

The Vine of Life Distilleth Drops of Grace: The Poetics of Accommodation in the Poems of Robert Southwell

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Abstract

The article discusses the poetics of accommodation in the English poems of Robert Southwell (ca. 1561–1595). Southwell's understanding of poetry is closely related to his understanding of the divine accommodation, i.e. the communication of the Christian idea of revelation in a way that is accessible and suited to humanity. The article explores this theme in relation to the literary theory advanced by Southwell's contemporaries (Sir Philip Sidney and various Jesuit treatises), and analyses Southwell's poetics, emphasizing the nature of God's agape and the emotional appeal of Southwell's devotional verse. The conclusion summarizes the specific achievement of Southwell's poetry. Keywords: Robert Southwell, English Renaissance literature, devotional poetry, Counter-Reformation Catholic poetics

1. Introduction

In terms of his poetic output, Robert Southwell (ca. 1561–1595) is a relatively minor author. Nevertheless, his importance and influence in the literary circles of the late English Renaissance was substantial. Within the forty-five years after the first publication of Southwell's *Saint Peters Complaint With Other Poemes* (1595), the book received 14 reprints,¹ making it one of the most widely circulated collections of the time. Some of Southwell's works were highly appreciated by distinguished authors and critics soon after their publication,² and his work is often mentioned in relation to the achievements of the Metaphysicals and the rise of the Baroque in England.³

The present article focuses on one of the central themes of Southwell's poetry, which in many ways explains its *raison d'être*, namely the nature and the forms of divine accommodation. Southwell's innovation in the field of devotional poetry is not only a matter of his intellectual excellence and his emotional intensity: his prime contribution seems to be his unique form of exploring the capacity of poetry to accommodate the Christian revelation. To that end, he develops a particular poetics concentrated on crafting the "language of accommodation" that (re)draws the attention of the reader to the "divine signification."

This article thematizes the topic outlined above by referring to the context of the literary theory advanced by Southwell's contemporaries and by analyzing the problem of divine accommodation as it is reflected in his poems. The conclusion aims to re-assess Southwell's contribution to the development of early modern English poetry, not only in the context of devotional poetry, but also in terms of the very concept of poetry at that time.

2. Accommodation of language and the language of accommodation

In his *Defence of Poesie*, published in the same year as Southwell's *Saint Peters Complaint*, Sir Philip Sidney explains the utility of poetry as a double vocation to "teach and delight." The poet is thus superior to both a philosopher and a historian, because he is more "effectual" in moving the mind to virtue and to the contemplation of the divine archetypes:

By these, therefore, examples and reasons, I think it may be manifest that the poet, with that same hand of delight, doth draw the mind more effectually than any other art doth. And so a conclusion not unfitly ensues: that as virtue is the most excellent resting-place for all worldly learning to make his end of, so poetry, being the most familiar to teach it, and most princely to move towards it, in the most excellent work is the most excellent workman. (26)

Sidney's apologetic tone is primarily addressed to the *misomousoi*, i.e. to those who doubt the civilizing force of poetry and accuse poets of lying and of moral licentiousness.⁴ It is no surprise, therefore, that the author keeps referring to the Bible to justify his claims about the appropriateness of poetic language to accommodate the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of God:

And may not I presume a little further to show the reasonableness of this word *Vates*, and say that the holy David's Psalms are a divine poem? If I do, I shall not do it without the testimony of great learned men, both ancient and modern. But even the name of Psalms will speak for me, which, being interpreted, is nothing but Songs; then, that it is fully written in metre, as all learned Hebricians agree, although the rules be not yet fully found; lastly and principally, his handling his prophecy, which is merely poetical. For what else is the awaking his musical instruments, the often and free changing of persons, his notable prosopopoeias, when he makes you, as it were, see God coming in His majesty, his telling of the beasts' joyfulness and hills' leaping, but a heavenly poesy, wherein almost he shows himself a passionate lover of that unspeakable and everlasting beauty to be seen by the eyes of the mind, only cleared by faith? But truly now having named him, I fear I seem to profane that holy name, applying it to poetry, which is among us thrown down to so ridiculous an estimation. But they that with quiet judgments will look a little deeper into it, shall find the end

and working of it such as, being rightly applied, deserves not to be scourged out of the church of God. (6)

In fact, the moralizing undertone of the various “imputations” against poetry that Sidney mentions also reflects the sense of uneasiness about the process of accommodating human language to divine ends. The attack on the “supposed imaginative excesses” of medieval religiosity in the English Reformation meant that “the relationship between literature, religion and the imagination was problematic and contested, sometimes making it safer to avoid religious topics than to risk treating them in a disrespectful or idolatrous manner” (Shell 52). The Catholics, however, were in a different position – and this also explains the specific contribution of Southwell to the “poetics of accommodation,” i.e. to the process of communicating the divine truth using the means of a “fallen” language. The role of Jesuit Ignatian psychology, i.e. the intricacy of the process of visualization of the subject meditated upon, meant that Catholic poets found it apt to communicate the divine in an imaginative way while employing truly innovative means to achieve this goal.

Southwell’s introduction to *Saint Peter’s Complaint* (“A letter to a loving cousin W.S.⁵”) can be seen as an interesting commentary on Sidney’s *Defence*. It expands on Sidney in saying that the “appropriateness” of poetry as a means of communicating the final reality has been validated and mandated by the experience of the ages as well as by the divine Word Himself. The “presence” and “relevance” of this kind of communication has also been attested in conferring the sacraments where the “words” become the means of imparting God’s grace:

POETS, by abusing their talents, and making the follies and faynings of loue the customarie subiect of their base endeauours, haue so discredited this facultie, that a poet, a louer, and a liar, are by many reckoned but three words of one signification. But the vanitie of men cannot counterpoise the authoritie of God, who deliuering many parts of Scripture in verse, and, by His Apostle willing vs to exercise our deuotion in hymnes and spiritual sonnets, warranteth the art to be good and the vse allowable. And therefore not only among the heathen, whose gods were chiefly canonized by their poets, and their paynim divinitie oracled, in verse, but even in the Olde and Newe Testament it hath been vsed by men of the greatest piety in matters of most deuotion. Christ Himselfe, by making a hymne the conclusion of His Last Supper, and the prologue to the first pageant of His Passion, gaue His Spouse a methode to imitate, as in the office of the Church it appeareth ; and to all men a patterne, to know the true vse of this measured and footed style. (5)⁶

Southwell thus points out that the sacramental principle of the Catholic Church mandates the utility of poetry by its very theology: if the Word is accommodated to the human means, then, by means of analogy, the human may aspire to the divine. This, however, expects a particular kind of “poetry,” a poetry avoiding the “abuses” of the secular poets. Especially the “unworthie affections” produced by wayward passions are to be set right:

But the deuill, as he affecteth deitie and seeketh to haue all the complements of diuine honour applyed to his seruice, so hath he among the rest possessed also most Poets with his idle fansies. For in lieu of solemne and deuout matters, to which in

duety they owe their abilities, they now busie themselues in expressing such passions as onely serue for testimonies to what unworthie affections they haue wedded their wills. (5)

As we learn further, in the first of the two addresses of “The Authour to the Reader,” the “delight” and “repose” are perfectly laudable objectives of poetry: they manage to harmonize the mind and lead to virtue innate in the Creation, provided they are graced by a proper, non-profane conceit:

The loftie eagle soares not still aboue,
High flight will force from the wing to stoup;
And studious thoughts at times men must remoue,
Least be excesse before their time they droup.
In courser studies ‘tis a sweet repose,
With poets pleasing temper vaine to temper prose.

Profane conceits and faining fits I flie,
Such lawlesse stuff thus lawlesse speeches fit:
With Dauid verse to Nature I apply,
Whose measure best with measured words doth fit:
It is the sweetest note that men can sing,
When grace in Vertue’s key tunes Nature’s string. (7)

However, in the second address, the process of crafting “Christian workes” is further specified as involving a sense of discipline and an especial skill in crafting the language to be able to open up both the simplicity (“natiue light,” “orient cleere”) and the intricacy of divine communication (“mistie loues”):

This makes my mourning muse resolue in teares,
This theames my heauie penne to plaine in prose;
Christ’s thorne is sharpe, no head His garland weares;
Stil finest wits are ‘stilling Venvs’ rose,
In Paynim toyes the sweetest veines are spent ;
To Christian workes few haue their talents lent.

Licence my single penne to seeke a pheere;
You heauenly sparkes of wit shew natiue light;
Cloud not with mistie loues your orient cleere,
Sweet flights you shoot, learne once to leuell right.
Fauour my wish, well-wishing workes no ill;
I moue the sute, the graunt rests in your will. (10)

Both the introductions, in fact, address the “eye” of the reader (“DEARE eye, that daynest to let fall a looke”), whose reading of the poem depends on his/her capacity to be en-lightened and to see the poems as a mediation, as an accommodation of the divine Word. In that sense, God’s communication is equated with His free grace, which is not bound to any particular means, but can make use of any means, provided “the single penne” finds

“a pheere,” i.e. a companion. Southwell thus understands poetry as a means of imitating the process of divine accommodation.

Anne Sweeney’s valuable study *Robert Southwell: Snow in Arcadia: Redrawing the English lyric landscape 1586-1595* associates the issue of poetic accommodation with Southwell’s understanding of his priestly mission in the nine years of his recusant existence in England. In fact, she explains his poetic development as a process of accommodating the foreign experience of his education and spiritual training to his native English context.⁷ His numerous translations are, in fact, adaptations designed to fit the situation of Protestantized England, carefully omitting allusions to doctrines and beliefs which would have caused unnecessary irritation, e.g. angels; or re-focusing certain works, e.g. *Saint Peters Complaint*, to fit the plain English style and the context of the apostasy of a major part of English clergy (Cf. Sweeney 99-115). Sweeney understands Southwell’s genius and influence in terms of his ability to come up with a new “emotional fluency” in the English tongue, i.e. in his exceptional ability to understand the nature of “English sensitivity” and its capacity to respond to the Catholic spirituality of the day (Cf. Sweeney 116).

To that end, Southwell also uses the means of parody: his “Dyer’s Phancy Turned into a Sinner’s Complaine” transforms Sir Edward Dyer’s (1543-1607) native lamentation over women’s inconstancy (“A Fancy”) into a sacred poem. Using the parody form in this context is a “way of both affirming the legitimacy of literary pleasure and of redirecting it to pious ends” (Shell 53).

In short, Southwell finds the mission of his poems substantially bound to his understanding of the Christian message in its Catholic form: the divine accommodation to the human condition reflects God’s sacramental presence in our lives. A devotional conceit, as opposed to a “profane conceit,” liberates the word to aspire to a new quality, because it sacramentally reflects the divine *agape*, i.e. God’s loving in-dwelling in the midst of reality. The aesthetic, theological and pastoral aspirations encounter each other in the act of poetry itself.

3. The language of God’s *agape* and the *agape* of language in “Sequence on the Virgin Mary and Christ”

Southwell’s understanding of the divine accommodation can best be documented in his “Sequence on the Virgin Mary and Christ,” first published in *Mæoniæ or Certaine Excellent Poems and Spirituall Hymnes* in 1595, following the success of *Saint Peters Complaint*. At the beginning of the *Sequence*, the entire history of salvation is presented as a re-telling of the Fall, as a paradoxical anti-type of the stiff, “fallen” communication between humanity and God. In the first poem of the *Sequence*, “The Conception of Our Ladie,” Christ’s birth is a sum of impossibility, a radical paradox:

Both Grace and Nature did their force unite
To make this babe the summ of all their best;
Our most, her lest (i.e. least), our million, but her mite,
She was at easyest rate worth all the reste:
What to men or angells God did parte,
Was all united in this infant’s hart.

Fower onely wights bredd without fault are named,
And all the rest conceivèd in synne;
Without both man and wife Adam was fram'd,
Of man, but not of wife, did Eve beginne;
Wife without touch of man Christ's mother was
Of man and wife this babe was bredd in grace. (116)

The Baroque sense of the *meraviglia* dazzles the reader with new contexts, paradoxes and surprising, if not altogether illogical connections unfolding the divine plan for humanity (e.g. Joseph's amazement at the untimely and incomprehensible pregnancy of his future wife; the reversal of the macro/microcosmic analogy of the "starr" at the epiphany pointing to the "starr" in the stall, which becomes the new "skye"; the paradox of the flight into Egypt, when "our Day is forc't to flye by nighte" etc.).⁸ In "Our Ladies' Salutation" Southwell unfolds a hidden, liberating "conceit" of the divine accommodation. It takes the form of a dazzling series of "graced" answers, i.e. paradoxical responses to the "fallen-ness" of the human condition:

Spell Eva backe and Ave shall yowe finde,
The first beganne, the last reversd our harmes;
An angel's witching wordes did Eva blynde,
An angel's Ave disinchautes the charmes;
Death first by woeman's weakenes entered in,
In woeman's vertue life doth nowe beginn. (120)

The ultimate meaning is to stress God's self-less *agape*, the unconditional love breaking both the impossible distance between humanity and divinity, but also the "stiff" givenness of the human logic:

With hauty mynd to Godhead man aspid,
And was by pride from place of pleasure chasd;
With lovinge mind God our manhead desird,
And us by love greater pleasure placd;
Man labouring to ascend procurd our fall
God yielding to descend cut off our thrall. (121)

The dynamics of the accommodation dealt with in the *Sequence* then moves on to the issue of the divine incarnation understood as a *gift*, or as a process in which the unconditional nature of the divine *agape* seems to reverse the *katabatic* (i.e. descending) movement of God's accommodation, turning it into an *anabatic* (i.e. ascending) dimension. "The Nativity of Christ" thus presents the point of change, where the two movements meet. Nevertheless, the poem stresses the peculiar logic of this event which defies any other explanation than that of the *commercium amoris*: i.e. a self-less exchange of greatness with littleness, limitlessness with being-limited:

Gift better then Him selfe, God doth not knowe:
Gift better then his God, no man can see;
This gift doth here the giver given bestowe:

Gift to this gift lett ech receiver bee.
God is my gift, Him self He freely gave me:
God's gift am I, and none but God shall have me.

Man altered was by synn from man to best; (i.e. *beast*)
Beste's food is haye, haye is all mortall fleshe;
Nowe God is fleshe, and lyes in maunger prest,
As haye the brutest synner to refreshe:
O happy feilde, wherin this foder grewe,
Whose taste doth us from bestes to men renewe! (128–9)

At this moment, the theological structure of the *Sequence* changes its focus: the theology *from above* turns into a theology *from below*. The hidden Word becomes word-ed, i.e. a speaking subject, but also a subject of human understanding and conceptualizing. In the following poems of the *Sequence*, the human form of the divine takes the lead: suffering and sacrifice of innocence (“The Circumcision” and “The Flight into Egipt,” “Christes Bloody Sweate,” “Christes Sleeping Frenedes”), Mary’s involvement in the vocation of her son (“The Virgin Mary to Christ on the Crosse”), to her death which gives the final turn to the ascending logic of “graced life” (the second part in “The Assumption of the Lady”). The Lady “ascends” as a free gift to God celebrating the divine banquet in heaven:

If sinne be captive, grace must finde release;
From curse of synne the innocente is free;
Tombe, prison is for sinners that decease,
No tombe, but throne to guiltles doth agree:
Though thralles of sinne lye lingring in their grave,
Yet faultles cors, with soule, rewarde must have.

The daseled eye doth dymmèd light require,
And dying sightes repose in shrowdinge shades;
But eagles' eyes to brightest light aspire,
And living lookes delite in loftye glades:
Faynte winged foule by ground doth fayntly flye,
Our princely eagle mountes unto the skye.

Gemm to her worth, spouse to her love ascendes.
Prince to her throne, queene to her heavenly Kinge,
Whose court with solemne pompe on her attends,
And quires of saintes with greeting notes do singe;
Earth rendreth upp her undeserved praye.
Heaven claymes the right, and beares the prize awaye. (143-144)

However, the accommodating “logic” of the divine agape in the *Sequence* (but also in other poems by Southwell) cannot be “theologized away” via any pre-conceived “logic,” i.e. some sort of technical knowledge about the “nature” of salvation. The dazzling surprises of Southwell’s *meraviglia* are deeply related to the nature of poetry as a means of communication, as a process of refreshing our “everyday,” “fallen” language. In most of

the poems of the *Sequence*, the “daseled eye” is invited into an act of praise, in which God’s *agape* is answered by an *agape of language*: i.e. by the “praising” in-dwelling of the new loving insight, marking the interiorization of the meditated subject.⁹ In responding to the divine *meraviglia*, Southwell employs exclamations (“O virgin brest,” “O dazeled eyes,” “O dyinge soules,” “O virgin pure,” “O blessed babes” etc.) pointing towards the unspeakable communicated in the “word-ed” language:

O dyinge soules ! behould your living springe !
O dazeled eyes I behould your sunne of grace !
Dull eares, attend what word this Word doth bringe !
Upp, heavy hartes, with joye your joy embrace !
From death, from darke, from deaphnesse, from despayres,
This life, this Light, this Word, this Joy repaires. (“The Nativity of Christ” 128)

This moment of meditative apprehension is often associated with a moment of a harmonious, musical experience: as Southwell suggests in the first of the addresses of “The Authour to the Reader” of *St Peters Complaint*, “graced” poetry “in Vertue’s key tunes Nature’s string.” The musical theme reappears in a number of other poems of the *Sequence*: “Worde to the voyce, songe to the tune she bringes,/The voyce her worde, the tune her ditye singes.” (“The Visitation”); “O blessed babes! first flowers of Christian Springe./Who though untymely cropt fayre garlandes frame,/With open throates and silent mouthes you singe/His praise, Whome age permitts you not to name;/Your tunes are teares, your instrumentes are swordes,/Your ditye death, and bloode in lieu of wordes! (“The Flight into Egipt”), “You angels all, that present were,/ to shew His birth with harmonie;/Why are you not now readie here, to make a mourning symphony” (“The Virgin Mary to Christ on the Crosse”). If poetry in Southwell’s terms “tunes the Nature’s string,” it shows language as the agent of the sacred and the in-dwelling of the divine deep inside the reality.¹⁰ Southwell’s effort to come up with “a new sort of English”¹¹ and to show – as he says in the introduction to *Saint Peters Complaint* – “how well verse and vertue sute together” (5) is thus a conscious re-sacralization of the poetic art. In that sense – as he concludes his introductory letter – the “fewe ditties” should aspire to the state of music and “be still a part in all [your] musicke.”

4. Accommodating an emotional response: God’s tenderness and vulnerability facing humanity

A substantial number of Southwell’s poems make use of the technique developed in Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises*, especially the call for an affective response to the meditated subject. In the second exercise, Ignatius asks the exercitant to meditate on sin and the meditation ends with a call to “tune” the emotions to the gravity of the subject:

Fifth Point. The fifth, an exclamation of wonder with deep feeling, going through all creatures, how they have left me in life and preserved me in it; the Angels, how, though they are the sword of the Divine Justice, they have endured me, and guarded me, and prayed for me; the Saints, how they have been engaged in interceding and praying for me; and the heavens, sun, moon, stars, and elements, fruits, birds, fishes

and animals—and the earth, how it has not opened to swallow me up, creating new Hells for me to suffer in them forever!¹²

This exclamation of deep wonder accommodates the new God-given being-in-grace to the will-power of the exercitant and should move him/her to identify deeply with the wonder of his/her saved existence. An emphasis on affective response can be found in a number of other Jesuit treatises, some of which were also published in England.¹³ Southwell's project of new "emotional fluency" of devotional poetry in England¹⁴ indeed found its full poetic expression in those poems where the process of "divine accommodation" reaches the world of human emotions and passions.

Such poems are of two sorts: those dealing with the Incarnation and those focused on the remorse and conversion of major sinners. The second kind is represented by poems about King David ("David peccavi"), Saint Peter ("Saint Peter's Complaint," "Saint Peter's Afflicted Mind," "Saint Peter's Remorse"), those dealing with another popular Counter-Reformation saint, Mary Magdalene ("Mary Magdalen's Blush" and "Mary Magdalen's Complaint at Christ's Death"), but also the already-mentioned parody of Edward Dyer ("Dyer's Phancy turned to a Sinner's Complainte") and "Synne's Heavy Loade."

The Incarnation poems stress the vulnerability and tenderness of the "little babe." "A Childe My Choyce" stresses the tender aspect of the new-born baby and the paradoxical wonder of the "Almighty Babe":

Alas ! He weepes, He sighes, He pantes, yet do His angells singe;
Out of His teares, His sighes and throbbes, doth bud a joyfall springe.
Almighty Babe, Whose tender armes can force all foes to flye.
Correct my faultes, protect my life, direct me when I dye! (71)

In "New Prince, New Pompe," the baby inspires not only wonder, but also compassion for the appalling circumstances of his birth:

Behould a sely tender Babe,
In freesing winter nighte,
In homely manger trembling lies;
Alas, a pitious sighte!

The inns are full, no man will yelde
This little pilgrime bedd;
But forc'd He is with sely beastes
In cribb to shroude His headd. (107)

The final paradox of Christ's "humble pompe" in the manger teaches a moral lesson in Christian ethics based on the affective response to the emotional density of the initial *compositio loci*.

The following poem, "The Burning Babe," is arguably Southwell's most famous achievement. It envisages a freezing "hoary Winter's night," when an isolated "I" meets "a prety Babe all burning bright" radiating comfortable heat, while simultaneously "frying" in flames. The final paradox again combines a sense of *meraviglia* in realizing the

Christmas context (“And straight I callèd unto mynde that it was Christmas-daye”) and a compassionate response to a suffering baby.

In “New Heaven, New Warre,” the Christmas theme finds yet another context, a military one, in which the powerless “babe” brings down “new heaven,” but also declares a “new warre” on “Satan’s foulde.” Indeed, the emotional intensity of the poem seeks to exploit the paradox of the divine “littleness” in comparison with the worldly ideas of heroism:

This little babe so fewe daies olde,
Is come to rife Satan’s foulde;
All hell doth at His presence quake,
Though He Him self for cold do shake;
For in this weake unarmed wise
The gates of hell He will surprise.

With teares He fightes and wynnes the feild,
His naked breste standes for a sheilde.
His battering shott are babishe cryes,
His arrowes, lookes of weeping eyes,
His martial ensignes, colde and neede.
And feeble fieshe His warrier’s steede.¹⁵ (111)

The “complaints” of the various saints, i.e. poems dealing with the powerful emotional realization of “synne’s heavy load,” understand poetry as a means of stimulating spiritual emotions. These emotions are related to inner purification achieved by the means of “teares” and “woundes.” In “Mary Magdalen’s Blushe,” the guilt of previous sensual pleasure is purified by the means of even deeper bodily and emotional struggle. This inner conflict is solved by the poetic redemption of the “divine meaning” of the word, i.e. by the realization of the new language of grace:

II.
Nowe pleasure ebbs, revenge beginns to flowe;
One day doth wrecke the wrath that many wrought;
Remorse doth teach my guilty thoughtes to knowe
Howe cheape I sould that Christ so dearely bought:
Faultes long unfelt doth conscyence now bewraye,
Which cares must cure and teares must washe awaye.

III.
All ghostly dints that Grace at me did dart,
like stobbourne rock I forcèd to recoyle;
To other flightes an ayme I made my hart
Whose woundes, then welcome, now have wrought my foyle.
Woe worth the bowe, woe worth the Archer’s might.
That draue such arrowes to the marke so right! (59)

The relief associated with the new world of grace, in fact, overturns the “earthly” order of things. The following poem, “Mary Magdalen’s Complaint at Christ’s Death,” confronts the pre-conversion idea of “love” and “life” with the “divine meaning” of Christ’s death on the cross. The sensual apprehension is “redeemed” by this brutal accommodation, i.e. by the means of a new emotional awareness within the life of grace:

With my love my life was nestled
In the summe of happynes;
From my love my life is wrested
To a world of heavynes:
lett love my life remove,
Sith I live not where I love! (63)

Such “accommodations” show the “usefulness” of poetry for spiritual ends as Southwell understands it. In “Dyer’s Phancy Turned into a Sinner’s Complaine,” the “feyning” of poets is contrasted with the “plight” of the sinner: indeed, devotional poetry is to restore the power of the word with the simplicity and sincerity of the emotions expressed:

And though I seeme to use
The feyning poet’s stile,
To figure forth my carefull plight,
My fall and my exile :

Yet is my greife not fayn’d,
Wherein I sterve and pyne ;
Who feeleth most shall thinke it lest (i.e. least)
If his compare with myne. (102)

This sense of paradoxical restoration is repeated in numerous other poems. In “David’s Peccavi,” the painful feeling of being abandoned by God remedies the “phancy” of his sin: “But now sith phancye did with folye end,/Witt bought with losse, will taught by witt, will mend.” The climax of “Synne’s Heavy Loade” expresses the theological gravity of sin using the intense image of Christ’s bloody sweat and his kissing of the ground. His final fall paradoxically restores the sinner’s fallenness:

O prostrate Christ ! erect my coked mynde;
Lord ! lett Thy fall my flight from earth obtayne;
Or if I still in Earth must nedes be shrynde,
Then, Lord ! on Earth come fall yet once againe;
And ether yelde with me in earthe to lye.
Or els with Thee to take me to the skye! (106)

In “Saint Peter’s Afflicted Mynde,” the “teares of bloode” seem to be the pre-requisite of a new spiritual restoration, in “Saint Peter’s Remorse,” the “present crosse” of the sinner shows the “ruynes of decayed joyes.” These help to accommodate the prayer for “amending” of what “is amisse” because “thy cure my comfort is.”

Arguably the best example of this kind of “emotional accommodation” of poetry for spiritual ends is Southwell’s longest poem, “Saint Peter’s Complaint,” a translation/adaptation of Luigi Tansillo’s (1510-1568) *Lagrime di San Pietro*.¹⁶ The central “poetic emblem” of this poem, the weeping eyes, is exploited in numerous collocations related to the story of Peter’s denial of Christ at the time of his arrest. The rich imagery of the poem explores both the gravity of sin and the tender humaneness of Christ’s eyes, which become the “liuing mirours” of the divine *agape*. The “teares” seem to be the only means to achieve a thorough inner re-formation by fully surrendering to our inability to gain anything without the divine grace:

VII.

Sad subiect of my sinne hath stoard my minde,
With euerlasting matter of complaint ;
My threnes an endlesse alphabet doe flnde,
Beyond the pangs which leremie doth paint.
That eyes with errors may iust measure keepe.
Most teares I wish, that haue most cause to weepe.

VIII.

All weeping eyes resigne your teares to me,
A sea will scantly rince my ordur’d soule ;
Huge honours in high, tides must drowned be :
Of eueiy teare my crime exacteth tole.
These staines are deepe: few drops take out no such;
Euen salue with sore, and most is not too much. (12-13)

Christ’s concentrated look at Peter mirrors “loue that inuites deuotion” (stanza LXVIII), i.e. it stresses the paradoxical powerlessness of the divine facing denial and execution. This “incapacity” is then mirrored in Peter’s weeping eyes marking the progressive sense of powerlessness facing the gravity of the betrayal:

CXXXII.

Redeeme my lapse with raunsome of Thy loue,
Trauerse th’ inditement, rigor’s doome suspend;
Let frailtie fauour, sorrowes succour moue,
Be Thou Thyselve, though changeling I offend.
Tender my sute, cleanse this defilèd denne,
Cancell my debts, sweet lesu, say Amen! (44)

The emotional intensity of “Saint Peter’s Complaint” is achieved by repetitive exploration of the theme, over and over again. Alison Shell talks about “an almost operatic exploration of emotional extremes” and emphasizes the poem’s slow progression towards the final climax related to Peter’s repentance and the prospect for God’s forgiveness (Shell

52). The wide space to be filled with the Ignatian “affective response” to the meditated subject thus clearly opens up a broad space of creativity for the poetic art.

5. Conclusion

When assessing Southwell’s contribution of to the development of early modern poetry and to the concept of poetry in general, we have to take into account his rather exceptional position in the canon. As we have seen, his effort to create a new “emotional fluency” in English religious verse was a process of “multiple accommodation”: accommodating the tradition of secular English poetry to devotional ends, accommodating the idiom of the Continental Catholic tradition to the English plain style, and last but not least, accommodating the actual message of the Christian “accommodation” to the creative act of poetry. While facing these challenges, he had to develop a whole new idiom that was perhaps even more important in its influence (Herbert, Crashaw, Constable, Alabaster and others) than in its actual poetic achievement.

As we have seen, Southwell’s theological concept of poetry is related to his understanding of the accommodating “economy” of salvation: poetry is not just a means to a particular end, it is an eminent undertaking reflecting the open-ended “language structure” of the world. God’s selfless *agape* thus finds a reflection in the self-less *agape of language*: devotional poetry *praises* God by its readiness for accommodating, i.e. for refreshing language to dwell lovingly and fruitfully amongst men. Devotional poetry must therefore face the challenge of being articulate in terms of the religious experience; however, it must also be emotionally satisfying and have universal appeal beyond the Christian community. After all, its quality will be judged by its capacity for “accommodation” to new contexts and new readers.

When talking about Southwell’s achievements, C. S. Lewis notes the following: “Southwell’s work is too small and too little varied for greatness: but it is very choice, very winning, and highly original” (Lewis 546).

At least the originality still makes it a worthwhile read.

Notes

¹ Lukas Erne’s and Tamsin Badcoe’s important comparative study “Shakespeare and the Popularity of Poetry Books in Print, 1583–1622” (*The Review of English Studies* 65 [2014], Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, available at <http://res.oxfordjournals.org/content/65/268/33.full.pdf+html>, 1 May 2014) mentions 12 editions in England and 2 editions printed at the English Jesuit College in St Omer. This statistic shows the enormous popularity of this work, whose early editions significantly outnumber those of other major poets of the time, including Shakespeare. In later editions, other poems were included.

² In *Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthornden*, in the 12th section entitled *Particulars of the Actions of Other Poets*, Ben Jonson points out “that Southwell was hanged yet so he

[i.e. Jonson] had written that piece of his *The burning babe*, he would have been content to destroy many of his.” Ben Jonson. William Drummond of Hawthornden. *Notes of the Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthornden*. (London: Shakespeare Society, 1832), 13. His prose pamphlet *A Humble Supplication to Her Majestie* was commented upon by Sir Francis Bacon, who found it “curiously written, and worth the writing out for the art, though the argument is bad.” See Alison Shell, “Robert Southwell” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature*, ed. David Scott Kastan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 52.

³ Here I refer mainly to the classic work of Louis Martz: *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1954). The Baroque elements are explored by Mario Praz’s *Flaming Heart: Essays on Crashaw, Machiavelli, and Other Studies in the Relations between Italian and English Literature from Chaucer to T. S. Eliot* (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1964); Helen White’s study “Southwell: Metaphysical and Baroque” in *Modern Philology* 61 (February 1964): 159–168, or Alison Shell, *Catholicism, Controversy and English Literary Imagination 1558–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), especially Chapter 2 “Catholic poetics and the Protestant canon,” 56–106.

⁴ In fact, Sidney talks about four main “imputations” to poets and poetry: “Now then go we to the most important imputations laid to the poor poets; for aught I can yet learn they are these. First, that there being many other more fruitful knowledges, a man might better spend his time in them than in this. Secondly, that it is the mother of lies. Thirdly, that it is the nurse of abuse, infecting us with many pestilent desires, with a siren’s sweetness drawing the mind to the serpent’s tail of sinful fancies,—and herein especially comedies give the largest field to ear [plough-ed] as Chaucer says; how, both in other nations and in ours, before poets did soften us, we were full of courage, given to martial exercises, the pillars of manlike liberty, and not lulled asleep in shady idleness with poets’ pastimes. And, lastly and chiefly, they cry out with an open mouth, as if they had overshot Robin Hood, that Plato banished them out of his Commonwealth. Truly this is much, if there be much truth in it” (34–35).

⁵ W. S. has been associated with William Shakespeare, who, indeed, was Southwell’s cousin (Shell, “Robert Southwell” 53).

⁶ In this article I use the Alexander B. Grosart edition, based on the early prints and collated with the manuscripts.

⁷ This complicated process of translation and adaptation of foreign models in Southwell’s poetry is further discussed in Sweeney (115–116).

⁸ The issue of accommodation in Southwell’s *Sequence* is also discussed in Cousins (39–42).

⁹ This topic is further elaborated upon in a classic study of Louis Martz: *The Poetry of Meditation: a Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1954).

¹⁰ This neosacramental poetics can be well documented in another of the English Jesuit poets, Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889). A good summary of his sacramental poetics can be found in Mary Simon Corbett’s article: “Art from the Inside: Seeing and Being,” Supplement of “The Way” (London: Heythorpe College, 1989), 67–76. The article is also accessible at <http://www.theway.org.uk/Back/s066.pdf> (10 May 2014).

¹¹ I am using the expression of Anne Sweeney (99).

¹² I quote from <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/ignatius/exercises.xii.vi.html> transl. by Father Elder Mullan (New York: P.J.Kenedy & sons, 1914). Here I quote from the internet version available at the Christian Classics Ethereal Library.

¹³ Here I refer mainly to an anonymous work called *Certayne deuout Meditations very necessary for Christian men dououtly to meditate vpon Morninge and Eueninge, euery day in the weeks: Concerning Christ his lyfe and Passion, and thefruites thereof* (1576), *Meditations vppon the Passion of Ovr Lord Iesvs Christ* (1606), a translated work by the Italian Jesuit Fulvio Androzzi, Nicolas Berzetti's *The Practice of Meditating with Profit the Misteries of Ovr Lord, the Blessed Vergin and Saints* (1613) or Luis de la Puente, *Meditations vpon the Mysteries of Ovr Faith* (1624). For this reference I am indebted to Cousins (34-36).

¹⁴ I am using the term of Ann Sweeney (115).

¹⁵ The British composer Benjamin Britten (1913–1976) used this poem in his wonderful *Ceremony of Carols*, composed in 1942.

¹⁶ The full title is *Le Lagrime di San Pietro di Cristo di Maria Vergine, di Maria Maddalena e quelle del Penitente*. The poem was first published in 1585.

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