“All Come In”: Penshurst as David’s Tabernacle

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This essay will begin to address certain problems of genre and some implications of the religious and historical subtexts in Ben Jonson’s “To Penshurst.” Two quotations from John Shawcross’s Intentionality and the New Traditionalism ratify its thinking. First, “The literary work is not simply words in some kind of appearance on the page: the reader’s apprehension of those words and that page are important, but so is the reader’s awareness of the words and the totality of its parts, and awareness of the words and the totality or parts depends on both the reader as individual and on what has been put into the work under scrutiny by the author” (3). The condition of critics is that of the blind men and the elephant, and yet Shawcross asks us to pull on every possible pachydermate appendage, a difficult and yet necessary veterinary exploration. And second, “Authorial presence means that the author has fashioned a piece of literature, has set up the words . . . in some arrangement . . . within a form” (13). Fashioning, setting up, and arrangement of words do not mean today exactly what they meant in Ben Jonson’s time. It is the reader’s further responsibility to acknowledge intentional form within its historical context before adventuring into modern critical waters.

Both of these statements point directly to Augustine, however unfashionable his poetics now may be.¹ I read “To Penshurst” in the light of premodern Augustinian poetics, a task that entails habits rather different from those generally employed by the modern reader, mandating that one subordinate the habit of deriving primary meaning from sequential textual order to an overview of the work. This process entails identification and serious consideration of the poem’s structural subtexts. The aim is to view the work in terms of the formal and aesthetic expectations that its maker sought to satisfy as well as in terms of the circumstances and milieu of its writing. There is still room both for the poem’s discursive surface—literal references, tone, theme, and image, cultural and historical references, rhetorical strategies—and for consideration of its structural subtexts. But prior consideration of the poem’s historical and structural intentionality can go some way to preventing a critical misreading.

Until recently, two critical approaches have dominated criticism of “To Penshurst”: one largely appreciative and the other generic,
since the poem has been perceived as a paradigmatic example of a new genre, the country house poem, which arose in the sixteenth-century and had expired or mutated by the eighteenth. The matter has given rise to a body of criticism that is both fruitful and conflicting---a healthy sign for continued study of the poem. Early on, source studies identified a debt to the classics, principally to Martial's Epigram III and the Horatian beatus ille tradition (Fowler, "Locality" 115). Paul Cubeta in 1963 and William A. McClung in 1977 established a critical norm that identified "To Penshurst" as the prime exemplar of the tradition with its motifs of hospitality, flirtatious fish, ripe daughters, praise of buildings and grounds. Measuring idealized country life against urban corruption, Penshurst was placed against the extravagant show house creations of the Elizabethan "new men": Cecil's Theobalds, Hatton's Holdenby, and Howard's Audley End among others. In effect, the country house poem was to be read "in the context of England and of history and recognized as a fundamental unit of the English body politic" (McClung 105). It proved to be a popular, if short-lived, genre: Alastair Fowler in The Country House Poem has listed some seventy-seven examples, all but eight postdating "To Penhurst." Prominent among these are Thomas Carew's "To Saxham" and "To my friend G. N. from Wrest," Robert Herrick's "A Panegyric to Sir Lewis Pemberton" and Marvell's "Upon Appleton House."3

Positioning "To Penshurst" as a kind of Urtext has its drawbacks. For one thing, the poem tends to be read discursively in terms of narrow generic expectations---classical reflections, aristocratic hospitality, praise of architecture, landscape, and patron, and so forth. This can lead to rather restricted perceptions, particularly given Jonson's deceptive simplicity.4 As John Shawcross has pointed out, his poetry seems to yield easily to a first reading, needing little explication (unless it concerns obscure historical reference) and blessedly clear of the convolutions of poets like Donne. And any religious element seems briefly and sparsely put (88). But such a predictive reading stems from lexical and linear rather than morphological apprehension of the poem. Form can be approached impressionistically, more often than not taking its cue from theme and metaphor (or, more recently, from theoretical and political desiderata), and its analysis is often limited to prosody or adherence to classical practice. But Shawcross in his definition of genre---"a literary piece of writing that takes on a form (or structure)")---defines structure as "a spatial form with perhaps some geometric principles . . . that may be defined by