Melodies Unheard

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On Henry Noel’s “Gaze Not on Swans”

Gaze Not on Swans

Gaze not on swans in whose soft breast
A full hatcht beauty seems to rest,
Nor snow which falling from the sky
Hovers in its virginity.

Gaze not on roses though new blown
Grac’d with a fresh complexion,
Nor lilly which no subtle bee
Hath rob’d by kissing chemistry.

Gaze not on that pure milky way
Where night vies splendour with the day,
Nor pearls whose silver walls confine
The riches of an Indian mine:

For if my emperesse appears
Swans moultring dy, snow melts to tears,
Roses do blush and hang their heads
Pale lillyes shrink into their beds;

The milky way rides past to shrowd
Its baffled glory in a clowd,
And pearls do climb unto her eare
To hang themselves for envy there.

So have I seene stars big with light,
Proud lanthorns to the moone-ey’d night,
Which when Sol’s rays were once display’d
Sunk in their sockets and decay’d.

I first came upon this lovely lyric in the five-volume anthology *Poets of the English Language*, edited by W. H. Auden and Normal Holmes Pearson, where it is attributed unambiguously to William Strode. So much did I delight in it that I eventually found a copy of the *Poetical Works of William Strode* (1907), edited by Bertram Dobell, who is by no means as confident as the anthologists regarding the poem’s authorship. Indeed, Dobell says, “The only authority for attributing the lines . . . to Strode, is that the poem is mentioned in Dr. Grosart’s list of his poems. It, however, is included in [Henry] Lawes’ ‘Ayres and Dialogues’ where it is assigned to Henry Noel, who would seem therefore to have the best claim to it” (129). I am persuaded by the judgment of Dobell, the opinion of Lawes, and my own instincts gained from reading the whole of Strode’s poetic output, in the course of which he never rises to anything like the level of this extraordinary poem. (Neither, for that matter, do any of the poems confidently attributed to Edward De Vere, Earl of Oxford, approach the qualities of the songs, poems, or plays of Shakespeare, though obstinate Oxfordians continue to suppose the former wrote the works of the latter.)

Yet, remarkable as it is, this poem belongs to a little genre of elaborate quatrains-verse compliments to ladies that would include a number of other graceful and elegant poems: Thomas Carew’s song “Ask me no more,” Sir Henry Wotton’s poem in praise of Princess Elizabeth, daughter of King James, who married the Elector Palatine in 1619, “You meaner beauties of the night,” and Sir Francis Kynaston’s “Do not conceal thy radiant eyes.” These poems, all extravagant praises of a woman’s beauty in grand and hyperbolic terms, go out of their way to ring changes upon the commonplace similes, the conventional imagery, that crop up in so much Elizabethan and Jacobean poetry, and venture instead upon a more daring originality and a more arresting kind of metaphor. Three of four of them (those by Carew, Kynaston, and, as I now think, Noel) are framed rhetor-
ically as injunctions: “Ask me no more,” “Do not conceal,” “Gaze not on swans,” while Wotton’s poem quivers with aristocratic disdain for the presumptions of the natural beauties of the universe. Beyond this point their rhetorical strategies vary, and in my view Noel’s is the most imaginative, subtle, and satisfying.

In its first stanza, the “full hatcht beauty” of swans is itself nearly miraculous, suggesting, first, the purity and cleanliness of a birth that emerges unsoiled from within the solid confines of an eggshell, and the sort of birth unique to Athena, come forth full-blown and mature from the brow of Zeus. The swan’s “soft breast” has all manner of feminine, erotic, maternal associations, and its whiteness does not even require mention, though it is obviously meant to chime with the whiteness of the snow mentioned in the third and fourth lines. That this snow “hovers in its virginity” betokens its lightness, its vulnerability, its purity, and its danger of imminent extinction.

It may be precisely the mutability of the snowflake’s existence that suggests to the poet those twin emblems of female beauty, the rose and the lily, that trace their way back to the Song of Songs, and became standard symbols of feminine beauty, found in such lyrics as Campion’s “There is a garden in her face, / Where roses and white lilies grow.” Though conventional (the rose was regarded as the most perfect of flowers and associated with the Blessed Virgin, as well as with the royal English houses of York, Lancaster, and Tudor, while the lily was associated with the royal dynasties of France and with Christ as a descendant of Kings David and Solomon), the very word complexion in connection with the rose summons not only something like the epidermal beauty of a woman but “the combination of qualities in a certain proportion” (OED) that would make it the most perfect, and regal, of flowers.

The “kissing chemistry” of the bee suggests the amorous, yet pure, sexual activity of pollination, the delicacy of the bee’s address to the flower’s nectar, a chemistry that will convert this precious fluid into the honey of the hive. Between humans, of course, kissing would accelerate the “chemistry” of mutual attraction, but even in the purer context of bee and flower a slight residue of the voluptuous lingers on. There remains a question about the word “rob’d,” which can be (for want of certainty) construed as either “robbed” or “robed,” and can be made sense of either way. The lily is robbed of its nectar by the bee, but it is also robed in its glory (Matt. 6)
by the bee’s chaste sexual offices. If “no subtle bee” has performed this office, the chastity of the lily remains intact, and its beauty must be attributed to more supernatural causes.

The Milky Way is described as “pure” (and in this it resembles all the preceding imagery) because the stars are the visible signs of the angelic hosts of heaven. (Looking up at a starlit night, Hopkins exclaims, “O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air!”) It is, in the words of another poet, a *via lactea*, suggestive of heavenly nourishment and supernatural abundance, and the first two lines of the third stanza equate it with, as well as distinguish it from, the splendor of the day. As for the pearls in the following lines, they, too, are biblical in the freight and wealth they carry, recalling the pearl beyond price (Matt. 13); yet at the same time the pearl was regarded as one of the few adornments of the otherwise naked Venus in her role as goddess of profane love. The pearl is here brilliantly described as hiding its full value invisibly within its exterior walls, and in fact the nacreous luster of pearls derives from its capacity at once to absorb and to reflect light, and its interior layers of accretion are the central ingredients of its beauty and worth. It should go without saying that in Elizabethan and Stuart times the richest of gems were all thought to come from the Orient, and this is why Columbus undertook to find a new route there, and believed he had succeeded.

We have now considered three stanzas, each with a double, or mated, set of subjects: swans and snow in the first, roses and lilies in the second, stars and pearls in the third. There now follow two (not three) stanzas in which the beauty of all six emblems mentioned is disqualified when contrasted with the sudden appearance of “my emperesse.” It is of no great consequence whether this woman is indeed an empress or simply the empress of the poet’s heart. On what authority I do not know, Dobell, who lists the poem under “Doubtful Pieces” as regards attribution, nevertheless gives it the title of “On His Mistresse.” But we must recall that the word *mistress* had many meanings in Renaissance parlance, some of them utterly devoid of any sexual overtone; a mistress was one who could command any service from her devotee, and Wotton’s poem is called “On His Mistress, the Queen of Bohemia” and was composed in a spirit of perfect propriety. In stanzas four and five all the beauties that have been listed now wilt, wither, withdraw in shame or, finally, brilliantly, commit suicide out of envy. The bloom and health of the rose is, by juxtaposition with the
woman’s beauty, converted to a blush of embarrassed mortification; the lilies, by the same shaming context, are forced to withdraw into their beds as George Herbert observed: “as flowers depart / To see their mother-root, when they have blown; / Where they together / All the hard weather, / Dead to the world, keep house unknown.” And the Milky Way, which earlier had vied with the splendor of the day, now hastens to veil itself. The pearls become the sacrificial, self-immolated adornments of the woman, as pearls traditionally bedecked Venus herself and certain royal ladies, prominently including Elizabeth. (The royal portraits of the queen almost invariably present her as adorned with a very firmament of pearls.) I have never ceased to admire the asymmetry in which the six admonitions of three stanzas are justified in two. This swift triumph of demonstration represents an easy and perfect confidence. But more importantly, it leaves a final stanza for the clinching, irrefutable analogue.

The last stanza seems to me a triumph. Its excellence consists in a brilliant, delicate balance and combination of ingredients, all at the service of a grand concluding fanfare of praise, as undeniable as a sunrise. The stars are “big with light” in several senses, and it is important, I think, to discover these ways gradually, by gradation, in the order they are likely to occur. First, they look big in darkness because, as Gilbert Murray reports Epicurus observing, “the Sun was probably about as big as it looked, or perhaps smaller; since fires at a distance generally look bigger than they are.” The stars also look big because of the pride attributed to them in the second line of the stanza. There they dignify themselves as guides, indispensable cicerones to the Cyclopean, one-eyed, “moone-ey’d” night. The stars are proud of their torch-bearing, illuminating office and are swollen with pride. The night, being one-eyed, requires guidance, and when full the moon resembles a single ocular pupil, especially of someone made at least partially blind by cataracts. The word “sockets” in the final line is meant first of all to recall the “lanthorns” of the second line. The first three definitions of “socket” in the Oxford English Dictionary are all mechanical in character, and the third is: “The part of a candlestick or chandelier in which the candle is placed.” If we can assimilate, as I think we are expected to do, the idea of lanterns to the sockets of candlesticks, the sudden presence of the sun in the third line both overwhelms the light of the candles.

and melts them by its warmth, and both powers account for the candles’ sinking and decaying. But the last line seems also to convey an almost grotesque memento mori flavor, and in this it recalls the first line of the stanza. Those stars were “big with light” as a woman is said to be “big with child.” But the potentially rich pregnancies of starlight, when overpowered by the birth of a new sun at dawn, are effaced, doomed, and destroyed, as night itself becomes the skull of what had been a dazzling nocturnal beauty. The sovereignty of the newborn sun is inaugurated by the skeletal diminution of the old, inferior order.

I remember once recommending this poem to a lady who was generally skilled in reading poetry, taught it, and whose approval I thought it reasonable to count upon. She was repelled by the last stanza, and could find in it nothing but the image of a skull from which the eyes and flesh had withered away. I think this reading, while probably present in some latent way, is meant to be altogether secondary to the sense of the socket as receptacle to a candle, and we are meant chiefly to envision the melting of wax and effacing of candlelight by the superior brilliance and warmth of the sun. For me, in any case, the poem works like a charm.