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The “Sad Pilgrim”: The Poetry of Sir Robert Sidney

The rediscovery of a manuscript of poems written by Sir Robert Sidney (1563-1626), which was first announced in London in late 1973, is arguably the most important Renaissance manuscript discovery of the past hundred years. Indeed, the only holograph manuscript of comparable importance published this century is Edward Taylor’s “Poeticall Meditations”, extracts from which first appeared in 1937 — and to describe Taylor as a “Renaissance” poet is to stretch the meaning of the term somewhat. In the Robert Sidney MS, we have the only substantial body of verse by an Elizabethan poet in his own handwriting and incorporating the poet’s own revisions. In addition to their enormous intrinsic interest, these poems also dramatically change our view of the literary activities of the Sidney Circle, that unique, closely connected family group which was inspired by the genius and person of Sir Philip Sidney.

The manuscript — which was briefly noted in sales catalogues early last century — was first described in detail by P.J. Croft in his outstanding work *Autograph Poetry in the English Language* (1973), and again in Sotheby’s catalogue for the projected sale on Tuesday, 19 November, 1974. After some justifiably enthusiastic publicity it was offered for auction, and was subsequently purchased by the British Library early in 1975. Hopefully, it will soon be adequately edited, so that Elizabethan specialists and the general reader alike may appreciate this significant addition to the canon of Elizabethan poets. The discussion that follows, which is presented as an introduction to Robert Sidney’s verse, is based on a study of the manuscript made in November, 1974, with the help of a grant from Dalhousie University and some very time-consuming and helpful assistance from Dr. James

Gray, Chairman of Dalhousie's English Department and from the Dean of Graduate Studies. Without their help, this paper could not have been written. So far the manuscript has not been published, but extracts have appeared in the auction catalogues issued in 1833, and 1834 by Thomas Thorpe and by Sotheby's in 1974, and in Croft's book. All quotations are therefore taken from these published sources.¹

The manuscript itself is a notebook, with ninety pages of text, plus a preliminary dedicatory page, which is inscribed "For the Countess of Pembroke". The hand, as Croft has shown, is undeniably Robert Sidney's. It is characterised by tense energy seen in the alternation of pressure in the downstrokes, and the vigour with which the ascending and descending strokes encroach on the neighbouring lines.² There are many places where the author has corrected his text, sometimes in a different ink and therefore perhaps much later, suggesting that the collection was of constant interest to him over a considerable period. Altogether there are 66 poems, 35 sonnets, 24 longer and 7 short poems, written in a variety of stanzaic and metrical forms. Some are described variously as pastorals, songs, or elegies; others are titled, "Upon a snufkin" for instance, or are noted as translated "out of Spanish", "out of Seneca". The sonnets and other poems are intermingled, without any apparent fixed order. One sonnet, numbered 35, "Time cruel time how fast pass you away" seems designed to conclude the collection. In the manuscript it is followed by a number of untitled and unnumbered poems, pastorals, an elegy and nine songs, which in revision, might have been inserted earlier in the sequence. Croft suggests, reasonably, that Sidney decided to increase the proportion of songs after completing the main sequence.³ As well, there are a few indications of his intention to revise the work: beside Sonnet 4, "Those purest flames kindled by beauties rare", he noted "this showld be first". The poem is an impressive exercise in high neo-Platonism and would have been an appropriate opening for a sequence dealing with love, nobility, absence and pain. He also noted that only five of an intended crown of sonnets had been completed, perhaps to remind himself of their need for revision.

Reading the multiplicity of late nineteenth-century sale catalogues, one visualizes hoards of eager agents of Sotheby & Company or Christie's unearthing long forgotten treasures to sustain a noble family fallen on hard times. But as Roy Strong has forcibly reminded us

recently, not only are England's country homes, with their artistic and bibliographic wealth, financially endangered, but there are still many literary gems coming to light from them,⁴ including, recently, a commonplace book of Robert Herrick's, sold at Sotheby's in 1965 to the University of Texas at Austin, the recent holograph of a poem of John Donne's, and now the Robert Sidney MS.

Why has this manuscript been unknown for so long? The earliest reference I have been able to trace is in a sale by Thomas Thorpe in 1833, where the work is ascribed to Robert's brother, Philip. Robert had never been recognized as a poet, hence Thorpe understandably wrote "it would appear that these beautiful verses, for such many of them are, were not the original compositions of Sir Robert Sidney, but transcripts from the loose papers of Sir PHILIP SIDNEY".⁵ The price asked was £10.10, a far cry from 1974's reserve price of £50,000. It didn't sell: in 1834, Thorpe again offered it, this time correctly attributing it to Robert Sidney, pointing out that the alterations to the text were clearly authorial, and triumphantly announcing that "the circumstances of these alterations being in his autograph, places the first Earl of Leicester [he means, of course, the second] within the pale of poets of the sixteenth century, a distinction to which it has not hitherto been supposed he was entitled".⁶ The manuscript seems to have been bought by Viscount Kingsborough, but in 1842 resold to Thorpe, for that year he offered it for sale again, this time cataloging it under the Earl of Leicester — in other words, Elizabeth's favorite, Robert Dudley, the First Earl. To add to the confusion, somewhere in this period it was rebound and described on the spine as "Sonnets by the Earl of Leicester MS". Attached to the front endpaper of the MS is a letter dated 24 January, 1848, verifying the hand as Dudley's, which is certainly a mistake. The manuscript was then purchased for Warwick Castle; it has two Warwick Library bookplates inside. The then Lord Brooke built up a collection of books and MSS associated with illustrious ancestors and the Leicester piece became part of this collection.⁷ Although the last owner was not publicly revealed, it was almost certainly the present Lord Brooke, Earl of Warwick.

What is of more interest is its history before it surfaced in Thorpe's sale. Why, particularly, have Robert Sidney's poems lain unrecognized for so long? One reason is that during his life and after, Robert was overshadowed by the brilliance of his elder brother Philip, the complete

Renaissance courtier, the idol of Europe. Robert was the dutiful younger son of a family ambitious but relatively new to the power struggles of the Elizabethan aristocracy, and the family's glory resided in Philip and to a lesser extent in his sister Mary, the Countess of Pembroke. In his early life, Robert had none of the prestige or flamboyance of Philip, who rather patronizingly described him as "a younger brother of so yongeli a fortun'd famili as the Sidneis, he is more stored with discourses then monei".⁸ Robert could not have afforded the tactless nobility of Philip's challenge to the Earl of Oxford on the tennis-court or his outspoken letter to the Queen on her proposed French marriage. He dutifully went on his grand tour to Europe, pursued by letters of advice from his brother as to his reading, Chivalric bearing, acquaintances, and finances.⁹ In 1585 he accompanied Philip, who had been appointed governor of Flushing, to the Low Countries, and was present at the Battle of Zutphen where Philip was mortally wounded — almost, one might say, willed to his death by an idolizing Europe. Philip's death was perhaps Elizabethan England's most traumatic public event. The death of the age's perfect courtier, the ideal of the late Renaissance's nostalgic chivalry, accumulated a complex mythological significance. Philip's death showed not only the commonplace lessons of the mutability of the public world, the randomness of political fortunes in the service of the capricious, ageing Elizabeth, but more — it seemed to represent the death of a whole age. From the late 1580s, Elizabethans were increasingly bewildered and disillusioned, as the Armada victory turned sour, the court infighting grew more and more frenetic, and the Queen paranoically cultivated the trappings of high neoplatonism to keep in check the corruption and confusion beneath the surface of the Court.

In the shadow of his brother, Robert had undergone the usual initiation of the Elizabethan courtier. In 1584, after some rather sordid negotiations, he married Barbara Gamage, a young Welsh heiress; in fact, the letters between them in the Sidney papers show them to have grown into a most loving couple. He constantly addresses her as "sweet heart" or "dear heart", and the letters are full of sadness of his absence from her. In 1594 he wrote "there is no desyre in me so dear as the love I bear you and our children . . . you are married, my dear Barbara, to a husband that is now drawn so into the world and the actions of yt as there is no way to retire myself without trying fortune further".¹⁰

The intense strain of being an honest courtier during the 1590s is evident throughout these letters. Indeed, we might say that Philip had the good fortune to die in 1586; Robert had to live on. In 1587, he was his brother's chief mourner and like his sister Mary, may have turned to poetry at this time partly in order to continue his brother's literary ideals. In 1588, he was appointed to Philip's old position of Governor of Flushing, and with only a few brief breaks, usually to carry out some unpalatable diplomatic task imposed by Elizabeth, he spent most of the next decade in the low Countries, his chief interest being to "rid himself of the post and return to his beloved Kentish home of Penshurst where he could be with his wife and children".¹¹ Constantly exhorted to live up to his brother's ideal, he seems to have been regarded by the Queen as both a convenient workhorse, and perhaps contradictorily, as a somewhat superficial and irresponsible character. One of his correspondents wrote in 1599 that friends had "found her Majesty [to] have a better opinion of you then at this present, and that she should say now all your youthful toyes are out of your brain, you would prove an honest man . . . The least toy is here made powerful to hynder any mans preferment".¹² Despite gossip and royal hardheartedness, Sidney soldiered on, even forced at times to borrow money and pawn family plate under threat of mutiny by his troops and starvation.¹³

After years of frustration, Robert Sidney's fortunes improved under James' reign. Life at Penshurst in the early seventeenth century was celebrated in that most harmonious of poems by Ben Jonson, "To Penshurst", where the rich, cooperative life of an organic and humane community is evoked.¹⁴ Jonson, incidentally, does not explicitly mention Sidney as a poet in the poem — although this would not have been entirely unusual, as outside his immediate circle Philip's reputation as a poet had hardly been mentioned before his death. In 1605 Sidney was created Viscount de Lisle, and in 1618 Earl of Leicester. He died in 1626, at 63, having survived his elder brother by forty years and his elder sister by five.

Although references to the literary interests of all the Sidneys, including Robert, are found in many dedications, letters, and prefaces of the period, there are few references to him as a poet. Jonson speaks of how Sidney's children

. . . may, every day,
Reade, in their vertuous parents noble parts,
The mysteries of manners, armes, and arts

which, at the very least, is ambiguous. In 1609, Chapman wrote of him as "the most Learned and Noble Concluder of the Warres Arte, and the Muses".¹⁶ There is a tradition that he wrote the lyrics for his godson Robert Dowland's *Musicall Banquet*,¹⁷ and he may have written verses in honor of his daughter's marriage.¹⁸ Certainly, like the rest of his family, Robert was widely praised as a generous patron of literature, and it is significant that the distinctive note of the Sidneys' encouragement of poets was that they were poets themselves. "Gentle *Sir Phillip Sidney*", wrote Thomas Nashe, "thou knewst what belonged to a schollar, thou knewst what paines, what toyle, what travel, conduct to perfection"¹⁹ — and clearly, now, the same can be said of Robert. Except that it wasn't at the time. Even if there are few printed references to Philip as a poet before his death, it is clear that *Astrophil and Stella*, the *Arcadia*, and the *Defence* were well known, especially in the Sidney circle.²⁰ But there is no such evidence for Robert's verse being known. The Sotheby's Catalogue description states that it was customary "for the Elizabethan courtier-poet to compose his amatory verse in the 'April of his years' and to renounce such youthful vanities in later life", which is true enough, and it is equally true that by the time of Robert's death he "had outlived the poetic fashions of his youth".²¹ But renunciation may well have come much earlier, and a clue is perhaps found in the poetic career of his sister, Mary. It is clear that her writing did not seriously begin until after Philip's death, when she took upon herself the vocation to continue his work in forwarding the Elizabethan poetic Renaissance. The bulk of her work, an impressive body of poetry and prose, grows directly out of Philip's inspiration: she edited his manuscripts, completed his versifications of the psalms, and wrote or translated a number of works directly influenced by his critical theories or dedicated to his memory. It may be that Robert also wrote his verse as a similar, although less public, attempt to continue his brother's intentions for poetry. He may have decided that Mary, more permanently settled at Wilton in the 1580s with the increasing comings and goings of Greville, Spenser, Daniel, and other poets, was better placed to direct the Sidneian literary revolution. It is to her that he dedicated and presumably presented his manuscript, possibly in one of his much desired but infrequent visits to England, about 1590.²² It was at Wilton that Philip had written most of the *Arcadia* and probably the *Defence* and *Astrophil and Stella*; it was there

that Robert had visited in 1584 when he and Philip stood godfathers to the Countess' second son, Philip, later the Fourth Earl of Pembroke and one of the "incomparable brethren" to whom Shakespeare's First Folio was dedicated. It was at Wilton, too, that Robert's poem presumably found a home until the library was dispersed after the Civil War by the fifth Earl.²³

I want now to turn to Robert's poems themselves. The clearest influence upon them is, of course, that of Philip. Like his brother's, Robert's poems are in the form of a Petrarchan miscellany of sonnets and songs, although they show a greater variety of metrical and stanzaic patterns than the normal sonnet sequence of the eighties and nineties – and this is a characteristic he may have derived from Mary, whose Psalms involve the most impressive formal experimentation in English verse before Hopkins. In the Countess' 165 psalms, there are 164 distinct stanzaic and metrical patterns, some of remarkable complexity and subtlety. Robert's are technically less ambitious, but they certainly reflect a similar interest in working with complex patterns of verse – as evidenced by the three unusual 13 line stanzas of Song 13, one of which I quote:

Vpon a wretch, that wastes away
 Consum'd with wants: whose last decay
 threatens each night to see no day
 Some speedy help bestow
 whoe prostrat heer before yow lyes
 and casting up his begging eyes
 sighs owt to you his hotter cryes
 in whome his health must grow.
 A poor wretch
 but your wretch
 whome misery so driueth
 as onely that hee liueth
 his sens of paine doth show.

Here the complex rhyme scheme (aaab cccb ddeeb) and the varying line length (88688633666 syllables) are reminiscent of the Countess' experiments, as indeed are many of Robert's pastorals and songs. None of the patterns exactly matches those of Mary Sidney and the diction, of course, is closer to the typical love-poetry of the era (such as in *England's Helicon*) than to the *Psalms*. But they are born out of the same fascination with formal experimentation: just as in Mary's Psalms only once is the stanzaic pattern repeated, so in Robert's 24 songs he

never repeats a pattern, and within particular poems, too, there is displayed a technical virtuosity comparable with his brother's and sister's. Song One, for instance, skilfully mixes lines of varied length, with a predominantly iambic beat:

O eyes, o lights deuine
 which in vnmatched face
 like twoe fayre suns, in cleerest heauen do shine
 and from so glorious place
 voutsafe yowr beames to moue
 on humble mee to raise my thoughts to loue

Like both Philip and Mary he uses feminine rhyme very skilfully in the songs (as in Song 10, "you whoe fauor doe enioy"), and his technical skill is seen in such sophisticated mixtures as Song 4's blending of rhyming anapaests with the regular iambs:

My sowle in purest fyre
 doth not aspyre
 to rewarde of my paine
 True pleasure is in loue
 onely to loue
 and not seeke to obtaine.

Like Mary, Robert shows an excellent control of movement and balance within single lines, as for instance in the final lines of Sonnet 21:

Or if on mee from my fayre heauen are seen,
 Some scattred beames: Know sutch heate giues theyr light
 as frosty mornings Sun: as Moonshyne night.

If Mary's influence is seen primarily in Robert's technical daring, nevertheless the most important influence is still that of his brother. The sequence is clearly modelled on *Astrophil and Stella*: it mingles sonnets with longer, more emotionally diffuse songs, and like Philip's, Robert's sequence contains an interesting level of biographical reference. The whole sequence is characterized by an opaque melancholy, a mood of disturbance and brooding which while endemic to Petrarchan sonnets in general, nevertheless seems to reflect something of Robert's own political and personal career, caught as he was in the Low Countries carrying on his brother's political duties. There is a brief, pessimistic Song, number seventeen, which seems to reflect some deeply tragic event in the poet's experience. The first stanza sets the note of brooding melancholy:

The Sunn is set, and masked night
 Vailes heauens fayer eyes.
 Ah what trust is there to a light
 that so swift flies

The second stanza looks forward to a new world which enjoys the flame of someone the poet mourns, presumably his brother. Philips' futile heroism must have been frustratingly present to Robert each day of his long, pointless tour of duty in the Low Countries and although Robert's poetry (unlike Mary's) does not include any poems written explicitly in his brother's honour, perhaps here we have a brief but significant reference to Philip's death. Perhaps Robert's poetry was a reaction not only to his depressing exile from England, but to the melancholy duty of following in his brother's old post. It is possible that having used verse as an emotional relief, once he had hopes of returning and eventually did actually return to England, it lost its psychological function for him. Certainly, much of Robert's verse could be read as a moving expression of a frustrated politician's escape-world, yearning for his wife and children and home at Penshurst. Sonnet 7, "The hardy Captein vnusde to retyre", speaks directly of his experiences in the Low Countries as "to the West" [to England, of course] he must have constantly turned "his eyes/Where loue fast holds his hart" (Song 6). The sixth Song of the collection is an especially revealing piece in this connection — as well as being the most impressive poetically. Like Raleigh's famous and haunting "As you Came to the Holy Land", it is based upon the traditional lost ballad of a pilgrim travelling to Walsingham. The opening of Raleigh's magnificent piece will be recalled, with its insistent, melancholic rhythms:

As you came from the holy land
 of Walsinghame
 Mett you not with my true love
 By the way as you came?

How shall I know your trew love
 That have mett many one
 As I went to the holy lande
 That haue come, that haue gone? ²⁴

The same lost ballad was the one from which Ophelia sings snippets in her madness. Robert Sidney's Song based on the ballad is a 136-line poem, hauntingly evocative in its use of the ballad with its traditional dialogue, here occurring between a Lady and a Pilgrim, and at the same time clearly autobiographical:

L. Yonder comes a sad pilgrim
 from the East hee returns
 I wil aske if hee saw him
 whoe for mee absent mourns.
 Aged father so to thee
 thy trauuail worcke thy rest
 Say if thy happ were to see
 the knight that loues mee best.

P. Many one see wee lady
 as wee come as wee goe
 by what tokens how showld I
 yowr knight from others know.

L. Pilgrim hee is wel to know
 these marcks hee euer beares
 Clad in russet hee doth goe
 his face greefs liuerie weares
 To the west hee turns his eyes
 where loue fast holds his hart
 Duty there the body ties
 his sowl hence cannot part.

Here the Lady presumably represents Robert's wife, and "the knight that loves me best" who "greefs liuerie weares" and who "to the west . . . turns his eyes" is the exiled Robert Sidney held by duty to the Low Countries away from what later in the poem he terms:

 the lady that doth rest
 near Medways sandy bed.

Penshurst Place, the Sidney home, stands on the Medway River just outside Tonbridge and almost due west of Flushing.²⁵ Interestingly enough Robert revised this particular line; originally, it read "near ritch Tons sandy bed", which of course refers to Tonbridge.

The Sixth Song is the most clearly autobiographical poem in the sequence. The bulk of the collection, in traditional Petrarchan fashion, is concerned with love, and is similar to a host of sequences written in the '80s and '90s, such as Daniel's *Delia* or Drayton's *Idea*, although no poem mentions any identifiable or even coherently fictional mistress. The diction is typical of the English *petrarchisti*. The lovers "sowle" exists "in purest fyre" (Song 4); he accepts both the joys and griefs of love, in his "bands of service without end" (Sonnet 13). We encounter the familiar world of Petrarchan paradox: on the one hand, the high idealism of the lover who affirms the beauty of "those fayre eyes"

which “shyne in theyr cleer former light” (Song 12), on the other hand there are the “paines which I vncessantly susteine” (Sonnet 2). The lady’s beauties are “born of the heauens, my sowles delight” (Sonnet 3), while the lover’s passions are “purest flames kindled by beauties rare” (Sonnet 4), as he contemplates in pleasurable agony how she takes “pleasure” in his “cruelty” (Sonnet 25), asking her why she “nowrishes” poisonous weeds of cold despair in love’s garden instead of the plants and trees of love’s true faith and zeal (Song 22).

This basic Petrarchan situation of frustration, contradiction and paradox is decked out in familiar neo-Platonic garb. Thus in the first Song:

O eyes, o lights deuine
 which in unmatched face
 like twoe fayre suns, in cleerest heauen do shine
 and from so glorious place
 vowtsafe yowr beames to moue
 on humble mee to raise my thoughts to loue

The world is a dark cave where loves lights never shine, except through the beloved’s eyes, the “purest stars, whose neuer dijing fyres” (Sonnet 1) constantly burn a path between the heavens and the lover’s soul. Another commonplace Elizabethan concept we encounter is of course time, the grim enemy of love, wearing, decaying, devouring, rusting all things.

We are in a world very familiar to readers of Renaissance lyrics. What distinguishes Robert Sidney’s poems from the mass of second-rate poets like Watson or Constable or from the anonymous verse of a miscellany like *Englands Helicon* is the remarkable and consistent control of form, tone, and movement. One interesting sonnet, number twenty-five, uses the typically Sidneian technique of feminine rhyme in the octave, to create a mood of melancholic beseeching, while in the sestet the poet uses a sparser, more cryptic and direct address, not unlike the aphoristic tone of some of Greville’s poems:

yow that take pleasure in yowr cruelty,
 and place yowr health in my infections:
 yow that add sorrowes to afflictions
 and thinck yowr wealth shines in my poverty

Since that there is all inequality
 between my wants and yowr perfections
 between yowr scorns and my affections
 between my bands and yowr souerainty

O loue yowr self: be yow yowrself yowr care:
 Ioy in those acts, in which yowr making stood;
 Fayre, lovely, good: of these made, these yow are:
 Pity is fayre, grace louely, mercy good.

And when Sunn like, yow in yowrself yow show
 let mee the point bee, about which yow goe.

Like Philip's and Mary's, Robert's poetry shows a deep commitment to the craft of poetry as well as to its inspiring consolations. It is more than conventional Petrarchan regret when he asserts that even "the most perfet stile kannot attaine" (Sonnet 11) to expressing the mistress' beauties or the pangs of love. The poems are the work of a poet with a highly sensitive ear, and a range of tone which while not broad, is deeply resonant, especially receptive to the emotions attached to absence and loss. In his *Caelica* Fulke Greville often takes up the conventional assertion that, when apart, true lovers are paradoxically closer because of the spiritual nature of their love; but he places the motif in a grimly realistic context, affirming instead that "absence is pain".²⁶ Similarly, Robert Sidney's brooding over absence, delay and loneliness have more than a conventional feel to them. Over and over again, the poet suffers from "greefs sent from her whom in my sowle I bless" (Song 23); constantly he feels that "delaies are death" (Song 18), as he waits "on vnkown shore, with weather hard destrest" (Song 22). Here, on the unknown shore, is the abandoned knight who has beseeched the pilgrim of the Walsingham poem to give his abandoned lady his undying devotion and the picture is communicated not just by conventional statement, but by the movement and the feel of the verse. Such common Petrarchan motifs are made peculiarly effective especially through the grave, deliberate melancholic movement of the lines, which convey the passion, the hopelessness and yet the continuing devotion of the lover. We are reading poetry of an exceptionally high level of craftsmanship, written by a poet skilled as well in the details of the poetic craft as in the range of poetic forms, which range from the courtly blazon or catalogue of the lady's beauties in Sonnet 32 to the more popular ballad form of the Walsingham poem.

Another indication of the degree of Robert's commitment to poetry is in the many interlinings and corrections we see in the manuscript. Like his sister, Robert seems to have been a constant "tinkerer,"²⁷ with

his work. From a study of Mary's corrections and drafts we can piece together a fascinating account of her poetical development;²⁸ with his, nothing as systematic emerges, but the corrections continually reveal a man concerned with improving on his first drafts. The corrections seem to be in the same hand, although some are in a different ink or pen, and so he may have worked over the manuscript for some time. Most of the changes are minor stylistic adjustments, such as "yowr" for "this" (Song 6). On the other hand, Sonnet 28, "Ayre which about these wanton leaves dost play" is greatly revised, only three of the fourteen lines remaining untouched; more typical is Sonnet 25 which has one full line and a number of words changed — and that proportion of corrections seems about average.

Intellectually, Robert's verse seems less ideologically committed than Mary's or even much of Philip's. One of the characteristic notes of the literature of the Sidney Circle is a balance between, on the one hand, high neo-Platonism, with its emphasis on the autonomy of the human will and man's desire for perfection and, on the other hand, a strong Calvinist piety, emphasizing God's transcendence of humanity and the corruption and worthlessness of human aspirations.²⁹ It is interesting that Robert seems relatively indifferent to this great debate. There is no indication that he was especially interested in the more extreme varieties of neoplatonic or magical philosophy associated with John Dee or Giordano Bruno, which were current in the 1580s. Perhaps living isolated from the mainstream of English philosophical developments in the 1580s and 90s, he was untouched by such speculation, and altogether Robert's character and interests were more pragmatic, less speculative. The intellectual tensions of his poems remain the stock-in-trade of the Petrarchan poet; his sequence is poetically but not intellectually sophisticated. Nor, indeed, do the religious references in the poems suggest that he shared the intensity of theological interest of, say, his brother's closest friend, Fulke Greville. Sonnet 27 speaks of religious laws being shattered, but there is nothing of the deep disillusion of Greville's *Caelica* CIX:

Sion lies waste, and thy Jerusalem,
O lord, is fall'n to utter desolation³⁰

Where religious references do occur in the poems, they are used skilfully to darken the established mood of a poem rather than to transform a conventional motif into a profound religious speculation.

It is, of course, wrong to attempt to fit Robert into his brother's or sister's poetic mould; he has his own distinctive voice and interests. Indeed, what might more interestingly be considered is the place of that voice within a very remarkable phenomenon: uniquely in English literary history, we have five closely connected members of a single family who are uncommonly good — and in at least one case exceptional — poets. There is Philip, the most sophisticated craftsman of the Elizabethan Renaissance, the author of the age's seminal critical treatise, its most popular work of prose fiction and the sophisticated and highly influential lyric sequence, *Astrophil and Stella*. There is Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke, a translator, a poet of striking virtuosity and the age's most important patroness. We can now add a third member of this generation in Robert, and to complete the group, there are Mary's son William, not only Shakespeare's patron, but a subtle poet, sensitive to the changing fashions of lyric verse in the 1620s and '30s, and Robert's daughter Mary, Lady Wroth, the author of the prose romance *Urania* and an impressive collection of love sonnets probably modelled on her father's and containing some striking verbal similarities to his. A great deal of scholarly and critical work is currently under way on this whole group. Philip, of course, has long been well served by biographers, editors, and commentators: William Herbert's poems have recently been reprinted; Mary Sidney is coming into her own in the past decade or so, although a full edition of her work is much needed; it is Robert and his daughter Mary who have been most neglected. An edition of the *Urania* is under way, and hopefully, Mr. Croft will now be enabled to edit Robert's poems for the modern reader.³¹

We have, then, in these ninety pages of nervous handwriting, a new Elizabethan poet of outstanding interest. The final question I wish to raise, therefore, is this: just how good a poet are we dealing with? One of the distinctive characteristics of Elizabethan verse is the striking number of extremely competent poets below the very first rate — Daniel, Drayton, Wither, Constable, Southwell, Alabaster, Dyer, Oxford, for instance. Without doubt, Robert Sidney deserves a place at the top of this group. He does not quite possess Philip's variety or intimate control of tone and mood within a poem; the emotions of his verse express themselves in broader sweeps. But his ear is highly sensitive, his poems reverberate with deep, sensuous moods — pain,

disillusion, absence, death. Perhaps the closest comparison is with another gentleman poet of the Elizabethan court, one who often (literally) just dropped his poems into ladies' pockets and who never collected his verse — Sir Walter Raleigh. For both, poetry may have made up a small part of life, but their commitment to its craft and insight was intense. Like Raleigh, too, Robert's strengths lie in the individualistic brooding over the great commonplaces of Elizabethan life and literature — time, absence, grief, deprivation. Without being ideologically directed, the thought of their lyrics is similarly weighty, and both are masters of lyric form. The comparison is perhaps most apt because each sensed the suggestiveness of the old Walsingham ballad, and while Raleigh's is tighter, perhaps more evocative in its rich, almost indefinable melancholy, Robert's is more personal, the emotions diffuse and yet no less keenly communicated. Both are poems by men who experienced with intensity the emotions their poems transmuted; both, perhaps, turned to poetry occasionally as an escape from the world's pressures — and both found in it a commitment that went beyond mere emotional solace.

Ben Jonson praised Robert Sidney as a man of generosity, responsibility and piety, and speaks of how his children might

Reade, in their vertuous parents noble parts,
The mysteries of manners, armes, and arts.

The mysteries of manners and armes we knew about; Robert was a Sidney, a name which as Jonson put it, was in "the impresse of the great".³² Until the rediscovery of this manuscript, however, we did not know of Robert's "arts". Perhaps by the time Jonson wrote "To Penshurst", Robert himself had all but forgotten his youthful poetry. We can only be glad that the longer time of history sometimes uncovers what the short time of individual men happens to bury. In the poems of Robert Sidney, "the sadd pilgrim", we have such an occurrence and now the need to both read his verse and to rewrite part of the history of the greatest age of English lyric poetry.

Footnotes

1. See Thomas Thorpe, *Catalogue of . . . Manuscripts* (London, 1833), lot 944, p. 156; London, 1834, lot 601, p. 153; P.J. Croft, *Autograph Poetry in the English Language*

- (London, 1873), I, no. 22; Sotheby & Co., *Catalogue of Valuable Printed Books . . .* [Monday, 18th November; Tuesday, 19th November, 1974] (London, 1974), lot 390, pp. 95-101, hereafter cited as *Catalogue*. See also the reports in the *London Times* for October 14, and November 20, 1974.
2. Croft, no. 22.
 3. *Catalogue*, p. 100.
 4. See Roy Strong et. al., *The Destruction of the Country House 1875-1975* (London, 1974), and the exhibition on this theme at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, in the autumn of 1974. Especially relevant in Strong's book is the essay by A.N.L. Munby, "The Library", pp. 106-110.
 5. Thorpe, 1833, p. 156.
 6. Thorpe, 1834, p. 153.
 7. See W. Hilton Kelliher, "The Warwick Manuscripts of Fulke Greville", *BMQ*, XXXIV (1969), 107-121, where a useful discussion of the Warwick library is to be found. The Greville MSS, now in the British Library, were sold on behalf of Lord Brooke at Christie's, 19 June, 1968. Another Sidney manuscript from the same source is an illuminated version of the Psalms by Philip and Mary, now deposited by its owner in the Houghton Library, Harvard. See my bibliographical description of the MS, now deposited at the Houghton at the request of Mr. Peter Wick of the Houghton Library, and the forthcoming account in *The Library*.
 8. *CSP, Domestic, 1581-1590*, p.33.
 9. See e.g. Roger Howell, *Sir Philip Sidney: the Shepherd Knight* (London, 1968), pp. 60-61, 129, 138.
 10. *HMC: De Lisle and Dudley*, II, 145; see also II, pp. 160, 164.
 11. J.B. James, "The Other Sidney", *History Today*, XV (1965), 184.
 12. *HMC: De Lisle and Dudley*, II, p. 440.
 13. *CSP: Domestic, 1591-1594*, p. 209; *HMC: De Lisle and Dudley*, II, p. 257.
 14. Cf. Jonson's celebration of the hospitality of Penshurst and Sidney's interest in cultivating his estate with the following from a letter of September 25, 1595, to his wife: "Sweetheart. I pray you remember to send to Jacques, the gardner, to come to Penshurst against Alhalowtyde, and to bring yellow peaches, apricots, cherry and plum trees to set along the wall towards the church". See *HMC: De Lisle and Dudley*, II, p. 164. J.C.A. Rathmell interestingly suggests other parallels between the poem and Sidney's letters in "Jonson, Lord Lisle, and Penshurst", *ELR* I (1971), 250-260.
 15. Ben Jonson, "To Penshurst", *Poems*, ed G.B. Johnston (London, 1954), p. 79.
 16. *Catalogue*, p. 96.
 17. *Ibid.*
 18. I owe this observation to a conversation with Margaret A. Witten-Hannah, of the University of Auckland who is working on *Urania*, by Lady Mary Wroth, Sir Robert's daughter.
 19. *Pierce Pennilesse*, in *Works*, ed. E.D. McKerrow (London, 1958), I, p. 159.
 20. W.A. Ringler, Jr. (ed.), *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney* (Oxford, 1962), p. lxi; *Catalogue*, p. 96.
 21. *Catalogue*, p. 96.
 22. *HMC: De Lisle and Dudley*, II, pp. 101-123 helps us trace Sidney's movements in 1588-1590; he appears to have been out of England continuously between c. August 23, 1589 - October, 1590; he visited his sister at Wilton in September 1588, and again in August, 1593. It would have been possible also to have been there during his visits to England from October 1590 - April 1591 or at the end of 1592.
 23. Precise information on the library at Wilton House is scarce. John Aubrey states that in his time there was "a good Library, which was collected" in the Countess of Pembroke's time, but none of the few details he gives fits Robert Sidney's manuscript. See Aubrey's *Brief Lives*, ed. O.L. Dick (Harmondsworth, 1962), p. 220; see also *The Natural History of Wiltshire*, ed. John Britton (London, 1847), p. 86, Ringler, p. 547. My colleague, Dr. S.E. Sprott, suggests that an important and as yet unattempted research project, useful for

students of both the Sidneys and Shakespeare, would be to reconstruct, from the mass of contemporary references, the holdings of the Wilton Library in the early seventeenth century.

24. *The Poems of Sir Walter Raleigh*, ed. Agnes M.C. Latham (London, 1951), p. 22.
25. *Catalogue*, p. 99.
26. Fulke Greville, *Caelica*, XLV, *Selected Poems*, ed. Thom Gunn (London, 1968), p. 77.
27. The term is that of Ringler, p. 504, who applies it to the Countess of Pembroke's alterations to Philip's Psalms.
28. See G.F. Waller, "The Text and Manuscript Variants of the Countess of Pembroke's Psalms", *RES*, n.s. XXVI (1975), 1-18.
29. G.F. Waller, " 'This Matching of Countraries': Bruno, Calvin, and the Sidney Circle", *Neophilologus*, LXII (1973), 331-343.
30. Greville, *Caelica*, CIX, *Poems*, p. 138.
31. Recent scholarship on Mary Sidney includes items cited in nn. 28, 29 above, plus J.C.A. Rathmell (ed.) *The Psalms of Sir Philip Sidney and the Countess of Pembroke* (New York, 1963), and "Hopkins, Ruskin, and the Sidney Psalter", *Lon. Mag.*, VI. ix (1959), 51-66; Coburn Freer, *Music for a King* (Baltimore, 1972); G.F. Waller, "Calvinism and Courtly Philosophy in the Sidney Psalms", *ES*, LV (1974), 23-30 and "Ideological Ambiguity in the Sidney Psalms", *Wascana Review*, IX (1974), 124-133. For William Herbert, see Brian O'Farrell, "Politician, Patron, Poet: William Herbert Third Earl of Pembroke", unpub. doct. diss (UCLA, 1966); Gaby E. Onderwyster (ed.), *Poems written by the Right Honorable William Earl of Pembroke* (Los Angeles, 1959).
32. Jonson, *Poems*, pp. 79, 82.