



“But Ah”

In *English Literature of the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (1954), C. S. Lewis makes a surprising claim about the final line of Philip Sidney's Sonnet 71: “But ah, desire still cries, ‘Give me some food.’”¹ Lewis writes that Sidney's skill as a poet is evidenced not by the artistry of the line that he wrote, but by the artistry of any number of lines that he did not write. “In almost any other poet,” Lewis claims, “the first thirteen lines would have the air of being a mere ‘build up’ for the sake of the last. But Sidney's sonnet might have ended quite differently and still been equally, though diversely, admirable.”² Those first thirteen lines, Lewis insists, have a value that is neither actualized nor diminished by the pivot of “But ah.” Lewis invites us to imagine that Sonnet 71 might have ended differently. What else might desire have said? Or who else might have spoken in the final lines that could have been but were not written, lines that would have “still been equally, though diversely, admirable”? The poem offers little evidence with which to elaborate this imaginative exercise. The preceding lines of the poem appear to shut the whole thing down. Syntactically unnecessary to the sentence which comes before, the “But” that opens Sidney's final line comes out of nowhere—as if, if not for the conventional form of the sonnet, Astrophil might have kept a lid on the “cries” of “desire.”

But even as Lewis insists on the integrity of those first thirteen lines, the persistent “cries” of “desire” resurface still in Lewis's prose. The sentence with which Lewis declares the independent value of those first thirteen lines, as well as the interchangeability of the final line with any number of other, unwritten final lines, begins with “But” and attributes to the poem's aesthetic value the same temporality that characterizes the “cries” of

“desire.” “Still,” for Lewis, describes a capacious theory of aesthetic value that turns not on the necessity of the poem as it was, is, and always will be, but on a formal contingency that includes what the poem “is” as merely one possibility among an admirable many. Lewis’s own prose is missing the “ah” of Sonnet 71. He is busy pinning down the idea that we can admire what a poet was capable of writing in addition to what that poet wrote. But I think we can still hear what Rachel Eisendrath describes as thought, looking in the face of what is not thought, only to absorb what is not thought back into thought itself.

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NOTES

1. Philip Sidney, *The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), line 14.
2. C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 329.