

Death and the Sonnet

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This article argues that the fundamental theme of the sonnet is not love but death. Though some sonnets have from the beginning focused explicitly on death, the majority from the late Middle Ages to the Renaissance are love poems. Petrarch may be regarded as the prototypical sonneteer and idolizer of love; but on close analysis his focus is found to be more on the ephemerality of love than on love itself. The structure of the sonnet supports – even creates – a predisposition toward death. Both the Italian and the English varieties display a fixed and intricate structure of extreme terseness, offering space for an utterance of concentrated force and complexity, but one whose principal feature is brevity. While complexity of structure allows for the conflicted or self-reflecting consciousness that Paul Oppenheimer claims of this form, brevity brings its discourse to a point, in Michael Spiller's sense, all too quickly. The bringing to a point of a short-lived dilation reflects in miniature the confrontation of the individual consciousness with its own point or full-stop. The article demonstrates that death sonnets are not exceptions to a more erotic rule but explicit statements of what is present in all sonnets, implicit in the form itself.

Quanto piace al mondo è breve sogno – ‘whatever pleases in the world is a brief dream’ – concludes Petrarch in the first sonnet of his *Canzoniere*. Petrarch, who did not invent the sonnet and who included poems other than sonnets in this famous sequence, is arguably the sonnet's greatest artificer and exponent. Though he is renowned as a poet of love, this quoted line is the key to his sonnets' dominant theme, a theme that he derived from and adapted to the form in which he

chose to write.¹ It is also the key to many of the other sonnets written before and after Petrarch's time, in many languages of the world. The most basic matter of the sonnet is not love but death – death as the end of life, pleasure, beauty, desire and even pain.

This paper starts with Petrarch because he is the prototypical sonneteer. Thomas P. Roche says that 'All studies of the sonnet sequence must begin with Petrarch, for the genre sprang fullgrown from [his] mind'.² Contemporary cognitive poetics, using the findings of cognitive science, sees the kinds and categories of human thought not as classes sharing specific common features but as groups of items that cluster around prototypes. According to Michael Sinding, 'People identify certain prototypical members of [a] category, and then view other instances in relation to the prototypes'. The 'other instances' may hold a variety of Wittgensteinian 'family resemblances' to these prototypes, but 'categorization' starts with 'this fact of centrality' of the prototype.³ If Petrarch is the type of the sonneteer, his prototypical sonnet is a love poem only on the surface; deeper down, its ultimate theme is death. Starting and ending with Petrarch, this paper will demonstrate how the sonnet comes to be a poem of death, in both formal essence and historical tradition.

In literature as in other arts, it can be argued, form always conveys meaning, in an essential as well as a conventional way. Convention associates certain types of theme, genre or voice with particular forms because of how these forms have been used historically, suggesting possibilities of expression in terms of tradition and memory. But the form in its essence has meaning, too, offering a specific shape and size for a thought and therefore moulding and limiting what can be said and how it can be said at the microscopic level. We may ask whether William Shakespeare would have come up with the felicitous line 'When I, perhaps, compounded am with clay' without the pressure of the iambic pentameter and the demands of the sonnet's rhyme

¹ Thomas P. Roche, Jr., *Petrarch and the English Sonnet Sequences* (New York, 1989), pp. 3–6, agrees that this focus on transience is crucial to the sonnets' meaning, which he claims is religious rather than erotic.

² *Ibid.*, 1.

³ Michael Sinding, 'After Definitions: Genre, Categories, and Cognitive Science', *Genre* 35 (2002): 181–209 (p. 186); Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, 1953), p. 32.

scheme.⁴ The normal syntax of such an utterance, ‘Perhaps when I am compounded with clay’, is not impressive rhythmically – and ‘dust’ might seem a more traditional substance than clay with which to compound one’s physical remains, unless one needed to find a rhyme for the word ‘decay’. Although structure is not fully predictive of the ‘perceived effects’ generated by a text, it does – always – ‘count towards’ the text’s final meaning, as Frank Sibley and Reuven Tsur, among others, argue.⁵

The sonnet’s most salient formal feature is its brevity.⁶ Brevity is a perceived feature which is partly dependent on cultural context, for all dimensions are relative. The sonnet seems short because Western literary tradition favours the epic over the epigram and a stanza is usually a particle, not a whole text. But the sonnet’s brevity is not merely a comparative perception; it is also determined by another formal feature: complexity of construction. Because the rhyme structure of the sonnet is so intricately asymmetrical, it encourages – and in the tradition it has been used for – a complex series of related and oppositional utterances. Many complete texts between sentence and paragraph length embody a single enigmatic or epigrammatic description or exclamation; but the sonnet typically offers an argument – of great concision and, hence, intensity.⁷ Taking up a position early on, its developing discourse always includes at least one turn or *volta*, its multi-threaded texture comprising dialogism, self-referentiality, dialectic or even irony. In just fourteen lines it is difficult to supply all the reasons and evidence, transitions and rhetorical appeals, necessary to a convincing argument, especially in a tradition in which rhetoric is normally expansive. This pressure to crowd a great deal

⁴ *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (London, 1997), Sonnet 71.

⁵ Frank Sibley ‘Aesthetic Qualities’, in Joseph Margolis (ed.), *Philosophy Looks at the Arts: Contemporary Readings in Aesthetics*, rev. edn (Philadelphia, PA, 1978), 64–87 (pp. 66–71); Reuven Tsur, ‘Rhyme and Cognitive Poetics’, *Poetics Today* 17 (1996): 55–87 (p. 85); idem, ‘Contrast, Ambiguity, Double-Edgedness’, *Poetics Today* 6 (1985): 417–445 (p. 444). See also Susan Wolfson, *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford, 1997), p. 3.

⁶ Heather Dubrow, ‘The Sonnet and the Lyric Mode’, in A.D. Cousins and Peter Howarth (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet* (Cambridge, 2011), 25–45 (p. 30); Michael R. G. Spiller, *The Development of the Sonnet* (London, 1992), p. 9.

⁷ Spiller, *Development of the Sonnet*, 17–18.

into an unexpectedly small space contributes greatly to the sonnet's apparent brevity.

Brevity thus has semantic implications. The sonnet in its original Italian form extends only to about 154 syllables, forcing the poet, according to Michael Spiller, to 'come to the point'.⁸ This 'pointedness' is of course the opposite of novelistic narrative, which extends a line of discourse into as many baroque shapes as those traced by Corporal Trim's stick in *Tristram Shandy*, evading and postponing the point in order to add more events to the twisting passage of borrowed time.⁹ Sonnets may sketch out one or two events, as Petrarch does with his encounter with Laura and her death, and as Spenser does more actively in sonnets such as 'One day I wrote her name upon the strand' (*Amoretti* 75). Alternatively, they may refer to a story folded or unfolding in the background, as Shakespeare's 'betrayal' sonnets do. However, they do not offer enough space within themselves to develop the 'and then ... and then ... but then ...' structure of storytelling. Sonnet sequences often present a narrative in their totality, but the difference between a stanzaic narrative poem and a sonnet sequence is always significant. Even compared with the nine-line Spenserian stanza, each sonnet is autonomous. The difference is similar to that between a film (however slow-moving) and a series of still photographs. Every snapshot may reflect the same object from a different angle or focus setting, without any compulsion to move on.

This is strikingly demonstrated by comparing Shakespeare's 'Full many a glorious morning have I seen' (Sonnet 33) and 'Why didst thou promise such a beauteous day' (Sonnet 34), which were presumably written about the same event. While the former, in the high style, is full of wonder at the beloved's sun-like, immutably noble capacity to transcend trivial shifts in circumstance and reputation, the latter is an angry series of denunciations of the beloved's behaviour, couched in appropriately low style, culminating in forgiveness. No time-lapse separates the two sonnets; they are just two totally different ways of looking at the same unkindness on the part of the beloved. Throughout

⁸ Spiller, *Development of the Sonnet*, 10.

⁹ Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy Gentleman* (Harmondsworth, 1967), pp. 453–454. See Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* (New York, 1984), p. 104.

the sequence, many unique voices and viewpoints anatomise a very limited number of situations and events.

In fact, sonnets by nature subordinate all expansion – expository and descriptive as well as narrative – to this process of contracting to a point from a specific position. It is this pointedness that is related to death. According to Barbara Herrnstein Smith, the sonnet's pointed 'conclusiveness' is even 'in a sense suicidal':

The conditions for maximal closure will arise when the structural principles in a poem predetermine its conclusion most rigorously and when the greatest number or concentration of certain features appear in its terminal lines. In such a poem, every element would be designed to set up or secure the conclusiveness of its conclusion. It would be a pre-eminently teleological poem and in a sense a suicidal one, for all of its energy would be directed toward its own termination.

In the same section of her book on *Poetic Closure*, Herrnstein Smith calls the coincidence in a text of strong structural closure with strong thematic closure 'hyperdetermination' – a coincidence that very often occurs in sonnets, particularly those of Petrarch. Although Herrnstein Smith is focusing mainly on the epigram in this section, she states at the end of it that 'Neither the occurrence nor the significance of hyperdetermination is confined to the epigram as such.'¹⁰

Spiller, in *The Development of the Sonnet*, sets about proving in detail Herrnstein Smith's claim earlier in her book that 'The sonnet is one of the most highly determined formal structures in Western poetry'.¹¹ He shows that an Italian sonnet must 'come to the point' not just once but several times, in a hierarchy of pointed utterances – in an octave and then a sestet, in two quatrains and two tercets, even in four couplets and two tercets, each smaller point subordinate to a larger one.¹² Every impulse towards dilation in the sonnet is brought up short and made auxiliary to an ordered set of conclusions. The full stop at the end of the whole poem is a more emphatic, and hence

¹⁰ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago, 1968), pp. 197, 204, 210.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹² Spiller, *Development of the Sonnet*, 11–12.

potentially death-dealing, period than those concluding the octave and the sestet.

In his analysis, Spiller fails to note that the rhyme scheme of the sonnet octave does not in fact consist merely of couplets; it is a complex interplay, as J. W. Lever observed in the 1950s, of '[t]wo patterns of rhyme'. Lever describes the couplet component of this rhyme pattern as more 'static', 'lyric[al]' and 'emotion[al]' than the other component, which he inaccurately styles 'a progressive movement of alternations'.¹³ This other component is in fact enclosing, not alternating rhyme: the A-syllable with which the first line ends is repeated not after the occurrence of only one B end-syllable but after two of them. An enclosed quatrain, ABBA, does generate some sense of forward movement – because the reader is left with a loose end until the conclusion – but enclosing rhyme is not as progressive as alternating rhyme, which constantly points expectation onward towards the line after next, encouraging a fairly uninterrupted linear fluency.¹⁴ As Tennyson was to recognize in *In Memoriam*, enclosed stanza forms emphasize the turning-back effect of rhyme over its leaning-forward effect. And couplets, including a couplet embedded in the heart of an enclosing structure, are even more effective circling and returning devices.¹⁵

Thus, the octave advances from A to B, repeats B and then circles back to A. This structure then recurs in lines 5–8 with the same A and B rhymes, the second time with far less sense of progression, since A and B have both been encountered before. The first line of the second quatrain in fact forms a couplet rhyme with the last line of the first quatrain, though the turning-back effect is to some extent ameliorated

¹³ J. W. Lever, *The Elizabethan Love Sonnet* (London, 1956), p. 6.

¹⁴ In any long stanza that uses couplets as well as more progressive structures, an ambiguity exists between narration and reflection. William Empson famously demonstrates this in the case of the Spenserian stanza in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London, 1947), pp. 33–34.

¹⁵ Recent studies of couplet narrative have argued that the couplet form is both versatile and non-static when used in extended passages. See, for example, J. Paul Hunter, 'Formalism and History: Binarism and the Anglophone Couplet', *Modern Language Quarterly* 61 (2000): 109–29 (pp. 109–13). These arguments do not, however, apply to an isolated couplet thrown into contrastive relief by its contact with other structures.

by the new semantic foray that the second quatrain usually heralds – by starting a new sentence and/or a new idea or image. In this second quatrain, the A introduction is followed by a B-couplet whose rhyme is also already familiar from the first quatrain. Thus, after all this *déjà vu*, the final A syllable that completes the octave is extremely predictable, slotting into place with a very strong sense of closure and predetermination.

Lever claims that the reason why the sonnet sestet is more flexible than the octave as to its rhyme scheme is that, rather than striking out on its own, its main function is to ‘[answer] back’ to the octave.¹⁶ In Spiller’s terms, while the octave must turn back to make a point after every attempt at progression, the sestet consists entirely of turning back. However, it turns back in a new way: rhymes from the octave do not recur and the rhyme pattern is usually based not on multiples of two but on the odd number three. Being even briefer than the octave, the sestet is more authoritative, since its argument, covering the same ground, is more pointed.

Sonnet 75 of Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*, for example, revolves again and again around those ‘lovely eyes’ (*‘i begli occhi’*), mentioned explicitly in lines 1, 9 and 12:

*I begli occhi ond’i’ fui percosso in guisa
Ch’ e’ medesmi porian saldar la piaga,
E non già virtù d’erbe, o d’arte maga,
O di pietra dal mar nostro divisa;*

M’hanno la via sí d’altro amor precisa, 5
*Ch’ un sol dolce penser l’anima appaga;
E se la lingua di seguirlo è vaga,
La scorta pò, non ella, esser derisa.*

Questi son que’ begli occhi che l’imprese
Del mio signor victoriose fanno 10
In ogni parte, e piú sovra’ l mio fianco.

Questi son que’ begli occhi che mi stanno
Sempre nel cor con le faville accese;
Perch’io di lor parlando non mi stancho.

¹⁶ Lever, *The Elizabethan Love Sonnet*, 6.

Those lovely eyes, that struck me in such guise
 that only they themselves could heal the wound,
 and not the power of herbs, nor magic art,
 nor some lodestone from far beyond our seas,

have so closed the road to other love, 5
 that one sweet thought alone fills my mind:
 and if my tongue wishes to pursue it,
 that guide, and not the tongue is to be blamed.

Those are the lovely eyes that make
 my lord's enterprise victorious 10
 on every side, above all my heart's:

those are the lovely eyes that always live
 in my heart among the blazing sparks,
 so that speaking of them never makes me tired.¹⁷

Like so many of Petrarch's sonnets which use their form to perfection, this one plays obsessively with repetition and return – repeating in thematic representations the pattern performed by the rhyme scheme. The poem starts by mentioning the single percussive event that struck the speaker and changed him; after that no narrative progression is possible. Hypothetical alternative action contemplated at the beginning of the second quatrain, '*la via si d'altro amor*' ('the road to other love'), is already curtailed by those '*begli occhi*' that still govern the sentence structure as subject. Each attempt at a new beginning in the more interpretative tercets, too, is simply a return, the '*begli occhi*' demonstrating in the first their power and in the second their endurance. The slight irregularity of the rhyme pattern in the sestet (CDE DCE) allows a different colouring of sound to each apprehension of the eyes because of the difference between rhymes C and D in lines 9 and 12 that would otherwise be a simple refrain. '*Questi son que' begli occhi che l'impreso*' ends with a brighter sound and a more active verb than '*questi son que' begli occhi che mi stanno*', which suggests,

¹⁷ Francesco Petrarca, *Il Canzoniere* (Firenze, 1858), p. 43, trans. A. S. Kline in *The Complete Canzoniere*; retrieved from <http://people.virginia.edu/~jdk3t/petrarchkline.htm> on 4 September 2014. I have highlighted the structure of all the sonnets in this article by inserting spaces between structural units.

even before the appearance of the adverb '*Sempre*' in the next line, the persistence of the eyes' staying power in the speaker's heart.

The striking of the lover – here by those fatally beautiful eyes, in other sonnets by an arrow or a golden net – is the epiphanic moment of the speaker's encounter with Laura to which nearly all of Petrarch's love poems return, again and again 'speaking of' it, reliving it in his heart 'among the blazing sparks' that it has kindled, eternally pondering the mystery of its transformative power – which is not, in the end, a vivifying power but a deathblow. Even though the word '*stanco*' ('I tire') is negated, it is the last word of the poem, memorialized by the full-stop and the silence succeeding it.

In contrast to the Italian sonnet, the English sonnet seems at first glance dominated by alternation. Each of the three alternating quatrains is able to make a completely independent point, for the rhymes – except in Spenser – are not usually shared between quatrains. It could perhaps be argued that the English sonnet does not make quite as much of an 'inward turn'¹⁸ as the Italian because of the English sonnet's lack of enclosures and scarcity of repetitions; certainly its formal parts are less integrated. The quatrains, being prosodically equivalent, may also be more semantically parallel, or less subordinate to one another, than octave to sestet. However, all three quatrains are subject to the authoritative finality of the couplet, be it in affirmation or contradiction of their discourse. The English infatuation with couplets was to grow to a passion after the heyday of the sonnet, but it was foreshadowed and perhaps created in the early Renaissance by Wyatt's witty or sententious sonnet closures.¹⁹ The whole of an English sonnet gravitates downward towards its couplet; as the Italian sestet carries more authority than the octave so here does the couplet bear more weight than all the quatrains put together. This imbalance is the great merit or fault of the English sonnet form, evident in high relief in Shakespeare, who favours antithesis.²⁰ The three quatrains may make three independent but densely argued points, all tending in the same direction, but then the couplet will state a final, terse conclusion that

¹⁸ Paul Oppenheimer, *The Birth of the Modern Mind: Self, Consciousness, and the Invention of the Sonnet* (New York, 1989), pp. 3–4.

¹⁹ Spiller, *Development of the Sonnet*, 89–91.

²⁰ See Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), p. 29.

permanence – an unchanging ‘bright[ness]’, improbably ‘shin[ing]’ despite the unchallenged ‘black[ness]’ of its medium – not the mobile, metamorphic vitality of lived time. It is an epitaph, defying time as epitaphs have always done, closing the sonnet in an eternal memorial to love in death.

Thus, in both types of sonnet, Italian and English, and even, as I shall demonstrate later, in a hybrid of the two, the whole potentially ‘hyperdetermined’ text is dominated by its ending.²¹ This ending is closely anticipated at all times not only because of the intricately pointed complexity of structure but also because the poem is so brief. Brevity and closure – mortality and death – are implicit in this form. Accordingly, they are also explicit as the dominant themes of the sonnet.

Paul Oppenheimer declares that the sonnet, at the time of its invention in thirteenth-century Sicily, not only expressed but *caused* the ‘idea of turning inward’ that characterizes modern Western self-consciousness.²² Claiming the sonnet as the first truly written poetic form in the modern vernaculars,²³ Oppenheimer sees it as promoting private meditation rather than public performance.²⁴ Because the sonnet is intended for silent reading, it exists essentially not in actual sound, or the evanescence of the spoken utterance, but in the mind’s ear of the reader and in her visual perception, on a page before her, of a small square figure against ground. Being non-narrative, the sonnet does not ask for progression, for one scene to supplant another, but

²¹ Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure*, 210.

²² Oppenheimer, *Birth of the Modern Mind*, 3–4. Recent historicist commentators, in a debate summarized by David Schalkwyk in *Speech and Performance in Shakespeare’s Sonnets and Plays* (Cambridge, 2002), pp.102–11, would claim that Oppenheimer’s view of early modern interiority is ‘anachronistic’ (102). However, as Schalkwyk shows with reference to the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, ‘Human subjectivity does not belong to any one culture or period; it does not arise at any discernible historical moment; it is born with language itself’ (107). Schalkwyk also discusses the presence of what he calls the ‘language of silent interiority’ in Shakespeare’s sonnets, which, he claims, is there uniquely combined with ‘theatricality’ (114, 120).

²³ See also William J. Kennedy, ‘European Beginnings and Transmission: Dante, Petrarch and the Sonnet Sequence’, in Cousins and Haworth (eds), *Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*, 84–104 (p. 90).

²⁴ Oppenheimer, *Birth of the Modern Mind*, 24–25.

typically posits a situation or problem and then circles around it. The ‘inward turn’ is taken by both the speaker and the reader of the poem, for the speaker’s voice is always to some extent self-reflexive – the intricate form itself encouraging metaconsciousness – and the reader remains constantly aware of the spatial existence of the printed text, all of which is there before her at once, and of the white space or vacancy framing it. Spatiality is another consequence of brevity.

Turning inward is always eventually toward a knowledge of one’s own death. The fact that early sonnets were nearly all love poems does not contradict this. Love, which appears the opposite of death, is in fact death’s close ally. Sigmund Freud asserts in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* what every individual is at pains to deny, that death is the great aim of life and all libidinous drives that assert life are in fact mere digressions from the stronger, older drives toward death.²⁵ Developing this, Jacques Lacan sees *jouissance*, or pleasure, as in fact its own enemy, striving not for further pleasure but for the end of pleasure.²⁶ If literature, as one of life’s pleasures, is merely a digression from the straight, goal-driven path from birth to death, then the sonnet does not offer much of a digression. It can afford but little space to ‘get lost’ in, which is what a novel or even a longer lyric lures the empathic reader to do, so that she forgets for the moment the goals of her own life. Though the sonnet may make several short excursions into philosophical speculation, narration or description, usually on the topic of love, these impulses are all swiftly curtailed by the frequent and predetermined octave-and-sestet, or quatrain-and-couplet, endings. However intensely love and its concomitants, beauty and pain, are communicated in all of the sonnet’s forays, this bringing to a point of each short-lived dilation reflects in miniature the confrontation of the individual consciousness with its own point or full-stop.

Even the earliest sonnets exemplify the pressure of death on the lover. One of these, ‘*Lo basalisco a lo specchio lucente*’ (‘The basilisk in a lucent mirror’), was written circa 1230 by the actual inventor of the sonnet, Giacomo da Lentini. Both flamboyant and complex, this

²⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York, 1961), pp. 38–41. This late text is an anomaly in the body of Freud’s work, in which he usually emphasizes the importance of the libido, or life drive, in the human psyche.

²⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book VII, trans. Dennis Porter (London, 1992), pp. 205–17.

densely written little poem illustrates sudden death in many of its images and asserts (in Oppenheimer's translation) that the speaker is 'Happy to meet [his own] death before great beauty':

*Lo basilisco a lo specchio lucente
traggi a morire con isbaldimento;
lo cesne canta piú gioiosamente
quand'è piú presso a lo so finimento;*

lo paon turba, quando è piú gaudente, 5
*poi ch'è suoi piedi fa riguardamento;
l'augel fenise s'arde veramente
per ritornare in novo nascimento:*

*In tal nature eo sentom'abenuto,
ch' allegro vado a moro a le belleze* 10
e'nforzo il canto presso a lo fenire,

*e stando gaio torno disarmato,
e ardendo in foco invoco in allegreze
per voi, Piú-gente, a cui spero redire.*

The basilisk before a lucid mirror
Surrenders to death in a joyful agony;
The swan keeps singing with a joyful horror
When overwhelmed by its mortality;

The peacock, at its height of brilliant plumes, 5
Shivers in horror on glancing at its feet;
The phoenix bird consumes itself in flames
Completely, to return, reborn, complete.

I feel myself becoming this type of creature—
Happy to meet my death before great beauty
And pushing my song to glory at its last turn. 10

And right in the midst of joy feeling pure torture—
And burning in flames, renewing my happy duty
To you – so fine – to whom I would return.²⁷

²⁷ Oppenheimer, *Birth of the Modern Mind*, 56–57.

The speaker identifies with four emblematic creatures, the basilisk that dies because of its narcissistic self-regard, the swan that sings most beautifully at the moment of its death, the peacock horrified at its one imperfection and the phoenix, immolating itself in order to reappear in renewed but identical beauty. Each image, described in the octave and interpreted in the sestet, includes an intensity of joy and that joy's sudden adjournment. Death causes the end of joy in three out of four cases, the utterances' perfect symmetry giving them a sense of inevitability. Their formal and semantic closes exactly coincide – two lines given to each image in the octave, one to each in the sestet but framed by a personal opening and closing. The fact that, for the phoenix, death is not permanent, points ironically at the lover's many deaths, not only sexual 'little deaths' but also the many other sonnets to be written on the same circular and unprogressive theme.

This sonnet, with its focus upon the lover rather than the beloved, its explicit use of Narcissus emphasizing its self-regarding metaconsciousness, its almost masochistic intermingling of joy and horror, beauty and death, epitomizes Lacan's unoriginal claim that 'the function of the beautiful [is] to reveal to us the site of man's relationship to his own death, and to reveal it to us only in a blinding flash.'²⁸ It prefigures, too, many of the thematic trends of the stanza for centuries to come. If the topic of the sonnets of the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance seems to be love, or the lover's observation of his love, or the lover's commentary on the appearance of his beloved, or the lover's complaint about his treatment by the beloved, it focuses more sharply on the shortlived nature of human experience and on the relentless thwarting of earthly desires. The beloved's beauty is a reminder of the transience of all beauty and, more importantly, of the mortality of the perceiver of beauty.²⁹

In spite of the overriding popularity of love as the foreground theme in the sonnet, almost from the beginning an alternative tradition has existed that deals with death to the exclusion or overshadowing of love. Even Petrarch wrote some sonnets in this tradition, for example the yearningly religious Sonnet 81: '*Io son sì stanco sotto il fascio antico*' ('I

²⁸ Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 295.

²⁹ See Catherine Bates, 'Desire, Discontent, Parody: The Love Sonnet in Early Modern England', in Cousins and Haworth (eds), *Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*, 106–124.

offered in the final couplet. In ignoring the advice, of course, he and the rest of humankind risk those other 'flames' that actually do 'burn thee'.

In the first quatrain, he starts out with a godlike perspective on the 'earth', but narrows focus slightly onto generic 'Man' in the second quatrain. That the cosmic violence wreaked on 'earth' is strictly paralleled by 'inward furies' raging within humankind is hammered home by close repetition of the first quatrain in the second. Even the rhyme-words, 'blasted/distasted', 'shaken/taken' are exactly repeated; the two quatrains make up a unit in which the first half is almost an exact replica of the second. The reader now expects a repetition in the third quatrain of this inescapable and unprogressive fury.

But, at line 9, a turn occurs, signalled by the logical transition, 'Then', which resembles the turn from octave to sestet in an Italian sonnet. This sonnet is in fact a clear hybrid, for the discourse from here on is quite different. Though lines 9–12 are constructed as a quatrain, it is grammatically alien to the first two quatrains and repeats neither their rhyme nor their rhyme-words. This section 'answers back' to lines 1–8 by directly addressing 'man' in the imperative, a dogmatic mood that stands out from the devastated indicatives of the opening. Alternating not only between rhymes but also between directives ('endure thyself', 'must bear') and explanations that offer cause ('Life is a top') and then consequence ('the stubborn bootless striveth'), this quatrain leads directly onward to the couplet, which completes the discourse of what seems, semantically at least, a sestet. Opening with the word 'Or', the couplet recommends parallel alternative action to that outlined in the previous four lines, following the same imperative-indicative pattern in an abridged form. 'Endure thyself' transforms to 'forsake thyself' in a movement towards renunciation that the violence of all twelve preceding lines conspires to justify.

The poem is a *tour de force* of pain and anguish, torturing the reader with the human condition, including not only its passions and disasters but also its guilt, for 'Love, fury, lustings out of man are taken'. In such a small compass as the sonnet these devastating realisations come one upon another with almost unbearable immediacy. The final stroke is the self-regarding speaker's exhortation to 'forsake [himself]' – he who is clearly the one most 'torn with love' that is at least partially self-love, the one 'Drown'd with despair', 'shaken' by 'lustings' and 'whipp[ed]' by 'sorrow'. So dramatically does he present his own flagellated self

facing the dilemma of death that for him, surely, renunciation of the self will be close to impossible.

Sonnets such as this one focusing explicitly on death are not uncommon, but, clearly, most late medieval and Renaissance sonnets are love poems. The influence of the courtly love convention of the Provençal poets on Giacomo and his contemporaries at the court of the Emperor Frederick II is well known,³² but this contingent historical phenomenon dovetailed with an essentially structural phenomenon – the sonnet’s programmed theme of death and mortality. In the end there may be no better way of illustrating the pressure of death on living consciousness than through the intense experience of beauty’s appreciation, longing, loss and absence that courtly love entails on the lover. While some death sonnets, like Greville’s, represent sickened turnings away from the erotic tradition and are hence just the darker side of the same coin, others, such as Donne’s ‘Death be not proud’, embody death as a positive presence. However, a real experience of death – always and only known from the living perspective – is more likely to take the form of fear, lack, desire for the impossible and a sense of the terrible contrast between life’s intensity and the vacuum of nonbeing. The unrequited love of the courtly tradition, including its self-regarding subject and his masochistic attraction to pain, is the perfect pretext for a dramatization of death. Brevity is the condition of our lives; a knowledge of this brevity intensifies all experience and turns the focus inward; desire for what is impossible is not so much an existential rebellion against death as the emblem of our encounter with it.

In later periods sonnets have turned promiscuously to many topics other than love and death, led into these errant ways impressively by John Milton. It is always possible to override with rhetorical force and contradictory, counterpointing formal strategies – at least to some extent – the underlying semantic tendencies of a verse structure: Milton’s masterful reshaping of the iambic pentameter in *Paradise Lost* is well known, for example. Following Milton’s example, the Romantic poets, particularly William Wordsworth, favour the sonnet as the medium of themes such as the nature-human relationship, political

³² See, for example, Oppenheimer, *The Birth of the Modern Mind*, 13–25, and Spiller, *Development of the Sonnet*, 14–18. (Oppenheimer includes both the original Sicilian sonnet and the translation.)

wrongs and ideals and eulogies of great figures of the past and present. However, the sonnet shows a persistent habit of turning back to the old themes. George Meredith's sequence of slightly adapted sonnets, *Modern Love*, returns later in the nineteenth century to love and death, with a strangely Victorian bitterness and intensity. Gerard Manley Hopkins speaks directly or indirectly about death through his variants on the form, with another kind of intensity that is at times almost unbearable. The modernist sonnets of E. E. Cummings also tend in the traditional thematic directions, despite his fourteen-line poems' often extraordinary formal deviations from the sonnet norm. More recently, Marilyn Hacker's sequence, *Love Death, and the Changing of the Seasons* demonstrates even in its title the thematic directions that its well-formed sonnet components take.

A brief consideration of Petrarch's Sonnet 311 shows more clearly than most the prototypical speaker's preoccupation with death, for this sonnet occurs in the sequence after the death of Laura:

*Quel rosignuol che sì soave piagne
Forse suoi figli o sua cara consorte,
Di dolcezza empie il cielo e le campagne
Con tante note sì pietose e scorte;*

E tutta notte par che m'accompagne 5
*E mi rammente la mia dura sorte:
Ch'altri che me non ho di cui mi lagne:
Chè 'n Dee non credev'io regnasse Morte.*

O che lieve è ingannar chi s'assecura!
Que' duo bei lumi, assai più che'l Sol chiari 10
Chi pensò mai veder far terra oscura?

*Or cognosch'io che mia fera ventura
Vuol che vivendo e lagrimando impari
Come nulla qua giù diletta e dura.*

That nightingale who weeps so sweetly,
 perhaps for his brood, or his dear companion,
 fills the sky and country round with sweetness
 with so many piteous, bright notes,

and it seems all night he stays beside me, 5
 and reminds me of my harsh fate:
 for I have no one to grieve for but myself,
 who believed that Death could not take a goddess.

Oh how easy it is to cheat one who feels safe!
 Who would have ever thought to see two lights, 10
 clearer than the sun, make earth darken?

Now I know that my fierce fate
 wishes me to learn, as I live and weep:
 nothing that delights us here is lasting.³³

This sonnet is unusual in that its octave is a simple alternation of two rhymes (ABAB ABAB), while the sestet comprises a pair of identical tercets linked in the centre by a couplet (CC) made up of the last line of the first and the first line of the second tercet: CDC CDC. The sorrow expressed in the octave, using the traditional image of the nightingale, is simpler than the conflicted emotions evoked in earlier sonnets by Laura's living presence. Hence, it finds an unusually unobstructed expression in the straightforward current of alternations. In line 7 the lover is quite explicit about the fact – implicit in a great many other sonnets – that he grieves not for Laura but for himself. The 'inward turn' is in other words expressed outwardly. The speaker also explicitly foregrounds his own relationship with Death: at the end of the octave he sees himself as believing that 'Death could not take a goddess.' But the sestet, displaying a more complex, interconnected rhyme scheme, revisits the cause of the octave's lyrical grief with a bitter intensity. The tormented outcry, '*O che lieve é ingannar chi s'assecura!*' ('Oh how easy it is to cheat one who feels safe!') is an accusation implicitly aimed at, if not addressed to, this personified Death whom the speaker so trustingly underestimated in the octave. His sharp sense of betrayal transforms the '*dura sorte*' ('hard fate') of the octave to the more predatory '*fera ventura*' ('fierce' or 'savage fortune') of the final tercet.

³³ Petrarca, *Il Canzoniere*, p. 298; translation by A. S. Kline, *The Complete Canzoniere*.

What he recounts as learnt in this painful conclusion is a repetition of that old – but so difficult – lesson of mortality: ‘*nulla qua giù diletta e dura*’ (‘nothing that delights us here is lasting’). This, more typically than Greville’s vision of fury, is what the sonnet in its formal essence teaches us.

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