

SONNET XVII

Who will believe my verse in time to come,
If it were filled with your most high deserts?
Though yet heaven knows it is but as a tomb
Which hides your life, and shows not half your parts:
If I could write the beauty of your eyes,
And in fresh numbers number all your graces,
The age to come would say this Poet lies,
Such heavenly touches ne'er touched earthly faces.
So should my papers (yellowed with their age)
Be scorned, like old men of less truth than tongue,
And your true rights be termed a Poet's rage,
And stretched metre of an Antique song.
 But were some child of yours alive that time,
 You should live twice in it, and in my rhyme.

In this Sonnet we hear the poet for the first time. The Guide has selected his disciple. But the important thing is that the poet has to recognize his Guide. Such recognition is a critical step in the process. Otherwise the Guide would not be able to guide him. Let's recall that Hamlet, for example, failed to recognize his guide and, because of that, he could not save Elsinore from its evolutionary fiasco.

Following the Guide's indication in Sonnet 11, the poet intends to record the Guide's teaching. He realizes, however, that if he describes the Guide and his wisdom, his future readers will not understand his verses ("who will believe my verse in time to come, if it were filled with your most high deserts?") He will not be able to describe convincingly enough the Guide, his function, and his ability ("though yet heaven knows it is but as a tomb which hides your life, and shows not half your parts"). If he attempts to describe the Guide's loving eyes and write verses listing the Guide's wonderful attributes, his future readers will accuse him of lying ("if I could write the beauty of your eyes, and in fresh numbers number all your graces, the age to come would say this poet lies"). They will say no human face was ever so divine ("such heavenly touches ne'er touched earthly faces"). The poet's verses will be scorned, like old men who talk too much without saying anything of substance ("so should my papers, yellowed with their age, be scorned, like old men of less truth than tongue"); the poet's description of the Guide's role and his function will be dismissed as madness ("and your true rights be termed a poet's rage"). So, the poet is afraid that his poems will be perceived as an exaggerated fantasy ("and stretched metre of an antique song"). The poet hopes, however, that his poems will be understood by some readers in the future ("but was some child of yours alive that time"). In this way, the Guide's teaching will be preserved ("you should live twice in it, and in my rhyme"). It seems that Shakespeare knew from the very beginning that it was going to take some time before his Sonnets and his plays will be understood.

This Sonnet marks the poet's entry onto the spiritual path. The following Sonnets are a record of the poet's experiences while travelling along the path.

(Excerpt from "Shakespeare Sonnets or How heavy do I journey on the way" by Wes Jamroz)