Pain and Pleasure in Petrarchan Poetry

This essay will examine, in the context of three Elizabethan poems in the Petrarchan school, how the poet depicts and explores pleasure and agony and whether these are truly separate concepts or are just aspects of the same fundamental idea. These poems are:' Love that Doth Reign and Live Within my Thought', written by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey around 1543, Philip Sydney's Sonnet 45 in *Astrophil and Stella* which was written sometime in the 1580s and John Donne's 'The Legacy' written some time before its first publication in 1633.

The suffering of the Petrarchan lover is the major topic in most English Petrarchan Poetry (Gibson, 2015, p301-306). The praise of the beloved is subservient to the poet's exploration of the beauty and desirability of Petrarchan lover's mistress. More important to the lover is his inward focus and self-absorption with the pleasure he finds when considering the desirability and loveliness of his mistress, and his despair and pain when she is indifferent, or even hostile to his advances. The poem is also a vehicle for the poet to display his poetic skills including word play, puns, double meanings, use of symbols and emblems, metaphor and simile. These talents are presented, not for the edification of the poet's lover, but for admiration by other male poets, courtiers and in the exercise of obtaining patronage.

The beloved is therefore a means to an end, a goal that that should never be achieved, as it would undermine the poet's opportunity to continue to meditate on his unfulfilled desires and, in one way or another, end the pleasures of his suffering. Indeed, perhaps the ultimate example of this is the original Laura, who always remained out of reach: imperviously chaste, and then died before Petrarch could complete the last third of his Rime.

Bates (2011, p105-127) says that ‘the positive state of desiring something always begins with a negative state – with the condition, that is, of wanting or of not having it’. She points out that ‘Thus Astrophil, for example, complains of the cruelly emptied space – now this Orphane place – in which he had fully expected to find Stella … comparing his loss to that of a wounded soldier or amputee’. From this she concludes: ‘Ultimately, the focus of interest is not the desired object but the desiring subject’ and ‘throughout the Renaissance sonnet tradition poets came up with a number of tactical manoeuvres to ensure that the beloved object remained absent or at some remove’. The poet’s intention is thus to prolong the lover’s desire and pain indefinitely for their own personal ends (and hence personal pleasure). The role of the beloved becomes merely functional, to provide the wanted object, and her pleasure or pain is immaterial to the poet.

Bates further argues that it is best ‘to think of the desire that runs through the early modern sonnet sequence as being of the intransitive variety: as if to say, ‘the speaker desires’, period, rather than ‘the speaker desires x or y’’. This seems to be a rather abstruse, theoretical and largely irrelevant argument. The key argument is that the speaker in the poem, desires, and inevitably in the Petrarchan tradition, fails to achieve his wants however he expresses that desire. Whether this is expressed transitively or intransitively, the net outcome is the same – a stasis in which neither the lover nor beloved progresses their emotional state.

Bates does put her finger on the nub of the Petrarchan problem however in saying ‘Between these two voices – each one as ineffective as the other – the sonnet sequence stages a scene of almost total rhetorical redundancy: language is shown to be anything but instrumental and speech as utterly lacking in executive power.’ (2011, p.113).

This is exactly what the poet wants (even if it hardly helpful to the lover and beloved in the poem). The poet wishes to write great poetry and the state of stasis between lover and beloved is the perfect environment to do this. As Kerrigan and Braden (1989) put it: 'one thing the Petrarchan poet has, in compensation for his anguish, is poems'.

Consider first, an early Petrarchan poem, 'Love that Doth Reign and Live Within my Thought', written by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey. This is in fact, a translation of Petrarch's sonnet *Canzoniere* 140 (Gibson 2012[15], p397). In the first quatrain, the speaker describes how the personified Love has conquered and consumed his body. Love literally inhabits the speaker's thought and breast and shows plainly on the speaker's face. The female beloved responds in the second quatrain, expressing anger at the speaker and rejecting Love. In the concluding sestet, Love departs from the speaker's face, to hide in his heart. The speaker cannot relieve his suffering because he is compelled by duty to serve his master, Love. Despite his beloved spurning Love, the speaker mut stay at his fallen master's side to fulfils his duty and is contented to die.

Comparing Surrey's version (Gibson 2015, p404-5) to that of the translation of Petrarch it can be seen that Surrey has changed the rhyme to take the English sonnet form. Surrey also strengthens the image of the common Petrarchan theme of 'love as a battlefield' replacing Petrarch's rather indirect military reference 'sometimes armed comes into my face; and there makes camp and places his banner.' to a more direct description: 'Clad in the arms wherein with me he fought, Oft in my face he doth his banner rest.' Surrey uses words like fought, captive, arms, banner, and coward to make the poem a battlefield where the military confrontation between Love and the beloved woman is played out.

Surrey employs regular iambic pentameter in this poem, although some lines: 'Love that doth reign…'; 'Clad in the arms…'; 'Oft in thy face; Sweet is the death…' begin with a trochee and then the line is completed with iambs. This modified metre adds an impetus to these lines, rather like starting a phrase in music with a triplet leading up to the main beat – this is particularly effective in the case of 'Sweet is the death' as it moves the listener's focus from the initial 'sweet' to the immediately contrasting 'death', giving a sharp change of mood, and emphasising the marriage of happiness and death in the last line.

In the first quatrain of Sonnet 45 in *Astrophil and Stella* (Sidney, 1962, p163), Astrophil describes his now familiar tale of woe, his lovesick longing for Stella is visible all over his face, but, although she knows she causes it, she is coldly unresponsive – she 'cannot skill', meaning she lacks the ability or capability to understand and thus pity his need.

In the second quatrain, we see a different view of Stella. Here she finds no impediment to shedding tears in response to the romantic tales of 'lovers never known'. Unlike Astrophil, these are lovers that Stella has never met, and in double meaning, are also fictitious to begin with. This is a double blow to Astrophil – he lives in the real world, in which Astrophil cannot respond, but is barred from the fictitious world where his desires could indeed be satisfied.

In the concluding sextet, Sidney asks: what should a real, flesh and blood lover do against such unassailable competition? From the real lover's point of view, Stella is able to apply her pity freely and generously to fictional lovers, without any taint to her honour ('yet with free scope more grace doth breed') whereas here honour requires aloofness ('new doubts') to the wreck ('wrack') of the physical lover ('servant') in front of her. What can the speaker do? His only recourse is to somehow erase his physical presence. Thus the speaker says: 'I am not I'—a metre-based pun, since 'I am' is in fact not the iamb that it is supposed to be). The

lover must replace himself with a fictional romantic ‘tale’ of himself, then Stella can, without loss of honour, show the ‘pity’ so desired by the lover.

Sidney (in the guise of Astrophil), in the first sonnet of the Astrophil and Stella sequence suggests that the poetic verse will be a key to unlocking the pity of Stella and thus a route to pleasure for Astrophil:

> Loving in truth, and faine in verse my love to show,
> That the deare She might take some pleasure of my paine:
> Pleasure might cause her reade, reading might make her know,
> Knowledge might pitie winne, and pitie grace obtaine[...]. (Sidney 1962, p187)

Thus, Sidney’s rhetorical delights are expressed by proxy in Astrophil’s poetry and aim to delight and teach Stella to return his love. But Sidney’s purpose is never to actually allow a successful emotional or physical union between Astrophil and Stella. In the few times that Stella sets aside her disdain, and reads his words, they ‘misfire, failing to delight, teach or move here and instead affecting him’ (Alexander 2017 p55):

> in piercing phrases late,
> Th'anatomy of all my woes I wrate,
> Stella's sweete breath the same to me did reed.
> O voice, o face, maugre my speeche's might,
> Which wooed wo, most ravishing delight
> Even those sad words even in sad me did breed. (Sidney, 1962, 58.9-14, p193)

In Astrophil and Stella 45, Astrophil tries to think about Stella reading him figuratively, as he so often reads her. As Alexander says:

> Astrophil writes, reads, and is written, both literally and figuratively: he is poet, reader, and text; but he is also at times like a poet, like a reader, like a text. Stella, similarly, sings, reads, and is read, and is also like a figure who sings, or reads, or is read. (Alexander 2017 p55)

Much of the pleasure for the audience of Sidney’s sonnet sequence is therefore in experiencing the complexities of the writing. Astrophil is at times a poet, a writer but he is

also depicted as a poet in the poetry and is part of the text. Stella, similarly, sings, reads, and is read, and is also like a figure who sings, or reads, or is read. In Alexander's words: 'In sonnet 45, it is her competence as a reader of fictions that appears to Astrophil to render her deaf to the fact of his love; loving and reading are disjoined.' (Alexander 2017 p55).

'The Legacy' (Donne, 2010, p207) not only uses Petrarchan conventions—the parting of lovers as death, exchange of hearts (e.g., Sidney, Old Arcadia 3, 'My true love hath my heart, and I have his') but also plays with them and subverts them – the lovers' relationship becomes a legal document – a will'.

The speaker says in the first octet that each time he parts from his lover, he dies. It does not matter how short his parting is, the implication being that any separation is fatal to his heart. This is a metaphorical death, and although one might be tempted to relate this to the Elizabethan 'little death' of the sexual orgasm, this does not seem immediately plausible here as this poem seems concerned with physical separation. The speaker says that his parting imposes the duty of giving his beloved his own heart – he is both self-executioner (as he parts from his lover, this killing his heart), and his own executor – the legacy of his will being his love.

In the second stanza, the speaker searches for his heart, so that he can give it to his beloved: 'I bid me send my heart, when I was gone'. But he is unable to find his heart and this redoubles his suffering since although still loyal to his beloved he feels the pain of defrauding ('cozen') of his gift:

> When I had ripp'd, and search'd where hearts should lie,
> It kill'd me again, that I who still was true
> In life, in my last will should cozen you. (Donne, 2010, p207)

The poem takes an unexpected turn though in the third octet. Instead of his own loving heart, he finds a fabricated heart, something that has been constructed ('As good as could be made by art'). This is the most difficult part of the poem. The phrase 'It was not good, it was not bad / It seem'd' suggests that the heart was neither loving nor hateful – but simply indifferent. It appears the speaker has captured his lover's heart, but only to find it uncaring and unloving, and then in the final lines he says, he could not return his lover's heart, because in reality, because he (and no other lover) could possess it in the first place ('no man could hold it, for 'twas thine'). The final couplet thus speaks of the lover's total anguish that whatever he does, his beloved will always remain aloof, cold and disengaged.

Conclusion

Pleasure and pain are essential elements in Petrarchan poetry, a genre which may superficially be seen as means of seduction. On closer inspection the poets use a number of tactical ploys to ensure that the beloved object remains aloof, unengaged, absent or at some remove. Only in this way can the poet personally take pleasure in the pain and anguish embodied in his poetry and display his poetic fireworks for the amusement of his peers and patrons.

[2193 words]

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