

POETRY

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

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book on standards other than usually applied to first books, it is that the time is late, the archives are cluttered with rubbish and stammering minds, and that performance, not promise, is now expected from the young.

Oscar Williams

THE 16TH CENTURY LYRIC IN ENGLAND¹

A Critical and Historical Reinterpretation: Part III

OF SAMUEL DANIEL little need be said. His best single poem is the sonnet beginning *Beauty, sweet love*; his best poems are all available in the standard anthologies and are well known. Like Sidney, he aims primarily at grace of expression; his tone is less exuberant than that of Sidney; his style is more consistently pure; his inspiration is less rich. His tone is one of polished melancholy.

A form nearly as popular with the Petrarchan poets as was the sonnet, we shall find in the song; that is, in the lyric written expressly to be set to music. England possessed great musical composers before the age of Elizabeth, and their lyrics were naturally fairly typical of their ages. But most of the great English music was written during the twenty-five years or so which saw the rise and decline of Petrarchan poetry in England, and it is not surprising that most of the lyrics set to music in this period should be the products of the Petrarchan movement. Most of the

¹This is the third of a series of three articles by Mr. Winters on the 16th century lyric.—ED.

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songs of Sir Philip Sidney were obviously written to be sung, and many found their way into the song-books. Of those composers who appear in the main to have set the lyrics of other men, John Dowland, the lutanist, is perhaps the most valuable collector of poems, as he is one of the greatest of composers, but many beautiful poems, most of them of unknown authorship, are to be found in the collections of other men. Of the composers who regularly wrote, or appear to have written, their own lyrics, the best poets are Campion and Morley. Of the writers, not composers, who wrote many lyrics to be set, the greatest are Sidney and Shakespeare.

Thomas Morley, the gayest and one of the finest composers of madrigal music, and the most minute of all the masters of the English lyric, as well as one of the most polished, may be used to illustrate the song:

Ladies, you see time flieth,
And beauty, too, it dieth,
Then take your pleasure,
While you have leisure,
Nor be so dainty
Of that which you have plenty.

Or again:

No, no, Nigella!
Let who list prove thee,
I cannot love thee.
Have I deserved
Thus to be served?
Well then content thee,
If thou repent thee.

No, no, Nigella!
In sign I spite thee,

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Lo, I requite thee.
Henceforth complaining
Thy love's disdainings,
Sit, thy hands wringing,
Whilst I go singing.

The songs of Campion have greater scope, equal polish, and a sombre and profound feeling. The two best, perhaps, are the famous lyrics beginning, *Now winter nights enlarge*, and *When thou must home to shades of underground*, poems that probably surpass anything in Sidney, both in scope and in execution, in spite of the fact that Sidney is commonly ranked among the greater poets and Campion among the minor. The first of these two is particularly rich and beautiful, not only in the sensuous imagery of the first stanza, but in the humanity and wise disillusionment of the second; one should note the vastness of night suggested in the first four lines, the fusion in images of light of the fire, wine, and wax, the continuation of this suggestion in the word "honey" used, however, metaphorically, and the way the spirits of the convivialists leap in the line subsequent to that in which the cups overflow. Among the best of his poems are the following: *Shall I come, sweet love, to thee* (perhaps the inspiration of the *Indian Serenade*, by Shelley), *Sleep, angry beauty*, *There is a garden in her face*, *Thou art not fair for all thy red and white*, *What then is love but morning*, and, especially, *Whether men do laugh or weep*.¹

¹Among the best poems in Dr. Fellowes' *English Madrigal Verse* (Oxford, 1920), exclusive of poems by Campion, or usually attributed to him, are the following: Alison: *What if a day*; Bateson:

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The songs of Shakespeare are roughly similar to those already discussed: they show the combination of gaiety and pathos normal to the Elizabethan song; they often combine realistic detail, of more or less popular antecedents, with Petrarchan ornament and elaborate meter; they display, in fact, greater metrical virtuosity even than the lyrics of Campion; but in spite of their great beauty and in spite of the glory reflected upon them from Shakespeare's greater work, it would be unfair to say that they were more moving than the best of Campion.

Sidney's best songs are probably the following: *Doubt you to whom my Muse these notes entendeth, Only joy, now here you are, O you that hear this voice, Who is it that this dark night, The nightingale as soon as April bring-*

I heard a noise; Byrd: I joy not, My mind to me, Where fancy fond, O You that hear this voice, When younglings first, Is Love a boy; Gibbons: The silver swan, Laïs now old; Morley: Now is the gentle season, Round, around, In nets of golden wires, Now is the month of maying, Sing we and chant it, No no Nigella, Thus saith my Galatea, Fire! fire! my heart, Damon and Phyllis squared, Ladies you see time flieth; Mundy: Were I a king; Peerson: Can a maid that is well-bred, The spring of joy is dry; Pilkington: Pour forth, mine eyes, Stay nymph, the ground, Have I found her; Vautor Sweet Suffolk owl, Weep, weep mine eyes, Dainty sweet bird; Ward: Sweet pity, wake; Weelkes: Welcome sweet pleasure, Death hath deprived me; Attey: Vain hope, adieu! Barley: Short is my rest; Cooper: Oft thou hast; Corbine: Some can flatter, Sweet Cupid; John Dowland: Dear if you change, Sleep, wayward thoughts, His golden locks, Fine knacks for ladies, Behold a wonder here, Flow not so fast, ye fountains, Stay time awhile thy flying, Go nightly cares; Jones: Once did I love, Shall I look, O thread of life, How many new years; Pilkington: Whither so fast; Porter: Love in thy youth.

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eth, Ring out your bells, Who hath his fancy pleased, What tongue can her perfection tell. Sidney's best work was done in the form of songs; his songs are nearly all perfect in execution; the slighter songs display extraordinary wit and polish, and some of the most ambitious have considerable depth. But whereas the songs of Campion and of Shakespeare and of the lesser writers tend to be simple in construction (I am alluding now to plan, not to meter), Sidney often employs elaborate expository frames, and he makes no discernible sacrifice of elegance in employing them. These frames are often expended on very slight subjects, but sometimes are dignified by serious subjects. In addition to writing certain fine poems of his own, he brought the technique of the expository lyric to a state of refinement and of variety which it had not before enjoyed. Ben Jonson's debt to Sidney is very great; so is that of Donne, whose lyrical genius amounted to a kind of grim parody of Sydney; so is that of most of the 17th century. As late as the 19th century, we find Swinburne trying to imitate Sidney's rhyme schemes and Browning modeling one of his best poems—his *Serenade at the Villa*—very closely upon Sidney's lyric beginning, *Why is it that this dark night*. Sidney is probably at his best in the lyric beginning *Who hath his fancy pleased*, a poem which develops one of the two most serious themes of which he is capable (namely, Platonic love, and, as in the closing sonnets of *Astrophel and Stella*, the Christian renunciation of love) in the finest style of which he is capable. I wish to reiterate, however, that in spite of the

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historical importance of this and other songs of a similar nature, Campion's two best poems seem to me essentially richer and more moving poetry.

The all but innumerable anonymous songs of the period likewise played an important part in refining English style, more than one song being notable for a single phrase or cadence but so notable for that alone as to be unforgettable. The influence of the song-books and miscellanies on such poets as Herrick and as Crashaw is very extensive, but the subject would take us out of our century. We may fairly conclude the subject of the songs by quoting one of the best of the anonymous specimens. It is to be found in John Dowland's second book of airs (Dr. Fellowes, in reprinting it, has damaged it very seriously by giving it a lineation which is obviously incorrect) and in *England's Helicon* (where the correct form may be found):

Come away, come, sweet love,
The golden morning breaks;
All the earth, all the air,
Of love and pleasure speaks.
Teach thine arms then to embrace,
And sweet rosy lips to kiss:
And mix our souls in mutual bliss.
Eyes were made for beauty's grace,
Viewing, ruing, love's long pain:
Procured by beauty's rude disdain.

Come away, come, sweet love,
The golden morning wastes:
While the Sun from his sphere
His fiery arrows casts,
Making all the shadows fly,
Playing, staying, in the grove;
To entertain the stealth of love.

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Thither, sweet love, let us hie
Flying, dying in desire:
Winged with sweet hopes and heavenly fire.
Come away, come, sweet love,
Do not in vain adorn
Beauty's grace that should rise
Like to the naked morn.
Lilies on the river side
And fair Cyprian flowers new blown,
Desire no beauties but their own.
Ornament is nurse of pride,
Pleasure, measure, love's delight:
Haste, then, sweet love, our wished flight.

It will be seen that poetry of this type introduced into England a quality of style wanting in such writers as Gascoigne and Raleigh—a quality not only of technical grace but of refined sensuous perception—at the same time that it very largely neglected their virtues.

We will turn now and briefly to the poets who combined the essential qualities of both schools, and who brought the fusion of these qualities to a high level of accomplishment. I shall confine myself to three of these: Ben Jonson, John Donne, and William Shakespeare. My treatment must necessarily be suggestive rather than exhaustive, and will relate wholly to the subjects which I have been discussing.

Considering these poets purely as lyrical writers, we should probably find Ben Jonson the easiest to define. His style is on the whole plain and direct, but it is likewise polished and urbane. It shows the solid substructure of Gascoigne and of Raleigh, with at least evidence of a knowledge of the flexibility of Sidney. Jonson is no such en-

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raptured rhetorician as Sidney, but on the other hand his knowledge of Sidney's rhetoric prevents his indulging in any such affectation of roughness as we find to some extent in Gascoigne: he is, in a sense, freer from mannerism and more direct than either.

Jonson is a classicist in the best sense, and though his classicism is no doubt in part the result of his study of the Greek and Latin poets, as it was probably in greater part the result of his natural bent and genius, it is reasonable to see in his work a resolution of the best qualities to be found in Sidney and in the earlier poets. One does not learn to write English verse from studying Latin, though one may thus acquire valuable training; Jonson must have been familiar with the poets in question; and the poets in question *were the English language*, so far as poetic style was concerned, at the time when Jonson was mastering the language, and there was very little to distract the attention from them. There is in Jonson no conflict of the two tendencies, as in Drayton, but there is distinctly a resolution of the two.

Jonson's lyrics are expository in structure and need to be read very closely if one is not to lose the continuity of the argument. He wrote a little devotional poetry of a high order, but his subject matter is chiefly ethical in the narrowest sense of the term: that is, he deals with problems of conduct arising from relationships between one human being and another, or between one human being and certain tragic or other difficulties; indeed, his devotional poetry concerns

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itself explicitly with man's moral relationship to God. His view of life is thus both dramatic and heroic; it is seldom devout; it excludes the mysterious. His poems have not only directness, but poise and nobility. The language is accurate not only in the statement of feeling, but in the statement of idea; there is an exact correlation between motive and feeling that may easily be mistaken for coldness and mechanical indifference by the reader accustomed to more florid enticements. The feeling of his poems resides commonly in the very language in which the idea is defined; the idea is a conceptual statement of the motive of the feeling. Among the greatest poems illustrating these qualities are the following: *Though beauty be the mark of praise, Where dost thou careless lie, High-spirited friend, From death and dark oblivion, near the same, False world, good night* (I refer to the complete poem, not to the bleeding remnant in the *Oxford Book of English Verse*), *Good and Great God, can I not think of Thee*, and *To draw no envy, Shakespeare, on thy name*. The qualities of this group of poems may be indicated by the quotation of the latter half of *False World, good night* (*To the World, A Farewell, for a Gentlewoman Virtuous and Noble*):

Yes, threaten, do. Alas, I fear
As little as I hope from thee:
I know thou canst not show nor bear
More hatred than thou hast to me.
My tender, first, and simple years
Thou didst abuse, and then betray;
Since stirdst up jealousies and fears,
When all the causes were away.

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Then in a soil hast planted me
Where breathe the basest of thy fools;
Where envious arts professed be,
And pride and ignorance the schools;
Where nothing is examined, weighed,
But as 'tis rumored, so believed:
Where every freedom is betrayed,
And every goodness taxed or grieved.
But what we're born for we must bear:
Our frail condition it is such,
That, what to all may happen here,
If't chance to me, I must not grutch.
Else, I my state should much mistake,
To harbor a divided thought
From all my kind: that for my sake,
There should a miracle be wrought.
No, I do know, that I was born
To age, misfortune, sickness, grief:
But I will bear these with that scorn,
As shall not need thy false relief.
Nor for my peace will I go far,
As wandrers do, that still do roam;
But make my strengths, such as they are,
Here in my bosom and at home.

The passage illustrates perfectly the qualities which I have described; it illustrates further a plainness and directness far more akin to Gascoigne and to Greville than to Sidney; Jonson is another who writes for those on whom the black ox has trod. But above all, it illustrates that fine perception and control of nuances of feeling which are possible only to the stylist who deliberately abandons the obvious graces; such writing is not only more weighty than that of Sidney, but is by the same token more sensitive and more skillful.

Jonson's major lyrics have been neglected, in favor of his minor lyrics, masterly performances in themselves, but less illustrative both of Jonson's genius and of the age. The

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minor lyrics, however, with the aid of his plays, miscellaneous writings, and legendary personality, have been able to keep him in some measure before the student's eye as a lyrical poet; he has never, in this capacity, lapsed into the obscurity in which Raleigh was long permitted to rest and in which Gascoigne and Greville (in spite of a few attempts to revive an interest in the latter) rest to this day. If the reader with fixed habits could wrench his attention to the major lyrics long enough to appreciate them, it would aid him to appreciate Gascoigne and Greville as well. There are many valuable secondary lyrics of a quality similar to that of the great lyrics which I have listed, and most of them but little read: the epitaphs on his children, especially that on his son, the epitaphs on the Countess of Pembroke and on Salathiel Pavy, the lines to the Countess of Bedford beginning: *This morning, timely rapt with holy fire, A Hymn to God the Father*, the first and second poems to Charis, *The Hour-Glass, My Picture Left in Scotland*, and the song in *Love's Triumph through Callipolis* beginning: *Joy, joy to mortals the rejoicing fires*.

There are, in addition, the justly popular minor masterpieces, like *Drink to me only with thine eyes, Come, my Celia*, and *Queen and huntress chaste and fair*, poems which discipline the heritage of the song-books and bequeath it to the seventeenth century.

John Donne differs from Jonson in ways that are obvious though perhaps easier to see than to define. His meters are sometimes grossly incorrect, the chief difficulty arising from

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the perverse misplacement of accents. Though he owes much to Sidney, his debt differs from that of Jonson: Donne utilizes the procedure of Sidney, but appears less a disciple than a serious parodist. If there is an affectation of directness in Gascoigne, there is a greater affectation of directness in much of Donne: in fact, in temperament and in achievement Gascoigne probably resembles Donne more than does any of Donne's disciples. Jonson's employment of abstractions shows the easiness that comes of use; Donne, though genuinely profound, affects profundity, sometimes with grotesque results. These defects sometimes over-ride his genius wholly and produce bad poetry. On the other hand, they are sometimes restrained sufficiently for the corresponding virtues to emerge, and we then have one of the greatest English poets. His greatest poems deal with love, human and divine. His greatest single poem, perhaps, on the happy fruition of human love is the well-known *Valediction Forbidding Mourning*; on the unhappy outcome of human love, the greater but less known *Valediction of His Name in a Window*. Both poems display most of the defects which I have mentioned, though not in an aggravated form; they represent an extreme use of the Petrarchan machinery, as exemplified in Sidney's songs, by a poet with a metaphysical view of life, with a talent for realistic detail, and with no love for ornament that is sensuous rather than intellectual. Some of the divine poems display equal force and a purer style. One may cite as a particularly great example the first of the Holy Sonnets, beginning: *Thou hast*

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made me, and shall thy work decay. Donne's characteristic defects are absent from such a poem as this; the virtues are comparable to the virtues of Jonson.

It is interesting to compare the Shakespeare of the sonnets to both of these writers, though my present comparison must be brief and superficial. Some of the greatest sonnets come to mind as resembling very closely Jonson and the Donne of the purer poems: *Tired with all these, Let me not to the marriage of true minds, The expense of spirit in a waste of shame, Poor soul, the center of my sinful earth,* are among the more obvious. In many poems, however, he seems closer to Sidney, or is at least employing devices which are more comprehensible in terms of Sidneyan practice than of the earlier. Shakespeare treats material of more or less the same ethical range as does Jonson; but unlike Jonson, he displays in certain poems an obsession with certain metaphysical notions of time and destruction, particularly in their subtle and imperceptible impingement upon the human consciousness. Shakespeare is minutely aware—almost sensuously aware—of the invading chaos, the unmanageable and absorptive continuum, amid which the ethical man, the man of free choice and of usable distinctions, exists.

Unlike Donne, Shakespeare does not write devotional poetry; there is only one more or less devotional poem among the sonnets. Shakespeare's difficulties are pre-Christian; his sensibility is metaphysical at times but not theological; his mood is perplexed, awed, and at times astounded, but it is practically never devout.

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We can make another distinction between Shakespeare and Donne, a dangerous distinction, perhaps, but one which I feel would be justified by fuller analysis. Donne also deals with the metaphysical, but his poetry deals with a kind of experience profoundly different from that of Shakespeare. Donne tends to deal with the recognition of definitions. His best poetry is composed mainly of explicit definitions, or of explicit and definite figurative excursions from definitions; the passion with which the human significance of these definitions is felt by him, he communicates in the quality of the language with which he states them. This is true of Jonson as well. Still speaking as cautiously and as relatively as possible, I should say that Shakespeare tends to approach the metaphysical in a more direct and immediate fashion, as regards the experience, an approach which, paradoxically, leads to a more evasive, or at least elusive, expression. That is, he constantly sees the matter that haunts him, as a quality, and frequently as an almost sensuous quality, of something else, and so treats it indirectly. He does not, as does Donne, isolate the quality in a definition and then treat the definition directly or in a clearly illustrative figure. Shakespeare's method makes for a richer sensuous texture, for greater and more elusive suggestion. Donne's makes for greater certainty and for greater concentration and completeness. Of the two methods, Donne's appears to me, abstractly considered, the sounder, or at least the safer: Shakespeare's method is the first step in the dislocation of feeling from motive which has been carried to its logical

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conclusions in the 19th and 20th centuries. But Shakespeare's discretion is proof against most dangers, and his genius is far greater than Donne's. I shall attempt to illustrate what I mean before proceeding. Allow me to quote Sonnet 77, which appears to have been written to accompany the gift of a blank book:

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 may'st thou taste.
The wrinkles which thy glass will truly show
Of mouthed graves will give thee memory;
Thou by thy dial's shady stealth may 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 from thy brain,
To take a new acquaintance of thy mind,
These offices, so oft as thou wilt look,
Shall profit thee and much enrich thy book.

The imperceptible coming of wrinkles displays the physical invasion of the enemy, just as the imperceptible changing of the dial's shadow displays the passing of the enemy. The comparison is a common one in the 16th century, though not elsewhere so beautifully stated except in Shakespeare's own sonnet 104. Shakespeare can apprehend a common figure in a profoundly original manner, just as we observed that Gascoigne could apprehend a moral truism in an original manner. In the ninth line, the enemy invades the mind, the center of being; it was the conceit of the blank book that enabled the poet to extend the familiar figure to this brilliant and terrifying conclusion. This terrifying sub-

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ject, the loss of the identity before the uncontrollable invasion of the impersonal, is no sooner suggested than it is dropped; and the poem ends with a sound and beautiful moral statement regarding the advantages of writing.

There is in such a poem a very guarded employment of the type of irrelevant excursion to be found in a very unguarded form in many of the sonnets of Sidney. In this connection, we may consider especially the adjective *waste*, in the phrase, *Commit to these waste blanks*. The word is obviously a pun, with the emphasis on the secondary meaning. It means not only *unused*, or *blank*, but it means *desert*, or *uninhabited*, or *uninhabitable*, a sense reinforced by the verb *waste* in the second line. It carries over the feeling of the invading chaos from the preceding line; but rationally considered, the pages are not waste in this sense, but are the instruments offered for actually checking the invasion of the waste. A feeling, in other words, is carried over from its proper motive to a motive irrelevant to it, and the dominant feeling is thus reinforced at the expense of the other. This procedure is foreign to Jonson and to Donne alike; carried a step or two further, it would lead to aesthetic chaos. In Shakespeare it contributes in part to the aura of suggestion which we are likely to feel about his statements; of suggested terror in some of the metaphysical sonnets and of suggested sweetness in some of the more human. In such a poem as this we have a discreet example of the most perilous of all procedures, the use of expressive, or imitative, form; in order to express the invasion of con-

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fusion the poet for a moment actually enters the realm of confusion instead of describing it.

It is in such poetry as this that one can best appreciate the benefit conferred by the Petrarchists. In spite of their limitations and errors, they enriched the sensuous texture of the language; they made possible the metaphysical sensuousness—and we have seen that the expression is not wholly obscure—of such writing as this, or they appear to have made it possible. The flexibility and sinuosity of such poetry are at least in part their gift, as is the classical precision of Jonson. They completed the poetic vocabulary, although their own vocabulary was incomplete, and they appear to have rendered possible, or at least greatly to have facilitated certain poems that have never been surpassed.

Yet in conclusion I wish to reiterate that the Petrarchans represent a tendency of secondary importance in the century, not of primary. The great lyrics of the 16th century are intellectually both profound and complex, are with few exceptions restrained and direct in style, and are sombre and disillusioned in tone. If we regard as the major tradition of the century the great poems of Gascoigne and Raleigh, and those most closely resembling them by Greville, Jonson, Donne, and Shakespeare, we shall obtain a very different view of the century from that which we shall obtain by regarding as primary Sidney, Spenser and the song-books; we shall bring much great poetry to light; and we shall find the transition to the next century far less obscure.

Yvor Winters