

17th Century Lyric Poetry

John Donne and Ben Jonson both grew up outside of the court. Donne was doubly separate from it on account of the Catholic faith of his family, which made him a potential traitor. Their works and lives show them striving to enter the courtly tradition of writing, although in different ways. **Donne** sought to gain a reputation as a “wit”, apparently hoping it might earn him a place at court. He wrote in the mannered style that was fashionable, and sought to astonish his readers by the novelty of his “inventions” so that they would notice and remember him. His attitude is that of an outsider desperately trying to become an insider. When he turns to God in the Divine Poems, there is little difference because he views God as another mighty lord whose favour he tries to win through witty pleading.

Jonson, whose step-father was a brick-layer, chose another model and tried to become a modern Horace, providing ornamental poetry for a social milieu far above his own while at the same time asking to be allowed to criticize it through subtle satire. Jonson’s art was sufficient for the first, but his anger and disgust at what he heard and saw were often too strong for the second. Of all the poets and writers seen so far, Jonson is almost the only one who wrote in order to earn a living. His poems are mostly occasional and his masques are written for a particular court occasion.

Yet when Jonson had his “Works” published in 1616 in a carefully prepared folio, it was intended to promote his image as a writer of classical standing, rather than to be a commercial success. In contrast Donne’s poems were only published after his death; in his lifetime many were copied into the manuscript anthologies of poetry kept by the courtiers and noble poetasters that he had intended to impress.

If the word “Metaphysical” is rejected, and with it the old, widespread idea that there was some kind of “Metaphysical School of Poets” inspired by Donne (there was not), it soon becomes clear how similar Donne and Jonson were. Indeed, Jonson sometimes writes like Donne, although their characters and goals were very different. Above all, born within a year of one another in 1572/3, both grew up in the reign of Elizabeth when the court was producing its most vibrant myths and fictions, that of the noble poet symbolized by Sir Philip Sidney, in particular.

Their styles were deeply marked by the period’s fascination with the mannered **epigram** typified by the works of the Roman poet Martial. It is no coincidence that both Donne and Jonson wrote numerous epigrams and that their poetry is essentially epigrammatic, in the concern for concise phrasing and strikingly neat expression as in the sardonic and satiric eye with which they survey the world. The other great influence on certain 17th century poets such as Crashaw and Cowley was Italian, the use of exaggerated and discordant images known as **conceits**, Petrarchan in origin but developed to new extremes by Giambattista Marino (1569 - 1625) and known as *marinismo*.

Those who wrote lyrics in the first half of the 17th century mostly belonged to a younger generation who grew up under a less romantic but still existent court. Once the court came under attack, then disappeared completely, the literature written for it took on a new value as a sign of the royalist cause. The history of the publication of lyric poetry between 1640 and 1660 is very largely a history of covert royalist resistance. At the same time, the bases for the modern manner of publishing and selling poetry as a commercial enterprise were being laid down. The audience for the lyric was no longer limited to an elegant few.

Religious poets

George Herbert (1593 - 1633)

The life of George Herbert makes a remarkable contrast with the lives of the other poets of his age, because almost nothing happened to him. Yet his poems are counted by many readers as among the most perfect in the English language, and are surely some of the finest Christian poems ever written. His father died when he was still a child. His mother, **Magdalen Herbert**, was only about five years older than **John Donne**, whom she first met in 1599. By coincidence, her first husband's family name was the same as that of the Herberts of Wilton (Sir Philip Sidney's sister Mary became Mary Herbert countess of Pembroke by her marriage). There was no relationship between the two families. George Herbert's family was of Welsh origin.

Donne was deeply impressed by Magdalen Herbert's beauty and character, he addressed a number of poems and letters to her. She was a considerable patron of young writers. From 1607 Donne often visited her home near Charing Cross. In 1609 she married Sir John Danvers, a man only half her age, and became **Lady Danvers**. Donne continued to visit and correspond with her, and spent six months in their house in Chelsea in 1625; he also preached a memorial sermon when she died in 1627.

Donne was close to her eldest son, Edward, later **Baron Herbert of Cherbury**, (1582 - 1648) who must have been like him in many ways. It is one of the ironies of history that among twentieth-century scholars of English literature, George Herbert is ranked so much more highly than his brother. Edward Herbert succeeded brilliantly in the royal service, lived much of the time in France, and was ambassador to France 1619 - 1624. From 1629 he was a member of the king's high councils. In his writing we find a style very similar to Donne's, full of complicated figures and conceits. His autobiography is a remarkable work.

Edward Herbert was an influential philosopher; his *De Veritate* (On Truth, 1624) in which he presents a form of Deism, a naturally deduced belief in God that does not require Church or doctrines, made him the "**Father of English Deism**". He wrote poems in a style at least as complex as Donne's, either because of direct influence or because his mind was so similar to Donne's. Donne felt very close to him and sometimes wrote poems in response to his. Both of them had characters that combined the solemn and the mocking.

George Herbert was more than ten years younger than his brother, twenty years younger than Donne, who only mentions him twice in his surviving poems and letters. They were certainly not very close friends, although Donne sent him a poem in 1615, together with a copy of his new seal, to which Herbert replied in verse. It was to Edward that Donne wrote personal letters.

For a long time George was at Cambridge university, becoming a fellow of Trinity College in 1616 and public orator (maker of official atin speeches) in 1620. Like his mother, to whom he was very attached, he was a devout Christian. When he was growing up, some English theologians began to reject the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, according to which God has decided who is going to be saved and nothing we do can make any difference. Instead, in the early years of the 17th century, "Arminian" theologians encouraged a regular life of prayer and meditation of the Scriptures, a sacramental Christianity far closer to the Catholic tradition. This developed into what is known as "High Church Anglicanism" in the time of Archbishop Laud and Herbert's poems express similar approaches.

George Herbert was slow to "take orders" (become an ordained minister). After many years in Cambridge he seems to have felt the need for a new direction in his life, either public life in the court or ministry in the Church. By 1625 he had decided to enter the Church; in that year he was staying with his mother at Chelsea when Donne was there (Donne mentions

his presence in a letter). He had already been made a Deacon; in the English Church as in the Catholic this is usually a step to being ordained a priest soon afterwards.

Herbert did not become a priest until 1630, but from 1626 he was responsible for a parish in Huntingdonshire. It was not far from **Little Gidding**, where **Nicholas Ferrar** and his brothers with their families had recently established a new kind of pious community, not unlike a monastery, with regular prayers, community service, and study. The community enjoyed the support of the king, who visited it (he was a pious and moral-living man). It was detested by more extreme Protestants. In 1646, Cromwell's soldiers raided the house and expelled the people living there.

Herbert visited Little Gidding and was extremely close to its founder. Just before he died, he sent the manuscript of his poems to Nicholas Ferrar, asking him to decide whether to publish them or burn them. Many of the poems seem to have been written while he was deciding whether to enter the Church. In April 1630, Herbert became rector (parish priest) of **Bemerton**, a small rural village near Salisbury. He was ordained priest in September 1630 and served humbly the simple people of that remote village until he died of tuberculosis in 1633.

On receiving the manuscript containing Herbert's poems, Ferrar read them with deep emotion and immediately had them published. They formed a small book entitled *The Temple* with a preface by Ferrar briefly suggesting Herbert's personal devotion in prayer and humility as a priest. Very few people seem to have read any of the poems during Herbert's lifetime but the book was an immediate success, reprinted at least nine times in the seventeenth century. It was read especially by the people in the national church who had begun to consider themselves "Anglican" as opposed to Calvinist or Congregationalist, but many leading puritans were also impressed by it. King Charles read it in prison.

In 1652 a prose text by Herbert on his ideal of the country priest, *A Priest to the Temple*, was published with other writings as *Herbert's Remains*, with a much more substantial biographical preface by an Anglican priest, a royalist, Barnabas Oley. In 1670, **Izaak Walton** published his famous "hagiography" *The Life of Mr. George Herbert* which depended partly on Oley's work although Walton had known Herbert personally. The work of Oley and Walton firmly established the image of Herbert as an Anglican saint, pious and humble in life and death. This was to reduce the appeal of his poems in later times; the poems were often seen in the eighteenth century as coarse and naive expressions of a religiosity not in tune with the spirit of the age. Yet some were turned into hymns that are still sung in the late twentieth century.

Herbert has come back into critical favour in the 20th century but the fact that his poems are all on explicitly Christian themes limits what can be said about them in the light of modern theoretical approaches. His poems are admirable in their formal variety, Herbert writes in many stanzaic forms as well as the sonnet. Apart from a long opening poem, "The Church-Porch" and an equally long final poem, "The Church Militant", *The Temple* has no overall structure. The remaining 160 or more poems are given the general title "The Church" and are in no apparent order, although the earlier ones seem more concerned with themes of repentance and near the end there are a number of poems about death and life in heaven. A small number are emblematic "shaped poems" in which the length of lines varies to produce a pictorial effect, an altar ("The Altar") or angels' wings ("Easter Wings"), for example.

Herbert was deeply familiar with the Bible and much of his imagery derives from it; he is fond of allegorical applications, readily seeing parallels between everyday things and the mysteries of heaven as Jesus does in the Gospel parables. He has read with some attention the mannered poems of earlier poets such as Sir Philip Sidney, both in *Astrophel and Stella* and in the *Arcadia*. Sometimes Herbert uses devices such as echo ("Heaven"), varying refrains ("Virtue"), dramatic monologue ("The Collar"). A few poems are miniature

narratives, evoking some kind of allegorical dreamlike experience (“The Pilgrimage”). The great majority are in the form of meditative prayers in which the individual human soul (not necessarily Herbert’s) struggles with the conflicting aspects of the relationship with God.

Donne’s religious poems close when the speaker’s wit has succeeded in finding a way of expressing a prayer for mercy in such a way that God will be obliged to grant it, or deny Himself. Herbert’s poems go much further than Donne’s in enacting saving Grace itself. In that sense, Herbert can seem less exciting than Donne because of the way his poems seem invariably to end in harmony. Sometimes, as in Donne, the harmony is one that God is invited to make: “Oh let thy blessed spirit bear a part, / And make up our defects with his sweet art.” (“Easter”) There is a strong awareness of the need for God to do all the work if the person is to be saved; at the same time, many poems express thanks and praise, for Herbert shows a calmer assurance in God’s love than Donne.

According to Walton’s *Life*, when he sent *The Temple* to Nicholas Ferrar the dying Herbert described the poems as “a picture of the many spiritual Conflicts that have past betwixt God and my Soul, before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus my Master: in whose service I have now found perfect freedom”. In writing them, Herbert had made a clear exclusion of secular themes of poetry, as in deciding to be ordained he set aside all worldly honour. His poetic choice of simplicity is parodically represented in the poem “**Jordan (1)**”

Shepherds are honest people; let them sing:
Riddle who list, for me, and pull for prime:
I envy no man’s nightingale or spring;
Nor let them punish me with loss of rhyme,
Who plainly say, *My God, my King*.

In “**Jordan (2)**” he echoes the opening poem of *Astrophel and Stella* for the same purpose:

When first my lines of heav’nly joys made mention,
Such was their lustre, they did so excel,
That I sought out quaint words, and trim inventions;
My thoughts began to burnish, sprout, and swell,

(...)

But while I bustled, I might hear a friend
Whisper, *How wide is all this long pretence!*
There is in love a sweetness ready penn’d:
Copy out only that, and save expense.

While professing in these poems to reject the complexity and artificiality of courtly verse, Herbert is as attracted as any other poet of his time by conceit, multiplication of images, and surprise. This gives us, for example, the only sonnet in English without a single verb, “**Prayer (1)**”:

Prayer the Church’s banquet, Angels’ age,
God’s breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav’n and earth;
(...)
Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul’s blood,

The land of spices; something understood.

After so many exalted metaphors, the simple, unexpected “something understood” disorients; it is not clear if it too refers to what prayer is, or if it indicates what may have been happening in the reader in the course of the poem. There seems to be no tension in such a poem, until the reader realizes that all the epithets applied to prayer only have meaning to someone who has experienced prayer, and that the extended list serves mainly to suggest the impossibility of saying what prayer is, beyond the undefined “something” that is “understood”.

Among the “parable poems” we find Herbert rewriting Genesis in the light of the myth of Pandora’s Box to make “**The Pulley**”:

When God at first made man,
Having a glass of blessings standing by,
“Let us,” said he, “pour on him all we can:
Let the world’s riches, which dispersed lie,
Contract into a span.”

So strength first made a way;
Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honour, pleasure.
When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that, alone of all his treasure,
Rest in the bottom lay.

“For if I should,” said he,
“Bestow this jewel also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts instead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature;
So both should losers be.

“Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlessness:
Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
May toss him to my breast.”

In this poem, Herbert’s title is evidently designed to stress the message, which again demands reflexion. The poem seems harmonious, asserting a positive, renaissance view of human nature richly endowed with blessings; yet its theme is an endless sense of dissatisfaction with anything less than God. Most striking is the image it offers of a ruefully pragmatic God who is ready to accept that people may well turn to faith when they are disillusioned with the world, rather than out of any more immediate sense of love.

The characteristic feature that appeals most in Herbert is the sheer beauty of the words and images evoking the experience of Nature in such a poem as “**Virtue**”:

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,
The bridal of the earth and sky:
The dew shall weep thy fall tonight;
For thou must die.

(...)

Only a sweet and virtuous soul,
Like seasoned timber, never gives;
But though the whole world turn to coal,
Then chiefly lives.

This poem is one of many in which Herbert asserts the value of the invisible world of God over the transience and vanity of the visible world. This mystical vision of life helps to explain why his poems have no apparent social dimension; they take their place in the Christian tradition that sees this world as a Vale of Tears through which we must pass and hope to reach heaven unscathed.

There are poems which briefly evoke the possibility of revolt against God, “**The Collar**” being the most dramatic:

I struck the board and cried, “No more;
I will abroad!
What? shall I ever sigh and pine?
My lines and life are free, free as the road,
Loose as the wind, as large as store.
Shall I still be in suit?”

(...)

Away! take heed;
I will abroad.
Call in thy death’s-head there; tie up thy fears.
He that forbears
To suit and serve his need,
Deserves his load.”
But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild
At every word,
Methought I heard one calling, *Child!*
And I replied, *My Lord.*

The ending suggests that Herbert had no direct experience of revolt put into action; instead, he was kept pure and innocent, always intensely aware of God’s presence even when life seemed to be luring him away. He shows none of the radical division of Donne’s life between secular and sacred. Rather, his character must have been touched by times of inner melancholy, the depressive tendency that Milton evokes in “Il Penseroso”. The experience of emerging from such a dark period gave birth to one of Herbert’s most sensitive lyrics, “**The Flower**”:

How fresh, O Lord, how sweet and clean
Are thy returns! even as the flowers in spring;
To which, besides their own demean,
The late-past frosts tributes of pleasure bring.
Grief melts away
Like snow in May,
As if there were no such cold thing.

Who would have thought my shriveled heart
Could have recovered greenness? It was gone
Quite underground; as flowers depart
To see their mother-root, when they have blown,
Where they together
All the hard weather,
Dead to the world, keep house unknown.

(...)

And now in age I bud again,
After so many deaths I live and write;
I once more smell the dew and rain,
And relish versing. Oh, my only light,
It cannot be
That I am he
On whom thy tempests fell all night.

These are thy wonders, Lord of love,
To make us see we are but flowers that glide;
Which when we once can find and prove,
Thou hast a garden for us where to bide;
Who would be more,
Swelling through store,
Forfeit their Paradise by their pride.

The desire for heaven on which this poem ends cannot be separated from the theme of the desire for death. The last five poems in “The Church” deal respectively with Death, Dooms-day, Judgement, and Heaven, while the last of all is entitled “**Love (3)**”. This final poem, a dialogue, is an evocation of the heavenly banquet and of the Christian’s relationship with God, for Love is the name here representing God (“God is love” writes St. John):

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-ey’d Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lack’d anything.

A guest, I answer’d, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr’d them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?

My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

In theory, the life of the poet has nothing to do with an evaluation of the poems, but in reality this is not true. The awareness that John Donne was a libertine who suddenly fell passionately in love, ruined his career, and had difficulty reconciling his youthful folly and immorality with the ideals of serious Christianity, adds interest to the strains echoed in his poems. Herbert's reputation for deep piety and unspotted Christian living have had the opposite effect, suggesting that his poems are devoid of the contradictions that most people find so fascinating.

Herbert is never intent on using poetry to define himself, the I who speaks these lyrics is a generalized *persona* that any reader may make their own. The values his poems stress are inevitably conservative values of humility, submission to God's ways, eagerness to leave this world behind. With their love of perfect form they are essentially classical poems and the use of concrete images to represent immaterial realities is hardly enough to set him beside Donne or his own brother Edward as a "Metaphysical". Herbert is the finest poet of Christian spirituality that England ever produced, and the religious works of Donne, Crashaw, or Hopkins cannot compare with his when viewed as a whole.

Richard Crashaw (1612/3 - 1649)

No poet is as little studied as Crashaw among those admitted as major 17th century poets. He is largely despised for the imagery of lines found in a poem on Mary Magdalen's tears:

And now where'er he strays
Among the Galilean mountains
Or more unwelcome ways
He's followed by two faithful fountains;
Two walking baths; two weeping motions;
Portable and compendious oceans.

Similar odd conceits are found in many of his works; in addition he wrote mainly religious verse, became a Catholic, died abroad. As a result he does not fit into generally accepted critical frameworks. Early in the 20th century, critics tried to class him as a "Metaphysical" poet belonging to the "school of Donne" but the comparison is not convincing. Others have called his verse "Baroque" but since this term is not used of other English writers it means little. Like each of the other poets in this period, he had his own reasons for writing and developed his own personal style. His Catholicism has often been exaggerated, many of his poems were written before his conversion in France.

Crashaw's father was a fiercely anti-Catholic puritan. He owned a collection of Catholic books which he read in order to write against their teaching. His son Richard seems to have read the same books in order to learn from them. He attended Cambridge University, where he received his BA in 1634 and became a Fellow of Peterhouse in 1635. This was a particularly high-church college, with a Master who was close to Archbishop Laud. He was a friend of Abraham Cowley and often visited Little Gidding. During the Civil War he left

Cambridge and then England, going to Paris where many royalists lived in exile. By 1646 he had become a Catholic; he was poor and sick. In 1649 he went to take up a position at the famous shrine in Loretto (Italy) but he died within the year.

Crashaw was first of all a writer of epigrams; he published a volume of Latin epigrams on religious topics in 1634. In 1646, when he was already abroad, a volume of poems in English was published, *Steps to the Temple*, which contained a separate section of secular poems entitled *The Delights of the Muses*. After he died, friends in Paris published a collection of his late writing, *Carmen Deo Nostro* (Song to our God). Crashaw translated book one of *The Massacre of the Innocents* by the Italian Giambattista Marino (1569 - 1625) who was famous for his verbal conceits and extravagantly ornamental imagery.

Despite the echo of Herbert's *The Temple* in the 1646 title, Crashaw's art owes little or nothing to him. Instead we must look to the **sacred epigram**, with its condensed expressions of religious thoughts, to **traditional hymns**, and the liking for conceit found in both. Crashaw's poems are marked by a strong musical sense, such as that in these lines from the long "oratorio" "In the Holy Nativity of Our Lord God: A Hymn Sung as by the Shepherds":

Gloomy night embraced the place
Where the noble infant lay.
The babe looked up and showed his face:
In spite of darkness, it was day.
It was thy day, Sweet! and did rise,
Not from the East, but from thine eyes.

Winter chid aloud, and sent
The angry North to wage his wars;
The North forgot his fierce intent,
And left perfumes instead of scars.
By those sweet eyes' persuasive powers,
Where he meant frost, he scattered flowers.

Crashaw sought to awaken in himself and his readers an emotional devotion to Christ; he often used a traditional method concentrating on the sufferings of Christ on the cross, as in the poem "On the Wounds of Our Crucified Lord":

O these wakeful wounds of thine!
Are they mouths? or are they eyes?
Be they mouths, or be they eyne,
Each bleeding part some one supplies.

Lo! a mouth, whose full-bloomed lips
At too dear a rate are roses.
Lo! a bloodshot eye! that weeps
And many a cruel tear discloses.

O thou that on this foot hast laid
Many a kiss and many a tear,
Now thou shalt have all repaid,
Whatsoever thy charges were.

This foot hath got a mouth and lips
To pay the sweet sum of thy kisses;
To pay thy tears, an eye that weeps
Instead of tears such gems as this is.

The difference only this appears
(Nor can the change offend),
The debt is paid in ruby-tears
Which thou in pearls didst lend.

Crashaw certainly had a passionate side lacking in Herbert, and the fact that many of his most intense poems are either about women or addressed to women has drawn interest. These lines of *carpe diem* urgency from a poem addressed to the exiled Countess of Denbigh, urging her to become a Catholic, take on quite another, erotic, meaning if read out of context:

To save your life, kill your delay.
It is love's siege, and sure to be
Your triumph, though his victory.
'Tis cowardice that keeps this field,
And want of courage not to yield.
Yield, then, O yield, that love may win
The fort at last, and let life in.
Yield quickly, lest perhaps you prove
Death's prey before the prize of love.
This fort of your fair self, if't be not won,
He is repulsed indeed; but you are undone.

Some interest attaches to the elaborate headings Crashaw devised for his poems, with several lines of explanation, sometimes an adage (epigram or saying), and a pictorial emblem as well, like the firmly locked heart that precedes the dedication of this poem:

TO THE
Noblest & best of Ladyes, the
Countesse of Denbigh.
Perswading her to Resolution in Religion,
& to render her selfe without further
delay into the Communion of
the Catholick Church.

Reference to the emblematic tradition will probably help readers struggling to find an entry to the complex verbal pictures that Crashaw favours.

Henry Vaughan (1621 - 1695)

The other main religious poet of the century, Vaughan was deeply influenced by Herbert, yet his poems belong to another world, in many ways already the modern world. Vaughan was born in Breconshire, in Wales; Herbert's family was of Welsh origin too, as was Donne's. As a young man, Vaughan attended Oxford and the law schools of London

before taking the royalist side in the Civil War. The defeat of the king prompted his “retreat” back to his home, where he became a doctor.

After publishing two small volumes of secular poems in 1646 (*Poems*) and 1651 (*Olor Iscanus*, Swan of Usk), he produced the religious poems for which he is mainly admired in a first edition of *Silex Scintillans* (The Fiery Flint) in 1651. This was followed by a second, enlarged edition with the same title in 1655. This was almost his last publication, except for *Thalia Rediviva* (1678) containing poems by him and his twin brother Thomas. Thomas Vaughan was deeply interested in the “alternative science” of alchemy inspired by the writings of “Hermes Trismegistus” and the Rosicrucians. Thomas’s interests may have suggested to Henry his way of seeking correspondences between the visible and the invisible world, although any form of Platonism would have led in the same direction.

Like Andrew Marvell, Vaughan wrote his most interesting poems during the Civil War and Interregnum. We have no exact dates for them, but his retreat to Wales indicates his reaction to the social events of the time. His poems suggest the search for new directions in a time of confusion and loss. He had been only briefly in England, was not part of a poetic social milieu, his contacts were with printed books of poetry, rather than with poets. His time in the royalist milieu can just have been enough to stir his imagination and indicate what had been lost. Herbert turned his back on the court and aimed at Heaven; for Vaughan there was no court left but he too turned to Heaven. He writes in more directly personal terms than Herbert though in lines very close to his, sometimes directly quoting him. The genesis of his “mystical” vocation as a poet seems to underlie the poem “**Regeneration**”:

A ward, and still in bonds, one day
 I stole abroad;
It was high spring, and all the way
 Primrosed and hung with shade;
 Yet it was frost within,
 And surly winds
Blasted my infant buds, and sin
 Like clouds eclipsed my mind.

(...)

The unthrift sun shot vital gold,
 A thousand pieces,
And heaven its azure did unfold,
 Checkered with snowy fleeces;
 The air was all in spice,
 And every bush
A garland wore; thus fed my eyes,
 But all the ear lay hush.

Only a little fountain lent
 Some use for ears,
And on the dumb shades language spent,
 The music of her tears;
 I drew her near, and found
 The cistern full
Of divers stones, some bright and round,
 Others ill-shaped and dull.

(...)

...

Here musing long, I heard
 A rushing wind
Which still increased, but whence it stirred
 No where I could not find.

I turned me round, and to each shade
 Dispatched an eye
To see if any leaf had made
 Least motion or reply;
But while I listening sought
 My mind to ease
By knowing where 'twas, or where not,
 It whispered, "Where I please."

"Lord," then said I, "on me one breath,
And let me die before my death!"

Many critics feel that in general Vaughan's poems start bravely but fail to maintain the same height to the end. This may be a failing, it is also inherent in their theme. Vaughan's poems often celebrate moments of mysterious insight; it is the nature of such moments not to last, the poet's return to the rather dull, unsatisfactory life in this world is a necessary part of the experience.

In many of Vaughan's poems we find him taking delight in nature or else recalling times when he experienced such delight and contrasting them with a desolate present. The theme of nature is perhaps connected with the theme of Paradise, glimpsed and lost. His raptures are not those of Wordsworth yet his readers cannot resist making the comparison, especially between "**The Retreat**" and Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality":

Happy those early days! when I
Shined in my angel infancy.
Before I understood this place
Appointed for my second race,
Or taught my soul to fancy aught
But a white celestial thought;
When yet I had not walked above
A mile or two from my first love,
And looking back, at that short space,
Could see some glimpse of His bright face;
When on some gilded cloud or flower
My gazing soul would dwell an hour,
And in those weaker glories spy
Some shadows of eternity;
Before I taught my tongue to wound
My conscience with a sinful sound,
Or had the black art to dispense
A several sin to every sense,
But felt through all this fleshly dress

Bright shoots of everlastingness....

This theme of lost Paradise is also found in the start of “**Corruption**”, with fallen humanity still close to the original experience of Eden:

...

Nor was heaven cold unto him; for each day
The valley or the mountain
Afforded visits, and still Paradise lay
In some green shade or fountain....

Only time has passed and the glory has departed:

Almighty Love! where art thou now? Mad man
Sits down and freezeth on....

Sin triumphs still, and man is sunk below
The centre, and his shroud.
All's in deep sleep and night: thick darkness lies
And hatcheth o'er thy people--
But hark! what trumpet's that? what angel cries,
“Arise! thrust in thy sickle”?

The dramatic voice that echoes suddenly at the end of several of these poems, reversing the direction of their movement, is taken from Herbert, but serves other purposes for Vaughan. Here the voice indicates an apocalyptic dimension, a divine intervention poised imminent over the darkness and absence that the poem has been describing. Out of this emerges a sense that the poet's voice is a prophetic voice heralding a new day, God's day bringing judgement and light to the dark, fallen world. In this, Vaughan looks back to Spenser and anticipates certain 18th century “pre-Romantic” poets' notions of the prophetic poet.

Readers often acclaim the opening lines of “The World” but then regret the obscurity of the last lines; that would probably not worry Vaughan, who seems to care little for his readers. His poems usually address God, or the dead, or himself; the reader is simply permitted to overhear the monologue and its final response, if any comes. “**The World**” presents quite clearly Vaughan's attitude of “retreat” from a society and a world whose follies he deplored. This is the theme of *contemptus mundi* contempt of the world that has been popular since Old Testament times, and there is little in the poem that links it specifically to the particular situation of Commonwealth England. It is a striking satire in biting tones, at times echoing passages from St John's Gospel:

I saw eternity the other night
Like a great ring of pure and endless light,
All calm as it was bright;
And round beneath it, Time, in hours, days, years,
Driven by the spheres,
Like a vast shadow moved, in which the world
And all her train were hurled.
The doting lover in his quaintest strain
Did there complain....

The darksome statesman hung with weights and woe
Like a thick midnight fog moved there so slow
 He did not stay or go;
Condemning thoughts, like sad eclipses, scowl
 Upon his soul,
And clouds of crying witnesses without
 Pursued him with one shout.....

The fearful miser on a heap of rust
Sat pining all his life there, did scarce trust
 His own hands with the dust;
Yet would not place one piece above, but lives
 In fear of thieves....

Yet some, who all this while did weep and sing,
And sing and weep, soared up into the ring;
 But most would use no wing.
“O fools!” said I, “thus to prefer dark night
 Before true light!
To live in grotts and caves, and hate the day
 Because it shows the way,
The way which from this dead and dark abode
 Leads up to God,
A way where you might tread the sun and be
 More bright than he!”
But, as I did their madness so discuss,
 One whispered thus:
“This ring the bridegroom did for none provide,
 But for his bride.”

Vaughan’s poetry focusses on a transcendent world beyond the visible universe, often identified with the world beyond death:

They are all gone into the world of light!
And I alone sit ling’ring here;
Their very memory is clear and bright,
And my sad thoughts doth clear.

In this evocation of the solitary poet pondering in a world from which others have departed, Vaughan is anticipating the attitude found in many of the Pre-Romantics, although their main reference was Milton’s *Il Penseroso*.

A poem like “**The Waterfall**” passes quickly beyond its starting point in nature to explore the ways in which life here is full of signs of a more essential reality beyond it:

With what deep murmurs through time’s silent stealth
Doth thy transparent, cool, and watery wealth
 Here flowing fall,
 And chide, and call,
As if his liquid, loose retinue stayed

Ling'ring, and were of this steep place afraid,
The common pass
Where, clear as glass,
All must descend,
Not to an end,
But quickened by this steep and rocky grave,
Rise to a longer course more bright and brave.

This is characteristic of much Christian poetry, but it is also a feature that might be read as characterizing the times in which Vaughan was writing. The Civil War and Commonwealth were deeply troubled times when the present laid no claim to permanence and when nothing seemed to suggest that better days were coming. Where some poets evoked memories of the courtly past to inspire hope for the future, Vaughan turned to a more eschatological dimension.

Thomas Traherne (1637 - 1674)

There are similarities between the writings of Vaughan and Traherne, their spiritual characters must have been rather similar. The main difference lies in the fact that Vaughan published his poems in his lifetime, and so could become known. Traherne's writings may have been known to his close family and friends, neither his poems nor his prose meditations called "Centuries" were published until the early 20th century. He has therefore had no role in the development of the poetic tradition. Readers of Traherne are mainly struck by his vibrant way of evoking childhood experiences of nature, similar to Vaughan and Wordsworth. This theme is expressed in his prose "Centuries" and in poems of which these stanzas from "**Wonder**" are often quoted:

How like an angel came I down!
How bright are all things here!
When first among his works I did appear,
O how their glory did me crown!
The world resembled his eternity,
In which my soul did walk
And everything that I did see
Did with me talk.

The skies in their magnificence,
The lively, lovely air;
O how divine, how soft, how sweet, how fair!
The stars did entertain my sense,
And all the works of God so bright and pure,
So rich and great did seem,
As if they ever must endure,
In my esteem.

In the **Third Century** we find similar ideas expressed in prose:

Certainly Adam in Paradise had not more sweet and curious apprehensions of the world than I when I was a child. (...) The corn was orient and immortal wheat,

which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown. I thought it stood from everlasting to everlasting. The dust and stones of the street were as precious as gold. The gates were at first the end of the world, the green trees when I saw them first through one of the gates transported and ravished me; their sweetness and unusual beauty made my heart to leap, and almost mad with ecstasy, they were such strange and wonderful things. The men! O what venerable and reverend creatures did the ages seem! Immortal Cherubims! And young men glittering and sparkling angels and maids strange seraphic pieces of life and beauty! Boy and girls tumbling in the street and playing were moving jewels. I knew not that they were born or should die, but all abided eternally as they were in their proper places. (...)

Like certain lines in Vaughan, they serve to remind us of the importance of the themes of loss and nostalgia in English poetry both before and since the Commonwealth. They also suggest the way in which literature develops out of writers' memories of their childhood capacity for wonder. Yet implicit in them is a sense of loss that may be connected with longing for the days of the pre-Civil War era.

Secular Lyrics

The "Sons of Ben" and the "Cavalier Poets"

The lyric poets writing in the first sixty years of the 17th century resist modern attempts to group them into neat groups. In that, they are already modern. The poets writing on religious themes have been studied at length because the religious lyrics of Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, and Vaughan have never been equalled. Their use of complex metaphors in formal rhetorical figures allowed them to write poems that were at the same time personal and general and that have been read with particular sympathy in the twentieth century.

The secular lyrics of the period are less intense and have largely ceased to be read for pleasure. Histories of literature often refer to "the **Sons of Ben**" or "the **Tribe of Ben**" (in imitation of the Old Testament Israel's tribal names) because this was a group or coterie that identified itself as such and included poets who wrote as conscious inheritors of the classical norms established by Jonson.

As Jonson grew older, the fact that he had no sons to call him "father" must have become hard for him, and he formed an association of bright young men to keep merry company with him. They used to meet to drink and talk in the Apollo Room (from a bust of Apollo), an upstairs room of some size in the Devil Tavern. Among those welcomed there, a small group of especially close friends came to call themselves Jonson's "sons". These included the poets Richard Lovelace and Robert Herrick. Other poets who were not part of the group considered Jonson to have been the finest English poet and consciously followed him.

A name often given to these same writers is "**Cavalier poets**". The name 'cavalier' was used for the gentlemen and nobles fighting for the king. The Puritans hated them, Milton referred to "the ragged infantry of stews and brothels, the spawn and shipwreck of taverns and dicing houses". For the royalists, the cavalier was the inheritor of the old courtly traditions of courtesy and chivalry: brave, loyal, and handsome.

The poets usually grouped as Cavalier Poets are Thomas Carew (1595 - 1640), Sir John Suckling (1609 - 1642), and Richard Lovelace (1618 - 1657). Robert Herrick is often included in the group because of his association with Lovelace as a Son of Ben, but he was a priest in the Church of England, never a soldier. What unites these poets is the classical

elegance of style they learned to value from Jonson and a certain lightness of touch. They do not form a “school” and were not personally very close to one another.

The works of Carew and Suckling were published in printed form after their deaths: Carew’s in 1640, Suckling’s in 1646 and 1659. Carew was mostly writing in the 1620s and early 1630s, Suckling in the 1630s. Their poems were written before the final destruction of the court in the Civil War; they were published as a gesture of royalist resistance. Lovelace published much of his work in 1648, followed in 1649 by Herrick, in the same spirit.

The **publication** of such poems during the Civil War and Commonwealth gave them a political significance they did not originally have. The posthumous publication of the works of Donne and Herbert in 1633 served as a model, looking back to Jonson’s “Works” of 1616. The publisher **Humphrey Moseley** deserves special recognition, for he published between 1642 and 1651 volumes of works by Quarles, Milton, Waller, Crashaw, Shirley, Suckling, Cowley, Carew, Cartwright, Stanley, and Vaughan. He established a market for volumes of poetry by individual poets, living as well as dead. Other publishers continued to produce posthumous volumes, that of Marvell’s works produced in 1681, three years after his death, being perhaps among the most celebrated.

Robert Herrick (1591 - 1674)

Herrick’s father was a goldsmith, like other members of the family. His father fell from a window and died soon after Robert was born; when he was sixteen he became an apprentice under his wealthy uncle, also a goldsmith. In 1613, when he was already over twenty, he entered St John’s College, Cambridge. In 1623 he was ordained as a priest in the Church of England. He seems to have written occasional poems from an early age; back in London from Cambridge, he became part of the circle of Jonson and in 1625 he was ranked equal with Jonson and Drayton by Richard James in his *Muses’ Dirge*. In 1627 he joined a military expedition to France organized by the Duke of Buckingham to help the Protestants. It was a disaster but as a reward for his services as chaplain he was given charge of the parish of Dean Prior, a small village in Devon, very far from London.

It may be supposed that most of his lyric poetry was written during his years in Devon. A number of poems refer to the traditional rural festivals and games that the Puritans considered “pagan” and tried to abolish. He must have been very bored there, and surely longed to be back in London. In fact he seems once to have tried to return, leaving the village for a while and going to live with a woman nearly thirty years younger than himself. He never married, his poems suggest a man inclined to enjoy looking at women rather than respond romantically to them.

In 1647 the Church of England was reformed by Parliament, the old system of priests and bishops was abolished, and Herrick lost his position. He returned to London, perhaps hoping to find again the charmed literary circle of his early years, and in 1648 arranged for his poems to be published as *Hesperides*, together with a section of religious poems under the title *His Noble Numbers*. He must surely have been disappointed. He stayed in London, helped by friends and family, during the Interregnum. In 1660 the old system of Church government was restored and Herrick returned to Dean Prior for the rest of his life. There is no sign that he continued to write poetry.

Herrick’s art is that of a craftsman, it might be compared to the goldsmith’s craft in its care for the smallest details of word order and rhythm. Swinburne called him “the greatest song-writer ever born of English race”. The huge collection of poems in *Hesperides* seems to have no thematic unity or overall structure. The poems are mostly epigrammatic exercises in wit. The most striking thing about Herrick’s single volume is the sheer size of it. The

Hesperides comprise 1,130 poems, and the *Noble Numbers* offer an additional 272 religious poems.

Certainly, Herrick published his work in a spirit of resistance; the poems addressed to or celebrating members of the royal family have titles printed in large block capitals. The poems on topics he mentions in the opening “Argument of His Book”, ‘Maypoles, Hock carts, wassails, wakes’ are in opposition to the Puritan campaigns designed to abolish all the traditional rural festivities considered to be ‘pagan’.

There is an immense charm in poems like “Corinna’s Going A-Maying” with its urgent tone:

Each flower has wept and bowed toward the east
Above an hour since, yet you not dressed;
Nay, not so much as out of bed?
When all the birds have matins said,
And sung their thankful hymns, ‘tis sin
Nay, profanation to keep in...

If Corinna is still in bed, it may be because she does not wish to go out with the poem’s speaker. The early morning of May 1 was notorious for kissing and the rather loose morality observed by the young men and girls out in the fields but this poem’s last stanza excuses all that as “harmless folly” and develops instead a rather old-fashioned “*carpe diem*” theme:

Our life is short, and our days run
As fast away as does the sun;
And, as a vapor or a drop of rain
Once lost, can ne’er be found again,
So when or you or I are made
A fable, song, or fleeting shade,
All love, all liking, all delight
Lies drowned with us in endless night.
Then while time serves, and we are but decaying,
Come, my Corinna, come, let’s go a-Maying.

Herrick’s liking for the theme of time, which looks back to the Elizabethan lyricists’ concern with transience and mutability, is best seen in one of his most perfect lyrics, “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time”:

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old time is still a-flying;
And this same flower that smiles today,
Tomorrow will be dying.

The following two stanzas develop the theme in images of the sun running toward its setting and of age being a process of decline, ending:

Then be not coy, but use your time,
And while ye may, go marry;
For having lost but once your prime,
You may for ever tarry.

The message “go marry” is unconventional, that of a wise pastor rather than a libertine rake. The insistence on marriage suggests that Herrick enjoyed playing jokes in his verse.

Many modern critics, followers of New Criticism’s concern with perfect form and thematic unity, have admired some of the poems evoking the visual effects of women’s clothes in a rather fetishistic manner. Yet some of these poems are little more than jokes, amusing by unexpected turns of phrase or combinations of words, as in “Delight in Disorder”:

A sweet disorder in the dress
Kindles in clothes a wantonness.
A lawn about the shoulders thrown
Into a fine distraction;
An erring lace, which here and there
Enthralls the crimson stomacher...

There are poems that suggest romantic involvement but they too seem like games and the last poem of the *Hesperides*, an epigram, sums up his own image of himself: “Jocund his muse was, but his life was chaste”. The vast number and varied themes of the collection make any overview impossible. Herrick’s work reflects his need to fill the empty hours and although he can be greatly admired, he had little or no influence on other writers. His *Noble Numbers* include poems that are prayers supposedly spoken by children. Perhaps he wrote them for the children of his parish. They are interesting as some of the earliest examples of the “literature for children” that developed in the later 17th and 18th century, and that Blake took as his model in the “Songs of Innocence”.

Thomas Carew (1595 - 1640)

It is not strictly correct to call Carew (pronounced *Carey*) a “cavalier poet” because that name only starts to have real meaning around 1640, when he was already dead. He was a poet who lived and wrote at court in the 1620s and 30s. He was a courtier at a time when, under Charles I, the court was almost completely isolated from the mainstream of English life. He seems to have cultivated a style as an idle libertine that was to become popular at the Restoration court of Charles II but as a poet he shows a sharp mind and a good sense of what now is called “literary criticism”. He also wrote poems that indirectly support Charles’s policy of remaining aloof from the Thirty Years’ War that was ravaging Germany.

Among the poems most often quoted, his “A Rapture” seems to owe a lot to the Ovidian tradition of erotic fantasies represented by Donne’s “Elegy 19: Going to Bed”. It is addressed to a lady named Celia and may contain an echo of the erotic fantasies expressed by Volpone in Jonson’s play when he is trying to seduce Corvino’s virtuous wife, Celia. There are also echoes of Marlowe’s shepherd. The entire poem uses complex imagery of various kinds to represent fantasized erotic sexual activity:

Now in more subtle wreaths I will entwine
My sinewy thighs, my legs and arms with thine;
Thou like a sea of milk shalt lie displayed,
Whilst I the smooth, calm Ocean invade
With such a tempest as when Jove of old
Fell down on Danae in a storm of gold... (*lines 79 - 84*)

The court of Charles I was rather strict, and this poem is a kind of game, confirming the rules by seeming to break them. The sexual union once complete, the man explains that this is happening in a fictional literary space utterly without reference to any system of values or morality. He then proceeds to invert the most famous stories of sexual chastity in an exercise of Wit obviously inspired by Marlowe's "Hero and Leander": Lucrece "hurls her limbs into a thousand winding curls"; Penelope prefers "th' amorous sport of gamesome nights... Before dull dreams of the lost traveler"; Daphne and Laura likewise, and "ten thousand beauties more... Pay into love's exchequer double rent".

Yet the last section re-establishes virtue by a new strategy, pointing out that courtiers are expected to fight deadly duels for the Honour of themselves and their ladies:

And yet Religion bids from bloodshed fly,
And damns me for that act. Then tell me why
This goblin Honour which the world adores
Should make men atheists and not women whores?

Employing the kind of casuistry Donne employed sometimes, Carew recalls the demands of Religion and Virtue at the end of a poem seeming to deny them.

Following Jonson as master of classical harmony, Carew could also write elegant lyrics to be set to music, like his most famous "Song" with its *carpe diem* theme:

If the quick spirits in your eye
Now languish, and anon must die;
If every sweet and every grace
Must fly from that forsaken face,
Then, Celia, let us reap our joys
E'er Time such goodly fruit destroys.

Or if that golden fleece must grow
For ever, free from aged snow,
If those bright suns must know no shade,
Nor your fresh beauties ever fade,
Then fear not, Celia, to bestow
What still being gathered, still must grow.
Thus either Time his sickle brings
In vain, or else in vain his wings.

Given the commonly made distinction between "classical" and "metaphysical", it is important to note that Carew, with his classical polish, wrote one of the most important contemporary appreciations of Donne's poetry in his "Elegy upon the Death of the Dean of Paul's, Dr. John Donne" that was included in the first (1633) edition of Donne's poems.

Carew's main tribute is to Donne's "fresh invention" or originality, which he sees as something remarkable in a time when poetry is expected to be the imitation of Greek and Roman models. Instead, Donne has "opened us a mine / Of rich and pregnant fancy, drawn a line / Of masculine expression". Donne's achievement is the greater because he was using English and not the Latin or Greek of the ancients:

Since to the awe of thy imperious wit
Our stubborn language bends, made only fit
With her tough thick-ribbed hoops to gird about

Thy giant fancy...

It is perhaps significant that he does not seem to expect that any poets similar to Donne will follow him, although the way in which he says it seems to be an echo of some of Donne's patterns:

O pardon me, that break with untuned verse
The reverend silence that attends thy hearse,
Whose awful solemn murmurs were to thee,
More than these faint lines, a loud elegy,
That did proclaim in a dumb eloquence
The death of all the arts, whose influence,
Grown feeble, in these panting numbers lies
Gasping short-winded accents, and so dies...
Sir John Suckling (1609 - 1642)

Nearly fifteen years younger than Carew, Suckling was a very different kind of personality, the product of a new age perhaps. Both were gentlemen of the royal privy chamber, both were mobilized in the wars against Scotland in the late 1630s, both wrote poetry. That is not to say that Suckling and Carew were "friends" as has often been claimed. Suckling several times mentions Carew in his poems, usually in a mocking or even hostile way, and his poetry looks rather like a radical denial of the values of virtue and harmony that Carew promoted. Their attitudes to women and love are notably different; in "The Wits" Suckling claims to prize "black eyes, or a lucky hit / At bowls, above all the Trophies of wit" and the poem "Loving and Beloved" begins with "There never yet was honest man / That ever drove the trade of love". He is not opposed to women but will not look for any deep relationship and not expect much from them. His voice is sometimes close to that of the cynical libertine.

The style he favours is informal and colloquial:

Out upon it! I have loved
Three whole days together;
And am like to love three more,
If it prove fair weather.

Time shall molt away his wings,
Ere he shall discover
In the whole wide world again
Such a constant lover.

But the spite on't is, no praise
Is due at all to me:
Love with me had made no stays
Had it any been but she.

Had it any been but she,
And that very face,
There had been at least ere this
A dozen dozen in her place.

At the start of the Civil War, Suckling was the leader of the royalists, with a personality well-suited to the archetypal cavalier. He anticipated Charles's attempt to break the power of Parliament with a plot of his own. When it failed, he went into exile in France and is said to have committed suicide there. His works were published by the bookseller Moseley in 1646 and were seen as a vibrant celebration of a courtly culture that had now been destroyed. Suckling was the most popular of the cavalier poets throughout the 17th century but modern readers find little of interest in him.

Richard Lovelace (1618 - 1657)

Lovelace was younger again. Very wealthy, as Suckling was, he first impressed the king by his charm and good looks while still a student at Oxford in 1636. He joined the military expeditions against Scotland before 1640 but during the Civil War he was either in prison--having challenged the authority of Parliament in 1642--or serving as a soldier of fortune abroad. He was again imprisoned by the Commons in 1648, at a time when they wanted to control the loyal royalists. In prison he prepared his poems for publication, they appeared in 1649 as *Lucasta*. For the rest of his life he seems to have been terribly poor. Soon after he died his brother published his remaining works as *Lucasta: Posthume Poems* but he was soon completely forgotten.

Lovelace never knew the court before the outbreak of fighting, his poetry has the mark of the warrior-poet and his most famed poem skillfully re-situates the theme of love: **To Lucasta, Going to the Wars**

Tell me not, sweet, I am unkind
That from the nunnery
Of thy chaste breast and quiet mind,
To war and arms I fly.

True, a new mistress now I chase,
The first foe in the field;
And with a stronger faith embrace
A sword, a horse, a shield.

Yet this inconstancy is such
As you too shall adore;
I could not love thee, dear, so much,
Loved I not Honour more.

The poem's last two lines have been frequently quoted, often with some amusement by critics who fail to see the level of total devotion that must have been required from the cavaliers in their defeat. Devotion to the king's cause was as emotional an affair as devotion to any mistress, and in the loyalist's eyes it took precedence. At the same time, the images of warfare--swords and shields--are romantic and archaic; the Civil War was won with guns and pikes.

Lovelace's uncompromising refusal to submit to the new situation is stated in "To Althea, from Prison" where he plays with the paradox of freedom in captivity; even in prison he can celebrate the king he serves:

When I shall voice aloud how good
He is, how great should be,
Enlarged winds, that curl the flood,
Know no such liberty.

Stone walls do not a prison make,
Nor iron bars a cage;
Minds innocent and quiet take
That for an hermitage.
If I have freedom in my love,
And in my soul am free,
Angels alone, that soar above,
Enjoy such liberty.

Very many people know the phrase “Stone walls do not a prison make” who have never heard of Lovelace. He had a talent for writing clear, memorable phrases.

In a number of his poems, Lovelace goes back to an earlier emblematic tradition and writes about insects; one of his most often read poems is “The Grasshopper: To My Noble Friend, Mr. Charles Cotton” where the first five stanzas celebrate the grasshopper of Aesop’s fable that spends the summer singing and finds himself empty-handed when winter comes. The second five stanzas use tones borrowed from Jonson to celebrate his friendship with Cotton, winter now becoming an image of the state of England without the king and court:

Thou best of men and friends! we will create
A genuine summer in each other’s breast;
And spite of this cold time and frozen fate
Thaw us a warm seat to our rest.

In later poems, published posthumously, we find Lovelace evoking other animals in less happy tones, such as a fly being slowly sucked dry in a spider’s web. The Commonwealth offered little hope to the faithful royalist.

Love in the earlier collection is sometimes a libertine activity, with little sense of reality or of mutual relationship. In the posthumous collection we find far more cynical poems, such as “Love made in the First Age. To Chloris” where solitary sexual fantasies offer more satisfaction than actual female company. It develops a picture of a kind of golden age where male sexual activity was absolutely free and ungoverned; unlike Carew’s “Rapture” there is no qualifying ironic return to morality. It ends:

Now, Chloris, miserably crave
The offered bliss you would not have,
Which evermore I must deny,
Whilst ravished with these noble dreams
And crowned with mine own soft beams,
Enjoying of myself I lie.

It is true that the Adultery Act of 1650 made adultery punishable by death and rewarded simple fornication with several months in prison. This poem’s open advocacy of solitary masturbation as an alternative to the torments of unrequited love prepares the way for the cynicism about sexual pleasures found in Restoration poets such as Rochester.

Poets of the Mid-century

Edmund Waller (1606 - 1687)

Waller is today largely ignored. Yet he was an immensely popular poet in the 17th century. His was a rich family but instead of joining the court he became a member of Parliament and for a time was part of the opposition to the king. When the open revolt of the Long Parliament came, though, he joined the royalist camp. In 1643 he was the leader of a plot to capture London for the king. It was discovered, he was fined, imprisoned, then banished. Moseley published his *Poems* in 1645. He remained abroad until 1651, when he made his peace with Cromwell. At the Restoration he was recognized as having been a loyal royalist and continued as a senior member of Parliament into his old age. In 1685 he published a volume of *Divine Poems*.

Waller began to write poetry in his youth. He obviously admired the classical style of Jonson although it is equally clear that he lacked Jonson's strong sense of moral outrage; Waller was never a satirist and many of his poems are simple panegyrics of people in power, including a long poem celebrating Oliver Cromwell. The smoothness of his style and his public voice leave little room for the complexities that provoke critical interest today. He is mainly noticed because Dryden was convinced that Waller, together with Denham, had played a special role in the development of the Augustan Age's classical style, calling him "the father of our English numbers" and insisting that "he first made writing easily an art".

Certainly the poem "Of the Danger of His Majesty (Being Prince) Escaped on the Road at Santander" is of historical interest, and quite remarkable if really it was written as early as 1625. Here for almost the first time we find the regular flow of **heroic couplets** that was to be the main characteristic of so much Augustan poetry. The starting point for this style would seem to have been Jonson's "To Penshurst" but Waller's tone is more heroic as he relates how the barge carrying prince Charles back to his ship was caught in a sudden squall:

The impatient sea grows impotent and raves
That (night assisting) his impetuous waves
Should find resistance from so light a thing:
These surges ruin, those our safety bring.
Th'oppressed vessel doth the charge abide
Only because assailed on every side.
So men with rage and passion set on fire
Trembling for haste impeach their own desires.
The pale Iberians had expired with fear,
But that their wonder did divert their care,
To see the prince with danger moved no more
Than with the pleasures of their court before.
Godlike his courage seemed, whom nor delight
Could soften, nor the face of death affright.

(lines 69 - 82)

One poem by Waller, "Song", has been particularly admired and quoted. It is a series of perfectly conventional images of transience expressed by roses, but done with great metrical skill:

Go, lovely rose!
Tell her that wastes her time and me
That now she knows
When I resemble her to thee,
How sweet and fair she seems to be.

Tell her that's young,
And shuns to have her graces spied,
That hadst thou sprung
In deserts where no men abide,
Thou must have uncommended died.

Small is the worth
Of beauty from the light retired;
Bid her come forth,
Suffer herself to be desired,
And not blush so to be admired.

Then die! that she
The common fate of all things rare
May read in thee;
How small a part of time they share
That are so wondrous sweet and fair!

The poem comes to the brink of the *carpe diem* theme but never expresses it. Instead it stands as a moral poem invoking the *memento mori* theme. The second stanza must have suggested Pope's lines in "The Rape of the Lock" where Belinda wishes she had stayed in some isolated spot:

There kept my charms concealed from mortal eye,
Like roses that in deserts bloom and die.
(iv. 158)

Both poems were sources for Gray's famous lines in the "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" that draw on similar images in poems by several poets:

Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.
(lines 55-6)

In Waller's poem we see a beginning of the Augustan interest in finding moral significance in the processes of nature and a turning away from the love lyric as such. Yet Waller also wrote a quantity of direct love lyrics in an older style, many addressed to "Sacharissa" who is assumed to be a lady he wooed in vain to be his second wife during the 1640s in France. His first wife died after only three years of marriage.

He had a certain sense of the rapid change that was happening in English poetry; in the poem "Of English Verse" he mocks the Elizabethan poets' idea of immortality in verse:

But who can hope his lines should long
Last in a daily changing tongue?

(...)

Poets that lasting marble seek
Must carve in Latin or in Greek;
We write in sand, our language grows,
And like the tide our work o'erflows.

Chaucer his sense can only boast,
The glory of his numbers lost!
Years have defaced his matchless strain;
And yet he did not sing in vain.

The rest of the poem takes the reader in an unexpected direction, for the speaker suggests that all poetry is written to please women and need only remain effective for as long as those women are still beautiful.

As a political poem, the "Panegyric to My Lord Protector" is of interest in view of its parallel in Marvell's "Horatian Ode" and because of what we know of Waller's sympathies. He has sometimes been criticized as a sycophant but that is too harsh. At the time nobody could know that the Restoration would come so quickly. He praises Cromwell (reported to be his cousin) for the naval victories against foreign forces and his "successful" victories over Ireland and Scotland. Yet there is a sting in Waller's praise of Cromwell as military leader when he compares his rise to that of Augustus after the assassination of Julius Caesar:

As the vexed world, to find repose, at last
Itself into Augustus' arms did cast,
So England now does, with like toil oppressed,
Her weary head upon your bosom rest.

Augustus was the archetypal military dictator and Waller nowhere suggests that Cromwell has any right to be celebrated as more than a successful general.

After the Restoration, we find Waller praising the naval authorities for a 1665 victory over the Dutch in his "Instructions to a Painter". This poem is of no interest in itself, only Andrew Marvell (equally a member of Parliament) produced a satiric answer in his "The Second Advice to a Painter" in which he shows how corrupt the naval leaders were and how unreal the victory was. He followed that by an even wittier "The Third Advice to a Painter". Comparison with these works shows how far Waller was from being capable of producing the fierce exercises of wit that public poetry in the Restoration demanded. Marvell's poems were necessarily published anonymously.

Waller is famed for one other poem, "Of the Last Verses in the Book", the last in the volume of religious poems published just before his death, with its affirmation of the value of old age and its calm acceptance of approaching death:

The seas are quiet when the winds give o'er:
So, calm are we when passions are no more,
For then we know how vain it was to boast
Of fleeting things, so certain to be lost.
Clouds of affection from our younger eyes
Conceal that emptiness that age descries.

The soul's dark cottage, battered and decayed,
Lets in new light through chinks that time has made:
Stronger by weakness wiser men become
As they draw near to their eternal home.
Leaving the old, both worlds at once they view
That stand upon the threshold of the new. (*lines 7 - 18*)

Sir John Denham (1615 - 1669)

The generally peaceful mood of Denham's "Cooper's Hill" (first published 1642) does not resemble the poet's life story. He was a compulsive gambler and notorious rake in his youth. He supported the royalist cause but was obliged to surrender the castle he commanded in 1642. In 1648 he left England and returned at the Restoration. He was sometimes insane in his last years. His poems include satires and classical imitations. He also wrote a tragedy "The Sophy" that was performed in 1641.

He is remembered because Dryden quoted some lines from "Cooper's Hill", addressed to the River Thames, as a model of writing. Many minor Augustan poets tried to imitate them:

Oh could I flow like thee, and make thy stream
My great example, as it is my theme!
Though deep, yet clear, though gentle, yet not dull,
Strong without rage, without o'erflowing full.
(lines 189 - 192)

This topographical poem of 358 lines derives from various earlier models that are mostly georgic in nature, for example the landscape poetry of Drayton's *Poly-Olbion*. It surveys the landscape visible from a hill near Denham's family estate, a view that includes the city of London, the royal castle at Windsor, the ruins of Chertsey Abbey, the Thames, and the water meadows along its banks.

Denham combines descriptive evocations of the view with various kinds of reflection inspired by what he sees. Many of Denham's meditations are political or historical in nature. He is particularly violent in his criticism of Henry VIII whose destruction of the monasteries he considers an act of pure greed. Beyond that, he fears a reformatory zeal that destroys instead of renewing. The sight of the meadows and woods along the Thames makes him recall royal hunts there and from line 247 the poem becomes the description of the king hunting a stag. The stag tries to hide among the herd of deer but they scatter from him: "Like a declining statesman, left forlorn / To his friends' pity and pursuers' scorn". The stag is given feelings of courage and fear, hesitates whether to stand or flee. Finding itself surrounded by the hounds, the stag welcomes an arrow shot by the king as a noble death.

Suddenly Denham turns the hunt into a memory of the struggle for liberty leading to Magna Carta (1215) that King John sealed in these very meadows, the guarantee that the king would not rule in an arbitrary way as tyrant or treat his subjects like slaves. He returns to the theme of greed. Kings' unjust demands force their subjects to take up arms and resist, demanding even more in their turn. The message is ambiguous and the last lines of the poem have provoked much debate about what political message Denham means to give:

When a calm river raised with sudden rains,
Or snows dissolved, o'erflows the adjoining plains,

The husbandmen with high-raised banks secure
 Their greedy hopes and this he can endure:
 But if with bays and dams they strive to force
 His channel to a new or narrow course,
 No longer then within his banks he dwells,
 First to a torrent, then a deluge swells:
 Stronger and fiercer by restraint he roars,
 And knows no bound but makes his power his shores.
 (lines 349 - end)

The poem seems to have spent quite a lot of time warning the king against greed and abuses of power. It is hard to be sure as to what level of allegory is present in these last lines, and a lot also depends on the moment they are thought of as being spoken. Since Denham revised the poem and re-published it several times, the last in 1668, he clearly did not limit its meaning to the Civil War period in which it was first composed.

Abraham Cowley (1618 - 1667)

Old Mother Wit and Nature gave
 Shakespeare and Fletcher all they have;
 In Spenser and in Jonson Art
 Of slower Nature got the start:
 But both in him so equal are
 None knows which bears the happiest share.
 To him no author was unknown
 Yet what he wrote was all his own.
 (lines 23 - 30)

These lines from Denham's poem written at the death of Cowley show the standard critical terminology of the time. His reputation did not much outlast him and he is one of the least read poets. His name is remembered because he translated Pindar from the Greek and composed **Pindaric Odes** of his own. Cowley's career follows a line similar to that of many other poets except that he was of humble social origins, his father was a stationer who died before his son's birth. Thanks to scholarships he could study at Westminster School, then at Trinity College, Cambridge. He joined the court at Oxford at the start of the Civil War and followed the queen to Paris in 1644. He came back in 1654, perhaps as a spy, but seems to have compromised with the Commonwealth authorities. He got no great gains at the Restoration and died before he was fifty.

He was a precocious child, composing a verse romance "Pyramus and Thisbe" when he was ten and his first volume of poems was published when he was only fifteen. The need to make his way in life by writing may explain his work. His love poems, "The Mistress", were first published by Moseley in 1647. He wrote a political epic "The Civil War" but it was not published in his lifetime. He clearly had high literary ambitions and also wrote a biblical epic on the life of David, the "Davideis" that was published in *Poems*, published by Moseley in 1656. There we also find the first of his Pindaric Odes. Cowley's collected poems were published in 1668, just after his death, and again in the early 18th century.

Cowley's name is now mainly remembered by students because Samuel Johnson, in his *Lives of the Poets*, devoted a large part of his Life of Cowley to an analysis of "Metaphysical Wit" which he found best exemplified in Cowley's "The Mistress". The word

“metaphysics” was first used by Dryden to criticize Donne: “he affects the metaphysics... and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts, and entertain them with the softnesses of love” (*Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire*, 1693). Alexander Pope is reported to have said that Cowley borrowed his “metaphysical” style from Donne.

Dr. Johnson’s main criticism is that such writers as Donne and Cowley have little poetry and too much wit. This provokes him to try to define their wit and the result is famous:

a kind of *discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. Of wit, thus defined, they have more than enough. The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought, and, though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased.

Interestingly, Cowley wrote an ode on the same topic, “To Wit”, where he spends much time stating what wit is not before arriving at his main idea:

In a true piece of Wit all things must be,
Yet all things there agree,
As in the ark, joined without force or strife,
All creatures dwelt: all creatures that had life;
Or as the primitive forms of all
(If we compare great things with small)
Which without discord or confusion lie
In that strange mirror of the Deity.

The poem ends with a conceit a little similar to that used later by Pope at the end of his *Epistle to a Lady*, when Cowley addresses the implied addressee (none is named, it may be the reader):

And if any ask me then
What thing right Wit and height of genius is,
I’ll only show your lines, and say, *’Tis this*.

Cowley will probably never return to favour; his poems are at the same time impersonal and too individual. His love lyrics, however, deserve more attention than they have received, if only for the way in which they exist almost completely detached from the poetic tradition out of which they grew. The love that they celebrate seems not to exist in any kind of reality; as a result, the conceits take on a literal sense they did not have in earlier court poetry, which knew better what game it was playing.

The resulting strangeness is disturbing and many readers reacted against it, already in the 17th century. The religious imagery provoked particular indignation:

Compared with her all things so worthless prove
That naught on earth can towards her move
Till’t be exalted by her love.
Equal to her, alas, there’s none:
She like a deity is grown,

That must create or else must be alone.

(*"The Discovery" 3rd stanza*)

There was a long tradition of using words like "grace" and "mercy" in love poetry but in the Puritan age it is particularly perverse to use such terms. The reader is unable to see at what level the poems should be read. There have also been many complaints about the difficulty of the Pindaric Odes and it may be that the poet's friendship with the philosopher Thomas Hobbes during their shared exile in Paris is the key to his struggles to express in revolutionary ways thoughts about such themes as Truth and Fate.

One stanza from "My Diet" has clear links with Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" which is odd in a rather similar way. It is very hard to believe any man would ever want to address these words to a real woman, and we are left wondering what Cowley and Marvell intended to do:

On a sigh of Pity I a year can live:
One Tear will keep me twenty at least,
Fifty a gentle Look will give,
A hundred years on one kind word I'll feast;
A thousand more will added be
If you an Inclination have for me--
And all beyond is vast Eternity.

(*"My Diet" last stanza*)

Andrew Marvell (1621 - 1678)

Marvell's life fails to follow any of the patterns so far seen. His father was a Yorkshire clergyman and Marvell grew up in Hull. He took no part in the Civil War, spending four years from 1643 until 1647 travelling in Europe. Returning to London, he seems to have frequented Royalist literary circles; he composed a poem in praise of Lovelace included in the first edition of *Lucasta* in 1649. Marvell was not an unconditional royalist or republican and his "Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland" is a delicately nuanced text of great power. From 1650 - 1652 he was tutor to Mary Fairfax, the young daughter of the Parliamentarian General Fairfax who had withdrawn to his estate at Nun Appleton in Yorkshire. While there, he seems to have written many of his lyrics. In 1653, he moved to Eton, on the Thames opposite Windsor Castle, as tutor to William Dutton who was Cromwell's ward and wrote a number of poems celebrating Cromwell.

In 1657 he became Latin Secretary to the Council of State, the post **John Milton** occupied until he became blind; Milton seems to have become his friend although their characters and opinions were very different. In the elections of 1659 Marvell became Member of Parliament for Hull, a position he continued to hold until his death.

At the Restoration Marvell spoke out in favour of Milton and obtained his release from prison. He was involved in embassies and wrote satires in prose and verse, some published anonymously, that enjoyed a high reputation. He may have been part of some kind of secret intelligence network. He never married and died of the medical treatment he was receiving for a fever.

His housekeeper Mary Palmer claimed to have been his wife, hoping to inherit his money. In order to support her claim, she arranged to have the various poems she found in his rooms published as a folio volume in 1681, a few years after his death. Marvell's *Miscellaneous Poems* contain the lyrics that are now famous but which Marvell seems almost

never to have shown to anyone. They made little impression at the time of publication; only a few people read and appreciated them. A nephew of Marvell, William Popple, who had been close to him, prepared a corrected version of the folio by writing into his copy the poems that were missing, including those in praise of Cromwell and the satires. An edition based on this volume, but also including many other poems not by Marvell, was published in 1776. In the 19th century his lyric poems were better known in North America than in England. In the 1920s, T.S. Eliot's interest in him as one of the Metaphysicals brought him to public attention. Eliot later lost his initial sympathy for Marvell but his lyrics have continued to fascinate many readers.

A large degree of Marvell's appeal is the elusive quality of his best poems. Like Cowley, he uses conventions in a way and at a time when the reference of their "codes" is no longer apparent. There must surely be a private "subtext" to many of the poems, that we cannot now reconstruct with certainty. The poems often seem to suggest a degree of self-mockery and they challenge by their riddles.

Marvell's best-known poem today is the strange *carpe-diem* poem "**To His Coy Mistress**" which seems to have been suggested by Cowley's "My Diet". The image that states the theme of the middle section identifies Time with Death: "But at my back I always hear / Time's winged chariot hurrying near" (lines 21-2) and these lines underlie lines in the third section of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922): "But at my back in a cold blast I hear / The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear" (lines 186-7) as well as "But at my back from time to time I hear / The sound of horns and motors..." (lines 196-7).

The syllogistic structure of the poem begins by evoking lengthy aspirations to love in a world without decay and death. The second section introduces in increasingly powerful images the reality of mortality, culminating in an epigram: "The grave's a fine and private place, / But none, I think, do there embrace." (lines 31-2). The conclusion, in response to this, is centred in the word "now" repeated three times and intensifies the emotional power of the *carpe diem* argument by using images highly unsuited to romantic courtship:

Let us roll all our strength and all
Our sweetness up into one ball,
And tear our pleasures with rough strife
Thorough the iron grates of life.

There has been much discussion of the level at which this ought to be read. Some critics refer back to Donne's use of unlikely images in intense love poems but others feel that the comparison of the couple to "amorous birds of prey" (line 38) takes the poem outside the limits of all decorum. It may be that the poet was expressing his longing for an active life; it is equally possible that Marvell was following Cowley in playing with codes that had lost all their conventional references.

One of the most striking poetic moments in the poem comes in the lines "Thy beauty shall no more be found, / Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound / My echoing song" (lines 25 - 7) which is remarkable for evoking the unimaginable sound of the poem in which these lines occur *not* echoing in a vault where, in addition, there will be no living ears to hear.

Marvell cultivated the terse, pointed style, he favoured tetrameter (four-foot) rather than pentameter. Although certain lines suggest a link with Cowley, there is no real similarity between them, as the response of readers shows. There is no great difficulty in Marvell's images, his poems paint charming pictures, only the reader is left perplexed as to what can possibly have prompted such poems. "**The Nymph Complaining for The Death of Her Fawn**" has a female speaker lamenting the death of a tame deer shot by "wanton troopers riding by". The deer was the gift of a "Silvio" who later proved false to her. The tone is

pastoral but oddly intense in the ending, when the speaker plans to follow the fawn into death after placing her statue over its grave. She tells the sculptor not to bother to carve tears:

For I so truly thee bemoan
That I shall weep, though I be stone:
Until my tears, still dropping, wear
My breast, themselves engraving there.

(Lines 115-8)

It is this kind of fanciful moment that gives the greatest pleasure to Marvell's modern readers; the conceit of a statue weeping tears that will carve the image of themselves in the stone is neat yet perplexing.

A number of Marvell's poems deal with the conflict between Art and Nature, at times embodied in the difference between the sophistication found in gardens and the simple flowers of the natural countryside, as in "**The Mower Against Gardens**". Some poems embody the preference for simple nature in the pastoral figure of Damon the Mower; in the poem that bears his name he is heard singing a love complaint; near the end his scythe slices into his ankle and he falls, "By his own scythe the mower mown" (line 80). Sidney's *Arcadia* remained popular into the Restoration, but it is hard to see why Marvell felt called to write such a poem in the pastoral mode.

The theme of Nature culminates in the complexities of "**The Garden**" where the speaking *persona* praises *otium* in terms and tones that challenge too easy an interpretation. The speaker is apparently madly in love with nature, and rejects all human society: "Society is all but rude, / To this delicious solitude" (lines 15-6). Hyperbole increases as the speaker claims to prefer trees to girls, playing with the conventional theme of cutting the loved one's name in the bark of a tree: "Fair trees, wheresoe'er your barks I wound, / No name shall but your own be found" (lines 23-4). Following Marlowe and other wits, Marvell amusingly reverses traditional myths: "Apollo hunted Daphne so, / Only that she might laurel grow" (lines 28-9).

The garden's plants begin to take on a life of their own in a series of disquietingly sensual images:

The luscious clusters of the vine
Upon my mouth do crush their wine;
The nectarine and curious peach
Into my hands themselves do reach;

(lines 35-8)

There seems to be a sexual dimension to this stanza, culminating in its last line: "insnared with flowers, I fall on grass." The complexity continues as the fifth stanza moves from body to mind:

Meanwhile the mind, from pleasure less,
Withdraws into its happiness;
The mind, that ocean where each kind
Does straight its own resemblance find;
Yet it creates, transcending these,
Far other worlds and other seas,
Annihilating all that's made
To a green thought in a green shade.

This poem is marked by a series of withdrawals, from society to solitude, from body to mind, and from the perception of external reality to the creative imagination. This process continues in a final Platonic if not mystical step:

Casting the body's vest aside,
My soul into the boughs does glide:
There like a bird it sits and sings,
Then whets and combs its silver wings,
And, till prepared for longer flight,
Waves in its plumes the various light.

(lines 51-6)

The speaker evokes Adam's Paradise before the Fall, but in a novel and ironic way, for this is Paradise not only before the Fall but before the creation of Eve, with an implied criticism of God's second thoughts:

But 'twas beyond a mortal's share
To wander solitary there:
Two paradises 'twere in one
To live in paradise alone.

The final stanza returns to a more general admiration of the garden but with a further trace of irony in the pun of "time" with "thyme":

And as it works, th'industrious bee
Computes its time as well as we!
How could such sweet and wholesome hours
Be reckoned but with herbs and flowers?

There is a nostalgia for a lost paradise in such a poem, mingled with an awareness of the impossibility of its own dreams. An exquisite echo of this is found in the poem "**On a Drop of Dew**" that seems to have been inspired by a reading of Herbert or Vaughan. Here too there is an image of intense longing to be away from the temporal, material world:

See how the Orient Dew,
Shed from the Bosom of the Morn
Into the blooming Roses,
Yet careless of its Mansion new
For the clear Region where 'twas born,
Round in its self incloses:
And in its little Globe's Extent
Frames as it can its native Element.
How it the purple flow'r does slight,
Scarce touching where it lies,
But gazing back upon the Skies,
Shines with a mournful Light;
Like its own Tear,
Because so long divided from the Sphere.

The rest of the poem explains this as an image of the soul's longing to be away from this world, then introduces the Old Testament Manna that evaporated "Into the Glories of th' Almighty Sun."

Marvell's most complex poem is his lengthy "**Upon Appleton House**" dedicated "to my Lord Fairfax". In its 97 stanzas almost all the themes of Marvell's other lyrics are evoked and transcended. It may be that after writing this work, Marvell felt no need to continue with this kind of poetry. In his lyrics there is always lurking a search for the meaning of life in a world where public life must necessarily involve pain, together with a feeling that withdrawal into the beauties of nature must be a preparation either for death or a return to activity. The evocation of the history of the Fairfax family and of the landscape around Appleton House leads to the appearance of Fairfax's daughter Mary.

The poem is supposedly for General Fairfax, who had withdrawn from Cromwell's service in 1650, just after the return from Ireland, refusing to take part in an invasion of Scotland. Yet Fairfax himself is rarely mentioned, much more time is devoted to evocations of the countryside surrounding the house as it appears in the different seasons. The river in particular interests Marvell for the conceits it offers in flood or calm: "The River in itself is drown'd / And isles th'astonished cattle round" (lines 471-2).

The river is equally present at the end of the poem, as night falls and the fishermen walk home carrying their little canoes on their backs in a final conceit:

How Tortoise like, but not so slow,
These rational Amphibii go?
Let's in; for the dark Hemisphere
Does now like one of them appear.

The poem is a poem of praise, yet like all of Marvell's lyrics it refuses to fit neatly into any category or interpretation.

The same is true of Marvell's most famous political poem, "**An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland**" which must have been written in 1650 but was not published then and only survived in two copies of the 1681 folio. The praise of Cromwell is qualified and made more complex by the way Marvell introduces an evocation of the execution of King Charles, written in a way that perhaps explains why the poem was not published. Charles is presented as an actor on a "tragic scaffold" or stage:

He nothing common did or mean
Upon that memorable scene,
 But with his keener eye
 The ax's edge did try;

Nor called the gods with vulgar spite
To vindicate his helpless right;
 But bowed his comely head
 Down, as upon a bed.

(lines 57-64)

Marvell is one of the most intriguing poets that England ever produced, but one reason for his strangeness may well be the fact that he wrote almost uniquely for himself; the poems are self-reflexive in a very special way. Poetry with him has reached the point where private and public verse no longer coincide at all. His public verse, the satires and political poems not described here for want of space, serve a quite different function in quite different

language; the lyrics had to wait for a long time before they found an audience and we shall never know just what Marvell himself thought he was doing when he composed them. The poet and society in his work stand in a new tension, perhaps not so unlike that suggested by Milton in his pre-Civil War poems, but with a very different resonance in modern sensibilities.

Further Reading

The Cambridge Companion to English Poetry: Donne to Marvell, edited by Thomas N. Corns. Cambridge University Press. 1993.