

G. E. Waller

REVIEW ARTICLE

THE STRONG NECESSITY OF TIME

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!

(*The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, II (London, 1962), 2546-7).

Coleridge's observation, regrettably slightly misquoted, appears on pp. 89-90 of Ricardo J. Quinones' recent book, and may usefully serve to introduce a consideration of it.¹ Many scholars have wrestled with the Renaissance's recording and exploration of its own sense of contingency and mutability,² and yet there exists, as Mr. Quinones says, "no comprehensive and organic study of time in the literature of the Renaissance" (x). 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). Time and mutability are certainly important categories of existence deeply affecting the most sensitive minds of the age. Paul Tillich suggested that the particular *angst* of the Renaissance was bound up with "a widespread sense of men's own contingency", a sense that men are "driven, together with everything else, from the past toward the future without a moment of time which does not vanish immed-

ately".³ In England, the crucial era of anxiety seems to be, as Mr. Quinones notes (297) although without accounting for it, the 1590s, the decade of economic crashes, deepening political insecurity, war-scares, the visible decay of the beauty of Gloriana, and not least the rise of Shakespeare and Donne as major writers. Of course, to account for such a deeprooted phenomenon as a change in men's responses to their own temporality can be a frustrating task. Newton claimed that "absolute, true, and mathematical time, of itself, and from its own nature, flows equably without relation to anything external", but as Rosalind remarked, "Time travels in divers paces with divers persons".⁴ Because we can never be separated from the mystery of our own being, our experience of time can never be satisfactorily articulated in objective terms.

Part of Mr. Quinones' problem 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" 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, 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".⁵ Mr. Quinones emphasises that for Petrarch, Shakespeare, or Spenser, time is "more an aspect of personality than a theological world view" (15). Undoubtedly mutability was not simply a convenient abstraction, but bit deeply into everyday experience:

What man that sees the ever-widening wheele
 Of *Change*, the which all mortal things doth sway,
 But that therby doth find, and p'ainly feele,
 How MUTABILITY in them doth p'lay
 Her cruell sports, to many mens decay?⁶

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 its treatment of the history of ideas and the swirling currents of feeling that underlie ideas that Mr. Quinones' book fails badly. His aim 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. There are, 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 (c. 1612-3), nevertheless by the mid-seventeenth century, Milton's Eve still has motives which are "quintessentially Renaissance" (472).

Behind such crudities lies the alluring spectre of Burckhardt who, eulogized by Mr. Quinones as "our premier Renaissance historian (481) inspires his 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 by Mr. Quinones 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). For a thousand years, and more, there is an essential continuity of epistemology in the works of philosophers, theologians, poets, storytellers, and artists in dealing with time. So we get—to take random examples—Luther repeating Augustine's definition of the unreality of time, or Henry Cuffe, in 1600, echoing generations of divines, writing that time is not just the measure of motion but an instrument

of the Providence of God, whose power extends over all time from Creation to Judgement.⁷ For most men of the sixteenth century, as for Dante or Boethius, Time is ultimately unreal by comparison with a transcendent Eternity. "What greater contraries can there be", exclaims Philippe de Mornay, echoing Boethius, Augustine, Aquinas, Dante, Petrarch, *et al.*, "than tyme and eternitie".⁸ Poets repeat such commonplaces with as much fervour as they echo the classical *carpe diem* or the exhortations to seek fame or *virtù*. In Fulke Greville's words:

Reader! then make time, while you be,
But steppes to your Eternity.⁹

Because the issues raised here are important, it is, I think, worth spending some time exposing the weakness of Mr. Quinones' argument. What is occurring is not an overnight revolution of Burckhardtian proportions. The old certainties continue to be advocated strongly, but other possibilities—certainly including those discussed in the book under review—become more insistent. It is not a question of any large scale rejection of any "world picture"—ignoring whatever questions such an all too convenient phrase begs—but rather a widening spectrum of the possible and plausible questions and answers about the nature and meaning of time.

Generalizations, B'ake remarked, are the mark of an idiot. And any alternative generalizations I offer Mr. Quinones will similarly stand condemned. But it would seem crucial that to ignore so drastically the theological dimension of Renaissance thought, let alone the age's religious, mental or emotional conditioning, so sweepingly is to get much of the age and its literature terribly wrong.

I would suggest, as an instance, that there are two crucial interconnected issues which are both "theological" and "aspects of personality". Time, we may say, is an abstract category of existence, as when we speak of Time as opposed to Eternity; second, there is time in the sense of the passing of moments, the inevitable mutability and change, as evoked by Shakespeare:

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end.¹⁰

These two issues, the relationship between time and a non-temporal transcendent Eternity, traditionally expressed in the Christian doctrine of Providence, and time as mutability, are fundamental to understanding the Renaissance apprehension of time. If Mr. Quinones wanted more telling evidence than he marshals for the Renaissance secularization of time, he would find it in the sixteenth-century revaluations of the doctrine of Providence by radical philos-

ophers like Giordano Bruno. Indeed as the preacher George Gifford exclaimed, men were increasingly unable "to behold eternity . . . and that doeth make them esteeme this world as if it were all in all".¹¹ Bruno, whose influence in England, despite Francis A. Yates' labours, is still undervalued,¹² advocates a radical doctrine of Providence based on a rejection of a transcendental realm of being beyond time. Instead, Providence is identified with a quality in human experience, with man's determination and prudence before the opportunities time brings him.¹³ Unlike most Renaissance writers, Bruno accepts life's mutability with delight. He sees man as being continually challenged to reach out to the future, since his destiny can be achieved only through the passage of time, "within the heart amid the changes and chances of life". Life is "a perpetual transmutation . . . a unity, which through mutability has all things in itself".¹⁴

Bruno's radically immanentist doctrines are one influential sign of a reevaluation of the received views on the relationship between time and eternity. Even if the discussion takes us beyond the boundaries of literary criticism, the issues he deals with are central to the Renaissance poet's apprehension of time. The role of the great artist is to seize upon the experiential roots of the abstractions that sway our lives, and if metaphysical questions emerge from Petrarch's *Rime* or Shakespeare's *King Lear*, they do so precisely because they grow from a profound imaginative concentration on experiential realities such as growth, decay, and death that are far from abstract. L. C. Knights once suggested that there was "important work waiting to be done 'on the frontiers', where the study of literature joins hands with the study of . . . philosophy, theology &c".¹⁵ Mr. Quinones' topic demands such treatment, but unfortunately he has not grasped the requirements of the genre.

There is another important matter of methodology raised by the book. 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), which somewhat dates the author's original draft—to the potentially illuminating parallels with Kierkegaard and Heidegger. Existential interpretations of, say, *Hamlet*, even *A Midsummer's Dream*, are rather in vogue at the moment, although to be convincing more is required than a sprinkling of existential terminology. But parallels with modern writers who are as concerned with time as men of the Renaissance, do raise an important point of procedure. As Wilbur Sanders has recently suggested in an important study, mere contemporaneity of "background" mate-

rial is in itself no guarantee of relevance.¹⁶ 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 onward, 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".¹⁷ Mr. Quinones' fitful parallels with Kierkegaard and Heidegger might have developed into an important exercise in speculative cultural history if he had seen how the complex and gradual secularization of the post-Renaissance era has to do with something deeper than motifs like fame and the generation of children. 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. Prospero's gesture of breaking his staff is, one agrees, a prophetic image of a new age, even a new apprehension of time. Like Bruno, Shakespeare is working towards a dramatically enacted concept of Providence indwelling in temporal actions—not as a factor additional to life, but a quality within, driving man on to affirm the curative potential of the present and the future despite the threat of meaninglessness and despair. Prospero renounces the charismatic power of a mysterious, all-powerful, eternal Providence and assumes a limited, human responsibility to create what Aldous Huxley called "a way of living in time without being completely swallowed up in time".¹⁸ Similarly, in *The Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare's attitude to time and its relations with what was traditionally termed Providence is startlingly different from that accepted by, say, Dante or Spenser. In Shakespeare's world, the loss of Mamilius and Antigonus, or the sixteen lost years, can be contained but not reversed. At the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer exhorts men to trust not temporal vanity but transcendent Providence; Shakespeare, too, exhorts his audience to have faith, but in their human capacity for regeneration and reconciliation, for creatively taking time's chances and opportunities.

It is a measure of the suggestiveness of *The Renaissance Discovery of Time* that it prompts its readers to further speculations. But irritatingly, it is the important, underlying, matters which are made peripheral to the book's major interests in the Burckhardian 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 the dynamics of the whole age. In addition, there are some weird distortions as he straightjackets 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—

Her audit, though delay'd, answer'd must be,
And her quietus is to render thee.¹⁹

In deference to the reviewing trade, the usual crop of stylistic infelicities and errors ought to be noted. Mr. Quinones tends to be wordy, perhaps trapped like others on the same topic, by its temptation to abstraction. So we are told that "unlike the natural order where decomposition is organic and necessary, the human order has the capacity for true development" (69). Having been fed that mouthful, we are offered in a discussion of Shakespeare's romances, the observation that "people can get control of themselves, and lovers can arrive at a genial maturity" (427). Typographical errors noticed include two lines of text reversed on p. 24, "Warwich" on p. 300, and a peppering of minor proofreading errors which cause some indigestion (e.g. pp. 458, 478, 518, 534, 538-539).

But to enter into the kind of meaningful dialogue Mr. Quinones' book demands, it would be carping to waste time on trivia. Mr. Quinones' subject is fascinating, important, and elusive. In pursuing it, he has raised weighty questions although, as I have suggested, many more important ones have been ignored. So, on the one hand, to return to Coleridge's admonition, it is both reassuring and delightful to read a study which makes so central what, to the reviewer and many readers, is familiar and fruitful ground. But on the other hand, there is disappointment when so much that is vital is ignored.

Finally, in dealing with such a topic, we should acknowledge one of

the modern pioneer writers on the subject of time in the Renaissance, one who is not acknowledged in Mr. Quinones' book. Some forty years ago, L. C. Knights suggested in a brief and pithy essay on Shakespeare's sonnets that some extended study of the theme might be useful. With his later essay on *2 Henry IV*, this piece still constitutes the most suggestive treatment of the topic.²⁰ Both essays deserve to be noticed and reread. By comparison, the rest of us, with our subjective and partial selections of writers and motifs, remain time's fools, pining before the strong necessity of time.

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NOTES

1. *The Renaissance Discovery of Time*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1972, xvi + 549 pp. Price \$15. U.S.
2. Parts of this article are based on my forthcoming book, *The Strong Necessity of Time* (Mouton & Company: The Hague). Other recent works on a similar topic include Frederick W. Turner, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Time* (London, 1972), and Elizabeth D. N. McCutcheon's unpublished dissertation, "Lancelot Andrewes and the Theme of Time in the Early Seventeenth Century" (University of Wisconsin, 1961). As Mr. Quinones notes, articles and theses on various aspects of the topic abound.
3. *The Courage to Be* (London, 1962), p. 53.
4. Sir Isaac Newton, *Mathematical Principles*, trans. Florian Cajori (Berkeley, 1934), p. 6; Shakespeare, *AYL*, III. ii. 290-291.
5. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, VII. vii. 47.
6. *Ibid.*, VII. vi. 1
7. Cf. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, XI. xiii; Martin Luther, *Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, XIII (Saint Louis, 1956), pp. 100-101; Henry Cuffe, *The Differences of the Ages of Mans Life* (London, 1607), pp. 44-45. For further discussion see e.g. C. A. Partides, "The Renaissance View of Time: a Bibliographical note", *N & Q*, LVII (1964), 217-236.
8. *A Woorke concerning the trewnesse of the Christian Religion*, trans. Sir Philip Sidney and Arthur Golding (London, 1587), p. 139. Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary, 1 Sentences*, XIX. ii. 2; *Summa Theologica*, I. xlvi. 2.
9. *Caelica*, sonnet 82.
10. *Sonnet* 60.
11. *Eight Sermons, upon . . . Ecclesiastes* (London, 1589), fol. 11^r.
12. See e.g. F. A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London, 1935); G. F. Waller, "Transition in Renaissance Ideas of Time", *Neophilologus*, LV (1971), 3-15, and "This Matching of Contraries': Bruno, Calvin and the Sidney Circle", *Neophilologus*, LVI (1972), 331-343.
13. Giordano Bruno, *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, trans. Arthur D.

- Imerti (New Brunswick, 1964), pp. 141-143.
14. Bruno, *de triplici Minimo . . .* (Frankfurt, 1591); *On the Infinite Universe and Worlds*, trans. D. W. Singer (New York, 1950), p. 285; *Cause, Principle, and Unity*, trans. Jack Lindsay (Castle Hedingham, 1962), p. 141.
 15. "In Search of Fundamental Values", *TLS*, no. 3204 (July 26, 1963), 349.
 16. *The Dramatist and the Received Idea* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 318-319.
 17. *Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred* (Philadelphia, 1963), p. 63.
 18. "Shakespeare and Religion", *The Cornhill Magazine*, CLXXIV (1964-5), 84. The prophetic image of Prospero's breaking his staff has been interestingly used by the modern theologian William Hamilton, in *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Harmondsworth, 1968), pp. 56-57.
 19. *Sonnet 126*.
 20. "Shakespeare's Sonnets", reprinted in *Explorations* (London, 1946), pp. 51-75; "Time's Subjects: The Sonnets and *King Henry IV, Part II*", in *Some Shakespearean Themes* (London, 1959), pp. 45-64.