

Review Article

Prescribed Poetry

It is nearly always interesting to see what a professional man such as a medical doctor has to say if he takes to poetry. Browsing in a bookstore, John Drinkwater was "electrified" by an old volume of verse* from the year 1655 by Dr. John Collop, who lived from 1625 to sometime after 1676. You can't do anything for a poet with a name like that, objected E. V. Lucas, but Drinkwater wrote an essay of appreciation in the *Yale Review* and reprinted it in his *Book for Bookmen* (1926). Subsequently, Collop has been named in standard histories of poetry, briefly excerpted in an occasional anthology, and commented on in unpublished studies and in two specialized articles. Now at last his poems are available to the general reader in a well printed edition with introduction, notes, and some textual apparatus by Dr. Conrad Hilberry.

Collop's poetry expresses a private way of practical life in troubled times. As Dr. Hilberry observes, "Collop prided himself on the independence of his thought." A physician by profession, he lauded Harvey but opposed him on the point of bloodletting. A Royalist in politics, he criticized Charles I and counselled Prince Charles to be Christ-like: "Thy Kingdome is not here." An Anglican in religion, he eulogized Laud but praised charity and toleration in disputes over doctrine and ceremonies. "It seems to me," remarks Dr. Hilberry, "that one can make sense of Collop's position, if at all, by noticing the conjunction of the man and the time." By the mid-1650's national circumstances were such that it must have been plain to an intelligent layman, however conservative by inclination, that the only hope for religious unity and national peace lay in mutual charity.

Doubtless events were not lost on Collop; he has a number of compositions on public persons of his day at critical moments. His poems, however, suggest a coherent outlook that had best be called "sceptical" in the sense of the word that may be applied to his older contemporary the Anglican physician and stylist Sir Thomas Browne. Collop praises Browne's *Religio Medici* (1642) and *Vulgar Errors* (1646)—"Brown others errors,

**The Poems of John Collop*. Edited by CONRAD HILBERRY. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1962. Pp. xii, 227. \$5.50.

others write their own"—and in a prose work, *Medici Catholicon* (1656), may have been stirred by him. He appears to have argued, like the sceptics, that since contrary positions may be maintained about such subjects as the nature of the soul, we must conclude that we cannot be certain of, that is, we cannot know, any unchanging perfect realm of ideal intellectual essences. "Since truth is one, why thus are none agree'd?" he asks in a poem "On Truth." The reason is that every controversialist sees by his own interests, Protestant or Catholic, Anglican or Presbyterian. The solution is to suspend final judgment, refuse ultimate committal, and like Montaigne learn virtue in the study of one's "Proteus-like" self and one's "giddy" companions:

I change my friends oft as I change my cloths;
 He nothing hath, hath all, and not himself.
 What though a rouling stone gathers no mosse?
 For to be clog'd with dirt's not gain, but losse.
 I make the way to truth smooth, while I roul;
 But oh ith' world no other art I find,
 Beside the tacking round with every wind.

"A defence of Curiosity," from which these lines are extracted, is clearly based on sceptical literature. The freedom of irrational brutes is associated with that of natural men. The unreliability of sensation is adduced from the old argument that jaundiced eyes make everything look yellow. The roll-call of philosophers is that of Diogenes Laertes and Sextus Empiricus and their Renaissance reporters.

In medicine this stance results for Collop as for Browne in open-minded empiricism. In religion it results in toleration of differences of opinion and in faith in a few articles of supra-rational belief that are necessary to salvation and certain because they are revealed. From here it is not far to the position of the Latitudinarians Chillingworth (who had been a strong reader of Sextus Empiricus) and Falkland, both of whom Collop admires. In ethics this stance results in concern for practical morality. Collop versifies the traditional arguments about the soul and suggests that "none do prove" that it is immortal, rational, infused, traduced, an act of the body, one in all men. What matter? Its salvation, not its nature, is the issue. "What is it Lord? 'Tis thine . . ." Collop tends to write, like Montaigne, of himself. His prime subject is his own moral and devotional life:

Who knows himself, knows all; hee's wise indeed,
 Who can retire within, and himself read.

In his day his art, like his thought, was "contemporary". Broadly speaking, his poems fall into three categories: what Dr. Hillberry calls controversial or occasional poems, amatory verse, and religious lyrics. The amatory poems in tetrameter couplets are not many nor important. The religious lyrics are strongly reminiscent of George Herbert's and on occasion may compete:

My tears Lord in thy bottle keep.
 Lest flames of lust, and fond desire,

THE DALHOUSIE REVIEW

Kindle fresh fuel for thine ire,
Which tears must quench, like *Magdalene*,
I'll wash thee Lord, till I be clean.

These first-person poems show the devotional sincerity and tension of Herbert's, derive much of their imagery from the Bible and nature, and move in step with the emotions in brief and varied stanzas. They have probably been better thought of than Collop's others.

The others (which are in a majority) are others. They burst on the ear with cacophonous and extrametrical syllables, wrenched syntax, and closed iambic pentameter couplets.

I leave the world, it me, yet not alone
Nor left, have ages for my patrons known.
Or can I be alone, who treat with th' world,
Which is within, your's to th' first Chaos hurl'd.
I onely then to be alone begin,
When on my privacies Sciolists crowd in.
Thus I can pinion time, memory recruit;
From th' Age snatch th' sickle, and reap Wisdomes fruit.

"Unquestionably", writes Dr. Hilberry, "the couplet poems take their diction, prosody, and general tone from Donne's satires, elegies, and letters." The metaphors, too, surprise and even jar, like Donne's, though Dr. Hilberry judges that "the imitation is not altogether successful" because sometimes Collop "neglects to build his images into whole poems" and in imagery he can never quite reach Donne's brilliant boldness.

The *Poems* of "our Seraphick Donne," as Collop calls him, first appeared when Collop was about fifteen years old and were printed in another four editions before he was thirty and (like Browne at the same age) published his own thoughts. Yet one wonders if Collop's poems do not belong in the longer and broader tradition of humanist versifying, especially the revived satirical strain from Juvenal, Martial, and Propertius (all cited by Collop) in which Donne with his appropriately harsh diction also had a part. Donne's syntax frequently runs over from couplet to couplet, whereas Collop's is almost without exception confined to the couplet, and many of the first lines in his couplets are end-stopped in the manner of Waller in the late 1650's. Dr. Hilberry observes part of this distinction in a footnote, but it seems to warrant more prominent notice. Collop's closed couplets are conspicuous, and possibly the degree and frequency of his syntactical aberrations are also idiosyncratic. In these virtuoso figurative compositions he is occasionally stunning.

The significance, however, of his personal style is possibly to be sought in the tradition that is loosely called Senecan, "above the salts of *Ciceronian* wit," as he put it. His syntax is elliptical and curt to the point of excruciation. He affects "points" of wit, and his lines and couplets strive to be apophthegmatic *sententiae*. He instructs himself by metaphors, and though he occasionally makes figures out of metaphysics, his images are commonly from everyday life—the life of a physician. He also makes it clear that he

rejects the "nine wenches" and the fables of ancient poetry, along with Homer, Hesiod, Virgil, Ovid, and the rest, because they are immoral or untrue by Christian revelation:

Poets feign *Phæbus* blushing sets in red,
While he descends down to his watery bed.
Sure in these purple streams [of blood] the Sun doth glide,
And in his Crimson Chariot blushing ride.

This is as close as Collop comes to Elizabethan "invention"; usually his genius results in something like

The souls within, a torch, light, warmth for thee.
Each's own *Umbrella* is, and his own sun.

He often seems to be an essayist writing Senecan style in verse. In fact, he is sometimes versifying prose—other men's prose; the line immediately above is a version of a sentence in Donne's *Letters* (1651): "we are therefore our own umbrella's, and our own suns." Collop is related to the Lipsian tradition of prose writers such as Montaigne, Bacon, Jonson, and Cornwallis, and his personal literary technique, like theirs, is a vehicle of a personal outlook. He reflects, of course, mid-seventeenth-century tendencies. In the 1650's adherents of brief style in prose were, like Blount, allowing modest periods or, like Flecknoe, wanting "every line a sentence, and every two a period . . . , like an air in Music . . . either full of clozes, or still driving towards a close." It is well known that the neoclassical closed verse couplet was associated with rhetorical antithesis, balance, and inversions, and that the most important writer who helped to develop and establish it in imperfect form in the early seventeenth century was Jonson. Of the satirists the nearest to it was perhaps the Senecan Joseph Hall. Waller and Denham polished it, and generally eschewed harshness and inversions; Denham's famous exemplary lines on the Thames—

Though deep, yet clear, though gentle, yet not dull,
Strong without rage, without ore-flowing full—

first appeared in print in 1655. By then the couplet was winning the day. When didactic intent was strong, epigrammatism, brevity, and antithesis found scope within it, as in Cowley's lines "To Sir William Davenant" (1650)—

So *God-like Poets* do past things reherse,
Not *change*, but *Heighten* Nature by their Verse—

and in the poems of Martin Lluelyn—

Valour's not borne of *Nature*, but the *Will*,
They only conquer that with *Judgement* kill—

or syntactical complications reappeared, as in Falkland—

Doth each land's laws, belief, beginnings show;
Which of the natives but the curious know.

In Collop's poems even more marked characteristics of curt style have combined with the

closed couplet to produce a highly individualized voice among mid-seventeenth-century poets.

It is proper to ask what state of mind is ministered to by the Collopien medicine. Sometimes Collop was obviously having fun:

Though like a Liquorish stick you're thin,
Yet all its sweetness is within.

Here the wit is complimentary merriment, and the capacity for this is another of his accomplishments. His tongue is sometimes as nearly in as out of his cheek, and especially in his poems on ugly women, a genre usefully commented on by Dr. Hilberry, it would be silly to take him more seriously than he takes the reader. This is, incidentally, a caution to be observed against all the school of Donne. Yet the moral and the syntax are often too hard for mirth:

A rib doth soonest break to bend inclin'd.
Who sin in's breast, a Devil keeps therein.
She emblems change, and you'l so too.
Beggers wish beggers; potters potters ill.
Let dregs to dregs, and crack'd crack'd pieces cure.
From him Heav'n glory, Earth can't secrets hide.
He's free, who's wise, to rule himself doth know:
Conquer'd, by patience conquer can his foe.

Such elliptical zeugmatic lines are scarcely the spontaneous expression of experience or thought. They assume a syntactical set of mind and require it to be found by a reader. They gloat on difficulty and glory in hazarded control and achieved suspense. They make wisdom memorable by figures. They are the individual intimate speech by which this moralist extracts from his own understanding the difficult private wisdom of rational restraint on experience. Again and again Collop denounces or satirizes licentious passion, and against the fleeting pleasures of the world he is for poverty, retirement, and self-cultivation:

Pleasure's a wandring bird, doth singing sit,
But fly's away when you would catch at it.

The poet finds his true matter in himself: "What Poets phancy, here we true may feel." The Collopien style is a verbal discipline by which wavering fancy is made reluctantly virtuous.

Being a minor poet, Collop opens his book with verses on "The Poet." Rhyme, he says, is not what makes poetry; rather

words fit
High sense, Soul-like quickning each part of it.

None are born poets, and one may find

His *Helicon* must flow from sweat of's brain;
And musing thoughts lend his Poetick vein.

In this Jonsonian way

Th' Philosophers *Elixir* in each line,
Doth in Epitome all that's rich confine.

A new choice, however, of old apophthegms, even "with the disguise of verse on what's purloin'd," is not enough. The poet must be egregiously learned in history and affairs, but that too is not enough:

He must have ravell'd times, and Kingdoms through,
And when the world oreview'd, can make a new.

He must rise above learning and wit to that knowledge which is virtue and religious praise:

Virtue is alwaies green like th' Poets bayes:
The Luxury of whose wit runs not to weeds;
But running up provides for knowledge seeds;
Who Eagle-like doth on a Pyramid sit
'Bove passions tempests, and a flashing wit:
Above the Clouds secure doth view the Sun:
And in a line like him inlightning run:
Nay with Ecstataick Paul doth take a flight.

In the Epistle Dedicatory to his book Collop writes,

Nor wants Poetry her Virtues; Stones, Trees, and wilde Beasts, accompany an *Orpheus*, while he mollifies the most obdurate, and stone-assimilating tempers; teaches the most irregular pieces by his measures, to be squared by the rule of proportion, and serve to the edifice of Virtue; produces harmony out of Natures discords, while the most savage natures by his harmony, are reduc'd to consort. Civility dead, Poesie revives

This is the theory behind Collop's thinking among the courtly poets in the mid-1650's that he might resuscitate poetry by his *Poesis Rediviva: or Poesie Revived*.

Dalhousie University

S. E. SPROTT