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THE STRONG  
NECESSITY OF TIME

The Philosophy of Time in  
Shakespeare and Elizabethan Literature

*by*

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For Jennifer

Thy firmnes makes my circle just,  
And makes me end, where I begunne.



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## PREFACE

Certain concerns have gripped men's imaginations more strongly than others. Every age has had its own particular angst, but incessantly the mystery and power of time has perplexed and challenged the creativity of poets, novelists, and dramatists. The nature and meaning of time is also a recurring theme of philosophical speculation. Indeed, the attempt to grasp time's mystery as it passes seems to be one of man's perpetual metaphysical and imaginative preoccupations. The present study attempts to show how philosophical and literary trends were interacting in the crucial years of late Elizabethan and early Jacobean England.

The importance of such a study was suggested by L. C. Knights over thirty years ago when he wrote that "an essay might well be written on the Time theme in Shakespeare" to illuminate some important aspects of Shakespeare's genius and Elizabethan mind. (1\*) My study is greatly indebted to Professor Knights, with whose generous encouragement the doctoral dissertation on which it is based was undertaken. I hope that I at least partly carry out what he advocated in an article in TLS, July 26, 1963, where he wrote that "the study of literature cannot remain self-contained . . . there is important work waiting to be done 'on the frontiers', where the study of literature joins hands with the study of history, philosophy, theology, etc. But it will need to be done by those who really know what literature is, not by specialists in other subjects who merely look to literature for documentation."

The importance of time in Renaissance thought and literature has, of course, been widely acknowledged. In particular, two books have recently appeared on a topic similar to my own, Frederick M. Turner's Shakespeare and the Nature of Time (Oxford University Press, 1971) and Ricardo J. Quinones' The Renaissance Discovery of Time (Harvard University Press, 1972). As my treatment of the philosophical and theological issues at stake should make clear, I find Turner's work superficial and arbitrary in its choice of moral and philosophical themes. A superficial skim over a few philosophical commonplaces is no substitute for the detailed exploration into the intellectual hinterland demanded by the topic. His choice of Shakespeare's plays, too, unnecessarily narrows the topic and there are too few adequate references to other Renaissance writers to show the great changes occurring in Renaissance ideas on the nature and meaning of time. Ricardo J. Quinones' book is a more ambitious work altogether, and reading it prompts me to repeat the remark of Coleridge which appears, regrettably slightly misquoted, on pp. 89-90 of his book:

What is the right, the virtuous Feeling, and consequent action,  
when a man having long meditated & perceived a certain Truth

finds another, [ ? & / a] foreign Writer, who has handled the same with an approximation to the Truth, as he had previously conceived it? - Joy!(2\*)

Many scholars have wrestled, like Mr. Quinones, with the Renaissance's recording and exploration of its own sense of contingency and mutability, and yet even his book does not provide what he calls for, a "comprehensive and organic study of time in the literature of the Renaissance" (x). (3\*) The theme itself, indeed, is a constant source of frustration; we cannot bite it to the core. It is easy enough to accumulate a vast array of contrasting and contradictory references to Time, the destroyer, the fulfiller, the cannibal, the bountiful, the thief, in Renaissance literature. What matters more, and is more difficult, is to pin down the subtleties of tone or the discrete intellectual or emotional contexts into which such commonplaces are put by individual writers and artists. And further we have to convey the ways in which as Mr. Quinones notes, "for the men of the Renaissance, time is a great discovery" (3).

Part of Mr. Quinones' problem, like my own, is to define what he means by "Time". On one page, he can say "Time is change" (428); two pages later, "Time's nature is its unchangeability" (430). "Time", as so many treatments of the topic show, can become a category so unhelpfully vague, so much a conceptual imperialist, that it is extendable to include any matter of human concern in which the eager scholar chooses to be interested. All events occur by definition, in time, and all may be defined in terms of time. Nevertheless, as I shall show, the problem of time's nature and meaning has traditionally been granted a conceptual and metaphysical autonomy, and it was moreover a category to which Renaissance writers turned naturally to embody or explore their fear or unease before a sense of intellectual or emotional crisis. "For, who sees not", as Spenser wrote, "that Time on all doth pray." (4\*) Mr. Quinones emphasises rightly that for Petrarch, Shakespeare, or Spenser, time is "more an aspect of personality than a theological world view" (15). Mutability was not simply a convenient abstraction but bit deeply into everyday experience. And yet such subjective outcries reflect more than personal angst. They gather weight from the shared intellectual history of the age, and it is in their treatment of the history of ideas and the swirling currents of feeling that underlie ideas that previous studies of time in the Renaissance have significantly failed. Mr. Quinones' aim, for example, is admirable, "both analytical and historical . . . to preserve the individual integrity of an author" and "to bring out the profile and essential dynamics of a historical period . . ." (xii-xiii). Despite a skimpy paraphrase of selected pieces of Spenser and occasional crude readings of Shakespeare, the individual authors Mr. Quinones chooses, ranging from Dante through Milton, are illuminatingly handled. He gives in particular exciting analyses of Petrarch and Montaigne. But woefully often, when he attempts to "draw the lines of continuity and change" (xii) the author reveals a regrettable superficiality. For Mr. Quinones, history moves in easily discernible phases, even jerks: in the seventeenth century, for instance, "northern Europe moves into the post-Renaissance world and southern Europe declines" (13), the latter observation presumably referring to those "countries that did not move into the modern world, like Italy or Spain" (499).

Eras are constantly distinguished in such clearcut and almost animistic ways. We read of "the medieval neglect of time" (20), while Dante is "in the early days of temporal awareness" (37); by the fourteenth century however, "time operates in a quasi-Manichean way" (463) which must have been somewhat disorientating for it. While at one point in the argument the "End of the Renaissance" (443) is symbolized by Prospero's renunciation of his magic (c.1612-3), nevertheless by the mid-seventeenth century, Milton's Eve still has motives which are "quintessentially Renaissance" (472).

Behind such historiographical crudities lies the alluring spectre of Burckhardt, who, eulogized by Mr. Quinones as "our premier Renaissance historian" (481) inspires such glamorous generalizations about the Renaissance spirit, with its "image of human possibility" (198), to which Dante is the "first witness" (22); in familiar Burckhardtian garb, Dante and Petrarch are asserted to have "something of Ulysses in both of them, and much of the adventurousness of the Renaissance" (132). Like Burckhardt, too, Quinones sees the Renaissance in terms of the secularization of ideals; a Burckhardtian view of fame and generation as key forces by which men seek to overcome time dominates the analysis of his chosen writers.

What is consistently and disastrously played down in this particular book is the whole theological dimension to the Renaissance understanding of time. Augustine is occasionally mentioned, Boethius and even the New Testament are referred to briefly. But it is not enough and indeed, I would argue, it is impossible, to separate out time as - to revert to his terms - "an aspect of personality" from time as part of "a theological world view" (15). Even if the discussion takes us beyond the boundaries of literary criticism, the issues a philosopher or theologian like Bruno or Calvin deals with are central to the Renaissance poets' apprehension of time.

There is another important matter of methodology raised by Quinones' study. As well as relying heavily on an impressionistic quasi-Burckhardtian historiography, Mr. Quinones tries to stress the importance of his theme by a series of modern parallels. These range from the crude - an analogy between tragic structure and "the events of Dallas" (363), to potentially illuminating parallels with Kierkegaard and Heidegger. To be effective, parallels with modern writers require more than a sprinkling of existential terminology, but an important point of procedure is worth considering. As Wilbur Sanders has recently suggested, mere contemporaneity of "background" material is in itself no guarantee of relevance. (5\*) Modern preoccupations with time may be as important to our understanding of Shakespeare as Bruno or Montaigne: part of what makes a writer great is, after all, his uniqueness, even his strangeness, in his own time. And it is certainly true that from Blake onwards an influential tradition of modern writers has dwelt almost obsessively on the temporality of man's life as the dominant fact of his existence. Culturally, at the very least, as Thomas J. J. Altizer comments, "at bottom, the 'time' that modern man knows in his deepest existence is a 'time' created by the death of God". (6\*) In the writings of Bruno and Shakespeare in particular, we are at the fascinating point where a cultural revolution, involving the most sensitive minds of a generation, is

gaining impetus and self-consciousness. In the course of my study I attempt to suggest ways in which this has occurred.

It is a measure of the suggestiveness of a book like The Renaissance Discovery of Time that it prompts its readers to further speculations. But too often in studies of time in Renaissance literature, time has been treated merely as a fashionable literary motif; in Quinones' study, for instance, more important underlying matters have been made peripheral to the book's major interests in the Burckhardtian commonplaces, "children, secular education, and fame" (13). Necessarily, one must be selective, but despite some surface relevance of these motifs, Mr. Quinones is quite unconvincing in his attempt to make them out as central to the works he analyses, let alone to be the dynamics of the whole age. In addition, there are some weird distortions as he straightjackets literary works into his thesis. Hermione's disappearance in The Winter's Tale becomes the "maternal sacrifice that the woman must undergo when she enters into marriage" (438), and in similar, somewhat male chauvinist, vein, it is asserted that "Hermione's innocence ended symbolically with the birth of Perdita" (439). Moreover, to read Shakespeare's sonnets as an "endorsement of the ways of generation" (259), and with the histories as "the greatest Renaissance expression of the newly won faith in progeny" (305), is to lift the first 18 sonnets disastrously out of their context. It is also to ignore both the way those sonnets qualify, by tone and movement, the very assertion of procreation's powers of immortality; and as well, to overlook the urgent insistence recurring through the sequence that although beauty, love, and art may make time meaningful within particular experiences or moments, man, like the rest of the universe, is subject to time. Even Nature herself, as I shall argue -

Her audit, though delay'd, answer'd must be,  
And her quietus is to render thee. (7\*)

The subject of time is, therefore, fascinating, important, and elusive. In pursuing it, Mr. Quinones, like so many others, has raised weighty questions, although as I have suggested many more important ones have been ignored which my own study will hope to cover. So, on the one hand, to return to Coleridge's admonition, it is both reassuring and delightful to know one is writing a study of what is familiar and fruitful ground to potential readers. But on the other hand, there is a disappointment, when considering such previous studies; so much that is vital has been ignored. The definitive study remains to be written. I hope that my own, while not at all exhausting the requirements of the subject, at least burrows more deeply into neglected aspects of it.

Parts of this study have previously appeared as follows: part of the Preface in The Dalhousie Review, part of chapter two in Neophilologus, chapter six in Studies in English Literature, chapter eleven in English Miscellany, and part of chapter twelve in The Southern Review. Permission to reprint this material is gratefully acknowledged in each case.

Among the many other acknowledgments due for the undertaking and completion of this study, the following should be mentioned: the administrators of the Commonwealth Scholarship scheme; the Master and Fellows of Magdalene College, Cambridge for electing me to the

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G. F. W.

#### NOTES

(1\*) Explorations (1945), 71.

(2\*) Kathleen Coburn, ed., The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, II (London, 1962), 2546-2547.

(3\*) See my review article, "The Strong Necessity of Time", The Dalhousie Review, LII (1972), 469-477, from which some of the following remarks are adapted.

(4\*) FQ, VII.vii.47.

(5\*) The Dramatist and the Received Idea (Cambridge, 1968), 318-319.

(6\*) Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred (Philadelphia, 1963), 63.

(7\*) Sonnet 126.

## A NOTE ON EDITIONS USED

Quotations from Shakespeare's works are taken from one-volume William Shakespeare: The Complete Works, ed. Peter Alexander (1951). In citations, act, scene and line numbers but no page numbers are given, and titles of the plays are abbreviated as currently recommended by SQ, and Shak Stud.

Quotations from Donne's poetry are taken from the two-volume The Poems of John Donne, ed. Herbert J. C. Grierson (1912), cited throughout as Poems. In the notes the first and second Anniversaries are cited as 1 Anniv and 2 Anniv respectively. Quotations from Donne's sermons are taken from the ten-volume The Sermons of John Donne, ed. G. R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson (Berkeley, 1953-62), cited in the notes as Sermons.

A number of other abbreviations or cue-titles are used in the notes as follows:

|                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| <u>SCG</u>           | St. Thomas Aquinas, <u>The Summa Contra Gentiles</u> , trans. English Dominican Fathers, 3 vols. (1923-9).                                  |
| <u>ST</u>            | St. Thomas Aquinas, <u>The Summa Theologica</u> , trans. English Dominican Fathers (1911-22).   |
| Aristotle            | Aristotle, <u>Great Books of the Western World 8, 9: Aristotle</u> , 2 Vols. (Chicago, 1952).   |
| <u>City of God</u>   | St. Augustine, <u>Of the Citle of God</u> , trans. J[ohn] H[ealey] (1610).  |
| <u>Confessions</u>   | St. Augustine, <u>The Confessions of S. Augustine</u> , trans. Sir T. Matthew (1620).   |
| <u>Institutes</u>    | Jean Calvin, <u>The Institution of Christian Religion</u> , trans. T[homas] N[orton] (1561).  |
| Plato                | <u>Great Books of the Western World 7: Plato</u> (Chicago, 1952).   |
| Plotinus             | <u>Great Books of the Western World 17: Plotinus</u> (Chicago, 1952).   |
| Sophocles            | <u>Great Books of the Western World 5: Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes</u> (Chicago, 1952).                                   |
| Spenser <u>Works</u> | <u>The Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser</u> , ed. J. C. Smith and E. de Selincourt (1912). <u>The Faerie Queene</u> is cited as <u>FQ</u> . |

In all texts quoted, the original spelling has been retained, except that all archaic u, uu and i's have been regularised as v, w, and j.

The place of publication is London unless otherwise indicated.

**PART ONE:**  
**INTRODUCTION**



## TIME AND THE ELIZABETHANS

"Time" is a category of human experience that needs some close definition. So much can be subsumed under it that it might easily be rejected as an unhelpfully vague abstraction, a conceptual imperialist that can be extended to include any matter of human concern in which the eager scholar chooses to be interested: all events occur, by definition, in time, and therefore all events may be defined in terms of time. But the nature and meaning of time has been a traditional subject of philosophy; it has been granted, in works of numerous philosophers and poets, a conceptual or even metaphysical autonomy which justifies it as a viable independent subject for discussion. Moreover, as future chapters will demonstrate, it was a category of philosophical explanation to which many Renaissance writers turned naturally in order to embody or explain their fear or unease before a sense of intellectual or emotional crisis.

Time is an absolute psycho-physical continuum - as when men speak of past, present, future, hour, season, year. Yet time also embodies the more subjective sense of men's different awareness of time's passing - flowing, speeding, dragging, wasting. Men's awareness of time cannot easily be separated from its being, as it were, part of their own existence. Newton claimed that "absolute, true, and mathematical time, of itself and from its own nature, flows equably without relation to anything external", (1\*) but this is not time as it seems to affect man's inmost being, his anxieties or desires. "Time", says Rosalind in *As You Like It*, "travels in divers paces with divers persons." Perhaps because man is never separated from the mystery of his own being, his awareness of time and change can never be satisfactorily expressed in objective, scientific terms.

Although, as Hans Meyerhoff observes, "succession, flux, change . . . seem to belong to the most immediate and primitive data of our experience", and "the question, what is man, therefore invariably refers to the question of what is time", (2\*) it seems nevertheless that men in primitive societies demonstrated their awareness of time largely by elaborate attempts to unmake it, particularly by their participation in recurring myths and rituals which were designed to abolish or transform the effects of time. For such societies, "time is recorded only biologically without being allowed to become 'history' - that is, without its corrosive action being able to exert itself upon consciousness by revealing the irreversibility of events". (3\*) What was alone real for such societies was the sacred which is timeless, and the reality of life depended on man's participation in expressions of this timeless world. It was in the higher religions, especially Judaism, that time and history were first made the object of conscious reflection outside the area of myth and ritual. As time per se entered human consciousness, then men seem to have become more concerned with its slipping away and especially with the anxiety of death - an anxiety, as Paul

Tillich points out, not necessarily tied to the moment or details of death, but with the uncertainty of having to die sometime in the future, and having to live through each moment with this anxiety. (4\*) In this way, the slipping away of time became a recurring subject in song, meditation, poem, and philosophy. As A. N. Whitehead put it:

That "all things flow" is the first vague generalization which the unsystematized, barely analysed, intuition of men has produced. It is the theme of some of the best Hebrew poetry in the Psalms; it appears as one of the first generalizations of Greek philosophy in the form of the saying of Heraclitus; amid the later barbarism of Anglo-Saxon thought it reappears in the story of the sparrow flitting through the banquetting hall of the Northumbrian king; and in all stages of civilization its recollection lends its pathos to poetry. (5\*)

The nature of time became a fundamental problem of Greek metaphysics; the Christian Middle Ages, mixing together a strange compound of Biblical and Greek concepts, found time indescribable except as a pale imitation of God as it slipped away from them. In Augustine's words: "What then is tyme? If no man aske me the question, I know; but if I pretend to explicate it to any body, I know it not." (6\*) Many modern writers, living in an age where the concept of a transcendental realm complementary to time seems to many minds to have effectively disintegrated, have been deeply aware of the pressing need to find a way to give meaning to the seemingly irresistible flow of time towards death. From Kierkegaard onwards, an influential tradition of modern philosophy has dwelt on the temporality of man's life as a dominant and pressing factor of existence. Thomas J. J. Altizer, following Nietzsche's terminology, comments: "at bottom, the 'time' that modern man knows in his deepest existence is a 'time' created by the death of God". (7\*) Explicitly for such writers, and perhaps effectively for most twentieth-century men, what is most real is the profane, the temporal, the absoluteness of time.

It seems that certain epochs have been more deeply concerned with time than others. This, I suggest, is true of the Renaissance - particularly, in England, in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Elizabethan and Jacobean literature gives widespread signs of a particularly acute concern with the nature and meaning of time which, I shall argue, is connected with a profound, if gradual, intellectual revolution. The medieval religious tradition shows a remarkable surface homogeneity in the answers given to questions about the nature and meaning of time: generally, as chapter two will demonstrate, it was felt that time was created by God, continued and guided by His Providence, and that the individual's life on earth was merely an exile's flight from the destructive flux of time to the stable timelessness of God's Eternity. The apparent homogeneity of the medieval tradition is, in fact, made up of a number of diverse elements, and in the sixteenth century in particular, there are clear signs of a major breakdown in this intellectual uniformity. The old certainties continue to be strongly advocated, but other possibilities become more insistent. It is not a question of a large-scale rejection of a certain world-view - intellectual changes of this magnitude do not occur

instantaneously - but rather that the spectrum of intellectually viable answers seems to be widening.

In approaching my study of time in Elizabethan and Jacobean literature, therefore, I take the word 'time' to have two main, interconnected senses. First, time is an abstract category or continuum of experience, as when philosophers speak of Time as opposed to Eternity, as in the remark of the sixteenth-century Huguenot theologian Philippe de Mornay: "what greater contraries can there be, than time and eternitie".(8\*) Second, there is time in the sense of the passing of moments, the inevitable mutability and change men perceive in their lives, as evoked by Shakespeare's Sonnet 60:

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,  
So do our minutes hasten to their end . . . .

What is especially important for an understanding of an age's attitudes to time are the intellectual issues that are felt to be closely connected with time and the philosophical contexts into which these issues are put. Two interconnected and recurring matters underlie much of the complex, frequently confused, evidence I have found: first, an insistent preoccupation with mutability, the sheer fact of change in life, the threats it seems to pose to human security and permanence and the consequent problem of finding permanent values in an everchanging world; and second, an unease about the relationship between time and a non-temporal, transcendent Eternity, traditionally expressed in Christian theology by the doctrine of Providence. These two issues, time as mutability, and the relationship between time and Providence, will occupy a great deal of space in this study, and a brief preliminary discussion is in order.

For the Elizabethans, mutability could mean insecurity, change, decay, the ceaseless wearing-away of life. It is vividly represented in Spenser's *Titansse*:

What man that sees the ever-whirling wheele  
Of Change, the which all mortall things doth sway,  
But that therby doth find, and plainly feele,  
How MUTABILITY in them doth play  
Her cruell sports, to many mens decay?(9\*)

In the first three chapters, I analyse the widespread sense of mutability in Elizabethan and Jacobean literature, while the question of finding permanent values in a mutable world lies as a major preoccupation within many of the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

The other main issue I shall be consistently concerned with, the question of the relationship between time and an eternal, transcendental Providence, is of even more fundamental importance. A reading of sixteenth-century treatises, tracts, and sermons bears out Roy W. Battenhouse's claim that "the doctrine of Providence was the chief apologetic interest" of the age. (10\*) The traditional Christian doctrine, which saw God as creating and directing time towards a foreordained goal, still dominated most sixteenth-century thought: in the words of Sylvester's translation of Du Bartas: