Balz Engler

The Performance of Permanence

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What is it that gives a work of literature permanence, in other words, what is it that makes it a classic? Obviously, it must have certain qualities that make this possible, qualities, however, that may be defined differently at different times. But this is not sufficient: Works that show all the qualities considered necessary may be lying in an attic somewhere, collecting dust. There must be other factors that critics focusing on the existing canon would consider negligible. This short essay only offers a general answer to the question raised at the beginning.

Shakespeare's Sonnet 55 makes an important point concerning the power of poetry, but it is not the point commonly taken for granted.

> Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
> Of princes, shall outlive this pow'rful rhyme;
> But you shall shine more bright in these contents
> Than unswept stone, besmeared with sluttish time.
> When wasteful war shall statues overturn,
> And broils root out the work of masonry,
> Nor Mars his sword, nor war's quick fire shall burn
> The living record of your memory.
> 'Gainst death and all oblivious enmity
> Shall you pace forth, your praise shall still find room,
> Even in the eyes of all posterity
> That wear this world out to the ending doom.
> So, till the judgement that yourself arise,
> You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.
> (Shakespeare, *Shakespeare, ed. Burrow* 491)

In one respect Shakespeare's Sonnet 55 is a spectacular failure: Even though it promises to immortalize the young man it addresses we do not learn enough about him to have a living record of him. As Gerald Hammond has observed:

> The continual claims that poetry preserves and immortalizes read oddly against the vagueness of its descriptive vocabulary—"fair", "sweet", "lovely", and "beauteous" leave so indefinite an impression that almost any candidate put forward as the historical reality behind the young man can find persuasive support within the collection. (Hammond 72)

The very lack of information has led to intense speculation about the person addressed. The fact that speculation continues is not a matter of course. It indicates that, even though this poem (and the others in the sequence) may not have managed to immortalize a specific person, its celebration of the power of poetry has managed to create a quasi-immortal absence, a gap that we are permanently invited to fill. Some people may still feel the urge to speculate on the identity of the young man, but the status of the *Sonnets* as great literature is not affected by the question who among the various candidates is the correct one.

What is it then that can give a person immortality? has given the poem permanence? The poem presents violent death and oblivion (line 9) as the two enemies of memory and juxtaposes two methods of overcoming them: the "gilded monuments / Of princes"[1] and "this powerful rhyme" (2) and it considers poetry to be the more successful of the two.

How can a poem create permanence? A widely accepted answer is: *Writing.* The words written or printed on a durable medium guarantee intransience. This view seems to be supported by Sonnet 81: "Your monument shall be my gentle verse, / Which eyes not yet created shall o'er-read." (9-10). But writing as such cannot do this. It is also a characteristic feature of monuments, and inscriptions become illegible on the "unswept stone besmeared with sluttish time." (4) They may also become undecipherable.[2] Manuscripts may be lost, books may be misplaced and forgotten. If writing is not sufficient to give poetry permanence, what else can do it?

Shakespeare is taking up another understanding of the *aere perennius* motif, of poetry being more lasting than bronze. It does not concern writing, but fame. The motif, popular in his age, stands, of course, in a venerable tradition, which goes back to Horace (*Odes* III.30.1-8) and Ovid (*Metamorphoses* XV. 875-79).

The passage in Horace reads as follows in the Loeb translation:

> I have finished a monument more lasting than bronze and loftier than the Pyramids' royal pile, one that no wasting rain, no furious north wind can destroy, or the countless chain of years and the ages' flight. I shall not altogether die, but a mighty part of me shall escape the death-goddess. On and on shall I grow, ever fresh with the glory of after time. (Horace 279)[3]

Ovid is even more interesting:

> And now my work is done, which neither the wrath of Jove, nor fire, nor sword, nor the gnawing tooth of time shall ever be able to undo. When it will, let that day come which has no power save over this mortal frame, and end the span of my uncertain years. Still in my better part I shall be borne immortal far beyond the lofty stars and I shall have an undying name. Wherever Rome's power extends over the conquered world, I shall have mention on men's lips, and, if the prophecies of bards have any truth, through all the ages shall I live in fame. (Ovidius II, 426-27)

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[1] We should note in passing that the monument in this poem, as always in Shakespeare (and quite strikingly in Sonnet 81), refers to a tomb. The Elizabethans did not have statues in the classical or in the modern sense. The young man immortalized first must be dead before he can be given immortal life. (This also makes it so difficult and would make it so intriguing, to compare this poem with that other great poem about monuments, writing, and immortality, Shelley's "Ozymandias").

[2] The text on a statue of Ozymandias (Ramses II) would certainly be in hieroglyphs. Shelley wrote the poem in 1817; Champollion deciphered the hieroglyphics in the 1820s.

[3] The translation of "usque ego postero /crescam laude recens" is notoriously difficult. See Trumble.

Ovid explicitly makes the connection between the extension of the Roman empire and the fame of his works, and he insists on the reception and use of his works.

Keeping in mind this understanding of the *aere perennius* motif as a reference to fame, it is worth returning to a phrase in Sonnet 55: “the living record of your memory”. The *record* itself is not any different in its transience from the writing on the monument and the monument itself. To guarantee continued fame the *record* must be *living*, i.e. brought alive, and kept alive, by being read, recited, quoted, referred to, analysed, interpreted, parodied, in a general sense *performed*, again and again—in a process that feeds back on itself and may become self-sustaining. We read the texts that others have recommended to us, we recommend plays we have ourselves seen, we re-read texts that we remember as being important, etc. It is this kind of repetition—ritual repetition--which also raises and isolates texts from their historical and social context. As the sense of historical and social context is lost, they achieve the classical status of seemingly timeless significance.

Poetic form does have a role to play in this. It distinguishes the text of the poem from other language uses and suggests that it has been carefully created not just for a single use. The repetitive elements, metre and rhyme, suggest that it has been performed before and is meant to be performed again in the future. Among those who perform the text it therefore creates the *impression* of permanence and encourages them to pass it on.

But only if the text is indeed *performed*, poetic form may contribute to making fame more permanent. Because of this the claim so confidently made about the immortalizing power of poetry is bound to remain a wish, a hope, a longing.[4]

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As indicated, the *aere perennius* motif was popular in Shakespeare’ s age. It also plays a prominent role in the prefatory section of the Shakespeare First Folio. In their poems both Leonard Digges and Ben Jonson describe the edition as a monument that serves Shakespeare’s memory more powerfully than a statue, as it already existed in Stratford and was being considered for Westminster Abbey. But there are important differences between the two poems. Digges draws on the common reading of the motif that the availability of the printed text will guarantee the survival of Shakespeare works.

> […] thy works by which outlive
> Thy tomb thy name must, when that stone is rent,
> And time dissolves thy Stratford monument,
> Here we alive shall view thee still. This book,
> When brass and marble fade, shall make thee look
> Fresh to all ages. (Shakespeare, *Oxford Shakespeare* xlvi)

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[4] At the same time, it should be noted: By using Shakespeare’s Sonnet 55, by discussing it here as an example, I have myself contributed, however minimally, to the tradition of performing it, the tradition that keeps the poem, if not the record it offers, alive.

Jonson in his “To the Memory of My Beloved, the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare” deals with the issue in a more sophisticated manner:

> My Shakespeare, rise: […]
> Thou art a monument without a tomb,
> And art alive still while thy book doth live,
> And we have wits to read, and praise to give. (Shakespeare, *Norton Shakespeare* A28)

Jonson goes beyond Digges by insisting that Shakespeare’s book must be alive and must be read by people who understand him—in the manner suggested by Horace and Ovid. The oxymoronic phrase “Thou art a monument” seems to conflate the monument of the dead and the person alive, compressing the popular motif of the monument coming alive (Barkan).[5]

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[5] This may also suggest a richer reading of the sentence “Thou art a monument without a tomb”: *tomb* in the language of the period was pronounced in the same way as *tome*, and *without* may mean “outside”. In other words, Shakespeare works will only be alive if they continue to exist outside the book in a way that again and again makes people return to them.