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The 16th Century Lyric in England: A Critical and Historical Reinterpretation: Part I

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POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

THE 16TH CENTURY LYRIC IN ENGLAND¹

A Critical and Historical Reinterpretation: Part I

And it is not always face,
Clothes or Fortune gives the grace;
Or the feature, or the youth;
But the Language and the Truth.

Ben Jonson

ANYONE who has read large amounts of the lyric poetry of the sixteenth century will realize that most of it is poor, much of it astonishingly poor. I believe that the lack of critical discrimination and interest on the part of such textual and other historical scholars as have worked in the field has led to serious misconceptions. We are creatures in a considerable measure of habit, and we tend in the main to be uncritical of our habits. It has come to be axiomatic that the Petrarchan movement of the late sixteenth century, especially as represented by Sidney and Spenser, is the most characteristic movement of the century and that it contains the best poetry of the century if we except certain work by Shakespeare, Donne, and perhaps (this depends on the critic) Ben Jonson. We tend to find in poetry about what we are looking for, and in the early sixteenth century most of us look, perhaps not altogether consciously, for imperfect Sidneys; but the poets preceding Sidney and Spenser, though they produced a good deal of imperfect Petrarchism, are not essentially Petrarchists.

¹ This is the first of a series of three articles by Mr. Winters on the 16th century lyric. The second will appear in a future issue.—ED.

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They constitute a school as definite as the Metaphysical, Petrarchist, or Cavalier, and a school fully as impressive as any of these, at least as to quality.

A literary fashion of a period may easily become fossilized in literary history in such a way as to obscure important values and great writers. This occurred at the close of the eighteenth century, when the rising romantic school, as represented chiefly by Gray and Collins, obscured the two greatest poetic talents of the period, those of Samuel Johnson and of Charles Churchill: Johnson and Churchill belonged to the party going out of power; in the subsequent generations they had few if any sympathizers, and their poetry had no opportunity to become embalmed in any authoritative body of criticism; their great poems, Johnson's two prologues to *Comus* and to *A Word to the Wise*, and Churchill's *Dedication to Warburton*, have been little read and less understood. So in the sixteenth century: the graces of Sidney and Spenser, graces which are often superficial but which are always obvious and frequently charming, and the legend of Sidney's character, have tended to obscure another school of poets greater as poets and more important if one is to have a clear idea of the history of poetic development in the century. It is curious to note that the one man whose critical writing did more, perhaps, than that of any other to establish the legend of Sidney's personality and hence to achieve the end described, was Sir Fulke Greville, one of the greatest of the poets in consequence obscured.

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I shall attempt in this essay to define certain major talents of the century who have been neglected, along with certain related minor talents equally neglected; to reevaluate certain established reputations; to offer a new historical outline and a new set of critical emphases for the century; and to base my conclusions in every case on poems specifically named. I shall be laboring under two difficulties: I shall be endeavoring in nearly every reader to shake an habitual approach to the century and to stimulate to new perceptions; and I shall of necessity have to be sparing of quotations. The reader of good will who has any deep interest in the subject will in all fairness read carefully the poems on which I base my conclusions, will read them after having read my analyses and with my analyses in mind. Even then, a fair judgment of my conclusions will scarcely be possible till the reader has through rereading and the lapse of time absorbed the poems and the critical ideas at his leisure. I do not wish to sound unduly pretentious in my warning. Much of what I say will of necessity be commonplace or only a little out of the run of ordinary opinion; but my position is essentially new, and I believe that I have made certain critical discoveries of the first importance. The belief is an accretion of about fifteen years of fairly constant immersion in the poetry under consideration.¹

¹Our chief sources of lyric poetry for the 16th century in England, in addition to published collections of poems by various poets, are the poetic miscellanies, the song-books, the plays, and unpublished manuscript collections. The first miscellany, popularly known as

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If we can disengage ourselves sufficiently, then, from the preconception that 16th century poetry is essentially Petrarchist, to sift the good poems, regardless of school or of method, from the bad, we shall find that the Petrarchist movement produced nothing worth remembering between Skelton and Sidney, in spite of a tremendous amount of Petrarchan experimentation during this period, if we except certain partially Petrarchan poems by Surrey and by Wyatt, and that the poetry written during this interim which is worth remembering belongs to a school in every respect antithetical to the Petrarchist school, a school to

Tottel's Miscellany, appeared in 1557; the last important collection of 16th century lyrics appeared in 1602, under the title of *A Poetical Rhapsody*. The most important miscellanies ranging between are *A Handful of Pleasant Delights*, *A Paradise of Dainty Devices*, *A Gorgeous Gallery of Gallant Inventions*, *The Phoenix Nest*, *The Passionate Pilgrim*, and *England's Helicon*. These volumes cover a long period and a wide variety of kinds of poetry; it is therefore not profitable to attempt to treat them individually or together as representative of any particular tendency or tendencies, or not, at least, from my present point of view. The poetry contained in them is mainly rather poor, yet a large amount of very good poetry can be culled from them. *Tottel's Miscellany* contains the greatest amount of fine poetry, thanks largely to the presence of a very large amount of Wyatt; the next best is *England's Helicon*, which appeared in 1600, a collection of more or less pastoral lyrics. There is much greater uniformity in the Elizabethan song-books. Dr. Fellowes has reprinted in a single volume (*English Madrigal Verse*, The Oxford Press) the lyrics of most of the great Elizabethan madrigalists and lutanists. There is a good deal of variation of type in this volume, but most of the pieces by far are love-songs, more or less influenced by Italian models, and often translated from the Italian. The poems to be found in the plays are roughly of a kind; the poems to be found in the other deposits mentioned vary widely.

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which Wyatt and Surrey contributed important efforts, perhaps their best, but which flourished mainly between Surrey and Sidney and in a few men who survived or came to maturity somewhat later, a school which laid the groundwork for the greatest achievements in the entire history of the English lyric, which itself left us some of those greatest achievements, and which is almost wholly neglected and forgotten by the anthologists and by the historians of the period, even by the editors, for the greater part, of the individual contributors to the school.¹

The characteristics of the typical poem of the school are these: a theme usually broad, simple, and obvious, even tending toward the proverbial, but usually a theme of some importance, humanly speaking; a feeling restrained to the minimum required by the subject; a rhetoric restrained to a similar minimum, the poet being interested in his rhetoric as a means of stating his matter as economically as possible, and not, as are the Petrarchans, in the pleasures of rhetoric for its own sake. There is also in the school a strong tendency towards aphoristic statement, many of the best poems being composed wholly of aphorisms, in the medieval

¹The school reached its chronological and poetical culmination in the work of George Gascoigne (1525-77) and in Sir Walter Raleigh (1552-1618), more particularly in Gascoigne. Thomas Nashe (1567-1601) made a few of the best contributions, and certain others were made by Barnabe Googe (1540-94), whose only volume appeared in 1563, and by George Turberville (1540-1610), men who came between Gascoigne and Raleigh. There are other representatives of the school, more or less imperfect as representatives, whom I shall mention later.

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manner exemplified by Chaucer's great ballade *Flee from the press*, or, if short, being composed as single aphorisms. If we except Chaucer's ballade, we have no high development of the aphoristic lyric in England or in Scotland before the 16th century, and the great aphoristic lyrics of Gascoigne and of Raleigh probably represent the highest level to which the mode has ever been brought. Further, the aphoristic lyrics of the early sixteenth century represent only one aspect of the school that I have in mind; Gascoigne, for example, cast his greatest poem, *Gascoigne's Woodmanship*, in the form of a consecutive and elaborate piece of exposition, and several other poems near his highest level are expository rather than aphoristic in outline.

The wisdom of poetry of this kind lies not in the acceptance of a truism, for anyone can accept a truism, at least formally, but in the realization of the truth of the truism: the realization resides in the feeling, the style. Only a master of style can deal successfully in a plain manner with obvious matter: we are concerned with the type of poetry which is perhaps the hardest to compose and the last to be recognized, a poetry not striking nor original as to subject, but merely true and universal, that is, in a sense commonplace, not striking nor original in rhetorical procedure, but direct and economical, a poetry which permits itself originality, that is the breath of life, only in the most restrained and refined of subtleties in diction and in cadence, but which by virtue of those subtleties inspires its universals with their full value as experience. The best poems in the early

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school are among the most perfect examples of the classical virtues to be found in English poetry. I am aware that Gascoigne as a critic recommended the choice of original subject matter, but his concept of originality in this respect was naïve if regarded in the light of later practice, and his own practice must be judged in relation to later practice.

The best poems of Barnabe Googe¹ are the following: *Of Nicholas Grimald, To Dr. Balle, To Mistress A., To the Translation of Pallingenius, Of Mistress D.S., Of Money, and Coming Homeward Out of Spain. Of Money* I quote entire:

Give money me, take friendship he who list,
For friends are gone, come once adversity,
When money yet remaineth safe in chest,
That quickly can thee bring from misery.
Fair face show friends when riches do abound,
Come time of proof, farewell they must away.
Believe me well, they are not to be found
If God but send thee once a lowering day.
Gold never starts aside, but in distress
Finds ways enough to ease thine heaviness.

The poem illustrates the qualities which I have enumerated. The sprung rhythm of this poem, which is most noticeable in the fifth line, is, while not essential to the school, very common in a few poets, especially in Googe and in Nashe, and is peculiarly expressive of their mood, in its combination of matter-of-factness with passion. By sprung rhythm, I mean the juxtaposition of accented syllables by either of two methods: by the dropping of an un-

¹Published among Arber's English Reprints.

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accented syllable from between two accented, as in the seven-syllable couplets of Robert Greene and in the sonnets of Wyatt; or by the raising of the accentual value of a syllable that should normally be unaccented till it is accented equally with the syllables on either side of it as in the poem just quoted. In the former type of sprung rhythm, the norm which maintains the identity of the line is accentual; in the latter it is syllabic.

George Turberville is one of the most minute of the finished stylists of the century¹: perhaps only Thomas Morley, the madrigalist, is more nearly infinitesimal, as he is likewise more polished. The important poems by Turberville are: *To the Roving Pirate*, *To One that Had Little Wit*, *To an Old Gentlewoman Who Painted Her Face*, *Of the Clock and the Cock*, and *That All Things Are as They Are Used*. There are charming odds and ends of phrasing scattered through a good many additional poems. In *To One That Had Little Wit*, Turberville raises pertness to artistry:

I thee advise
If thou be wise
To keep thy wit
Though it be small.
'Tis hard to get
And far to fet—
'Twas ever yet
Dear'st ware of all.

¹Chalmers' *English Poets*: Vol. 2.

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In the poem *To an Old Gentlewoman* he combines pertness with pathos:

Leave off, good Beroe, now
To sleek thy shriveled skin,
For Hecuba's face will never be
As Helen's hue hath been.
Let Beauty go with youth,
Renounce the glozing glass,
Take book in hand: that seemly rose
Is woxen withred grass.
Remove thy Peacock's plumes
Thou crank and curious dame:
To other trulls of tender years
Resign the flag of fame.

In *The Clock and the Cock* he defines the trivial and suggests the mysterious. In *That All Things Are as They Are Used* and in *To the Roving Pirate*, he attains a kind of forthright moral dignity.

The greatest poet of the school is George Gascoigne, a poet unfortunate in that he has been all but irrecoverably pigeon-holed as a dull precursor in the history of certain major forms, but who deserves to be ranked, I believe, among the six or seven greatest lyric poets of the century, and perhaps higher. I base this opinion on the following poems: *Gascoigne's De Profundis*, the second and third of *Gascoigne's Memories*, *The Constancy of a Lover*, *Dan Bartholmew's Dolorous Discourses* (from *Dan Bartholmew of Bath*), *Gascoigne's Woodmanship*, and *In Praise of a Gentlewoman Who though She Was not very Fair Yet Was She as Hard-Favored as Might Be*. There are a good many other

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poems of charm but of less power and scope.¹

The third of the *Memories*, a poem on the subject of the spendthrift, and bearing certain resemblances to Wyatt's poem addressed to Sir Francis Bryan, but more pointed, compact, and moving, is one of the finest, and displays on a large scale the mastered hardness, the aphoristic analysis, which we have already encountered in Googe. The tone is set in the opening and never falters:

The common speech is, spend and God will send;
But what sends he? a bottle and a bag,
A staff, a wallet, and a woeful end,
For such as list in bravery to brag.
Then if thou covet coin enough to spend,
Learn first to spend thy budget at the brink,
So shall the bottom be the faster bound:
But he that list with lavish hand to link,
In like expense, a penny with a pound,
May chance at last to sit aside and shrink
His hare-brained head without Dame Dainty's Door.

The most striking lines in the poem are probably those embodying the colloquial personification toward the middle:

Yet he that yerks old angels out apace,
And hath no new to purchase dignity,
When orders fall may chance to lack his grace,
For haggard hawks mislike an empty hand:
So stiffly some stick to the mercer's stall,
Till suits of silk have sweat out all their land,
So oft thy neighbors banquet in thy hall,
Till Davy Debet in thy parlor stand,
And bid thee welcome to thine own decay.

¹*The Complete Works of George Gascoigne*, edited by John W. Cunliffe. Cambridge University Press, 1907.

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In Gascoigne's society, the destruction of the patrimony was a major catastrophe, and might well be irreparable; it was almost as serious a matter as death or moral disintegration, both of which it might easily involve. Considered in this light, the poem becomes something more than practical didacticism; it becomes a piece of moral analysis, nourished with moral perception. Davy Debet is not only debt, he is the bailiff, the new host, decay itself, and the moral judgment: he is pure terror. The poem displays a measure of the only kind of rhetorical affectation to be found in the school, the affectation of hard directness, supported in part by the traditional alliteration which later poets were to abandon.

There are perfect control and perfect directness in Gascoigne's love poetry:

That happy hand which hardily did touch
Thy tender body to my deep delight—

and yet again, from the poem entitled *In Praise of a Gentlewoman*:

And could Antonius forsake the fair in Rome?
To love his nutbrown lady best, was this an equal doom?
I dare well say dames there did bear him deadly grudge,
His sentence had been shortly said if Faustine had been judge,
For this I dare avow (without vaunt be it spoke)
So brave a knight as Anthony held all their necks in yoke:
I leave not Lucrece out, believe in her who list,
I think she would have liked his lure, and stooped to his fist.
What mov'd the chieftain, then, to link his liking thus?
I would some Roman dame were here the question to discuss.
But I that read her life, do find therein by fame,
How clear her courtesy did shine, in honor of her name.
Her bounty did excel, her truth had never peer,

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Her lovely looks, her pleasant speech, her lusty loving cheer.
And all the worthy gifts, that ever yet were found,
Within this good Egyptian Queen, did seem for to abound.
Wherefore he worthy was, to win the golden fleece,
Which scorned the blazing stars in Rome, to conquer such a piece.
And she to quite his love, in spite of dreadful death,
Enshrined with snakes within his tomb, did yield her parting
breath.

If fortune favored him, then may that man rejoice,
And think himself a happy man by hap of happy choice,
Who loves and is believed of one as good as true,
As kind as Cleopatra was, and yet more bright of hue,
Her eyes as gray as glass, her teeth as white as milk,
A ruddy lip, a dimpled chin, a skin as smooth as silk,
A wight what could you more, that may content man's mind,
And hath supplies for every want, that any man can find,
And may himself assure, when hence his life shall pass,
She will be stung to death with snakes, as Cleopatra was.

In *Gascoigne's De Profundis* the same qualities of style
and the same rich humanity of feeling are heightened to
devotional ecstasy:

Before the break of dawning of the day,
Before the light be seen in lofty skies,
Before the sun appear in pleasant wise,
Before the watch (before the watch, I say)
Before the ward that waits therefore alway:
My soul, my sense, my secret thought, my sprite,
My will, my wish, my joy, and my delight:
Unto the Lord that sits in heaven on high,
With hasty wing,
From me doth fling,
And striveth still, unto the Lord to fly.

The greatest poem of the author and of the school, a
poem unsurpassed in the century except by a few of the
sonnets of Shakespeare, is *Gascoigne's Woodmanship*. It is
addressed to Lord Grey of Wilton, and the allegory takes

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the form of an apology for the author's bad marksmanship as a huntsman: it appears that he usually misses his deer, or else kills by accident a doe carrying or nursing young, and so unfit for food:

My worthy Lord, I pray you wonder not,
To see your woodsman shoot so oft awry,
Nor that he stands amazed like a sot,
And lets the harmless deer unhurt go by.
Or if he strike a doe which is but carrion,
Laugh not good Lord, but favor such a fault,
Take will in worth, he fain would hit the barren,
But though his heart be good, his hap is naught.

He explains this weakness, as one aspect merely of his fatal tendency to failure; he has likewise shot at law, philosophy, and success as a courtier, and in every case has failed—in the case of philosophy, he admits his own weakness as the sole cause of failure:

For proof he bears the note of folly now,
Who shot sometimes to hit philosophy . . .

In the case of the law and in that of the court, he complains further of his incapacity in the baser arts of succeeding, and these passages have remarkable force. Then follows the sombre and powerful passage in which he introduces his next failure:

But now behold what mark the man doth find,
He shoots to be a soldier in his age,
Mistrusting all the virtues of his mind,
He trusts the power of his personage.

But he finds that he cannot free himself into the exercise of unalloyed physical strength; he has no taste for putting the innocent villager to the sword:

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He cannot spoil the simple sakeless man,
Which is content to feed him with his bread;

and neither has he a taste for the type of corruption within the army by which officers are able to acquire wealth
There follows a general meditation upon all of his failures; it concludes with a brilliant passage in which the poem is returned to the allegory:

Now when my mind doth mumble upon this,
No wonder then although I pine for pain:
And whiles mine eyes behold this mirror thus,
The herd goeth by, and farewell gentle does.

Then follows the conclusion, the greatest passage in the poem, and one of the greatest passages in English lyrical poetry, in which the subject is rehearsed and explained in terms of the allegory; in which the subject is explained in terms of Christian morality; in which the author is justified in so far as it comports with Christian humility that he should justify himself. I wish in particular to call attention to the rhetorical grandeur of this passage, the terseness, the subtlety of subdued but powerful feeling:

But since my Muse can to my Lord rehearse
What makes me miss, and why I do not shoot,
Let me imagine in this worthless verse,
If right before me, at my standing's foot,
There stood a doe, and I shall strike her dead,
And then she prove a carrion carcase too,
What figure might I find within my head,
To scuse the rage which ruled me so to do?
Some might interpret my plain paraphrase,
That lack of skill or fortune led the chance,
But I must otherwise expound the case.
I say Jehovah did this doe advance,
And made her bold to stand before me so,

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Till I had thrust mine arrow to her heart,
That by the sudden of her overthrow,
I might endeavor to amend my part,
And turn my eyes that they no more behold
Such guileful marks that seem more than they be:
And though they glister outwardly like gold,
Are inwardly but brass, as men may see:
And when I see the milk hang in her teat,
Methinks it saith, old babe learn now to suck,
Who in thy youth couldst never learn the feat
To hit the whites which live with all good luck.
Thus have I told my Lord (God grant in season)
A tedious tale in rhyme, but little reason.

Schelling states that "George Gascoigne was held in high contemporary estimation."¹ He cites numerous passages in support of the assertion, which is worth remembering when we come to the examination of later poetry.

The mature and laconic bitterness of Raleigh, and the bitter terror of Nashe, both found their best expression in the mode established by the poets whom I have been discussing, and continued the mode well into the Petrarchan, and perhaps beyond the Petrarchan, era. Their best poems are *The Lie*, *What is our life*, and *Even such is time*, by Raleigh; and *In Time of Pestilence* and *Autumn hath all the fruitful summer's treasure*, by Nashe; *The Lie* and *In Time of Pestilence* employ the sequence of aphorisms in a rapid movement and at a high pitch of feeling; all five poems are too well known to require quotation. *Yvor Winters*

¹Felix E. Schelling: *The Life and Writings of George Gascoigne*. Publication of the University of Pennsylvania: Series in Literature and Archeology, II-4.