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The Final Rhyme (or the Community of Lament): Benjamin's Shakespearian Sonnet Cycle

Am besten ist es, man liest die Sonnete gar nicht; wenn einer aber schon so eigensinnig verschroben ist, sie lessen zu wollen, verstehen darf er sie keineswegs.

Leon Kellner

Leon Kellner – the leading Shakespeare scholar of late Imperial and Weimar Germany – is referring in the epigraph to the state of research into Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, but his comments hold equally for the sonnet cycle of his son-in-law Walter Benjamin.¹ Benjamin considered his collection of sonnets, begun in 1914 and completed by 1922, to be a major work and included the manuscript among the papers entrusted to George Bataille in 1940 and recovered from the Bibliothèque nationale by Agamben in 1981.² Their publication in 1986 was followed by translations into Italian (2010), English (2014), and most recently French (2021)³. The tendency to regard the sonnets as a largely autobiographical episode in Benjamin's authorship has been one of the many obstacles to understanding not only the sonnets but also their role in the development of Benjamin's thought. Scholem, to whom Benjamin read the sonnets, esteemed them highly and after Benjamin's death lamented that he did not have a copy and indeed feared they had not survived. Independently of his own high estimation and that of friends like Scholem, Benjamin's sonnets offer important testimony for the years of transition between his pre-war Youth Movement writings of 1914 and his philosophical criticism of the 1920s. They offer a sequence of 73 poems with singular formal characteristics that raise many perplexing questions. Foremost among these is the choice of sonnet form adopted by Benjamin. His English translator

¹ See: Leon Kellner, "Shakespeares Sonette", in: *Englische Studien*, 68 (1933), pp. 57-80; Walter Benjamin, *Sonette*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986.

² See: Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014, pp. 667-68.

³ See: Walter Benjamin, *Sonnets*, trans. Carl Skoggard, Louisville, KY: Pilot Editions, 2014; Benjamin, Walter, *Sonneti e poesie sparse*, trans. Francesca Boarini *et al*, Turin: Einaudi, 2010; Benjamin, Walter, *Sonnette/Sonnets*, trans. Michel Metayer, Saint-Victoire sur Loire: Editions Walden, 2021.

Carl Skoggard is anxious to read the sonnets as conventionally Petrarchean, following the stanza rhyming scheme of 4 4 3 3 but noted that occasionally this pattern is transgressed by the presence of a concluding rhyming couplet concealed in the Petrarchean final tercet. In fact most of the sonnets have the concluding rhyming couplet aligning them through this encrypted final rhyme and metrical signature with the powerful and utterly singular precedent of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*.⁴

The first question, then, to be asked of the sonnet cycle is *why*, if not *how*, Benjamin wrote or was able to write a sustained Shakespearean sonnet sequence? It is a very singular achievement: as a sonnet sequence in German, it bears comparison with Rilke's non-Shakespearean *Sonnets to Orpheus* written in February 1922, and as a modern *Shakespearean* sonnet sequence with Fernando Pessoa's Shakespearean sonnet cycle begun in 1910 and published in Lisbon (in English) in 1922 as *35 Sonnets*.⁵ While Orpheus features prominently in Benjamin's sequence, the clear intent of his sonnets to 'make new' the Shakespearean form brings his cycle closer to Pessoa than to Rilke, but for reasons that call for closer analysis.

A comparison of the two contemporary Shakespearean sonnet sequences written in Lisbon and Berlin reveals instructive differences in what they inherit from the original Shakespeare *Sonnets*. Pessoa inherits the persona of the poet and his confrontation with immortality, while these features remain understated in Benjamin's sequence, which is at once more elegiac and explicitly political. The differences may be traced to the context of Shakespearean translation in Imperial and early Republican Germany, conspicuously absent in the Portuguese culture addressed by Pessoa. The Shakespearean sonnet sequence became a highly disputed and politicised form in early twentieth-century German culture. Part of this involved the politics of translation alluded to in one of Benjamin's last letters to Adorno, dated Paris May 7th 1940,⁶ written at the same time as Benjamin was selecting the works he wanted saved for posterity

⁴ See: William Shakespeare, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Stephen Booth, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977

⁵ See: Fernando Pessoa, *Trentacinque sonetti/35 Sonnets*, trans. Ugo Serani, Firenze-Antella: Passigli editori, 1999; Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. M.D. Herter Norton, London and New York: W.W. Norton, 1962.

⁶ See: Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno, *The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999, pp. 326-337.

with Bataille. Among the suggestions Benjamin offered for improving Adorno's 'The George-Hofmannsthal Correspondence' essay was:

Your allusion to Kraus might have acquired more weight had you referred to his critique of George's translation of the Shakespeare sonnets, especially since you explicitly touch upon the question of translation.⁷

Benjamin here refers to one of the fault-lines of early twentieth century German cultural history, the confrontation between Stefan George and Karl Kraus's very diverse translations of Shakespeare's sonnets and the intense differences in understanding not only of the sonnets but of language, translation, poetry and cultural politics more generally that was at stake in the two translations.⁸

I.

The singular place of George's 1909 *Shakespeare Sonnette: Umdichtung von Stefan George* (*Shakespeare's Sonnets: Reworking by Stefan George*) in the history of German Shakespeare translation, from Alois Brandl and Ludwig Fulda to Karl Kraus and Paul Celan, has been carefully described by Rey Conquer in an instructive article, "A Poetics of Parataxis: Stefan George's *Umdichtung* of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*".⁹ Conquer shows George's re-working of the sonnets was conducted in a largely visual register that transformed the aural elements of Shakespeare's sonnets into visual objects arranged paratactically on the page. His *Umdichtung* – reworking or recasting – of the *Sonnets* was at once a modernist appropriation and an effort to extend the limits of poetic language in German. The translation was introduced by George as a deliberately anti-romantic proposition dedicated to a spiritual transcendence of Shakespeare's more earthly homo-eroticism. George's *Umdichtung*, accordingly,

⁷ Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno, *The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999, p. 331.

⁸ See: Stefan George, *Shakespeare Sonnette: Umdichtung von Stefan George*, Berlin: Georg Bondi, 1909; Kraus, Karl, *Shakespeares Sonnette: Nachdichtung von Karl Kraus*, in *Kanonade auf Spatzen*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1994.

⁹ See: Conquer, Rey, "A Poetics of Parataxis: Stefan George's *Umdichtung* of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*", in: *Oxford German Studies*, 44:4 (2015), pp. 365-382.

formalizes the Shakespearean quatrains into imposing typographical blocks followed the couplet and uses rhyme as a visual rather than aural marker. The preference for the visual, and the quasi-objective informing George's translation provoked criticism from Kraus who regarded this strategy as 'sacrilege' and with his public readings of his own translations emphasized their aural element. Kraus subtitled his published version of 1932-1933, after decades of publicly reading his translations, a *Nachdichtung* or 'free rendering' pointedly distancing his versions from George's *Umdichtung* as a 'reworking' or 'recasting'. Both he and George respect Shakespeare's 4 4 4 2 stanza arrangement and both attempt to respect an approximation of rhyming, although Kraus's renderings are more discursive and his rhymes lighter than the tour-de-forcing of George's rhyme scheme. This is evident if we take as an example the final couplet of Shakespeare's notorious Sonnet XX, which, like all the rhymes in this sonnet, is 'feminine'. Shakespeare's bawdy conclusion to his address to the 'master mistress of my passion' would seem untranslatable:

But since she prick'd thee out for women's pleasure,
Mine be thy love and thy love's use their treasure.

George's version:

Doch da sie dich erlas zu weibes labe
Sei mein dein lieben ihnen liebes gabe.

George's translation loses both the prick and the intensity of the women's pleasure in the 'use' of it and replaces the somewhat sleazy feminine rhyme of pleasure and treasure with the upright 'masculine' rhyme of *labe* and *gabe*. The women in George's translation feast their eyes and accept the gift of love while Shakespeare's women find their treasure in the taking of pleasure. Kraus's *Nachdichtung* makes it clear that nature added something 'to my purpose nothing' to the master-mistress but leaves what it is to be deduced from the very Viennese distinction between 'Liebe' and 'Lust':

also so Ausgestattet, Frauen zu erlaben –

lass mir die Liebe, wenn die Lust sie haben.

While the treatment is more relaxed and colloquial than George's, the translation works with an innuendo that can be filled out in a public reading. If the women's pleasure in George's translation is confined to *labe*, so too in Kraus where they are *erlaben* or refreshed by the implied but still untranslated prick. The rhymes are softer but still miss the point of Shakespeare's extension of the master-mistress theme into the very rhyming scheme of the poem.

Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator"¹⁰ features in Conquer's account as largely sympathetic to George's translation strategy, even while his own *Umdichtung* of Shakespeare's sonnet form is episodically closer to Kraus's *Nachdichtung*, as providing a reading version of the translation. It differs from both, however, in its use of Petrarchean 4 4 3 3 stanza configuration with a disruptive 'final rhyme' of Shakespearean couplet encrypted in the second tercet. There is compelling evidence from Scholem that Benjamin read his own Sonnets aloud,¹¹ regarding them as performative notations as in Kraus's *Nachdichtung* but in many ways their form and content remains closer to George's paratactic objectivity than to Kraus's performance-oriented translations. We shall see that his Sonnets are composed of clashing images with very little introspective dialogue. And while the precedent of George's translation and of George's own *Stern des Bundes* (*The Star of the Covenant*)¹² are important for both, the choice of the Shakespearean sonnet cycle and the hallucinatory visuality of Benjamin's poems are not the only or even the main motivation.

The precedent of George's *Umdichtung* for Benjamin's choice of the Shakespearean sonnet form cannot by itself fully explain why Benjamin would devote eight years to the formally exacting task of writing Shakespearean sonnets. Another important formal precedent is provided by the work of Leon Kellner who wrote several still critically esteemed studies of Shakespeare and his language. Unusually among Shakespeare scholars of this period in any language, Kellner held the sonnets in the

¹⁰ See: Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator", in: *Selected Writings, Vol. 1: 1913-26*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996, pp.253-263.

¹¹ See: Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn, Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981, p. 15.

¹² George, Stefan, *Der Stern des Bundes*, Berlin: Georg Bondi, 1914.

highest esteem. He chose the Sonnets as the subject of what he knew would be the last article that he – a leading Zionist and friend of Herzl – would be able to publish in National Socialist Germany. There are a number of reasons why his approach to the Sonnets might be relevant for Benjamin's adoption of the form. The first is Kellner's view that Shakespeare's Sonnets are above all acts of thought, that his variant of the sonnet form with its concluding final rhyme in the couplet is ideally suited to reflection and thus as a medium of philosophical expression. The second is Kellner's philological approach to the sonnets, which works between the 1609 and the 1640 editions, showing how the latter emphasises thematic clusters in the sonnet cycle – a feature that Benjamin adopts in his own cycle. A third feature of Kellner's approach that is adopted by Benjamin is his underplaying of any autobiographical significance in the sonnets and a compensating focus on the contemporary political context registered throughout them, as in Sonnets 66, 108, and 125. This is a feature that should be remembered when assessing the alleged dominance of the autobiographical in motivating Benjamin to write his sonnets as a lament for his friends Heinle and Seligson. And finally, there is a strong impression in Kellner's work on the *Sonnets* that he is unimpressed by George's *Umdichtung*, preferring to cite from Brandl and Fulda's 1913 translation and commentary, a version that might be a more plausible source for Benjamin's developed technical knowledge of the form than George.

Kellner's approach to Shakespeare's Sonnets offers a useful matrix with which to approach Benjamin's sonnet cycle. It emphasises the facility offered by the form for complex philosophical reflection while pointing to the use of thematic clusters and a focus on political context without exaggerated reliance on autobiography. From these perspectives it becomes possible to approach Benjamin's sonnets as engaged first and foremost with a poetic and philosophical reflection on violence and war: they are political and non-autobiographical acts of thought.

This approach is supported by a closer scrutiny of what might seem to be main occasion of the sonnets, the suicide of Benjamin's friends the poet Friedrich Heinle and his partner Rika Seligson during the night of August 8th 1914 in protest against the Declaration of War on August 4th. Here it is important to correct a fundamental misunderstanding concerning the occasion of these poems. While the suicide of his friends may have provided the spark that ignited the composition of the sonnets it must not be assumed that they are of personal or merely autobiographical intent and

significance. This assumption remains the most debilitating obstacle to the serious reading of Benjamin's *Sonnets*, at a level with the thankfully obsolete autobiographical readings of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. Their death by joint suicide on August 8th 1914 was significant for Benjamin in that it placed his friends among the first of the millions of victims of the First World War. This made them and their voluntary deaths special, Heinle and Seligson led the way for millions to follow – they founded the community of lament for the dead of the First World War. Yet these voluntary deaths were also distinct from those that would follow in so far their timing on August 8th was chosen as a protest against the War. Their deaths were exemplary in that they were victims of the War in a different way than those who die on the Front. They died in an honourable fight against war, not abjectly fighting in the War. Benjamin stated this explicitly in his later essay on the occasion of the sixtieth birthday of Stefan George:

Early in the 1914 the *Stern des Bundes* rose fatefully above the horizon and a few months later there was war. Before the hundredth man had fallen it broke into our midst. Not in battle. He bled on the field of honour (GS II.I, 623).¹³

Heinle died not in but against the war – his death was a pacifist gesture against war, an act of violence directed against violence. This constituted Heinle and Seligson's deaths 'on the field of honour'. Benjamin's sonnets are not so much elegies for lost friends, but an attempt to think and reflect upon the violent opposition to the violence of war that their deaths so questionably exemplified. The reference to Heinle as among the first hundred victims of war places him and Seligson both among and against the War dead. Remembering them is not only to remember the dead but even more emphatically to remember the war that killed them. Their death is the origin of the sonnet cycle, but in Benjamin's understanding of origin as an 'eddy in the stream of becoming'. Their death against the war was an interruption of the killings in the war, and the Sonnet sequence bears witness to their exceptional deaths through lament and mourning not only for the mass death of the War but also for those who gave their lives taking up arms against it. If the sonnets are approached as attempts to think through the paradox of violent, pacifist opposition to war, then the choice of the

¹³ My translation.

Shakespearean sonnet form becomes more understandable. In the context of nationalist fervour, adopting the peculiarly English variant of the sonnet form itself constitutes a formal act of resistance.

Although in the George essay Benjamin does not mention his own sonnets, he does describe how he worked through his friends' death by writing the 'Two Poems by Hölderlin' essay, thus making it contemporary with the beginning of the sonnet sequence. And, indeed, Benjamin's decision to preface his sonnet sequence with a stanza from Hölderlin's 'Patmos' points to this proximity, but it also serves to establish a distance from the contemporary nationalist use and abuse of Hölderlin – in the George circle and beyond – to celebrate nationalism and war.¹⁴ Benjamin again indirectly recalls this motivation in a later essay "Against a Masterpiece" when he criticizes the George school's cultural politics in the guise of Max Kommerell's latest (1928) contribution to it with *Der Dichter als Führer in der deutschen Klassik* (*The Poet as Leader in German Classicism*).¹⁵ Benjamin ends his review with a forthright distancing of Hölderlin from any celebration of war: 'This salvation history of the Germans concludes with a chapter on Hölderlin...[but he] was not of the breed that is resurrected, and the country whose seers proclaim their visions over corpses is not his' (Benjamin, 1999, 383). The choice of the Christological poem "Patmos" is a powerful statement of the distance of Benjamin's reading of Hölderlin from that of the George school.

Benjamin's effort to distance Hölderlin from any nationalist appropriation paralleled a similar reading of Hölderlin by the Munich anarchist Gustav Landauer.¹⁶ The circumstances of his activity as a lecturer have been carefully analysed by Sebastian Truskolaski in his article "'Life of the Community': Gustav Landauer Reads Friedrich Hölderlin" which describes the shape and circumstances of a contemporary pacifist

¹⁴ See: Friedrich Hölderlin, "Patmos", in: *Hymns and Fragments*, ed. and trans. Richard Sieburth, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984, pp. 89-101.

¹⁵ See: Max Kommerell, *Der Dichter als Führer in der deutschen Klassik: Klopstock—Herder—Goethe—Schiller—Jean Paul—Hölderlin*, Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1982; Walter Benjamin "Against a Masterpiece", in: *Selected Writings, Vol. 2.1: 1927-30*, eds. Michael Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, 379–83. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.

¹⁶ See: Gustav Landauer, "Friedrich Hölderlin in seinen Gedichten", in: *Werkausgabe, Vol. 3*, eds. Bernd Mattenklott and Hanna Delf, Berlin: Akademie, 1997, pp. 55–78.

reading of the poet.¹⁷ This analysis may also be extended to Landauer's lectures on Shakespeare, written between Spring 1917 and November 1918, and published posthumously by Buber in 1920, that prominently features his readings of the *Sonnets*.¹⁸ Landauer prizes the 'spirit of freedom' that produced the poems and is unusually well informed about the circumstances of their composition, the identity of the dedicatee, and the virtues of the German translations, with a balanced assessment of George's *Umdichtung*, commenting ironically 'to understand and enjoy his translation – I'm not exaggerating – you always need the original'.¹⁹ His own translation in the lectures are a montage of the best elements from the existing translations. Moreover, he proposes a reading that emphasises Shakespeare's disinterest in the *Sonnets* in issues of religion or mythology, as well as with power, politics and war. Landauer's focus on the erotic in the *Sonnets* distances his reading from Benjamin's appropriation of their form, which is closer to George and Kraus. Yet, while it is unlikely that Benjamin was aware of Landauer's lectures, they can at least serve to confirm the range of possible readings of the *Sonnets* available in Imperial Germany within which Benjamin's sonnet cycle might be situated.

II.

Turning finally to the sonnet cycle itself, we are given a number of hints within the sonnets on how to read them. We should first recall that these sonnets are acts of political thought and should be approached as such. Those fragments of testimony that remain concerning the composition of the sonnets point to him regarding the sequence as comprising 50 completed sonnets, with the 23 additional and less well-wrought sonnets succeeding them. This makes Sonnet 51 particularly significant as the first of the sonnets outside the original sequence, and the one in which Benjamin retrospectively reflects on his poetic method – it's his epistemo-critical sonnet.

¹⁷ See: Truskolaski, Sebastian (2024) "Life of the Community': Gustav Landauer Reads Friedrich Hölderlin", in: *New German Critique*, No. 152 (August 2024).

¹⁸ See: Gustav Landauer, *Shakespeare: Dargestellt in Vorträgen* (2 vols.), ed. Martin Buber, Frankfurt am Main: Literarische Anstalt Rütten und Loening, 1920.

¹⁹ Landauer, *Shakespeare*, p x (my translation).

Just how meagre the measures of heaped laments

And how relentlessly the Sonnet holds me

to the path where the soul finds him

All this I will say in a parable

Both those strophes carrying me down

Are the way that winds through the rock

Where Orpheus's searching was near blinded

Before the clear light of the days of Hades

How urgently he begged for Eurydice

And How Pluto warning committed her to him

Cannot be parsed from the shorter path

Yet the tercets remain as secret witnesses

To how she invisibly followed him

Until she his gaze drives away the last rhyme.

The 51st sonnet offers some clues not only to Benjamin's formal choice but also the wider intent of his sonnets. It immediately follows the originally planned cycle of 50 sonnets as a supplement that tellingly abandons the encrypted final rhyming couplet of the preceding sonnets and offers an epistemo-critical reflection on the cycle. With the extended citation from Hölderlin's 'Patmos' at the beginning of the cycle, it serves as a device for framing the preceding fifty sonnets. The strophe from Hölderlin's christological poem might seem a strange prelude to a Shakespearean sonnet sequence, but this is clarified by the preoccupation evident throughout the cycle with the nature and the meaning of sacrifice.

Sonnet 51 begins with a lament both to 'meagre measures' of the heap of preceding laments and the implacable discipline of the Shakespearean sonnet form that kept him on the path searching for 'him'. 'He' may be Heinle/Seligson but understood as among the first fatalities of the First World War; theirs was the exemplary status of dying not so much *in* the War as *against* it. The rigour of the Shakespearian sonnet form kept the 'soul' on the path to finding the significance of this death. And just how it did so would be shown by a parable related in 51st sonnet. Benjamin made the same proposal in his later book on Hamlet – *The Origin of German Trauerspiel* – with its two prefaces, one a formidable philosophical "Episto-Critical Prologue" the other an Orphic parable, predating and intimating Rilke's "Sonnets to Orpheus".

The first two quatrains of the sonnets are said to carry the poet on a path into the subterranean world following the traces of Orpheus as he paradoxically descended towards the light or the clearing of the days of Hades. The near blinding of Orpheus by the dark light and the imploration for Eurydice's release is met by Pluto's warning, one, as Benjamin adds, that cannot be pointed to or interpreted by means of any short cuts but requires a relentless observation of the Shakespearean sonnet form. The tercets are introduced as secret witness to Eurydice's following Orpheus, although the grammar of the final line points to an indeterminacy over whether she is driven away by his gaze as in the traditional reading or whether it is she who drives away his gaze. The answer it seems is hidden in the 'final rhyme' which is indeed the couplet hidden in second tercet of most of the preceding sonnets. In Sonnet 51, Benjamin deliberately emphasises this attention to the final rhyme by exceptionally conforming to the Petrarchean rhyme scheme of the tercet and letting the final couplet clang unrhymed – 'secret' (*geheim*) in the first line rhymes with 'rhyme' (*Reim*) in the third, while the final couplet whose subject is the final couplet is left as the dissonant 'TRANSLATION' (*Tat*) and 'rhyme' (*Reim*).

For Benjamin, the Shakespearean couplet encrypted in the Petrarchean structure of the 50 sonnets offers less a conclusion than a statement of indeterminacy. The encrypted couplets disrupt the laments by questioning whether they are by or for Orpheus. The couplets afford an opportunity to step outside of the traditional act of thought that Leon Kellner recognized as the characteristic of the Shakespearean sonnet form and to upset any formal closure that it may require or advocate. The

lament for the death of Heinle and Seligson can be read as part of a cycle of laments for the dead of the war, placing them, as Benjamin later said, among the first hundred of the millions of the dead; but it also intimates that they died not as victims but as adversaries of the War: they died on the 'field of honour' of the war against war. The ultimate pacifist gesture placed Heinle and Seligson among the dead of the War but also separated them from the other victims. Such an inclusion and separation would be accomplished in the encrypted couplet or, as Benjamin described it in the retrospective 51st sonnet, in 'the last rhyme'.

Benjamin here lays out how his sonnets think at the level of structure – through dialectical descents into the realm of death in the quatrains, and attempts to return in the tercets: returns whose thwarting is witnessed in the encrypted couplets of the 'last rhyme'. But the power of the sonnet form, especially the Shakespearian sonnet form, also consists in its collisions of various levels of contradictory and ambivalent thought. In addition to the dialectical thought of loss and return, the rhythmic structure alluded to in Sonnet 51, there is also thinking with sound, pre-eminently but not only in rhyme; with colours – reds, blacks, whites, blues and greens, and with what Gerard Manley would later describe as inscapes (seas, lakes, forests, cities, rooms and above all battlefields); with directions in/out, up/down, north/south; with times of day, with seasons and with recurrent objects: cisterns, boats, machine guns, grenades, swords, clocks; as well as with the feelings of joy, dread, and fear. Gods and monsters roam these sonnets under cosmological settings of sun, sky and stars; sea voyages are embarked upon along with moments of enclosure and reflection in domestic interiors.

The sonnet cycle, too, follows the Shakespearian precedent in being made up a number of intersecting thematic clusters. These emerge in the wider context of recurrent thematic leitmotifs in addition to the figural vocabulary mentioned above. These include the red sky at dawn, the divisions of the day into morning, noon, evening and night, the friend, sea and lake crossings, and domestic interiors. The thematic clusters themselves may very provisionally be classified according to the following themes while appreciating that many of these clusters intersect, repeat and productively interfere with each other. Sonnets 1-9 share the theme of the dawn following the suicides of the friends; sonnets 10-14 share the theme of haunting, while sonnets 15 to 21 play on the theme of a sea voyage. Sonnet 15 is pivotal in connecting the theme of waves and calm with that of deceptive 'mirror world' (*Spiegelwelt*) that

will return later in the cycle. Sonnets 22-28 share a thematic fascination with the apocalypse, while sonnets 29-35 are governed by introspective first-person meditations; these lacrimae sonnets are succeeded by three city sonnets (36-38) with the final sonnet identifiably located in Berlin. Sonnets 39-42 are set in domestic interiors followed by three cosmic sonnets with the main sequence concluding at sonnet 50 with the theme of a 'mirror world' of a cistern reflecting stars and fruit.

With thought being engaged at so many levels and playing out in so many registers, it comes as no surprise that the sonnets are unusually recalcitrant to interpretation. They are not esoteric in the sense of containing hidden meanings, and the 51st sonnet we have seen situates the esoteric in the 'final rhyme,' but they are replete with thought at many figural and sonic levels. This may be shown in the case of one of most challenging sub-sequences in the sonnet cycle, the apocalyptic sonnets 22-28. This sequence begins in sonnet 22 with the hopeless silence of measureless lament. The two quatrains present the sealing of lips that would lament and their unsealing by the sword, and the cessation of lament in the binding of the friend's being and the poet's pain. The tercets return to the scene of the suicide, moving from the stifled laments to their origin in the 'ripened early morning' hour of his death in the first tercet, to the bleeding of the reddening of the world-morning and stilling of the high tide of sorrow, to the mirroring in the flat sea of his friends rising that in reflection is a falling. The simultaneous intensification and stilling of sorrow and the rising that is in the reflected sea a falling is held by the last rhyme of *gestillt* and *Spiegelbild* – 'stilled' and 'mirror image'. As prescribed in Sonnet 51, here the final rhyme performs and contains an unresolvable tension.

As the passing friend rises into the sky while falling mirrored in the sea, this scene of a red dawn sky with the sun rising on a stilled sea offers an apocalyptic seascape that echoes the Book of Revelation. This image is held as an imagistic transition that prepares for the moment of unveiling in Sonnet 23:

So the veil is now pulled back

And I look into the heart of the world

As we should not without disguise

And saw the fire that rages there

Though reflection flies around me there

Lit by the eternal flame that

Caresses with a cool breath

Yet I feel inwardly deceived

I submerged contemplating

A fire that hid itself beneath

The brewing of the Universe

My fate did not fulfil itself

Dazzled I threaten to forget

His life that was apportioned to me

In the first quatrain the veil of the world is lifted and the forbidden sight of the fire raging there is revealed. The first quatrain performs an opening that is a revealing followed by the deceptive revelation of the second quatrain. There has been revelation, but it is deceptive. Given the legacy of Sonnet 22, the rising that is a falling in reflection a fire raging but without heat. The feeling of deception that is left by the revelation is followed in the first tercet by a sinking into the sea of revelation of Sonnet 22 and a contemplation of the fire concealed in the brewing or the signs of vitality of the universe. But this submersion did not fulfil the poet's fate, for dazzled he would forget his *Dichterberuf* (poetic vocation) of taking up his share of his friend's life.

What that share might be after the deception of revelation is explained in the first quatrain of Sonnet 24, which begins on the day of judgement with 'golden conversation' between the re-united friends moving to the laughter of the silenced poets with whose jests the universe now resounds. This restored happiness is qualified by words swaying in the scales that were before silenced by the approaching

signs of death. In the final tercet, curses push down images while early stars glimmer above us and Eros's winebreath is in our voices. In the final couplet *glimmen* (TRANSLATION) rhymes with *Stimmen* (TRANSLATION), binding together the early morning stars that previously marked the morning of loss that silenced the poet with the voices of shared, erotic, drunken ecstasy. The contraries of the light of stars and the inspired voice are held in the final rhyme, but they drastically qualify the scenes of reunion at the end of time imagined in the quatrains.

The first quatrain of sonnet 26 finds Death bearing away the two suicides into his woods. Their amazed eyes opened wider than when they lived in the second quatrain, while earthly anguish was overcome in Eros's wagon of song. In the first tercet, sorrow is figured as ripened fruit while memory wafted the shared fragrance of past kisses. This idyllic transformation of the wood of death into the 'garden of a new paradise' presided over by an unarmed Angel in the second tercet is confirmed in the ascendent final rhyme of paradise and the pointing of the angel – *Paradies/wies* (TRANSLATIONS). The apparent victory over death is qualified in the first quatrain of Sonnet 27 in a parodic simile between winds filling a sail and holidays wandering over the land where children play among gleaming hedges and death's arm untiringly mows. In the second quatrain, the 'happy holidays' – *Feiertage* – funereally modulate into the remembered dead the 'TRANSLATION' – *Gefeierten* – and the winds of the first quatrain become swarms of ringing bells, childrens' grief and lament for the dead. Who will silence all this? In the first tercet the remembered and loved ones slip away, embracing in the dreary evening light to Hades where a place for the soul is 'prepared' – *bereitet* – towards which their gaze glows and 'follows' – *geleitet*. This place seems very far from the paradise of Sonnet 26 and the ascendant final rhyme, *Paradies/wies*, contrasting bleakly with the descendant *bereitet/geleitet* of Sonnet 27.

The final poem in the apocalyptic sequence – Sonnet 28 – marks a transition from the overwrought speculations of the preceding sonnets to the introspective sonnets of subdued lament that follow. It begins with comparatives: not even the moon forsakes the night so gently when it lights the first clouds of morning; not even the waves rising over the beach, nor the West wind waving the tips of cypress trees, nor the breath of the contented bride can match the breathing out of this fetid life by the suicides at midnight. The first tercet celebrates those who 'without anguish' chose the long fated way while the second announces the entry into the first person meditative

mood of the succeeding sonnets, in which neither friend nor song will bring back the lost ones and the comparatives of the quatrains resolve into a simile of the poet to a wanderer resting on a nearby hill being drawn to sleep in contemplating distant things; the imperfect final rhyme of 'rests' – *ruht* – and the invitation to sleep – *lud* – sounds a note of irresolution that is picked up and developed in the next sonnet.

The attention to the 'final rhyme' mandated by Sonnet 51 introduces a moment of indeterminacy into the thought processes of the sonnets. It introduces a note of ambivalence that steps outside of the ostensible fidelity to the Petrarchean rhyme scheme. In the terms set by the epistemo-critical sonnet 51, the tercets offer a witness whose fidelity is compromised by the hidden rhyme of the Shakespearian couplet. This makes the Sonnets a remarkable achievement for both German thought and poetry in the second decade of the twentieth century. At once formally dazzling and a demonstration of the subtlety of thinking with the sonnet form, Benjamin's sonnets occupy a key position in the development of his thought anticipating the themes of mourning, lament, violence and nature that would occupy him in other contexts during the 1920s. They also provide an astonishing extension to his canon of critical texts on Shakespeare and the place the Shakespearian sonnet form at the centre of any appreciation of his contribution to the complex reception of Shakespeare in twentieth-century Germany.

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