

UNDER THE TYRANNY OF TIME: SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS 71 AND 73

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In the western world, the problem of time and death interests many philosophers, psychologists, theologians, and even physicians. There are numerous books devoted to the study of these problems.¹ To a Chinese, two aspects of Western thought are especially conspicuous: one is the distinction of body and soul, and the other is religious consolation. Though the Chinese also discuss the immortality of the soul, the duality of body and soul has never been a major problem in Chinese thought. On the other hand, “the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* (which dates from around 3500 B.C.) treats the journey of the human soul in eternity as a factual certainty, and at least as earthly existence.”² In studying Socrates’ death, Walter Kaufmann suggests that “Socrates’ complete equanimity in the face of death reminded Plato of the Pythagorean, originally Orphic, dictum that the body is the prison of the soul: death is not—may not be, cannot be—the end.”³ Plato then advances the arguments for immortality of the soul in *Phaedo*.⁴ The immortality of the soul interested not only the ancients, but also such later philosophers as Descartes (1596-1654), who held that the soul outlasts the body; and Hegel (1770-1831), who claimed that death heralds the reconciliation of the spirit with itself.

The “religious consolation” mentioned above consists primarily in the Christian answer to death. The *New Testament* asserts the victory over death. According to the Christian doctrine, on the Last Day of Judgment, the graves will be opened and saints and sinners will resurrect and stand before the Son of God to be judged.

1. A 24-page long bibliography is prepared by Jacques Choron in his *Death and Modern Man* (New York: Collier Books, 1964), pp. 245-269.

2. Jacques Choron, *Death and Western Thought* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), p. 22.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall all be changed.

For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.

O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? . . .

But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.⁵

Of course, the idea of the immortality of the soul and the immortality of the flesh through Christ's resurrection does not necessarily satisfy the "solider thinkers." In opposition to his teacher Plato, Aristotle sought his answer to death in the natural world and in man's endowment, rather than in the invisible soul. He thought that man, like other living beings, survives only to the extent that he continues in his offspring.

. . . for any living thing that has reached its normal development and is unmutated, and whose mode of generation is not spontaneous, the most natural act is the production of another like itself, an animal producing an animal, a plant a plant, in order that, as far as its nature allows, it may partake in the eternal and divine. That is the goal towards which all things strive, that for the sake of which they do whatsoever their nature renders possible. The phrase "for the sake of which" is ambiguous; it may mean either a) the end to achieve which, or b) the being in whose interest the act is done. Since then no living thing is able to partake in what is eternal and divine by uninterrupted continuance (for nothing perishable can for ever remain one and the same) it tries to achieve that end in the only way possible to it, and success is possible in varying degrees; *so it remains not indeed as the self-same individual but continues its existence in something like itself - not numerically but specifically one.*⁶

Another western tradition similar to the Chinese one of *li-yen* 立言, to leave worthy

5. I Corinthians 15: 51-57.

6. See Richard McKeon, ed., *Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 415a 27.

writing, is the concept of relying on the immortalizing power of poetry.⁷ Obviously, writers east and west all realize the communicative power of language. But even here some different conventions may be seen. A Chinese writer may write to build himself a name for posterity or to record personalities and deeds that are worth being handed down to later generations. However, throughout Chinese literary history, very few writers are sure that their works will become immortal. In the western tradition, many poets, especially lyric poets of the Renaissance, proclaim that their poems will endure and give lasting life to those they praise, especially their lovers. These poems, of course, also immortalize the poets.

In discussion of Shakespeare's attitude toward death, Jacques Choron says, "Shakespeare expresses scorn for those who are driven to a belief in immortality by their fear of death and who 'want nothing of a god but eternity' (Coriolanus, Act V, Scene IV)."⁸ Shakespeare's attitude follows the general spirit of the Renaissance, an emphasis of empirical evidence and natural reason. In his sonnets on the beautiful young man, two ways of coping with time and death are proposed: (1) the young man is urged by the poet to beget a son in his own likeness; (2) the young man will live forever in the poet's lines. But there is a tension which underlies these two proposals. If the young man wants to get married, the poet faces the danger of losing him. Also, while the young man ideally gain eternal youth in the poet's writings, the poet himself sometimes feels uncertain of the adequacy of his poetry.

7. The traditional Chinese, especially the literati's, reaction toward death can be classified into three categories: one is *carpe diem*, another is to transcend the problem of death such as the teaching of Chuang Tzu, and the third is the seeking of "immortality." In the search for immortality, there are two different views: that of Taoist magicians and that of Confucians. Taoist magicians claim that men can attain immortality spiritually and physically by way of eating the elixir of life or doing special exercises such as those involving respiration control. (For the influence of Taoist magician's thought on Chinese attitude toward life and death, see especially Yu Ying-shih's prominent article "Life and Immortality in the Mind of Han China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 25 (1964-65).) The typical Confucian ways leading to immortality— or immortal fame in this world—are, as taught by Shu-sun Pao 叔孫豹 in the *Tso chuang* 左傳, *li-te* 立德, *li-kung* 立功, and *li-yen* 立言, that is, to pattern codes for posterity, to render distinguished services to one's time, and to leave worthy writing. (It was in 449 B.C. that Shu-sun Pao uttered his opinion of ways toward immortality. That year Confucius was only 3 years old. See Tso Chiu-ming 左丘明, *Tso chuang* 左傳, in *Shih-san ching chu-su* 十三經注疏 (嘉慶二十年重刊宋本) (Rpt. Taipei: Hsin-wen fen 新文豐出版公司, 1977), *chüan* 35, p. 24.)

8. *Death and Western Thought*, p. 97.

A comprehensive and insightful discussion of the overall structure of Shakespeare's sonnets, based primarily on their imagery, is given by Northrop Frye in his article "How True a Twain."⁹ Frye divides the whole of Shakespeare's sonnets into two groups: the first group consisting of sonnets 1 to 126, which are in sequence; the second group sonnets 127 to 154, which are considered hardly in strict sequence. The first group, the so-called "beautiful-youth group," "tells a 'high' story of devotion, in the course of which the poet discovers that the reality of his love is the love itself rather than anything he receives from the beloved."¹⁰ The second group, the "dark-lady group," "is 'low' and revolves around the theme of *odi et amo*."¹¹

Sonnets 1 through 126 can be further divided into three cycles, each of which apparently "lasts for a year, and takes him through every aspect of his love, from the most ecstatic to the most woebegone."¹² Sonnets 1 to 51 are of the first cycle, 52 to 96 are of the second, and 97 to 126 are of the third. In the beginning of the first cycle, which is considered a prelude, the poet urges the youth to get married and beget himself an heir. The power of poetry is manifest in each cycle. The poet feels that he may give the beautiful young man eternal life through his verse.

But were some child of yours alive that time,
You should live twice in it and in my rhyme. (sonnet 17)¹³

Yet do thy worst, old time; despite thy wrong,
My love shall in my verse ever live young. (sonnet 19)

The theme is repeated in sonnet 55 in the second cycle. Here, the poet is completely sure of his work, and considers it able to outlive statues and monuments.

Not marble nor the gilded monuments
Of princes shall outlive this pow'rful rhyme,
....
So, till the judgement that yourself arise,
You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.

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9. Northrop Frye, "How True a Twain," in *Fables of Identity* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1963), pp. 88-106.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
13. The text of Shakespeare's sonnets follows *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. by Stephen Booth (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). This text is based on 1609 Quarto.

And in sonnet 107, the theme comes back again.

And thou in this [poor rhyme] shalt find thy monument,
When tyrants' crests and tombs of brass are spent.

But the poet is not all the time so sure of his writing. A sense of the inadequacy of his poetry enters in sonnet 32, where his poems are considered to be "The poor rude lines of thy deceased lover." In the second cycle, in sonnet 76, the poet feels that his verse is "barren."

The poet senses his old age in sonnet 22:

But when in thee time's furrows I behold,
Then look I death my days should expiate.

In sonnets 71 to 74, the woebegone poet is once more haunted by his old age and by death.

Most sonnets of Shakespeare were written between 1591-2 and 1594-5,¹⁴ when he was around thirty years old, but the persona in these sonnets appears to be an old man in his late autumn years. Thus they are good examples of distance and impersonality in lyrical poetry.¹⁵ In this group of four poems, 71 and 73 are outstanding to us in that they are linguistically obviously different from each other: the former primarily uses propositional language while the latter imagistic language. To borrow Roman Jakobson's terms, the former is more metonymical than metaphorical, while the latter is more metaphorical than metonymical. So, in examining the "poetic function" of the language used in these two sonnets, I will attempt to view them through Roman Jakobson's theory concerning linguistics and poetics.

In studying aphasic disturbances, scholars find that there are two polar types: similarity disorder and contiguity disorder. Those who suffer from similarity disorder lose,

14. See the discussion of composition of Shakespeare's sonnets in Kenneth Muir, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979), p. 4. Cf. J. B. Leishman, *Themes and Variations in Shakespeare's Sonnets* (London: Hutchison, 1961), p. 141: "Before he wrote it [sonnet 73], Shakespeare must have been, at most, in his early forties, although an uninstructed foreign reader, meeting with this sonnet in an anthology, might pardonably suppose that the author of it must have been at least in his late ninties."

15. Jonathan Culler discusses the conventions of interpreting the lyric: distance and deixis, organic wholes, theme and epiphany, and resistance and recuperation. The first part discusses the fact of distance and impersonality. See *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 161-188.

varying in degrees of seriousness, the faculty for selection and substitution; while those who suffer from contiguity disorder lose the faculty of combination and contexture. As "speech implies a selection of certain linguistic entities and their combination into linguistic units of a higher degree of complexity,"¹⁶ Jakobson, as a linguist, perceives that

Every form of aphasic disturbance consists in some impairment, more or less severe, either of the faculty for selection and substitution or for combination and contexture. The former affliction involves a deterioration of metalinguistic operation, while the latter damages the capacity for maintaining the hierarchy of linguistic units. The relation of similarity is suppressed in the former, the relation of contiguity in the latter type of aphasia. Metaphor is alien to the similarity disorder, and metonymy to the contiguity disorder.¹⁷

From this study, Jakobson further applies this twofold nature of language—selection and combination—to the poetic language:

The selection is produced on the base of equivalence, similarity and dissimilarity, synonymy and antonymy, while the combination, the build-up of the sequence, is based on contiguity. *The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination.* Equivalence is promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence.¹⁸

The dichotomy between the principles of equivalence and contiguity, as used in poetic language, explains Jakobsonian theory of the metaphoric and the metonymic poles of language. Although the success of a poem must depend upon the interaction of the metaphoric and metonymic processes, still we can distinguish some poems as being more metonymical while others as more metaphorical.

For the convenience of discussion, sonnet 71 is quoted below:

No longer mourn for me when I am dead
Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell
Give warning to the world that I am fled
From this vile world with vildest worms to dwell.

16. See "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," in Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (Leiden: The Hague, 1956), p. 58.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

18. Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in T. A. Sebeok, ed., *Style in Language* (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1960), p. 358.

Nay, if you read this line, remember not
The hand that writ it, for I love you so,
That I in your sweet thoughts would be forgot,
If thinking on me then should make you woe.
O if, I say, you look upon this verse,
When I, perhaps, compounded am with clay,
Do not so much as my poor name rehearse,
But let your love ev'n with my life decay,
Lest the wise world should look into your moan,
And mock you with me after I am gone.

On the surface, the sonnet is an expression of selfless love. The speaker pleads repeatedly with his love to forget him soon after his death for he is afraid that thinking of him may incur suffering in his love. But a closer reading reveals that the reiterative request in the first quatrain, the second quatrain, and the sestet is paradoxically a disguise of the speaker's request for his love not to forget him. The urge to forget thus turns into a passionate plea for love, and the plea may result from the speaker's lack of confidence in the young man's love.

Structurally, this sonnet can be divided into three parts: the first quatrain, the second quatrain, and the sestet. In the first quatrain, as Stephen Booth has pointed out, "The end of each of these lines (1, 2, 3) is potentially the conclusion of the clause; three times a following line continues and thus obliterates the independent identity of a sentence already fixed in the reader's understanding. Quatrain 1 is thus an emblem of the speaker's self-mocking tactics in the poem at large: the poem says 'what is finished is finished; be done with it,' but it defeats its espoused purpose by being a persistent reminder of its author."¹⁹

The principle of equivalence is also found in the poet's constant reference to himself by using the first person pronoun. In this sonnet, there are altogether seven *I*'s, three *me*'s, and two *my*'s. The tautology is salient if compared to other sonnets, and it indicates the diffidence of the poet in regard to his position in his lover's heart. By repeating the first-person pronouns, he asserts his existence.

Though images of death are found in this sonnet, such as "the surly sullen bell," "with vildest worms to dwell," and "compounded am with clay," the force of this sonnet comes primarily from the syntactic structure. That is, the verbal "combination" strikes our attention more than does the verbal "selection." The feeling of uncertainty hinges on

19. Stephen Booth, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, p. 257.

the complications of sentence structure. In the first quatrain, this sense is touched off by the pattern, "No longer. . ./Than. . ." Both the second and the third quatrains begin with an if-clause. In fact, three *if*'s are used in this sonnet: "if you read this line," "If thinking on me then should make you woe," and "if. . . you look upon this verse." These conditional clauses, together with words like "nay," "perhaps," and "Lest," convey the hesitation of the poet in the modulation of thought. The final couplet is grammatically a part of the sestet, but semantically it may serve as the closure of all the previous quatrains. The poet, in a mocking tone, accuses the world of being "wise," an obvious irony as he regards the world as "vile" in line 4. The vile or cunningly wise world poses an obstacle, which stops short the love between the poet and his beloved when death falls upon him.

In sonnet 71, the poet's lack of confidence in love or despair of conquering death also shows in his doubt about the permanence of his poetry. When the poet says, "if you read this line, remember not/ The hand that writ it," he is not sure that his poem will move his love. As the speaker now is in his old age, this line cannot be regarded as written by a pupil pen; rather, he suffers from a general lack of confidence in the power of his poetry.

The poet is not sure of his social status in the "vile world" either. The poet's beloved may be laughed at for choosing someone like the poet who turns out to be not worthwhile. As Booth's note says, "with me" in line 14 may mean "(1) by means of me (i.e. mock you on account of your association with me); (2) along with me, as well as me (the same general sense *with* has in lines 4, 10, and 12).²⁰

Shakespeare is very careful in creating sound effect. In this sonnet, besides the harmony of sound and rhythm, most notable is his abundant and varied use of alliteration and assonance, such as in the fourth line:

From this vile world, with vildest worms to dwell

The melancholy feeling is intensified through the sounds of "v," "w," "i," "ai," and "ə:," all suggesting weeping or wailing.

Sonnet 72 continues from sonnet 71 in terms of thematic development and syntactic expression. Both the octave and the sestet have the structure "O lest. . ./For. . . ." The second quatrain begins with "Unless," which bears a suggestion of pleading. Like that

20. Stephen Booth, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, p. 258.

in sonnet 71, the final couplet is built in as a part of the sestet.

But when we read sonnet 73, we are immediately confronted with a very different type of poetic language, which is closer to the metaphoric pole of language.

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 doth 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 whereon it must expire,
 Consumed with that which it was nurished by.
 This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
 To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

With a strong sense that he is in his twilight years, the speaker in this sonnet earnestly prompts his lover to love him more intensely in view of the imminence of death.

The structure of this sonnet corresponds perfectly to the rhyme scheme—three quatrains and a couplet. Though one may tend to think that this kind of neat distribution is typical of Shakespeare, it is in fact not frequently found in his sonnets. The three quatrains are syntactically three loose sentences, each beginning with a modal statement inviting his lover to look at his old face to be followed by phrases and clauses to build up an image connotative of lateness in life. As a whole, it is the striking images rather than the sentence patterns that bring about the power of the sonnet. In other words, the impact of the poem is primarily conjured up by the application of the principle of selection rather than the principle of combination. Pierre Demers has drawn the following equations to illustrate the three complex metaphorical images in this sonnet.²¹

1. I, an old man = late autumn wood where the birds used to sing = bare ruined choirs = I who used to sing in my poems.
2. I, an old man = twilight in the evening = death after sunset = my rest from the trials and tribulations you caused me.

21. See Pierre Demers's introduction to *A Study Guide to Shakespeare's Songs and Sonnets* (Taipei: Hung-tao Publication Co., 1974), p. 19. I would like to acknowledge that the discussions of the study guiders in the course of preparing this study guide were very helpful to my understanding of Shakespeare's sonnets.

3. I, an old man = dying embers = deathbed on ashes = I, being killed by the passion that nourished my life.

Viewing from the perspective of equivalence in selection, we may also use equal signs between 1, 2, and 3 because these images all express a similar notion of impending extinction. Whether it is an image of late autumn, of twilight, or of dying fire, each image implies the lateness of the poet's life.

The complexity of metaphors in sonnet 73 has been exquisitely analyzed by Booth:

Moreover, there are several coexistent progressions in the quatrains. Time is measured in progressively smaller units: a season of a year, a part of a day, and the last moments of the hour or so that a fire burns. Color grows increasingly intense: yellow leaves, twilight after sunset, fire. Light grows dimmer: day-light (presumably) in quatrain one, twilight, night; space constricts from the cold windy first quatrain to the hot suffocating grave of ashes in the third. . . . The progressions are consistent with one another and with the nature of the three metaphors, but they are not mechanically parallel and do not lump together in the mind: the time units get smaller; the speaker looms larger; the color gets brighter; the light gets dimmer; the temperature gets hotter.²²

We may perceive, with the help of Booth's analysis, that when "time is measured in progressively smaller units," it suggests the approach of death, and that when "the temperature gets hotter," it suggests the increase of the poet's ardor as the end gets nearer.

After presenting three images that are related to life, the poet pleads that his beloved should love him strongly as the poet assumes that his beloved will lose, or part with him forever after his death.

Interpretations of the final couplet have been divergent. Stephen Booth says in a note that the "that" in line 14 may mean "(1) me or my love; and, perhaps, secondarily, (2) your youth or life."²³ He has combined two interpretations given by R.M. Lumiansky and Edward F. Nolan.²⁴ Certainly, we tend to prefer the interpretation "You know that I

22. Stephen Booth, *An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 125-6, 127.

23. Stephen Booth, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, p. 260.

24. R.M. Lumiansky's explication of sonnet 73 is "You see that I am growing old; therefore, you love for your youthfulness, which you must soon lose, grows stronger." On the other hand, Edward F. Nolan's explication is "You know that I am growing old; therefore, you love me more, since you must soon give me up"--i.e., "since you perceive that Death will soon deprive you of me." See their explications in *A Casebook on Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Gerald Willen & Victor B. Reed (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1964), pp. 269 and 270.

am growing old; therefore, you love me more, since you must soon give me up”—i.e. “since you perceive that Death will soon deprive you of me.”²⁵ The urge is based on the notion that the reminder of imminent death will awaken his lover’s awareness of the preciousness of love. Just like Wallace Stevens says in his famous poem “Sunday Morning” that “Death is the mother of beauty.”²⁶ The inevitability of death makes us appreciate more the beautiful things in our life.

The phonetic richness of this sonnet, especially its vowel patterns, has been discussed in detail by Roger Fowler.²⁷ In addition, spondees are again and again used instead of iambs to show variation of rhythmical structure:

- (1) Thát tíme ōf yéar
- (4) Báre rúined chóirs where late the swéet bírds sáng
- (7) . . . bláck níght
- (8) Déath’s sécōnd. . .
- (9) . . . sūch fíre
- (13) Thís thóu. . .

The spondees naturally slow down the rhythm and thus draw our special attention to the meanings of these words. So, they also help reinforce the poet’s longing for love.

Sonnet 74, a direct continuation of sonnet 73, resolves the problems raised in the previous three sonnets. A consolation comes from the regained confidence that his spirit, his better part, will remain with his beloved though his body will become “the prey of worms.” The better part of the poet, the spirit, is his poetry (“line”) written to praise his friend. In this sonnet, the poet seems to be regaining confidence. Sonnets 71 to 74 thus complete a unit.

To sum up, the inevitability of death is tragic to human beings. Just as Sophocles said in *Antigone*, “There is nothing greater than man, . . . but against death he has found no cure.”²⁸ In spite of this sense of misery, men still try to fight against death through natural experience or subjective interpretation. Since Shakespeare is representative of the Renaissance spirit, his ways of coping with the destructive power of death are (1) to beget offspring, and (2) to become immortalized through poetry. Both ways appeal to

25. *Ibid.*, p. 270.

26. Wallace Stevens, “Sunday Morning,” in *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 7.

27. See Roger Fowler, “Language and the Reader: Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73,” in *Style and Structure in Literature, Essays in the New Stylistics* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 98-99.

28. *Antigone*, V. 332, 360.

rational argument.

As to Shakespeare's sonnets 71-74, they form a unit in which the approaching death occupies the speaker's mind. Either in an ironical suggestion as is seen in sonnet 71 or in direct persuasion, such as in the final couplet of sonnet 73, the poet strongly urges his lover to love him.

When comparing these two sonnets in terms of poetic language, we find that sonnet 71 and sonnet 73 differ very much from each other. The force of sonnet 71 is derived mainly from the syntactic structure of the propositions of self-devaluation, while the force of sonnet 73 comes primarily from the spectacular metaphors which refer to the horror of mortality. The propositional language in sonnet 71 and the imagistic language in sonnet 73 determines that, in Jakobsonian terms, the former is more metonymical than metaphorical while the latter is more metaphorical than metonymical. The contrast not only illustrates one aspect of the richness of Shakespeare's language, but also proves that Jakobsonian rhetoric can help us better understand the poetic language.²⁹

29. Jakobson's theory has been widely used to interpret lyric poetry, but there are also objections. For example, Harold Bloom says, "Jakobsonian rhetoric is fashionable, but in my judgement is wholly inapplicable to lyric poetry." See Harold Bloom, "The Break of Form," in Bloom et al. *Deconstruction & Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1979), p. 11.