A POEM TURNED IN PROCESS

The preeminence of Sonnet 104 has been clouded by an apparent failure of poetic tact in its second line; but it is, nevertheless, the most coherent and the most intense representation of temporal process in all of Shakespeare’s sonnets.

To me, fair friend, you never can be old,
For as you were when first your eye I eyed,
Such seems your beauty still. Three winters cold
Have from the forests shook three summers’ pride,
Three beauteous springs to yellow autumn turned
In process of the seasons have I seen,
Three April perfumes in three hot Junes burned,
Since first I saw you fresh, which yet are green.
Ah, yet doth beauty, like a dial hand,
Steal from his figure, and no pace perceived!
So your sweet hue, which methinks still doth stand,
Hath motion, and mine eye may be deceived;
For fear of which, hear this, thou age unbred:
Ere you were born was beauty’s summer dead.

The poet begins by addressing his young friend with a personal assurance; and he perseveres in this vein not just to, but into the couplet. Then in line 13, with the exclamatory “hear this,” he suddenly abandons it; that is to say, he suddenly abandons the friend: the movement of time, from which he originally declared this young man exempt, has so penetrated his imagination that he can no longer even think of him as alive. And in the last line of the poem he makes a public proclamation informing future generations what they have lost in the friend’s long-forgotten death.

This disruption in tone, in address, and in expression is no doubt foreshadowed in the third quatrain. The poet has been concerned throughout 104 with both the visual beauty of the friend and his own visual capacity: “when first your eye I eyed” enforces this duality of attention. However, in the third quatrain his emphasis shifts from the first of these concerns, with which he both opened and closed the octave, to the second: the friend’s beauty is mentioned only after two lines on the problem of
perceiving the deterioration of beauty in general; and it is finally subsumed in the poet’s admission that “mine eye may be deceived.” In the third quatrains, moreover, the friend, who was addressed in line 1 and pointedly acknowledged in line 8, is recognized only in the expression “your sweet hue.” Even so, the sudden exclusion of the friend from the expanded audience of the couplet, especially since the reader finds himself suddenly included in this audience, is shocking; and the final pronouncement, cast across a great and increasing gulf of time, is tremendously strange. To explain the impact of this pronouncement further, we may notice the impressive “born . . . dead” antithesis with which it is enunciated; the unmistakable attribution of this antithesis—of this gap between the friend and the future—to temporal process; and the suspension of “dead” to the final, rhymed position in the poem.

There are a few other sonnets, notably 71 and 90, to the substance of which Shakespeare related his couplet as deeply, or almost as deeply, as he has done in 104, and there are quite a number in which he has employed the couplet to define some reversal of sense or feeling. But in no other poem has he so deeply integrated his couplet and, at the same time, used it to enunciate so profound and shattering a contradiction.

The literary practice that allowed Shakespeare to achieve such an effect in the narrow bounds of this sonnet has been explored recently by Stephen Booth. Its essence, broadly speaking, is a shiftiness, a slipperiness, in the handling of diction, rhetoric, syntax, meter, and, indeed, all aspects of poetic composition. Booth has suggested how the poetic style resulting from such a practice might relate especially to a poetic concern with temporal process. The first quatrain of 73, as he has pointed out, “makes the reader participate in little in a mutability in the lines themselves.” Again and again in the sonnets, to generalize this observation, Shakespeare enacts upon his reader a process of poetic shift and change that relates directly to the impression of temporal process he is simultaneously rendering discursively.

We have noticed in passing how the term “morning” in Sonnet 33 shifts its meaning as the poem progresses, finally in lines 7-8 coming to mean “night.” Consider now the opening line of Sonnet 60:

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore.

The inversions of the first foot and, immediately following the caesura, of the third provide a striking metrical effect, an echoing pair of rhythmic variations, / \ / and, again, / \ / . This transitory pattern, although we need not hear it as an onomatopoetic reflection of waves, does suggest one way of understanding them, that is, as an infinitely recurring system, “Each changing place with that which goes before,” as Shakespeare
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describes it in line 3. This, we may notice, is a comforting and, indeed, a lulling suggestion. But the last foot of this line or, rather, the flow of its whole second half toward the line-end induces a more comprehensive view of oceanic motion: although there may, indeed, be an everlasting series of replacements and, thus, an eternal continuum, each separate wave must, nevertheless, shatter itself upon the shore, its swelling integrity dispersed and reduced at last to a mere shudder among innumerable pebbles.

Both the vowel and the final consonant of “make” help Shakespeare assert the first, the eternal, interpretation of waves. The “k” alliterates with the “k” in “like”; the “a” echoes the “a” in “waves”; thus “make,” by catching up sounds in the first and last beats of the preceding four syllables, both defines that as a system, a pattern, and indicates its repetition. The fact that “make towards” constitutes an inversion of the iambic movement like that with which this pattern was inaugurated reinforces this indication. It is carried on by Shakespeare’s repeated use of “the” as the third syllable of the pattern: “Like as the . . . / make towards the . . .” The reader, waiting for a neat one-syllable term—“land?”—seems to rest on the verge of some comprehensive assurance—such as Yeats provided, for example, in the octosyllabic line, “I balanced all, brought all to mind.” But “pebbled” scatters this expectation. Although its first syllable is accented and thus acknowledges the pattern the reader has been expecting, the continuation of the word, unlike the one-syllable “waves,” forces him forward. And this, plus the novelty of the sounds in “pebbled” (and in “shore,” for that matter) requires the reader to endure the certain destruction of each separate wave.

The first two quatrains of Sonnet 64 provide a more extensive exemplification of the Shakespearean fusion of statements and enactments of temporal process. The adjective “defaced” at the end of line 1, “When I have seen by Time’s fell hand defaced,” may seem at this point to modify “I,” which is the only apparent substantival support for it. But as the reader pushes into line 2, “The rich proud cost of outworn buried age,” he shifts this adjective to “cost”—or shares it between these two substantives. “Sometime” and “lofty” in the second line-pair, “When sometime lofty towers I see down-rased / And brass eternal slave to mortal rage,” are equally volatile and more suggestive in their volatility than “defaced.” “Lofty” is, as the reader comes to see, a present falsehood, not something the poet may now “see” at all but, rather, a product of retrospective supposition: he sees not lofty towers nowadays but, rather, down-rased towers, the former loftiness of which he merely imagines. “Sometime” in the same line also slips as we advance, oscillating between adverbial modification of “see,” a connection that “down-rased” undermines, and adverbial modification of “lofty,” a connection that undermines “lofty.” “Eternal” in line 4 strains its syntactic moorings at least as forcefully as
“sometime,” pulling free from “brass,” a tie that the apparent caesura strengthens, and docking, as the onward sweep of reading requires, with “slave.” This shiftiness in “eternal” augments the close-coupled temporal paradox between “eternal” and “mortal,” the contradictory meanings of which present the reader both with a remarkable body of evidence and with an illustrative exercise of time’s power over human life.

The second quatrains of 64 presents even more spectacular evidence of the workings of time:

When I have seen the hungry ocean gain
Advantage on the kingdom of the shore,
And the firm soil win of the wat'ry main,
Increasing store with loss and loss with store.

The scope of its sense and the scope of its slipperiness are both greater than anything in the first quatrains; and in the abstract conundrum of its last line Shakespeare has swirled them together into a statement of dizzying intensity. “Increasing,” which opens this line, equally modifies “firm soil” in line 7 and “hungry ocean” in line 5, thus involving the whole quatrains in the complications it introduces. Because of its duplicity of connection, this term is self-contradictory, since an increasing ocean means a diminishing shore and vice versa. The idea of increasing “store with loss” is thus doubly contradictory—in its contrary references to “soil” and “ocean” and, of course, in itself. The reader must recognize, however, as he tries to sort out these contradictory meanings, that every one represents some truth about the observed situation, some actual motion or condition in the ocean’s address to the land. “Increasing . . . loss with store” further involves him. Once again, although the reader cannot at the same time both read and untangle the entire tissue of contrarieties within this phrase nor those connecting it to the preceding one, each possible sense and all combinations have not only an abstract sharpness in themselves, but a convincing relevance, as he must come to feel, to the concrete instance, the ceaseless surge of the shoreline, from which they have been educed. The self-destructive writhing of the words and phrases that Shakespeare has yoked into combination to account for his experience forces each of his readers to endure in the strains and shudders of his own mind the grinding complexities of temporal process as it creates and destroys our world.

The first line-pair of the third quatrains, with its repetition “of state, / Or state,” using “state” first in one sense and then, in the next iambic beat, in a different sense, and the third line, with the less demanding “Ruin . . . ruminate” echo, maintain something of the pertinent shiftiness of style. But throughout the whole development of this quatrains —

When I have seen such interchange of state,
Or state itself confounded to decay;
Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminate,
That Time will come and take my love away —

Shakespeare is actually imposing an intellectual stability upon his representation of natural process, just as his assertions declare, countering mindless mutability with a firm lesson, a lasting truth, "That Time will come and take my love away," which his rumination on these circumstances has produced. Since no mention of the poet's beloved was made before line 12, however, this truth, this particularity of focus, is adventitious. And the emotional response described in the couplet,

This thought is as a death, which cannot choose
But weep to have that which it fears to lose,

is both inadequate and improper. Sonnet 64 is one of those poems which we should read, as C. L. Barber might have suggested, in quatrains.

The ruminative strain, which becomes predominant in the third quatrains of 64, permeates a number of Shakespeare's sonnets on time: the famous 73, "That time of year thou mayst in me behold," is one of these. Consider its second line:

When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang.

The poet has here rearranged the natural sequence of events, transposing "none" and "few," but not, I believe, contrary to Mr. Booth (for once), at random. This transposition disguises the apparent impropriety of "hang," an impropriety rather like "lofty" in 64: if there were no leaves on the tree, the poet could hardly be justified in using the word "hang" in describing what one may "behold." Of course, using this word, even if it describes no present action, has great value of a kind: it reminds the reader of the innumerable leafy hangings, recently beheld, that the winter has destroyed, and makes the lack of any hanging leaves at this moment not merely an observed fact, but a felt loss. There is, however, a second and more profound explanation of the transposition of "few" and "none," an explanation, running somewhat counter to the first, that fits the whole intention of the poem, the poet's intention, that is, to teach a valuable lesson. The transposition of "none" and "few" implies a second look at the landscape, a closer scrutiny of these figuratively relevant boughs; and suggests the presence of a mind devoted to the most precise articulation of things that is possible. The first look informed the poet, one infers, of the final and fatal shudder of the last yellow leaves of fall and filled him with an overwhelming sense of desolation. But he forces himself to look again, to attend more closely, and thus descries here and there a few yellow leaves still hanging in place. With this transposition of "few" and "none," with this modification of the natural sequence of things, the poet interposes his mind between the object and the viewer, presenting himself to his addressee
as a man of intellectual integrity and refinement and thus preparing this addressee to honor the advice he will soon present to him.

Sonnet 73 entire reveals the poet intellectually in command of his natural materials, of the images that are relevant to the general statement toward which he is advancing. The poem presents three figuratively relevant situations, each one conceived as stationary, as firm enough to provide some foundation for a lasting truth. The obvious interconnections of the three, their ever narrowing temporal focus, and the increase from one to the next of references to human life all fit the poet’s purpose to establish his intellectual command and, by inescapable extension, the reliability of his statement. He acknowledges the processes leading to and from the three ultimate moments he has chosen; but, with the aid of verbal repetition and stanzaic definition, he establishes them as separate items of persistent and reliable intellectual relevance.

Sonnet 73 is, in fact, a case of intellectual overkill. The lesson, for the sake of which Shakespeare held such a tight control over his materials, is, after all, meager and, despite the reversal in its articulation, simple-minded. It hardly required the remarkable poetic attention Shakespeare has brought to bear on it. The best praise we can give 73 is this, that it bestows upon us one magnificent quatrain, two excellent ones—each of the three isolable from the others with little loss in descriptive or figurative force—and a couplet that demonstrates chiefly how little is to be gained from taking the three quatrains together.

Shakespeare did not ensconce the argument of 104 behind a “When” construction or fit it into a didactic frame such as he used in 64 and 73. The position he takes up in this poem, that his youthful friend is exempt from time, he submits directly to signs of temporal process that demonstrate the power of time to ruin everything. These signs, moreover, although stylistically similar to those we have discerned working in other sonnets, infuse 104 with special persistence and profundity.

In each of the three cases of seasonal change, the exposition of which fills the first two quatrains, two periods of time—every single period being represented by a noun-adjective phrase—are opposed to one another; in each case the earlier period is described as giving way to the later period; and every one of the three cases, as the recurring term “three” asserts, covers the same three-year span of poetic observation. Such emphatic patterning obviously implies an effective control of the material, an active, ordering intelligence. But the patterning and hence the impression of control are, as the process of reading reveals, ineffective. In the second of the three exemplary parallels, the two seasonal terms are nouns—although
one is plural and one singular; in the third, although "Junes" is a noun, "April" is adjectival. In the first parallel, significantly, we cannot be sure of the syntax. "Winters" first seems, by its position, to modify "cold"; but the reader finds in line 4 that the singular noun, "cold," may not govern "Have...shook," whereas "winters," as a plural noun, might easily do so. "Summers' pride," however, which concludes line 4, just as "winters cold" concluded line three, partly because of this consonance in position but chiefly because of the substantial consonance of winter and summer, reactivates the first option. This seasonal example is, in any case, of course, out of phase with both the second and third examples. The balancing terms, furthermore, are incommensurable with one another inside all three. Not only does "pride," which concludes the first example, fail to balance "winters," the more likely noun at the beginning; it is not even commensurable with "cold." Whether the necessities of rhyme completely block from the reader's mind the fact that winter could be described as humble or humbling and that summer could be characterized as warm I am not sure; but the eminence that rhyme gives to "cold" and to "pride" surely illuminates the fact that these terms, here placed in rhetorical balance, belong to quite different realms of human intelligence.

We may notice, more briefly, that "beauteous" and "yellow," the balancing descriptive terms in the second example, are also incommensurable with one another; and that each of them, furthermore, stands in an oblique relationship with its rhetorical correspondents in both the exemplary systems surrounding this one. "Hot," although it is obviously out of phase with "perfumes" inside the third system, does reflect "cold" in the first. But the reader who sees this must recognize a further oddity in Shakespeare's three parallel systems: that the later time, the time of destruction, came first in the first system, whereas it was placed second in the other two. The time words in the third, moreover, are the names of months rather than the names of seasons. The apparent balancing of noun-adjective pairs, then, and the apparent ordering of parallel examples have resulted not in a marvelously ordered system of discursive evidence but, rather, in a marvelously illuminated process of discursive slippage.

The first seasonal example, to continue our exposition of this process, is presented as a sufficient fact: winter has deprived the forest of its leaves. But the second example changes before the reader's advancing eyes from the same kind of fact to one of a quite different kind, to an example of the poet's seeing. Consider the term "have" in line 6. It seems first to echo the strongly emphasized "Have" in line 4—those springs have turned to autumn—and, although redundant, to validate the "have" that the reader himself, in order to complete the indicated parallel, supplied between "springs" and "to" in the line above. But this "have," as he is immediately shown, has quite a different use; and the "have" that he supplied, more-
over, he must now cancel. On the basis of the adjustments this second example has forced on him, the reader prepares to endure alternative readings of the third: he may take it to say: "I have seen three April perfumes etc."; or "Three April perfumes have etc." But the chance of preserving the parallelism of all three has been destroyed: the realm of general nature and the realm of personal observation have become hopelessly confounded.

To underscore the unsteadiness we have already described in the rhetoric and in the realms of meaning of 104, consider as a contrast the first two quatrains of Sonnet 12:

When I do count the clock that tells the time
And see the brave day sunk in hideous night,
When I behold the violet past prime
And sable curls all silvered o'er with white,

When lofty trees I see barren of leaves,
Which erst from heat did canopy the herd,
And summer's green all girded up in sheaves
Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard.

This passage is complex and demanding; but its syntax, meter, and rhetoric nevertheless convey the impression of a firm poetic command, a sufficient intellectual comprehension. The poet counts, sees, beholds, and sees the exemplary evidence of this poem. This syntactic consistency, this maintenance of the speaker in an attitude of active observation, presents his materials in a neatly wrapped intellectual package, in a package, furthermore, that he is perfectly competent to manage.

The metrical organization of 12, although we may notice some stresses within and between separate lines, enforces this impression. The first quatrain presents four evidences of time, defining each one within the bounds of one line. Every line-end thus marks a point of reliable rest. The third line, despite the fact that its verb, "behold," will eventually be seen to govern "curls" in the next line, makes within itself, like 1 and 2, a complete, satisfying statement. And the fourth line (although its beginning, "And s . . . ," which apparently reflects "And s . . . ," in line 2, requires a slight adjustment) also provides a comforting integrity.

Each of the four line-defined cases properly accommodates the full process it describes. Not only is the separateness, the isolated singularity, of each tick properly represented; but day is shown giving way, with chronological propriety, to night; the violet, which the term "violet" naturally presents in its perfect form, is described, after having been so mentioned, in its decay; and the "curls" are presented first as "sable," that is, of course, as what may be called their real color, and, thereafter, as silver and white—just as nature presents them. The poet is not slavish, however, in his recognition of these processes. He considers the intermediate stage of
the curls, for example, as the participle "silvered" suggests, not as a condition, like "sable," but as a development; and the "white," with which the curls are finally covered, he clearly thinks of as an alien quality imposed upon the real and natural color. The poet, then, has observed the natural sequence that works in each of these cases and yet has isolated each one as a separate object of his understanding. The impression of intellectual comprehension and control is augmented further by Shakespeare's having preserved an order among the four items, starting with the narrowest temporal span, the tick-tock of the diurnal chronometer, and advancing by degrees to the broadest. We may recall in passing the order of the seasons in 104: winter; summer; spring; autumn; April; June.

The second quatrain of 12, although conceived on a grander scale than the first, maintains the impression of poetic command and comprehension. In these two line-pairs, Shakespeare presents two complementary items from his observation, parallel predicates of the verb "see," the one describing a pasture and the other a cultivated field, which convey, finally, when they are taken together, an image of agrarian autumn. Both line-pairs open broadly, with "lofty trees" and "summer's green," and, then, at the close of their first lines, are sharply reduced. The trees are focused at the moment when they are "barren of leaves"; and the whole verdant realm of summer is narrowed, in the first place, to the green fields of grain and, in the second, to the time of harvest. The first line of the first pair describes the autumnal present, the second line, the summer past; the pattern is reversed in the second pair, the poet beginning with the departed summer, although he gives that only half a line, and then returning to the autumnal now. This chiasmic patterning of materials places the poet's emphasis on autumn, but it does so, not in connection with the overwhelming impress upon his mind of temporal process, but, rather, in accord with his didactic intentions. We may notice, to enforce this point, that the line he has composed by consulting his memory, "Which erst from heat did canopy the herd," rivals in vividness and suggestive power his descriptions of the immediate present. The poet's total experience, the various contents of his mind, as this indicates, are equally subject to his understanding. We may also notice the phrase "with white," which appears in the last lines of both quatrains, cementing the metaphorical image of human old age in the second with the more direct reference to it in the first. There is, finally, the virtuosity of line 8, a final flourish, by which Shakespeare signals his poetical detachment from the images of time that he has here presented and his intellectual command of these images.

The transcendent competence that radiates from the entire octave of Sonnet 12 is, of course, perfectly appropriate to the poet's intention to give his young friend the most impressive possible statement of advice. It must be recognized, however, that in 12 Shakespeare has made not time, but his
own intellectual command of time, impressive: the young man should accept the advice to marry and to procreate, that is, because it has been offered by so wise a friend.

In 104, on the other hand, the poet’s intelligence, although it has been powerfully asserted, is presented only to suffer, like everything within the poet’s view and his imagination, from inexorable process. Let us consider now the metrical organization of the octave, which conveyed in 12, as we have just seen, the poet’s marvelous control of his subject matter. Its opening assertion takes a full line, thus enjoying a metrical emphasis that begins things on a rather complacent, comfortable note. But the general explanation of this assertion takes neither a balancing line (like 60, 87, 109, and others) nor the rest of the first quatrains (like 33, 35 and others), but a line-and-a-half; and the interruptive line break, moreover, emphasizes not the sense, the intellectual force, of this explanation, but its dubious reliance on the seeing eye of the poet and, again, on the way it “seems” to him. The three examples of seasonal shift, which are metrically queered by this two-and-a-half line opening, continue queer. No two of them are the same length; and the fact that the third opens in apparent parallel with the second enforces the fact that they are both metrically out of phase with the first.

The first example, deployed in a single independent clause, covers a line-and-a-half; and the line pause, which especially stresses the noun/adjective “cold” (an emphasis that sits strangely with the poet’s avowed determination to assert the friend’s exemption from seasonal rigors), separates its nominative element from its predicate. The second example takes up first one line, by which it seems to be completed, and then, as Shakespeare’s more extensive awareness of “process” asserts itself, two lines. The eventual fit of this example into a pair of lines does not work like the two-line systems in the second quatrains of 12: its finally settling into phase with this formal division illuminates the fact, rather, that it is out of phase with its immediate rhetorical coeval. The third example fills yet a different metrical segment, a complete line. Its formal stability is as deeply compromised, however, as the two-line example just above: first, because it differs in metrical scope from both the first two, although it echoes the first line of the second example; second, because, being dependent syntactically on the syntactically slippery material above, this line must be augmented—but how: by “have”? by “have I seen”? by “In process of the seasons have I seen”? We might notice the false lead given with the term “in” in the middle of the line, which seems briefly, perhaps, to echo the “In” that opened the line above. These three examples entire take up four-and-a-half lines, ending at line seven; and the octave is completed with a line, “Since first I saw you fresh, which yet are green,” which reasserts the poet’s original position.

This line also, although regular and shapely in itself, discovers a
further metrical strain since it echoes not a line above, but the statement, "when first your eye I eyed, / Such seems your beauty still"—a statement that covers the end of line 2 and the beginning of 3. The term "first" receives the first metrical accent in both these statements; the synonymous terms, "when" and "Since," commence both; and the synonymous "still" and "yet" reinforce the second half-line of each. The effect of this metrical oblique echo, coming as it does on the far side of the seasonal process from which the friend has been declared exempt, is hard to calculate. We may notice, however, that the line definition makes the echo more emphatic than the first statement; and that the change from "seems" to "are" apparently fits this emphasis. On the other hand, this line definition illuminates a troubling criss-cross rhetorical pattern, the upward movement from "saw" to "are" being countered, perhaps, by the downward slope from "fresh" to the equivocal "green." We will be better able to weigh this line after discussing the sense and the scope of that climactic term.

In the context of such metrical and rhetorical instability as that which pervades the first two quatrains of 104, separate terms and phrases also slip and spread, losing old usages and meanings or acquiring new—"Increasing store with loss and loss with store." We have sufficiently acknowledged the shifts Shakespeare's contexts inflict on the different appearances of "have" in the first two quatrains, and the syntactic slippage of "winters" and "cold." "Springs" in line 5 is similarly stretched between nominative and accusative, between turning and being seen. "Perfumes," again, must be understood both as a subject governing "have burned" and as the object of "have seen"; or, rather, as the reader advances, he superimposes upon its nominative function an accusative function. The term "turned" in line 5 means "changed" or "become transformed" when understood in the context of the line it completes: the beauteous verdure of spring has changed to autumnal yellow. But as the reader pursues the poet's understanding of things into the next line, "turned" acquires what is really its more basic meaning, "to go around": the leaves have not simply changed hues; rather, they have become transformed by being caught up in the great seasonal circulations of earth and sun. This new meaning, which emerges from the general statement about the "process of the seasons," is strengthened by the poet's assertion of his presence, that is, by his new insistence on the observable presence of a mind actively concerned with seasonal phenomena, actively engaged in generalizing its observations of them.

The term "yet," which was used near the end of the second quatrains, is repeated at the beginning of the third; but, because of the exclamation that precedes this repetition and because of its position at the logically important beginning of the quatrains, it shifts meaning completely, acquiring the sense
“however,” and losing the sense “still”—in the same quatrain, we may notice, in which the term “still” acquires the meaning “without motion” in addition to the meaning “yet.” In the case of “yet” itself, as in that of “turned” above (and “state” in 64), we have, not a pun, that is, a pair of temporally concurrent meanings (as in “still”), but a slippage, a transformation and, thus, another example in diction of the erosive power of discursive process. As the reader endures the shiftiness of “yet” and the decay of both the original and the newly acquired meanings of “still,” he may recognize that the very terms one must use to declare stability are themselves subject to the pervasive processes of time. The shiftiness of “steal,” which commences line 10, enriches such a recognition. In *Henry V*, Pistol played on the two meanings that are relevant to 104 when he vowed, “To England will I steal, and there I’ll steal”—except that these meanings present themselves in 104 in reverse order. Here the term first represents the action of a hand—we may recall Hamlet’s “pickers and stealers.” Beauty, as a pure form, strips its physical manifestation, its “figure.” This understanding of “steal” forces the reader to encounter a syntactic mystery: what exactly “doth beauty . . . / Steal from his figure”? This mystery, which the uncertain reference of “his” merely compounds, falls prey to process, however, never being solved but only replaced. For as the reader proceeds through line 10, he is reminded of the first action that Pistol planned, an action of legs and feet that normally reveals some “pace”; and this relieves him from the need of an object for “doth . . . Steal”: beauty itself will steal away from its physical representation, its “figure,” as the ambulatory dial hand steals from its. But one mystery is thus supplanted by another: for this departure of beauty from its natural embodiments, although it happens before the reader’s eyes, is accomplished with “no pace perceived.” The word “pace,” which allowed the reader to resolve the problem of subject and object that he faced through line 9 and into line 10, has been cancelled in being presented; and he is left with a non-description of beauty’s departure from the natural world.

In the first two quatrains Shakespeare presented a spectacular motion picture of temporal process, forcing his reader to endure both sensible and discursive evidence of its working. But with the third, in which he shifts from a descriptive to a figurative mode of discourse and stoops from broadly divided years to the sub-atomic ooze of immeasurably tiny seconds, he reveals a further and more frightening aspect of it, that it lies not only beyond humanity’s effective resistance and control, but even beyond human powers of detection. The organization of the third quatrain, we may notice, is relatively regular: its first two lines define a general assertion about beauty, and its second two, which are introduced with the appropriate logical term, punctuate a particular application to the poet’s present concern, the beauty of his young friend; every line pause, and every
mid-line pause, moreover, illuminates some syntactic, rhetorical, or figurative unit of discourse. The mystery of process, which emerges from the explicit statement of the quatrain and inhabits its terms and its figures, is thus rendered with normal poetic emphasis; and the invisible encroachments of time are thus vividly present for all to see. After such a demonstration, the reader should have no trouble understanding and sharing the “fear” that motivates Shakespeare’s remarkable conduct in the couplet.

The young friend, however, has not shown any signs in the three years since the poet first saw him that natural process, either spectacular or imperceptible, has had any effect on him. Even at the end of the third quatrain, Shakespeare can say no more about the friend’s vulnerability but that his eye “may be deceived.” How then can we justify the dreadful proclamation with which the poem ends?

Describing the young man’s continued freshness as a lasting “green” obviously asserts an essential consonance between him and the verdant world. The first eight lines explicitly draw a distinction between this world, throughout which the power of time has just been demonstrated, and the young man, who has been declared invulnerable; but the term “green” links him with the summer, whose leaves have been thrice destroyed, with the spring, whose fresh foliage has thrice yellowed, and with the savory burgeonings of April, which have been incinerated again and again. Thus the repetition of the assurance to the young man, with which the octave ends, acknowledges in its climactic term its own falsity. “Green,” like other words in this poem, flickers before the reader’s eyes; actually, even before his eyes reach it, it has turned from “fresh” to “vulnerable.” And the young man’s impending death is thus assured. This is the effect, that is to say, if Shakespeare has really earned this use of “green.” And that is a live question, because he has undoubtedly spread this tint elsewhere with a rather careless hand. In the couplet of 63, for instance, he used “green,” as in 104, to confer a vegetal freshness upon a human subject—“His beauty shall in these black lines be seen, / And they shall live, and he in them still green”—in a witty, assertive, and, as it seems to me, quite trivial way. In 68 he employed the term similarly but with more restraint, using it in a narrowly defined figure of speech, a figure which is replaced after a single line, moreover, by a totally different one. But coming in 104 as the final word of the octave and receiving the emphasis of rhyme, “green” must carry an enormous weight of meaning.

Shakespeare was always quick to perceive a similarity, especially in organic development, between men and plants, both of which, as he remarked in 15, being “Cheerèd and checked even by the selfsame sky,” were wont to “Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease, / And wear their brave state out of memory.” We may no doubt bolster Shakespeare’s
application of "green" in 104 by recalling such practice, along with its poetic validations, in other sonnets. He has actually established his employment of this crucial term in 104, however, within the confines of this poem. In the first place, he has humanized the seasons even while developing their apparent difference from the one human being about whom he is here concerned. Spring is described, for example, by a form of the same word, "beauty," which the poet has already affixed to the friend; summer is characterized with the human quality of "pride"; and the scent of April's blossoming is called perfume, a term which equally indicates a natural and a manufactured fragrance. Thus when Shakespeare calls the youth "fresh," the reader should comprehend this term in the full range of its applications, taking it at once to describe both a wholesome natural condition and a healthy human condition. And the double sense of "green," which has been fit into a rhetorical balance with "fresh," follows in course.

The expression, "sweet hue," in the third quatrain, recalls and enhances the equation between vulnerable vegetal, and vulnerable human, life. "Hue," an obvious appositive to "green," is, like "beauty" and "fresh," a term that easily covers both human and vegetal appearances; and the term "sweet," likewise, can describe both a delicate fragrance and a delicate youth. The entire expression is odd, however, since one cannot see sweetness nor smell a hue; and this oddness, which augments the mysteriousness Shakespeare has infused throughout the third quatrain, recalls "April perfumes" in the quatrain above. When the reader considered the option between "have . . . burned" and "have I seen" to govern that expression, he was likewise faced with the problem of seeing odors; and he must originally have resisted it. But the word "burned," coming at the end of line 7, rekindles the option: the one time when one can see perfumes—or fumes of any kind—the moment at which one does receive visual warrant of their existence is the moment when they ignite. By affixing "sweet hue" to the youth in the third quatrain, then, Shakespeare recalls his earlier application of "green" and reinforces its indications of natural vulnerability.

The final representation of the fair friend as "beauty's summer," linking him explicitly with "summers' pride" and "beauteous spring," from which he had formerly been distinguished, has thus been fully earned. By the time the poet announces his death, this image of beauty has been encompassed by the multifarious workings, fast and slow, hot and cold, visible and unseen, by which every beautiful thing must eventually be destroyed.
NOTES

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4. The apostrophe is an editorial improvement: the 1609 edition of the Sonnets prints “Winters colde” and “summers pride.”
5. The 1609 version of this line, “And sable curls or silver’d ore with white,” does not affect my argument, although I am happy with Rollins’s emendation.
6. As Booth has shown in An Essay, pp. 70-77.
7. This effect derives in part from the extremely wide focus of the line: it may have the force: 1) of a sentimental avowal—“you will always be young and fair to me”; or 2) of a Platonic avowal—“your essential beauty is, to my mind, impervious to time”; or 3) of a simple statement of confidence in the young friend’s enduring physical beauty—or, rather, of a Missourian disbelief in time’s power (I think it was Hazlitt who said, “No young man believes that he will ever die”). I suspect that readers begin by understanding some combination of meanings 1 and 2, and thus allow themselves to be drawn into a discussion, primarily, of 3. Such a shift in discursive focus, we may notice, would add to the effects that we have studied in this chapter, effects that finally undermine or destroy all three of these meanings.
8. In Shakespeare’s time the clock, as well as the sundial, had only one hand, an hour hand: see Eric Bruton, Clocks and Watches, 1400-1900 (New York: Praeger, 1967), pp. 24 and 30; and Ernest Edwardes, Weight-Driven Chamber Clocks of the Middle Ages and Renaissance (Altrincham: Sherratt, 1965), pp. 35, 49, and 78. I believe, therefore, that the reader should recognize both possibilities when he first confronts the “dial hand.” The word “Steal,” however, narrows the meaning since, of course, the Renaissance clock ticked—see Bruton, p. 16 and The Rape of Lucrece, II. 326-329—and thus allowed the ear, if not the eye, to perceive its “pace.” Lines 7 and 8 of Sonnet 77, “Thou by thy dial’s shady stealth mayst know / Time’s thievish progress to eternity,” provide a valuable gloss on this passage, suggesting that, at least from “Steal” on, the reader is being prompted to imagine a shifting shadow.