

## Teaching Shakespeare's Sonnets: time as *fracture* in sonnets 18, 60 and 63

Miguel Martínez López

UNIVERSITY OF GRANADA

Literary studies on the *Sonnets* before the seventies were usually part of larger works on Shakespeare or on the sonnet. Specialization and detailed analyses of individual and groups of sonnets is absolutely necessary before attempting any further generalizations, which so far have led nowhere.<sup>1</sup> In this paper I suggest a possible approach to the discussion of Shakespeare's poetic stance as regards the intellectual metamorphosis of human apprehension of time at the dawn of the Modern Age. My reading and analysis of three of the «time-sonnets» (nos. 18, 60 & 73) is set within the context of a final-year or graduate class, minimally fluent in rhetoric, in basic medieval and Renaissance philosophy and in the intellectual history of this period.<sup>2</sup>

My central contention is that Shakespeare superbly epitomizes in his poetry and drama the fear of death resulting from a radical change in the apprehension of time: *time passus* (the form typical of the M. A.) becomes now *time fractus*.<sup>3</sup> Humankind is and has always been fearful of death (the ultimate consequence of the passing of time) but there is a historical period -broadly between the mid-fourteenth century and the mid-seventeenth century- in which existential anguish has been at its highest. For three centuries, a series of endless calamities assaulted Europe: the Black Death, the Hundred-Year War, the invasions of the Turks, the Great Schism of the Reformation... . In the Autumn of the M. A., Huizinga perceived a generalized pessimistic feeling about the supposed immediacy of the Apocalypse. Especially between 1575 and 1625, these generalized fears concentrated on the fear of the Devil, a strange awe that also took hold of the representatives of the governing establishment. These are the years of composition of *Dr. Faustus*, *Macbeth*, *Las Novelas Ejemplares*, and a myriad of theoretical treatises on the Devil, of which William Perkins' *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft* and Matthew Hopkins' *The Discovery of Witches*<sup>4</sup> are just two popular titles.

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<sup>1</sup> Neugebauer, A. 1970: The Sonnets. *Shakespeare's Survey* 15: 18. «Wholesale interpretations of the sonnets will have to give place to a careful examination of individual sonnets or natural groups of them before new syntheses, based both on historical considerations and on assessments of intrinsic merits, can be profitably attempted».

<sup>2</sup> There is no need to justify either the importance of the *Sonnets* in Shakespeare's literary production or the convenience of including them in any syllabi of English Renaissance literature; critical literature on Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, on the other hand, is second only to *Hamlet's*, so students should be carefully guided through the critical maze. Good introductions to the *Sonnets* useful for our approach here can be found in the following texts: Muir, K. 1979: *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. London: G. Allen & Unwin. Turner, F. 1971: *Shakespeare and the Nature of Time: Moral and Philosophical Themes in Some Plays and Poems of W. Shakespeare*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. Booth, S. 1969: *An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets*. New Haven, CT.: Yale U. P. Leishman, J. B. 1961: *Themes and Variations in Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Rpt. 1963, London: Hutchinson. Abad García, M<sup>a</sup> P. 1986: Shakespeare y el Soneto. Susana Onega ed. *Estudios Literarios Ingleses. Renacimiento y Barroco*. Madrid: Cátedra, 241-278.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of this problem of time in the Renaissance, see Waller, G. F. 1976: *The Strong Necessity of Time: The Philosophy of Time in Shakespeare and Elizabethan Literature*. The Hague-Paris: Mouton.

<sup>4</sup> About this, see Delumeau, J. 1978: *El Miedo en Occidente (Siglos XIV-XVIII. Una Ciudad Sitiada)*. Madrid: Taurus, 307-8; 374.

As with poets, it is expected of teachers to help students make sense «of the ways we try to make sense of our lives.»<sup>1</sup> Whether we believe there was a  $t=0$ , that the world is eternal, that it was created or that time will eventually cease, everybody shares some interest in -some call it necessity- of relating human existence to a beginning and an end. Nobody remembers the moment of birth and no one can realistically anticipate the moment of his or her death. When we are born, as well as when we die, we find ourselves *in mediis rebus*. Indeed, human existence is far from being a *status termini*, like that of the rock or the sea, that *are* but do not *exist* because to exist is to consciously self-relate. Human existence is thus a task, a process, a state of fulfilling or begetting (*Geschehen*) and this human generating acts in time constitute human history (*Geschichte*). Therefore, a human being is never «finished» until he or she dies, i.e., when he or she ceases to be; and History will not be over until there are no more souls on earth to count time. *Human* then is synonym of *possible*, the possibility of being that exists threatened by the certainty that our possibilities end up in nothingness, that is in death. Shakespeare's position about this issue is not exactly conventional. While it is true that he uses the conventions of Renaissance literature, the immense complexity of his answer is often by-passed or simply ignored. In Shakespeare's sonnets, we find a scope that ranges from self-confidence in Sonnet 18 («So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, / So long lives this and this gives life to thee», l. 13-14) to humble resignation, in the vein of Senecan Stoicism (may be also in an attitude of defiance) in Sonnet 146 («So shalt thou feed on Death, that feeds on men / And death once dead, there's no more dying then»). Through a poetry of profundity and resonance, the Bard successfully expressed the paradox of time and the paradox of life as a «heroic frenzy» against the limitations of human existence.<sup>2</sup> In Shakespeare's time sonnets<sup>3</sup> we will meet Shakespeare's sonneteer convention of the poem as a speaking picture, where pain, love and beauty are omnipresent subjects of the portrait, a portrait that is, in a sense, eternal. Mainly through paradox, oxymoron and alliteration, Shakespeare emphasizes, in the form of abstraction and idealism inherited from Neoplatonism, the essential antithesis that lies at the core of human life: eros vs. charitas, possibility vs. reality, progress vs. perfection, time vs. eternity ...

#### TIME PASSUS VS. TIME FRACTUS

One of the greatest meditations on time ever written is in the eleventh chapter of St. Augustine's *Confessions* and Frank Kermode has linked it to *Macbeth*, illustrating the variety of meanings that the word «time» presents in Shakespeare's plays.<sup>4</sup> Time in the *Confessions* ultimately is not astronomical or psychological, but mystical: it is a timeless awareness of the eternal. «Successiveness and multiplicity are simply the experience of the soul in the flux of

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. Kermode, F. 1967: *The Sense of an Ending*. Oxford: OUP., p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> «Implicit in Shakespeare's moral viewpoint are certain theological presuppositions, inasmuch as his philosophy is not confined to the earthly life of man, but "Like to the lark at break of day arising / From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate" (*Sonnet 29*). [...] Deep in his poems and his plays is a divine impatience with the limitations of "this vile world" (*Sonnet 71*; *Henry VI Part II* v. 2), "sad mortality" (*Sonnet 65*) and "devouring Time" (*Sonnet 19*; *Love's Labour Lost* i, 1) [...] If the moral philosophy of Shakespeare may be said to consist, like that of Socrates, in the task of preparing for a good death - as in Hamlet's "The readiness is all" (v.2) and Edgar's "Ripeness is all" (*King Lear* v.2); [sic] his theology may be seen as having its point of departure in the consideration of death itself and what lies beyond. In this respect, he follows the popular (as distinct from the scholastic) tradition of theology, which may be called a theology of "the four last things"-death, judgement, hell, and heaven. [...] Shakespeare's testament, to which he attached his signature, reads: "I commend my soul into the hands of God my Creator, hoping and assuredly believing through the only merits of Jesus Christ my Saviour to be made partaker of life everlasting, and my body to the earth whereof it is made"». Cfr. Milward, P. 1973: *Shakespeare's Religious Background*. Chicago: Loyola U. P., p. 244-6.

<sup>3</sup> Common classifications of the sonnets suggest thirty-four within the general «tempus edax rerum» theme and, out of these, ten within «Poetry vs. Time» (Nos. 18, 19, 54, 55, 60, 63, 65, 74, 81 & 107). Cfr. Pérez Romero, C. 1987: *Monumentos de Amor: Sonetos de Shakespeare*. Cáceres: Universidad de Extremadura, p. 14. See also John Benson's classification of our sonnets as «Imperious Time» in his octavo edition of 1640.

<sup>4</sup> Kermode, F. 1971: *Shakespeare, Spenser, Donne*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, p. 188; see also, by the same author, the above quoted *The Sense of an Ending*, p. 84-89.



do measure them. The consequence is that I can only measure time once and because it has passed. Therefore, I do not measure the quantity of the syllables proper but what in my memory is left of them. It is in the spirit, in the soul, that we perceive and measure time. We measure the quantity/length of a long syllable through the quantity of a short syllable and we say that it is double; we measure the length of a poem through the number and length of its lines; and the length of a line through the number of its feet, and the length of the feet through the quantity/length of its syllables. St. Augustine once said of time that he knew what it was, if not asked, but, when asked, he did not know. If nothing passed away, he said, there would be no past; if nothing succeeded there would be no future; if nothing existed there would be no present. All we know is that the past is no longer and the future is not yet; and the present, if it remained present, would not be time but eternity, its very opposite. Of these considerations, Augustine concluded that time exists inasmuch as it tends not to exist: if, in order that the present be present and not eternity, it has to change into past, we must admit that the reason for being of the present is in its ceasing to exist as present. Therefore, time exists inasmuch as it tends not to exist.

A key concept of time experienced as duration is «change», and «change» was traditionally synonym of «imperfection»; perfection, on the contrary, lies in the permanence of beauty, in the eternal return of the cycles of nature. The Renaissance world had learned the lessons of change and mutability and it had learned them the hard way: the earth was no longer static but moved through space; the boundaries of the earth and the centrality of the West were now blurred as a result of the voyages of discovery; where were the Adams and Eves of the New Found World? Instability and change were the keys to a society that could no longer believe uncritically in the traditional image of life as passage, as pilgrimage from birth to the other world through death on which medieval eschatology had largely rested throughout the M.A. The Renaissance intellectual reacted against these feelings of instability in various ways. Against the excess in the number and the complexity in the nature of the questions and the limitations of the answers available, he went back to the classics and indulged in the philosophy of the *carpe diem* and in the three *libidos*: *libido sciendi*, *libido sentiendi* and *libido dominandi*. Everything came down to a desperate thirst for immortality of any kind, that had to be achieved at any cost. Shakespeare and his generation were fully conscious of the fact that they also shared the path, the speed and the force that drives men towards the same goal, towards the ultimate solitude of death; they may be *sleeping*, *living*, *writing*, but can never be properly *dying*, because death is fully «perfective», the present that never turns into past, the end of possibility and the end of history, for all that matters. These thoughts are especially upsetting to the intellectual avant-garde of a generation that was no longer sure of anything, even less of a tragically timeless present, which -in Montaigne's words- is not what we arrive at through linear time,<sup>1</sup> but «one single now» that «fills the ever» (*Essays*, I, 22). Besides, Shakespeare's personality is bent towards tragedy and thus, in a way, turned into tragedy everything he touched, both in his poetry and in his plays.

#### TIME AS «FRACTUS» IN SONNETS 18, 60 AND 73

SONNET 18 (FROM SHAKESPEARE'S «SONNETS»)<sup>2</sup>

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:

<sup>1</sup> About the rejection of the medieval vision of linear time, see: Panofsky, E. 1985: *Ensayos de Iconografía*. Madrid: Alianza, p. 115-130: «Pero a esta concepción circular se superpone, sobre todo en los niveles más cultivados de la sociedad, una noción pesimista del tiempo. Para los europeos del inicio de los tiempos modernos, éste apenas si tiene algo que ver con las alegrías terrenas. No incita a proyectos. No dirige hacia un progreso material (o espiritual) en este mundo. Es, por el contrario, el viejo amenazador de los *Trionfi* de Petrarca. El Renacimiento lo asimiló progresivamente al siniestro Saturno. [...] Desde luego «alimenta», pero también «reduce a la nada todo lo que existe».

<sup>2</sup> The text of the sonnets follows Dover Wilson, J. 1966: *The Sonnets*. Rpt. 1985; Cambridge: CUP, although I have modernized v & u and j & i. Dover Wilson's and M. Seymour-Smith's are probably the best modern editions of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and the only two that keep the original spelling and punctuation.

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 wand'rst 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.

The three sonnets share the same central theme -the destructive power of time and the permanence of poetry- and they all elaborate on the Ovidian convention of the «Tempus edax rerum»;<sup>1</sup> however, they vary considerably in the means employed to portray the poet's anxious apprehension of time as fracture.<sup>2</sup>

The rhetorical question at the beginning of Sonnet 18 relates the human experience of time to nature. Cyclic conceptions of time are closer to timelessness than linear theories, of the type predominant in the M. A. From the very start, the poet links the beauty of the loved one to the cycle of the seasons; summer days are the shortest of the year and thus the comparison of life to this season already conveys an early glimpse of the ephemeral. The beloved one transcends the warmth and beauty of the season and sharply contrasts with the «rough winds» of time that «shake the darling buds of May», i.e., against youth and beauty. A metaphor drawn from the laws of tenure, «summer's lease hath all too short a date» -after those of Sidney's *Astrophel & Stella* 18- ends the first quatrain with an abstract reference to the ephemeral nature of time: «summer's lease», the amount of time of human life, regardless of the moment of the illocution, is always too short. Life, under the dictatorship of time, becomes a mere lease agreement with nature. This realization produces anger because it implicitly negates the belief that human beings can shape their own lives and destinies, that freedom indeed exists; the teaching of the Reformers and the image of the wheel of fortune maintained the same discouraging theses.

Shakespeare was probably in his thirties or forties when he wrote most of his sonnets, and by the standards of his age it is only natural that he should feel rather tired and old. The problem of time is not so much that it passes -and very quickly too- but that it lets one know and experience the anticipation of the end. Strife for life and awareness of the mutability and of the consequences of the passage of time -the perishable nature of the humane- is always very present in Shakespeare's works.

The second quatrain substitutes the simile of life and summer by that of sun and life. Shakespeare follows the conventional idea that the sun -referred to, in this case, through the metaphor «the eye of heaven»- is a positive source of energy and life, while night -after the

<sup>1</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XV, 234; other classic sources commonly attributed to Shakespeare's sonnets are: Ovid's *Tristia*, IV, vi and the Horatian «exegi momentum».

<sup>2</sup> Before close-reading the poems, students should be familiar with basic information about Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, among which: 1. Editions: although the basic editorial work had been completed as early as 1780 by Malone, see: Rollins, H. E. 1944: *Shakespeare's Sonnets. New Variorum*, 2 vols. 2. Text: earliest and most authoritative is Thomas Thorpe's *Shake-Speare's Sonnets*, 1609, in Quarto. John Benson's *Poems: Written by Wil. Shake-speare. Gent.* in Octavo manipulates the text to present the male addressee as female and arbitrarily groups the sonnets under headings of his own invention. 3. Date of composition: most of them, probably, between 1597 and 1603; Shakespeare was probably in his forties and feeling old. 4. Sources: Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Italian Cinquecento sonnets, Sidney's *Arcadia*, etc.

Biblical texts- carries the connotation of physical and moral danger. The night is «the kingdom of darkness», the negation of all that exists. The beauty of «the eye of heaven», like the beauty of all that lives, is bound to be dimmed, though. The paradox implicit in the eye that cannot see (l. 4-5) is sustained in line 7, when the poet laments that «every fair from fair sometime declines»; the very same dimension that gives us a world of possibilities, of opportunities, of gifts and beauty and enables us to use them so that we will be happy, later kills us. Shakespeare offers variations on this same paradox in sonnets 60 («And time that gave does now its gift confound»), 73 («Consumed with that which it was nourished by») and others. The reason, quite simply, is that the wages of living is changing, and change is only possible in one single direction, i.e., for the worse.

The third quatrain, the opening of the sextet, tries to find an escape from the inevitability of death through the affirmation of the permanence of beauty contained in the metaphor of the «eternal summer». The poet builds up tension and expectation through holding back what is for him the key to timeless existence: in order to escape the consequences of time, the beloved will have to become him or herself time in the eternal lines of poetry. The ambiguity of the term «lines» that may stand for both, poetry and wrinkles, superbly expresses the upheld antithesis of the contradictory nature of all that is created and thus subject to change. Nevertheless, that way death will not be able to «brag thou wander'st in his shade», and thus the battle for survival will not be completely lost. The violence of the confrontation, the anger and terror at the thought of death, the repulsion and feeling of fracture it produces, are perfectly represented in the series of negative clauses and in the semantics of the verbs «untrimmed», «lose» and «brag». The poet regains a sense of balance at the end of the poem, when the final couplet is reached: Shakespeare's faith in the permanence of his poetry offers his beloved, the subject of his verse, a peculiar form of immortality, since his or her beauty will be preserved at least until the end of time, until the end of history. The alliteration of /s/ and the oblique reference to poetry through the repetition of the deictic («this») supply an air of mystery and silence that reminds the reader that the art of creation, the literary act, is indeed an act of remembrance.

#### SONNET 60

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,  
 So do our minutes hasten to their end,  
 Each changing place with that which goes before,  
 In sequent toil all forwards do contend.  
 Nativity once in the main of light,  
 Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crowned,  
 Crookéd eclipses 'gainst this glory fight,  
 And Time that gave does now its gift confound.  
 Time doth transfix the flourish set of youth,  
 And delves the parallels in beauty's brow,  
 Feeds on the rarities of Nature's truth,  
 And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow.  
 And yet to times in hope, my verse shall stand  
 Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand.

While keeping part of the imagery of sonnet 18 («lines / wrinkles» and «light / darkness»), sonnet 60 represents one step forward towards abstraction and self-awareness of the universality of the issues at stake. The opening simile («Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore, / So do our minutes hasten to their end») is based on an image of water as a sign of death, typical of this period. From Homer to Shakespeare, the worst of all kinds of death is that of drowning, being swallowed by the waves. Death by water is unnatural. Dying is often conceived in literature as a voyage through water; thus, the Stygian Pool, where the River Styx ends: this is the river of sadness, the path of darkness and synonym of sin in the Greek and Christian traditions as well as in classical mythology. It is the river that leads to the infernal regions of the middle of the earth.

Another classic example is Caronte's ship of death, the ship of the dead. Shakespeare is particularly keen on this image, which he uses repeatedly in his poetry and drama. River and sea-water, for the Bard, symbolize physical and moral annihilation: Ophelia surely commits suicide by failing to save herself having fallen into the river, while Gonzago, in *The Tempest*, prefers the most inhospitable land to the ocean.<sup>1</sup> In Shakespeare's sonnet 60, the minutes are compared to the waves and the end of life to the death of waves in a pebbled shore. There is an ineluctable sequence, a permanent change, that disguises itself in the form of repetition -one wave after the other, one minute after the other «in sequent toil», life after life, generation after generation-; and there is weariness and pain too in their struggle -«all forwards do contend»-. The personal referent of the *Sonnets* has disappeared and will not return until the very last line of the poem, where the beloved one is mentioned as the poetic addressee of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*.

The second quatrain concisely explores the ages of human life, emphasizing the repulsion that humans feel towards change and its immediate consequence, ageing. The verb «crawl» -like Grendel's «gliding in the black night, the walker in darkness»- bears unpleasant connotations that link the passage of time to the Biblical devil of the O.T. embodied in the serpent of *Genesis*. On the other hand, human life in this world is seen as a «crawling», slowly dragging the body towards death. The moment of maturity is represented as a particularly ephemeral one, in a participial clause that introduces, as soon as it is over, the battle that «Crooked eclipses 'against his glory fight». We are back again to the fear of a fading sun that leaves humankind in darkness and thus in anguish before an invisible reality that can be felt but not seen in any clear way. The end of the second quatrain is marked by a lapidary phrase that finds in the perfectly regular iambic rhythm of line eight («And Time that gave does now its gift confound») the harmony that presides over the paradox of the present, which is bound to turn into past. This rhythmic pattern reproduces the eternal regularity of the passing of time and anticipates the submissiveness of the poetic voice in the contemplation of this inexorable reality.

This sonnet differs from no. 18 in that its three quatrains constitute a *variatio* of the same thesis, whereas in the former sonnet the «volta» -refutation or solution to the problems posed- is anticipated at the beginning of the third quatrain, in what is clearly an early refutation. In sonnet 60, we have to wait for the couplet to see a way out of the misery of oblivion through poetry. This third quatrain is one more variation of the «Tempus edax rerum» motif, with an emphasis on the metamorphosis of human beauty because of its passage, with the wrinkles, again, as the central physical evidence. The personification of time enables it to «Feed[s] on the rarities of nature's truth» (l. 11). The conclusion of the long expository part of this sonnet brings to the fore a classic negative image of death as the end of time: «And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow» (l. 12). The impact of this image on Shakespeare's contemporaries can hardly be calculated today, when the scythe has become almost a cliché; however, to a Renaissance audience, born to the tradition and implications of the dances of death, the *artes moriendi*, apocalyptic sermons, demonology, astrological predictions and constant portraits of Doomsday, the scythe was probably more than a popular motif. The rhetorical and emotional *gradatio* reaches a climax in line twelve with the vivid image of the scythe mowing down everything that exists, turning existence into the anticipation of an ineluctable vacuum. The tone of the poem is pervaded by a deep sadness and pessimism not free from a certain degree of submissiveness.

The final couplet appeals to the future in a suddenly positive and defying tone: poetry is personified and depicted as «standing» against the passing of time and the oblivion that death is likely to carry along with it. The end of the poem modestly expresses the generosity of the poet, who is not so interested in the survival of his fame as in the survival of the beauty of the beloved one, immortalized by art. This lack of egotism on the part of the poet adds a note of pathos and grandeur, at the same time, while it constitutes one of Shakespeare's original notes in his treatment of the otherwise conventional theme of poetry's immortalizing power. The feelings of fracture that time now bears can be easily recognized in Shakespeare's references to this mysterious dimension as «cruel» and utterly destructive, always ready with «his scythe to mow».

<sup>1</sup> See about this the above quoted Delumeau, J.: *El Miedo en Occidente, Op. cit.*, p. 59-60.

## SONNET 73

That time of year thou mayst in me behold  
 When yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang  
 Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,  
 Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.  
 In me thou seest the twilight of such day,  
 As after sunset fadeth in the west,  
 Which by and by black night does take away,  
 Death's second self that seals up all in rest.  
 In me thou seest the glowing of such fire,  
 That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,  
 As the death-bed, where it must expire,  
 Consummed with that which it was nourished by.  
     This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,  
     To love that well, which thou must leave ere long.

Sonnet 73 is perhaps the most complex and thematically far-reaching of all of Shakespeare's time sonnets. In an explicitly autobiographical tone -revealed in the abundance of first-person pronouns and in the use of a dialogical, conversational convention- the poet shares with his readers a deep though composed grief that the thoughts of time as fracture provoke (being vs. not being, being not to be). The intensity of feeling and the profundity of thought now reach a real climax. This sonnet indulges both in abstract reflection and in vivid images that try to make us literally see the drama behind the poet's apprehension of time as *fractus* and his fear of death; thus the estrangement techniques used and the repetition of verbs of perception. The permanent use of «thou» -in the poet's dialogue with the loved one and the reader- also transmits an impression of unanswerable objectivity and emotional estrangement to the poet's testimony: «That time of year thou mayst in me behold [...]» (l. 1). The reader's apprehension of the nature of time, as Shakespeare presents it, is dependant on a *gradatio* of verbs of vision that begins with the passive «behold» in l. 1, follows with the semantically unmarked «see» in lines 5 & 9 and ends with «perceive» in l. 13, simultaneous with the conclusion of the sonnet. These three stages of perception (behold, see and perceive), one per quatrain and one in the final couplet, suggest a structure in which realization of the true nature of time is a process, from pure contemplation to active awareness, that rules human reactions against the tyranny of time.

The first quatrain opens once more with a metaphor of nature, designed to introduce the reader to the concept of mutability. The cycle of the seasons, with the transformations it entails, stops now at the Autumn, when nature itself begins to dress up in the coat of death: it is an image of despair, subtly communicated by the absence of leaves on «boughs that shake against the cold» (l. 3). The reference to the «bare ruined choirs that shake against the cold» (l. 4) transfers the symbolic death of human beings to the death of England's catholic past. The line is pervaded by a feeling of nostalgia for this past «now dissolved and fallen into ruin like the medieval monasteries.»<sup>1</sup> This sonnet, if addressed to the young Earl of Southampton, may refer to the ruins of Beaulieu Abbey, on Southampton estate. If we accept 1594 as the date of composition, William Shakespeare, then 30, seems to identify himself with that catholic past, which inspires other similar references in his early plays. In closing, the first quatrain evokes the theme of mutability through a metaphor of the Fall and approaching winter as equivalent to dying and death. Cold, darkness and the ruins of England's catholic past help to provide a melancholy setting for this

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. Milward, P.: *Shakespeare's Religious Background*, *Op. cit.*, p. 78. Milward finds Shakespeare's feelings of nostalgia for the Catholic past of England in this sonnet and in other references to Cromwell's ruthless spoliation of the monasteries in two early plays, *The Comedy of Errors*, V, i, and *Titus Andronicus*, V, i.



sonnet, in which memory brings alive the life that once inhabited those places, like a final recollection of a human being at the end of his time.

The second quatrain could be divided into two parts: the first two lines run softly, as a reminder that time can also be passage: the twilight and the sunset fading in the west are images of transition and the alliteration of the phoneme /s/ ragelessly announces the silence of death. The abrupt interruption at the end of line six, followed by a sudden change in the rhythm of the line (made up of a sequence of monosyllables except for the final word), matches well its meaning: black night -the classic metaphor of death- takes life and time away, death being thus defined as the alter-ego of time. Shakespeare has imposed on language an intensity, directness and immediacy at once both highly economic and persuasive. Although time is often disguised, in the early stages of life, as a positive element, its true nature is revealed step by step and this is no other than fracture: time and death for the poet seem to be the same thing. There is violence too in death: «Death's second self [i.e. time] that seals up all in rest» (l. 8). Time-passus (l. 5-6) has become time-fractus in this lapidary phrase about annihilation (l. 7-8), placed exactly at the middle of the poem.

The last quatrain reinforces this image of time as fracture, but now through a series of new images that obliquely relate passion, fire, love, ashes, youth and finally death. The syntactic structure of these four lines is extremely complex and matches well with the hermetic meaning they seem to convey. On the one hand, we have an intricate network of deictics and phoric references that require careful elucidation on the part of the reader: the fire alluded to in line 9 probably refers to the poet's love, not necessarily passionate or directed towards the beloved one but love at large, love that does not look to qualities; therefore, it will continue to exist after the youth of the beloved one has turned into ashes (l. 10). A Biblical echo («Dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return») serves as term of comparison in the simile that links dust and death (l. 11). However, even love will come to an end when time is ripe for death; the poet can love once his youth and his lover's beauty are over, but this too will end in nothingness. The sonnet has become more and more gloomy in tone while the image of love choked by the ashes that once nourished it introduces a note of immense and sincere sadness and despair. Love, in the metaphor of fire, is consumed by time. The emotional content of these lines is intensified through pairings of words such as fire-ashes, ashes-youth, ashes-death, lie-deathbed and death-expire.<sup>1</sup> The paradox of time, can be observed now in the treatment of time as fracture in the sequence provided by these three sonnets: «every fair from fair sometimes declines» (Sonnet 18); «[...] Time that gave does now its gift confound» (Sonnet 60), and, finally, time is «Consumed with that which it was nourished by» (Sonnet 73).

The conclusion of this extended paradox arrives with the final couplet, that shows the perception of time as intimate and moral fracture «[...] [it] makes thy love more strong / To love that well which thou must leave ere long» (l. 13-14). Despite the inevitability of death, human life can regain a certain sense of purpose -not just by generation, childbearing (the solution offered in sonnets 1-17), or by that form of immortality that poetry may guarantee (see our commentary on sonnet 60) but simply through the intensity and truthfulness of love; love towards the things that most deserve to be loved, universal love that joins the cosmic forces of good that will prevail in the long run. Loving well will guarantee at least the survival of humanity, beyond the impossible individual survival of the self.

To conclude, Time, in Shakespeare's sonnets, as in many other writings of the Renaissance, manifests itself as the revealer of truth, because it uncovers the illusory values of this world. It is depicted by Shakespeare -in a quite orthodox way- by referring to basic Christian eschatological and apocalyptic imagery, after the Biblical affirmation that «the wages of sin is death». The

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<sup>1</sup> About this, see: Traversi, D. 1982: Shakespeare: the young dramatist and the poet. Ford, B. ed. *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*. Rpt. 1983; Harmondsworth: Penguin, p. 282: «The impression of the passage of time is conveyed with a fresh vividness that produces a pairing of words in cumulative and dynamic effect».

inner drama of a human being for whom time ends up in death while there are doubts about the existence and nature of the afterworld, induces two types of reactions: on the one hand, we have the unrestricted exaltation of the values of life, as an escape from the unbearable obsession with death.<sup>1</sup> Thus the exaltation of the three *libidos*. On the other hand, Renaissance men tried to combine the platonic sense of sublunary imperfection and mutability with Christian theology.<sup>2</sup> However, speculation cannot do away with the evidence that human aspirations -even the noblest ones, such as love, beauty, etc.- are often seen as destined to sterility. Shakespeare can then be seen as an outstanding forerunner of the existentialists, because his and their vision of time is similar in that both seem to share the idea that man is a being for death («El hombre es un ser para la muerte»). Augustine, Shakespeare and Heidegger all said this, but of the three Shakespeare was the one that put it in more beautiful and persuasive terms. They all shared a pessimistic view of life on this earth and a more or less unqualified negation of the concepts of freedom and possibility. Obviously Shakespeare does not suggest he has solved the enigma of time; probably he simply desires to share with us the infinite complexities and consequences of its nature in the myriad ways it affects us. Between time and eternity, he situates the third order of the Latin concept of *aevum*. Strife for life and awareness of mutability and of the consequences of the passage of time was ever consummatingly present before the devouring actuality of death. There is deep pain in the internal drama of Shakespeare's *time-sonnets*, but there is hope too. Nevertheless, in the poet's analysis of feelings and expectations, gloom often predominates over hope. Paradoxically enough, while our three sonnets (18, 60 & 73) seem to conceive poetry and love as the only possible reply in the battle against time and death, even their peculiar form of immortality is negated in other sonnets such as nos. 71 & 72, where the Bard seems to request the negative peacefulness of oblivion: «Do not so much as my poor name rehearse; / But let your love even with my life decay» (*Sonnet 71*, l. 11-12); and, in the following sonnet: «After my death (dear love) forget me quite, / For you in me can nothing worthy prove».

Time is killing us all, so it seems not unreasonable to try and become acquainted with our killer while we can. In this, as in other aims, Shakespeare proves his greatness and immortality as a writer.

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<sup>1</sup> About this, see: Langer, W. L. 1958: The Next Assignment. *American Historical Review*, January, p. 298.

<sup>2</sup> See Turner, F. 1971: *Shakespeare and the Nature of Time: Moral and Philosophical Themes in Some Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.