

***Who Knows Not Southwell's Clout?* Assessing the Impact of Robert Southwell's Literary Success upon Spenser**

Gary M. Bouchard
Saint Anselm College

Essay

Though the title of this essay references the most famous rhetorical question in Edmund Spenser's works, I offer it here as an emphatically sincere inquiry: Who, even today, fully understands or appreciates the cultural clout and literary influence that Robert Southwell had upon the early modern era? Described by Allison Shell ten years ago as "the invisible influence,"¹ Southwell is today more visible than ever before, including even perhaps during the latter years of his clandestine life in England. During those years and in the more than four centuries since, people have mostly looked past Southwell or looked at him without recognizing what was there. That has begun to change of late, such that the past decade has seen what may be termed a Southwell revival.² Robert

¹In her book *Catholicism, Controversy and the English Literary Imagination, 1558-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), Shell makes a strong case that Southwell has been overlooked by critics for the past several centuries.

²At the center of this revival are three books that have been published within the past five years: Scott Pilarz, *Robert Southwell and the Mission of Literature* (Ashgate, 2004); Anne R. Sweeney, *Robert Southwell, Snow in Arcadia: Redrawing the English Lyric Landscape, 1586-1595* (Manchester, 2006), and John Klause, *Shakespeare, the Earl and the Jesuit* (Fairleigh Dickinson, 2008). Each of these authors offers provocative insights about Southwell's life and work within his historical and literary context, and each also makes persuasive claims for his influence upon English literature. Additionally, in 2007 Professor Sweeney joined with Professor Peter Davidson to edit a new critical edition of Southwell's *Collected Poems*

Southwell is more visible as a poet today because recent careful scholarship has opened our eyes to see what has always been there and what has, for far too long, been disregarded. We see in the work of Scott Pilarz the inseparability of this poet's work from his mission and his mission's inevitable transforming end. We recognize in the meticulous evidence presented by John Klause Southwell's poetic fingerprints in the works of Shakespeare. And we may even be ready, at Sweeney's suggestion, to "understand Southwell as the nexus of much of the most profound thought of his age" (285).

It is within this context that I propose to "be bold, but [hopefully] not too bold" in looking for Southwell's influence where we would least suspect to find it, in the work of one of Elizabethan England's most successful and celebrated poets, Edmund Spenser, an avowed patriot and protestant who, if he regarded Southwell at all, regarded him as an enemy to his queen, his country and himself.

In pursuing the unlikely connection between these two poets, I am following the lead of Professor Shell, who first suggested "that Southwell's verse elicited an agonistic reaction from Spenser" (72). I concentrate my attention, as she did, upon Spenser's *Four Hymnes*, themselves a complicated grouping of poems with their own history of critical debate in which I must, of necessity, engage. Ultimately, I find that a careful assessment of Southwell's verse and Spenser's *Hymnes* suggests that Spenser in his *Hymnes* may well have been responding to the sudden popularity of Southwell's religious verse but more out of professional necessity, I think, than hostility. Informed by Anne Sweeney's argument that Southwell's verse introduced to England a more personalized intensity, I find Spenser's poetic response to Southwell to be not so much agonistic as inadequate.

In retrospect, 1595 was one of the more important literary years in the Elizabethan era. Besides the debut of Shakespeare's *Richard II*, there was the first London publication of works by

that presents his poems as they first appeared (Carcanet Press). All three of these authors, as well as all who have proceeded in studying Southwell, owe a debt to Frank Brownlow for his excellent summary of the poet's life and work in his Twayne Series volume, *Robert Southwell*, 1996.

Guillaume Salluste du Bartas, the French protestant writer who offered a defense of divine poetry. More significantly was the first appearance in print of Philip Sidney's *Defense of Poetry* and the publication of Spenser's *Amoretti and Epithalamion*. And even while readers anticipated the second installment Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, London would witness a most curious literary phenomenon, which began with an event that would seem to be anything but poetic: the public execution in February of 1595 of Father Robert Southwell, notorious Jesuit and traitor to England, whose prolonged imprisonment, it was hoped, might have caused people to forget about him altogether.

This of course was not the case. Southwell's public drawing, hanging, and quartering we know was a well attended spectacle, and it remains one of the more vividly described events of its kind. Given the sudden publication and proliferation of his poetic works within a month following his execution, one would think that it was itself a grotesque publicity stunt. "*Saint Peter's Complaint* was issued shortly after Southwell's execution, and was," Shell surmises, "designed to capitalize upon it. Three editions appeared in the first year, two published by John Wolfe and one by Gabriel Cawood, with the first to appear being issued by Wolfe. Southwell's biographers agree that there was a race to get the book out" (62). The most curious aspect of this phenomenon, of course, is not the poetry, the printers, or the poet's gruesome end, but the audience of readers ready to purchase and read the verse of an executed Jesuit priest. Some of them certainly were covert Catholics and others may have had strong Catholic sympathies, but these groups alone would not have been large enough to beget the kind of commercial success that ensued. Rather, as Shell points out, "the majority of Southwell's large audience, certainly at the beginning, must have been Protestants aware of Southwell's religious persuasions and Southwell's fate; and the poems' instant and continued popularity argues that a large section of the reading public was prepared to buy, and to go on buying, the works of a papist who had died a traitor's death" (63). This curiosity of the market-place may confound some of our assumptions about this era. We may puzzle at the seeming inconsistency of Elizabethan officials or ponder the degree of Catholic sympathies. What seems clear, in any case is that there was, in current speak, a market for religious verse, Catholic or otherwise. Printers were capitalizing on

this market and it seems likely that Southwell's poetry, now being promulgated for the first time in print, was actually increasing the value of that market (Shell 66).

This new trend in the marketplace, we can imagine, would have been perplexing, if not disconcerting, to England's most celebrated protestant poet returning from Ireland to oversee the publication of the second installment of his great epic poem, as well as an exceptional cycle of sonnets and other verse. Spenser might have wondered what was in the London water, or he might have ignored the new trend altogether—if not for the prefatory epistle and verse at the start of these poems that accused English poets of doing little more with their talents than fashioning pagan toys. Southwell was "accusing most mainstream poets of profanity, in an all-embracing condemnation of the effects of the Protestant poetic" (Shell 68). The very poetry that Spenser brought to London in his saddle bags—the best of its kind—was being castigated by a dead, Jesuit priest. And his critique was selling!

One can well understand why Shell imagines Spenser to have had an agonistic reaction to Southwell and his verse. Regardless of how he might have reacted in private, however, I believe that Spenser offered a literary response that was measured, and from a professional literary standpoint, even calculated. He certainly would have recognized that Southwell "was constructing a model of poetic virtue alternative to that imputed to Sidney" (Shell 70), but he wisely does not choose to bring any more attention to Southwell by entering this debate. In response to the Either / Or dichotomy issued by Southwell—unimpeded religious verse or nothing—Spenser offers up in *The Foure Hymnes* a highly stylized Both / And. Whatever fever this dead Jesuit was stirring in the hearts of others, he pointed Spenser, I believe, towards a gap in his otherwise illustrious literary resume. Spenser had to date not yet written a straightforward religious poem. So now he did.

At the crux of the critical debate concerning Spenser's *The Foure Hymnes* is the relationship of the first two hymns composed in honor of earthly love and beauty and the second two hymns composed in honor of heavenly love and beauty. Where one comes down in this debate depends, in large measure, on whether he or she is willing to take the poet at his word when he tells Lady Margaret, Countess of Cumberland and Lady Marie, Countess of Warwicke, in his dedicatory epistle that the first two hymns were

composed "in the greener times of my youth" (690).³ Having discovered that some corrupt young readers have been moved to "sucke out pyson" (690) from these hymns, an effect which has displeased one of his patronesses, Spenser decided, he says, to "call them in." Alas, however, these verses had been too widely distributed, so he "resolved at least to amend, and by way of *retractation* to *reforme* them, making in stead of those two Hymnes of earthly or naturall loue and beautie, two others of heavenly and celestiall" (690, my italics).

Many readers recognize in the poet's proposed retraction, a commonplace convention and find the four hymns so well unified in form, image, and narrative as to suggest persuasively that they were all composed at the same time, between 1595 and 1596. These readers regard the dedication as a clever bit of rhetorical posturing, designed to draw attention to the contrast between the two sets of hymns. One practical difficulty with reading the dedicatory epistle as a fiction, however, is that this would require that the poet's patronesses share in the lie that is being presented. This seems both peculiar and improbable. Some critics have shown convincing biographical evidence that Margaret Russell's life became "a pilgrimage of grief" when she was betrayed by her husband and have suggested therefore that the movement of the hymns from a celebration of romantic love to a celebration of spiritual love would have fulfilled her own longing for divine consolation.⁴ In other words, there were apparently good professional reasons for Spenser to compose two hymns that effectively retracted his earlier verse.

One need not believe, in any case, that the first two hymns were written decades earlier in order to acknowledge that there is a profound shift in theme between the two sets of hymns. Given the poet's claims in the epistle, as well as his sharp self-reproach at the beginning of *The Hymn of Heavenly Love*, it seems possible, even likely, that something other than just time came between the

³All quotations from Spenser's *Fowre Hymnes* are taken from *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*, edited by William A. Oram.

⁴See Russell J. Meyer's paper, "Webster, 'Two by Two or One by Four, the Structural Dilemma of Spenser's *Fowre Hymnes*," presented at Kalamazoo in 1982. Particularly noteworthy is Meyer's summary of the argument by Professor Quitslund.

composition of the first two hymns and the composition of the second two; it seems probable, in fact, that what the poet says in his dedication is at least an approximate version of the truth. What intervened between the two sets of hymns may simply have been, as the poet says, the complaint of one of his patronesses, who was disillusioned with the extravagant promises of cupidity, and, like many London book buyers in 1595, apparently seeking spiritual consolation in verse.

The other event that may well have intervened between the composition of the two sets of hymns is the execution of Robert Southwell and the subsequent proliferation of *St. Peter's Complain and Other Poems*. Spenser's two hymns in honor of Love and Beauty, after all, represent vividly everything against which Southwell objected in the dedications of his own verse: the use of poetry for unrestrained, profane adoration of Cupid and Venus. "Poets by abusing their talent, and making the follies and feynings of love the customary subject of their base endeavors," Southwell complained in his epistle,

have so discredited this facultye that a Poete, a lover and a lyer, are by many reckoned but three wordes of one signification [. . .] For in lieu of solemne and devoute matter, to which in dutye they owe their abilities, they now busy themselves in expressing such passions as onely serve for testimonies to howe unworthy affections they have wedded their willes"

(*Collected Poems* 1).⁵

And again, in his dedicatory poem, he declares in his prefatory verse to "Saint Peters Complaynt":

Still finest wits are stilling Venus Rose.
In paymin toyes the sweetest vaines are spent:
To Christian workes, few have their talents lent.
(lines 16-18)

If Edmund Spenser read these words, which were now

⁵All quotations from Southwell's works are taken from *Collected Poems*, edited by Peter Davidson and Anne Sweeney.

proliferating around London, he may, given his most recent compositions, have been chastened or mildly embarrassed or perhaps just outraged. It is hard to imagine, however, given "the follies and feynings of love" which he had brought to London to be printed, that he would have been indifferent. For at the very least, he would have recognized that he was possibly out of step with a trend. His long absence in Ireland may well have reinforced this notion, and his patroness's complaint might also have been a reminder.

Whatever the case, Spenser resolved to write for the first time a straightforward religious poem, *A Hymne of Heavenly Love*. And he began the poem with a self remonstrance that resembles Southwell's own language, using the word "follies" twice in his explicit recanting of his "paymin toyes" against which the poet-priest had complained:

Many lewd layes (ah woe is me the more)
In praise of that mad fit, which fooles call loue,
I haue in th' heat of youth made heretofore,
That in light wits did loose affection moue.
But all those *follies now I do reprove*,
And turned haue the tenor of my string,
The heauenly prayeses of true loue to sing.
And ye that wont with greedy vaine desire
To reade my fault, and wondring at my flame,
To warme your selues at my wide sparckling fire,
Sith now that heat is quenched, quench my blame,
And in her ashes shrowd my dying shame:
For who my passed *follies* now pursewes
Beginning his owne, and my old fault renewes
(lines 8-21, my italics)

As in the case of the dedicatory epistle to the *Hymnes*, critics have pointed out that such a recantation as this one is a convention traceable back at least to Petrarch. Yet, we may need to be reminded that just because something is conventional—be it a singing shepherd, a pining lover or a repentant poet—does not mean that it is therefore an utterly insincere fiction. The line between the "I" and the poet in any work of literature is necessarily indiscernible, but it does not follow that because something is

tropological that it is not also real.

Certainly if Spenser truly wished to reprove his former follies and did not wish his readers to warm themselves at his wide sparkling flame, he would have quenched those flames himself by not publishing (or perhaps, in this case, not republishing) the first two hymns to love and beauty. At the same time, Spenser says in the closing couplet of these first three stanzas that whoever now pursues his past follies is only beginning follies of his own, as well as renewing the poet's ("my") old fault. If this warning had come at the beginning of *The Fowre Hymnes*, it would have been peculiar enough to be regarded as a clever marketing ploy along the lines of "I have here published these four hymns. Please, whatever you do, don't read the first two, as they may provoke your sin and foster mine." This caution is really no less peculiar coming as it does after the fact, in *media res*, as it were, of the published work. Presumably readers of *An Hymn of Heavenly Love* have arrived at this poem after reading the first two of *The Fowre Hymnes* and are being told now by the author that they really ought not to have done that. The whole predicament is confoundedly Spenserian, and any reader of *The Faerie Queene* has experienced dozens of such moments of delightful or frustrating ambiguity. This is but another instance of Spenser being Spenser, and unlike the zealous Jesuit who has called for absolute reform, this well established protestant poet is, like the Queen who governed this age, having it both ways.

William Johnson has observed insightfully that most readers interpret the word retraction in Spenser's dedicatory epistle to mean "'withdraw' (from *retractus*, past participle of *retrahere*). But the word makes much more sense in its other meaning, derived from *retractare*, to undertake anew" (431). What the poet undertakes anew in the stanzas that follow the above retraction is the perfect counterpoise to Spenser's first hymn, which had lavishly celebrated the divine origins and powers of Cupid. Here in this hymn Spenser presents a very conventional overview of the Gospel story with some neo-platonic overtones in its treatment of Christ's origins as inspired by the Gospel of John. The hymn as a whole is a rather unspectacular account of salvation history as God's redemptive love is shown manifest in man's fall and Christ's subsequent birth, death, and resurrection; a succinct version, if you will, of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. The poetry itself is good, if somewhat forgettable. Framed to make references back to the *Hymne in*

Honour of Love, it is nonetheless free of the trappings of elaborate allegory or learned allusions and in the end may be described, with the exception of its evident poetic virtuosity, as rather *un*-Spenserian. The hymn is scripturally sound and theologically instructive and certainly pious enough to satisfy any of the real or imagined qualms of a patroness who desired Spenser to depict Christian rather than pagan truth. If the recounting of God's redemptive love in Christ is somewhat perfunctory, this does not mean that the *An Hymne of Heavenly Love* is not a sincere articulation of the poet's own Christian beliefs.

In any case, Spenser has demonstrated to his readers that they need not turn to the dangerous musings of a dead papist to find divine verse. He can write the religious poem and has done so. He follows this hymn with *An Hymne of Heavenly Beauty* to counterbalance his elaborate hymn to Venus. This praise of Heavenly Wisdom continues his "retraction" with a devoutly Christian tone, and as Sapience is a biblical entity, Spenser's capacity to write religious poetry is still on display. Even so, as Divine Wisdom is an allegorically feminine figure, Spenser is also on more comfortable poetic ground here, more able, as it were, to be Spenser.

Shell believes that the *Fovre Hymnes* offer an "agonistic reaction" to Southwell because, taken together as published in the volume, they seem to make the case that the Neo-platonic, allegorical extravagance of the protestant poetic need not yield to the moral strictures insisted upon in Southwell's call for reform. In other words, The *Hymnes* demonstrate that pagan toys can reside along side of conventional Christian piety to form a comprehensive truth about love and beauty. Insofar as *The Fovre Hymnes* are a response to Southwell, however, I do not think that response is necessarily an agonistic one. In the first place, I am proposing that whether or not Spenser composed the first two hymns in the greener days of his youth, he did write them before Southwell's execution and the subsequent publication of his poems in 1595. I believe further that Spenser's *An Hymne of Heavenly Love*, with its opening stanzas of self-remonstrance, show that Spenser did in fact recognize Southwell's clout. Had he chosen to publish just the hymns to earthly love and beauty, particularly on the heels of *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion*, he might have found himself out of sync with the interest in and demand for religious poetry. On the other

hand, had he published only the hymns to heavenly love and beauty, he would have been acknowledging and even verifying Southwell's clout. By publishing all four hymns together Spenser pleases his patronesses and satisfies his readers that it doesn't take a traitorous Jesuit papist to write a religious poem. At the same time, he retains in the work as a whole all things Spenserian: Neo-platonic extravagance, elaborate allegory, multiple allusions, yoked opposites and rhetorical ambiguity. By putting pagan extravagance on display within the same binding as conventional religious verse he counters Southwell's severe call for poetic reform. If Spenser regarded this response as a victory of sorts, he might also have been self-consciously aware of how strangely things had changed since he had published *The Shepheardes Calender* a decade and a half earlier. For here in this current literary moral exchange, he casts himself in the role of the more libertine Palinode, while on the other side, inhabiting the persona of the more pious Piers, was not an uncompromising Calvinist pastor, but a dead Roman Catholic priest.

Whatever his literary or political intent in his *Fowre Hymnes*, ultimately, Spenser's project meets with only limited success, and, relative to the kind of poems Southwell had fashioned, and which were now proliferating posthumously, Spenser's work may even be said to have failed. Few readers then or now acknowledge the *Fowre Hymnes* as among Spenser's greatest achievements. Rather, they are mostly overshadowed by the exceptional quality of his other works. And while the straightforward *Hymne of Heavenly Love* is unlike anything Spenser had ever written, it also demonstrates that Spenser did not really grasp the new poetic force that people were attracted to in Southwell's verse; a force that was much more than simply the choice of a religious subject matter. Anne Sweeney puts it this way: "Southwell was more than a copyable poet in the way that the form or style or phrasing of a Surrey or a Sidney could be copied: his status as both priest and martyr turned the actual process of creativity around from upthrusting creative ambition to an authoritative interpretation of the Divine creativity as it descends humanwards" (286). The new intensity in "personation," identified by Frank Kermode as characteristic of the early 17th century, was, Sweeney claims, already being done by Southwell in his first person meditations of Magdalen and Peter. "Where Wyatt and Sidney had introduced into English the eloquently

disappointed lover," Sweeney says, "Southwell, trained as he was in the recounting of real emotion, had introduced the language of the honest but incoherent heart" (Sweeney 152). Sweeney makes a persuasive case that a new poetic was emerging in the 1590's, one of psychological meditation of the kind we associate with Donne and Herbert, as well as Hamlet and an array of other Shakespeare characters. It was Robert Southwell's verse, not Edmund Spenser's, Sweeney claims, that was at the front of this new poetic force.

Sweeney's strongest evidence for this claim is also her most controversial, and that is the debt that she finds John Milton owes to Southwell. She states:

Milton, who evidently preferred Southwell's to Spenser's rhetorical vision, borrowed his early baroque imaginative universe-scape. In his visually rich portrayal of Biblical figures in a drama of his own devising, Milton was inheriting from Southwell's rhetoric the pedagogic imagery of the Roman churches, not Spenser's anxiously non-idolatrous allegories.

(283)

Other critics are certain to engage with Professor Sweeney's bold claim. For now, it is insufficient to note that *An Hymne of Heavenly Love* is no *Paradise Lost*; nor, though it recounts in summary form much of the same thought and events, could it be. For Milton's poem depends upon a force of internal meditative thought and voice that the very best of Spenser's poetry does not approach. People may certainly dispute the unnerving suggestion that Milton inherited his poetic voice in part from a martyred Jesuit of the latter sixteenth century. Nonetheless, readers of Southwell know that the "baroque imaginative universe-scape" that Sweeney identifies is certainly present in his poems. Spenser in his poetic maturity either missed this new poetic strain or disregarded it as excessive and idolatrous.

Future poets would not do so. In the next century, George Herbert decided while still in his teens to compose only religious poetry, and in doing so he referenced lines from Robert Southwell. Much later on, as a poet-priest defending the unambiguous truth expressed in his religious poems, Herbert critiqued that other kind of poetry that relies on Neo-Platonic exposition, depictions of

imaginary landscapes, and elaborate allegorical transference of meaning:

May no lines passe, except they do their dutie
Not to a true, but a painted chair?

Is it not verse, except enchanted groves
And sudden arbours shadow course-spun lines?
Must purling streams refresh a lovers loves?
Must all be vail'd, while he that reades, divines
Catching the sense at two removes?

Shepherds are honest people; let them sing
Riddle who list, for me, and pull for prime:
I envie no man's nightingale or spring;
Nor let them punish me with losse of ryme,
Who plainly say, *My God, My King*.
(Jordan [1], 4-15)

Who knows not—here in these unflattering lines—Colin Clout, the singer of a kind of song whose time has passed? The stark final line of the poem, on the other hand, fulfills prescriptively the call to poetic reform that Southwell had invoked.

Whether Southwell was, as Sweeney claims, the source of a kind of lyric poem that would lead not just to Donne and Herbert, but “to Milton, to Shelley and beyond” (284), we may ponder. However, that two rival poetic styles and voices were emerging in England in the middle of the 1590s seems to me very clear. One of those voices was, paradoxically, growing louder, after having been silenced. Another voice was wearing thin, having sung the greatest songs of that generation. Both of these voices, strangely, still echo in our own age, and the reverberations contain some things we never expected to hear. If the suggestions I have made here help to discern the shared and contrary meanings in those songs, then they may also contribute to what is a fresh and very incomplete conversation.

Works Cited

Klause, John. *Shakespeare, the Earl, and the Jesuit*. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008.

Gary M. Bouchard. "Who Knows Not Southwell's Clout? Assessing the Impact of Robert Southwell's Literary Success upon Spenser. *LATCH* 3 (2010): 151-163.

- Herbert, George. The English Poems of George Herbert, Edited by C. A. Patrides. London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1974.
- Meyers, Russell J. "Webster, Two by Two or One by Four, the Structural Dilemma of Spenser's *Four Hymnes*" presented at "Spenser at Kalamazoo" at the International Congress of Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, MI, 1982.
- Pilarz, Scott R. *Robert Southwell and the Mission of Literature 1561-1595*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004.
- Shell, Allison. *Catholicism, Controversy and the English Literary Imagination, 1558-1660*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Southwell, Robert. *Collected Poems*. Ed. Peter Davidson and Anne Sweeney. Manchester, UK: Carcanet Press, 2007.
- Spenser, Edmund. *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*. Ed. William A. Oram, et al. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989.