

CHRONOS OVERTHROWN – SHAKESPEARE SETS THE TIME ON MOUNT OLYMPUS

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Abstract: Shakespeare’s time is that of immortal gods, a creator deity who (re)defined the architecture of the world, shaping its sensitive core and labouring over every minutia detail of its fabric. Like Prometheus, who stole the fire from the gods and offered it to mortals, Shakespeare metamorphosed time and melted it down in every single fibre of the human soul, from sovereigns to paupers, people of his age and contemporary readers. He made them all people of his time, regardless of arbitrary chronologies and historical epochs. What better moment to muse on fugit irreparabile tempus and its transience than now when humankind commemorates four hundred years since the death of William Shakespeare and four hundred and seven years after the publication of his collection of 154 sonnets? This paper approaches some of the Shakespearean sonnets that ask time to narrate the story of the world as he knew it then, as we understand it now, and as it will always be remembered. On stage comes Time, and room we make to it, revealer, not destroyer.

Keywords: Shakespeare’s Sonnets, time metaphors, transience, love

“He was not of an age, but for all time!” Ben Johnson wrote in his famous eulogy, “To the Memory of my Beloved, the Author Mr. William Shakespeare: and What He Hath Left Us” (U. V. XXVI), recorded as the original introduction to the First Folio of Shakespeare’s plays, printed in 1623, and one of the most memorable forewords ever written. What a quintessential insight into the work of the Bard of Avon, the master of the quill that entrusted the white of the paper with some of the most genuine, painstakingly articulated expressions of the human self; it is as if the Creator himself, dwelling in the most intimate fibres of His work, came to tell the story of something which had not been rightfully explored and revealed to the world. If the Book of

Genesis narrates the story of the way in which God created the world, the works of William Shakespeare talk about the inner world of God's regent, the Man, whose endless realms of feelings and experiences still had nooks untrodden and poems unsung. "To unpath'd waters, undream'd shores" (The Winter's Tale, Act IV, Scene 4) rambled the Bard, portraying like no one other the pulsing kaleidoscope of man's heart and soul, instilling life in every word he wrote and uttered; it was silence, oblivion, insignificance that he defied with his defying treat of time, not through a scornful, declarative self, but through the drop of inspiring wisdom with which his mind and quill eroded time:

"[...] Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more" (Macbeth, Act V, Scene 5).

Heavily influenced by the *panta rhei* concept of transience, which axiomatically summarizes the Horacian belief that *vitae summa brevis est*, Shakespeare made poetry his weapon and with it fought for a tale which, unlike Macbeth's, had a meaning, as it came to signify *something*. Its echoes are not to be lost in deserts of emptiness, they are to co-exist with mighty *Time* itself, and become timeless. Much influenced by Ovid, Shakespeare reconfigured, in his own, personal and intimately assumed way, the Latin poet's credo as recorded in the epilogue of the *Metamorphoses*, beyond ephemeral geometries of power and geography:

And now my work is done, which neither the wrath of Jove, nor fire, nor sword, nor the gnawing tooth of time shall ever be able to undo. When it will, let that day come which has no power save over this mortal frame, and end the span of my uncertain years. Still in my better part I shall be borne immortal far beyond the lofty stars and I shall have an undying name. Wherever Rome's power extends over the conquered world, I shall have mention on men's lips and, if the prophecies of bards have any truth, through all the ages shall I live in fame (Metamorphoses.15: 871-879).

"No wonder that Shakespeare [...] found in Ovid a literary *alter-ego*" notes Coppélia Kahn (Kahn 1997), twinned as they were in the brilliant art of writing. In his complex introduction to the 1986 New Penguin Shakespeare edition of the *Sonnets*, John Kerrigan speaks about "a dislocation in man's sense of himself and the world", that comes to define an epoch

which made people recalibrate the sense of time, no longer abundant, as it was thought to be during the Middle Ages, but rather rare and invaluable:

The invention and dissemination of mechanical time in the Renaissance brought about a complete reordering of sensibility. Spencer's monster with his "flaggy wings" and swingeing "scythe" was born and bred in a clock... Time in rags with his scythe and hourglass; such figures were elaborated because they gave writers and artists emblems in which they could encapsulate their hopes and fears... Each day of the medieval year – summer and winter – was divided into twelve hours. So the hours were long in the summer and short in the winter. They dilated as harvest drew near and contracted again as the days grew cold...(Kerrigan, 1986: 34).

The critic senses this anxious displacement of time in Shakespeare that had practically "invaded" his life. Let us listen to his voice, through Richard II's soliloquy:

[...] keep time: how sour sweet music is,
When time is broke and no proportion kept!
So is it in the music of men's lives.
And here have I the daintiness of ear
To cheque time broke in a disorder'd string;
But for the concord of my state and time
Had not an ear to hear my true time broke.
I wasted time, and now doth time waste me;
For now hath time made me his numbering clock:
My thoughts are minutes; and with sighs they jar
Their watches on unto mine eyes, the outward watch,
Whereto my finger, like a dial's point,
Is pointing still, in cleansing them from tears.
Now sir, the sound that tells what hour it is
Are clamorous groans, which strike upon my heart,
Which is the bell: so sighs and tears and groans
Show minutes, times, and hours. (Richard II, Act V, Scene 5)

Looking at it *sub specie aeternitatis*, time has deeply engraved itself onto the very spirit of the Renaissance age, and so seizing was its grasp that nothing could be construed outside its

frame. The intimate, almost ontological relationship between one's nature and time outlines, beyond its mere Chronos-borne dimension, the far more profound projection of a self, equally sensitive and sensible in building a relationship with the complex philosophy of *minutes, times and hours*. No longer a peacefully flowing river, but rather a precipitous waterfall, time comes to *waste* all those who *wasted* it, and it is as much transience as thorough understanding in this process. The anguishing grief of falling out of time accompanies Richard's fall. Shakespeare set the time of human mind and soul, interpreting it from a considerably richer perspective than the two dominant philosophies of the moment, the ones that did inspire him, but failed to imprison his mind - the Greek perception of time as cyclical, and the Hebrew perception of it as a 'historical continuum' (Hill 1997:72) where Almighty God sets a 'proper time for everything under heaven' (Hill 1997: 75). Shakespeare must have anticipated the thoughts of Wittgenstein who questions the passage of time as movement itself and rather links it to the succession of events one comes to witness and experience in one's life, further deepened by Spengler's conviction that unlike space and its physical certainty, time is a discovery only made possible through the articulated process of thinking: "Time"[...] is a discovery, which is only made by thinking. We create it as an idea or notion and do not begin till much later to suspect that we ourselves are Time, inasmuch as we live' (Spengler 1934: 122). It was his keenest desire to depict man and his fragile, yet so often resolute self, as capable of fighting against the devastating force of time with wits and ingenuity (Hill 1997: 104). His *thoughts are minutes*, and with every word he utters and vision he imagines, worlds are waiting to be explored, peaks to be conquered and a time to gain contour – the time of the man who dares, loves and defies ephemeral platitudes with his thoughts. Thoughts which, in what the *Sonnets* are concerned, were meant to be shared with only a few, as they circulated mostly in manuscript, from 1591-5, when it is said that Shakespeare began drafting them until their publication in the *Quarto*, in 1609. Paradoxically, it has not yet been discovered whether Shakespeare authorized this only lifetime edition of his *Sonnets* or not, nor if he wanted his them to be made public or to remain private, in manuscript form. What we do know is that the first public mention of the *Sonnets* appeared in Francis Mere's *Palladis Tamia*, in 1598:

As the soule of Euphorbus was thought to live in Pythagorus: so the sweete wittie soule of Ovid lives in mellifluous & hony-tongued Shakespeare, witness his Venus and Adonis, his Lucrece, his sugred

Sonnets among his private friends. As Plautus and Seneca are accounted the best for Comedy and Tragedy among the Latines: so Shakespeare among the English is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage; for Comedy, witnes his Gentlemen of Verona, his Errors, his Loves labors lost, his Loves labours wonne, his Midsummers night dreame & his Merchant of Venice: for Tragedy his Richard the 2. Richard the 3. Henry the 4. King John, Titus Andronicus and his Romeo and Juliet. (Riverside 1997: 970)

Ovid and Shakespeare may describe an allegoric master and pupil relationship, who, despite being separated by centuries and seashores flew together like the legendary ancient rivers Neda and the Lymax, where mighty Zeus was presumably born. As the Lymax joins the Neda river at Phigalia, so did Shakespeare approach the work of Ovid when just a grammar school attendee. According to Jonathan Bate, 'Extensive reading and memorizing of the *Metamorphoses* was almost universally required in sixteenth century grammar schools ... It is not an exaggeration to say that Shakespeare's first lessons in poetry were lessons in the imitation of Ovid' (Bate 1993, passim). Furthermore, Shakespeare must have read Ovid not only in Latin, but also in English thanks to Arthur Golding's translation of the *Metamorphoses*, work completed in 1567. Like his master, Shakespeare believed that the 'Devouring Time' can only be kneeled down in final defeat with the power of the quill and the magic of the lyric passion. Addressing it directly, in a boldly defiant attitude, the sonneteer cries his unwavering faith in the might of his versified affection, his only weapon in the fight with time. Capitalized and almost shouted at, the Poet's greatest rival, Time itself seems to gradually loosen its grasp, crushed under its own weight ('old Time') and challenged by a fresh, audacious self; it is the two possessives and their projections – 'my love', 'my verse' that end the sonnet as if they were the final strikes of a duel with a grand finale that dim 'old Time' and dissolve its destructive action – 'thy worst', 'thy wrong', as in Sonnet 19:

Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion's paws,
And make the earth devour her own sweet brood;
Pluck the keen teeth from the fierce tiger's jaws,
And burn the long-lived phoenix in her blood;
Make glad and sorry seasons as thou fleet'st,
And do whate'er thou wilt, swift-footed Time,
To the wide world and all her fading sweets;

But I forbid thee one most heinous crime:
O! carve not with thy hours my love's fair brow,
Nor draw no lines there with thine antique pen;
Him in thy course untainted do allow
For beauty's pattern to succeeding men.
Yet, do thy worst old Time: despite thy wrong,
My love shall in my verse ever live young. (19)

This poetic credo of an artist convinced that all it takes to overthrow time is talent and wits surfaces in various poems as testimony of the fact that *in hoc signo* (versified love) *vinces*, since *ars longa, vita brevis*. Among them is Sonnet 30, one of Shakespeare's most meditative and delicate poems which adds up, in an intimate exercise of emotional economy, inwardly projected against the deep abysses of memories, and intelligently anchored by a special choice of words ('waste', 'expense', 'grievance', 'cancelled', 'paid before', 'losses') stories of life, evanescent moments of time which had bitten deep into the flesh of things:

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste:
Then can I drown an eye, unused to flow,
For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,
And weep afresh love's long since cancelled woe,
And moan the expense of many a vanished sight:
Then can I grieve at grievances foregone,
And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er
The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan,
Which I new pay as if not paid before.
But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
All losses are restor'd and sorrows end. (30)

Much to the reader's surprise, and relief, 'when' comes to be opposed by 'but' and some sort of magic happens as incongruities and losses begin to disappear, and all sorrow is dwarfed by the joy of thinking of and remembering an old friend. In poetry, and love, minuses may turn to

pluses, eventually defining a game of personal reflection. Will's magic quill *metamorphoses* not only the abstract, mathematical laws of accounting, but also those of nature whose 'changing course' may be halted by the revering verse of the poet whose 'eternal summer shall not fade', as nor will beauty and the love he nurtures.

Sonnet 18 with its evermore famous opening line 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' delicately approaches the theme of transience with the same mellow touch that neither conceals truths, nor belittles their substance, but which brilliantly comes to breathe the magic air of hopefulness. The sonnet brings forward not despair that 'shakes the darling buds', but also a sense of faith that comes to tell the story of the poem, in the end. If this sonnet were a perfume, its head notes, the ones which, though strong in scent, evaporate quickly would most likely be related to hopelessness and crude transience. Ruthless in its passage, time takes its toll 'and every fair from fair sometime declines', while 'rosy lips and cheeks / Within his bending sickle's compass come' - Sonnet 116. Once again, the artist's voice erupts in all its vigour and fills the emptiness time carved into the things and stories it would formerly tell, with a straightforward belief in the power of man's supreme affection grafted onto his exceptional versing, a gift of God bestowed upon him in seed-bearing abundance. The special alchemy of the fragrance, nonetheless, relies heavily not so much on these top notes, but on the middle and base ones, that emerge just prior to when the top notes dissipate; in the case of Shakespeare's sonnet, it is these notes that last in time and bloom the dreamlike symphony of its verse which ultimately spells trust and optimism:

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 sometime 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'rest 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. (18)

In the spirit of the Ovidian metamorphosis, verses 1 and 9 operate the alteration of two systems of reference, first considered in their ontological dimensions as approached by means of comparison, 'Shall I compare *thee* to a *summer's day*?', and later fusing one into the other, reaching intimate dissolution and mutual transformation, '*thy eternal summer* shall not fade'. The final couplet may be read in the key of a Shakespearean *alteration* of Ovid's testamental belief according to whom '[I] shall have mention on men's lips and, if the prophecies of bards have any truth, through all the ages shall I live in fame', since the English poet's hope breathes the same belief that time can only be defeated through his enduring art, the one called to ensure the immortality, both of himself, as of his muse.

The telluric arbitrariness of man's mechanical translation of the flow of time, allegorically referred to in Sonnet 12 – 'When I do count the clock that tells the time', whose number alludes to the number of the hours on the clock, is further echoed in Sonnet 60, that not only mirrors the minutes that make up an hour, as it continues with the same Ovidian attitude towards transience and fluidity:

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 crown'd,
Crooked eclipses' gainst his glory fight,
And Time that gave doth now his gift confound.
Time doth transfix the flourish set on 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. (60)

The *waves* of Virginia Woolf must have also washed the shores of the Shakespearean lyric, much influenced by his Latin friend and by the ancient concept of *panta rhei*. The same cyclical approach to time that characterizes the Greco-Roman philosophy floods the lines of the sonnet, and, as Katherine Duncan-Jones claims it is this perpetual toil that expresses a sense of loss that once was Ovid's sorrow too:

But looke,
As every wave drives other forth, and that that comes behind
Both thrusteth and is thrust itself: even so the times by kind
Doo fly and follow both at once, and evermore renew
For that that was before is left, and straight there doth ensue
Another that was never erst. (Metamorphoses.15: 230)

Life is nothing but an ongoing sequence of waves rolling in and out of some pebbles on a shore, witnesses, in their ephemeral existence, to the great rite of passage. 'Nativity', 'maturity', and 'crooked eclipses' roll like waves on the shores of the great rivers of life and death, though nothing can escape the ruthless 'scythe' of time which comes to mow all that once flourished and crowned the 'beauty's brow'. An almost overwhelmingly suffocating atmosphere 'rolls' whirling waves of implacable sadness out of the sonneteer's quill. The same pantheistic dissolution into nature and its cyclical flowing appears in Sonnet 73, where man's ages are closely linked to seasonal falloff: '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 ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang' (73). The adverb *yet* mellows the overall tone of the poem and makes room for a hopeful thought which pledges to restore the decayed state of affairs, by instilling the promise of immortality. The inexpugnable walls of time crumble under the delicate yet sovereign force of *versified* love, whose spell corrodes brass, cracks stone, conquers the earth and equally floods the seas. 'Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea, / But sad mortality o'ersways their power, / How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea, / Whose action is no stronger than a flower?' (65) Opposing rough materiality to over enduring Chronos, Shakespeare does nothing but deepen the *antennagoge* of the ending couplet, that special expression of rhetorical

sophistication which Robert Matz mentions, quoting George Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* (1589), as 'compensating for a negative idea by following it with a positive one' (Puttenham qtd. by Matz 2008: 30). 'O, none, unless this miracle have might, / That in black ink my love may still shine bright' (65) reads the sonnet's couplet, and despite the slightly chromatic oxymoronic projection, 'black' – 'shine bright', the domineering colouring is that of adamantine faith in what probably are the two things time with all its 'waves' cannot erase and steal away – love and its imprinting in witty words and elegant lines.

Paraphrasing Robert Matz, reading William Shakespeare's sonnets more than four hundred later, is still a question of building an intimate conversation, in which the contemporary self is invited to travel and discover a world still much alive and pulsing. And even if there is 'no happy ending in Shakespeare's Sonnets – just a series of provisional and partial efforts to stave off in different media the tortuous temporality of existence through an expression of the profundity of emotional attachment or through an assertion of the immortalizing power of poetry' (Schoenfeldt 2007: 140), *Time* is as much a revealer, as it also is a merciless destroyer.

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