

SONNET XLV

The other two, slight air, and purging fire,
Are both with thee, wherever I abide,
The first my thought, the other my desire,
These present absent with swift motion slide.
For when these quicker Elements are gone
In tender Embassy of love to thee,
My life being made of four, with two alone,
Sinks down to death, oppress'd with melancholy.
Until life's composition be recured,
By those swift messengers return'd from thee,
Who even but now come back again, assured,
Of thy fair health, recounting it to me.
 This told, I joy, but then no longer glad,
 I send them back again and straight grow sad.

The poet uses the symbols of earth, water, air, and fire to describe his present state of separation. He says that the reforming air and purifying fire are always with the Guide, regardless of wherever the poet may be (“the other two, slight air, and purging fire, are both with thee, wherever I abide”). At the stage of “air” the poet would be free from the limitations of ordinary intellect; at the stage of “fire” he would be able to break away from his emotional desires (“the first my thought, the other my desire”). Because of the poet’s worldly attachments, he is not able to preserve the permanency of his higher states; he slides back and forth between his ordinary and higher states (“these present absent with swift motion slide”). The required condition for inner balance is the harmonious presence of the four subtle faculties (“my life being made of four”).

When the lighter elements of air and fire are gone (“for when these quicker elements are gone”), the poet falls back into his ordinary state (“my life ... sinks down to death, oppress'd with melancholy”). His inner balance is restored as soon as these two elements are back (“until air and fire return to restore the proper balance within me”). The poet is able to recognize his inner state, because at such moments he is able to perceive messages from the Guide (“who even but now come back again, assured, of thy fair health, recounting it to me”). Such an inspirational state, or awakening state, is also referred to as the state “to be”.

The last two lines of the Sonnet explain why the poet is not able to sustain the state “to be” and almost immediately falls back to the state “not to be”. At such moments of idolatrous joy, the poet’s sentimental attraction diverts his attention towards the earthly form of the Guide. This results in the immediate withdrawal of the two lighter elements. Afterwards, the poet grows gloomy again (“this told, I joy, but then no longer glad, I send them back again and straight grow sad”). At the moments of idolatrous joy he realizes that he is still separated from the Guide, therefore he is “no longer glad”. “These present absent” states of going and returning mark the poet’s spiritual inconstancy. These two states of “present absent” correspond to Hamlet’s “to be” and “not to be”, respectively.

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