

CHAPTER I

Sir Philip Sidney: "huge desyre"

If one had to choose a single word to sum up Sir Philip Sidney, that word might well be "desire."¹ In his life, he was the very knight of desire; in his writing, the very poet of desire. In love and politics alike, desire was the pervasive driving force behind his thoughts and actions. The strong presence of this underlying truth of feeling was clear enough to David Kalstone in 1965, when he published what is still among the best close readings of *Astrophil and Stella* and of what he calls its "Petrarchan vision." "The sonnet sequence allows Sidney to dramatize from yet another point of view the lofty aims of the lover and the defeats imposed by desire."² A. C. Hamilton points out that before *Astrophil and Stella* courtly and Petrarchan love sequences typically end either in retraction or in transcendence. By persisting in desire to its fruitlessly bitter end, Sidney's *Astrophil* represents a radical departure "from the ending of any earlier sonnet sequence."³ One may agree yet add that in his bleak ending Sidney simply takes the essence of Petrarchism to its logical conclusion, and so to destruction. Above all, Petrarchism is a strong poetics of desire, of terrible longing for the absent and unobtainable. At other times Sidney himself wrote poems of recantation – the two "Certain Sonnets" formerly attached to *Astrophil and Stella* and now generally thought to have been written earlier – and is said to have repented of his love for Penelope Rich on his deathbed.⁴ But within the bounds of the sonnet sequence *Astrophil* is like a Petrarch who never repents, never assumes the persona of an Augustine to expose his own early errors.⁵

As a poet and figure of desire – of amatory desire, political

desire, religious desire, masculine desire, and simply human desire – Sidney provided the perfect basis for the rapid invention of the mythical Sir Philip Sidney, who sprang into remarkable life immediately after the poet's death.⁶ Knightly poet, chivalric lover, Protestant idealist, perfect gentleman, Sidney became the embodiment of all his admirers' desires, the focusing figure of a hopeful future increasingly less realizable and of a vanishing and now unobtainable past. Although Sidney was greatly admired as an exponent of a proud – but ever imperfectly realized and ever endangered – new Protestant civilization in England, and as a primary originator of a remarkable, prolific flowering of new poetry, it also became increasingly clear, beginning at the time of his death, that he represented the last truly vital flowering of an older ideal, which may be summed up in the words Petrarchan, courtly, and aristocratic.⁷ Petrarchan love, the dominant mode in England from the days of Wyatt and Surrey, and courtly love, which had ruled men's minds since the days of Chaucer and Skelton, both now intertwined in a rich English Renaissance synthesis, and found in Sidney their last great exemplar and spokesman. No longer would it be possible to love nobly and to desire endlessly in quite the same fatally splendid way. Indeed *Astrophil and Stella* marks the crowning achievement of golden Petrarchan love poetry in England yet at the same time reveals the fissures of its forthcoming dissolution, as – under the pressure of accelerating change in the basic politics, economics, and culture of England – new desires, ideals, and anxieties begin to crowd in and displace it.

Of course, we know that Sidney puts the Petrarchan conventions into question in the opening sonnets of his sequence. Others poets have used conventional language and inventions; Sidney will take his muse's advice, look in his heart, and write. We also know that, in saying this, Sidney is performing one of the accepted rhetorical moves – indeed, that he is still thoroughly within the Petrarchan tradition. His protests of sincerity and of naturalness are a nice instance of courtly *sprezzatura*, of art concealing art yet allowing itself to be seen and to be admired for its skill. This is only a superficial or a pretended resistance to

convention. The real signal that the tradition no longer suffices emerges only gradually, toward the close of the sequence, as Astrophil sinks into flat, hopeless despondency. He neither attains his desire nor repents of it – nor is he any longer even capable of sustaining it. He can find no outlet from his predicament. As we shall see, for Astrophil to escape the Petrarchan conventions would require of him a basic change of stance in his way of loving, a basic change of attitude, rather than a mere tinkering with rhetoric. Sidney finds, in *Astrophil and Stella*, that the courtly Petrarchan stance of endless desire without requital no longer works. But he is still too much immersed in an older, aristocratic culture to find a way out of this dead end. It will remain for other poets, over the course of the next century, to discover workable substitutes for Petrarchism – to reinvent the nature of love.

The question of where Sidney the poet stands in relation to Astrophil the fictive character has been endlessly debated. Those who think of Astrophil as a negative *exemplum*, as a perfect example of how *not* to behave, are usually also among those who stress his invented nature and emphasize the ironic distance between him and his creator.⁸ James Scanlon takes a strongly Robertsonian view of *Astrophil and Stella* as a cautionary tale. Astrophil's fate is intended by Sidney to warn readers away from similarly foolish and sinful behavior.⁹ Such a one-sided reading tends to reduce and to trivialize *Astrophil and Stella*, but there is far too much evidence in the sequence itself, as well as in our knowledge of Sidney's other works and of the norms of behavior in what was still predominantly a Christian society, for us simply to shrug it off. Astrophil *does* behave sinfully and foolishly; yet the effect of his tale is hardly trivial.

One reason why *Astrophil and Stella* cannot be reduced to a sermon in morality is that, as Alan Sinfield points out, however much we try to draw a sharp line between Astrophil and Sidney, Sidney chose to identify himself in some measure with his protagonist. "[I]f the poem is Sidney's dire warning of the dangers of the overthrow of reason and all Christian values by sexual passion ... then it is very strange that he should wish to identify himself at all with his protagonist."¹⁰ It is not, however,

entirely strange that Sidney should identify himself with a foolish sinner: he would hardly be the first or the last writer to do so. For another effect of this almost literal identification, as Sinfield recognizes, is to draw the reader into closer psychological "identification" with Sidney's poetic persona. We see things from Astrophil's point of view. We sympathize with him. In turn, we feel closer to the apparently self-revealing and self-accusatory Sidney. Our response becomes complex, uncertain, and ambivalent, although perhaps it may be partly explicable as "sympathetic involvement with and ethical detachment from the speaker."¹¹

It may help us to keep in mind the audience for whom *Astrophil and Stella* was presumably intended. The sonnets were not written for publication, to expose Sidney to the gaze of any stranger who might buy and read his book. They were circulated in manuscript to his friends, to sympathizers and doubters, and perhaps even to covert underminers: to an audience, therefore, who presumably already knew about Sidney's various failings, including his proneness to desire, his impolitic rashness, and his dubious infatuation with Penelope Rich. This would be what Arthur Marotti has called a "coterie" audience – which is to say that it would be exclusive, and already to some degree "in the know."¹² Once he released it, however, Sidney could not be confident that the manuscript would be restricted to his friends alone. In this sense, to circulate it privately was to lose control over it – in effect to "publish" it, a word that Sidney himself uses in Sonnet 34. But it is highly unlikely that Sidney wrote *Astrophil and Stella* with the book-buying public or some unknown posterity as its primary, intended audience. Thus (to extend Ferguson's argument), the sonnet sequence may be viewed as a covert, indirect, and carefully crafted rhetorical "defense" or "apology," in which Sidney admits his known sins to a circle of courtly friends through the persona of Astrophil in order to excuse, mitigate, and reinterpret them.

But what do the sonnets themselves say about motive? Speaking through Astrophil, Sidney returns several times to ask Sinfield's very question: Why should he publish his foolishness

to the world? In sonnet 34, Astrophil first offers one reason: "Art not asham'd to publish thy disease?" / Nay, that may breed my fame, it is so rare" (lines 5–6). Does literary ambition drive the poet, or perhaps ambition to use poetry as a means to success in politics and love? Sidney's voice sounds too ironic here to accept such a reading. To be known to suffer from a disease, even a rare one, is a questionable distinction. Astrophil, more immersed in his quandary than Sidney, immediately wonders if there is any advantage in becoming famous for his "fond ware" (line 7). But the sonnet's close puts the possibility of finding an explicable motivation, even a foolish motivation, further into doubt:

Peace, foolish wit, with wit my wit is mard.
 Thus write I while I doubt to write, and wreake
 My harmes on Ink's poore losse, perhaps some find
Stella's great powrs, that so confuse my mind. (lines 11–14)

Anticipating Freud's "Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming," Astrophil – or Sidney – confesses to writing out of a state of mental civil-war or self-destruction, simply because he must.¹³ His love for Stella drives him to various conflicted acts of self-revelation and self-annihilation. Much the same explanation appears in sonnet 50: "So that I cannot chuse but write my mind" (line 9). Then, when he thinks to cancel the self-revealing sonnet, he cannot. Half comically he offers another reason: because it begins with Stella's ineradicable name.

Sonnet 45 proposes a traditional, practical reason for the act of writing: to persuade Stella to return his love, to "pitie the tale of me" (line 14). That straightforward motive (though complicated by the presumption that she can be induced to pity the fictionalized tale of his woe more easily than she can pity him in person) might apply to the earlier sonnets, but not, apparently, to the whole sequence, which ends with Astrophil's recognition that he has no hope. If Astrophil has nothing practical to gain from Stella, did Sidney then write to educate a broad readership by his own sad example, accepting censure and ridicule for the benefit of others? Sonnet 104 rebukes such a response, attacking not only "Envious wits" (line 1), presumably

Sidney's rivals for recognition, power, and love, but also facile moralists:

Your morall notes straight my hid meaning teare
 From out my ribs, and puffing prove that I
 Do *Stella* love. Fooles, who doth it deny? (lines 12-14)

The drawing of moral judgments based on Astrophil's story is vividly portrayed as an action that is killing and destructive. It tears its supposed "moral notes" "from out" the poet's "ribs," as if the would-be moralist were tearing out the lover's living heart.¹⁴ Sonnet 107, the next to last in the sequence, makes a similar point: "O let not fooles in me thy workes reprove, / And scorning say, 'See what it is to love'" (lines 13-14). To say that Astrophil is a sinner or a fool is to say that Stella has made him one, which he declares to be inadmissible. We can, of course, judge the person who says this to be a self-defensive fool and condemn his plea as no better than wishful thinking, from which we should maintain an ironic distance – a distance we must then presume also to have been Sidney's. But who among us can feel himself wiser or wittier than Sidney – or even wiser or wittier than poor Astrophil? That surely is another sobering lesson of the sequence. To respond with unqualified reproach and scorn is to assume Sidney's label of fool. The sequence is so constructed as to categorize its audience as understanding and forgiving aristocrats, members of Sidney's circle, or as censorious and inhuman judges, who exclude themselves from that circle by their very posture of judgment. If those are the only two choices we are offered, no doubt most of us would prefer to number ourselves with the first group, and not the second.

Taking our example from Sidney, who on Ringler's evidence recanted in verse before he proceeded to commit his principal sin in that medium, let us go on to consider the apparent solution given by his well-known retractions before we further consider the problem of the desiring lover in *Astrophil and Stella*. The problem turns out to be far more intractable than either we or Astrophil might have wished, for, as even the retractions reveal, in Sidney desire is simply unquenchable:

Thou blind man's marke, thou foole's selfe chosen snare,
 Fond fancie's scum, and dregs of scattred thought,
 Band of all evils, cradle of causeless care,
 Thou web of will, whose end is never wrought;

Desire, desire I have too dearely bought,
 With price of mangled mind thy worthlesse ware,
 Too long, too long asleepe thou hast me brought,
 Who should my mind to higher things prepare.

But yet in vaine thou hast my ruine sought,
 In vaine thou madest me to vaine things aspire,
 In vaine thou kindlest all thy smokie fire;

For vertue hath this better lesson taught,
 Within my selfe to seeke my onelie hire:
 Desiring nought but how to kill desire.

In the octave the whole weight of Sidney's rhetoric comes down on the one repeated word: "Desire, desire." Desire is the "Band of all evils," the underlying connection between all other sins and errors. It is, in other words, that universal "concupiscence" about which St. Augustine and St. Thomas (among others) wrote so much. Concupiscent desire, a product of the Fall, is now a basic and inescapable constituent of human nature. Desire does not even need a specific object to work on. As a Lacanian or other Poststructuralist critic might put it (though of course in more current language than Sidney's), desire is a "cradle of causeless care." It is ever displaced from its secret origins. It is self-begetting. It seeks an unattainable object to project itself and fixate on. A "web of will," its "end is never wrought," its closure or satisfaction never found.

In the sestet the speaker forcefully declares, in the face of desire, that he has found a solution. "But yet in vaine thou hast my ruine sought, / In vaine ... / In vaine ... / For vertue hath this better lesson taught." Yet, after all, the lesson that virtue teaches proves less than comforting or definitive. The speaker as good as confesses that he has only determined to begin ridding himself of one form of desire by fiercely trying to displace it with another. At the close of the sonnet we still find him in a state of longing and of agitated internal conflict: "Desiring nought but how to kill desire." Unrequited sexual or worldly desire, to

which he has long been subjected, gives place (if indeed it *has* yet given place) to unrequited religious desire. The basic paradox remains unresolved; the ending leaves the speaker only beginning to clutch at some hope of amendment. Although the other of the paired retractions, "Leave me ô Love," abandons the terminology of desire for that of love, it too represents a desperate longing for an assured spiritual life that the speaker has not yet attained. Sidney may hope for future resignation to the divine yoke, but at present he can do no more than "aspire to higher things" or seek "heav'n." In the final couplet he takes what amounts to a blind, almost suicidal, anticipatory leap into eternity: "Then farewell world, thy uttermost I see, / Eternall Love maintaine thy life in me." This hopeful resolution still must be put into practice. Truly for Sidney the end of desire "is never wrought" until the point of death. Nor do his other writings or the evidence we have about his ambitious but frustrated life suggest that, short of death, he ever freed himself of the restless stirrings and perpetual cravings of desire. If we can believe the anonymous report, he broke the thread of desire for Lady Rich only on his deathbed.¹⁵

If in his retraction Sidney can do no more than long for hope, and if religion itself offers him no present escape from desire, then we can hardly expect that the lesson of his secular poetry will be much more sanguine. The importance of desire in his early poems is suggested by the strongly emotional adjectives with which he couples the word. In the *Lady of May* desire is brave; in poems from the *Arcadia* it is hot, high, huge, unrestrained, long, deep, dull, and base.¹⁶ Desire variously flatters, rules, enflames, clips wings, tosses on restless seas, and inflicts painful wounds. In *Certain Sonnet* 6, Sidney vividly pictures desire's insistent, irrational longing, its effect on its victim, in the image of a baby's demanding cry:

Sleepe Babie mine, Desire, nurse Beautie singeth:
 Thy cries, ô Babie, set mine head on aking:
 The Babe cries "way, thy love doth keepe me waking."
 Lully, lully, my babe, hope cradle bringeth
 Unto my children alway good rest taking:
 The babe cries "way, thy love doth keepe me waking."

Since babie mine, from me thy watching springeth,
 Sleepe then a litle, pap content is making:
 The babe cries "nay, for that abide I waking."

No promise of future "content" is sufficient to still the cravings and cryings of desire. Nor, we may extrapolate from the situation ("pap content is making"), has any prior moment of contentment sufficed to silence its present cries. Greedy inconsolable desire is ever waking, ever crying, for food and for satisfaction that it cannot have – now, at once, and always.

It is not entirely surprising that, apart from Shakespeare,¹⁷ the greatest Renaissance poets of desire are all courtiers. For, in pursuing their profession, indeed in realizing their aristocratic identity, courtiers are inevitably caught between noble ambition and humiliating dependency, and find themselves in a situation only too apt to fan insatiable desire. As we shall see, cultural change worsened Sidney's predicament. Loss of a head to Henry VIII was almost pleasanter than loss of heart under Elizabeth. In that earlier generation, love might seem as unrequited as it later seemed to Sidney, yet fundamental differences may be discerned. For example, the Earl of Surrey, in his sonnet "When ragying love with extreme payne," finds his plight as a lover almost unendurable. When "wofull smart" has brought him to "the poynte of death," however, he likes to cheer himself by comparing his predicament to that of the Greeks at the siege of Troy. That war was bloody, protracted, nearly endless, at times seemingly hopeless, but – a fundamental point – it was at least honorable and indeed finally successful. Surrey is actually heartened by this bleak comparison of his love to the ten years of tribulation which the Greeks endured:

Therefore I never will repent,
 But paynes contented stil endure:
 For like as when, rough winter spent,
 The pleasant spring straight draweth in ure,
 So after ragyng stormes of care
 Joyful at length may be my fare.¹⁸ (lines 25–30)

Satisfaction of his love is only a possible hope, never perhaps to be realized; yet that hope gives him essential satisfaction in his endless suffering.

Indeed Surrey can take satisfaction in his endless desire even if requital is impossible. In his sonnet "Love that doth raine and live within my thought," using another martial metaphor, he compares his situation to that of a conquered stronghold. In the face of his mistress's beauty, his "cowarde love" has retreated down into his heart, where it lurks and complains. Surrey presents himself as a vassal to lordly love. Like a good retainer, he vows to remain faithful in spite of all:

Yet from my lorde shall not my foote remove.
Sweet is the death that taketh end by love. (lines 13-14)

These lines highlight one of the essential qualities of the love formed by the convergence of courtly and Petrarchan love in the earlier English Renaissance. This love intimately combines concepts of honor and of feudal obligation with endless internal longing. The feudal relationship implicit in this model of love obliges the lover, if he wishes to escape the stain of shameful recreancy, to remain loyal to his love and to his mistress until death, regardless of the length and intensity of his suffering or the small chance of success. The Petrarchan internalization tangles loyalty with desire, and fixes them both on the unobtainable object.

"Love that doth raine" is, of course, an imitation of Petrarch's *Rime* 109, "Lasso, quante fiate Amor m'assale." But as critics have observed, Surrey, like Wyatt before him, adds to Petrarch's inward longing the explicitly courtly theme of loyalty to a feudal superior in the face of death or of what amounts to self-destruction. As Surrey's contemporary Wyatt puts it:

What may I do when my maister fereth
But in the feld with him to lyve and dye?
For goode is the liff, ending faithfully.¹⁹ (lines 12-14)

In both versions the master (love) is at fault, and the servant (the lover) is innocent. Nevertheless, a loyal servant must follow his master, right or wrong, or else he will lose the honor that gives him his very being.

The theme of honor is pervasive in *Astrophil and Stella*. It is also

deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, loving Stella so pre-occupies Astrophil that it keeps him from performing his public duties as he should. It robs him of rationality. On the other hand, it inspires him to win tournaments and to distinguish himself as a gentleman. It is the feather in his cap. In sonnet 13, Jove, Mars, and Love dispute whose coat of arms is the fairest, with Phoebus as judge. Jove represents government, and Mars war, the two noblest pursuits a gentleman could follow. But Cupid (curiously like an upstart Elizabethan inventing or improving his pedigree)²⁰ produces the noblest arms of all:

Cupid then smiles, for on his crest there lies
Stella's faire haire, her face he makes his shield,
 Where roses gueuls are borne in silver field.
Phoebus drew wide the curtaines of the skies
 To blaze these last, and sware devoutly then,
 The first, thus matcht, were scarcely Gentlemen.

(lines 9-14)

To say that, compared to a lover, a ruler and a warrior are scarcely gentlemen is a comical hyperbole, but it contains a residuum of truth. Astrophil's love for Stella may be irrational and shameful, insofar as a gentleman should be a Christian and a public servant. Yet it would also be shameful, indeed far more shameful, if he were to desert his love. Astrophil is confronted by a division of conflicting duties. His commitment to be loyal, once made, cannot be honorably withdrawn and must take precedence over every other obligation, even at the cost of ruining and damning himself.²¹

The English Renaissance saw a renewal both of chivalry and of courtly love. The two are obviously connected and governed by codes of aristocratic, quasi-feudal behavior and perception.²² As the Renaissance proceeded, especially under Queen Elizabeth, politics and patronage converged with love, and the two kinds of "courting" became almost interchangeable.²³ This near interchangeability came about largely because of the convergence of two aspects of desire: desire for reward, and desire for the unattainable ideal that gives life meaning. Desire for reward has been amply noted by New Historical studies of

the last decade. Men court patrons and mistresses because they want some material return, financial or sexual, or both. They want to satisfy their lusts, to seek position, power, and social aggrandizement. Less noticed is another aspect of desire, which is less interested in a crude immediate return than in a kind of self-validation.²⁴ Men follow feudal superiors or worship ladies because they thus give meaning to their lives, confirm their worth, gain honor, prove their nobility, and establish their own inmost identity as persons. The idea that one gains worth by loving and serving what is worthy is a basic tenet inherited from the feudal past and approved by most writers of the time. If a man is faithful to the worthy object of his desire, even to the end, he wins victory from apparent defeat.

We find both kinds of desire in *Astrophil and Stella*. Part of the admired "realism" of the sequence comes from Sidney's frank admission of his mixed motives. Sonnet 71 devotes thirteen lines to one form of desire, and one to the other:

Who will in fairest booke of Nature know,
 How Vertue may best lodg'd in beautie be,
 Let him but learne of *Love* to reade in thee,
Stella, those faire lines, which true goodnesse show.
 There shall he find all vices' overthrow,
 Not by rude force, but sweetest soveraigntie
 Of reason, from whose light those night-birds flie;
 That inward sunne in thine eyes shineth so.
 And not content to be Perfection's heire
 Thy selfe, doest strive all minds that way to move,
 Who marke in thee what is in thee most faire.
 So while thy beautie drawes the heart to love,
 As fast thy Vertue bends that love to good:
 "But ah," Desire still cries, "give me some food."

Kalstone, who pays this sonnet more attention than any other in the sequence, emphasizes both its capacity to balance differing visions and invite "multiple interpretations," and the force of the last line in overthrowing the previous thirteen. His emphasis is finally on the latter argument. "[T]he point of the poem is to show the power of desire to bring a carefully created structure toppling to the ground" (p. 119). That is an attractive reading

for our century, but convincing as it is, it remains partial. It insufficiently recognizes the presence of desire throughout the body of the poem as well as in its explicit appearance at the turn.

After all, from a rational, Christian perspective, there is no excuse for Astrophil, or for Sidney, to continue to indulge himself in love for a married woman (an impediment the sequence emphasizes) either lustfully *or* idealistically. The conflict is not only between “reason” and “desire,” as Kalstone and most interpreters since would have it, but between *two forms* of love and desire, ideal and sexual. Reason versus desire was the familiar form of the debate, which descends from medieval tradition. This partial reading is understandable, since Sidney himself obscures his situation by drawing on the old debate for his rhetorical structure. But Astrophil’s situation subjects the debate to modifying tensions. The conflict is not only between Christian virtue and courtly love, reason and lust, but between one form of amorous desire and another. As Kalstone notes, the poem is an imitation, and in some ways a demolition, of a Petrarchan original, *Rime* 248, “Chi vuol veder quantunque po Natura.” But Petrarch’s original is not merely idealistically virtuous, as Kalstone suggests.²⁵ It aches with an idealized longing. That strong note of desire is much diminished in the early lines of Sidney’s version – partly because Stella has not died and thereby shown that “cosa bella mortal passa et non dura” (“this beautiful mortal thing passes and does not endure”).²⁶ Yet desire is a necessary part of a vision that includes “*Love*” combined with “reason” in the captivating bonds of “sweetest soveraigntie” – to another’s wife and to whatever further aspirations Stella represents for him.

Almost always in *Astrophil and Stella* Sidney uses the actual word “desire” to mean desire for physical satisfaction, desire for solid “food” as he sometimes puts it. Yet, throughout the whole sequence and in the Sidney myth, Sidney is, after all, Astrophil, the star-lover. His desire is also fixed on an unattainable ideal. In the eighth song, in a scene of intense sensuality, he pleads for Stella’s surrender. When she refuses, his “song is broken” (line 104). Rejection leads Astrophil into the bleak despair with which the sequence ends. Yet in this same song Astrophil also

speaks of an ideal beauty, which, although always inseparable from his sexual longings even at its purest, is surely the epitome of the high Petrarchan, unreachable ideal:

"*Stella* souveraine of my joy,
Faire triumpher of annoy,
Stella starre of heavenly fier,
Stella loadstar of desier.

"*Stella*, in whose shining eyes,
Are the lights of *Cupid's* skies,
Whose beames, where they once are darted,
Love therewith is streight imparted.

"*Stella*, whose voice when it speakes,
Senses all asunder breakes;
Stella, whose voice when it singeth,
Angels to acquaintance bringeth.

"*Stella*, in whose body is
Writ each character of blisse,
Whose face all, all beauty passeth,
Save thy mind which yet surpasseth." (lines 29-44)

This powerful combination of longings for a spiritual ideal and a sexual object proves impossible for Astrophil to maintain – yet equally impossible for him to relinquish. Indeed, the combination of motives and feelings represents the root conflict of the Petrarchan vision, repeated in various forms by a thousand other poets, from Petrarch to Sannazaro, from Surrey to Sidney himself, but now, in combination with courtly love, drawing toward a historical moment of unbearable and unsustainable intensity.

As Marotti has argued in "“Love is Not Love,”" in order to secure her throne despite the cultural disadvantage of being a woman, Queen Elizabeth brought the language of amorous desire strongly into the political arena and the patronage system. Amatory desire, already linked internally in conventional thinking with other forms of worldly desire, became even more closely identified with political ambition – with the burning need of men like Sidney for recognition and preferment. Another major exemplar of this terrible mixture of amatory and political desire is Sidney's contemporary, Sir Walter Ralegh.

Raleigh rose far higher in the Queen's dangerous political affections than Sidney ever did, but the outcome was similar. He too found no resolution to his desire. He left as a late poetic legacy the broken fragment of *The Ocean to Scinthia*, in which he mourns the hopeless failure of all his worldly desires, which centered on the figure of the Queen who has now rejected and disgraced him:

Shee is gonn, shee is lost! Shee is found, shee is ever faire!
 Sorrow drawes weakly, wher love drawes not too.
 Woes cries, sound nothinge, butt only in loves eare.
 Do then by Diinge, what life cannot doo.

...

Thus home I draw, as deaths longe night drawes onn.
 Yet every foot, olde thoughts turne back myne eyes,
 Constraynt mee guides as old age drawes a stonn
 Agaynst the hill, which over wayghtie lyes

For feebell armes, or wasted strenght to move.
 My steapps are backwarde, gasinge on my loss,
 My minds affection, and my sowles sole love,
 Not mixte with fancies chafe, or fortunes dross.²⁷

(lines 493–96, 509–16)

In the sharply nostalgic line, "My steapps are backwarde, gasinge on my loss," Raleigh evokes the ritual of backing away from the queen for the last time. Thus he recalls the presence chamber and its central figure, with all that they evoke of love and ambition, from a prison cell. His visionary ideal has now retreated irrevocably into the past: both Raleigh's personal past and also, I would argue, a cultural and poetic past that was to prove equally irrecoverable. Sidney and Raleigh, coming at the end of an age, desire endlessly but reach a new impasse in their desires. *The Ocean to Scinthia* closes on the same note of bleak disappointment and withering, unsatisfied desire as *Astrophil and Stella*. Both poets have lost that essential confidence that unrequited loyalty will eventually, as Surrey propounds in the example of the Greeks at Troy, bring its just reward – or, as Surrey and Wyatt find in the example of Love's defeated soldier, simply *be* its own reward.²⁸

Raleigh and Sidney found the Petrarchan stance of endless

desire inadequate to their situations, I would suggest, because they had the ill luck to be unsuccessfully ambitious at just the historical moment when political desire, which formerly had the cachet of noble ambition to justify it, was beginning to be viewed with increasing disillusionment. Preferment seemed ever less likely in men's eyes to be a confirmation of noble worth, and ever more likely to be a step up the ladder of manipulation, pretension, and greed, with figures like Lord Burghley, of little aristocratic mien, securely at the top. The Tudor policy of creating new nobles and gentry, to support a line of initially dubious legitimacy and with largely new political, economic, and religious ambitions, had already damaged the mystique of the patronage system, whose best justification was in its origins in the feudal ideal of loyalty and service.

Ambition to confirm one's aristocratic identity and serve the state was degenerating into social climbing and competition for spoils. "Honor," as several biting satires complained toward the close of the century, was gained by the purchase or gift of monastic lands, or of the lands of the old nobility. Political ambition, always open to suspicion in any age, was increasingly detached from validating aristocratic ideals. In the contest for honor and recognition the perpetual winners were not Sidney or Raleigh but the gray, Machiavellian Cecils, who knew what Queen Elizabeth really needed in a statesman. Given the Queen's aims, of keeping herself in power and securing the Protestant national order – not risking it in foreign adventures – such results were inevitable. Never again, as it proved, would the old ideals without renovating transformation serve the changing ends of English monarchy.

Courtly Petrarchan desire, which impelled the lover faithfully to serve his lady just as a feudal servant served his master, and which was thus consonant with the old order, proved no longer useful for an aspiring lover to employ. It was more than convenient for the Queen to keep the courtly love conventions alive, and thus to keep her jostling courtiers where she wanted them, but this manipulation of old ideals for new ends, with which they were finally incompatible, was bound to disappoint the poet-lovers who had the ill luck to serve under her in that

role. While the ideal holds, as we have seen, the courtly lover can snatch victory from defeat by his faithfulness. But if it collapses, as it did in the later years of Elizabeth's reign, the defeat becomes a defeat indeed, and faithfulness has lost its fundamental purpose.

As Lawrence Stone has suggested, as well, the aristocracy was undergoing a major crisis at this time.²⁹ It survived, in a manner, but only by changing and by developing new modes of behavior, both political and amatory. We shall find that Thomas Carew, a courtier-poet who served his monarch two generations after Sidney, learned from hard experience quite a different style of loving from Sidney's: one that better suited the shifting demands of the patronage system. While Sidney's model for a lover's behavior remained nostalgically feudal, and Raleigh's steps were backward, gazing on his loss, Carew – though still a polished aristocrat – found a more useful and forward-looking model in the New-Scientific agricultural marketplace.

In some respects, Petrarchan desire is recognizably “modern.” Indeed, two terms, “sexuality” and “desire,” have almost entirely displaced “love” from what we like to call our “postmodern discourse.” We can well understand and sympathize with Sidney's desire. It was a longing for sexual fulfillment and, related to that, for political and material success. But it also derived from an undifferentiated longing for something unobtainable. If one wants to translate it into current ways of thinking, it might be thought of as deriving from an impossible wish for transcendence, or for the recapture of an infant's unindividuated bliss, or for possession of Lacan's obscure “objet a.” This recognition of common feelings between ourselves and Sidney is an important reason why *Astrophil and Stella* continues to speak to twentieth-century readers, modern and postmodern, to those who admire Sidney for his psychological “realism,” perhaps even more strongly than it once spoke to earlier generations who admired him for his high romantic chivalry.

But, as we have seen, Sidney's desire also had recognizably courtly as well as Petrarchan components. This is the element that seems archaic in Sidney's style of loving, and that even in his

own time ensured that his desire would fail. Above all – above God, above reason, above worldly success – he longed for honor and recognition of noble worth. To Sidney and his contemporaries it must have seemed that the aristocratic ideal was flowering anew. But it was actually about to fall into a long process of change and decay. As we have suggested, in matters of love and chivalry Sidney was among the last representatives of the old age and among the first of the new. The chief *raison d'être* of an aristocrat, after all, is to fight. Although that function continued to have some degree of currency in England for centuries to come, warfare in feudal terms and according to feudal ideals was already giving way before the advance of new political, social, and technological forces.

Sidney managed to die in battle. His legend endured. But *Don Quixote* (1605) was published within a generation of his death. Loyalty in a losing cause, dying bravely, would continue to be admired, but usually with mixed emotions and with increasing wonderment. Chivalric ideals would persist through many further revivals and transformations, but increasingly detached from a firm basis in politics, economics, and the broader culture. As the metaphors introduced by Wyatt and Surrey into their versions of Petrarch's original sonnet suggest, the English Renaissance love tradition rested for a while on a connection between Petrarchan longing and feudal loyalty. But the long devolution from the full aristocratic ideal toward the differing values of a market economy and then of an industrial society was bound to affect people's modes of thinking about love. True, there would later be significant returns to the chivalric ideal of love, among the Romantics, the Victorians, and, even later, among popular writers. But no longer would it seem credible to desire and to serve a lady endlessly, with unrewarded loyalty – at least without seeming more an oddity, an anachronism, or a pathological victim, than a worthy exemplar. Even Sidney found his commitment to Petrarchan love – although once entered into inescapable – in practice impossible.³⁰ As we shall see, his immediate successors, beginning with Donne, would try new variations on the Petrarchan ideal and find them, too, unworkable. Gradually, however, expanding cul-

tural change, personal hardship, and individual psychological need would impel several of them to discover real alternatives. After a generation or two, the basic courtly-Petrarchan stance of an unrequited lover faithful unto death would become virtually unthinkable.

THE REINVENTION OF LOVE

Poetry, politics and culture from Sidney to Milton

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1993

First published 1993
Reprinted 1995

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Low, Anthony, 1935–

The reinvention of love: poetry, politics, and culture from Sidney to Milton /
Anthony Low.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0 521 45030 6

1. English poetry – Early modern, 1500–1700 – History and criticism. 2. Love
poetry, English – History and criticism. 3. Politics and literature – England. 4.
Language and culture – England. 5. Sidney, Philip, Sir 1554–1586 – Criticism and
interpretation. 6. Milton, John, 1608–1674 – Criticism and interpretation. I. Title.

PR535.L7L68 1993

821'.309354–dc20 93-18184 CIP

ISBN 0 521 45030 6 hardback

Publication of this book has been aided by a grant from the Abraham and Rebecca
Stein Faculty Publication Fund of New York University, Department of English.

Transferred to digital printing 2003

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