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The Poet's Problem & Shakespeare

The desire to communicate as accurately and as effectively as possible the essence of a feeling creates the poetic problem, which is nothing more than the long, foggy distance that separates the absolute character of personal experience from the relative nature of objective, public experience. The bridge across that separation is language—a vague, ambiguous, not very substantial bridge. But words seem too abstract to catch, hold, and reflect all the rich qualities and overtones of memories, sensations, and subtle night-thoughts. The rightness, the certainty that we feel about our feelings and thoughts is directly connected to their privacy and their richness, and as soon as we put those thoughts into words it seems as if all the certainty disappears and all the rich delight of our immediate experience is lost. Yet a poet is forced, by his desire and need to share his vision, to become tied to language, to become committed to re-inventing it, giving it a new skin and fresh flesh, and to become continually involved with imagery, simile, and metaphor. Simply, the poet's problem is how to communicate the essential nature of his thoughts without permanently mangling them. Shakespeare's sonnet "That Time of Year" (sonnet #73) is a perfect and beautiful solution to the problem.

When you read the sonnet aloud you never feel the strain of a dead, mechanical meter or forced inversions. The words sound new and clean, and they flow easily together with each phrase coinciding with the movement of the poet's thought. There are no jagged edges or misplaced pauses, and there is a natural change of tone leading from somber note of the first quatrain through the tighter, heavier sounds ending the second. After the Petrarchian pause the tone of the first eight lines is like a memory trace barely felt behind the sharper notes leading directly to the concluding couplet. The sound of these fourteen lines is always completely controlled, never over-modulated or stiff, and all is done so naturally that it takes several readings to even notice that the words were written by someone outside the room of your own thought. Shakespeare solves much of the poetic problem by using the sound of language to make words concrete rather than abstract, and he is then able to slip past the surface barrier of the listener's mind to create new images from within.

For it is finally the imagery of Shakespeare that does the work of converting his private emotions into public knowledge. The awareness of the approach of death becomes as real as the bare, almost-leafless fall trees "which shake against the cold" and the "ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang." Death is no longer an idea or a whispered word, but something as actual and natural as night and final sleep, as certain to follow the self-consuming life-fire as the dark comes after day. But at no place does the imagery become symbolic, allegorical, or overly personal. There is no need to search through diaries or analyze letters and astrological signs to understand the poem. All the reader needs to do is pay attention, for the only symbols are the swiggles of ink or the marks of sound that convention turned into words. The words, then, have their meaning in the imagery, but the images mean nothing—they do not point to anything beyond themselves. But neither are the "ruined choirs" and leafless trees mere dressing, ornamental flourishes and decoration. An image is

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/3

not the clothing of a thought or an emotion—it is the thought or emotion realized in poetic action. An image not only fixes an experience, brings it into focus, but the image literally is the private experience of the poet turned into public memory.

Communication between men is possible because we live in a common world and, more importantly for literature, because the human minds that experience the common world are so similar that they are almost structurally identical. So a poet communicates his private vision by creating an ideal imaginal world that is a model of his internal world, his thoughts and feelings. The new imaginary world is an analogy, is similar to the poet's emotions and thoughts, but, unlike them, the created poetic world is complete, emotionally consistent, and lucid. The effectiveness of Shakespeare's imagery is based on the fact that it is so completely itself, so sharp and direct and accurate without being cluttered with non-essentials. Shakespeare creates a world that is similar-to yet sharper-than the actual world; his world is composed of selections or slices from the everyday world of common experience, and his images, the objects of the poetic world, are one with the action within it. His created world fits together, moves and delights us, and, using our flat word for whatever gives delight, we say his poem is beautiful.

But a poem is both delight and testimony as well as form and content. To say that a poem communicates an experience and leave it at that is to fall into the sensibility trap, to worship pure sensation or the twitching of your nerve endings. Of course, just as thought never appears without emotion in a sane man, the technique of a poem cannot be separated from the content, but that does not mean form is content or that the quality of the total experience depends only on technique. Further, it is obvious that experiences vary in value and scope as well as in shape and intensity. Getting your leg mangled or your brain pickled in drugs or alcohol would certainly be intense, but no one on this side of sanity would prefer that kind of experience to the one of making love or discovering something new in the world around him.

So, what does sonnet 73 communicate and what is the quality of the experience you get when you enter Shakespeare's poetic world? It is impossible to answer that question precisely without pointing to the poem and repeating it. But it is possible to hint at what is accomplished, to give, in general terms, the outline of the sonnet's world. What Shakespeare gives is knowledge. This is not the abstract and depersonalized knowledge science is limited to and handles so well, but it is knowledge of what it means to be a unique human being living in our world. It is not psychology (poetry, true poetry, never is psychology), for psychology can tell us only about the class mankind and not about the self, the persons that we are. Shakespeare, by creating a complete poetic world, opens his mind to us, and we share his emotions, his insights, and his vision. We enjoy the brilliant play of his imagery as well as we enjoy having our perception cleansed by the clarity of his vision and the maturity of his thought. If wisdom is the marriage of intelligence and feeling, then Shakespeare's sonnet gives us the opportunity to be wise, the knowledge that we need to become completely human, and the sense of ourselves experiencing the going-on of time and the coming-on of death.

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/3

Simply, Shakespeare's sonnet is a great and beautiful poem because it communicates without serious loss or distortion the vision of a complete man, a man who is not a stranger in the world nor mystically at one with it, a man who is neither a cynic nor a fool, a man alive and aware with the rich and subtle genius of sanity.