

*Thy glass will show thee how thy beauties wear,
 Thy dial how thy precious minutes waste;
 The vacant leaves thy mind's imprint will bear,
 And of this book this learning mayst thou taste.
 The wrinkles which thy glass will truly show,
 Of mouthed graves will give thee memory;
 Thou by thy dial's shady stealth mayst know
 Time's thievish progress to eternity.
 Look what thy memory cannot contain;
 Commit to these waste blanks and thou shalt find
 Those children nursed, delivered of thy mind.
 These offices, so oft as thou wilt look,
 Shalt profit thee, and much enrich thy book.*

Of the critic Kenneth Burke it has been said that he began his classes in fiction by asking his students first to open the book in hand to its exact midpoint and look for the central theme. The assumption is classical: good narratives are arranged symmetrically. The procedure works well with the five-act structure of Shakespeare's plays, which regularly have at their center a crucial decision or act by the protagonist. For example, in act three of *Othello*, the hero kneels with Iago and swears allegiance to him, rejecting Cassio and Desdemona. After that comes the descent into pathos.

Sonnet 77 marks a departure in the speaker's advice to his friend on the way to counteract time and perpetuate ideal beauty. He tells him to commit his thoughts to blank pages ("vacant leaves," l. 3) of his memorandum book, perhaps one already given to him by the speaker. Indirectly he urges his friend to follow in his footsteps by writing down what "memory cannot contain" (l. 9) and nursing the children of his brain. These will replace the offspring of the marriage urged in the first seventeen sonnets. In effect, the speaker encourages his friend (who may also be a poet), to carry on the poetic search for truth and so to evade time's ravages.

The opening lines of the sonnet deal with three things, often thought to be gifts from the speaker: a mirror, a clock and a notebook. These are associated, respectively, with beauty, time and ideas — all of which are threads laid

down early on. The speaker is continuing his role as mentor, but he is more like an equal to the young man now and his thoughts and those of his friend seem to be merging. The speaker suggests that his friend's ideas, after being recorded, will, through his "offices" (the contemplation of his own ideas), enrich his book. The mirror, the clock, and the written thoughts – all blend into a *memento mori*, like the skull some monks of antiquity used as an inkwell to remind them of their mortality.