

Sir Robert Sidney's *Poems* Revisited: the Alternative Sequence

Maria de Jesus Crespo Candeias Velez Relvas

UNIVERSIDADE ABERTA DE PORTUGAL

For the last five or six years, and for some different occasions, I have had the opportunity, and the pleasure, of dedicating myself to the study of Sir Robert Sidney's poetic work. This "revisitation" is primarily motivated by the fact that, as far as I know, *The Poems* keep being neglected by the potential readers but also because the text keeps offering varied possibilities of analysis, further paths to be explored.

After the rediscovery of the *corpus* in 1973 and its publication in 1984, Mr P. J. Croft's own excellent critical edition,¹ and some articles (all of them enthusiastic, I must say) by a few scholars,² constitute the only approaches to the work. I strongly believe that this new voice from the Elizabethan golden age, that has brought new and important elements to our perspective of the time, should not be forgotten. Therefore, I cannot understand or accept the criteria adopted by the editors of a very recent anthology of poetry, who selected a wide range of works written by Elizabethan and Jacobean authors, even by some anonymous ones, and did not publish a single composition of Robert Sidney.

Besides the interest of the poems, his sequence discloses relevant peculiarities: it is the longest autograph manuscript from the period discovered until now, contained in a bound notebook which survived complete and admirably preserved for four centuries, exhibiting the unity, revisions, corrections and organisation outlined by the poet himself. The two major problems that usually afflict all those who study ancient documents do not exist then, i.e. the precariousness of the conservation and the authenticity regarding the origin and authorship.

The formal pattern is the result of a scheme carefully conceived. 35 sonnets, including an unfinished crown, are consecutively numbered and, among them, other poems in diversified forms appear intermixed: 18 songs, 5 pastorals, 1 elegy, with an internal and continuous numbering (Song 1, Pastoral 2, Song 3, etc.).³

But the autograph manuscript also exhibits another detail: in the upper margins of some pages, an alternative numbering gives origin to a new set composed by 13 of the first 15 poems. Here, in this alternative sequence, Robert Sidney did not establish a division between sonnets and diversified compositions, the unfinished Crown constitutes a single piece (Poem 7), and Sonnets 7 and 8 were omitted.

What was, we may ask, the purpose of the poet when he conceived this new shorter *corpus*?

I will try to put into evidence the major aspects of the longer sequence and only then focus on the alternative one, precisely because it is alternative and constituted by selected pieces of something previously designed.

¹ Croft, P. J. ed. 1984: *The Poems of Robert Sidney*. Oxford, Clarendon Press.

² Katherine Duncan-Jones, Gary Waller, Deborah Wright and Hilton Kelliher.

³ Seven other poems appear in the notebook but everything indicates that they are extrinsic to the sequence (s): they were not numbered by the author, two of them are translations, and they present diversified metrical forms, that prevent their inclusion either in the set sonnets-songs-pastorals, or in a new one.

The main sequence starts in and with splendour. A correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm is established from the very beginning, when the lyric 'I' compares "The fair maid's eyes" to "stars" (Sonnet 1 - line 4) and when he uses the powerful metaphor "O eyes, O light's divine" (Song 1 - line 1). During five poems, the lover rejoices in the contemplation of Beauty, in the presence of the beloved.

Abruptly and immediately afterwards, however, absolute oppositions are introduced, disclosing the first and decisive transformation. In Song 3, all the light and splendour vanish and are replaced by shadows and sadness. From now on, the strong antithesis Past *versus* Present or Light *versus* Darkness will be expanded in innumerable isotopies — to Light belong Beauty, Happiness, Plenitude, Purity, Love, Devotion, a strong Presence; to Darkness, the variations of Grief, Suffering, Want, Abandonment, Emptiness, Absence.

The main sequence is extremely dynamic. The great variety of metrical forms seems to be supporting another sort of diversity: we find intermixed moments of contemplation (Sonnets 1-4; Song 1), of courtly bondage (Sonnets 9-10; Crown; Song 4), of meditation (Songs 17-19), of disruption or laceration (Song 3; Sonnets 5-7),⁴ and, together with them, all the bucolic spaces that sometimes involve the peaceful moments of appeasement, sometimes the distressful moments of grief. Within this diversity, Neoplatonic contemplation and courtly love appear to be fundamental instants of the lyric speech, one stronger than the other, as we are going to see.

The poet uses many *clichés* of courtly tradition: the lady is simultaneously beautiful and cruel, distant and superior, but never physically described, according to the convention — what we perceive is an undefined image, portrayed by gradations of light and brightness; the lover is totally dedicated to her, emphasises the importance of *look* and *see* in her presence, suffers because of her distance, cruelty and absence — but there is not love at first sight and he does not rejoice while suffering because he expands through words the various sentiments of extreme rebelliousness, cynicism and irony (Songs 10, 11 and 12, for example).

In fact, the first five compositions, Sonnets 4 and 9 with the rejection of desire, and Song 20, among many other lines, reinforce explicitly the Neoplatonic conjunction Love—Beauty—Knowledge free from courtly tradition. The feminine entity, always addressed as 'you' (we find no emblematic Cinthia, or Diana, or Stella, or Cælica) shares the macrocosmic superior essence and is the vehicle to knowledge. It is the idea and an ideal of universal Beauty that is contemplated through the lady as mediatory entity. The absence of this fountain of plenitude leads the lyric 'I' to a position of shade, therefore of grief.

His speech is developed in a kind of labyrinth — the varied *loci* are always surprising as they are being discovered — and based upon the complicated web of antithetical and dissimilar experiences, opposite to something linear or pre-outlined. I believe that it is precisely according to this point of view that Robert Sidney's poetic text diverts from certain conventional characteristics.

Having these aspects in mind, let us now approach the alternative sequence and observe its development and its possible deep meaning or meanings.

The 1st. Poem (Sonnet 4) introduces the sense of predestination that, without any other antecedents, implies acceptance. The lyric 'I' departs from an assumption ("These purest flames .../ [...] In whom I live ..." -lines 1 and 3), utters his dependency ("Which are what I am, and I what they are" - line 4), his devotion and fidelity ("I worship her that shineth in these fires" - line 11) and rejects desire ("... with a mind free from false desires, / Untouched of other loves, of vows untrue" - lines 9 and 10).

The 2nd Poem (Sonnet 9) is a direct continuation of the first one. The lover emphasises the importance of the look, the image that penetrates him, occupying his inner self ("When you, or in

⁴ These are just a few examples that may exemplify the various moments of the lyric speech.

your shape an Angel dressed" - line 7), and then reiterates the rejection of desire ("... *desire, as an unworthy guest / ... I did remove*" - lines 3 and 4).

Therefore, in Poem 3 (Sonnet 3), which constitutes the beginning of the high moments in the alternative sequence, the lyric 'I' describes his inwardness full of the beloved's radiant image ("*Beauties born of the heavens, my soul's delight, / The only cause for which I care to see*" - lines 1 and 2).

The high moments proceed in Poems 4, 5, 6 and 7 (Sonnet 1, Song 4, Sonnet 10 and Crown), fusing the idea of extreme beauty, supremacy and distance of the lady with the notion of service and permanent devotion from the lover.

In Poem 8 (Sonnet 6), light disappears ("Cares which in darkness shine, finding her sighs / Eclipsed ..." - lines 4 and 5), the distance between 'you' and 'I' becomes deeper ("That face, those eyes, that voice, those hands, that breast" - line 2) and, according to the convention, the lady's unjust and cruel attitude generates grief (lines 9-14).

In Poem 9 (Sonnet 2), the lover accepts his suffering and rejoices in it ("*The pains which I incessantly sustain, / [...] / Are joys, not griefs*" - lines 1 and 3). He specifies all the degrees of devotion co-inhabiting with non-reciprocity that will be developed in Poem 10 (Pastoral 2).

Poem 11 (Song 1) explores the duality that rules the alternative sequence: total devotion from the lover / permanent distance from the beloved. In this poem, the lyric 'I' combines "love" and "griefs" with the primacy of the look: "*O eyes, O lights divine / [...] You are my dearest lights, / My suns, my clearest day, / The spheres which move my joys, and life's delights / ... see and know the griefs, which in me be.*" (lines 1, 7-9 and 12). Here, he anticipates everything that is going to be delineated in Poem 12 (Song 3).

After the radical transformation within the Song ("*I now poor, sad, alone, / Did once possess a treasure, / But lose did wealth and pleasure / By unjust change of one.*" - lines 57-60), the lyric 'I' finally immerses into negativity — Poem 13 (Sonnet 5) — and will stay there because this is the last poem in the sequence. Consequently, nothing else will happen from now on.

We may conclude that the alternative *corpus* also runs from light to darkness, establishing a new way towards negativity, and that it seems to be based primarily upon the tradition of courtly love, due to the strongest features present in the diction. However, even now, and if we read Poem 13 carefully, I believe that there is, again, a detour from convention. The choice of this sonnet as the final piece in a set of 13 poems,⁵ introduces a notion of movement that shakes the inertia of the 12 previous compositions, as well as the sense of acceptance from someone who does not react. Although the lyric 'I' suffers and through his speech tries to express the negativity of his condition, using meaningful images ("days in sorrows spent", "easeless nights", "love's wounds", "deep scars", "my ruins", "my miseries", "new hurts", "benumbèd sprites" -- stanzas 1 and 2), he considers that "love's blows are no so pleasant game" - line 8. Although the poem and the sequence end with a sense of hopelessness ("Heavy with grief, Till I mine eyes do heave / Unto her face, whence all joys I receive, / And think all nothing that for her I prove. - lines 12-14), even now, he rebels against unfavourableness and repulse ("Then full of pain, my too fond will I curse, / And cry at her as than a tiger worse, / And do forswear all bondage more to love;" - lines 9-11).

Does (or can) the alternative sequence destroy the unity of the main one? I do not think so. In my opinion, this original device corresponds, as we have seen, to a selection and re-ordering of some poems, and constitutes a parallel text. "*With the vigour of his own invention,*⁶ the poet wrote a new lyric speech with already known lines, giving origin to another set of verbal equivalents to express

⁵ The selection of 13 poems is certainly relevant to the final meaning of the alternative sequence, if we consider the sense of unluckiness inherent to this number. The insistence on it occurs in other moments of the poetic text: each stanza of Song 13 has 13 lines; for the unfinished Crown Robert Sidney had in mind 13 Sonnets ("*The rest of the 13 sonnets doth want.*", he wrote at the end of the Crown).

⁶ Sidney, Sir Philip, 1984: *An Apology for Poetry*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, p. 100.

his states of mind and feeling. Much more static and conventional, though, the alternative lyric speech also ends with echoes of the unrest, cynicism and rebelliousness that may be perceived along the main *corpus* because, after all, and surprisingly, “love’s blows are no so pleasant game”.

POEMS

ALTERNATIVE SEQUENCE		MAIN SEQUENCE
1	=	SONNET 4
2	=	SONNET 9
3	=	SONNET 3
4	=	SONNET 1
5	=	SONG 4
6	=	SONNET 10
7	=	CROWN (Sonnets 11-14)
8	=	SONNET 6
9	=	SONNET 2
0	=	PASTORAL 2
1	=	SONG 1
2	=	SONG 3
3	=	SONNET 5

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