THE RENAISSANCE SONNETEERS:
A STUDY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF STYLE

by

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Abstract

The following thesis is an attempt to illustrate the development of style in English Renaissance poetry from the beginning of the Reformation, under Henry VIII, through the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, to the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, using, as a principal guide to this development, the work of the major sonneteers: Wyatt and Surrey, Spenser, Sidney, Shakespeare, Donne, and Milton. The fundamental theorem upon which the thesis rests is dependent upon the following assumptions: that the unifying principle which gives art its structure resides in the artist's subconscious and is largely beyond his wilful control; that this principle is shaped to a great extent by various forces in the artist's intellectual environment which help to mold his whole personality; and that the structure of art in general and of poetry in particular must therefore reflect at least the more general characteristics of that intellectual environment, regardless of the artist's individual peculiarities.

Even a very cursory examination of the intellectual history of the English Renaissance will reveal that the period is in a state of constant flux and can be divided into three distinct but consecutive phases: the ordered, certain
world of the High Renaissance is brought to the peak of its stability during the last two decades of the sixteenth century; in the 1590s it begins to show clear signs of breaking down, under the shattering impact of Copernicus and the New Philosophy, and by the early seventeenth century it has collapsed into chaos and generated a thoroughgoing neurotic insecurity; the remainder of the seventeenth century is devoted to a gradual philosophical reintegration, working toward the ultimate solidarity of eighteenth century rationalism, and reaching its first plateau with the relative calm of the early Restoration period. These three phases of intellectual development are all clearly represented in the literature of the period, as well as in the other arts, in the High Renaissance, mannerist, and baroque styles.

The sonnets of the Renaissance are particularly useful for illustrating the development of literary style for three reasons: they are compact, well-defined, and therefore very convenient microcosms of poetic structure which, because of their precise definition, lend themselves readily to a comparative study; they display a great deal of attention to the strictly formal aspects of poetry and are therefore more than casually relevant to an examination of style; and finally, they are written in greater quantity than any of the shorter poetic forms and they appear continuously throughout the period in the work of most of the major poets.
It appears that among the sonneteers of the Renaissance, Spenser, Donne, and Milton are respectively the most distinct representatives of the High Renaissance, mannerist, and baroque styles in poetry. Spenser, in his ordered ritualistic treatment of NeoPlatonism and courtly love typifies the High Renaissance; Donne, in his disingenuous inversion of Elizabethan idealism, reflects the insecurity of the Jacobean period; and Milton, in his broadly comprehensive affirmation of new certainties of vision, exhibits the reintegration of baroque thought. Wyatt and Surrey are working toward the Spenserian conception of poetic unity; Sidney is working away from Spenser, or at least from what Spenser represents, even though his sonnets appear several years earlier; and Shakespeare is progressively more and more caught up in the movement towards mannerism which is displayed so consistently in the poetry of Donne. In the sonnets of these seven poets, then, the style of English poetry can be seen to run through a complete cycle, reflecting in miniature not only the structural principles of art in general but the whole intellectual development of England's golden age.

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Department of ENGLISH

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Introduction

Between the accession of Henry VIII in 1509 and the deposition of James II in 1688 England underwent a social revolution: the economic, cultural, religious, and political structure of the country was thoroughly undermined and radically revised in almost every respect. The epoch gave birth to modern capitalism; it saw the vast expansion of printing, the secularization and extension of education, and the inauguration of modern mathematics and the physical sciences; it suffered the Protestant Reformation and the Puritan Rebellion; and it witnessed the awesome execution of Charles I, the end of absolute monarchy in England, and the first signs of political emancipation for the middle classes. In short, the Renaissance came, flourished, and died. It hardly needs pointing out that such penetrating changes were bound to have a powerful effect upon the arts, and especially upon the literary arts: new problems loomed up as the old ones waned, and new attitudes demanded expression. But the result, as one might expect in such violently shifting social circumstances, was more than a matter of overt differences in attitude; it was bound up with the idea of literary form, and led to new conceptions of literary structure and unity.
It is a currently popular hypothesis that, as a consequence of its rapidly changing social organization, the period broadly designated by the term "Renaissance" embraces no fewer than three fundamentally distinct attitudes toward the structure of art in general. The terms "Renaissance," "mannerist," and "baroque," which have been used to describe these three attitudes, are derived ultimately from the critical apparatus of the graphic and plastic arts, and the aesthetic qualities with which they have been concerned are primarily the visual criteria of Renaissance painting, sculpture, and architecture. But the hypothesis has been profitably extended to include the literature of the period, on the assumption that all the arts of a common social background have an intrinsic formal relationship which is somehow a reflection of the social background itself. The basis of the hypothesis as it is promulgated by its chief modern proponent, Wylie Sypher, lies in formal analogy:

If we can find analogies of form within the various arts of the renaissance, we possibly can define for literature as well as for painting, sculpture, and architecture the mechanisms of a changing renaissance style that emerges, transforms itself, re-emerges, and at last plays itself out in a severe equation. 1

In this context, the term "form" is used metaphorically, to

denote any way in which the artist organizes his material or statement. Thus, if the analogy bears itself out, literature in the "renaissance" style will consist in a static and highly symmetrical configuration of a great variety of somewhat loosely related conventional materials, reflecting the common view of the renaissance artist, critic, and scientist, who "believed he could integrate the world by obeying the Golden Measure and Probability, which was the foundation of 'the grand style,' an affirmation of Logos and Proportion in each of the arts as well as in physics, astronomy, and philosophy." ² Mannerist style similarly reflects a phase of social disintegration, inverting the tenets of renaissance art to concentrate upon "disproportion, disturbed balance, ambiguity, and clashing impulses in painting, architecture, and sculpture, as well as in 'metaphysical' poetry." ³ The hypothesis completes itself in the broad comprehensiveness of the baroque style, which relaxes the tensions of mannerism and reintegrates the multifarious fragments of renaissance art in a grandiose affirmation of total unity.

For reasons which will become apparent later in the chapter, the changing Renaissance styles are particularly well represented in the sonnets of the time, and more particularly, in those of the major sonneteers, Wyatt, Surrey,

² Sypher, op. cit., p. 33. ³ loc. cit.
Spenser, Sidney, Shakespeare, Donne, and Milton. As far as English literature is concerned, the renaissance, mannerist, and baroque attitudes are expressed least ambiguously in the poetry of Spenser, Donne, and Milton, respectively. Spenser has long been recognized as one of the most representative exponents of the "timeless brightness" of the English High Renaissance; the poetry of Donne characterizes the period of literary "decadence" following the reign of Elizabeth; and Milton provides the grand baroque synthesis of the later seventeenth century. If there is a tenable analogy between the arts, if literature does somehow reflect the theorems of artistic practice in general, if Spenser's *Epithalamion* and Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, Donne's *Anatomy of the World* and Peter Breughel's engraving *Sloth*, *Paradise Lost* and Bernini's gigantic piazza to St. Peter's share common unifying principles, one might expect the sonnets of Spenser, Donne, and Milton to elucidate, in a similar way, the general tenets of poetic composition underlying the larger and more complicated works. And the remaining poets, Wyatt, Surrey Sidney, and Shakespeare, can be expected to render interesting and revealing insights into the formative and intermediate stages of renaissance mannerist, and baroque composition, the three main phases in the poetic development of England's golden age.

It has already been suggested that the structure of a
work of art is in some sense an image of the cultural milieu which produces it:

the unity of a work of art, the basis of structural analysis, has not been produced solely by the unconditioned will of the artist, for the artist is only its efficient cause: it has form, and consequently a formal cause. 4

The formal cause is inevitably contained in the environment of the artist, which molds and stimulates his perceptions. Art is central in the world of cultural experience, standing between history, or the field of action, on the one hand, and science and philosophy, or the field of discursive reason, on the other; in this relation it is nourished and informed by both. 5 By the same token, literature is central in the world of art, bounded on one side by the rhythmic arts, music and the dance, which, by and large, move in time, and on the other by the graphic and plastic arts, painting, sculpture, and architecture, which, by and large, stand in space; once more literature is informed by each of its two neighbours, incorporating, at least by analogy, the principal characteristics of both: the aural quality, the rhythm, of one, and the pictorial

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5 For this and the following schema I am indebted chiefly to Frye, "Rhetorical Criticism: Theory of Genres," Anatomy of Criticism, Princeton: University Press, 1957, pp. 243-303, who is in turn indebted to both Aristotle and Sidney.
quality, the pattern, of the other.

In the world of literature there are basically three poetic genres: the dramatic, the narrative, and the lyric; and among these the lyric is central, capable, to repeat the foregoing scheme once more, of incorporating the principal characteristics of the other two. The drama is fundamentally matter for spectacle: one goes to "see" a play, and although one must listen to the words, and although a great deal of pleasure can be derived from just reading the words on the printed page, the emphasis even here is upon the visual rather than the aural image, and upon the "pattern" of events. The narrative genre is fundamentally matter for reading, and ideally, for reading aloud; there are certainly images which can be visualized, but the emphasis is upon the sound pattern (despite the misleading etymology of this word) and, even in the case of Spenser, whose narrative, like his lyric poetry, is distinctly pictorial, upon the audible features of the rhetoric. Very much to the point here, is Eliot's observation that Milton, "whose gifts were naturally aural," was actually aided by his blindness in that it made him concentrate on what he could do best; and that Shakespeare's visual imagination offers a striking contrast. 6 It is worth noting that

Homer, another of the world's great narrative poets, is reported also to have been blind.

It is very difficult for narrative poetry to become dramatic, at least in the strict pictorial sense in which this term is applied to the drama itself: the direct, assertive manner of address, and the consequent inevitable presence of the narrator obviates the sort of intimate identification with the characters which is essential. For similar reasons the drama has great difficulty becoming thoroughly narrative in technique without becoming either stilted or tiresome at the same time. Every dramatist who has grappled with the problems of exposition knows this. The dramatic tone is expected somehow to approximate or represent that of conversation, and the audience is usually addressed indirectly by the author, through his characters only, except in the case of the narrative prologue or epilogue, where the poet's representative speaks to the audience directly, in the poet's behalf. The lyric genre, however, is thoroughly protean. The author is present, as he would be in the narrative, but he "turns his back upon his listeners," 7 so to speak, and behaves as if he were a character in a play, either soliloquizing or pretending to be addressing some other character whom he imagines to be

7 Frye, Anatomy, p. 250. The whole notion that generic distinctions are to be made on the basis of "the radical of presentation" or mode of address, is due to Frye.
present. Thus the lyric becomes "the genre which most clearly shows the hypothetical core of literature": 8 it is able to combine the pictorial, even the spectacular features of the drama, with any number of the contrived rhetorical devices of the narrative—elaborate artificial rhyme-schemes, metrical patterns, and acoustic ornaments of all sorts—without offending the reader's sense of proportion. In this way the lyric is able to range across the full spectrum of poetic expression, from such forthright, explicit assertions as Surrey's "Description and Praise of his Love Geraldine," bordering on straight narrative, to the highly dramatic lyrics which are characteristic of Donne, according to the particular circumstance or whim of the poet.

Of all the great quantity and variety of lyric poetry written in the Renaissance, the sonnet is by far the most popular form. For this reason alone it is very useful in a study of the development of Renaissance style. It must be admitted from the outset that the restriction of such a study to the limited framework of the sonnet is bound to involve certain limitations: the brevity and stringency of the form itself prevents it from being entirely representative. But the sonnet has special technical merits that make it particularly useful as the basis for careful and

8 Frye, op. cit., p. 271.
minute stylistic comparison, merits which the drama and
the narrative do not have. In the first place, despite
the rigid requirements placed upon certain aspects of the
form, it is highly protean, as we have seen of the lyric
in general, in its ability to range from the narrative to
the dramatic at the will of the poet; thus the sonneteer
has an enormous wealth of literary device at his disposal
with which he can regulate the tone, texture, and general
organization of what he has to say, according to the par­
ticular demands imposed upon him by his temperament or his
environment. On the other hand, certain elements of the
sonnet form are mandatory and must remain constant, so that
they can be taken more or less for granted. One poem can
then be superimposed upon another, in a manner of speaking,
and the variable elements will be all the more apparent and
will all the more readily reveal the differences in crafts­
manship, principle, and attitude, with which such an inves­
tigation is chiefly concerned. Furthermore, the structural
details of the sonnet will always be prominent in the mind
of the poet because of the highly organized nature of the
poem: the sonnet is in some ways an extremely well-defined
technical exercise, and though it will transcend the bounds
of such an exercise in the hands of a good poet, it will
never transgress them; it will always exhibit a great deal
of attention to the purely structural elements.
The development of literary style is never an altogether conscious movement. The greater poets will always have new things to say and will always be searching for new methods of expression and striving to escape cliche; but in the margin of subjectivity which is common to all art, the poet's social and psychological circumstances are bound to constrain his expression to follow certain lines beyond his conscious control. In a good poem, however, the poet's intuition will organize all the different aspects of formal composition, objective and subjective, until they arrange themselves into an organically related image of a unified socio-aesthetic idea, the continually changing idea to which they contribute and from which they receive their impetus. And in a poem such as the sonnet, where the structure is such an important consideration, there will be a great deal of formal information to draw upon. The poet's individual conceptions of form will manifest themselves in every part of the poem, from the total shape to the smaller, less obtrusive patterns. They will appear in the poet's attitude toward his conventional materials, in his treatment of standard symbols and stock themes, in his tendency toward satire or parody, and so on. They will appear in all the more subjective areas of poetic composition—in the elusive, private symbols—which are so difficult to isolate and
identify. And they will appear in the acoustical decora-
tions of rhyme and metre, and in the quaint rhetorical
details for which the Renaissance grammarians had so many
interesting and erudite tags—epanorthosis, paronomasia,
antimetabole, and all the rest—details which sixteenth
century schoolboys, who "adored sweet Tully and were as
concerned about asyndeton and chiasmus as a modern school-
boy is about county cricketers," 9 were very much aware
of, but which in recent years have become arcane even to
the scholars themselves.

One cannot expect perfect chronological consistency
in the examination of any given literary figure:

It would...be foolish to suppose that all the art-
ists in any period use the same syntax. The syntax
of Spenser is not the syntax of Marlowe; the syntax
of Montaigne is not the syntax of Tasso. None of
these four writers inhabits the same world as the
others. So, also, an artist can modify his syntax
as he matures.... Michaelangelo, like Titian, runs
through a gamut of styles ranging from the syntax
of the high-renaissance and mannerism to baroque.
And Milton's course is the most devious of all, em-
erging from the distinctively renaissance form of
Comus, gathering violence in the mannerist tech-
niques of Lycidas, realizing its full baroque power
in Paradise Lost and Samson Agonistes, and then
modulating itself in the late-baroque order of Par-
adise Regained. 10

Poets with apparent mannerist tendencies, therefore, might

9 C. S. Lewis, English Literature in the Sixteenth Cen-

10 Sypher, Four Stages of Renaissance Style, p. 17.
be found to antedate other writers working in the renaissance mode; and mannerism might still be found flourishing in the heart of the baroque phase. Furthermore, certain writers might combine elements of both renaissance and mannerist or mannerist and baroque styles at once. It will therefore be necessary, lacking the guidance of a thoroughly organized critical system which has stood the test of time, to emphasize those aspects of the literature which appear particularly relevant to the argument and to subordinate those which do not. In a broader view, however, some general trend of formal development should become apparent. It should be profitable, then, to examine the structure (in the broadest and most inclusive sense of the word) of a representative selection of the poetry of the major Renaissance sonneteers, in the hope of revealing the differences in their various conceptions of art, and in the hope of discovering the ways in which these reflect the differences in world-view which lie behind the renaissance, mannerist, and baroque styles.
Wyatt and Surrey

The poetic style of the early Renaissance is in most respects rather confusing. By the year 1485 England had been in a state of political upheaval for the best part of a century, and what little poetry had been written had appeared sporadically and without continuity. The Battle of Bosworth Field brought stability to the country once more, and provided men with the leisure in which to read, sparking a new demand for poetic production. But the literary tradition had so been disrupted in the hands of Chaucer's successors that there were no definite literary models to turn towards. The early Tudor lyricists were all attempting to work their way towards a new poetic style, and their obvious model, even though he was primarily a narrative poet, would have been Chaucer; but the changes which had taken place in the rapidly developing language had rendered Chaucer's metrics largely unintelligible; and in addition to this difficulty, the few available manuscripts were in very poor condition. Chaucer's high reputation led some of the Tudors to imitate his poetry as well as they knew how, but his metrical fluidity appeared to them as a quaint sort of roughness which eventually proved aesthetically unsatisfying, with the result that the fine structural qualities
of Chaucer's poetry came to be neglected altogether, and he was read, if at all, for his subject matter, which was regarded as "instructive" despite the linguistic barrier. In the sixteenth century, therefore, the English poets began to turn towards Europe for their literary exemplars, and all that Chaucer had done for English metrics in the fourteenth century had to be repeated almost from the beginning.

The most valuable attempts in the early Renaissance to re-establish a metrical pattern for English poetry were made by Wyatt, and these were followed up shortly after by Surrey. But whatever Wyatt may have done in his other poetry, the metrical logic behind many of his sonnets has remained, after four hundred years, largely obscure:

the most persistent technical question about Wyatt has been the meaning and significance of the roughness of much of his versification. Was it deliberate, did Wyatt know what he was doing, and was he willing, like Donne, to run the risk of hanging for not keeping of accent? Or was the old barbarous method of Hawes and Barclay too strong for him? Or, since he was clearly a lover of Chaucer, was his ear ruined by the bad editions of Chaucer current in his time? 11

It seems clear that the metrical "roughness" of Wyatt's sonnets was deliberate: it is unlikely that the current linguistic changes should have seriously damaged his sense

of rhythm, or (alternatively) that they should have subse-
quently obscured the rhythmic pattern in only a portion of
his verse, leaving the remainder, and all that of Surrey,
substantially intact: Wyatt proved himself a more than able
metrist in much of his other poetry, a good deal of which
is as metrically fluid as anything Surrey ever set his hand
to. And it seems less than probable that his alleged
"awkwardness" is the result merely of the difficulties of
translating very carefully from the Italian, as Chambers
suggests, or that these poems are:

mere exercises in translation or adaptation, rough-
ly jotted down in whatever broken rhythms came readi-
est to hand, and intended perhaps for subsequent pol-
ishing at some time of leisure which never presented
itself. 13

Over twenty of Wyatt's thirty-two sonnets are translations
or in some measure adaptations of Petrarch, and Wyatt was
often (though by no means always) extremely conscientious
in reproducing the Italian to the letter; but in certain of
these translations, even the more accurate ones, the scan-
sion is quite regular, and in several others a few obvious
and simple emendations which would not have affected the

12 See, for example, Wyatt, "Satires," The Poems of Sir
Press, 1915, vol. I, p. 135-151. All these poems are writ-
ten in a careful, regular terza rima.

13 E. K. Chambers, Sir Thomas Wyatt and Some Collected
sense in the least would have cleared up all the difficulties in scansion completely. On the other hand, Wyatt wrote a number of sonnets which do not depend upon any sources, and the metrical irregularities are no less prominent here than elsewhere. The odd metrics are apparently conscious and deliberate experiments, and the poet seems to be drawing attention to this fact in the apology for his lute:

Blame not my lute for he must sound
Of thes and that as liketh me,
For lake of wit the lute is bownd
To geve suche tunes as plesithe me;
Tho my songes be sumwhat strange,
And spekes such wordes as toche thy change
Blame not my lute. 16

And the plaint to his mistress:

A brokin lute, untunid strings
With such a song maye well bere part,
That nother pleasith him that singes,
Nor theim that here, but her alone,
That with her herte wold strain my herte
To here it grone. 17

The important questions that remain, then, concern just what Wyatt was doing and why he did it. The answers

14 See, e.g., "Som fowles there be," Foxwell, Poems, p. 22.
15 See, e.g., "There was never ffile," ibid., p. 21.
16 "Blame Not My Lute," ibid., p. 303.
17 "Sins you will nedes that I shall sing," ibid., p. 306.
to these questions can not, at the moment, amount to anything more than sensible conjecture; but the most likely hypothesis is that Wyatt was exploring the possibilities of the sonnet form, a form which had never been used in English before 1527, when Wyatt himself discovered it on his embassy to Italy; and he seems to have been exploring in several directions.

It is possible, as Miss A. K. Foxwell has suggested, that some of Wyatt's sonnets are unsuccessful attempts to render the current misconceptions of the Chaucerian decasyllabic line into sixteenth century poetry, 18 and that these misconceptions were the result, first, of the badly edited texts, notably Richard Pynson's 1526 edition, which were all that were available in Tudor England, and secondly, of the changes which had taken place in fifteenth century pronunciation, stress, and inflection, changes which were not understood even in Dryden's time, nor indeed until long after that. But this is the least convincing argument: it is too often forgotten that Wyatt demonstrated an admirable sense of rhythm in much of his poetry, and would not have been altogether likely to produce an intentional metrical cacophony merely for the sake of antiquarian punctiliousness, no matter how far an adulation

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of Chaucer might have taken him. Moreover, Miss Foxwell's thesis explains only a very few of Wyatt's irregularities, which can be explained equally well as experiments with no specific inspiration; and the same objections apply to Dr. Lever's suggestion that Wyatt was trying to reproduce the Italian hendecasyllable in English. 19 Wyatt was a highly experimental poet, and in many of his sonnets he makes a definite breach with conventional rhythms, setting up new patterns of his own which are closer to a free tetrameter verse, combining "accentual repetition with variations in speed," 20 in a way which might possibly have been intended for singing or for musical accompaniment:

I abide and abide and better abide
And, after the olde proverbe, the happie daye:
And ever my ladye to me dothe saye,
"Let me alone and I will provyde.
I abide and abide and tarrye the tyde
And with abiding spede well ye maye:
Thus do I abide I wott allwaye,
Nother obtayning nor yet denied.
Aye me! this long abiding
Semithe to me as who sayethe
A prolonging of a dieng dethe,
Or a refusing of a desyred thing.
Moche ware it bettre for to be playne,
Then to saye abide and yet shall not obtayne. 21

Wyatt clearly has no intention here of writing in any of the established metrical patterns, Italian or English.

20 Frye, Anatomy, p. 279. 21 Foxwell, Poems, p. 34.
though most of his critics, especially the less flexible contingent of the eighteenth century, seem unable to conceive of any other possibility and berate him for a lack of "harmony of numbers." 22 For the foregoing poem, however, Northrop Frye claims that:

this lovely sonnet is intensely musical in its conception: there is the repeated clang of "abide" and the musical, though poetically very audacious, sequential repetition of the first line in the fifth. Then as hope follows expectancy, doubt hope, and despair doubt, the lively rhythm gradually slows down and collapses. 23

Wyatt's rhythmical constructions are evidently not conventional, but whatever the conscious rationale may have been, there appears to be, as Frye has suggested, a definite logical consistency behind them.

As a rule, Wyatt's sonnets are assymetrical, not only in the details of their scansion but in the broader features of prosody as well; the lines are generally of a markedly irregular length; and the delicate, carefully contrived balance which Petrarch maintains between his octave and sestet, and the sharp separation between quatrains and tercets, are often ignored by Wyatt, or perhaps even subverted. Wyatt keeps Petrarch's rhyme-scheme more


23 Frye, Anatomy, p. 279.
or less intact, but the light rhymes, 24 more frequent in Wyatt's sonnets than anywhere else in his poetry, tend to upset the symmetrical effect. And he invariably concludes his sonnets with a final couplet, making a special effort to keep it separate from the rest of the poem and to give it distinct, resounding rhymes; thus he upsets or alters the delicate Petrarchan balance even further, giving the sonnet a strong epigrammatic flavour and beginning a tradition which had an almost universal appeal for the aphoristic mentality of the later Renaissance sonneteers.

Wyatt also adapts Petrarch's subject matter to suit the vagaries of his own temperament. Like Petrarch, but not to the same extent as Petrarch, he is concerned to infuse the mediaeval tradition of courtly love with some of the overtones of Renaissance transcendentalism which was already developing in England. In his translation of Petrarch's "Amor, che nel pensier mio," he is (unlike Surrey, who translated the same poem) very careful to preserve the moral imperatives of "ragion, vergogna e reverenza" in his "reason, shame, and reverence." 25 But he also seems particularly interested in the Petrarchan habit of sustained,

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24 Rhymes like "coulor" and "therefore," "passion" and "season," "greved" and "weried," which depend upon rather remote phonetic similarities.

elaborate personification, which is typically mediaeval (Spenser's methods notwithstanding). Many of the poems he chooses to translate from Petrarch employ this device, and he uses it frequently in his original poems as well. And in addition, he invests the tone of his poetry with a certain degree of the gloom characteristic of the mediaeval frame of mind from The Wanderer on; he may translate Petrarch literally, word for word, but he usually transforms Petrarch's otherworldly idealism, perhaps by a simple shift in word order, to suggest a note of worldly despair; and in the poems of his own inspiration, Wyatt is frequently downright cynical:

Ffarewell Love and all thy lawes for ever,
Thy bayted hookes shall tangill me no more:

   . . . . . . . . . . .
With idill yeuth goo use thy propertie;
And thereon spend thy many britill dertes.
For hitherto though I have lost all my tyme,
Me lusteth no longer rotten boughes to olyme. 26

And whatever humanistic tendencies Wyatt may have, these do not extend to matters of vocabulary: he makes a deliberate effort to expunge Petrarch's classical references, seldom using any of his own, and he "anglicizes his terms of reference"; 27 in "My galy charged with forgetfulnes" Petrarch's allusion to Scylla and Charybdis is generalized

to "Rock and Rock"; and in "Ever myn happ" Petrarch's Tigris and Euphrates is replaced by the Thames.

Petrarch lived many years earlier than Wyatt, but in some ways he was more modern: he stood Janus-faced on the threshold of the Italian Renaissance, which antedated its English counterpart by well over a century. Wyatt looked in two directions also, but his imagination seems to have been captivated more by the mediaeval era. Fatalism was one of his most serious considerations, and words such as "fortune," "destyne," and "happ" appear liberally throughout his poetry; as J. W. Lever points out, "chance" was one of his favourite words and perhaps his presiding deity. 28

The mediaeval period was more tenacious in England than in Italy. The suggestions of gloom and cynicism which appear in Wyatt's sonnets are not merely personal: they are typical of the mediaeval temper. The metrical peculiarities are characteristic of the late mediaeval poetry of the fifteenth century; 29 and the technical assymetry is a common tendency in Gothic art—in the mediaeval drama, such as

28 Lever, The Elizabethan Love Sonnet, p. 35.

29 F. T. Prince—"The Sonnet from Wyatt to Shakespeare," Elizabethan Poetry, eds. J. R. Brown and B. Harris, London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1961, p. 13 ff.—suggests that Wyatt's metrical irregularities might be the result of his using the so-called "pausing" or "broken-backed" line. But this could be true only in a very general way: Wyatt's rhythmical effects are by and large free of the awkwardnesses common to Hoccleve, Lydgate, Skelton, et. al.
Everyman, in the typical romance, such as the Roman de la Rose or those of Chrétien de Troyes, and even in some of the paintings of Van Eyck and Giotto. The Renaissance conception of "the good life" with all its implications of order and harmony—as More sees it, for instance—had not yet been established very firmly in English thought. Renaissance symmetry and the classical traditions of form had not been founded outside the Continent; and though Wyatt was to go a lot further toward developing them in what is presumably his later poetry, the details were left for Surrey to experiment with, and for their successors, the Elizabethans, to polish and perfect.

When Wyatt introduced the sonnet form into English poetry, Surrey was only ten years old, and it was to be some time yet before he would begin writing poetry of any sort. When he did begin writing, possibly as early as 1532 when he spent over a year at the French court as a companion to Henry VIII's bastard son Richmond, Wyatt, according to Miss Foxwell's chronology, 30 had written the major portion of his poetry and almost all of his sonnets, and had produced, among the many metrical experiments for which he is better known, a number of urbane, polished sonnets which

are as metrically regular as any that Surrey ever wrote:

Dyvers do the use as I have hard and kno,
When that to chaunge ther ladies do beginne,
To mone and waile, and never for to lynne,
Hoping therby to pease ther painefull woo.
And some ther be, that when it chaunceth soo
That women chaunge, and hate wher love hath bene,
Thei call them fals, and think with wordes to wynne
The hartes of them which otherwhere doth goo.
But as for me, though that by chaunse indede
Change hath out-worne the favor that I had,
I will not wayle, lament, nor yet be sad,
Nor call her fals that falsley ded me fede;
But let it passe and think it is of kinde,
That often chaunge doeth plese a womans minde. 31

The octave and sestet are conventionally divided, with
the expected turn of thought at the beginning of the ses­
tet; the quatrains and couplet are carefully distinguished;
and most lines are end-stopped, the result being something
which surely Spenser would have been proud of, at least
 technically. Moreover, among Wyatt’s thirty-two sonnets is
one which employs the nearest approximation to the so-called
"English" rhyme-scheme, differing only in that there are
two rhymes rather than four in the octave (abababab cdcdcdce),
and two others which use the Italian rhyme-scheme but which
have four rhymes in the octave (abacadce defghi), signifi-
cantly relaxing the stringency of the form.

It is a simple step from these precedents to the stan-
dard English form which Surrey, except in a very few cases,

31 Foxwell, Poems, p. 35.
used consistently, and which his graceful, mellifluous, if somewhat superficial lyrics made so popular among the Elizabethan poets. And all the evidence, external and internal, indicates that Surrey learned most of what he knew from Wyatt. He began by imitating Wyatt's version of the English sonnet, using only two or sometimes three rhymes in the whole poem, before he went on to develop his own variation. Yet until very recently Surrey has been praised unanimously by the critics, and regarded as superior to Wyatt in every technical respect, if not conceptually as well. Even such a careful scholar as H. E. Rollins remarks of Surrey that:

his special importance comes from the improvements he made on the models set by Wyatt; for his admiration of his master...did not blind him to the elder writer's defects. It seems likely that Surrey consciously attempted to make his metrical accents fall in general upon words that were accented because of their importance, and upon the accented syllables of those words. He experimented, furthermore, with run-over lines, cesura-variations, and other prosodic matters in such a way as to make Wyatt seem antiquated by comparison and so acceptably as to affect the practice of subsequent poets. 32

Whatever truth there is in this statement, Surrey's importance is considerably exaggerated and Wyatt's is grossly underrated. All the specifically metrical achievements with which Surrey is generally credited, with the single

exception of the typical English sonnet rhyme-scheme, are accomplished with equal facility by Wyatt, and probably at an earlier date. And as I have indicated, the rhyme-scheme itself is clearly anticipated.

The quality most significant in bringing Surrey to literary fame is that he was a courtier both important and notorious, closely related by blood to the English royalty, and widely known among all levels of English society; he was beloved by the defenders of the Catholic faith and disparaged by the adherents of the Reformation as, in the words of John Barlowe, Dean of Westbury, "the most folish prowde boye that ys in England." He was therefore more likely than he would otherwise have been to be brought to the attention of the reading public. The quality in Surrey which enabled him to make a significant contribution to English literature was his typically "renaissance" concern with symmetry: he was an able rhymester and had a metronomic ear which, once tuned to perfection, he always heeded. Wyatt had shown him something he could do well and had presumably shown him how to do it; he had shown him how to write a highly symmetrical verse in a regular metre. Surrey himself had discovered the relatively simple English form of the sonnet, and the relative ease with which it could be composed, compared to the Italian form: the freer rhyme-scheme imposes less stringent restrictions upon the poet's verbal ingenuity. Surrey was
quick to sense its potential appeal, and he exploited it thoroughly, using it in nearly all his sonnets:

Set me wheras the sonne dothe perche the grene,
Or whear his beames may not dissolue the ise,
In temprat heat, wheare he is felt and sene;
With prowde people, in presence sad and wyse;
Set me in base, or yet in high degree;
In the long night, or in the shortyst day;
In clere weather, or whear mysts thickest be;
In lofte yowthe, or when my heares be grey;
Set me in earthe, in heauen, or yet in hell;
In hill, in dale, or in the towming floode;
Thrawl, or at large, alie whersoo I dwell;
Sike, or in healthe; in yll fame, or in good;
Yours will I be, and with that onely thought
Comfort my self when that my hape is nowght. 33

This sonnet is typical of Surrey, and not particularly striking in its effect; its lengthy catalogue of antitheses, a common device in Surrey's verse, becomes somewhat tiresome towards the end, and is rather an excuse than a logical consequence for the inevitable conclusion in the couplet; there is no thematic development; merely highly pleonastic juxtaposition. Nevertheless, as a sonnet, the poem has certain merits which would have particularly appealed to its intended audience: it is clearly and carefully divided, by means of the repetition of certain resonant phrases, into its three quatrains and a couplet; the lines are all end-stopped and the caesurae carefully

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placed in each line; and there is a strong emphasis upon metrical regularity, rhetorical parallelism, and general symmetry, which were to be developed *ad nauseam* later, by the Elizabethans. On occasion, Wyatt had done all these things better, but he had been too vigorous an experimenter to labour any single technique. Surrey used the devices exhaustively, and thus made their possibilities more apparent to the later "renaissance" writers (Spenser in particular) who were concerned.

After the death of Surrey in 1547 no significant number of new sonnets was published for a period of over forty years. Some dozen sonnets by Grimald and some "uncertayn authors" appeared with those of Wyatt and Surrey in Tottel's *Miscellany* in 1557; Gaseoigne incorporated a number into his *Sundrie Flowers* of 1572; and there were others of lesser significance; but by and large, although Wyatt and Surrey seem to have been popular among the reading public, their sonnets do not appear to have had any remarkable immediate effect upon the poets themselves. But when the sonnet did begin to flourish, in the 1590's, it immediately became, in the hands of Spenser, Sidney, Drayton, Daniel, and a great host of other poets, one of the most popular and successful lyric forms of the English High Renaissance.
The High Renaissance, the brief but extremely prolific interval in which the "renaissance" style is most fully realized and which extends in England from some time in the 1570's to about 1600, is characterized by a pervasive sense of order in all things. This is not merely the classical order of symmetry, balance, and harmony—though such considerations are relevant—but the subtler and perhaps, from a modern viewpoint, more specious complementary order, attempting to reconcile, or sometimes refusing to acknowledge, the many discordant elements in the vast universe of discourse. The intellect of the period was somehow able to utilize the best of all available worlds without being unduly disturbed by the inevitable contradictions. A pertinent illustration is to be found in the policy of the Anglican Church of the day toward the problem of religious liberty—the policy of comprehension:

the point is not to maintain rigidly the integrity of the particular confession no matter how many are alienated, but rather to comprise as many as possible in a single church by making minimal and ambiguous demands. Territorialism stresses truth at the expense of unity, and comprehension stresses unity at the expense if not of truth at least of clarity.34

Neo-Platonism and Aristotelianism, free will and Constellation, the new science and the whole scholastic heritage were able to exist side by side, and although there were steadily increasing tensions between them, with increasing difficulty these tensions were able to be suppressed:

a Protestant may be Thomistic, a humanist may be a Papist, a scientist may be a magician, a sceptic may be an astrologer.... [But] side by side with what certainly seems to be a quality of adventurousness and expansion there is a growing restriction and loss of liberty. 35

Such multiplicity is in part a natural consequence of the contradictions inherent in any human system, but here, it is abetted by the Renaissance capacity for objectification and impersonality. The philosophical idealism of the High Renaissance was more external and public than heartfelt and personal; it consisted in an elaborate, artificially ordered and essentially static social abstraction, inheriting a good deal from scholasticism; it was shared in principle, like modern democracy, by a whole culture; and it countenanced no efforts on the part of fastidious, Procrustean individual interests to disrupt the beauty of its order by expunging any of its apparently incompatible details. This ranging, multifarious, somewhat strained and dogmatic eclecticism was Spenser's inheritance, and he distilled its principles.

35 C. S. Lewis, English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, p. 63.
into poetry to create one of the more characteristic of High Renaissance compositions, the Amoretti.

The Amoretti was not Spenser's first venture in sonneteering. He began experimenting with the sonnet form very early in his career with some contributions to Van der Noodt's Theatre for Worldlings which consist in a number of twelve-and fourteen-line translations of Petrarch, some of which have Surrey's rhyme-scheme. By 1591, when the great rash of Elizabethan sonnet sequences had begun to appear, he had published four short sequences--Ruins of Rome, Visions of the Worlds Vanitie, Bellayes Visions, and Petrances Visions--developing both Surrey's rhyming pattern and his own characteristic scheme--ababcbccddeee. The Amoretti appeared early in 1595, and although it is not one of Spenser's most significant works, it surpasses anything, with the possible exception of Astrophel and Stella, that had been attempted thus far in the sonnet in England. Moreover, as a fairly mature work in Spenser's canon, it serves as a valuable guide to the aesthetic principles underlying not only Spenser's more important work but also a whole body of poetry written in the "renaissance" style. This is not to suggest that all the literature of the period was cast in the same mold, or that Spenser composed his verse by thumbing through a treatise on rhetoric. There is admittedly a widely supported misconception, even
among some of the more reputable critics, that Spenser's sonnets, like most of the love-lyrics written in the same period, are uninspired and unoriginal protestations of an insincere and therefore poetically invalid emotion; in the opinion of Patrick Cruttwell:

to look at one such sonnet sequence is to look at them all; there can never have been, before or since, such a standardized and derivative poetry. Drayton's *Ideas Mirrour* (to take just one more example) has all the elements which we have found in Spenser and could find in a hundred others. 36

But such biased attitudes describe, at best, only half the picture. Spenser's poetic style has its own subtle distinctiveness which would have been quite apparent to the readers of the time; it is important to remember that the educated taste of the period was radically different from ours, seeking its creative ingenuity in altogether different areas: Until the drama came into its own in the later 1590's, the age was closer to the eighteenth century in that its poetry leaned more towards the techniques of the narrative—rather static rhetorical subtleties to which we are no longer sufficiently acute, or in which we are no longer sufficiently interested, to properly appreciate. And above this special pleading, Spenser's poetry is of such fine quality as to distinguish a number of his sonnets as excellent poems in

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their own right, quite apart from any academic historical considerations. 37 But Cruttwell's attitude does point up one very important feature of the "renaissance" style: its public, impersonal, and statically conventional quality.

The Amoretti is a fabric made out of a great variety of conventional materials—Classical, Christian, Platonic, scholastic, courtly, and Petrarchan—woven into a largely conventional pattern, as immobile and eternal as a Cameo engraving or the frieze on a Grecian urn. Amor courtois, described by C. S. Lewis as a "feudalisation of love," 38 is particularly amenable to Spenser's ends because of the rigidity of all feudal arrangements. In the Amoretti, of course, it is modified by Petrarchan transcendental considerations, and here and there Spenser is more aggressive or more pedagogical than the typical lover; but generally, he presents the static relationship of all such poetry:

all Petrarchan poetry seems to share a fixed relation of lover to lady: the lady is always unobtainable—at least unobtained—the lover hopeless, or at least hapless.... Petrarchan love is the attitude of the lover in this static situation. 39

37 The best remembered ones are perhaps Amoretti, XXII, LXVII, LXVIII, LXXV, and LXXIX.


Spenser's mistress is seen as a vaguely Christianized feudal "Lord" or warrior, or perhaps as a pagan goddess; he, the lover, is a stereotyped "vassal" or a suppliant of one sort or another; and the language of courtship becomes the formal address of courtly service or the boisterous cant of chivalric warfare or the automatic response of religious worship:

This holy season fit to fast and pray,  
Men to devotion ought to be inclined:  
therefore, I likewise on so holy day,  
for my sweet Saint some service fit will find.  
Her temple fair is built within my mind,  
in which her glorious image placed is,  
on which my thoughts doth day and night attend  
like sacred priests that never think amiss.  
There I to her as the author of my bliss,  
will build an altar to appease her yre:  
and on the same my heart will sacrifice,  
burning in flames of pure and chaste desire:  
The which vouchsafe O goddess to accept,  
amongst thy dearest relics to be kept. 40

The Christian, courtly, and pagan ritual and the Platonic attitude are all linked together in the same poem, and one must admire the facility with which they are superimposed upon one another. But the implied relation between them is clearly specious. One is simply not expected to pry into the details too minutely. The poet's aesthetic principles, or his metaphysics, or both, do not require him to provide

a rigorous philosophical resolution of the inherent contradictions between the pagan and Christian elements in his poetry. 41 And his idealism does not require him to relate the poetic situation to any of the external problems of his courtship. The love affair is treated as a purely conceptual abstraction. Such treatments of love were bound to provoke Donne's caustic barb at all Elizabethan Petrarchans:

Love's not so pure, and abstract, as they use
To say, which have no Mistresse but their Muse. 42

But Spenser is expected to adopt this fashionable pose, a pose to which his audience was so fully accustomed as to be oblivious or completely indifferent to all its incongruities.

The basic material or "content" of the Amoretti, the unrefined prose statement, is important insofar as it reveals, in a general way, Spenser's sanctification of the Court of Love, and Renaissance Platonism, and whatever is

41 Spenser's neo-Platonic solution to Renaissance philosophical difficulties with the problems of sexual love, linking the pagan courtly microcosm to the sacred heavenly macrocosm--an important motif in the Amoretti--is most fully proliferated in his Fowre Hymnes. But the solution is a poetic synthesis and does not have to answer to the rigours of philosophical analysis.

to be associated with the doctrine that "all that's good, is beautifull and faire." But the overt statement of most of the individual poems is as static and conventional as the situations themselves, consisting in stock formulae and standard epithets such as "gentle," "sweet," "proud," and "base"; the adjective "faire," for instance, appears more than fifty times in the eighty-nine poems of the sequence. And yet Spenser's "aural gifts" enable him to turn all this standardized verbiage into a vehicle for some of the most individual poetic effects in the language:

the diffused lightness and sweetness, and yet the apparent vagueness and wastefulness that we find elsewhere in English perhaps only in Shelley.

For the most part, Spenser is not so much concerned with making a concise, well-considered statement about love as with laying out a simple fabric of convention in which to embroider a delicate rhetorical pattern.

Spenser's facility with his conventional materials is probably responsible for what are commonly and perhaps not entirely invidiously regarded by modern readers as the most serious defects of the Amoretti—diffuseness and lack of depth. But his facility with the language, his acute consciousness of the aural aspects of poetry, which is also

43 Spenser, "An Hymne to Heauenly Beautie," l. 133.
44 Prince, "The Sonnet from Wyatt to Shakespeare," p. 23.
neglected by modern readers, is probably the greatest single contributing factor to his importance in the hierarchy of English poets. Some of the most beautiful effects in the Amoretti are due to the verbal and rhythmic patterns of the skillfully deployed syntax. These particular structural qualities of Spenser's sonnets are not always superlative: Spenser is at his worst when he is intolerably pleonastic, like Surrey in his "Description of Spring," and hence fragmentary and disunified; he is most successful when he is able to adjust the metrical and verbal patterns of his poetry, the sound and the sense, to comply with the natural linked unity required by his particular form:

Is it her nature or is it her will, to be so cruel to an humbled foe? if nature, then she may it mend with skill, if will, then she at will may will forgoe. 46
But if her nature and her will be so, that she will plague the man that loves her most, and take delight t'encrease a wretches woe, then all her natures goodly gifts are lost.
And that same glorious beauties ydle boast, is but a bayt such wretches to beguile, as, being long in her loves tempest tost, she means at last to make her piteous spoyle.
O fairest fayre, let never it be named, that so faire beautie was so fowly shamed. 47

The poem has been made like a piece of tapestry. The play

45 see Amoretti, XXVI and LXIII.

46 We should not be too hasty to interpret this as a clue to the identity of the rival of Shakespeare's sequence.

47 Amoretti, XLI.
upon the words "will" and "nature" create a somewhat irregular pattern in the first part of the poem, tending to knit it firmly together; but the loose sentence structure and the careful parallelism of phrase with phrase, clause with clause, divides the poem into geometrically discrete units, tending to keep the parts separate. The rhetoric thus corresponds to the poem's natural shape, determined by the punctuating devices of rhyme and metre.

There is only a very small degree of metrical variation in the poem, and even this little is more than usual for Spenser. As Northrop Frye indicates, there are, in every poem, two distinct rhythms operating at once:

One is the recurring rhythm, which [is] a complex of accent, metre, and sound-pattern. The other is the semantic rhythm of sense, or what is usually felt to be the prose rhythm. 48

Spenser's metrical constructions tend to make the semantic rhythm coincide with the recurring rhythm (iambic pentameter), just as his rhetorical constructions tend to make the phrase length coincide with the line length (ten syllables); the result is that the units of verse are kept even more separate from one-another. 49 Almost all the lines in the

48 Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 263.

49 Milton's technique is at the opposite pole from that of Spenser: the two rhythms are quite independent, complementing rather than reinforcing one another, and fusing the expression into a continuous flow.
poem above, as in general with Spenser's poetry, are in a relatively strict iambic pentameter, in accord with the preconceived metre; and every line is end-stopped, supporting the tendency of rhymed decasyllabic lines to isolate themselves as self-contained units, and thus breaking the flow of the rhythm. The volta does not appear once, between a clearly defined octave and sestet, but three times, at the end of each quatrain. Every quatrain is a separate period, complying with the divisions suggested by the rhyming pattern; but the language and imagery have a well-defined logical sequence, moving from the particular to the general and imposing a tenuous unity on the three quatrains by correlating them without subordinating any one. Accordingly, there is a systematic progression in the interlacing rhyme-scheme. Just as there is a thematic link between one quatrain and the next, so there is a rhyming link: each quatrain has one rhyme in common with those adjacent to it. And the conclusion takes the form of a quasi-logical deduction. There is an abrupt shift in tone from the leisurely diffuseness of the body of the poem to the aphoristic neatness of the conclusion. Accordingly, there is a shift to a new set of rhymes, which exist in a different relation to

50 The rhyme-scheme of Spenser's sonnets is a simple extension of that of his characteristic nine-line stanza. The close connection between the two forms is pointed up by the fact that several of his sonnets end with an Alexandrine.
one another; and if the conclusion indulges a somewhat questionable logic, it is nevertheless declared valid by the implicit rational quality of the rhyming couplet: the repetition of the final rhyme elicits a sense of inevitability.

The language of the poem, like that of all Spenser's poetry, is clear and straightforward. It may be a little quaint, sometimes, because of its archaism or its lack of connectives and articles, but it is never difficult, and the perfect balance and symmetry of its rhetoric only add to its clarity. Spenser's task is made easier by the fact that although he is undoubtedly an extremely complicated person he has no complex psychology to express, unlike his successors, who were burdened with a new set of shattering problems; despite his claim to a troubled state of mind, he is, as a rule, detached and objective:

it is...probably true that the lack of tension in his verse reflects the lack of tension in his mind. His poetry does not express (though it often represents) discord and struggle: it expresses harmony. 51

The Amoretti has a binding kinship not only with Spenser's other works but with a large proportion of the poetry of the whole age. Its metrical techniques, its rhetorical

51 Lewis, Sixteenth Century English Literature, p. 238.
devices, and its conventional materials are to be found, in varying degrees, not only in *The Faerie Queene* and the *Epithalamion*, but (with all the necessary allowances for individual differences) in Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*, in Shakespeare's early poetry, in Marlowe's first plays, and in innumerable other works from the High Renaissance. The conservative aesthetic and social attitudes, the comprehensive, eclectic multiplicity, the impersonality, and the leisurely, untroubled development are characteristic of Spenser's era. Spenser and the other poets of the period were static artists, like the painters of the Quattrocento; their concern was with being, not becoming, and they seldom expressed the urgency of a poet who must deal directly rather than through established conventions with his own personal torments. The beautiful verbal patterns of the *Amoretti*, the order, the simplicity, the symmetry and perfect harmony of language and form, are but one aspect of the pervasive sense of order which is the hallmark of the High Renaissance.
Sidney

The Amoretti appeared early in 1595, and the greater part of it had presumably been composed during the earlier 1590's. 52 Astrophel and Stella first appeared in an unauthorized edition in 1591, five years after Sidney's death, and the whole of it, as far as we know, had been composed during the early 1580's. 53 The chronological relation between the two works seems to present an immediate contradiction: Sidney begins, in the very first poems of his sequence, to protest vigorously against that sort of poetry which Spenser is still labouring to perfect:

Let Dainty wittes cry, on the Sisters nine,
That bravely maskt, their fancies may be tolde:
Or Piders Apes flaunt in their phrases fine,
Enameling their pride with flowers of golde.
Or els let them in stately glorie shine,
Ennobling new found tropes, with problemes old:
Or with strange similes, inricht each line,
Of hearbes or beastes, which Inde or Affricke hold.
For me in sooth, no Muse but one I know,
Phrases and Problemes from my reach doe growe,
And strange things cost too deere for my poore sprites,
How then? even thus, in Stellas face I reede,
What love and beauty be, then all my deede
But copying is, what in her nature writes. 54

52 A clue to dating is given in Amoretti, LX, 4-8.
53 See Lever, p. 51.
The poetic tradition of the English High Renaissance was already well developed, but it had yet to culminate, in the mature work of its greatest exponent, Spenser, in the mid 1590's; and yet fifteen years before this poetry had even been published, its principles were being attacked by a young man who had so far acquired no poetic reputation to speak of, except perhaps among interested members of Elizabeth's court. The problem is partly answered by the consideration that Sidney was, if not much younger in years than Spenser, a good deal younger and more progressive in spirit: he was a man of the world and a man of action, for whom poetry was, at most, a consuming avocation. And his worldly responsibilities at court and in the field had perhaps made him more aware than Spenser of new worldly realities— the rapidly mounting social and political tensions which Elizabeth was making every effort to suppress, and with some success, but which nevertheless seem to be reflected in Sidney's objection to the High Renaissance aesthetic. On the other hand, for all his protesting, Sidney is unable, or not sufficiently concerned, to revise the High Renaissance mode of writing in any great measure, at least in the major portion of his poetry. Except for a very few instances, and these few largely toward the end of Astrophel and Stella (notably in sonnet LXXIV), Sidney continues to use the "dictionary
method" to sing "Petrarch's long deceased woes/ With new
borne sighes," 55 making no really significant departure
from the tradition in which Spenser was to write.

It is suggested in the title of *Astrophel and Stella*
that, regardless of the historical basis of certain events
to which Sidney alludes, the subject of his poetry will be
treated in a manner no less conventionally ideal than that
of Daniel's *Delia* (anagrammatizing the word "ideal"), Dray­
ton's *Ideas Mirror* (ringing up Platonic suggestions), and
a host of other sonnet-sequences which were published at
about the same time. Sidney's object, like Spenser's, was
not to represent "Nature," but to improve upon it by giving
it a conventionally ordered, "celestial" pattern:

Nature can never set forth the earth in so rich
Tapistry as diverse Poets have done, neither with
so pleasant rivers, fruitfull trees, sweet smel­
ing flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too
much loved earth more lovely: her world is brasen,
the Poets only deliver a golden. 56

Penelope Devereux-Rich was undoubtedly a very real person­
ality in Sidney's life, and quite possibly a very unusual
and fascinating one at that, but throughout most of *Astro­
phel and Stella* she is treated in the same artificial man­
ner in which Spenser presents Elizabeth Boyle, as a typed

figure in the centre of an elaborately ordered game, with all the conventional trappings of *amor courtois*:

*Stella, whence doth these newe assaults arise,*  
*A conquered, yeelding, ransackt hart to win?*  
*Whereto long since, through my long battred eyes,*  
*Whole Armies of thy beauties entred in,*  
*And there long since, Love thy Lievetenant lyes,*  
*My forces raz'd, thy banners rais'd within;*  
*Of conquest what doe these effects suffise,*  
*But wilt new warre uppon thine owne begin.* 57

At times, especially in his mistress' absence, Sidney is more realistic than Spenser:

*Out Traytour absence dar'st thou counsell mee*  
*From my deare Conqueror to runne awaie,*  
*Because in brave arraye here marcheth shee*  
*That to entice mee profers present paye.*  
*Is Faith so weake, or is such force in thee?*  
*When Sunne is hid, can Starres such beames displaie?*  
*Cannot Heavens foode once felt keepe stomachs free*  
*From base desire on earthly cates to praiye?* 58

Sidney's acceptance of the mere possibility of infidelity to his mistress is unPetrarchan to say the least. His conception of love is generally less transcendental than that of Spenser: it is, after all, more strictly in the courtly tradition, in that it has been adulterous from the beginning; and its object in sexual consummation is more apparent. But the figurative situations (such as the martial scenes above) which Sidney uses to represent it, and the

57 *Astrophel and Stella*, XXXVI.

58 *Astrophel and Stella*, LXXXVIII.
rhetorical traditions in which it is couched, though he takes pains to mock them from time to time, are hardly less conventional or standardized.

And Sidney's thoroughgoing eclecticism is a perfect parallel of Spenser's:

It is most true, what wee call Cupids dart
An Image is, which for our selves we carve:
And fooles adore, in Temple of our hart,
Till that good God make church and Church-men starve.
It is most true, that eyes are bound to serve
The inward part: and that the heavenly part
Ought to be King, from whose rules who doth swerve,
Rebels to nature, strive for their owne smart.
True that true beautie vertue is indeede,
Wherof this beautie can but be a shade:
Which Elements with mortall mixture breede,
True that on earth we are but Pilgrimes made.
And should in soule, up to our Country move:
True and most true, that I must Stella love. 59

In this single sonnet, one which bears a striking similarity to Spenser's "This holy season, fit to fast and pray," Sidney brings together three fundamentally incompatible attitudes toward love: the courtly, the Christian, and the neo-Platonic. In the first quatrain, the cult of courtly love and its presiding deity are apparently dismissed as a fool's fantasy, although the ambiguity of the fourth line, "Till that good God make church and Church-men starve," makes it difficult to determine how much credence Sidney is prepared to allow the god Cupid, or Amor, and hard to

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59 Astrophel and Stella, V.
decide whether or not he might be using the terms "church" and "Church-men" in the figurative way in which Romeo uses "pilgrim" and "palmer" to indicate his "mannerly devotion" to that "holy shrine," Juliet's hand. In the next quatrain it is made clear that those who neglect the spiritual aspect of love "strive for their owne smart," and are presumably treading the primrose path to damnation. But then Sidney deserts the problems of incongruity between courtly and Christian, and in the sestet he introduces a third incompatible, the notion of the Platonic "form" and the Platonic ladder, which is not consonant with the metaphysical consideration of damnation: the Platonic universe is basically monistic, containing only "the Good," in the world of forms, and the less good elsewhere; the Christian universe, especially in the Protestant view, is basically dualistic, containing both good and a positive, volitive evil force. As for the Platonic ladder, it has been fundamentally heretical ever since the Pelagian dispute to assume that man is perfectable in his earthly life, or that he can ascend above his middle state toward the condition of the angels: one is redeemed from Hell ultimately by God's grace alone. And if the poem is to be taken as a rejection of courtly love, how is the reader to construe the ambiguous comment

in the last line of the poem, which can easily be read as an admission of helplessness and an endorsement of worldly (and in this case adulterous) sexual love. The philosophical contradictions in *Astrophel and Stella* are quite apparent, at least to the punctilious modern mind, but Sidney's conceptions of unity, like Spenser's, and like those of the Anglican Church, do not require him to make any serious attempt to resolve them.

If Sidney departs from the High Renaissance tradition in any significant way, the departure is probably most apparent in his prosody. He begins writing sonnets as Wyatt does, with a series of prosodic experiments, and he tests a number of different rhyme-schemes and metrical patterns; but, like Wyatt, he never seems quite satisfied with any one form. The first poem is in Alexandrines, and though Sidney soon becomes aware of the relative ineffectiveness of this metre, he continues to use it here and there for the rest of the sequence, the last instance being in sonnet CII. In the first sonnet, Sidney adopts Wyatt's version of the English rhyme-scheme (ababab abcdde); and in the second, he tries one of the Petrarchan forms (abbaab cdecde); but he continues to experiment throughout the ensuing twenty or thirty sonnets. He produces two new versions of the octave (ababbaba and abbbabaab) in the sixth and thirteenth sonnets respectively, never using more than
two rhymes except in the fourth (abacaca); and he tries several variations in the sestet (cddcdd; cdcdee; cddcee; and cdeef) seldom using more than three rhymes. In the long run he goes back to the patterns he started with in the first two sonnets, using the first relatively infrequently and concentrating on the second. Thus he establishes a return to Petrarch, or quite possibly to Wyatt, from whom he may have learned a good deal not only about prosody but about poetry in general, and especially about translating from Petrarch.

Sidney's decision to write mainly in his somewhat unusual version of the Italian form has provoked a note of vigorous disapproval from at least one reputable modern critic:

he deserves all honour for...appreciation of the value of formal strictness. However, his practical application shows some lack of perception. Thus for the sestet he almost always uses the pattern cdcdee. This is a step away from Wyatt's cddcee, and a step in the wrong direction. One of the chief rules of the Italian form is that the sestet is composed of two tercets, and that it must not therefore be allowed to turn into a quatrain followed by a couplet. If it does, the subtle symmetry (in inequality) of two fours followed by two threes, is lost, and the unity of the whole is affected. 61

The relevance of such criticism, which is rather dogmatically theoretical, may be affected by consideration of the

cliché that the rules don't make the poetry. The decree that the subtle symmetry (in inequality) of two quatrains followed by two tercets somehow displays a higher order of virtue than the subtle symmetry (in inequality) of three quatrains followed by a couplet is Delphic in its mystery. Furthermore, Sidney generally marks the end of the first tercet with a substantial pause anyway, and thus divides the sestet in two ways at once, achieving something of the effect of Spenser's interlacing rhyme-scheme, strengthening the internal bonds, and generating the linked unity which was Spenser's constant goal.

As far as the other prosodic matters are concerned, Sidney is more erratic still. The general rule is that he divides his sonnets into an octave and a sestet, and the sestet less distinctly into two tercets; but the major division may come at the end of the seventh line, as it does in the eighth sonnet, or at the end of the sixth, as it does in the seventeenth. He generally, but not always, divides the octave into quatrains, and as I have said, he generally divides the sestet into tercets, but he frequently isolates the final couplet, as most of his contemporaries do. As a rule, he end-stops most lines; and the caesurae are more commonly near the middle of the line; but in these latter features of prosody Sidney departs more than anywhere else from conventional practise.
Scattered here and there are the irregular cadences of conversation:

I never dranke of Aganippe well,
Nor never did in shade of Tempe sit:
And Muses scorne with vulgar braines to dwell,
Poore Lay-man I, for sacred rites unfit.

Some doe I heare of Poets fury tell,
But God wot, wot not what they meane by it:
And this I sweare by blackest brooke of hell,
I am no Pickepurse of an others wit.

How fals it than, that with so smooth an ease
My thoughts I speake? And what I speake I showe
In verse; and that my verse best wittes doth please,
Guesse we the cause. What is it this? fie no.
Or so? much lesse. How then? sure thus it is;
My lips are sure inspir'd with Stellas kisse. 62

Such instances are rare, but they deserve all the credit for originality which Sidney humorously bestows upon himself. Where he formerly repudiated the Elizabethan artificiality scornfully, while continuing to use it as the basis of his poetry, here he feigns an inability to use it at all, in a parody of himself:

the vehement denial of literary pretension in a poem so thoroughly literary is a joke in which the poet-lover, assuming the pose of ingenuousness and simplicity he finds in his models, makes fun of it by protesting too much; he insists on his homeliness ("Poore Layman I"), is clumsy in a studied and witty way ("God wot, wot not what they meane by it"), swears his grim alliterative oath, and ends with a rhetorical guessing game. Astrophel is distinguishing himself from the conventional manner of his models...by means of parody. 63

62 Astrophel and Stella, LXXIV.

In theme, tone, and rhythm, the techniques of the drama are beginning to leak into lyric poetry, and the static "renaissance" symmetry is beginning to break down.

But Sidney's greatest importance is for the poetry he wrote within the High Renaissance tradition; and his success in handling the renaissance conventions is probably responsible for the immediate success and powerful influence of *Astrophel and Stella*. In what is believed to be his last sonnet, Sidney repudiates the Love God once more; in fact he repudiates earthly love altogether, leaving one to wonder what sort of poetry he might have written if he had lived through Zutphen. But the repudiation still has a conventional ring:

Leave me Æ Love, which reachest but to dust,
And thou my mind aspire to higher things:
Grow rich in that which never taketh rust:
Whatever fades but fading pleasure brings.

Draw in thy beames, and humble all thy might,
To that sweet yoke, where lasting freedoms be:
Which breakes the clowdes and opens forth the light.
That doth both shine and give us light to see.

O take fast hold, let that light be thy guide,
In this small course which birth drawes out to death,
And thinke how evill becommeth him to slide,
Who seeketh heav'n, and comes of heav'ny breath.
Then farewell world, thy uttermost I see,
Eternall Love maintaine thy life in me.

*Splendidis longum valedico nugis.* 64

64 Certaine Sonnets, Feuillerat, p. 322.
By the time Shakespeare's Sonnets came to press in 1609 the great flood of sonnet-sequences which had begun with Astrophel and Stella in 1591 had pretty well exhausted its resources. Some of its better known products had been Daniel's Delia and Constable's Diana in 1592, Barnes' Parthenophili, Giles Fletcher's Licia, and Watson's Tears of Fancy in 1593, Percy's Sonnets to Coelia and Drayton's Ideas Mirror in 1594, Barnes' Spiritual Sonnets, Barnfield's Cynthia, and of course Spenser's Amoretti in 1595, Lynche's Diella in 1596, and Tofte's Laure in 1597. There were a number of other sequences, but the great majority were published before the turn of the century, by which time the public appetite for such verse seems to have been sated. In most of this poetry there is no remarkable departure from the pattern set by Astrophel and Stella: as we have seen, Sidney's sonnets are full of protest against standardization; less emphatically, certain of the other sonneteers such as Daniel and Drayton raised similar objections. 65 It had been clear to Sidney almost as soon as he started writing sonnets that there was something lacking, something rather lifeless in the conventions in which he

65 See Daniel, Delia, XLVI; Drayton, Poems (1599), XXXI.
and his contemporaries felt constrained to write, something which he felt a constant need to excuse or ridicule. He made the best of the High Renaissance conventions, contributing a good deal to their vigour with his mild mockery; and his less capable contemporaries followed suit, as far as they were able, trying desperately to refashion the old material into something new. But with the exception of Spenser, whose rhetorical abilities enabled him to work most productively with the Elizabethan stock-in-trade, no poet was able to match the originality of Sidney's achievements consistently; and by the end of the century the sonnet's popularity had suffered a marked decline.

In Astrophel and Stella the interplay of chivalric attitudes and Elizabethan response had reached its maximum tension. A peculiar set of circumstances, a particular cast of mind, had sustained this tension throughout Sidney's sequence; but the achievement could neither be repeated nor surpassed. Hence, while more flexible mediums developed new modes of expression, the sonnet, which seemed to offer so much, failed by and large in performance. Convention no longer evoked response, and subject-matter sundered itself from form. Only through a major creative effort, comparable to that of Petrarch himself in his revitalization of the Troubadour inheritance, would the sonnet once more answer fully to the needs of the age. 66

The major creative effort, which had a limited influence compared to that of Petrarch, was made by Shakespeare.

The sonnets of Shakespeare number well over a hundred

66 Lever, pp. 143-144.
and sixty, including two poems of disputed authorship at the end of the 1609 edition, and a number of others scattered here and there throughout the plays, especially in *Love's Labour's Lost*, where some seven sonnets are woven into the dramatic fabric. The problem of dating these poems with any accuracy, even most of those in the plays, permits no definite conclusion. But it is widely agreed among scholars and critics, from the indications offered by a large number of parallels with the drama and on the basis of internal textual and stylistic evidence, that the *Sonnets* were probably begun about 1592, when the sonnet had just attained its immense popularity in England, and when Shakespeare was still working to sharpen his "pupill pen" and enrich his "barren rime." The terminal date, however, is a less definite matter. Tucker Brooke sets 1595 or perhaps 1596 as the outside limit:

> it is obvious...that the time for an intelligent man to write sonnets was before 1596, and not after that year, for by 1596 the Elizabethan sonnet was evidently a drug on the market and continued to be written only by a few Bourbons like Drayton and Drummond. 68

But such dogma is not easy to support. The truth of the


matter is that no one is sure. Shakespeare was undoubtedly a highly unusual personality, and although he may have followed the demands of popular taste as he generally did in his dramatic works, there is no good reason to assume this out of hand. The Sonnets were published during the poet's lifetime only in Thomas Thorpe's assumedly pirated edition, and they were by no means necessarily intended for a popular audience. Moreover, sonnets were still being written and published in some quantity as late as the turn of the century; and Shakespeare himself continued to write them into the plays: in Henry V, which was written in 1599, the epilogue takes the form of a sonnet; and in All's Well That Ends Well, which is not believed to have been written until after 1601, Lady Helena writes a sonnet-epistle in the same vein as those in Love's Labour's Lost. One can only conjecture from evidence of style, and such evidence does not prohibit the possibility of some of the Sonnets being written late in the first decade of the seventeenth century.

Shakespeare's contributions to the development and revitalization of the sonnet were not accomplished in a day. There is more than a little in the Sonnets, particularly in the earlier portion of the sequence which is generally agreed to be of relatively early composition, that is almost entirely conventional and belongs, as one
might naturally expect, with the standard sonneteering practice of Shakespeare's contemporaries in the earlier 1590's. Shakespeare learned his lyric techniques in the same way that he learned to write drama, by imitation as well as by experiment:

Shall I compare thee to a Summers day?
Thou art more louely and more temperate:
Rough windes do shake the darling buds of Maie,
And Sommers lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heauen shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd,
And euery faire from faire some-time declines,
By chance, or natures changing course vntrim'd:
But thy eternall Sommer shall not fade,
Nor loose possession of that faire thou ow'est,
Nor shall death brag thou wandr'st in his shade,
When in eternall lines to time thou grow'st,
So long as men can breath or eyes can see,
So long liues this, and this giues life to thee. 69

The structure of the poem—the rhyme-scheme, the regular heroic metrical pattern, the positioning of the caesurae, the self-contained, carefully end-stopped lines, the division into octave and sestet, quatrains and couplet, the measured, geometrically patterned development of thought, and the general overall symmetry of construction—is typical of thousands of sonnets published in the 1590's; the problem of mutability is stock material toward the end of the century; and the treatment of this material, the comparison of the lover's character and appearance with the

69 Sonnets, XVIII.
beauties of nature, and the somewhat facile assurance of his immortality through poetry, is commonplace among sonneteers since the days of Petrarch. In fact, in the first part of the sequence Shakespeare owes a good deal to Petrarchanism: the studied humility, the bondage of the poet to his subject, and the terms in which this relationship is expressed, are necessary observances of courtly love:

Lord of my loue, to whome in vassalage
Thy merrit hath my dutie strongly knit,
To thee I send this written ambaassage,
To witnesse duty, not to shew my wit. 70

And the obscurity of the identity of this "Lord" is quite consistent with the Petrarchan lover's obligation to keep the name of his loved one secret. The apellation "Lord," incidentally, does not in itself even reveal the gender of Shakespeare's companion: the Petrarchan poets give their mistresses the same title.

To a certain extent, even Shakespeare's rhetoric, which is on the whole chiefly responsible for the imaginative power of these early sonnets, bears the marked imprint of conventionality. In "Shall I compare thee to a Summers day," the word play upon "faire" is reminiscent of Spenser, and such phrases as "the eye of heauen" are

70 Sonnets, XXVI.
about as hackneyed as they come. And Shakespeare is rather fond of a favourite rhetorical device of the High Renaissance—paronomasia, or, as E. K. would say, "a playing with the word":

Take all my loues, my loue, yea, take them all,
What hast thou then more then thou hadst before?
No loue, my loue, that thou maist true loue call;
All mine was thine, before thou hadst this more:
Then, if for my loue, thou my loue reciuest,
I cannot blame thee, for my loue thou vsest." 71

To a certain extent Shakespeare, like Spenser, is laying out a sort of rhetorical tapestry, which is highly ornamented and attractive in its embellishments, but which, after the fashion of tapestry (or of such renaissance painters as Botticelli), has all its substance in the picture plane and lacks the convincing depth of perspective to which the modern mind has become accustomed.

A second look at the sequence, however, even at the early portion, reveals certain qualities that are atypical. In the first place, although the poet's attitude is, generally speaking, that of the Petrarchan lover, and although much of the terminology comes from the language of courtly love, the object of the poet's admiration is, during the greater part of the sequence, a young man; and though certain of the European sonneteers had adopted such a pose in

individual, isolated poems, \(^{72}\) none had sustained it at any considerable length. Thus the whole framework is set a little askew, given a different, rather odd perspective, and Shakespeare's typically hyperbolic outbursts are cast in a somewhat unusual light. Secondly, unlike nearly all other English sonneteers before him, Shakespeare owes almost nothing, at least directly, to European sources:

except for the last two sonnets, whose authenticity has been doubted and which are generally regarded as adaptations of a theme ultimately derived from the Greek Anthology, no Shakespearean sonnet seems wholly modelled on foreign originals. \(^{73}\)

In fact, as Janet Scott demonstrates in her well known study of the Elizabethan sonnet, though Shakespeare does appear to draw some of his imagery and even his phraseology from his English predecessors, particularly from Daniel, most attempts to establish definite and specific foreign sources for any of the material in the Sonnets (in Italy or France, for instance, where the English sonneteers had traditionally found their favourite models) are highly tenuous at best. \(^{74}\) Concomitant with this


\(^{74}\) Scott, p. 234 ff.
characteristic of Shakespearean sonneteering techniques in his tendency to rely more upon his own resources for rhetoric, imagery, and symbolism, as well as for the more general features of subject matter, and alongside the conventional elements of his expression, to represent his impressions and emotions in a more realistic light, rather than to employ the quasi-allegorical methods of poets like Sidney and Spenser. He protests, like Sidney, against Renaissance artificiality:

So is it not with me as with that Muse, Stird by a painted beauty to his verse, Who heaven it selfe for ornament doth vse, And euery faire with his faire doth reherse, Making a coopelement of proud compare With Sunne and Moone, with earth and seas rich gems: With Aprills first borne flowers and all things rare, That heavenys ayre in this huge rondure hems, O let me true in love but truly write, And then beleeeue me, my loue is as faire, As any mothers childe, though not so bright As those gould candells fixt in heavenys ayer: Let them say more that like of heare-say well, I will not prayse, that purpose not to sell. 75

And as his poetic techniques develop, so does his realism become more and more pronounced, until ultimately, the old Elizabethan conventions are so reworked, reapplied, or flatly rejected (as in the well-known parody which is the last word on Petrarchanism 76), that a new kind of sonnet begins to take shape.

75 Sonnets, XXI. 76 Sonnets, CXXX.
As we move toward the latter end of Shakespeare's sequence new and unusual qualities begin to emerge, and those peculiarities which were beneath the surface in the early poems become prominent. The structural modifications are perhaps not so astounding, although here and there there are certainly some striking effects: one sonnet has fifteen lines; one is not a sonnet at all and has only twelve lines, consisting in six couplets; and one is written in tetrameters; 77 there is a greater tendency toward enjambment and a higher frequency of "misplaced" caesurae; the quatrains do not always remain distinct, and the volta between octave and sestet is sometimes shifted around; the rhythm in general becomes less regular:

Th'expence of Spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action, and till action, lust
Is periurd, murdrous, bloudy full of blame,
Sauage, extreame, rude, cruell, not to trust,
Injoyed no sooner but dispised straight,
Past reason hunted, and no sooner had
Past reason hated as a swallowed bayt,
On purpose layd to make the taker mad.
Made in pursuit and in possession so,
Had, hauing, and in quest, to haué extreame,
A blisse in prooфе and proud a very wo,
Before a joy proposed behind a dreame,
All this the world well knowes yet none knowes well,
To shun the heauen that leads men to this hell. 78

Such rhythmical fitfulness is surprising enough, not in its

77 Sonnets, XCIX, CXLV, and CXXVI. 78 Sonnets, CXXIX.
technicalities alone, but in its particular appropriateness for the subject matter, and in the jarring response it is thus able to evoke. In other areas, however, the effects are even more startling. As we can see from the foregoing sonnet, Shakespeare moves away from the narrative techniques he has been pursuing in *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, and adopts a dramatic stance, giving his poetry a much more personal quality and the appearance of a greater immediacy. Sexual matters are treated in much more explicit and apparently disturbing terms; throughout the latter part of the *Sonnets*, beginning with the "Dark Lady" sequence, sex becomes so prominent a theme and is approached with such intent scrutiny and so destructively that it borders upon erotic obsession, psychologically akin to the morbid obsession which characterizes a large portion of Donne's religious verse. The last vestige of courtly idealism is utterly denied, and Petrarchanism is turned inside out:

Who taught thee how to make me loue thee more,  
The more I hear and see lust cause of hate,  
Oh though I loue what others doe abhor,  
With others thou shouldst not abhor my state.  
If thy vnworthinesse raisd loue in me  
More worthy I to be belou'd of thee.  

As this part of the sequence draws toward its close, the

79 *Sonnets*, CL.
poetry draws further and further away from the sweetness and light of the High Renaissance tradition from which it originally sprang: the ambiguities mount one upon another; puns become innumerable; paradox, usually the deliberately sophisticated variety which so appealed to Donne's perverse sense of humour, replaces the bland renaissance epigram; the element of obscenity becomes prominent; and all the psychic irregularities (apparently stimulated by potent guilt complex 80) tend to become shrouded in a rhetorical obscurity:

Who euer hath her wish, thou hast thy Will, And Will to boote, and Will in ouer-plus, More then enough am I that vexe thee still, To thy sweete will making addition thus. Wilt thou whose will is large and spatious, Not once vouchsafe to hide my will in thine? Shall will in others seem right gracious, And in my will no faire acceptance shine? The sea all water, yet receiues raine still, And in aboundance addeth to his store; So thou beeing rich in Will adde to thy Will One will of mine to make thy large Will more. Let no vnkind, no faire beseechers kill, Think all in one, and me in that one Will. 81

Superficially, the poem is typical of the High Renaissance tradition, but beneath the surface there is a new consciousness of the meaning rather than the mere sound of words, and a new consciousness of the absurdities which can arise from ambiguity. The typical renaissance fascination with word

80 See Sonnets, LXXI, LXXII. 81 Sonnets, CXXXV.
play (paronomasia) is still apparent, as it was in Spenser, 82 but the facile delicacy of Spenser's language has been inverted: the puns on "Will" are clearly obscene, at least on one level. The petition for grace, or pitee, is developed at length, as usual, and in its glib use of analogy it is identical in form to the typical Elizabethan argument used, for example, by Spenser; 83 but such far-fetched inducements as "The sea all water, yet receiveth rain still" are not only preposterous but downright insulting (and of course highly amusing). The High Renaissance tradition has been turned upside down; all the standard elements are there, but they have been used chiefly to demonstrate their own absurdities and, ironically, to defeat their own ends. Shakespeare has looked upon truth "askance and strangely," "gor'd his own thoughts," "sold cheap what is most dear," 84 and heralded in the age of mannerism which is to be presided over by Donne.

82 See Amoretti, XLI, pp. 37-38 preceding.
83 See, e.g., Amoretti, XX, 5 ff. 84 Sonnets, CIX.
Donne

The manifold tensions beneath the ordered world of the High Renaissance could not be suppressed forever: all the stabilizing forces, the philosophical and social certainties, gradually became subject to change and disruption. In Spenser himself the old attitudes begin to wear thin toward the end:

When I bethinke me on that speech whyleare,
Of Mutability, and well it way:
Me seemes, that though she all vnworthy were
Of the Heav'ns Rule; yet very sooth to say,
In all things else she bears the greatest sway. 85

In Sidney the problem is even more apparent; and by the time Shakespeare was writing his later sonnets the renaissance poetic had run its course. The world-shaking upheavals and discoveries of the sixteenth century were finally beginning to take effect in life and thought generally, and to be reflected in the consequent form and style of the arts of the period. The delicate artificiality of Petrarchism had grown tiresome, and the quality of its literary product had degenerated to that of mere exercise, expressing sentiments which had little or no rapport with the new ideas which were beginning to dominate the time. All the

85 Mutability Cantos, VIII, 1.
conventions of courtly love had once been beautifully or-dered and seductively explicit, but they had long outlived their original purpose; the whole status of the individual had altered radically, and it could no longer be adequately represented in such an artificially ordered pattern as the Elizabethan poets would have had it. The structure of the universe itself had been disrupted: Ficino and the great humanists of the sixteenth century who followed him, Copernicus and the great astronomers, had given the macrocosm a paradoxical new order, the former pushing man towards its centre and the latter moving the earth away. And Calvin had attacked the core of mediaeval religion, denying free will and insisting on predestination, and yet, by means of another paradox, shifting the responsibility of interpreting God's will from an infallible church to the fallible rational faculty of the individual. The force of these ideas was cumulative, and after a temporary calm, ancient and comfortable social, ethical, and religious principles were undermined in their basic foundations, and a feeling of profound doubt oppressed every area of man's existence.

The growing disorder imposed altogether new demands upon the poet. The complexity of man's altered status gave rise to a corresponding complexity in the matter and manner of his literary expression. The humanists' emphasis on the individual and upon the rational function, the full force of
which was only now really being put into practise in England, invited a much more personal and distinctly rational treatment of more personal and immediate problems. And the prevailing uncertainty demanded a more careful, analytic, and all-absorbing method of investigation, one which took nothing for granted, and one which regarded nothing as too sacred to undergo, if necessary, trial by fire. It was the task of the poet to reunify the disparate elements of a shattered world; but the legacy of the sixteenth century was not equal to the task. The result was mannerism, and this new style, which we have seen breaking through in the later sonnets of Shakespeare, is exemplified most clearly and consistently in the poetry of Donne.

Donne is extremely alive, perhaps more so than any of his near contemporaries but Shakespeare, to the magnitude of the problems facing the early seventeenth century. The well-known passage from An Anatomie of the World sums up the dreadful implications of Copernican astronomy:

Then, as mankinde, so is the whole world's frame
Quite out of joynt, almost created lame:
For, before God had made up all the rest
Corruption entred, and depraved the best:

And new Philosophy calls all in doubt,
The Element of fire is quite put out;
The Sun is lost, and th'earth, and no mans wit
Can well direct him where to looke for it. 86

Sixteenth century order has been utterly shattered, and neither Donne nor anyone else has been able to produce a satisfactory substitute. He must make the best he can of the old renaissance tradition, like many of his contemporaries who have been similarly disturbed, but he is bound to treat it in an entirely different way:

without wasting time on any proclamation that this is 'the new poetry' or on any denigration of his predecessors, Donne creates a kind of poetry that had never been heard before. 87

Sidney had protested vigorously against the old rhetorical conventions but he had been able to do very little to alter them; Donne protested very little but he altered them radically. And the differences, the realignments and disalignments of the High Renaissance tradition, are made graphically vivid in Donne's Holy Sonnets.

Donne had written other sonnets. In a sequence called La Corona, written earlier in his career, 88 he employed a good many of the conventions of style with which he later becomes so impatient; but the Holy Sonnets are something new: they present an immediate surprise, even to the modern sensibility which is accustomed to all sorts of peculiarities of style. Donne incorporates many of the conventions of the

87 Lewis, Sixteenth Century English Literature, p. 548.

High Renaissance into his work, and at the same time he implicitly repudiates them, in a way somewhat similar to that of Shakespeare in the sonnets I have discussed in the foregoing. In the first place, these poems are, all but one, on specifically religious subjects; and yet they were written at a time when the sonnet had been firmly established as a vehicle for the expression of earthly love, and had seldom been used for sacred purposes. It is significant that although Donne wrote a good deal of love poetry he wrote no love sonnets, as far as we can be sure: for such purposes the form had already been thoroughly exploited and had become trite. But Donne employs the sonnet as if he still regarded it as a secular form, and he treats religion as if, in a sense, it were profane. He treats God as a concrete, tangible entity; he speaks to him directly, and with much more passion than any Elizabethan sonneteer ever used to importune his mistress; and he speaks in explicitly sexual terms:

Divorce mee, 'untie, or breake that knot;  
Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I  
Except you enthrall mee, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chast, except you ravish mee. 89

Spenser's profane love is a distant and holy abstraction;  
Donne's divine love is an immediate and worldly reality.  

89 Holy Sonnets, XIV.
All his experience is intensely personal, and his vision, the mannerist vision, is the product of a peculiar psychology, related, in some respects, to that of Hamlet: self-conscious, uncertain, neurotic, exhibitionist—it is difficult to describe. He is obsessed with mortality, and he constantly equates death with sex. The ambiguous use of the word "die" is commonplace in the Renaissance, but where the Elizabethans had seen sexual intercourse as a figurative death, Donne perceives death in terms of a violent and final orgasm: "...my good is dead,/ And her Soule early into heaven ravished." He makes a concerted effort to cast a new and eerie light upon the commonplace, and to shock his readers into thinking about the peculiarities of their own personalities.

The personal tone throughout Donne's poetry, secular and religious alike, is abetted by the generous use of theatrical devices. What C. S. Lewis observes of the love-poetry is true of the Holy Sonnets also:

...Donne's lyrics are dramatic; they sound like an ex tempore speech and imply a concrete situation. They rap out an answer to something already said...or start a conversation by expressing some thought as if it had that moment come into his mind. 91

At times his enthusiasm might lead him to sensationalism

90 Holy Sonnets, XVII. 91 Lewis, loc. cit.
or melodrama, but he redeems himself a hundredfold, with passages of superb dramatic power which are rare in lyric poetry in any language or from any period. He may recall a violent Biblical scene:

Spit in my face yee Jewes, and pierce my side, Buffet, and scoffe, scourge, and crucifie mee; 92

he may dramatize an impassioned one-sided debate with his wayward soul:

Wilt thou love God, as hee thee? then digest My Soule, this wholsome meditation; 93

or he may blurt out some horrible apprehension which has been plaguing him for weeks:

What if this present were the worlds last night? 94

but whatever his method, he always gives the impression of immediacy and spontaneity. He moves the sonnet away from the tradition of narrative poetry which had dominated it for so long, and like Shakespeare, he draws it toward the drama which had so recently come of age. And the form is flexible enough to adapt readily to all the new demands. In one of these poems he bursts recklessly in upon the scene, demanding, in a characteristic display of hubris,

92 Holy Sonnets, XI. 93 Holy Sonnets, XV.
94 Holy Sonnets, XIII.
that God proclaim the Day of Judgment immediately:

At the round earth's imagin'd corners, blow
Your trumpets, Angles, and arise, arise
From death, you numberlesse infinities
Of soules, and to your scattred bodies goe. 95

"Imagined" corners? Presumably the image is derived ultimately from the Apocalyptic vision of St. John the Divine, who saw "...four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds"; 96 and possibly Donne also has in mind the typical Renaissance map of the world, which often depicted trumpeting figures in each of the four corners; but he cannot restrain himself from a scrupulous objection to the fallacy of this conception, even at such an awe-inspiring moment as this:

It would never have occurred to most Renaissance poets to throw in this skeptical, empirical qualification into a poetic picture of the Day of Judgment.... Their imaginations were more at home with myth. Donne's mind seems nowhere more scientific in its biases, and more psychologically unlike the imaginations of many of his literary contemporaries, than in his estrangement from the myth making faculty of mind, to which the scientific attitude has been, from its inception, an inveterate foe. 97

Yet despite Donne's punctilious objection to this ancient Biblical myth, or perhaps by its aid, the spontaneity of

95 Holy Sonnets, VIII. 96 Rev. vii, 1.

tone is sustained throughout the poem. Donne has hardly uttered his reckless, irreverent demand, when he becomes aware of his over-weening pride and desperately retracts what he has said:

But let them sleepe, Lord, and mee mourne a space,  
For, if above all these, my sinnes abound,  
'Tis late to aske abundance of thy grace,  
When wee are there; here on this lowly ground,  
Teach mee how to repent; for that's as good  
As if thou'hadst seal'd my pardon, with thy blood. 98

He creates the illusion that he had no complete, unified conception before he set the poem down on paper, but that he wrote it line by line, as it occurred to him: he thinks in the poem, so to speak. When he has considered the proposition from its various points of view he discovers that he has led himself into a trap, and he does not hesitate to change his tack entirely.

Despite its intimacy and its emotional power, Donne's poetry has an extremely logical texture, albeit a strained and murky logic which carries the excesses of Scholasticism to even further extremes. Donne's imagination seems to have been able to assimilate ideas and images from every area of his broad experience, and he had the facility for discovering the most recondite similarities between them. Certainly most poetic imagery derives from a perceived likeness between

98 Holy Sonnets, VIII.
different objects and different situations; the peculiar-
ity of Donne's mind is not that he relates such dissimilar
things, but that the relations which he perceives are more
often logical than sensuous or emotional, and that he con-
stantly connects the remote with the near, the intellec-
tual with the sensual, the abstract with the concrete, the
sublime with the commonplace, and the macrocosm with the
microcosm. 99

The method of Donne's logic is distinctly analytic:
he probes every image again and again until he has rooted
out all the peculiar and obscure meanings that he can make
use of. Dr. Johnson once remarked disdainfully of Donne
and his adherents, that:

Those writers who lay on the watch for novelty could
have little hope for greatness; for great things can-
not have escaped former observation. Their attempts
were always analytick: they broke every image into
fragments, and could no more represent by their slen-
der conceits and laboured particularities the pros-
pects of nature or the scenes of life, than he who
dissects a sunbeam with a prism can exhibit the wide
effulgence of a summer noon. 100

If Dr. Johnson's conceit has something of the "far-fetched"
quality for which he reprimands Donne, it is, in his own
words, "worth the carriage": it suggests the meticulous,


self-conscious, skeptical attitude Donne has toward all ideas, and it suggests the lengths Donne is prepared to go to, to display this attitude. Sometimes he will investigate all the various aspects of a single image to fill out a single poem:

Show me deare Christ, thy spouse, so bright and clear. What! is it She, which on the other shore
Goes richly painted? or which rob'd and tore
Laments and mournes in Germany and here?
Sleepes she a thousand, then peepes up one yeare?
Is she self-truth and errs? now new, now outwore?
Doth she, and did she, and shall she evermore
On one, on seaven, or on no hill appeare?
Dwells she with us, or like adventuring knights
First travaile we to seeke and then make Love?
Betray kind husband thy spouse to our sights,
And let myne amorous soule court thy mild Dove,
Who is most trew, and pleasing to thee, then
When she'is embrac'd and open to most men. 101

This poem is, as nearly as possible, typical of Donne, and it represents all the important features of mannerism as well as one could hope. Donne begins with a simple prayer which is characteristically misleading in its straightforwardness, using the hackneyed image of Christ's Bride to represent the Christian Church. Then he ambiguously suggests an identity between the Bride of Christ and the Whore of Babylon, casting a new, somewhat skeptical light on the conventional image by deliberately misusing it. He mocks the meretricious Catholic Church and scorns the austere

101 Holy Sonnets, XVIII.
Protestant. Then he exposes the doctrinal absurdities of both factions with a series of charged questions. It becomes evident that Donne is seeking some sort of unity in Christendom, some supreme and unequivocal authority, but he clearly fails to find it: his interrogative method is symptomatic of his uncertainty. 102 The poem moves toward what should be a conclusion by rephrasing the plea of the first line: "Betray kind husband thy spouse to our sights"; and it ends with one of Donne's characteristic strained paradoxes. There is an obvious disparity between the apparent intention of the closing remark (a bid for religious tolerance) and its irreverent, indecent implications (a suggestion of prostitution). And the problem is left hanging, with no attempt to resolve these contradictions and no suggestion of a satisfactory solution. If we did not know who wrote the poem we might suspect him of blasphemous parody; and yet the strength of Donne's faith is beyond question.

The prosodic elements of the poem are similarly frustrated. Donne adopts the Italian sonnet as a pattern, with Wyatt's modification of the rhyme-scheme: \texttt{abbaabba cdcdee}; and he arouses the standard anticipations in the reader by

102 The predominance of questions is perhaps one of the typical features of mannerism. There are fewer than two dozen questions in the whole of the Amoretti; Astrophel and Stella has over sixty, but forty of these are in the last half of the sequence; Shakespeare has about twenty in the first fifty sonnets and forty in the last fifty; and Donne has twenty-five in only nineteen sonnets.
fulfilling the more obvious requirements of the form—a consistent rhyme-scheme, a length of fourteen lines, and, more or less, a decasyllabic line—and he affirms these anticipations by beginning the poem with a few lines approximating regular iambic pentameter. Then he denies all the expectations he has stimulated, by distorting the rhythm as much as he can. After the first five lines he abandons the heroic line to produce an unpredictable, unmetrical cadence, interlarded at brief and irregular intervals by a variety of punctuating devices:

Is she self truth and errs? now new, now outwore? Doth she, and did she, and shall she evermore, On one, on seaven, or on no hill appeare?

The effect is fragmentary and rough. Donne end-stops some lines and allows others to run over, but he has no discernible system, except perhaps that of iconoclasm. The rhyme-scheme tends to divide the poem first of all into an octave and a sestet, then the octave into two quatrains, and the sestet into a quatrain and a couplet. But Donne's rhetoric ignores these distinctions. His introduction is complete in the first line, and he promptly launches a barrage of awkward questions which continue until the end of the tenth line, disregarding the conventional volta at the end of the octave entirely, and ignoring the minor breaks between one quatrain and the next. The volta finally does occur at the
end of the tenth line, but it is so far out of its usual place that the delicate balance of the form is seriously upset: the resolution must be drawn out in the limited space of the remaining four lines, and the effect is inevitably one of strain and imbalance. The usual aphorism at the end of the sonnet here takes the form of a paradox, as it frequently did in Shakespeare, and the repetition of the final couplet rhymes serves only to underline the perverseness of Donne's mannerist logic.

Thus mannerism works on two levels, psychological and technical. Donne's personal insecurity gives rise to the strained technical ingenuities of the mannerist style; his complex psychology, like that of the Jacobean dramatists and such mannerist painters as El Greco, Tintoretto, and Carvaggio, the psychology which denies renaissance idealism and renaissance order, clashes also with conventional ideas of rhetoric and agitates the form and the phrase to the verge of dissolution:

The clash between the psychological and rhetorical directions is audible in the wavering caesura, the sliding metre, the wrenched accents. The renaissance sonnet did not try to accommodate these strains, which suggest the curious torment in mannerist faith—and mannerist doubt. 103

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103 Sypher, Four Stages of Renaissance Style, p. 130.
Milton

Mannerism was not born with Donne and it did not die with him. It persisted well on into the seventeenth century—in the poetry of Marvell and Cowley, to cite two striking examples. But concurrent with the dislocations of mannerism, the new baroque temperament was gradually beginning to develop. The contradictions of Donne's view of things were slowly being resolved, and bit by bit the shattered mannerist world was reintegrating. The political and religious structures of England remained rather unstable until some time after the Restoration, but the new science, which had been so disturbing to Donne, paradoxically provided a cornerstone for the philosophic and cultural reintegrations which were to culminate in the solidarity of eighteenth century rationalism.

This development took place gradually throughout the seventeenth century, but very early in the Jacobean period Bacon affirmed the importance of the scientific method in The Advancement of Learning, and conceived a gigantic plan for the categorization of all knowledge in his largest work, Magna Instauratio. Despite the uncertainty and disillusionment of his contemporaries, Bacon was optimistic enough to declare enthusiastically: "I have taken all knowledge to
be my province." To his essentially modern temperament, knowledge was power; and his methods of investigation laid the foundation for the Royal Society. Contemporary with Bacon, Galileo's dynamic, baroque laws of force prepared for Newton's comprehensive physical theory; Kepler's astronomy resolved the contradictions of Tycho Brahe's involute universe; and Descartes' coordinate geometry, the mathematics of motion, made calculus possible, and opened the boundless realms of modern science and modern technology.

In English poetry the new temperament is represented first and foremost in the mature works of Milton; but the massive comprehensiveness of Paradise Lost grew out of the accumulated reflections of a lifetime, and was the result of a long process of development, from the typical renaissance character of such poems as The Nativity Ode, through the unstable structures of Comus and Lycidas. The growth of Milton's baroque style is illustrated from its very beginnings, in his sonnets; and its fruition in Paradise Lost is anticipated in those last sonnets, "On the Late Massacre in Piemont," "On his Blindness," and "On his Wife."

Milton's twenty-three sonnets were written sporadically, over a period of about thirty years, and unlike those of his predecessors, they range about over a variety of unrelated subjects, most of which had hitherto been considered more appropriate for other poetic forms. He uses the
sonnet for verse epistles, occasional compliments, political diatribes, elegiac tributes, personal reflections, and mere trifles. Certainly there are Elizabethan sonnets which depart from the conventional love-theme and stand as independent poems, but these are exceptional. Spenser and Sidney and even Shakespeare wrote what are loosely called sonnet-sequences, and with few exceptions they confined their choice of subject to various aspects of courtship or love. Even the iconoclastic Donne preserved the thematic unity of the sequence-structure, reserving the form for different approaches to a single subject. Milton's use of the sonnet as an independent poem requires that each stand upon its own merits: Milton cannot rely upon other poems in a series to carry the weight of an occasional weak effort. Each poem must therefore convey the complete, self-contained expression of a single, unified thought:

All Milton's sonnets...are of this individual character. Each handles one main idea in such a way as to be self-sufficing; there is no dependence on anything that precedes or follows. 104

The first of Milton's sonnets, from about 1630, is a little exercise entitled "O Nightingale." It is distinctly a renaissance piece, Italianate, derivative, standardized, constructed of diffuse, conventional imagery, and belonging

in every way to the Petrarchan tradition. The following five, written at about the same time, are all in Italian, and all are equally derivative. These are Milton's only love-poems, and the fact that he chooses to write about courtship only under the protection of a foreign tongue may well point toward his uneasiness with this aspect of the renaissance tradition:

...the penitential view of love which the Petrarchan tradition implies, is alien to Milton's moral temper and these poems are consequently unconvincing. 105

Following the Italian group, Milton's next sonnet is the well-known reflection "On his Being Arrived at the Age of Twenty-three." Milton appears to have learned a good deal about the form through writing the five Italian poems. His style is still typically renaissance, but he has achieved a greater mastery over the renaissance techniques:

The quatrains are more carefully distinguished and internally balanced than in the sonnet on the Nightingale, and in the tercets the poem makes its assertions with a striking outburst which we have seen Milton practising in Italian. 106

The question which the poem raises is perhaps more intimate than one would find in a renaissance sonnet. It has some


106 Ibid., p. 96.
of the immediacy of Donne's expression, and its personal import helps to free Milton from the diffuseness of Elizabethan poetry:

How soon hath Time the suttle theef of youth,
Stoln on his wing my three and twentieth yer!
My hasting dayes flie on with full career,
But my late spring no bud or blossom shew'th.
Perhaps my semblance might deceive the truth,
That I to manhood am arriv'd so near,
And inward ripeness doth much less appear,
That som more timely-happy spirits indu'th. 107

He uses a good many more words than he needs, to express a simple idea and a simple emotion, but the pleonasm is better disguised, less obviously redundant, than that of most renaissance sonnets; and in the sestet the thought exhibits some of the compact originality which is later to characterize Paradise Lost:

All is, if I have grace to use it so,
As ever in my great task-Masters eye.

But the measured regularity of the metre, the distinct separation of every line from these adjacent to it, and the precise organization of the thought, stating the problem in the octave and answering it in the carefully distinguished sestet, are all characteristic of the sonnets of the High Renaissance.

After this poem, Milton writes no more sonnets for a period of about ten years, but when he resumes with "When the Assault was Intended to the City," his style is essentially the same. The first clear signs of change do not appear until the eleventh sonnet, "On the Detraction which Followed upon my Writing Certain Treatises." Here, Milton no longer regards the form of the sonnet as sacrosanct, and he feels free to use it as the spirit moves him. The subject of the poem is slight, and the tone, like that of the following sonnet, "On the Same," strangely combines a light-hearted wit with rather serious undertones. Similarly, the structure fails to observe convention:

A Book was writ of late call'd Tetrachordon;  
And wov'n close, both matter, form and stile;  
The subject new: it walk'd the Town a while,  
Numbring good intellects; now seldom por'd on.  
Cries the stall-reader, bless us! what a word on  
A title page is this! and some in file  
Stand spelling fals, while one might walk to Mile-End Green. Why is it harder Sirs then Gordon,  
Colkitto, or Macdonnel, or Galasp?  
Those rugged names to our like mouths grow sleek  
That would have made Quintillian stare and gasp.  
Thy age, like ours, O Soul of Sir John Cheek,  
Hated not Learning wors then Toad or Asp;  
When thou taught'st Cambridge, and King Edward Greek.

This near-parody of the sonnet reveals Milton's interest in the form: the studied awkwardness of such comic burlesque, of which one would hardly suspect Milton capable, is among the most difficult of all literary exercises. The diction
has a calculated lack of dignity, and the double rhymes, like strained puns, are designed to provoke a wry grimace. There is a lot of enjambment; the caesurae are likely to appear anywhere in the line; the distinctions between the octave and sestet, between quatrains and tercets, are lost; and the form has broken down and broken away from the renaissance tradition, repeating the metamorphosis which had produced the jarring metrics of Donne's *Holy Sonnets* many years before, and at the same time moving deviously toward the fluid rhythmical techniques which contribute so much to the magnificence of Milton's later works.

Dr. Johnson's observation concerning these sonnets, that "Milton...was a genius that could cut a Colossus from a rock; but could not carve heads upon cherry stones," 108 is indicative, not merely of the eighteenth century disdain of lyric poetry in general, but of Johnson's insensitivity to Milton's intention in the most serious of these poems. He was not attempting to make intricate little word-patterns: the Elizabethans had already worked this to death; he wished to give his sonnets the weight and substance of much larger poems; to give them the appearance of the expansive verse paragraphs of *Paradise Lost*. The last eight of these poems, and (for technical reasons) especially the nineteenth, show

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Milton's grand style in its maturity, striving to achieve
the vast comprehensiveness and the adamantine integrity so
characteristic of baroque art:

When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one Talent which is death to hide,
Lodg'd with me useless, though my Soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, least he returning chide,
Doth God exact day-labour, light deny'd,
I fondly ask; But patience to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts, who best
Bear his milde yoak, they serve him best, his State
Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
And post o're Land and Ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and waite.

This poem was written probably less than three years after
Milton had been stricken with total blindness in 1652, 109
when the terrible calamity of his situation was still pain­
fully prominent in his mind. It opens with a statement of
despair, and slowly expands to consider all the serious im­
plications of his condition. Milton recalls the Parable
of the Talents with all its awe-inspiring associations, ap­
parently believing that his loss of sight must mean the end
of his career as a poet, must mean that the immense design
of Paradise Lost can never be realized, must mean that all
the strength and penetration of the poetic vision in which
he has had so much confidence is doomed to expire with his

109 See M. Y. Hughes, ed., John Milton: Complete Poems &
corporeal vision and put an end to his noblest aspirations. He is all the more distraught to think that he is no longer able to serve his God properly, and all the more apprehensive of the possible consequences of this debility. But the resolution, which has been anticipated by the opening word, "When," since the very beginning of the poem, is gradually unfolded: Milton rises above his self-concern and elevates his emotion into a noble and universal affirmation of the ultimate justice of the ways of God. The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune become, to Milton, but a mild yoke which man must bear for a little space, under the watchful care of Divine Providence. In a sweeping vision of thousands of angels hasting with boundless energy to the edges of the world, and thousands more gathered quietly about the throne of God, the poem draws to its conclusion with a note of peaceful resignation. The broad comprehensiveness and expansiveness of this sonnet arise in part from the weighty, universalized theme, but just as much, from the careful selection of giant images with vast archetypal associations. Milton uses all the resources of his rhetoric to give his complicated involute expression the appearance of a single, continuous, breathless utterance.

110 See A. W. Verity, Milton's Sonnets, p. 55; see also De Doctrina Christiana, I, ix, Hughes, p. 990.
The rhetorical structure of the poem consists in a long balanced complex sentence followed by a short loose compound sentence. The former begins with a series of subordinate clauses strung out one after another, and the main verb, "ask," is retained until mid-way in the eighth line, thus holding the reader's grammatical expectations in suspense for well over half the poem. The break at this point might technically be regarded as a volta, but there is not the abrupt shift in thought which would be expected in most Elizabethan sonnets. The first sentence must be completed before one can pause, and even then, the coda of the last three lines is necessary to complete the sense satisfactorily. The flow of thought continues unbroken throughout.

The rhyme-scheme of the poem is one of the patterns commonly used by Petrarch. All Milton's sonnets use one or other of the various Italian schemes, notably avoiding the final couplet in all cases but one: couplet rhymes tend to produce an epigrammatic quality, as we have seen in most of the Elizabethans, isolating the lines concerned and disrupting the flow of the language. In this sonnet, Milton uses five rhymes, two in the octave and three in

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111 The technique is similar to that used in the first paragraph of Paradise Lost, where Milton begins in an oblique case (as Homer and Vergil both do), and withholding the main verb, "Sing," for several lines.
the sestet, strictly according to tradition. The peculiarity of the poem is that the resonance of the rhyme that is a natural and, one would think, inevitable feature of any sonnet, is subdued by the power of Milton's diction.

It has been observed of *Lycidas* that:

...Milton's chief effort is directed towards making a new adjustment between Italian verse-forms and Latinate diction; the result is that the predominance of the rhymed patterns...is here replaced by the predominance of diction as an element of structure. Intricate word order, carefully sustained repetitions and lengthy periods tend to relegate rhyme to a secondary position. 112

This is equally true of all Milton's later sonnets. The rhymes are all relatively important words, but even where the lines are end-stopped, the sense of anticipation which is aroused by the long suspended periods is so strong, and the continuous rhythmic flow sustained by the density of the language is so cohesive, that the rhymes do not so much serve their usual function as punctuating devices. Similarly, the quatrains and tercets are completely integrated and the distinction between octave and sestet is obscured. The form has become completely fluid, and all the delicate renaissance distinctions are merged into the flow of the language. Where Spenser thinks in quatrains and couplets and Donne thinks in fragments, Milton thinks

112 Prince, *The Italian Element in Milton's Verse*, p. 79.
in terms of a much larger and more cohesive unity which, in this case, constitutes the whole poem.

Thus, in a few lines of verse, Milton has been able to suggest greater dimensions, greater breadth and depth, than one would ever suspect to be within the sonnet's capabilities. *Paradise Lost* is yet to come, but there is no technical facility wanting, and the richness and dynamism and comprehensiveness are already anticipated. The inexplicable genius of the man contributes as much to his art as any externals; he stands alone in the scope of his conceptions, and without him the baroque in English literature would be of relatively minor importance. But the influence of the epoch must not be underrated: *Paradise Lost* could not have been written fifty years earlier or twenty years later. Just as the balanced harmony of the High Renaissance gives rise to the order and symmetry of Spenser's verse, and as the dislocations of the early seventeenth century lead to Donne's mannerism, the reintegrations of Milton's day permit the certainties of vision and the vitality of the will which are essential to baroque art and baroque affirmation.
Conclusion

The term "development" is possibly inclined to be misleading when it is used to indicate the changes which are continually taking place in literature, or in art generally, with the passage of time. It is a truism in literary criticism that poetry, or creative prose, or any sort of expression that is fundamentally imaginative, does not improve: it merely changes. But it seems to change in a consecutive, systematic way, which is somehow related to the changes which take place contemporaneously throughout the rest of art, and indeed throughout the rest of history. It has been observed, particularly by the Spenglerian critics, that the forms and themes of literature seem to move in circles, seem constantly to repeat the patterns of antiquity in a way that appears to be almost predictable, like Spenglerian history. It might be more accurate to describe this process in terms of a spiral: there has been a persistent periodic alternation between phases of romanticism and phases of conservatism, between phases of disorder and relative order; but the literature of any one epoch is never quite the same as any that has preceded: it has taken from the past and will always be ready to give to the future. Yet even this sort of "development" has
not always been generally recognized, at least among literary critics, and especially among critics of Renaissance literature. In the nineteenth century, where the idea of the Renaissance as a historical period first emerged, and where systematic, integrated criticism of the arts of the age first began, 113 the Renaissance was seen as a unique, unified, self-contained epoch, characterized chiefly by a sharp division from the intellectual darkness of the mediæval past, and standing almost apart from history, as an eternal ideal. The idea of continuity with the immediate past, in literature, or in any of the arts, and to a certain extent even in the social history, was obscured by an overwhelming emphasis upon the separation from the "Dark Ages," and any aesthetic differences within the period itself were largely ignored: "The nineteenth century critics fixed their attention almost entirely upon the heights of renaissance art which they called the grand style." 114 Arnold, who was one of the most acute observers of his own age, was not concerned to make distinctions between Shakespearean "touchstones" and Miltonic; he was only interested in pointing out their common quality of "high seriousness."

113 The germinal nineteenth century criticism of Renaissance art, chiefly concerned with the visual arts from Giotto to Michaelangelo, was by the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt; see The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, translated by S. C. G. Middlemore, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1890.

114 Sypher, Four Stages of Renaissance Style, p. 3.
And until Grierson published his highly influential edition of Donne's poetry, in 1912, Donne and the so-called "metaphysical" poets were neglected and almost forgotten behind the literary giants of the Renaissance.

In recent years, however, literary tastes have found a particular affinity for the peculiar syntax of Donne and his followers, which somehow seems to echo the dislocations and irregularities of our own age; coupled with this, literary criticism has taken a new tack toward the more scrupulous, analytic methods of the legitimate sciences; and literary historiography has found the means to draw parallels between art and sociology. This combination of interests has revealed, in addition to the more obvious common idiosyncrasies of certain of the metaphysical poets, basic differences between the literature of the mid-sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries which have apparently gone unnoticed in the past. As a result, the whole output of Renaissance literature has been reclassified: what was once seen as an integrated whole has been broken up into a series of related but distinct phases, the most outstanding of which are exhibited in the styles of "renaissance," "mannerist," and "baroque" literature.

Insofar as these three styles appear in the sonnets of the period, the almost ideal representative of the renaissance mode of writing appears to be Spenser, whose ordered
comprehension of the timeless universe of the High Ren­
aissance typifies the contemporary ideal. The elaborate
order of Spenser's beautiful poetic world did not rise out
of chaos, of course, as we have seen; its germ can be found
in the rather bland techniques of Surrey, and even in the
later sonnets of Wyatt, who seems to have been generally
more involved with the dissolution of the Gothic style (in
the same way that Donne was caught up in the dissolution
of the High Renaissance) rather than with the laying of new
foundations or the systematic formulation of new poetic
principles. During the course of the half-century between
Surrey and Spenser the High Renaissance conceptions of an
ordered world gradually consolidated themselves, and culmi­
nated in the "grand style" of The Faerie Queene, which is
reflected in miniature in the rhetorical patterns of the
Amoretti. But by this time, High Renaissance order had al­
ready been subject to attack, in the poetry of Sidney, and
its basic instability, its inability to accommodate the in­
evitable consequences of the intellectual discoveries of
the sixteenth century, was soon to be exposed in the later
sonnets (and of course in the later plays) of Shakespeare.
The mannerist phase, which is well under way in Shakespeare,
is continued throughout the poetry of Donne where it is
carried to perhaps even further extremes: all the old con­
ventions are there but they no longer mean anything, and
their chief purpose is to point toward the hollow charade which they represent, and to the insecurity which their decay has inspired.

At this point, certain poets do not seem to fit too easily into the pattern of development. Jonson, in particular, whom one would expect to be caught in the mainstream of mannerist art, appears to be largely unaffected by the march of events, at least as far as most of his poetry is concerned. Perhaps he can best be described as a late renaissance artist: he is distinctly conservative and stands more or less aloof from the dislocations of his contemporaries with a classical style which sustains something of the timeless brightness of renaissance poetry well into the seventeenth century; and he condemns the irregularities of mannerism in no uncertain terms: "Donne, for not keeping of accent, deserved hanging.... Shakespeare wanted art." 115 And yet, more perplexingly, "he cursed Petrarch for redacting verses to sonnets, which he said were like the tyrant's bed, where some who were too short were racked, and others too long, cut short." 116 By the middle of the seventeenth century this feeling must have been widespread: the penchant


116 Ibid., p. 899.
for sonneteering had been dying a slow death ever since the turn of the century, and by the time Cromwell had come to power, no poet of any importance other than Milton was still writing sonnets.

The later Miltonic sonnet is, as we have seen, a new sort of poem. The Elizabethans had almost killed the sonnet with kindness, wearing the High Renaissance conventions out; Shakespeare had revived it momentarily as a secular form; Donne had transformed it into a religious lyric; and Milton had given it a new identity. He had admittedly taken most of what he needed from the past, especially for the formal aspects of his sonnets; but he gave the old static conventions a new life: he made the heroic line flow about a new principle of unity, and gave the sonnet-form power which it had never had. Eventually, however, Milton abandoned the form, also. After the Restoration he wrote no more sonnets.

The tradition had consumed itself, and it was to remain dormant for more than a hundred years, until it rose again out of its own ashes to begin another cycle in the hands of the great Romantics, Wordsworth and Keats.
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