigger a need in the literal to go “beyond” itself, to find a realm where, for example, the eye is indeed capable of hearing, while implying a profound and deep criticism of the human senses and the ability of sense-making precisely in their *proper* and *trivial* functions as well: what Bottom is indirectly suggesting is, indeed, no less than the wise acknowledgement that the eyes *cannot even see*, that the ears *cannot even hear*, etc., with all the confusions and the asymmetry of the proper functions of hand, tongue and heart noted above.

On the other hand, the interplay of the literal and the metaphorical will result in the carrying over of the lack and of the negativity of the literal plane onto the level of the metaphorical as well: Bottom further – and no less wisely – implies that no matter how hard we might work on a total transformation or “translation” of our senses and sense-making, the enterprise of enriching even each and every sense-organ with all the capabilities of all the others (e.g. the eyes, besides seeing, with hearing, touching, tasting, etc.) would still mean remaining within the confines of human boundaries, and a lack and negativity will always remain, on each and every level, since, trivially again, even metaphorisation is a human process after all.

I here we have reached the lesson of the theatre again, which is always a lesson *for* it as well: the theatrical “dream-world,” at least in one sense, is created to make up for the lacks in the literal realm, yet what is created and what we traditionally call the metaphorical, always feeding on the literal, gets its energy also from what it does not – and will never – have. We once more encounter the paradox of meaning: meaning shows its enormous potential where it is *not*, it creates most effectively – or at all – *before* and *after* it is gone. Hence also the significance of the fact that we will never be able to decide whether Bottom did sleep with Titania or not. Yet it is of utmost importance that we neither remain content with *celebrating* this uncertainty (as, I believe, deconstruction is sometimes prone to do), nor give up trying to fill the “lacuna,” the tense “emptiness” before and after meaning, in as many ways as we can. It seems that meaning gets generated from the way I fill in the “absences” with my suppositions and inferences and, first and foremost, from the amount of *trust* I put into a chosen direction *from myself*. While necessarily and inevitably trusting language always already built on communal trust, I *wager what I am* on something *other than what I am*. Wager, of course, implies that I can also lose, and trust always involves credit, so, self-evidently, there will never ever be absolute certainty. Yet the *possibility* of my being a loser does not mean that I *am*, already, a loser: I have to allow for an *equal* chance of winning. I am more than ready to acknowledge that I do not know when and how my *actually* being a

winner (a loser) gets announced – or even predicted. For Hamlet, for example, there is Claudius to do the job: “Our son shall win” (V,2;289), a venomous wager indeed, containing the direct opposite of the final truth. Still I contend that unless I allow for the *other* alternative with *equal* force, my trust is no trust.

The above speculations about the power of meaning may even be connected with a further understanding of *mimesis*, a very well-known one provided by Paul precisely in 1 *Corinthians*. The clue that seems to make the link possible is one of Bottom’s “extensions,” namely his mentioning of the *tongue*, which might recall the following crux from the whole body of the “subtext” he is working with (I quote from the *Geneva Bible*):

Though I speake with the tongues of men and Angels, and haue not loue, I am as sounding brasse, or a tinkling cymbal. And thogh I had the *gift* of prophecie, and knewe all secretes and all knowledge, yea, if I had all faith, so that I colde remoue mountaines and had no loue, I were nothing.

(13:1-2)

Now towards the end of the famous “Hymn of Love” we find the following much-discussed passage:

For now we se[e] through a glasse darkeley: but then *shal we se[e]* face to face.
Now I knowe in parte: but then shal I knowe euen as I am knowen.

(13:12)

St Paul juxtaposes here two worlds: the earthly one he is now subject to offers only a dim, blurred vision, identified by the quality of darkness – and we may just wonder what the *glass* can mean: is it indeed a “Platonic” looking-glass, reflecting, in faint shadows, God’s “Reality” and deceptively showing everything in the reversed order, i.e. the right to be the left and the left to be the right? That, I believe, is the standard interpretation and this is no place to quarrel with it at length, though I think that even Plato’s cave-image is more complex than that. Here I wish to point out one noteworthy feature: though Paul explicitly says that now my knowledge is partial, he does not spell out its opposite in *perfect*, but anchors the quality to be characteristic of my knowledge in “God’s world” in the way I *am known*. This may not only mean that ‘then I will know as now I am taught, then I will perfectly know what I now hear only in teaching,’ as, for example, the gloss of the *Geneva Bible* interprets the passage, but also that I will then know *in the way God knows me even and already now*. Then partiality is not so much opposed to *perfection* but to *wholeness* and *intimacy*, and the sense of *know* in

the passive voice (“as I am known”) is understood as ‘being acquainted and familiar with’ rather than as ‘being in the possession of a piece of information I hitherto was denied of, or did not grasp profoundly enough.’ Thus the implication of Paul’s words would, under my interpretation, be that God will neither add anything to my partial knowledge of, say, facts, nor will He “perfect” it in depth and thoroughness, but that He will, *really* and *truly*, acquaint me with things I think I already am familiar with, and, most notably, will make me familiar, at last, with *myself* – with myself, whom I now believe I know best. Thus – I would like to argue – “transcendence” here is given in the quality of *intimacy*, most notably triggered by the metaphor of “seeing face to face.” Transcendence for Paul seems to lie in the total abolition of human separateness both from other human beings and from “the objects of the world.”

This is the point where I think we may gain a valuable insight for the theatre and for a theory of mimesis: the theatre re-presents, and, at least in a certain way, undoubtedly “transcends,” the “real” world, not to teach me things I have never previously heard of, or know not enough about, but to show me the very things I meet, hear and see every day and to acquaint and re-acquaint me with them precisely because I think I know them intimately – whereas I do not. Thus the aim is not to know more *about* the thing but to know *it*, to be, as it were, *one* with it. This is the sense of knowledge – intimate acquaintance, “Biblical,” “Paulian” purport of *to know* – Othello, for example, desires with respect to his Desdemona.²⁹ The measure and extent of this acquaintance and re-acquaintance is secured in one’s existential condition, namely in one’s ability to know oneself (precisely, as it turns out with Othello, in his ability to get to know himself *in the Other*), which, however, may be found as wanting with respect to the quality of *wholeness* as with all the other capacities for being human. Yet, at least according to St Paul’s understanding, the “real playwright,” in the fullest power of His “mimetic ability” to *show*, is God and only God, Who is able to show me people and things according to the measure of *His* knowledge of me *as I am*.

To interpret knowledge as an antidote to human separateness does not seem to be too far-fetched in the context of the “Hymn of Love” where, for example, “Love [...] disdaineth not: it seeketh not her owne things” (13:5) and where, in verse 2, the necessity of love is argued for, among other things, in opposition to the understanding of all mysteries. It neither seems to be too much of an exaggeration in the context of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, about which at least that much is agreed that it is a comedy of love. Yet there is, of course, nothing but disagreement concerning what *kinds* of love

²⁹ Cf. Géza Kállay, *Nem pusztán szó: Shakespeare Othellója nyelvfilozófiai megközelítésben*. [It is not words: Shakespeare's *Othello* from the perspective of the philosophy of language]. Budapest: J. Ágot Műhely Alapítvány, 1996.

are dealt with as the principal themes of the play.³⁰ In accordance with the genre of the “comedy of love,” *amor* mostly leads to confusions, accusations, quarrels, jealousy and even humiliation, yet it is precisely against this background that one scene stands out, heavily marked by the sense of intimacy.³¹ This scene is the duet of Bottom and Titania, encircled by the choir of the fairies. Peaseblossom and Mustardseed are asked to scratch Bottom’s head, “Monsieur” Cobweb should get him the “honey-bag” or a “peck of provender” with “good dry oats” and a “bottle of hay,” while music is lulling him to sleep (cf. IV, 1; 1-44). Bottom may have the head of an ass, yet he desires things an old husband does after long years of marriage, whatever we suppose to have happened between him and Titania earlier. And, again, it is of utmost significance that the single intimate scene of the play is linked to Bottom, precisely in his transformed-translated version of an ass.

In line with a philosophical reading of the play, I wish to claim that at least one way in which Wittgenstein interprets knowledge in his *Philosophical Investigations* (and, as I argued elsewhere,³² he understands the need for “transcendence” in his *Tractatus*) has a lot to do – as Stanley Cavell has shown³³ – with his recognition of human separateness as a condition of, and, thereby, a reason for, doing philosophy. Knowledge, in the Wittgensteinian-Cavellian approach, is thought about not only in terms of ‘gain’ or ‘private property’ but also as a form of acknowledgement and as the vehicle of an attempt at intimacy. This is precisely one of the most valuable insights which urges me to try to connect Wittgenstein’s philosophy with the analysis of Shakespearean drama.

If it is true, then, that a line of interpretation gains its meaning from the amount of trust one invests into it, Bottom appears to trust his own line of interpretation well enough: he even wants Peter Quince to further “translate” and interpret his dream in a literary form: “I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream: it shall be called ‘Bottom’s Dream’, because it hath no bottom” (IV, 1; 214-215). It is only later that he realises that in fact he cannot tell what “methought I was”

³⁰ Cf. Brooks, pp. cxxx-cxxxiv.

³¹ I owe this observation to Professor István Géher.

³² Géza Kállay, “The logic of depiction’ and ‘the baseless fabric of this vision’: A Comparative Reading of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* and Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*” in *Mesotes. Zeitschrift für philosophischen Ost-West-Dialog*, 1/1994, pp. 125-135.

³³ Cf. Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America. Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein. The 1987 Frederick Ives Carpenter Lectures*. (Albuquerque, New Mexico: Living Batch Press, 1989), pp. 29-75.

and “what methought I had” (cf. IV, 1; 206-207). When he meets his company again, he announces:

Masters, I am to disclosure wonders: but ask me not what; for if I tell you, I
am not true Athenian. I will tell you everything, right as it fell out.

(IV, 2; 28-30)

Yet when Peter Quince, the slated author of the intended ballad, urges him with: “let us hear, sweet Bottom,” he only replies: “Not a word of me” (IV,2;31-32). Meaning has already disappeared only to get richer, once again, in the “vacuum” it has left behind. Yet Bottom’s simultaneous zeal and refusal to tell his tale, and his previous pun on his name (Bottom’s dream, which has no bottom), as well as the application of the play’s all-encompassing adjective, *sweet*, to his own character indicate that he has, indeed, become the incarnation of one of the most significant principles of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*: the yoking together of incongruous elements just to discover their mutual affinities. Bottom – as it has been hinted at above – is both foolish and wise (wise in his foolishness and foolish in his wisdom), his pun “combines” – as Brooks points out –

the old academic joke of non-sequitur nomenclature, *lucus a non lucendo*, with the two opposites implied: no bottom because no foundation, and no bottom because unfathomably profound.³⁴

Thus the very figure of Bottom participates – as Kott has convincingly argued – in two traditions: in Neoplatonic metaphysics and in the *serio ludere* of the carnival legacy,³⁵ which appear to be irreconcilable only at first sight. The connection, and, hence, the communication between the two is possible through one of the most fundamental principles both traditions share: the “above” and the “below,” the “top” and the “bottom” correspond to, and mutually test, each other, thereby becoming strangely interchangeable. In the Platonic-Plotinian tradition, the “below” is just a base and “murky shadow,”³⁶ yet we have nothing other than that in this world to point towards the pure and unattainable truth of the perfect *eidos* “above.” In the *serio ludere* of the carnival legacy “the signs and emblems of the bottom are the earthly probation of

³⁴ Brooks, p. cxvii.

³⁵ Cf. Kott, especially pp. 38-41.

³⁶ Kott, p. 38.

the signs and emblems of the top"³⁷ and the elevated and noble attributes of the human mind are exchanged [...] for the bodily functions (with a particular emphasis on the "lower stratum": defecation, urination, copulation, and childbirth). In carnival wisdom they are the essence of life; a guarantee of its continuity.³⁸

No wonder, then, that Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is as favourite a source for quotations in one system as in the other. For learned Erasmus, for example, it was "a praise of folly" and for Rabelais, the author of perhaps the most famous piece of carnivalesque literature, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, it is the divine authentication of the essence of carnival rites according to which "the fool is wise and his madness is the wisdom of this world."³⁹ Here are some of the most popular quotes from Paul's letter (I am reading the King James version):

For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where *is* the wise? where *is* the scribe? where *is* the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.

(1:19-21)

But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, *yea*, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are.

(1:27-28)⁴⁰

So Bottom, who, after his awakening, will "peep" with his "own fool's eyes" (IV, 1; 83) – as Puck puts the matter – fits in perfectly with both traditions, with and without the ass-head. The ass is, of course, at the same time the symbol of the high and low in itself; here, in the context of the "bottom" incarnation of "God's secrets" it is enough to refer to *Matthew* 21:5: "Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass."

³⁷ Kott, p. 38.

³⁸ Kott, p. 39.

³⁹ Kott, p. 41.

⁴⁰ For the use of most of these quotations in Neoplatonic and carnivalesque texts, and further for these traditions see Kott, pp. 40-43.

This interchangeability of the high and the low, this merger of opposing – or seemingly opposing – qualities may really make one subscribe to Hermia’s view, expressed not much before Bottom’s awakening: “Methinks I see these things with parted eye, / When everything seems double” (IV, 1; 188-189). Yet, as we have seen, the play not only invites us to “seeing double” (the one in the two and the two in the one), but it intimates a profound dissatisfaction concerning the human inability to perceive and to give voice to “most rare vision”-s. Here is Bottom again: “I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what my dream was. Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream” (IV, 1 ;203-206). Here and, as it has been discussed above, in the notorious burlesque of *Corinthians*, the implication throughout is that perception would be impossible, because the experience is beyond human measure, it surpasses our lame faculties. And Paul’s “original” words quoted above concerning God’s turning the hierarchy of wisdom and foolishness upside down purport to make the same point. In fact, in *Corinthians* and elsewhere, Paul goes to great lengths to stress that God has upset a traditional system of measurement in favour of the human being: He devised a new scale and created counterbalancing devices so that He may be able to pass judgements which are still just, yet not condemning. In *Romans*, for instance, Paul puts the paradox this way:

For as by one’s man disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous. Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound: That as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord.

(5:19-21)

In the context of a comedy of love it is all the more important to emphasise that it is God’s love which has made Him “cook the books” and “cheat” with his scales: “But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were sinners, Christ died for us” (*Romans* 5:8).

Thus, in Paul’s letters and in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the problems of love and of perception are forever tied up with the problem of measurement. Of course, surmising an inherent bond between measuring and perception has a long tradition. Measurement has only narrowly been defined as the “correlation with numbers of

entities which are not numbers"⁴¹ or as "the assignment of numerals to objects or events according to rules"⁴² and it is usually this narrow sense which is meant when we talk about "fundamental measurements" like determining weight or length.⁴³ In the broad sense, measurement also includes our everyday – and usually totally unconscious – practice of delimitation, comparison and even identification, so when we say, for instance, that "this is an ass" or that "he is a bigger fool than she" or, with Bottom, that "I have a reasonable good ear in music" (IV, 1; 28), then we are, in fact, also performing acts of measurement. Ernest Nagel is right in pointing out that "the problems of measurement merge, at one end, with problems of predication" in general – measuring, from this larger point of view, can indeed be defined as "the delimitation and fixation of our ideas of things."⁴⁴ Although we need not go as far as Bishop Berkeley did and say that *esse est percipi*, we can readily admit that, in a certain sense, perception *itself* is, always already, measurement. It is all the more interesting to note that what is difficult is not only to find the proper category within which one perception can be distinguished from another, but also to give voice to what we are actually doing when we are measuring, to spell out what measuring actually consists in. In his article "On the Theory and Scales of Measurement," S. Stevens relates that "for seven years a committee of the British Association for the Advancement of Science debated the problem of measurement."⁴⁵ The committee, comprising nineteen mathematicians, physicists, psychologists and philosophers, "was instructed to consider and report upon the possibility of 'quantitative estimates of sensory events' – meaning, simply: Is it possible to measure human sensation?"⁴⁶ The seven years did not prove to be enough, the committee had to remain in session for another year, and even in the final report of 1940 one of the members insisted that they should include the following:

⁴¹ Ernst Nagel, "Measurement" in Arthur Danto & Sidney Morgenbesser, eds., *Philosophy of Science*. (New York: Meridian Books Inc., 1960), pp. 121-140 [Originally in *Erkenntnis*, Band II Heft 5, 1932, pp. 313-333], p. 121.

⁴² S. S. Stevens, "On the Theory of Scales of Measurement" in Danto and Morgenbesser pp. 141-149 [Originally in *Science*, Volume 103, No. 2684, 1946, pp. 23-31], p. 142.

⁴³ Cf. Stevens, pp. 142-147.

⁴⁴ Nagel, p. 121.

⁴⁵ Stevens, p. 141.

⁴⁶ Stevens, p. 141.

Any law purporting to express a quantitative relation between sensation intensity and stimulus intensity is not merely false but is in fact meaningless unless and until a meaning can be given to the concept of addition as applied to sensation.⁴⁷

The problem, of course, is the age-old one of how we go over from the realm of quality into the terrain of quantity and vice versa. In our everyday life it is usually easy for us to cross the border between the two: when somebody says, for example, that “too much of a good thing can make you sick” or, as Lysander puts the matter, “a surfeit of the sweetest things / The deepest loathing to the stomach brings” (II, 2; 136-137), we perfectly know what is meant; the real perplexity is to tell *when*, exactly, (after which spoonful of ice-cream, after how many sniffs at sweet roses) we can really say that so much *good* has been *harmfully* too much. And neither do we fare any better when we go in the opposite direction and approach quality from quantity: we can, for instance, readily tell, as the ancient Greek “paradox of the heap” goes,⁴⁸ that one grain of wheat is not a heap, two grains of wheat are still not a heap ... – yet *precisely* how many grains does it take to feel entitled to apply the category (the idea, the quality) of “heap” to the grains? It would be absurd to claim that, say, two-thousand-five-hundred-and-twelve grains are a heap while two-thousand-five-hundred-and-eleven are not, whereas we feel that there must be, or at least should be, an exact line of demarcation.

I think that to raise the issue of measurement, in both the broad and the narrow sense, with respect to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or to Shakespearean drama in general is relevant in more than one way. Bottom's monologue, investigating the bounds of human sensation and imagination, is, indeed one of the most famous cruces. But we encounter several other instances in the play where a character's main concern is to “categorise,” or at least to describe or circumscribe something the primary feature of which seems precisely to be that it is undefinable. In the company of so many “supernatural agents” this is hardly surprising. When Demetrius, with the love-potion on his eyes, wakes up and catches sight of Helena, it takes him a long time to find the proper similes and mythological parallels to express his feelings:

⁴⁷ Stevens, p. 141.

⁴⁸ Cf. Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers. Volume I: From Thales to Zeno*. The Argument of the Philosophers Series. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 259.

O Helen, goddess, nymph, perfect, divine!
 To what, my love, shall I compare thine eyne?
 Crystal is muddy. O how ripe in show
 Thy lips, those kissing cherries, tempting grow!
 (III, 2; 137-140)

It is precisely what forever remains unspeakable in love that the handicraftsmen make, unaware, most fun of in their performance in Theseus' court:

Pyramus [Bottom]: *O grim-look'd night! O night with hue so black!
 O night, which ever art when day is not!
 O night, O night, alack, alack, alack,
 I fear my Thisbe's promise is forgot.*

(V,1;168-171)

Here Bottom – as he promised at the first rehearsal – really “move[s] storms” and “condole[s] in some measure” (I,2;23). A wall may separate the lovers all right, yet to pinpoint what one feels when one is in love, or to delimit which of the five human senses perceives this or that “stimulus,” would really belong to the “languages of the unsayable.” No wonder that, in the “very tragical mirth” of Pyramus and Thisbe, malapropisms make their reoccurrence again:

Pyramus [Bottom]: *I see a voice; now will I to the chink,
 To spy and I can hear my Thisbe's face.
 [...]
 My soul is in the sky.
 Tongue, lose thy light;
 Moon, take thy flight!
 Now die, die, die, die, die.*

(V, 1; 190-191, 292-295)

Yet even the “supernatural agents” point towards problems of categorisation: Titania, in explaining why the weather has been so unusually wet and why “pelting” rivers “have overborne their continents” (II, 1; 91-92), complains that now “the quaint mazes in the wanton green / For lack of tread are indistinguishable” (II, 1; 91-92), and that

The spring, the summer,
 The chiding autumn, angry winter, change

Their wonted liveries: and the mazed world,
By their increase, now knows not which is which.

(II, 1; 111-114)

Besides the problem of categorisation and of going to the “edges of language” when one is in love, we also have explicit references to *proportion* and to *measuring*, still strictly within the context of love, of course. Helena is especially fond of applying the metaphors of measurement to love – Helena, who is undoubtedly the more reflexive and “philosophical” of the two girls, in this respect forming, interestingly enough, a pair rather with Lysander than with Demetrius.

Helena first succinctly formulates the well-known proportion between desire and the unattainable features of the object of desire: “O, I am out of breath in this fond chase: / The more my prayer, the lesser is my grace” (II, 2; 87-88). Later, when Lysander pledges the same oaths to her as he did to Hermia, she teaches him an elaborate lesson in quantification, demonstrating how equally proportioned qualities counterbalance, and thus annul each other, how “truth kills truth” (III, 2; 129):

These vows are Hermia’s: will you give her o’er?
Weigh oath with oath, and you will nothing weigh:
Your vows to her and me, put in two scales,
Will even weigh; and both as light as tales.

(III, 2; 130-133)

The subtle connection she can perceive between quality and quantity with respect to the transforming power of love has already been quoted in another context:

And as he [Demetrius] errs, doting on Hermia’s eyes,
So I, admiring of his qualities.
Things base and vile, holding no quantity,
Love can transpose to form and dignity:
Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind,
And therefore is wing’d Cupid painted blind;

(I,1;230-235)

Harold Brooks glosses *holding no quantity* as: “bearing no proportion (to what they are estimated at by love).”⁴⁹ The text is extremely condensed and it is hard to pin

⁴⁹ Brooks, p. 18.

down what Helena is actually saying. As it has been noted already, perception (“looking”) really seems to be reserved for *immediate* sensing, i.e. for the “literal,” “realistic” images one has when one’s eyes encounter something as opposed to looking through the mental eyes of love, which carry a transforming-translating capability – love has the “biased look,” the eyes the “unbiased” one. Thus love is interpreted as a kind of “form of experience” in the Kantian sense, which always already shows a quality in *this* or *that* way. The occurrence of the word *quantity* (‘proportion’) is all the more interesting here: Helena’s point seems to be that it is precisely the quantifying, “proportioning” scale of love which can serve as a kind of mediator between such diametrically opposing qualities as “base and vile” and “form and dignity”. Shall we say, then, that, according to Helena, *base* and *vile* on the one hand and *form* and *dignity* on the other, are basically the *same* qualities, gaining their difference only in the *amount* we have of them? Would it be possible to distinguish between qualities by referring exclusively to quantity?

These questions may sound less strained if we consider how central a role measuring played in Shakespeare’s time. In fact, this is precisely *the* age when the idea that measurement can be made exact, pure and unbiased came to the fore. Today, when we learn Cartesian geometry in elementary school, it is hard for us to remember that “prior to Descartes, geometry was not established on a thoroughgoing numerical basis”⁵⁰ and that it was at the turn of the 16th - 17th century when it was first seriously considered that instead of the Aristotelian, basically qualitative assessment of things, another, numerically based, quantitative approach would be possible. Of course, it is neither the case that, earlier, numbers had not played, occasionally and unsystematically, any role in measurement, nor that the breakthrough, first in astronomy and later in the whole of philosophy, happened overnight. The development of this conception was, needless to say, a long and gradual process, and one may draw a line from Copernicus’ *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* (1543), through Descartes’ *Discourse on the Method* (1637) to Newton’s *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687).⁵¹ Yet the idea that quality would be “translatable” into quantity came into vogue in this period. Several of Shakespeare’s immediate contemporaries were almost obsessed with the problem of measuring, and the last decades of the 16th century and the first ones of the 17th seem to be the years when the “battle” between a traditional, qualitative approach and a new, mathematically based quantitative value-system was still “in the balance,” the “new

⁵⁰ Nagel, p. 121.

⁵¹ Cf. E. J. Dijksterhuis, *Simon Stevin. Science in the Netherlands around 1600*. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970), p. 1.

method” being experimented with, rather than being elevated to the rank of a “matter of evidence,” the status it has gained after Descartes and Newton.

One of the most notable forerunners of what Dirk J. Struik calls the “new science”⁵² was Simon Stevin (1548-1620), native of Brugge in Flanders. Stevin combined the theoretical knowledge of the mathematician with the practical interest of the engineer and among several elaborate treatises on arithmetic, geometry, cosmology, navigation, fortification, book-keeping, perspective in painting, music, civic life, the Dutch language and even on the pressure of the bridle on the mouth of a horse, he published three essays specifically on measuring: *The Elements of the Art of Weighing* (*De Beghinselen der Weegheconst*, 1586), *The Practice of Weighing* (*De Weeghdaet*, annexed to the previous work) and *The Practice of Measuring* (*Van de Meetdaet*, which appeared only in 1605, but had been drafted more than twenty years earlier).⁵³ Stevin’s work was noted and esteemed in England, too: one of his early publications, *De Thiende* (1585), known today in English as *The Tenth*, or as *The Disme*, or as *The Dime*, was translated as early as 1608 and a new translation and edition was to follow in 1619.⁵⁴ Yet then the “world of science” was relatively small and the “natural philosophers” of the time in The Netherlands, in France and in England kept borrowing ideas from one another with and without acknowledgement. For example, Stevin’s book on navigation, *De Havenvinding* (1599) was not only translated into English by Edward Wright in the same year under the title *The Haven-finding Art*, but Stevin used Plancius’ methods, Plancius based his theory on Gemma Frisius’ findings, and Frisius was personally known by the notorious John Dee, who, besides acting as royal advisor, magician and “international impostor,” was himself the author of a book on navigation, also serving, at least according to Frances Yates, as a model for Shakespeare’s Prospero.⁵⁵

⁵² Dirk J. Struik, *The Land of Stevin and Huygens. A Sketch of Science and Technology in the Dutch Republic during the Golden Century*. (Dordrecht: Reidel Publishing Company, 1981), p. 61.

⁵³ On these titles and dates see Dirk J. Struik, ed., *The Principal Works of Simon Stevin Volume II. Mathematics*. (Amsterdam: C. V. Sweets and Zeitlinger, 1958), p. 764, and Dijksterhuis, pp. 135-136. My information on Stevin comes from these works and from Struik, *The Land of Stevin and Huygens*. Today we would say that, roughly speaking, Stevin’s first two essays are on statics while the third one is a textbook in practical geometry, yet to unproblematically apply this classification would indeed be misleading and anachronistic, since, as it has been noted, it was precisely Stevin’s time when such categories were beginning to gain the sense in which we use them today.

⁵⁴ Cf. Dijksterhuis, p. 134 and Struik, ed., *The Principal Works of Simon Stevin*, Vol. II, p. 373.

⁵⁵ Cf. Struik, *The Land of Stevin and Huygens*, pp. 40-41; Dijksterhuis, p. 135; Gerald Suster, *John Dee: Essential Readings*. (London: Crucible, 1986), p. 46 and Frances A. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 159-163.

The breakthrough for Stevin was undoubtedly *De Thiende*, in the 'Preface' of which he says the following:

Therefore, if any will think that I vaunt myself of my knowledge, because of the explication of these utilities, out of doubt he shows himself to have neither judgement, understanding, nor knowledge, to discern simple things from ingenious inventions, but he (rather) seems envious of the common benefit. [...] Seeing then that the *matter* of this Dime [his book] [...] is number, the use and effects of which yourselves shall sufficiently witness by your continual experiences, therefore it were not necessary to use many words thereof, for the *astrologer* knows that the world is become by *computation astronomical* a paradise. [...] And the surveyor or land-meter is not ignorant of the troublesome multiplications of rods, feet, and oftentimes of inches, the one by the other, which not only molests, but also often [...] causes error, [...] to the discredit of landmeter or surveyor, and so for the money-masters, merchants, and each one in his business. [...] [I]his *Dime*, taking away those difficulties [...] teaches (to speak in a word) the easy performance of all reckonings, computations, and accounts without broken numbers, which can happen in man's business, in such sort as that the four principles of arithmetic, namely addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division, by whole numbers may satisfy these effects, affording the like facility unto those that use counters.⁵⁶

Stevin's style is pompous and tortuous, yet his purpose is clear: he not only wishes to introduce the decimal notation and the method of computation without fractions but he aims at the standardisation of "the confused systems of weights and measures of his day by a system based on the decimal division of one unit."⁵⁷ With respect to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it seems that on questions of measurement Stevin would rather side with Helena's suggestions than with the ones Bottom alludes to, yet the larger philosophical implications of Stevin's efforts, expounded to the full in the 17th century, are even more significant. In Stevin's 'Preface' we may witness the germ of the idea that "natural philosophy" should work out a single "universal method" to the benefit of the whole of mankind. The method should be simple, so that everyone might easily learn and handle it and would have the invaluable and unsurpassable merit of serving as a foundation by reference to which all things could be understood, explained and known. No wonder that the most likely candidate to take

⁵⁶ Struik, ed., *The Principal Works of Simon Stevin*, Vol. II, pp. 391-397.

⁵⁷ Struik, ed., *The Principal Works of Simon Stevin*, Vol. II, p. 383.

the role of the backbone of such a method was number: “numbers” – as Nagel points out –

make possible a refinement of analysis without loss of clarity and their emotionally neutral character permits a symbolic rendering of invariant relations in a manifold of changing qualities.⁵⁸

Stevin was far less interested in the metaphysical underpinnings of his scientific investigations than Descartes. The Flemish scientist mostly emphasised the practical blessings of a simple and over-arching method which could be applied to various areas hitherto handled as separate and thus considered to be unrelated. However, it seems to be obvious that the desire for a “universal method” was conceived somewhere in the everyday practice of measurement – it was precisely because of his practical interests, leading to easily demonstrable, immediately assessable and convincing results that Stevin’s work was taken up, ultimately contributing to a philosophy which wishes to account for all phenomena in the world by referring to a single, basic principle and which, as a corollary of this endeavour, believes itself to be in a position to talk about the “true” or “real” qualities of things. As Nagel puts it:

It is generally only after numerical measurements have been established and standardised that references to the “real” properties of things begin to appear: those properties, that is, which appear in circumstance allowing for most felicity in their measurement.⁵⁹

However, as it was noted above, Shakespeare’s time was the period indeed when the qualitative approach to the world and the quantitative method were still genuine alternatives. Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), a senior of Stevin’s only by fifteen years, was no less occupied with the question whether a universal theory of things was possible than his Flemish contemporary. And Montaigne, too, asked if human sensation and knowledge would ever be capable of giving an adequate account of the diverse phenomena that surround us, while he was also paying special attention to how human measures compare to the wisdom of God. In the late 1570-ies, just a few years before Stevin drafted his first works on measuring, he put down the following in his most famous essay, *The Apology for Raymond Sebond*:

⁵⁸ Nagel, p. 122.

⁵⁹ Nagel, p. 122.

But they [= the philosophers] are funny when, to give some certainty to the laws, they say that there are some which are firm, perpetual, and immutable, which they call natural, which are imprinted on the human race by the condition of their very being. [...] Now the only likely sign by which they can argue certain laws to be natural is universality of approval. For what nature had truly ordered for us we would without doubt follow by common consent. [...] Let them show me just one law of that sort – I'd like to see it.⁶⁰

This subject [truth] has brought me to the consideration of the senses, in which lies the greatest foundation and proof of our ignorance. [...] To judge the appearances that we receive of objects, we would need a judicatory instrument; to verify this instrument, we need a demonstration; to verify the demonstration an instrument: there we are in a circle.⁶¹

This arrogance of trying to discover God with our eyes made a great man of our religion [Tertullian] give the deity bodily form. And it is the cause of what happens to us every day, to attribute events of importance, by particular assignment, to God. Because they weigh with us, it seems as though they weigh with him also. [...] [Some philosophers] say that as the souls of the gods, without tongue, without eyes, without ears, have each a feeling of what the other feels, [...] so the souls of men, when they are free and released from the body by sleep or some trance [...] see things that they could not see when mingled with the body. 'Men,' says Saint Paul, 'professing themselves to be wise, became fools and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man'. [...] And [seeing] this divine structure of the heavenly palace that we see, do we not have to believe that it is the abode of some master worthier than we are? Isn't the highest always the worthiest? And we are placed at the bottom.⁶²

"And we are placed at the bottom": this is one of the sentences – besides the well-known "What do I know?" – that could sum up, by way of a conclusion, the central message of Montaigne's essay (his, if the pun can be allowed, position). Montaigne, because he wrote essays instead of scientific treatises, is seldom taken

⁶⁰ Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*. Translated by Donald M. Frame. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), p. 437.

⁶¹ Montaigne, p. 443 and p. 454.

⁶² Montaigne, pp. 394-395.

seriously as a philosopher,⁶³ yet amidst his numerous references to antique authors and poetic metaphors, we have to appreciate the detailed reasoning, too: senses are unreliable and therefore no knowledge with certainty is possible, the lack of universal consent falsifies the claim that there are indubitable propositions, and thus it is vain to think that we can go beyond individual “measurements” and to hope for a uniform assessment of either the world or of God. The implication is this, as I interpret Montaigne: quality will forever remain bound to the uniqueness of the individual and there is no way in which one could “translate” it, with the help of a “common denominator” into quantity. Therefore, for Montaigne the use of philosophy is primarily in reminding us of our “facticity,” our existential position, and in making us acknowledge that it is faith and faith alone which may bring us closer to God. In fact, it was the dangerous implications of this “fideism” and the Pyrrhonian scepticism revived by Montaigne which served as one of the greatest challenges also for Descartes. Descartes did try to show, as Montaigne demanded, at least “one law of that (universal) sort,” a firmly true and metaphysically certain one: “Cogito ergo sum,” on the basis of which, in turn, the proof of the existence of God and of the world could be provided. Our discussion has taken us back to Descartes’ overheated chamber, where, he claims, he first had his famous three dreams leading him later to his “universal method.”⁶⁴ Yet this is not the time to usher Montaigne into this chamber; here my principal aim was to indicate some of the points Montaigne would agree on with Bottom rather than with Helena. I do not wish to suggest any direct influence of Montaigne or Stevin on Shakespeare, and the great likelihood that Shakespeare read Montaigne does not concern me here, either.⁶⁵ It might sound bizarre that I compare the ideas of some philosophers with the notions of some characters in a drama. Yet I believe that Shakespeare did make, in his own way, some contribution to the problem of measurement. So let me recall here for a moment the opening scenes of *Macbeth*, where we may witness an initial conflict between the quantitative and qualitative approach.

Old King Duncan and his company tend to conceive of the world in terms of an equilibrium, where the reports reaching the King about the battle already feature a

⁶³ On this problem see especially Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis. The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 36–42.

⁶⁴ Cf. Géza Kállay, “‘To be or not to be’ and ‘Cogito ergo sum’: Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* against a Cartesian Background” in *The Anachronist 1996*, Eds. Ágnes Péter, et al. (Budapest: Department of English Studies, School of English and American Studies, E.I.T.).

⁶⁵ On Montaigne’s possible influence on Shakespeare the best treatment I know is Robert Ellrodt, “Self-Consciousness in Montaigne and Shakespeare”. In *Shakespeare Survey* 28, (1975), pp. 37–50.

quantitatively balanced duality. In this balance of the scales, doubt makes its appearance with a double force, and gets counterbalanced by the twice multiplied efforts of the two noble warriors, Macbeth and Banquo. Duncan believes that the vacuum created by the disappearance of one kind of a thing can be totally filled by the opposite which takes its place. By contrast, the Weird Sisters imply that quality is a matter of perspective, that mutually exclusive categories necessarily entail each other. Their paradoxes suggested that qualities are present not in what they are but in what they, through their opposites, are not; the witches were saying that qualities are present in their antithetical absence rather than in their presence. This, somewhat to continue the Bottom-type blasphemy, does not seem to be too far from Paul's above quoted insight that "base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are" (1 *Corinthians* 1:28) and from Bottom's "vision" that it is in unsayable and inexplicable love as intimacy and even perhaps as violence that the penetration into foolishness as wisdom and to wisdom as foolishness is possible.

In *King Lear* – to give another example with a play which has already been alluded to – tragedy seems precisely to arise when Lear tries to trade quantifiable, measurable (countable and accountable) goods (plots of land on the map) for the dialectics, the qualitative disproportionateness and unbalanced tension of such human feelings as a daughter's love towards her father. Shakespeare's perception of the tragic as inherently bound up with the untranslatability of quality into quantity starts perhaps as early as *The Merchant of Venice*, which, according to István Géher's brilliant argument,⁶⁶ marks, in a certain way, the "discovery" of the tragic in the oeuvre. Here Shakespeare no longer anchors basic conflict or loss in the enigma of adolescent love and chances, as in *Romeo and Juliet*; in Shylock's story he rather measures, on the scale of businessmen and creditors (the "money-masters and merchants," as Stevin would put it) the weight of the human heart as love and - to make it even more "fundamental" – as throbbing flesh, with the conclusion that the more Portia is cruel and merciless in the name of justice and the more she humiliates "the Jew," the greater and the more dignified he becomes. In fact there is a straight line from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* through *The Merchant of Venice*, *Measure for Measure*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* to *The Winter's Tale* along which we may trace Shakespeare's insights into the intricacies of measuring, proportion, exchange, quantity and quality. At the end of this essay, however, by way of a conclusion, we should rather inquire into "fundamental measurements" in the primarily comic context provided by Bottom and by the texts he has invoked.

⁶⁶ Cf. István Géher, *Shakespeare-olvasókönyv. Tükörképünk 37 darabban*. [Reading Shakespeare. The Mirror I Held Up To Us in 37 Pieces.] (Budapest: Cserépfalvi & Szépirodalmi, 1991), pp. 277-287.

One way to interpret fundamental measurements is how Helena, Stevin and we, in our everyday practice, often do: to suppose that we have the adequate means to perceive and to numerically assess the world, while also assuming that even love, which can indeed transform opposing qualities into each other, looks through the mind or reason and not the heart. The other way is how Bottom and Montaigne, with acknowledged indebtedness to Paul, go at the matter: they say, and even incarnate, that we are, “placed at the bottom” and while they insist on the impossibility of translating quality into quantity and on the bankruptcy of human sensation, they also imply that it is some kind of *love* that may transcend and translate the human being. This love also results in knowledge yet the standard of the scale here is my *being* – and, most importantly, it is not *what* and *how much* I *know* that counts but how *I am known*, as well as the degree of my acquaintance and intimacy with the things I may sense both inside and outside the theatre. Hence also the significance of the single truly intimate scene of the play featuring Titania and the ass-headed Bottom. Thus, through intimacy, in Bottom’s, Montaigne’s and Paul’s case, measurements become fundamental not in the sense of “simple” or “universal” but in the sense of “most important,” pertaining to the “bottom” of our being.

If it is true that it is Bottom’s manifold and “polysemous” figure that translates and incarnates the standard against which everything else in the play is measured, then it is also in his transfiguration that we should look for a clue to answer one of our initial questions, namely: how far may we go with the interpretation of a text without the feeling of “distortion”? It seems to me that all distortions are permitted, provided one simultaneously embodies the text: there is no limit to the licensing of translations if we also allow ourselves to be translated.

We will, forever, take out our measuring rods and scales and trust our senses. And we will, forever, acknowledge that our perception is inadequate and that measuring is not in our hands. Yet should we not sometimes also become Christ’s *asses* to bring him, at least, to Jerusalem?