

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Poems (1585-87)

Sir Walter Raleigh (1552-1618)

Let's start with the man's poetry; else it is likely to be buried by the more conspicuous part of his life--- the statesmanship, the diplomacy, contributions to the progress of colonization, the explorations of South and North America, and finally of course, the beheading: let's start with the poetry of which Raleigh wrote much throughout a prominent and threatened life. You will inevitably be asking yourself how this refined, introspective, and unusually fine eared man fits together with the man of state and warfare? We are taking a brisk foray unto Raleigh's poetry making, then making passing notes on the man as a whole.

Brief poems

We can start by looking at the following small and characteristic scraps of Raleigh's poetic expressions:

1

*IF all the world and love were young,
And truth in every shepherd's tongue,
These pretty pleasures might me move
To live with thee and be thy Love.*

The theme of relentless time, and of the need to make timely use of it, runs heavily through Elizabethan poetry. (Would we say it is a reaction to the new felt pain of loss cascading onto the just post medieval world, as the stark and unprotected loss through death infects the center of life itself? The mediaeval mind had, after all, worked hard to protect itself against the naked fear of death. The attempt to negotiate with that deadly race of time is nowhere as exquisitely painful as in Shakespeare's sonnets.) Do we read our way, here, into a Raleigh who will be tempted to brood? Into a melancholy spirit? Or is this not the same Raleigh who told his executioner not to be afraid of chopping his head off?

2

*What is our life? A play of passion,
Our mirth the music of division,
Our mother's wombs the tiring-houses be,
Where we are dressed for this short comedy.*

Here the lament tone of the first poem is replaced by a related theme--also emblematic of Elizabethan lyric--the notion that life itself is a quick illusion--lights on then lights off. An anonymous ancient Greek poet put it this way:

*What is anyone?
What is anyone not?
Man is the dream of a shadow.*

3

*I was a Poet!
But I did not know it,
Neither did my Mother,
Nor my Sister nor my Brother.*

Shrewd assessment of the naming process. What you are called--a poet, a ruffian, a wife beater--is nothing but empty sound chewed out of the available vocabularies of your time. Weigh the radical implications of this tiny poem. Does it cohere with the points of the first two small poems? Of course. Time flies, death takes its place, emptied existence remains. The Sound and the Fury prevails.

4

*Nature, that washed her hands in milk,
And had forgot to dry them,
Instead of earth took snow and silk,
At love's request to try them,*

A milk and honey poem, and from a knighted military man, greaves and armor no less. Give me snow and silk, to earn the clasp of your hand.

The shadowy dream life we are given, the precious of the instant, these fleeting natural gifts have love deeply inscribed in them

5

*Like truthless dreams, so are my joys expired,
And past return are all my dandled days;
My love misled, and fancy quite retired--
Of all which passed the sorrow only stays.*

We make our ways back into the central themes. But the tonal direction changes at this point; It is suddenly worth more than noting that time rushes past. It leaves us exposed to death. But even that is not all. Time deludes us, scraping away the past to leave only the pain of the past.

6

*Give me my scallop-shell of quiet,
My staff of faith to walk upon,
My scrip of joy, immortal diet,
My bottle of salvation.*

A plea for peace in the rush of events. We are talking about a writer who led exploratory expeditions to South America and Virginia, who carried out countless diplomatic missions on behalf of the Queen, who when not imprisoned led the fullest life in the world and yet longed for that interiority of self, for which, as we know, he came to face the depths of pain and loss.

7

*Passions are likened best to floods and streams:
The shallow murmur, but the deep are dumb;
So, when affection yields discourse, it seems
The bottom is but shallow whence they come.*

Pretty intricate psychology of expression for a 'soldier on active duty.' The repertoire of courtly turns of phrase is right out of Raleigh's courtly milieu, but unsparingly critical of his own self-revelations. Must one not wonder at the degree of self-abuse he was prepared to tolerate?

8

*Go, soul, the body's guest,
Upon a thankless errand;*

*Fear not to touch the best;
The truth shall be thy warrant.*

Could we say that Raleigh comes to terms, in a poem like this, with an invitation to life, for all its concealed challenges, to play itself out to the hilt? The truth, he reassures his reader--who is chiefly himself,--will stand warranty for his errors, serving, let's say, as an ontological insurance policy.

Longer poem

Now consider, from the same period, *Walsingham*. a longer poem by Sir Walter. It touches on many of the themes and tones we have visited in the brief poetic pieces considered above. But it does so through an inner monologue, which in its course becomes a dialogue, in which the overarching topic of enduring love gradually supplants the dominant concerns we have already discussed--the furious onrush of time, the brevity of human life, the emptiness of language, the ineradicable signature of pain left by life. This longer Raleigh work addresses all these issues, but like many great poets' work forces all issues into one, the burning potency of love.

(Time saving note for the reader: the entire poem before us is a dialogue, between the individual speakers of the first and second stanzas).

Walsingham (The name refers to a a much venerated Catholic shrine in England, blessed by an apparition of the Virgin Mary in the time of Edward the Confessor, 12th century).

How shall I know your true love
That have met many one
As I went to the holy land
That have come, that have gone?

She is neither white nor brown
But as the heavens fair
There is none hath a form so divine
In the earth or the air.

Such an one did I meet, good Sir,
Such an Angelic face,
Who like a queen, like a nymph, did appear
By her gait, by her grace.

She hath left me here all alone,
All alone as unknown,
Who sometimes did me lead with her self,
And me loved as her own.

What's the cause that she leaves you alone
And a new way doth take;
Who loved you once as her own
And her joy did you make?

I have loved her all my youth,
But now old, as you see,
Love likes not the falling fruit
From the withered tree.

Know that love is a careless child
And forgets promise past.
He is blind, he is deaf when he list,

And in faith never fast.

His desire is a dureless content
And a trustless joy
He is won with a world of despair
And is lost with a toy.

Of womenkind such indeed is the love
Or the word Love abused
Under which many childish desires
And conceits are excused.

But true Love is a durable fire
In the mind ever burning;
Never sick, never old, never dead,
From itself never turning.

Reflection

Who was the real Sir Walter Raleigh, who fought wars, explored the world, and laid down his coat in the mud so that his queen would not dirty her slippers? Oh yes, and who told his executioner to *get on with it, man*? Was he in fact an exterior man, immersed in the world, yet of the mindset from which the cunning and spiritual poem pieces we have been reading emerge? Are we in our time able to understand such a person?

Have we not, above, tried to get inside the mind of Sir Walter Raleigh? That was in any case our intention, as we pried inside a number of short, and one long, poem. Is a man, after all, not to be found in his poems, where he opens his heart?

Even if he be wearing armor and a sword, and is Sir Walter on the street? Is it not the real man inside? Sir Walter Raleigh was of course all of one piece, of one soul, an English aristocrat, writer, poet, soldier, courtier, spy, and explorer. He is as real as they get, deeply embedded in the material and historical world--while at the same time he seems fully aware that his soul aligns elsewhere.

But at what point of the material world did Raleigh decide to take place? He was born to a Protestant family in Devon. Though little is known of his early life, we know that he spent some time in Ireland, taking part in the suppression of local rebellions and exercising his patriotic enthusiasm for British colonization.

Later he became a landlord of properties confiscated from the Irish rebels. He rose rapidly in Queen Elizabeth I's favor, a key to his being knighted in 1585. He was involved in the early English colonization of Virginia under a royal patent. In 1591 he secretly married Elizabeth Throckmorton, one of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting, without the Queen's permission; for this indiscretion Raleigh and his wife were sent to the Tower of London.

After their release, they retired to Raleigh's estate at Sherborne, Dorset. In 1594 Raleigh heard of a 'City of Gold' in South America and with royal support sailed to find it, later publishing an extravagant account of the place he called *El Dorado*. After Queen Elizabeth died, in 1603, Raleigh was again imprisoned in the Tower, this time for allegedly being involved in a plot against King James I, who shared none of Elizabeth's fascination with Raleigh. In 1616, nonetheless, Raleigh was released in order to conduct a second expedition in search of *El Dorado*. This effort was unsuccessful and unruly and in the course of it the men under Raleigh's command ransacked a Spanish outpost-- which was a forbidden act in a time of great political tension with Spain. Raleigh returned to England and, to appease Spain, was arrested and executed in 1618. Thus ended the life of the earthly creature who had with such ardor sought to interrogate the unearthly in himself.

Themes

The themes foremost in the poetry of Raleigh, from which we have considered only a small sample, are prominent--but deserve restatement.

Love The *Walsingham* poem shows Raleigh struggling with the perplexities of love, searching for a burning hot love which will be true, in its way a Dantesque condition that brings us close to the divine. Raleigh agonizes at the same time over the changing character of time, which makes it impossible for true love to last.

Shortness of Life For Sir Walter Raleigh the frailty of mortal love ties directly into the brevity of life. One flirts in and out of captious time, unable to sustain enduring relations.

Pain Life is not only brief but in its passing it leaves behind the dross of pain. This theme continues to drag against the notion of time as swift and rapidly passing.

Purity The poem *Walsingham* relates a quest for pure beauty. *Have you seen* my perfect love somewhere? But it is forced to leave that quest to the heavens, for the only love Sir Walter can find on earth is fallible.