

**Alchemy, Natural Cycles, and Discomposure : The Representation of Love in the
Renaissance Sonnet**

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*'I desire to perish, and yet I ask health.../ I feed me in sorrow, and laugh in all my
pain'* (Wyatt 123, lines 10-12).

As a period defined by tremendous cultural upheaval, the Renaissance encouraged the reimagining of the English poesy, significantly altering the thematic orientation of the authors in the new epoch. As a transition from the Medieval period, where literature was largely conditioned by the existing religious norms, Renaissance embraced the notions of individual interiority, actively promoting the exploration of self through creative expression (Greenblatt et.al 6-7). Particularly inspired by the Italian poetic tradition, the English poets sought to increase the artistry of their vernacular language to create original imagery in verse and demonstrate their skills. One innovation brought to England in that epoch was the poetic form of sonnet, whose eloquent shape and lyrical nature helped it gain recognition among the distinguished poets of that period. This essay aims to assess how the sonnet form helps the Renaissance poets create imagery and conceit by studying the ways in which love themes and language are developed in Thomas Wyatt's 'I find no peace', Sonnet 108 from Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, and William Shakespeare's Sonnet 73. It proposes that the distinctive structural arrangement of the sonnet enables the poet to develop multiple narratives within the text and reconcile them in the concluding lines to create a more elaborate and vibrant image.

To better understand how the features of the sonnet help the poet generate imagery and conceit, it is important to form a representation of this form. Sonnet is a lyrical poem which conventionally consists of fourteen lines, however, exhibits a variation in structure and rhyme. In English literary culture the sonnet was mainly represented in two distinct forms, known as the Italian and the English (Birch 302). The Italian sonnet relates to the poetic work of Francesco Petrarch, who initiated a new style in lyric poetry, highly figurative in language and representing love as a state of emotional contrasts. It consists of an octave with the rhyme scheme of ABBA, followed by a turn in thought- volta, representing a sestet with different rhyming variations (Greenblatt 119). The English sonnet was developed from the Italian form

and consists of three quatrains of ABABCDCDEFEF rhyme, and a rhyming couplet (Birch 302). In terms of its subject matter, the sonnet was conventionally oriented at lyrical themes and encouraged the use of elegant, picturesque language. Both a challenging and innovative form, the sonnet precisely fitted the ambitions of the Renaissance poets, who aimed to make the English language suitable for the poetic expression of the individualistic self.

A translation of Petrarch's Rima 134, Wyatt's 'I find no peace' creates imagery by developing two conflicting narratives, which reveal the divergent feelings experienced by a lover. The sonnet's opening lines 'I find no peace, and all my war is done, / I fear and hope, I burn and freeze like ice' introduce the series of paradoxical symptoms experienced by the speaker due to his unrequited love, portraying him as interposed between warmth of hoping and coldness of fear and self-doubt (Wyatt 122, lines 1-2). In correspondence with these thematic contrasts, Wyatt's sonnet demonstrates the interplay of two dissimilar narratives developed in the quatrains and after volta. While the octet depicts preventive influence that desire has on the speaker's will, in the sestet he seems to be acting consciously: 'I desire to perish, and yet I ask health.../ I feed me in sorrow, and laugh in all my pain' (Wyatt 123, lines 10-12). It is only in the last line that Wyatt places the conflicting states in harmony, as the speaker notes: '...my delight is causer of this strife' (Wyatt 123, line 14). 'I find no peace' thus illustrates the elegance of the sonnet form, where the poet can develop two counter-opposed perspectives into one vibrant image.

Wyatt's poem also reflects the style of language representative of the sonnet form, with the author adapting Petrarchan tone to the existing English vernacular. Significantly, Wyatt uses relatively simple vocabulary, with the meaning of words being reinforced by their positioning in contrast to each other. For instance, in lines 'I fly above the wind, yet can I not arise, /And nought I have, and all the world I seize on' the poet accentuates the interaction of opposites through syntactic inversion, inventively putting 'I' between 'can' and 'not' and

placing 'nought' both before the subject and the verb (Wyatt 122, lines 3-4). This stylistic delicacy of Wyatt's verse expresses the lyricism and elegance of the sonnet form and could well suggest the praising commentary from Puttenham (62), who called Wyatt one of the 'chief lanternes of light' in English poesy. Indeed, through this simplicity Wyatt clearly conveys the feelings of the speaker, portraying a sequence of contradicting ambitions, which develop in one culminating paradox - being similarly displeased with 'both death and life' (122, line 13). Wyatt's adaptation of language for the lyrical format of sonnet allows him to bring artistry to the text and contributes to the realness of the created imagery.

Still, notwithstanding the simplicity of its language, the peculiar rhyming scheme of the sonnet helps Wyatt instil a more complex picture in the reader's mind. The contrasts depicted in the text are strengthened by the cyclical form of rhyme, which reflects the speaker's emotional unrest. The first quatrain eloquently describes this structure: while lines 1 and 2 pacify the speaker with 'done' and 'ice', he attempts to 'arise' in the third line and manages to 'seize on' the whole world in line 4, as if winning over the emotions that burdened him (Wyatt 122). Yet the first line of the subsequent quatrain returns the speaker into emotional 'prison', from which he can "scape nowise" (Wyatt 122, lines 5-6). This tendency is repeated in the second four lines, yet gets reconsidered in the sestet: after bitter 'plain', the accent is made on 'health' and 'myself', as if letting the speaker to embrace the prolonged moment of peace and leave his troubles (Wyatt 123, lines 9-11). Nonetheless, this opportunity is not realised: the character submerges in 'pain', and his 'life' regains darker tones, becoming consonant with 'strife' (Wyatt 123, lines 13-14). This cyclical pattern, together with the opposing themes developed in the sonnet, demonstrates Wyatt's poetic talent and enlivens his portrayal of the speaker's inner troubles.

The connection of divergent narratives in an Italian sonnet was further implemented by Philip Sidney, who used it to portray the metaphoric struggle between hope

and despair in the concluding Sonnet 108 of *Astrophil and Stella*. The sonnet's octet depicts this contrast by reflecting differing states in which Astrophil is brought by his feeling. In the first four lines the lover faces the torments of Sorrow and outfights them with the thoughts of Stella, his 'only light' (Sidney 603, line 4). Nonetheless, despite its newly acquired freshness, Astrophil's feeling cannot be realised due to the character's own inner troubles: 'But soon as thought of thee breeds my delight... / Most rude Despair.../Clips straight my wings... (Sidney 603, lines 5, 7 and 8). As Catherine Bates (105-106) notes, the concept of desire as unfulfilled want in the Renaissance sonnet serves as a standing issue, which the poet aims to resolve by developing it into an elaborate metaphor. Bates's commentary aptly explains the shift that appears in the volta, as the character sadly acknowledges the uncompromising paradox of love in the concluding tercet: 'That in my woes for thee thou art my joy,/And in my joys for thee my only annoy' (Sidney 603, lines 13-14). The structural features of the Italian sonnet enable Sidney to develop an eloquent discussion of love as a dual condition and create vibrant imagery by opposing two sides of the same feeling.

Along with its structural distinctiveness, Sidney's sonnet actively exploits figurative language and draws frequent parallels with alchemical procedures, which contribute to the development of conceit in the poem. This is already reflected in the opening lines, where Sorrow 'melts down his lead' into Astrophil's 'boiling breast', submerging him into melancholy (Sidney 603, lines 1-2). This motif reappears in the second quatrain: there Astrophil's reencouraged soul, metaphorically portrayed as a bird, is detracted from the opportunity to reach 'his nest' – Stella, by the heaviness of his sorrow, compared to alchemical lead (Cain 14; Sidney 603, line 6). Alchemical references, as Jeremy Cain (13) suggests, are positioned in the centre of the sonnet to illustrate the spiritual transformation of the character under the paradoxical contrasts of love. Indeed, the subsequent representation of Astrophil's soul as 'dark furnace', and Stella, unreachable to him, as 'Phoebus's' gold.../

Whom iron doors keep from the use of day' reflect the character's resentment due to inability to fully realise his love (Sidney 603, lines 3, 10 and 11). Sidney's unconventional thinking reflected in the comparison of emotions to the elements in alchemical practice reinstates the depth of poetic expression characteristic of the Renaissance, while also revealing the poetic beauty of the English language.

While the structure of the Italian sonnet and figurative language enable Sidney to conjoin the scattered feelings of Astrophil, the conflict between the bipolar sides of love is maintained through its rhyming pattern. Referred to as the 'proportion in concord' by Puttenham (76), rhyme delineates imagery in a text, and Sidney cleverly balances the contrasting emotional tones by distancing the consonant words in the quatrains of ABBA rhyme. Contrary to Wyatt, who uses this scheme to construct a cyclical narrative, Sydney provides individual space for both uplifting and burdening aspects of love. Particularly, in the first quatrain 'might', which describes the emotional torments of Astrophil, is separated from 'light', his hope, by 'breast' and 'oppressed', which increase the pressure developed in line 1 (Sidney 603, lines 1-4). Nonetheless, 'light' is then followed by 'delight', shifting the image from dark to more auspicious (Sidney 603, lines 4-5). At the end, the consonance of the concluding lines connects the opposing feelings – 'joy' and 'annoy', however, they are still presented as disparate and irreconcilable (Sidney 603, lines 13-14). Thus, Sidney uses the rhyme scheme to show the divergence of feelings which unite in love and support his portrayal of Astrophil's emotional struggle.

The specific structure of the English sonnet, in its turn, enables the poet to create conceit through successive positioning of individual images, which are brought together in an epigrammatic conclusion, as instantiated in Shakespeare's Sonnet 73. There Shakespeare presents the theme of old age with three distinct sets of imagery, gradually diminishing the scope of the narrative as he switches from one thematic picture to another. Starting from the

image of late autumn, developed in the first four lines, the poet then turns to twilight and, finally, ends the description on the 'last glow of a dying fire' (Greenblatt et.al. 22). As suggested by Cousins (128), the 'inventiveness with which Shakespeare interplays the quatrains' in the sonnet increases the functionality of its couplet. As he notes further, the poet creates the complex image of the speaker's physical decline only to prove the strongness of spiritual bond between him and the addressed young man in the concluding lines (131): 'This thou perceiv'st which makes thy love more strong,/ To love that well, which thou must leave ere long' (Shakespeare , lines 13-14). This clever conclusion connects the images developed in the quatrains together and emphasises the sonnet's focus on the theme of love, initially hidden behind the metaphoric description of ageing.

Furthermore, the use of figurative language allows Shakespeare to reconfigure the traditional poetic description and present the individual feelings of the speaker as a part of the wider world. This is evident in the first lines of the poem: 'That time of year thou may'st in me behold/When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang...' The distinctiveness of this description is that, instead of conventional cronographia, where the individual is placed within a context of time, here autumn is situated within the speaker, representing him as 'an incarnation of the season' (Cousins 129). The portrayal of a natural process turns into the depiction of the speaker's inner world, where the acknowledgement of self-loss is joined with the bright reminiscences of the past. In his mind the shivering boughs resemble 'bare ruined choirs' where 'late the sweet birds sang', reminding the speaker of his 'vanished youth' (Shakespeare 729, line 4; Greenblatt 22). The remaining quatrains reflect the similar imagery: the described twilight 'after sunset faideth...' and the fire 'on the ashes of his youth doth lie', suggesting the irrevocable emotional decline of the speaker. (Shakespeare 729, lines 5-6 and 9-10). Shakespeare's portrayal of ageing as an irreversible natural process reflects both his individual talent and the poetic beauty of the English language, uncovered in the sonnet form.

The structure of rhyme in Sonnet 73 upholds the theme developed in the text as the consonant words augment the speaker's presentiment of the eternal 'black night' (Shakespeare, line 7, 729). With the quatrains written in cross rhyme, the rhyming lines produce the effect of delayed consonance, as if showing the sparks of the speaker's weakening soul. This is illustrated well in the second quatrain: the rhyming words 'day' and 'away' along with 'west' and 'rest' are distanced from each other, realistically illustrating the gradual fading of time. With its thematic rhymes, the second quatrain acts as a transition between the different stages in the speaker's life. While in the first quatrain the rhymes reflect his attempts to reconcile the dreary present with the joyous past, the third quatrain indicates to the reader that the demise is inevitable, and even the young 'fire' will someday 'expire' (Shakespeare 729, lines 9 and 11). At that, the poet ends the narrative on the positive note, showing the transcendent nature of love by placing together the words 'strong' and 'long' (Shakespeare 729, lines 13-14). The inventive use of rhyme in the sonnet accentuates the sense of fading time and reinforces the created image through the consonance of synonymic ideas.

The incorporation of the sonnet form into the English poetry of the Renaissance inspired the reinvention of poetic imagery and conceit. Starting from relatively simple metaphors in Wyatt's adaptation of the Petrarchan sonnet, the conceit in the Renaissance literature was further developed by the sonneteers such as Sidney and Shakespeare. Sidney's comparison of human emotions to alchemist's tools in Sonnet 108 creates a sense of authenticity as the poet explores human self in relation to the philosophical currents of his period. Similarly, Shakespeare converts the standard descriptive methods in his Sonnet 73, representing the speaker's ageing as an inevitable natural process in which both his physical and emotional states are affected. In developing these thematic ideas, the poets are significantly aided by the sonnet form, which allows them to experiment with different

figures of speech by virtue of its formal conventions. The fixed structure of the Italian and the English sonnet gives the poet a pattern to develop a thought, while their outlined rhyming schemes uphold the themes and support the imagery created in the poem, offering the reader a realistic and concurrently artistic experience of unique momentous feelings.

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