

2 Resonance and Intensity

One of the most difficult aspects of literary experience to describe rigorously is the way in which reading a literary work can create a tone, an atmosphere in the mind that seems to persist long after the pages have been put down. Literature is valued because of this *resonance* which is difficult to articulate or define. The difficulty is twofold, firstly in the graded and variable sense of the phenomenon itself: resonance is not an object but a textured prolonged feeling that can be revived periodically after the initial experience. A sense of significance and personal salience can strike the reader on a first reading, or may emerge only later on, and then several times in ongoing life with different intensities and depths. Secondly, the difficulty in pinning down resonance also lies in the poverty of our analytical apparatus for describing it, in literary criticism. Typically, where the feeling is ever discussed, it is described in impressionistic terms. The vagueness of the discourse reflects and perpetuates the sense of vagueness of the concept. Much of this discussion aims not so much at capturing the notion of resonance descriptively as re-enacting it in the rhetorical texture of the critic's own language.

However, impressionism is a good place to start a more analytical journey, in order here to try to explain the subjective experience that I am talking about, and to generate some key terms. Here is a definition of resonance from a writing-aids website (Kathy Krajco's *Lighthouse Writing Tips*, posted 20 January 2008):

Literary Resonance in the Art of Writing

To 'resonate' literally means to bounce back and forth between two states or places. Resonate comes from the Latin word for 'resound'. In sound, resonance is a prolonged response to something that caused things to vibrate. When sound reverberates, it's resonating within a bounded space, like the body of a guitar. Thunder often resonates/reverberates across an uneven landscape.

Resonance in writing is something that affects us the same way. It's an aura of significance, significance beyond the otherwise insignificant event taking place. It's caused by a kind of psychic reverberation between two times, places, states, or spheres – one common and the other extraordinary. So, for example a Biblical epigraph for a poem about an empty school bus in a snowstorm resonates between the temporal and eternal, lending the bus an aura of cosmic significance.

[. . .]

The end of Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* is a [. . .] study in resonance prolonged to wring the last bit of emotion from you. It resonates like thunder, except that the reverberations get louder and more intense. Subtle, relentless references to the weather establish the main character as a Christ figure going to his death. Similarly, in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the climactic moment brings on a violent thunderstorm, as though this betrayal of a king and father has cosmic implications.

(Krajco 2008)

Resonance in literary reading here focuses on the dual properties of a *prolonged response* and an *aura of significance*. The term clearly draws on its primary usage in mechanics and music. In mechanics, resonance is a feature of oscillating or vibrating objects, where two bodies share a similar or sympathetic structure so that oscillation in one at a particular frequency will cause the other object to vibrate at the same frequency. The way that a tuning fork causes a string on a musical instrument to play the same natural note when held in close proximity is an example. Some instruments – especially Indian stringed instruments like the sitar – have resonant strings which are not plucked or struck directly but sound out in sympathy when a string with the right frequency is played. Different strings will sound not only when the frequency matches but also when a multiple of their shared frequencies matches: these resonances are called *overtones*.

In mechanics, resonance has a measurement of *intensity*, which refers to the size of the variation of the oscillation from a central, normal resting position. Resonance is reduced by *damping*, typically where a separate object with a different structural resonance interferes in the oscillating system, and the speed of the damping effect is measured by the *decay* in the resonance. For example, a musical string struck forcefully can be said to have a higher intensity than one struck gently; a bridge, capo or palming of the instrument will damp down the sound; and a large echoing cavity, such as in a grand piano or acoustic guitar, will reduce or stall the decay in the sound, increasing the *echo* or *persistence*.

When people speak of resonance in texts, it is clear that they are using the term as a metaphorical extension of the mechanical-musical sense, and for

most people this will not be a discourse informed by physics or music theory. In fact, the vagueness of most people's understanding of resonance verges on magical ineffability, which is probably what makes it attractive as an impressionistic term to use for the vague ineffability of the experience. (Notice how Krajco's account above slips easily from acoustic resonance to 'psychic reverberation'.) However, the precise formulations of the mechanics of resonance can be useful here. If people have a sense that literary resonance involves a prolonged response, generating an aura of significance, with sympathetic overtones, from an initially intense moment followed by interference, damping, and decay or persistence, then those are the terms that need to be fixed at the heart of our account.

In this chapter, I suggest an analytical means of discussing the concept of literary resonance, drawing on cognitive scientific principles. The aim is not to recapture or re-enact the feeling of the literary experience but to offer an analytical framework within which this feeling can be discussed. Perhaps surprisingly, my starting point is work on *attention*. Traditionally in cognitive poetics, theories of attention have been deployed in order to account for meaningfulness rather than textural experience. However, I think the mechanisms for describing the semantic significance of attention are the same for experiential texture.

According to a founding principle of cognitive science, higher-level functions (such as literary resonance) are augmentations and adaptations of more basic existing cognitive mechanisms. Readerly attention is evidently at base a matter of visual perception (and there is more research work on visual than auditory perception: see Styles 2006). Therefore textual analogues of aspects of the extensive cognitive science work on visual perception and recognition can be made with some confidence.

The human visual field beyond a few metres' distance is essentially two-dimensional: the stereoscopic effect of our two eyes can make objects jump left or right against the background when they are fairly close, so that one eye effectively sees behind what is blocked from the other eye, but this effect diminishes greatly with distance. The moon follows your car as if fixed to it while driving on a clear night. The trees at the bottom of the garden seem pinned to the sky beyond. The view of a valley from the top of a mountain can seem like a flattened painting, a patchwork or jigsaw of intricate but seamed shapes. The perceptual field arrives in the eye, lensed upside-down, as a flat mosaic of shapes, coloured at the centre, monochrome at the edge, undifferentiated at the levels of significance or meaning. Everything beyond this basic input of tone, colour and shape is given to the view by the cognitive processes of the brain, which delineates objects from the background and from each other, and denotes what is seen with qualitative information. The visual field is rendered as a conceptual space, populated by discrete objects in a constructed foreground and background. The viewer's attention acts either like a spotlight or zoom lens, focusing in turn on one object or another, and

the viewer can be distracted by new, odd or more interesting objects that were either already in the field of view but unregarded, or that come into the attentional space by some means.

There are five key research questions for cognitive psychologists in this area (following Logan 1996). How is space represented? What is an object? What determines the shape of the ‘spotlight’ of attention? How does selection occur within the focus of attention? How does selection between objects occur? There are several issues that have analogues in the literary space that concerns us here, as follows, and these will be addressed in the course of this chapter:

- What is the experiential nature of literary space?
- What are literary objects in this space and what are their properties and edges?
- How is the reader engaged by some features, and then distracted by other features, and what is the effect of the disengagement?
- How does selection for attention account for feelings of alertness, literary intensity and wilful disposition?
- How does a rich field of objects generate a sense of richness in depth in a literary work?

A model of resonant space

The conceptual space generated by reading a literary work, whether a naturalistic description of a scene (most fictional narratives) or a stylised set of propositions (a lyric), is, like most visual encounters, a ‘cluttered array’ (Spelke 1990) in cognitive perceptual terms. That is, it consists of a number of colours, edges, forms and surface textures that are available for processing into recognisable and attended objects: more objects vying for attention than can be assimilated in totality, so that one interpretative configuration or another must be imposed to make sense of what is being experienced. The configuration that is actually chosen will be the product of a moment-by-moment adjustment in which certain elements in the space distract the attention of the reader and others are relatively neglected. (See Figure 2a for a schematic summary, which will be explored with examples throughout this chapter).

Elements that take the viewer’s attention can be termed *attractors*: in the literary sphere, these can be specified stylistically, as set out in the next subsection. An attractor can come to attention by being newly introduced into the literary space, or it can be an existing element that is revived in attentive working memory, again by various stylistic means. Once invoked, attractors can be maintained in focus either positively by certain sustaining techniques, or negatively by the absence of any shift devices. Incidentally, there is some research that suggests that the left hemisphere of the brain dominates

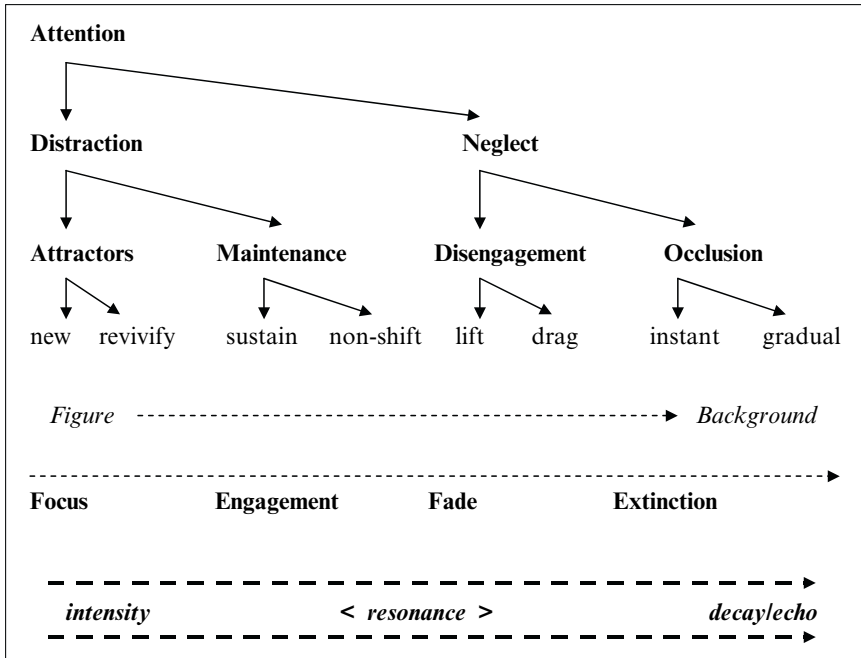


Figure 2a An attention-resonance model

attractor-invocation while sustaining attention is largely the business of the right hemisphere (see Robertson and Manly 1999; Styles 2006: 67–8). The left hemisphere tends to control local and specific interpretations, while the right controls global configurations. Furthermore, the right hemisphere seems to be the dominant one for the entire process of attention: attentional disabilities are more likely to result from right parietal injuries or lesions than left hemisphere ones (Posner 1993; Corbetta et al. 1993). Given the usual specialisation of (crudely) the linguistic left and the emotional right (see Purves et al. 2008), this suggests to me that attention is the right place to look not just for matters of informativity but also and perhaps primarily for emotional experiential matters of literary resonance.

Alternatively to attractors, elements which are either no longer the focus of attention, were never prominent features, or have been deliberately backgrounded can be said to be relatively *neglected*. Neglect can be a matter primarily of readerly disengagement, and this can take the form of a reader consciously *lifting* the element out of the focused domain of awareness: there is a sense that the element is still ‘there’ but is on its way out of focus. Alternatively, the readerly disengagement can be more a matter of attentional *drag*, with a sense that the element is now part of the background but there is still a whiff of it in the air. Lastly, the neglect can seem to be more a

matter of textual patterning, such that another focused element comes to *occlude* the previously focused figure. This occlusion can be instant for an element that is linguistically removed from the scene (for example, by negation or a verb of disappearance, death or removal), or it can be gradual, where the element simply fades away by not being mentioned for a duration of several clauses.

The felt effects of these elements in textual attention are focus, engagement, fading and extinction, which in turn represent a scale of figure and background. Figure/ground in cognitive linguistics and in cognitive poetics tends to be regarded as a polar category, whereas from the perspective of scaled readerly attention, it is a cline of prominence, ranging through degrees of foregrounding into vague, undifferentiated but rich background. Altogether, the scale briefly sketched out above represents a cline of resonance, with striking literary intensity at one end, and decay or echo tailing off into a rich sense of textual resonance towards the other.

Note that, for any practical analysis such as those that follow in this chapter, the attention-resonance model will require the exploration both of linguistic features in the text as well as readerly disposition. The degree of resonance in any given literary reading is not simply a matter of the stylistic power of the text but is also a matter of the reader's intensity of alertness, degree of resistance, or willingness to invest themselves emotionally in the experience. These factors will be also taken up in later chapters in this book.

Literary objects in resonant spaces

In 1929, the Belgian surrealist painter René Magritte (1979) produced a visual essay, 'La poésie est une pipe' (Poetry is a pipe), in which he described the nature of the relationships between drawn objects (such as sketches of a leaf, a boat, a cloud, a tree, and so on), drawn words (such as 'ciel' sky, 'soleil' sun, 'brouillard' fog, and so on), the concepts of those objects in the mind, and the concepts in the mind of the words outside the drawings denoting the objects. This complex of relationships forms the basis of the textural experience of looking at his famous paintings featuring a drawing of a pipe with 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' (This is not a pipe), a painting entitled *La Trahison des Images* (The Treason of Images) 1928, or later an apple above the words 'Ceci n'est pas un pomme' (This is not an apple) 1964, or a whole series of similar word-image canvases in the early 1930s collectively known as *La Clef des Songes* (The Key to Dreams). Magritte was tapping into the early insights of *gestalt* ('shape' or 'form' in German) *psychology*, being developed in the 1920s and 1930s by Max Wertheimer (1958), Wolfgang Köhler (1947, 1959), Kurt Koffka (1935) and others. Much of this work consisted of developing experimental techniques with ordinary informants to discover how objects were recognised and conceptualised, based on the principle of *Prägnanz*

(‘conciseness’, ‘succinctness’, ‘precision’ or generally ‘regularity’). Gestalt psychology still forms the basis of the description of the foregrounding of objects from the perceptual field, though later neuroscience turns this description into an explanation of perceptual processing.

An object is perceived as a figure, out of the mosaic of shapes in the visual field, if it can be resolved along one or more of the following principles (these vary according to author and translation, but they are more or less consistent):

The principle of closure. If an object appears to have a complete and continuous outer circumference, then it is likely to make a good figure. This principle is so strong that perceivers will often mentally complete the circumference of an incomplete shape in order to see it as a closed entity (for example if it is broken, fragmented, or partially hidden from view).

The principle of continuity. This derives from the last observation, in that objects are assumed to continue behind other objects with the same colours, pattern, texture or other properties that can actually be seen. The effect is particularly strong if the blocked object protrudes from both sides of the blocking object, so that the hidden shape behind the blocking object can be guessed.

The principle of proximity. Objects that are grouped together are likely to be perceived as sharing properties, or even as sharing a unified identity.

The principle of similarity. Additionally, objects that look similar to each other will be assumed to be related. Similarity can be perceived on the basis of similarity of shape, colour, size, or function.

The principle of symmetry. Regular, stable or predictable shapes are more easily perceived as figures than irregular, amorphous or protean shapes. This principle underlies the fact that familiarity with a shape will quickly render that shape as a figure, whereas a newly encountered entity might need to be studied before it can be resolved into a perceivable object.

The principle of common fate or function. If two features in the perceptual field change at the same time, are pushed at the same time by something else, are squashed or destroyed simultaneously, change colour or brightness at the same time, or are otherwise apparently connected by the same event, then those features are likely to be treated as parts of the same single object.

Magritte's sketches in the essay illustrate many of these principles in action. Above a drawing of an isometric, three-dimensional view of a brick wall, he asserts that 'Un objet fait supposer qu'il y en a d'autres derrière lui' (An object makes you think that there are other objects behind it). And, 'Or, les contours visibles des objets, dans la réalité, se touchent s'ils formaient une mosaïque' (It seems that the visible edges of objects, in reality, touch each other as if they formed a mosaic), above a sketch of clouds whose edges have been interrupted by a brick wall and a tree. In each of these cases, what we do not see is a mosaic, but different focused elements with a foreground and background. In each, it is easy to see that the furry little outline is a cloud, the regular tiled edge is part of a wall, and the three bare lines are a tree trunk, even though each of these objects is incomplete. However, Magritte also draws the side-profile of a human face, with the jawline edge also serving as the edge of a cloud. Given the objectively equal choice between a cloud and a face, it is much easier to see a face with an odd-shaped elongated beard, rather than a cloud with a facial expression – indicating that there is something more figural in the human shape than the amorphous shape.

In terms of literary discourse, we need to establish what are the features by which we might recognise objects that constitute good figures. In other words, drawing on what we know about the perceptual field, what are likely to be the characteristics of features in a literary text that attract the reader's attention? In line with the principles set out above, good attractors in texts will be referred objects that are presented as having a unified and coherent structure and identity: these are likely to be textualised as noun phrases. Because of a perceptual phenomenon known as the *inhibition of return*, by which the eye gets bored by static unchanging objects and is attracted by variation and newness, current or new objects are likely to make good attractors. Good attractors are also likely to exhibit a textual persistence that is strong enough to overcome the repetitious cause of inhibition of return: that is, they will be maintained in co-reference, perhaps by repeated naming or pronominalisation, by elegant synonym variation, or by verb-chaining. Referred objects are also likely to be good attractors if the verbs to which they are attached are active, positive (in the ordinary sense of the meanings of those verbs rather than in the grammatical senses of these terms) and energetic.

Noun phrases and verbs which describe and imply closeness (literal foregroundedness) are likely to form good attractors. Closeness can be perceived in terms of large volume (near objects are perceptually bigger than distant ones), high volume in terms of noisiness, high volume in terms of brightness and heat. Familiar objects in the visual field are more readily resolved as figures, since a conceptual template is already available, so humans are readily attractive figures in this sense. Furthermore, human speakers (because of their activeness) are better attractors than a description of a hearer; but humans, whether speaking or listening, tend to be more figural than animals; animals are more figural than objects; and objects are more figural than

abstractions, in general. This empathy scale demonstrates that referents are often characterised by more than one feature of attraction. Lastly, motion and spatial relationships are also matters of attentional change. Carstensen (2007: 8) describes attentional change as being a *shift* (which has the effect for the viewer of apparent motion), or a *zoom* (which renders apparent change in size), or a *state change* (in which sudden appearance or newness is the major feature).

Gathering these points together, we can produce a list of the typical features of good textual attractors:

- *newness*
(currency: the present moment of reading is more attractive than the previous moment)
- *agency*
(noun phrases in active position are better attractors than in passive position)
- *topicality*
(subject position confers attraction over object position)
- *empathetic recognisability*
(human speaker > human hearer > animal > object > abstraction)
- *definiteness*
(definite ('the man') > specific indefinite ('a certain man') > non-specific indefinite ('any man'))
- *activeness*
(verbs denoting action, violence, passion, wilfulness, motivation or strength)
- *brightness*
(lightness or vivid colours being denoted over dimness or drabness)
- *fullness*
(richness, density, intensity or nutrition being denoted)
- *largeness*
(large objects being denoted, or a very long elaborated noun phrase used to denote)
- *height*
(objects that are above others, are higher than the perceiver, or which dominate)
- *noisiness*
(denoted phenomena which are audibly voluminous)
- *aesthetic distance from the norm*
(beautiful or ugly referents, dangerous referents, alien objects denoted, dissonance).

This inventory gives us a checklist of parameters to trace through a literary text. Note that the categories cut across traditional linguistic matters, with

grammatical notions at the top and experiential notions towards the end. A consequence of adopting a cognitive linguistic perspective is that grammar and experience are not separate categories. Another oddity about the list is that the degree of attraction is affected both by the nature of the object and by the relationship of that object to other elements in the field of attention. The relative status of non-figured objects as they are placed or fade into the background is relevant: for example, a moment of brightness in a text can be enhanced by a description of dimness in the co-text.

These features can be used to observe the techniques in the following examples.

When You Are Old

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep.

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true;
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

William Butler Yeats (1893)

The intuitive resonance of this poem for many readers lies in the subdued, melancholy and nostalgic tone set up in the first half, to be followed then by a more poignant and startling sense of sadness and loss towards the end. The poem works mainly by exploiting specific attractors along several dimensions, some simultaneously and others sequentially. On the dimension of brightness, the poem begins by dimming down the background ('grey', 'soft', 'shadows'), and it draws in parallel on the backgrounding potential of the scale of height (here, dimness is echoed by down-ness in 'nodding', 'take down', 'deep'), and the contrary, inactive end of the scale of activeness ('old', 'sleep', 'slowly'). The other terms here are affected by their proximity to these general qualities: 'old' here is construed as slow, sad and weak rather than experienced, contented and wise; the invocation of books and reading is rendered passive and patient; and readers with whom I have informally discussed the poem report a mental picture of the fire as a grate of glowing embers rather than a blazing hearth, which confirms the same resonant effect. (Incidentally, a reading of

'glowing bars' as an electric bar heater on low power works as well but is historically inaccurate, these fireplaces only being invented in 1892, the same year that the poem was composed.) By contrast, the human speaker of the first stanza is figured strongly, relatively defined by the backgrounded, inactive, listening 'you'. The implicit speaking 'I' of the poem is made somewhat more explicit in the deictic (and close) reference to 'this book'.

The second stanza continues to set up a subdued background, with non-specific 'How many' and abstractions 'glad grace' and 'beauty'. The agency of the verb *love* is pluralised and made indefinite by these first two lines, only for the strong figural attractor of 'one man' in the third line to enter very forcefully. This force is enhanced by the fact that the active human and specific agent of 'one man' occurs after a series of abstractions ('grace', 'beauty', 'love', and falsity and truth – the latter reversed from its usual idiomatic sequence ('true or false') so that 'true' is linked proximally with 'one man'). The figuration is signalled by 'But', and this pivotal attentional moment occurs exactly in the middle of the poem. The 'you' character is relatively backgrounded by all this patterning, such that even the suggestion that the 'you' is in motion on a journey is carried not by a verb-element but by the meaning of the modifier in 'pilgrim soul', which is statically located 'in' you, and then by the modifier in 'changing face'. In the final stanza, though the 'you' is the actor in bending down and murmuring, this actor is profiled passively: the grammar of the first two lines here picks up the agency structure of the first stanza, where 'bending down' and 'murmur' are positioned at the same deictic level as 'nodding', and 'take down . . . , . . . read, and dream'.

The brightness and activity contrast is worth tracing here. The poem dims down the future moment of old age in the first stanza, in order to enhance the memory of a past love in the second; then at the beginning of the third stanza it dims down the old-age future again using the same elements as previously (down-ness and dimness in 'bending down' and 'glowing bars'), and it simultaneously makes the poem quiet ('Murmur') and diminishes the intensity and specificity of feeling ('a little sadly'). The quiet, dim, small and sad scene is thus reset after the brief contrastive figuration of 'one man's' love, in order to explode in a flurry of volume, action and light over the final three lines of the poem. An abstraction ('Love') is pulled leftwards on the empathy scale by personification, becoming a rich attractor especially conjoined with the most active verbs yet, 'fled And paced'. The down-ness and dimness is replaced by height and brightness 'upon the mountains', which are even explicitly related to the human scale 'overhead', underlining the personification of 'Love' and reinvoking the human attractor end of the empathy scale. The third verb 'hid' and 'his face' enhance all of this again, and the noise, brightness, height and dissonance of the final metaphor are all simultaneously fired by 'amid a crowd of stars'.

The poem thus finishes with a startling and striking metaphorical image that many readers find resonant, its force intensified by the relative calming

of the attentional background (and the power of newness always remains on final lines for longer than any preceding lines because nothing appears next to distract attention). Of course, the grammatical anomalies across the stanza boundaries point to the poignancy of the situation being invoked by the poem. In spite of the full-stop at the end of the first stanza, the next line, 'How many. . .', could easily follow grammatically on from the first sentence (and indeed sounds exactly as if it did on a spoken reading). Similarly, there is a grammatical disjunction at the start of the third stanza, where 'bending' picks up the addressed 'you' of the first stanza, interrupted by the memory of the past. That apparent past (when 'one man loved the pilgrim soul in you') is actually in the present moment of utterance of the poem, in which the speaker (in most readings strongly identified with that 'one man') imagines a distant future of lonely old age for you, because you did not grasp the opportunity now in your near-future for loving him back. You could forestall the most attentionally-arresting image of desperate loss in the final two lines, if you heed the implicit plea of the poem as a whole. The quiet, indirect speaker (both the unarticulated 'I' and the strongly suggested 'one man') and the addressee 'you' imagined in your old age, are swept from the scene in the third person personification and dissonant final image. The poem leaves you there – it does not return you temporally either to the present moment nor to the imagined distant future – in the suspended, awful, striking and emotionally intense possible time which is the immediate consequence of the opportunity you now, back in your current life after the poem, have to grasp.

The striking and resonant phrases in this poem, when readers are asked what springs to mind, tend to come from the following set: 'dream of the soft look your eyes had once', 'moment of glad grace', 'the pilgrim soul in you', 'how Love fled', 'And paced upon the mountain overhead', and 'hid his face amid a crowd of stars'. The relative prominence or focus, the strength of these attractors, in different permutations, account for most readings of the poem. For example, another reading of the poem profiles the dimness, age and down-ness in the first stanza as evocative of a moment of extreme old age near death. The religious connotations of several phrases ('glad grace', 'love false or true', 'pilgrim soul') suggest a speaker who is the dead partner of the addressee (referring back to his younger, living self as the 'one man' who grew old with you). In this reading, the personification of 'Love' combines the abstraction as a blend with the actual younger living man; in contrast with the dim interior fireside scene, the speaker refers to himself in an exterior and infinite space, between mountains and stars amongst crowds, where he has passed into heaven. This reading is less nostalgic and more anticipatory, but it remains within the profiling possibilities of the attentional patterning scheme outlined above.

Once this sort of analysis is undertaken, certain patterns emerge in literary texts that are surprising. For example, it is interesting how many literary texts owe their cognitive mechanics to the manipulation of light and shade. The

fact that so many writers intuitively dim down the background in order to enhance the figural attractors in their texts suggests that this sort of visual contrast is deep-seated in perceptual consciousness. For example, here is Milton describing a dream of his dead wife:

Sonnet XXIV

Methought I saw my late espoused Saint
 Brought to me like *Alcestis* from the grave,
 Whom *Joves* great Son to her glad Husband gave,
 Rescu'd from death by force though pale and faint.
 Mine as whom washt from spot of child-bed taint
 Purification in the old Law did save,
 And such as yet once more I trust to have
 Full sight of her in Heav'n without restraint,
 Came vested all in white, pure as her mind:
 Her face was veild, yet to my fancied sight
 Love, sweetness, goodness in her person shin'd
 So clear, as in no face with more delight.
 But O as to embrace me she enclin'd
 I wak'd, she fled, and day brought back my night.

John Milton (1658)

Dimness and paleness dominate the first half of the poem, in explicit denotations such as 'pale and faint', by reference to dirt and stains, and by conventional association with graves and death. The brightness is suddenly turned up at the beginning of the second half of the poem:

Full sight of her in Heav'n without restraint,
 Came vested all in white, pure as her mind: . . .

Denotational brightness ('white') is matched with associated brightness and whiteness ('pure'), accompanied by a cue to the full visual perspective ('sight'), together with high-volume ('without restraint') fullness ('full', and 'all in'). These all appear as elements around the active verb 'came vested'. The next few lines maintain and increase the light: 'shin'd', 'clear', '(de)light'. The contrastive lighting is paralleled by a series of three metaphorical comparisons ('like *Alcestis*', 'as . . . the old Law', 'as yet . . . in Heaven'), which evoke pagan pre-history, the Old Testament, and the heavenly promise of salvation in the New Testament. The comparison phrase ('as') continues to evoke his wife's 'mind' and 'face', but the final occurrence ('as to embrace me . . .') denotes an intention (the metaphorical meaning of 'enclin'd') that is never realised. The reversals of the dream vision are captured in the sudden shift to active verbs ('enclin'd' as material action, 'wak'd', and 'fled'), and the

dissonant paradox, ‘day brought back my night’. This, of course, draws on a metaphor of the darkness of night as emotional darkness, but biographically also refers to Milton’s blindness where his days were also literally dark. (See Stockwell 2002b for further analysis.)

Engagement, depth and distraction

In the two analyses above of Yeats and Milton, I have indicated the common phenomenon whereby one dimension of resonant force (brightness, in both cases) is paralleled by other dimensions operating to the same polarity. So an increase in brightness is often co-located with large volume, noisiness, activity, involved agency, empathetic identification, and so on. Even where the accompanying elements in the close co-text are not in themselves aligned with these scales, the force of the attractor phrases is often so deeply intense that other parts of the text become coloured by the same perceptual quality. This is analogous to the halo effect that a bright white object confers on other light objects nearby, in visual terms. For example, in the Yeats poem, ‘old’ is lined up as a feature of slowness and sadness, rather than any of the other, more positive possible connotations of the term in general: the grounded elements in the text are given overtones by the presence of strong resonant attractors. This can be seen in the following famous sonnet by Shakespeare

Sonnet 18

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

William Shakespeare (published 1609)

A hugely popular poem generally read as a straightforward declaration of love, this is also one of those several sonnets by Shakespeare that are as much, if not more, focused on the talent of the writer and the memorial