

Merely Mortal Dross?

Soul and Time in Shakespeare and Milton

Jelige:

“time”

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Introduction

The poems discussed below have many aspects in common. Although the authors are well-known, the poems themselves are perhaps not their most important works. These poems, however, contain the idea of time, various philosophical perspectives, Biblical and religious references; two of them (Shakespeare's "Sonnet 19" and Milton's "On Time") even share some of the same words and are similarly short in length. Though all of these aspects can be equally important, in my essay I am going to focus on the personae in both poems presenting Time as a conscious entity from two different perspectives (heavenly and earthly) and a Late Ancient Greek Neoplatonic point of view. While unfolding my argument, I will not follow the chronological order, and will not examine the possible influences of one poet on the other, since the (otherwise important) relation between the two poets is negligible in the light of the main focus. Aside from question of influence, these poems share important characteristics. They are minor pieces in the respective oeuvres and both of them are fairly early works in their authors' careers. At the same time, their philosophical tendencies are well observable, especially in the main subject around which both personae develop their ideologies¹. These ideologies are in the center of my research. First, I shall look briefly at the general philosophical roots and main characteristics of Platonizing philosophies, and their possible influence on the two poets and the culture of their age in general. Then I am going to examine the poems themselves and indicate the plasticity of Platonism—i.e., I shall identify some other influences, which, with the passing of the centuries got integrated into the original idea. Providing further minor examples from the oeuvres I shall demonstrate how the philosophy of Plotinus was truly a part of the authors' evolution of thinking. In the third section the main ideological struggles and paradoxes of Late Ancient Greek Neoplatonism will be presented by comparing the two different texts. Fourthly, the personae's concepts of afterlife will be analyzed. As I shall argue in the conclusion, the results of these considerations might contribute to a complex understanding of the problems raised by Shakespeare's and Milton's poems.

¹ By "ideology" I mean the complex set of ideas and thoughts by which the personae construct their mindset about both the intelligible and the unintelligible.

A Brief Introduction to Classical Neoplatonism

Both *On Time* and *Sonnet 19* contain Platonizing ideas, from which those of the Late Ancient Greek Neoplatonism, especially Plotinus' system from the 3rd century, are the most prominent. Christianity integrates Plotinian metaphysical convictions into its own theological scheme which displays a merger of the Platonic intelligible universe with a Classical concept of God. Plato's ideas have always been a fertile ground of different interpretations; his philosophical system cannot be easily systematized. Different commentaries emphasize different aspects, thus “. . . it is possible for two thinkers who have been conventionally and perhaps legitimately classified as Platonists to have very different philosophies” (Kristeller 50). Both classical Platonism and later on, Later Ancient Greek Neoplatonism stress such ideas as the existence of a higher, noetic-transcendent reality and the reascendence of the soul to this or these realm(s); this is why they can be easily reconciled with the relevant Christian ideas, which, essentially, claim the same.

Plotinus was the founder and the most prominent thinker of Classical Neoplatonism. By being opposed to Gnosticism and using Aristotelian, Platonic and Stoic elements he created an original philosophical synthesis. Concerning metaphysics, he made distinction between two kinds of Intellects: the “knowing” or “sober” (*thea tou emphronos*—contemplation of the intelligent/rational part) and the “loving” (*nous erón*—loving Intellect; Plotinus 6, 7, 35, 19-25). This distinction also represents two viewpoints from which his, and in some occasions, even Plato's original philosophy can be interpreted. In the Platonizing philosophies, the human soul's greatest desire is to reach back to its source, to ennoble itself, to rearrange the relationship between the noetic and the corporeal, and, at the end, re-ascend to the source and leave the body behind. However, one should not forget about the way the soul, a pure intellectual entity demeans itself to the corporeal, material world. One can conceive of the relation of the soul to this twofold reality as of a relation towards a two-way system of anastomosis: it can lead upward and downward through almost the same stages. It can be seen as a full circle, and can be an allusion to the circle of birth and dying. Plotinus thus made distinction between two “ways” of the upward path, which, if one looks at them more closely, can be seen as intertwined. The “sober” or—in this essay—“heavenly” way is the reascendence of the soul by seeking for and contemplating the eternal ideas—for the thinker of this approach, the material is the worst agent of the universe, a “metaphysical evil” which oppresses the form (i.e., the pure ideas, the

substance of everything, the pure intelligible) and keeps the mind occupied. The “loving” or “earthly” approach grabs the soul by sensuality. It supposes that existence lies in Beauty itself, and for that, Beauty is represented as a wise unity. Originally this Beauty has nothing to do with what we call “symmetry” or “aesthetic”, but it is a rather unearthly thing which cannot be wholly observed; it is transcendent, something which lies beyond the capacities of the intellect; it represents the harmony of the pure unintelligible. Beauty is a whole, and it is existence itself², thus, seeking Beauty itself (and knowing what to seek) by all means leads man to reaching Unity, reaching true existence.

By seeking the ultimate truth, man can gain knowledge; in this context, poetry and other forms of art are the noblest of what man can achieve. Poetry itself can be seen as “. . . embodying the physical and ethereal harmonies of the universe” (Norton 16). Because of its philosophical content as an aesthetical form—its special use of language and its meters and rhymes, its striving for Beauty and harmony, poetry may be the closest earthly thing to God. No wonder both Shakespeare and Milton, apparently affected by the intellectual movement of Neoplatonism—as we may see later on—, were concerned with eternal ideas.

Shakespeare and Neoplatonism

Both Shakespeare’s and Milton’s personae perceive this prominent philosophical problem (i.e., mortality versus eternity, corporeal versus transcendent) quite differently and yet quite the same way. How and why is that? One possible explanation can be their different educational basis.

² “When sense-perception, then, sees the form in bodies binding and mastering the nature opposed to it, which is shapeless, and shape riding gloriously upon other shapes, it gathers into one which appears dispersed and brings it back and takes it in, now without parts, to the soul’s interior and presents it to that which is within as something in tune with it and fitting it and dear to it...” Plotinus: I. 6. 3., *On Beauty*

“They [beautiful qualities] exist and appear to us and he who sees them cannot possibly say anything else except that they are what really exists. What does “really exist” mean? That they exist as beauties” Plotinus: I. 6. 5., *On Beauty*

“[...] the soul’s becoming something good and beautiful is its being made like to God, because from Him come beauty and all else which falls to the lot of real beings. Or rather, beautifulness is reality, and the other kind of thing is the ugly, and this same is the primary evil.” Plotinus: I. 6. 6., *On Beauty*

It would be incorrect to say that Shakespeare was uneducated; however, compared to Milton, we must assume that he had some disadvantages. Just as all other ideologies begin to alter when they become known and talked about in public, the popular form of Neoplatonism became different from the original antique, and Florentine. The common knowledge distilled from these complex systems of Neoplatonism concerned perhaps most importantly, the question of love. Love and time are, and had been, intimately intertwined even before Shakespeare. We as human beings are living *in time*; and love's loss and the aging and death of the lover are quite common themes in literature. Thus, the question of love can illuminate our poets' respective interpretations of time and the differences between their modes of thought. Marsilio Ficino, defined this state as "the spiritual love for another human being that is but a disguised love of the soul for God" (Kristeller 61)³. Referring to Plato's concept of love⁴, here he is not strictly speaking of the Christian God, but talking about the idea of eternity and beauty, the harmonious unity mentioned before.

Talking about the Italian Renaissance, it may further be pointed out that Shakespeare was influenced by Italian emblems. Fabiny deals with the relationship between Italian iconography and Shakespeare concerning his dramas, claiming that in the texts, just as during the Renaissance, time appears to be ambiguous—on the one hand, a destroyer, and on the other hand, the "revealer of truth" (Fabiny, 215). Iconography was a general source for poetic images, thus the author claims that these representations of Time appear not only in Shakespeare's plays but in his sonnets also (216). Fabiny also suggests that the first emblem book to be published in England was known by Shakespeare, thus providing further evidence for the connection between the author and this quite popular "philosophy" (228). We can see that in his *Sonnet 19*, Shakespeare chooses not to emphasize the revealer aspect of time, but rather the destroyer, the one associated with Cronus. I will examine the relationship between Cronus and the poets' imagery in a following chapter.

³ Cf. Ficino, *De Amore*, I. 4, II. 6, II. 9.

⁴ Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 210a-211b.

Switching back to our main point, the idea of “Platonic love” was so widespread and popular in the Renaissance that we are to assume that Shakespeare was familiar with the concept, or, at least with its popular version. In addition, even before Ficino this emotional pattern had been present in the arts. As Kristeller puts it about Petrarca, Platonic love cannot be easily distinguished from the common pattern of Petrarchism (Kristeller 61). From time to time man has to search for something ideal, or in this case, *someone* ideal, and conserve the aim of his or her devotion—by contemplation and suffering they can emerge to a more elevated state of being, that is, they can get closer to God. In my view, it is an unnaturally chastened love which rejects sensuality for the sake of rejecting it, and this rejection implicitly contains the sprouts of Neoplatonism. As mentioned above the concepts of time and love have been closely intertwined for a long time. For Shakespeare, the personal tragedy occurs when time wants to take his flesh-and-blood idea away; when his muse is not as ideal as he should be anymore; and, probably, when in the end time carves marks not only into his body, but into his senses and mind. We can see in several of Shakespeare’s sonnets that this battle with time was of the highest significance for him—he even used the same attributes and emblems to describe Time’s cruel nature (e.g. sonnets 45: “swift motion”, 60: “our minutes hasten to their end”, 65: “swift foot”).

Although his sonnets cannot be claimed to have been numbered according to the time they were written, the ones clustering around *Sonnet 19* depict some similar Neoplatonic ideas of love and the individual as the poem in focus does. For instance, the lover’s representation as an eternal being also appears in *Sonnet 18*: “But thy eternal summer shall not fade / Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest” (9-10). In *Sonnet 22*, a peculiar form of existence appears: the lovers possess the beauty of their loved ones in their hearts (“For all that beauty that doth cover thee / Is but the seemly raiment of my heart, / Which in thy breast doth live, as thine in me”). Because of this, the speaker would only acknowledge time’s destructive powers on himself when he notices the alternations on his loved one. Here one can see again how important the significant other’s beauty became; it is almost a standard for measuring time. This beauty seems to be so important that even in Shakespeare’s his “earlier” sonnets we can read the same wish over and over again: “And all in war with Time for love of you, / As he takes from you, I engraft you new” (Sonnet 15, 13-14).

Milton and the Cambridge Platonists

Milton, by contrast, probably received an excellent education in philosophy (Lewalski 12). He was most probably familiar with Neoplatonism, and since he had been attending Christ's College in Cambridge, also with some of the future Cambridge Platonists.

These fellow Cambridge students claimed that in the center of intellectual life should be moral principles (Fallon 50). These "moral principles are logically but not temporally prior to the actions of God, which unfold in accordance with those moral principles" (52). These Cambridge fellows treated the flesh as a gross substance (like Milton also seemed to do) from which the soul can be freed by the light of God (i.e., the intellect).⁵ However, Milton and the Platonists did so on different bases—though Fallon claims that Milton in Christ's was a dualist, and it was only later on that he became a materialist, there are logical explanations why he could not have been a follower of this intellectual movement (80). As we shall see later on, the similarities between Milton and these Platonists do not go so far.

However tempting it may appear to claim an acquaintance between Milton and Henry More, maybe the most prominent of the Cambridge Platonists, they can hardly have worked together. As we are now to unfold arguments against their mutual influence on each other, we should bear in mind that *On Time* was most likely written in the early 1630s (Carey 170). Milton and More were most likely familiar with each other's name, having been published in the same memorial book in 1638 (Lewalski 70), but there are no other instances pointing towards their closer acquaintance (Lewalski 18). It is worth noting that Milton was not fond of Cambridge, thus it is unlikely that he should have attended any academic grouping of his alma mater (Lewalski 15). Many times he had been away from Cambridge, especially in the last year, when More started attending the university. More's most prominent works (by reason of which he is considered a Platonist) were only published in the 1650s: *Conjectura Cabbalistica* (1653), *Enthusiasmus Triumphatus* (1656), *The Immortality of the Soul* (1659). This was a decade when Milton had already written strictly monist pieces. Fallon argues that Milton's philosophy is more

⁵ "The great mystery of Christianity is the perfecting of the Humane nature by participation of the Divine. Which cannot be understood so properly of this gross flesh and External senses, as of the Inward humanity, viz. our Intellect, Reason, and Fancie." More: *Conjectura Cabbalistica* 2 (qtd. in Fallon 69)

similar to that of Anne Conway's, a pupil of Henry More, whose monist philosophy focuses on God as the source of all being, and whom Milton also did not know in person (Fallon 117). Conway argues that God is the one behind every substance, even material itself.

Milton's relation to *Cambridge Platonism* is thus clarified in broad lines. There are, however, ideas on which they seemed to agree—and these are some of the core themes of Plato and antique Neoplatonism. Only approximately one year after finishing *On Time*, Milton wrote a mask entitled *Comus*. In this play, several Platonizing ideas appear, for instance, the first four lines seem to be inspired by the following part of Plato's dialogue:

*Before the starry threshold of Jove's court
My mansion is, where those immortal shapes
Of bright aërial spirits live insphered
In regions mild of calm and serene air,
Above the smoke and stir of this dim spot
Which men call Earth, and, with low-thoughted care,
Confined and pestered in this pinfold here,
Strive to keep up a frail and feverish being,
Unmindful of the crown that Virtue gives,
After this mortal change, to her true servants
Amongst the enthroned gods on sainted seats.*

[. . .] by reason of feebleness and sluggishness, we are unable to attain to the upper surface of the air; for if anyone should come to the top of the air or should get wings and fly up, he could lift his head above it and see, as fishes lift their heads out of the water and see the things in our world, so he would see things in that upper world; and, if his nature were strong enough to bear the sight, he would recognize that that is the real heaven and the real light and the real earth. (*Phaedo*, 109e-110a)

Then, again, there is another instance found in Plato's dialogues for the description of the heavens. Here the conversation is about the struggle to break out from this world by mastering our soul and virtues.

But when they go to a feast and a banquet, they proceed steeply upward to the top of the vault of heaven, where the chariots of the gods, whose well matched horses obey the rein, advance easily, but the others with difficulty; for the horse of evil nature weighs the chariot down, making it heavy and pulling toward the earth the charioteer whose horse is not well trained. There the utmost toil and struggle await the soul. For those that are called immortal, when they reach the top, pass outside and take their place on the outer surface of the heaven, and when they have taken their stand, the revolution carries them round and they behold the things outside of the heaven. But the region above the heaven was never worthily sung by any earthly poet, nor will it ever be. (Phaedrus, 247a-c)

Another instance of Milton's knowledge of Platonic and antique Neoplatonic ideas can be observed in the following lines from the same play in which he describes the above-mentioned ascendance and reascendence of the soul, the two-fold way:

*Till oft converse with heavenly habitants
Begin [sic!] to cast a beam on the outward shape,
The unpolluted temple of the mind,
And turns it by degrees to the soul's essence,
Till all be made immortal. But, when lust,
By unchaste looks, loose gestures, and foul talk,
But most by lewd and lavish act of sin,
Lets in defilement to the inward parts,
The soul grows clotted by contagion,
Imbodies, and imbrutes, till she quite loose
The divine property of her first being. (459-469)*

This "beam" can be seen as referring to Plato's *Republic*, more specifically 508e-509a, where Socrates explains the irradiation of Good onto the human mind:

This reality, then, that gives their truth to the objects of knowledge and the power of knowing to the knower, you must say is the idea of good, and you must conceive it as being the cause of knowledge, and of truth in so far as known. Yet fair as they both are, knowledge and truth, in supposing it to be something fairer still than these you will think

rightly of it. But as for knowledge and truth, even as in our illustration it is right to deem light and vision sunlike, but never to think that they are the sun, so here it is right to consider these two their counterparts, as being like the good or boniform, but to think that either of them is the good is not right. Still higher honor belongs to the possession and habit of the good.

Milton's lines are an allusion to Plotinus' ideas about how the contemplation of heavenly or transcendent beings and philosophy can ennoble the soul, in the same proportion as, vice versa, the material, the body, the matter and all its attributes can materialize the soul.

Some Platonizing thoughts can be identified in his *At A Solemn Musick* written approximately at the same time as *On Time*: "Blest pair of *Sirens*, pledges of Heav'ns joy,/ Sphear-born harmonious Sisters, Voice, and Vers" (1-2). In these first two lines of his poem Milton indirectly talks about the Sirens and the harmony of the spheres, which, on the one hand, can be an allusion of Plato's music of the spheres described in *The Republic* X, 617b-c, and which he also describes in *Timaeus* 35-36; this is a description of the mathematical and musical harmonies which constitute the World Soul, and thus, the universe itself. Secondly, it can be an allusion to Cicero's idea of the same in *Somnium Scipionis*—Cicero being an epitomizer of Plato's *Timaeus*, it is possible that he took an idea from that dialogue directly. Finally, those two lines could also be traced back to Plotinus, who claimed that music is a way which leads us to Absolute Beauty:

As for all the imitative arts, painting and sculpture, dancing and mime, which are in some way composed of elements from this world and use a model perceived by sense and imitate the forms and movements and transpose into their own terms the proportions which they see, it would not be reasonable to trace them back to the intelligible world except as they included in the forming principle of man. But if any artistic skill starts from the proportions of [individual] living things and goes on from there to consider the proportions of living things in general, it would be a part of the power which also in the higher world considers and contemplates universal proportion in the intelligible. And certainly all music, since the ideas which it has are concerned with rhythm and melody,

would be of the same kind, just like the art which is concerned with intelligible number.
(Plotinus, 5, 9, 11, *On Intellect, the Forms, and Being*)

On the basis of this introduction, we can be certain that the young Milton was well acquainted with the classical and post-classical Greek Neoplatonic ideas, and, in his early poems, he made great efforts to reconcile them with the traditional Christian conceptions of Heaven and afterlife. In *On Time*, as we shall see later on, Milton appears to follow the idea of the Platonian “sober” Intellect, the one which ascends to the One, or, with Christian terminology, to God by and through a pure contemplation. In his poem, devotion overcomes temptation and sensuality. Milton’s approach is closer to the original ideas of Plotinus and Plato, but also heavily influenced by Christianity.

Observable Changes of the Original Platonic System in the Poems

As it has already been mentioned, both *On Time* and *Sonnet 19* share common patterns. Let us assume that in light of the main approach (i.e., examining the different representations of Time on the same philosophical basis), the time interval between the two poems is negligible, and let us not examine the one’s influence on the other. There are only speculations concerning the exact respective dates of composition; however, given that the estimated composition date for Shakespeare’s *Sonnet 19* is in 1595-6 (Burrow 105), and for *On Time* it is around 1633 (Carey 170), we can see only ca. 35 years difference, which, concerning the assessment of the specific philosophy and ideologies under discussion, is perhaps makes a philosophical and ideological completely feasible and justified.

As we examine the poems, we may note the significant alteration and blending of different ideas: a common pattern is the fusion of different mythologies and cultures. As Kristeller noted,

We must resign ourselves to the fact that in most cases the Platonist elements of thought are combined with doctrines of different origin and character, and that even the professed Platonists did not express the thought of Plato in its purity, as modern scholars understand it, but combined it with more or less similar notions that had accured to it in late antiquity, the Middle Ages, or more recent times. (Kristeller 65)

The renewal of Greek and Roman mythology is a Renaissance peculiarity which keeps on in the Baroque period. An example for mixed cultural and religious references can be found in Shakespeare's Sonnet 19, where the first line seems to be inspired by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In *Metamorphoses* XV 234-6, we read this: "O Time, thou great devourer, and thou, envious Age, together you destroy all things; and, slowly gnawing with your teeth, you finally consume all things in lingering death!" The second line of the poem: "And make the earth devour her own sweet brood" is slight reference to the tale of Cronus (Hesiod, *Theogony* 453-467) in which the titan eats his own children for selfish reasons. Concerning Cronus, some emblematic features are also present. Here we should note that even though Chronos (god of time, a three-headed serpent) and Cronus (the ruthless titan) are originally not identical figures, by late Ancient Greek and early Roman times the two gods merged. Not only are their names paronyms, but their appearances could also be confused. (Kákosy 154 and Trencsényi-Waldapfel 256)⁶

Partly by this confusion emerged this Father Time-figure, who represents the dark, negative aspect of time: he is not only frightening in deed but also in appearance. However, he can also be seen as a revealer. "Tempus erit", the time will come, sounds the old Latin phrase—and this Father Time does not only bring destruction but also revelation, and that is the aspect which Milton observes. Shakespeare, however, probably associates this Father Time figure with the old man holding a scythe and/or an hourglass, as it is depicted in several emblem-books.

In his *Sonnet 19*, these subtle references to Classical, Medieval and Renaissance imagery transform into more apparent mythological symbols, such as the phoenix (i.e., immortality: "And burn the long-lived phoenix in her blood", S19, 4) and "swift-footed" (i.e., fast: S19, 6) as an epithet possibly referring to Achilles from Homer's *Iliad* (Burton no pag.). The appearance of these emblematic portrayals is not without reason, since emblem books were in use in great numbers during the Renaissance and the Baroque.⁷

⁶ Cf. Marie-Louise von Franz: "the Greeks actually identified time with the divine river Oceanos [...]. It was also called Chronos (Time) and later identified with Kronos, the father of Zeus, and also with the God Aion." (Franz, 5)

⁷ Cf. what Daly says in this respect: "Earlier the Greeks had shown an interest in Egyptian hieroglyphs. Plato, Herodotus, Plutarch, Pliny, Clement of Alexandria, Plotinus, Lucan, Diodorus all make reference to the hieroglyphic system which embodied wisdom in picture signs. The Greeks were not concerned with the phonetic aspects of the

Pictures, either verbal or material, have always helped people understand complex ideas. An instance for this phenomenon, as we see above, is ancient Egyptian writing, which did not describe phonemes but rather the general idea behind spoken words. According to this passage, Platonist thinkers tended to observe these pictures as signs for a more ethereal meaning. Words often incline to be incomplete; they cannot fully express thoughts. Pictures, on the other hand, can contain many words, several layers of meaning, thus a more elevated and very complex idea in themselves. Though it may not be intentional, Shakespeare attaches yet another layer of Platonism to his Sonnet. By describing Time and its representations with heavy emblematic imagery which everyone (even in the 21st century) subconsciously associates with time, he awakes, through references to universals by particular emblematic things, the Platonic notion of universal ideas. This technique raises the question of which was before, the sign or the meaning? How come that such simple pictures can contain the truth in themselves? This Beauty, this lover also becomes a symbol, if we take him for a material reality containing a whole and perfect meaning. He is the symbol of himself; a symbol of beauty. Though the ideas are not as prominent in the Plotinian system as they were in the Platonic one, but if we consider that the soul can acquaint them in some ways, and that they are a higher reality we “left behind”, its projections as symbols can be prominent agents in the soul’s reascendence and process of self-realization.

The motif of Cronus devouring his own children (thus time destroying its creations) is also present in Milton’s *On Time* in the opening line (“Fly, envious *Time*”: Cronus ate his children up in jealousy, for fear of losing his reign; see *Theogony* 461-2), and then in the paradox of the fourth line (“And glut thy self with what thy womb devours”). However, the poem also features two allusions to ideas expressed in the Revelations (“run out thy race” refers to the oath

language, only with the symbolic system, which they viewed in the light of their own theory of Platonic ideas. As Iversen puts it: ‘what interested the Greeks was not Egyptian writing at all; but from their own “Platonic” interpretation of the relation between sign and meaning in Egyptian hieroglyphs, grew the idea of the existence of a true symbolic system of writing in which abstract notions and ideas could be expressed by means of concrete pictures of material objects’” (Daly 16).

taken in Rev 10:6, which implies that time will ultimately come to an end; and “Attir’d with Stars” as the woman John saw in Heaven with a crown of twelve stars upon her head in Rev12:1), showing the speaker’s more Biblical, or so to say, “heavenly” orientation and emphasizing Father Time’s revealing aspect. It is interesting to see how the Platonic, Aristotelian, and Neoplatonic method of contemplation and the Christian foreshadowing and anticipating the Last Judgment intertwine.

As we have mentioned earlier, several of Milton’s early poems contain ideas of body-mind dualism. *On Time*, *Nativity Ode*, *At a Solemn Musick*, and even *Comus* are all among his earliest pieces, and they bear the underlying idea of a corrupted material reality. The young Milton’s philosophy was supposedly dualist, as Fallon describes: “. . . [his poetry] presupposes a relation of body and soul traceable to Plato and Renaissance Neoplatonists” (Fallon 79). Milton characterizes the body in his *Nativity Ode* as a “darksome house of mortal clay” (Carey, line 14). However, this notion is not only relevant to Renaissance-, but also to the 3rd century Neoplatonism (Plotinus, I. 6. 6. and *passim*), and even to Plato himself, cf. *Phaedrus*. Milton’s still-developing philosophy can be observed in *On Time*. It starts from pagan mythological ground: “Fly, envious Time, till thou run out thy race” (OT, 1), which is an allusion to Cronus, that ushers in a distinctively Christian expression: the end of times. Then the poem comes through a Platonizing section: “When every thing that is sincerely good / And perfectly divine” (OT, 14 – 15). This possibly refers to an *ideal* Heaven. The sonnet ends in the Christian vision of Heaven: “About the supreme Throne of him”, (OT, 17). These stages are not to be distinguished from one another. Thus, the “upward spiral” of the soul intertwines with a Christian vision of the end of times, which is also notable from a Greek Neoplatonic point of view: time is attached to our material world, as informed and animated by the soul, and the goal which the soul is striving for is beyond and above time. It is not a never-ending chain of moments, but a total timelessness: eternity understood as a principle of time, above time itself. In Plotinus, Eternity is attributed to the hypostasis of Intellect, whereas Time characterizes Soul (cf. Plotinus 5, 1, 4, and Plato, *Timaeus*, 37d). This is the point in which we can reconcile the pagan (circle-like) and the Christian (linear) forms of time.

The Two “Eternities”

Milton’s vision seems to describe the material world (“chaos”) slowly being cleansed from all “mortal dross” (OT, 6) to free the soul which would then ascend to more ethereal spheres. The poem expresses faith in freeing the soul from the chains of the body, so that it can return to its real home (Fallon 80, cf. Plotinus, 5, 1, 12). This very conviction is one of the core ideas of Neoplatonism (and Platonism, see Republic, Book X 618b-619a and 621c-d).⁸ Milton’s poem is rather for the soul than it is for the ego; in sincere belief, he consciously denies the thing which is a condition of our worldly existence: the material reality in general.

This craving for eternity is also present in Shakespeare’s *Sonnet 19* (“Him in thy course untainted do allow,” S19, 11). However, the most striking detail for the reader may not be this endeavor, but rather the male personal pronoun for referring to the lover. The origin of an erotic relationship between two males can also be found in Platonism. As Evans suggests: “There was an established tradition in Europe that placed a higher value on the love relationship between men than the love between sexes” (Evans 17). He also points out that there is an Aristotelian argument claiming that a relationship between men is bound to be closer since men are more alike to each other (Evans 18). Hence, we would expect this kind of relationship to be favored in Renaissance Neoplatonism, because such a *Platonic* (i.e., loving for reaching Beauty itself) relationship as this could be considered the noblest, since its “flame” is not burning as intense as it is in case of heterosexual relationships. So a man-to-man relationship would not consume the soul by focusing too much on physical love—it would rather ennoble and refine it. Also, bodily and heterosexual (and bodily and homosexual) lovers “by getting children they acquire immortality [...] imagining they “for all succeeding time procure” (*Symposium* 208e), while spiritual and homosexual lovers “in their souls [...] conceive [...] prudence and virtue in general” (209b). This honoring is in harmony with the ultimate aim of both Platonism and Classical Neoplatonism, i.e., the freeing of the soul. By rescuing one’s mind from the chains of bodily love that comes along with heterosexual relationships, one can concentrate on the soul so

⁸ This Platonic negative belief concerning the value of the physical world may be seen as problematic. As Tromly indicated, “. . . Milton’s speaker expresses his belief with sublime certitude, but only by the expedient of refusing to acknowledge the human anxieties which may make faith problematic” (Tromly 393).

that it can transcend the world to reach the purely divine ideas. In this sense, Shakespeare's poem suggests that one can achieve this perfection without the death of the body, for in this case, the body itself contains the pattern that should be eternized. This is not quite the Plotinian view; in this case, Shakespeare tends to value the material reality too much (when, in contrast, Plotinus regards it as a metaphysical evil), and does not aim for a wise unity with a transcendent entity.

The Brief Etymology of “Devour”

The only thing that stands in the way of perfection is “devouring Time”, the agent that is common in both poems.⁹ But what does *devour* mean? According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (s.v. “devour” 1, 2a, 3c), this word, in the most common sense, means “to swallow or eat up voraciously, as a beast of prey; to make prey of, to prey upon.” If we consider this meaning, then “devouring Time” can be an allegory of Cronus, the Titan. This rhymes with the next two meanings of “devour,” which can be applied to human persons (Time is personalized because of the capitalized “T”): “To eat greedily” and “to eat like a beast”. In both poems, Time eats up everything without any further consideration, from the eternal phoenix to everything material. It is portrayed as a mindless beast created only to destroy. Then there is a further meaning of “devour” which is not present anymore in present day English but which is attested in the 16th century: “to make prey of, treat with rapine”. This completes the picture of Time as a beast hunting for not only mutable, but also immortal beings. The four definitions of “devour” thus further emphasize the personal but, at the same time, beast-like character of Time, which are also distinctively present in the poems. In the following, we shall see how differently the personae relate to this phenomenon.

The Subject's Relation to Time

In *On Time*, the speaker is rather triumphant (Tromly 391). Time, being able to consume only what is “false and vain” (OT, 5), i.e., the creations of the material, is nothing but an evanescent

⁹ “Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion's paws” (S19, 1)

“Fly envious *Time*, [...] And glut thy self with what thy womb devours” (OT, 1 and 4)

trouble. “So little is thy gain” (OT, 8) implies that no matter how hard this “beast” tries to destroy everything, it is only instrumental in its own downfall. In the poem’s linear time-vision, by “calling on the lazy leaden-stepping hours” (OT, 2), the Biblical Last Judgment (in a closer perspective, the individual’s death) is only coming closer. After that, Time will cease to exist, the soul will be transfigured, and everything that had been destroyed will appear meaningless in the realm of the indestructible, the Ideas, or the Christian Heaven (i.e., “every thing that is sincerely good and perfectly divine” OT, 14-15). Also, “Truth, and Peace, and Love” can be an allegory of the Trinity, truth being the Father (“For the word of the Lord is right: and all his works are done in truth,” Psalm 33:4), Peace being the Son (“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you . . .,” John 14:27) and Love being the Holy Spirit (“Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ’s sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me,” Rom 15:30, and in several Church Fathers).

In *Sonnet 19*, however, the speaker is rather desperate. In Shakespeare’s earlier sonnets, “Time is an agent of reality that leads the organism ceaselessly, inevitably, to destruction and perhaps oblivion. But if this essential reality is recognized in time, means of staving off ruin are available . . .” (Quinones 328). In *Sonnet 19*, one such means is the only concern of the speaker: to persuade his lover to beget children in order to reproduce his beauty before Time eludes him. From a Platonic point of view, this is a bad solution, a vicious circle: by creating, the inferiority of matter is secured, and the soul is again captivated by it—whereas according to Plato, we should perceive Beauty only with our Intellect.

In this early sonnet, however, Time, the mindless beast is insurmountable. The speaker, in fact, tries to struggle against it (“But I forbid thee one most heinous crime,” S19, 8), but it is all in vain. Compared to the concept of time present in *On Time*, this force seems to be far greater. Why so? First of all, right in the first part of the poem, Time does unnatural things: it blunts the lion’s paws, makes earth devour her own brood, defangs the tiger and kills the phoenix, a creature that is immortal (Vendler 124-5; thus the speaker already exaggerates Time’s destructive powers). These are all crimes that Time would not be allowed to commit. Besides these, there are Time’s ordinary crimes represented, such as the change of the seasons and making the world’s sweets fade (not only the negative, but the positive aspects are present, too: “glad seasons,” S19, 5). It seems that the speaker would have to accept these after facing the

crimes *contra naturam*; he is so hopeless that he surrenders to Time. Only after this surrender comes the description of the highest crime: the “crime against form” (Vendler 125). The speaker’s lover embodies Beauty itself; by “carving hours” to his “fair brow,” Time ruins this perfect pattern. From this more “earthly” approach, it is indeed the “most heinous crime,” because according to the Platonic theory of coming-into-being, Nature needs ideas in order to produce their material *ectypa* (offprints) in the womb of Space. Shakespeare’s description is so picturesque that we can imagine Time as either Death with a scythe (cf. “carve”) or as a lunatic artist (also a mindless beast), cf. “draw no lines there with thine antique pen” (S19, 10). The word “antique” bears the sense of both “old-making” and “making beauty ugly” (Evans 132). This presupposes the (Neo)Platonic concept of Beauty being an eternal ideal pattern, and the Platonic conviction of reaching Beauty by means of pure love. In Shakespeare, the speaker has already reached it because his lover is the embodied ideal pattern of Beauty itself. This is why—unlike in *On Time*—the emphasis shifts from Heaven to Earth. The value to protect exists *here* on Earth, and is in actual danger. The speaker realizes he cannot stop Time in its destruction (“Yet do thy worst, old Time . . .”, S19, 13), so he decides to eternize his love (Beauty, or his actual amorous feelings or both?) in verse: “. . . language can preserve the pattern that flesh has forgotten” (Vendler 126).

Afterlife in the Poems

Another question raised is, why is the speaker of *Sonnet 19* so desperate about the questionable indestructibility of this pattern? After all, does this idea not exist truly after death? Further, can it not be that however perfect this man might be now, his substance would reach its true form only after death? The speaker perceives Beauty’s pattern only in the body of the lover; but the flesh may, and most certainly will wither, so the whole existence of this eternal idea is corrupted. In contrast with *On Time*, this sonnet does not mention any particular deities, or the possibility of afterlife. It seems as if the theology of this work were a strange fusion of atheism, idealism and the beauty-cult of Renaissance Neoplatonism. This fusion would imply that the patterns exist, but the bearer as an individual does not, or only by means of his successors or in written works. But is this a real concept of afterlife? Possibly not: “. . . the sonnet sequence itself reproduces him [the lover] and gives him a life which he no longer possesses” (Michael L. 278). By either

writings or heirs, there remains only a glimpse of our personality or the physical pattern of the body we used to bear.

In *On Time*, however, the speaker is conscious of the reality of his own afterlife. Even his real life awaits him in Heaven or the realm of ideas. He clearly represents God sitting on His throne at the end of times (or at the end of one's lifetime), when Time shall cease to exist and Death itself will die. The poem's vision is a religious devotion to all the positive ideas. This concept of afterlife is a rather Christian one, though the personalization of forces (time, death, and chance) suggests that these are somehow in the realm of ideas. The speaker clearly pictures the final synthesis of these forces and the matter when God will incorporate them in a triumphant, all-enclosing union.

Conclusion

In conclusion we can say that both poems are considering time's nature in relation with human perception and its influence on the human soul and afterlife. Both speakers pose one of the basic questions of human existence, namely, what does this existence mean in the context of time? How do we truly exist *in time*? The personae seem to find answers imbued with Platonic philosophy. However, the ways by which they accept their answers differ greatly; and this is where we can perceive the two different approaches to the same ancient (Platonic) idea, that of the soul being thrown into existence and striving to reascend by different means.

We have already talked about the loving and the knowing Intellects; but that is just an expression of an endeavor which has long occupied the minds of humans. Where are we to find eternity? Are we to turn to a transcendent realm of existence, or are we to confine ourselves to material reality?

In the poems, both speakers claim that the solution to their problem lies in eternity. However, the realizations are quite different: Milton's speaker focuses on the heavenly aspects: he claims that what *does* remain is the eternal soul (in a more Platonic term, the form) in a triumphant union with God. He rather turns to eternal ideas, the realm of the intelligible, unchangeable reality. He is triumphant because he was able to transcend his material existence—at least, he claims to have done so.

In contrast to this, Shakespeare's persona suggests that there is no afterlife; at least he is not sure of it. However, according to him, what *should* remain is the eternal pattern (which is certainly not the soul but rather an abstract, impersonal idea), but only in verse or by means of descendants, not with God. But is living in a poem a real existence? In Shakespeare's universe, the individual is held captive by matter; they are not able to transcend their own existence and death.

This contrast between heaven and earth shows how different the poetic judgment of the same philosophical idea can be. The harsh Platonic distinction between the different realms of existence, and, further, the Neoplatonic notion of the soul can either spur desperation or joy. But the fall and the reascendence are only two halves of the same circle: the soul is deprived of its original realm of existence, but has a potential to find its way back.

Time has always been with us, just as we have always tried to solve the question of an afterlife. This spurred our artists to think, to find new ways of thinking the relationship between the soul and the body, and to seek for redeeming knowledge, a coherent, creative, and eclectic fusion of relevant ideas, and to aim for the ultimate truth.

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Appendix

William Shakespeare: Sonnet 1910

Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion's paws,
And make the earth devour her own sweet brood,
Pluck the keen teeth from the fierce tiger's jaws,
And burn the long-lived phoenix in her blood,
Make glad and sorry seasons as thou fleet'st,
And do whate'er thou wilt, swift-footed Time,
To the wide world and all her fading sweets:
But I forbid thee one most heinous crime:
O carve not with thy hours my love's fair brow,
Nor draw no lines there with thine antique pen.
Him in thy course untainted do allow
For beauty's pattern to succeeding men.
Yet, do thy worst, old Time: despite thy wrong,
My love shall in my verse ever live young.

¹⁰ Burrow, Colin, ed. *William Shakespeare. The Complete Sonnets and Poems*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, 419.

John Milton: On Time¹¹

Fly envious Time, till thou run out thy race,
Call on the lazy leaden-stepping hours,
Whose speed is but the heavy plummet's pace;
And glut thyself with what thy womb devours,
Which is no more than what is false and vain,
And merely mortal dross;
So little is our loss,
So little is thy gain.
For when as each thing bad thou hast entombed,
And last of all, thy greedy self consumed,
Then long eternity shall greet our bliss
With an individual kiss;
And joy shall overtake us as a flood,
When every thing that is sincerely good
And perfectly divine,
With truth, and peace, and love shall ever shine
About the supreme throne
Of him, to whose happy-making sight alone,
When once our heavenly-guided soul shall climb,
Then all this earthy grossness quit,
Attired with stars, we shall for ever sit,
Triumphing over Death, and Chance, and thee O Time.

¹¹ Carey, John, ed. *Milton: The Complete Shorter Poems*. Edinburgh: Pearson Longman, 2007, 170-1. In some critical editions truth, peace and love are also written with capital letters.