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Robert Southwell and the ‘Empresse of the skyes’: A Reading of ‘The Sequence on the Virgin Mary and Christ’

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Abstract

‘The Sequence on the Virgin Mary and Christ’, by the poet and martyr St Robert Southwell, S.J. (1561–95), is a beautiful work that is generally still undervalued. The sequence explores the physical, moral, and emotional unity of Mary and her Son in the work of our salvation. The larger context is the Protestant devaluing of hyperdulia. In its historical moment – it was written sometime in the 1580s – it is a subtle exploration of the theme of kenosis and of what a ‘prince’ or ‘queen’ should really be. While being relatively inexplicit, Southwell seems to poise the Virgin Mary against that other ‘empress’, Elizabeth I, and writes with intimacy from the perspective of his own self-understanding as ‘Beatae Virginis filius’ (a son of the Blessed Virgin). The sequence’s modern, editorial title needs to be replaced with one that matches its devotional aims and content. As he faced up to the almost certain prospect of his own martyrdom, Southwell looked to Mary as true mother and queen to sustain him in his sacrifice.

Keywords: Elizabeth I; poetic sequence; recusant literature; Robert Southwell; Virgin Mary

1. Introduction and context

In 1533, when Thomas More tackled William Tyndale about the ‘dyspygntyge our lady’ within German Protestantism, he could have little sense of what would happen in England in the years ahead.¹ The twin influences of ‘justification by faith alone’ and *sola scriptura* were on the march. Across northern Europe, many of the new protestants saw it as their evangelical duty ‘to demolish and demystify the cultic and devotional world of which [the Virgin] was the centrepiece’.² A few English instances of this trend will suffice. In the later 1530s, the pilgrimage shrines to the Virgin were shut down, and in 1538, there was a rounding up of their famous statues – Our Lady of

¹Quoted from *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, ed. by Anthony S. G. Edwards et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963–1997), VIII (1973), p. 485.

²Diarmaid MacCulloch, ‘Mary and Sixteenth-century Protestants’, *Studies in Church History*, 39 (2004), pp. 191–217 (p. 191).

Worcester, Our Lady of Ipswich, Our Lady of Willesden, and others, probably including Our Lady of Walsingham, the most famous shrine of all – all then burnt in the garden of Chelsea Manor, London, Thomas Cromwell’s residence as Privy Seal.³ Things accelerated under the more overtly protestant rule of Edward VI (1547–53). Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, drastically reduced the number of feasts for the Virgin, retaining only the Purification and the Annunciation, while discontinuing, for example, The Visitation (2 July) and the great feast of the Assumption (15 August). The *Regina Coeli* and the *Salve Regina* were banned. ‘In an era when the Virgin’s presence in approved liturgy and devotion was drastically reduced, images torn down or burnt, rood screens [...] torn away, desecrated, and painted over [...] the number, and even the accessibility of places dedicated to the Virgin faded’.⁴ During the re-Catholicisation of England under Mary Tudor (1553–58) devotion to the Virgin revived, and some physical destruction was reversed, but her reign was too short for anything like a full restoration. We can hear something of the changed atmosphere in William Mundy’s antiphon *Vox Patris Caelestis*, written for the Assumption, and perhaps also in Tallis’s *Gaude gloriosa Dei Mater* (which may also have been written at this time),⁵ but then Mary Tudor was dead, and Protestant Elizabeth ascended the throne. Drastic theological and liturgical change occurred once more.

Historians used to make much of the idea that, under Elizabeth I, the cult of her as Virgin Queen was in some sense, psychically and emotionally, a replacement for the reduced hyperdulia to the Virgin herself, but in recent years this has come to seem relatively unnuanced. Nonetheless, the entanglements are striking, indeed sometimes shocking. In August 1578, during her royal progress through Suffolk and Norfolk, the queen had a fine image of the Virgin Mary destroyed in front of her. The picture, of which we have only a poor description, had been found hidden in a hayloft in the grounds of Euston Hall, home of Edward Rookwood, the queen’s host. Its discovery and subsequent burning at Elizabeth’s command were the start of the persecution of Rookwood for his Catholicism. It is quite a scene to imagine: the queen seated in state, and the painting (‘for greatnes, for gayness, and woorkemanshipp, I did never see the matche’) curling in the flames.⁶ By now, well into her 45-year reign, Elizabeth was a grand queen indeed, and, lest we forget, also an empress. Spenser would address her as such in his dedication to *The Faerie Queene* (1590). The title came from Henry VIII’s claim in the Act in Restraint of Appeals (1533), his important anti-papal legislation, that his lands constituted an empire and so should be outside the jurisdiction of the pope.

Robert Southwell (1561–95) was born on the cusp of the change from Catholicism under Mary Tudor to modified Protestantism under Elizabeth. His biography, detailed

³See Eamon Duffy, ‘Walsingham: Reformation and Reconstruction’, in his *A People’s Tragedy: Studies in the Reformation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 176–95.

⁴Gary Waller, *The Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern English Literature and Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 109.

⁵See Kerry McCarthy, ‘William Mundy’s “Vox Patris Caelestis” and the Assumption of the Virgin Mary’, *Music & Letters*, 85 (2004), pp. 353–67.

⁶For an analysis of this episode, and the quotation here, see Helen Hackett, ‘Rediscovering Shock: Elizabeth I and the cult of the Virgin Mary’, *The Critical Quarterly*, 35 (1993), pp. 30–42, esp. 34–36. Ironically, the description of the painting is from Richard Topcliffe, the notorious recusant hunter, who would later be responsible for Southwell’s torture.

from one point of view, sparse in another, is limited in his childhood, so it is impossible to tell how exactly, in his early years, the issues above impinged on him. What was it like growing up in the 1560s, in an old gentry family, just north of Norwich, in the village of Horsham St Faith, with the adults around him wrestling, in religious anxiety, with the newly re-established dispensation of the Church of England? His own grandfather, Sir Richard Southwell, had played a part in the destruction of Our Lady's shrine at Walsingham. Was this ever a point of family discussion? Southwell's father, also Richard Southwell, was probably, for much of his life, a conforming member of the Anglican Church, though whether out of deep conviction is questionable. Later, in part under the influence of Southwell's *An Epistle unto His Father* (c. 1587–89), he would convert or re-convert to Catholicism, and he died a Catholic in 1600. Southwell's mother and her relations in Sussex and elsewhere seem to have been more stalwart in their loyalty to Catholicism. Anne Sweeney summarises a no doubt complex and ambiguous situation like this: 'Southwell's family appears to have maintained Catholic sympathies in private, while struggling to conform to royal wishes and laws in public, a nervous, precarious existence'.⁷

June 1576 was a defining moment. As a 14-year-old, Southwell travelled to Douai in the Spanish Netherlands (now in northern France) to attend Anchin College, a new Jesuit school; in 1579 he then entered the Jesuit novitiate in Rome. At the English College in the 1580s, he took the special oath of the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin Mary and became Prefect of the local chapter. In his private devotional writings at this time (probably in the early 1580s), he refers to himself, as a member of the Jesuit order, as 'Beatae Virginis filius' and 'filius ancillae tuae' ('a son of the Blessed Virgin' and 'the son of Thy handmaid').⁸ 'The Sequence on the Virgin Mary and Christ', the work under discussion here, is a part of this mature vocation. We do not know its date of composition, whether before or after July 1586, the start of his mission to England, though I would conjecture the latter is more likely. Eventually, after five years of brave ministry to the secret Catholics of England, after capture and torture, and four years in prison, he was hauled to Tyburn for execution. It was February 1595 and he was 34. Before the incompetence of the hangman prolonged his suffering, his last full prayer was 'Blessed Mary, ever a Virgin, and all you Angels and Saints assist me ... *In manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum*'.⁹

The fourteen poems of 'The Sequence on the Virgin Mary and Christ' are focused on Mary's shared life with Christ and progress from the Immaculate Conception right through to the Assumption. They are intended to form a self-conscious unity, but at Southwell's death in 1595 they existed only in one or more manuscripts, and the printers who then published them anonymously consciously broke up the poems to mask their ultimately Catholic character. In its full form, with its last two poems on Mary's death and Assumption, the sequence did not see print until McDonald and Brown's

⁷Anne Sweeney, *Robert Southwell, Snow in Arcadia: Rewriting the English Lyric Landscape* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 3.

⁸*Spiritual Exercises and Devotions of Blessed Robert Southwell, S. J.*, ed. by J.-M. de Buck, SJ (London: Sheed and Ward, 1931), pp. 141, 181.

⁹Christopher Devlin, *The Life of Robert Southwell, Poet and Martyr* (London: Longmans, 1956), p. 323.

edition of 1967.¹⁰ It is, in short, very much a work of recusant literature and, as such, has long been hidden from a wider cultural view. We have to imagine it passed round from hand to hand, to secret Catholics likely to have their faith enhanced.

Before coming to the sequence in detail, I want to say something, briefly, about its baroque style. There is a philosophy, indeed a theology, implicit in any poetic style in the exact ways that language is felt and deployed. In this case, this is a poetry full of rhetorical intricacy, conceit, epigram, and flourish, with many examples of *meraviglia* (what Peter Davidson aptly calls ‘the baroque exciting of wonder’).¹¹ The brazenness of the baroque style and its complexifying of language evoke religious mystery and depth on the one hand, and poignant human realities on the other hand. First, looking upwards as it were, it suggests the final inadequacy of language: poetic language can struggle towards the highest hyperbole in the face of the divine, but this is still not enough: seeming exaggeration only enacts its ultimate limitation. Second, looking downwards as it were, the sheer artifice of style paradoxically alerts us more deeply to the vulnerable human realities it is sometimes talking about. Ordinary, quotidian human things are given their fullest dignity.

There is a human tenderness and sweetness here in the way Southwell addresses the life of the Virgin Mary and what she means to him personally. Joy is the recurring theme. The word itself, as a noun and imperative, is prominently repeated in poems ii and vii, but it is at the centre of a wider lexis concerned with warmth and gratitude. Of course, in reading the sequence, we have to be sensitive to historical context and to the baroque idiom, but, this said, in what follows, I am guided by simple questions: What does Southwell have to offer us *now* in relation to the Virgin Mary? What of his faith has he shared?¹²

2. The birth of Mary and the birth of Christ: Poems i–vi

There is no preface or preamble, so we have to assimilate Southwell’s world at the point of our entry into it. The first two poems follow the Church Fathers in seeing Mary as the new or second Eve, but they are concerned immediately with what her conception implies: the complete enmeshment of divine and human. At the moment of conception, ‘Our second *Eve* puts on her mortall shroude’ (i. 1), i.e., she enters the

¹⁰The poetry is quoted throughout from this edition: *The Poems of Robert Southwell, S.J.*, ed. by James H. McDonald and Nancy Pollard Brown (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967). See its textual introduction for the additional information here. In a few instances, I have made adjustments to their text, e.g., adding accents and modernising/un-modernising spellings, to clarify meaning or pronunciation. The other good edition is *St Robert Southwell: Collected Poems*, ed. by Peter Davidson and Anne Sweeney (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007), which reproduces exactly the ‘Waldegrave’ manuscript text at Stonyhurst College.

¹¹Peter Davidson, *The Universal Baroque* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 56. Southwell features variously in ch. 1 ‘British Baroque’. Davidson is one of a number of scholars who have rightly sought to overturn the use of the term ‘metaphysical poetry’.

¹²For some previous criticism, see Joseph D. Scallon, *The Poetry of Robert Southwell, S.J.*, *Salzburg Studies in English Literature* 11 (Salzburg: Institute for English Language and Literature, 1975), pp. 96–108; F. W. Brownlow, *Robert Southwell* (New York: Twayne, 1996), pp. 104–10; Scott R. Pilarz, S.J., *Robert Southwell and the Mission of Literature, 1561–1595: Writing Reconciliation* (London: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 221–28; and Lilla Grindlay, ‘“No tombe but throne”: Robert Southwell and the Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin’, *Early Modern Literary Studies*, 24 (2015), pp. 1–17.

world of life and death, and 'Earth breeds a heaven, for God's new dwelling place' (i. 2). This 'heaven' is utterly human. At the end of the first poem, it is as though we are being asked the startling question, 'Who are the only four people ever conceived without sin?' and the subsidiary question, 'How was Mary different from the others?' This may seem an exercise in baroque-styled wit, but the pressure of feeling is from amazement and joy – the near impossible realisation that, so graced, Mary is an ordinary biological child, the point brought home in the final line:

Four only wights bred without fault are namde
 And all the rest conceivèd were in sinne,
 Without both man and wife was *Adam* framed,
 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 bred in grace. (i. 13–18)

From this follows, in the second poem, the imperative instruction of 'Joy' and 'Joy' (ii. 1, 3). Mary is the 'Load-starre of all engolfd in worldly waves', but she is 'the child of man' before she is 'the parent of a god' (ii. 5, 18). Southwell takes for granted God beyond the bounds of imagining, wholly other, wholly love. The immediacy of divine grace flooding Mary at the point of her conception is the starting point of our salvation but only from a limited point of view. Things started before the ages:

The Patriarchs and Prophets were the flowers,
 Which Time by course of ages did distill,
 And cul'd into this little cloud the showers,
 Whose gracious drops the world with joy shall fil,
 Whose moisture suppleth every soule with grace,
 And bringeth life to *Adams* dying race. (ii. 7–12)

The rhetorical control here is extraordinary. Mary as 'this little cloud' is a medieval Carmelite image ultimately from 1 Kings 18:44, and it is repeated here from the first poem (i. 3). The prophet Elijah, out in the desert, after the terrible three-years' drought – brought upon the people by their idolatry and self-alienation – finally sees the little cloud that signals the start of refreshment and new life. Mary is that cloud to our arid souls. The life-giving rain is God's love and life made visible in Christ. The cloud (Mary) gives birth to the moisture (which is Christ), which 'suppleth every soule with grace' (ii.11). The sense of 'supple' here is less 'to make pliant or flexible' (OED, 3.a.) and more 'to soften the consistency of, to reduce the hardness of' (OED, 2.a.). One of OED's citations, from Mary Herbert's late-sixteenth-century paraphrase of psalm 147, is a good parallel:

ô make harmonious mix of voice and string
 To Him, by whome the skies with cloudes are lin'd:
 by whom the rayne from cloudes to dropp assign'd
 supplies the clodds of sommer-scorchèd fields.¹³

¹³The *Collected Works of Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke*, ed. by Margaret P. Hannay et al. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), ii. 249.

In Southwell's imagination, we are those 'sommer-scorchèd' clods. We need to be 'suppled' by grace. What is striking, given the subject matter of these poems, is the complete absence of apocryphal or legendary material, the kind of stories we find in the *Protevangelium of James* and *The Golden Legend*, e.g., of Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna, and of Mary's own childhood. We might think of the medieval mystery plays or of Giotto's wonderful frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel (c. 1305). I will return to this point later. We can note at this stage the real investment in typology as a theological means and what this might tell us about the larger perspective.

The realism that underlies the verbal elaborateness continues in iii, 'Her Spousals', about the holy family. For Southwell, the relationship of Joseph and Mary is a priestly and eschatological sign, and of course – as he assumes – something with various hints and precedents in the Old Testament. This is a marriage between two people who have consecrated their lives to virginity. Mary was a wife in part at least 'To save her selfe and child from fatall lie' (3) – to save herself, as a potential unmarried mother, from social ostracism (or worse) and Jesus from the taint of illegitimacy; so too 'His sonne of *Joseph's* child the title bare:/Just cause to make the mother *Joseph's* wife' (9–10). This marriage is described as a kind of 'sacred league' (13), where 'league' shades towards its formal contemporary meaning of 'a military, political, or commercial covenant made between parties for their mutual protection, and assistance against a common enemy' (OED n.², 1.a.), but it is also a matter of overwhelming tenderness:

God lent his Paradise to *Josephs* care
Wherein he was to plant the tree of life
(iii. 7–8)

Two things are acknowledged in this poem: the dark trust of faith – both Mary and Joseph were living out something unprecedented in human terms – and the ways in which the public marriage was a shielding or hiding of something completely holy: Mary was married to Joseph 'Unwonted workes with wonted veiles to hide' (6).

Poem iv, 'The Virgins salutation', is about the Annunciation, though again, as in poems i and ii, with a typological rather than pictorial focus: there is no attempt to visualise Luke 1: 26–38. The poem hinges on what was then a standard Latin pun, from the Small Hours of Our Lady and other sources: the way in which Latin *Ave* ('Hail', as in the Hail Mary) reverses in more than one sense the Latin *Eva* (Eve): the *Ave* of Gabriel's salutation to Mary (Luke 1:28) was the beginning of the overturning of the Fall brought about by Eve's pride. Note again the way in which Southwell wants to draw us in and instruct us. There must be no bystanders, only people of decision. We ourselves must 'spell' *Eva* backwards, so undoing alienation, by beginning afresh the prayer to Mary. This cherishing of anagram may remind us of the riddling of the opening poem, but again seriousness is in view. In the following stanza, the interaction between 'witching' and 'disinchaunts' is particularly effective, but note that the crucial emphasis is 'woman's vertue':

Spell *Eva* backe and *Ave* shall you finde,
The first began, the last reverst our harmes,
An Angel's witching wordes did *Eva* blinde,
An Angel's *Ave* disinchaunts the charmes,
Death first by woman's weakenes entred in,
In woman's vertue life doth now begin. (iv. 1–6)

I want to focus closely on v. 'The Visitation' as one of the sequence's finest and most characteristic poems. Of course, this is the second Joyful Mystery of the Rosary, and there is much here that is completely usual, including Mary's compassion and her loving service to her elder relative. Let us try and look at the more singular emphases. Here is the poem in full:

v. *The Visitation*

Proclaimèd Queene and mother of a God,
 The light of earth, the soveraigne of Saints,
 With Pilgrim foote, up tyring hils she trod,
 And heavenly stile with haidmaid's toile acquaints,
 Her youth to age, her health to sicke she lends, 5
 Her heart to God, to neighbour hand she bends.

A prince she is, and mightier prince doth beare,
 Yet pompe of princely traine she would not have,
 But doubtles heavenly Quires attendant were,
 Her child from harme her selfe from fall to save, 10
 Word to the voice, song to the tune she brings,
 The voice her word, the tune her dittie sings.

Eternal lights inclosèd in her breast,
 Shot out such piercing beames of burning love,
 That when her voice her cosens eares possest, 15
 The force thereof did force her babe to move,
 With secret signes the children greet each other,
 But open praise each leaveth to his mother.

This is a transcendent moment. The Word, having entered his own world, is recognised prophetically and humanly, and with great joy: implicitly the focus is on Luke 1: 43: 'And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?' Lines 1–2 and 7–10 give a heaven's eye view. At the moment of her 'yes' at the Annunciation, Mary was proclaimed the future queen of heaven. Now a 'prince' herself, and bearing in her womb the 'mightier prince' (7), and attended and guarded by 'heavenly Quires' (9), she journeys to her cousin's house – but this is not what we actually see. Our vision is directed to a single-minded young woman, on an arduous journey through hill country, on her arrival at her destination calling out lovingly to her cousin. The transcendent and immanent are played against each other in a baroque double-take. In this poem, and also in viii, it is as though Southwell has half an eye on the contemporary world, on Queen Elizabeth I's staged and performative monarchy, or indeed on the kind of concerns that Shakespeare explores in *King Lear*, where 'robes and furred gowns hide all' (IV. 2. 165).

Note the precise word choices. Mary has a 'Pilgrim foote' (3). In an Elizabethan context, that is a singularly Catholic adjective. The practice of pilgrimage had been banned in England in the reign of Henry VIII, a ban renewed on Elizabeth's accession. Here, combined with 'toile' (4), it suggests that Southwell has a shrewd idea of just how far Mary has travelled from Nazareth in Galilee in order to get to her cousin's village near Jerusalem. The heavy alliteration of 'up tyring hils she trod' with 'toile' (3–4) makes

explicit one of the meanings of Luke 1: 39 and brings home the living human image of a genuinely strenuous journey. (So many paintings of The Visitation rather fail to make clear the hill country of Ein Karim).¹⁴ In line 4, the posing against each other and the balancing of 'heavenly *stile*' with 'handmaid's *toile*', and the nearly ironic 'acquaints', suggest how Mary's humility parallels God's kenosis in Christ. 'Stile' (i.e., style) has its meaning of 'a legal, official, or honorific title', as, for example, in Francis Bacon's use 'The Kings Stile, is now no more of England, but of Britaine'.¹⁵ The *real* queen, the correctly titled 'soveraigne of Saints' (2), has no 'pompe of princely traine' (8), for her queenship is focused on love and service. Traditionally, Mary is supposed to have made the long journey to see Elizabeth with others. Southwell gives no such indication, so increasing the pathos-laden difference between appearance and reality.

The deliberately intensified, involved syntax of lines 11–12 may give the reader pause, but nonetheless it is another wonderful baroque touch. Line 11 indicates Mary's action, i.e., her greeting on entering the house, and line 12 indicates Elizabeth's response, the famous words of Luke 1: 42–43. So, more straightforwardly, the meaning is 'She [Mary] brings the Word (or words) to Elizabeth's voice, she brings song to Elizabeth's tune; and so, in response, Elizabeth's voice sings her Word [the child in Mary's womb], Elizabeth's tune sings Mary's ditty'. Words and tune come together in harmony. In effect, Elizabeth, like the child in her womb, is the last of the prophets: she has, as it were, the melody needed to solve the world's riddle, the world alienated from its source. Now Mary supplies Elizabeth with the words, or Word, for her tune: the answer is Christ, who, in this astonishing instant, Elizabeth recognises. Southwell takes very seriously what is implied in the gospel: the sheer loving exchange between the two women, so that, as we might say, here sheer love enacts sheer theology. At another level, of course, everything refers to the fact that, in this moment, Elizabeth creates what has become the 'song' of the *Ave Maria*: 'Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is fruit of thy womb, [Jesus]' (Luke 1: 42).

The start of the third stanza is the most obvious addition to the biblical text, but the baroque extravagance or elaboration again serves to bring home a very human reality: on the one hand, we have the language of 'Eternal lights inclosed in her breast,/Shot out such piercing beames of burning love' (13–14), and on the other hand, we have what this serves to emphasise: the really human encounter of two women overjoyed to see each other. The poem ends on what we might dare to call a note of almost homely humour.

The theme in poem vi, 'The Nativitie of Christ', is creation as gift, and the incarnation as God's most intimate self-giving of himself as 'gift' within this: 'Gift better than himselfe, God doth not know:/Gift better than his God, no man can see' (vi. 13–14). This Nativity contains none of the usual depictions of manger, animals, and shepherds but instead focuses on *just* the baby, crying, not yet an hour old. By now, we may be so used to baroque wit that we miss the phrase where this is apparent (in italics in the following quotation). Southwell evokes with tenderness the way the wholly-joyous God (he will repeat 'joy' twice in the next stanza) enters the alienated world and takes on its tears. Here is the baby in the manger:

¹⁴Good exceptions are Giotto's depiction (north transept, Lower Church, Assisi), c. 1320, and even more strikingly Fra Angelico's panel picture, in his Cortona Altarpiece (Diocesan Museum, Cortona), c. 1433.

¹⁵See OED, *style* n., II 18.a.

Beholde the father, is his daughter's sonne:
 The bird that built the nest, is hatched therein:
 The olde of yeares, an houre hath not out runne:
 Eternall life, to live doth now beginne.
 The word is dumme: *the mirth of heaven doth weepe*:
 Might feeble is: and force doth faintly creepe. (vi. 1–6)

Personal feeling is in the foreground and the issue of how to respond to Christ as gift. The next stanza gives us one imperative after another ('beholde', 'behold', and 'attend'), climaxing with this rhetorical intricacy:

Up heavie hartes: with joye your joye embrace.
 From death, from darke, from deafenesse, from dispaire:
 This life, this light, this word, this joy repaires. (vi. 11–12)

To the gift of Christ, the poet *must* respond with the gift of his own life. Nothing else will do. The main texts in play here are Romans 5: 15–17 and 2 Corinthians 9: 15:

God is my gift, himselfe he freely gave me:
 God's gift am I, and none by God shall have me. (vi. 17–18)

3. Mary in the childhood of Christ: poems vii–xii

That this second movement of the sequence begins with vii 'His circumcision' may be something of a surprise to the 21st-century reader, but, as in medieval times, in the sixteenth century, Luke 2:21 was still a normal point of meditation.¹⁶ The typology is poignant, emphasizing how fully the Word is now one of us. As he undergoes circumcision, the Christ-child's blood and tears anticipate the blood and water of the crucifixion: 'This sacred dew let angels gather up,/Such dainty drops best fit their nectared cup' (vii. 11–12). High artifice mixes with the human reality of a mother's tears for her baby:

With weeping eies his mother rewde his smart,
 If blood from him, teares ran from her as fast,
 The knife that cut his flesh did pierce her heart,
 The paine that Jesus felt did *Mary* taste,
 His life and hers hung by one fatall twist,
 No blow that hit the sonne the mother mist. (vii. 13–18)

Mary's intimate empathy (as at the Cross) is evoked by the way in which the rhetoric of each line balances mother and son.

The next poem is remarkable and deserves special care. Again, as with 'The Visitation', I give the text in full:

viii. *The Epiphanie*

To blaze the rising of this glorious sunne
 A glittering starre appeareth in the east

¹⁶The Feast of the Circumcision of the Lord was long celebrated on 1 January, until liturgical changes in the 1960s.

Whose sight to pilgrim toyles three sages wun,
 To seeke the light they long had in request,
 And by this star to nobler starre they pace, 5
 Whose armes did their desired sun imbrace.

Stall was the sky wherein these plannets shinde,
 And want the cloud that did eclipse their rayes,
 Yet through this cloud their light did passage finde,
 And pierc'd these sages' hearts by secret ways, 10
 Which made them know the ruler of the skies
 By infant tongue and lookes of babish eies.

Heaven at her light, earth blusheth at her pride,
 And of their pompe these peeres ashamed be,
 Their crowns, their robes, their traine they set aside 15
 When God's poor cottage, clouts, and crew they see,
 All glorious things their glory now despise
 Sith God Contempt doth more then Glory prise.

Three giftes they bring, three giftes they beare away,
 For incense mirre and gould, faith hope and love, 20
 And with their gifts the givers hearts do stay,
 Their mind from Christ no parting can remove,
 His humble state, his stall, his poor retínew
 They fancy more than all their ritch revénew.

Somehow this deceptively simple poem has escaped the anthologists. Its focus is the glory and poverty of kenosis. First, note the verbal link to 'The Visitation': Mary's laborious journey to Ein Karim involved 'Pilgrim foote' and 'handmaid's toile' (3–4), and now the journey of the Magi also involves 'pilgrim toyles' (3). Similar too is the contrast of great and little. There is the high baroque of lines 1–2 and 5–6: Christ is the sun rising gloriously at dawn, anticipated by Mary as the Morning Star (Venus); and then, in line 5, one star leads the Magi to another 'star' – i.e. the star in the East leads them to Mary (as Morning Star), and in line 6, in the stable, Mary, as star, embraces, in her lap, the Christ-child as 'sun'. Enclosed within this gracious elaborateness is something more realistic, all the more so by contrast: 'pilgrim toyles' suggests a really long journey for the Magi, and also something of its means and end. Their journey to Bethlehem is compared to a long Catholic pilgrimage and the struggle to get to a holy site – for illumination, perhaps to witness a miracle or a healing, or at the very least for life reform or reorientation.

Southwell's Magi are rich king-sages with great and splendid trains of followers and baggage, who have 'long' yearned for wisdom (4). They are 'pilgrims' too in the simpler sense that they are searchers walking towards faith, or in faith longing for the things unseen and desiring the sight of them. Now, in their wealth and prestige, they stumble on a stark paradox, enacted in the interchange between 'stall' and 'sky': 'Stall was the sky wherein these plannets shinde' (7). Great and little jar: the 'planets' (Mary and Christ) exist in the 'stall' (stable, place for animals). 'Light' is repeated between lines 4 and 9. The Magi seek 'light' (i.e., faith or wisdom), and now, despite the 'want' (poverty) in front of them, divine 'light' or illumination shines through to them. At this

point, Southwell abandons standard Epiphany motifs. Again, we may note the linkage with 'The Visitation' in terms of 'pomp' and 'traines'. In the earlier poem, in her journey to help her cousin, Mary had the full right to a princely progress but (as it were) declined it: 'Yet pompe of princely traine she would not have' (v. 8). Now, in the face of the poverty and lowliness of 'the ruler of the skies' (11), i.e., the Christ-child, heaven is ashamed of its light and the earth of its pride, and the Magi literally dismiss their attendants and take off their robes (15)! This is a fascinating extrapolation from the biblical text, especially given the sensitivity of contemporary Elizabethans to dress codes.

There is exactness in the rhetorical parallelisms of lines 15–16 and their startling juxtapositions of grand and small: 'crowns' goes to 'cottage', 'robes' to 'clouts', and 'traine' to 'crew'. I suspect that 'cottage' is not arch and not just there for alliteration, but rather a memory of one of the Latin synonyms for 'stable' or 'house' (Matt. 2:11) in commentary and paraphrase: compare, for example, St Jerome's 'villula Christi' or Erasmus's 'sordidum & abjectu tugurium'.¹⁷ Our equivalent for 'clouts' is 'nappies' or 'diapers'. As an indication of the contemporary resonance of 'crew' (16), we may note that most of its uses in Shakespeare are derogatory, low, or comical, sometimes veering towards the modern 'gang'. Perhaps it might be appropriate to think here of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and its 'crew of patches, rude mechanicals' (III. 2. 9). Who exactly are the 'crew' of line 16? Presumably the shepherds, the ox, and the ass. These rich Magi in their gorgeous robes, with their philosophical sophistication (as we may suppose), confronted abruptly with basic rural poverty, are not unlike King Oberon and Queen Titania faced with the commonness of Bottom and his friends. They now see that they need to rethink their lives.

Another departure from the standard Epiphany occurs in relation to the gifts. Mainly, in the Church Fathers, and indeed in the medieval English Carols that follow them, the gifts are explicated as symbols of kingship (gold), divinity (incense), and redemptive suffering (myrrh). So, in Augustine, 'Gold, as paid to a mighty King; frankincense, as offered to a God; myrrh, as to one who is to die for the sins of all'.¹⁸ The treatment here is different: the kings give material gifts but receive spiritual gifts in return. This is a resonant moment in the context already established. The Magi's embarrassed disconcertion turns to humility. Now they have, as it were, to disrobe themselves into the full truth. Faced with the 'cloud' (9), i.e., the oddness and poverty of the scene in front of them, their hearts are none the less illuminated: the Divine Motherhood and the divinity of Christ shine out to them.

Poem ix, 'The Presentation', is again focused on self-emptying, in this case on the unworldly logic by which the redeemer of the world has himself to be 'redeemed' at the Temple at the price of 'two selye [i.e. humble] turtle doves' (ix. 2). But Southwell quickly contrasts this scene of innocence – and the interchange between Simeon's 'weeping eies' and the Christ-child's 'smiling lookes' (ix. 9) – with, in the next poem, the viciousness of King Herod and the way in which he becomes a 'darke eclipse'

¹⁷Jerome, Epistola 46, PL 22:490; Erasmus, *Paraphrasis in Matthaicum* (1522). Interestingly, when, in the reign of Edward VI, Nicholas Usall translated Erasmus's paraphrase for use in churches, he chose 'cottage' for 'tugurium': 'that wonderful starre [...] shewed unto them not only Bethleem, but also the cottage it selfe, being very lowe, poore, and base, and therefore verye harde to fynde'.

¹⁸Quoted from St Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea* (Commentary on Matthew), English trans. of 1841, with a new intro. by Aidan Nichols, OP (Southampton: St Austin Press, 1997), p. 76.

on the Christ-child's 'sunne' (x. 4). Herod's actions force the holy family into exile. Poem x, 'The flight into Egypt', is another instance – we might say the extreme instance – of how, at one level, the conceits of the baroque only serve to press home reality. Southwell addresses the Holy Innocents directly. There is real feeling here:

O blessed babes, first flowers of christian spring,
 Who though untimely cropt faire garlandes frame,
 With open throats and silent mouthes you sing
 His praise whom age permits you not to name,
 Your tunes are teares, your instruments are swords,
 Your ditty death, and blood in lieu of wordes. (x. 13–18)

'Instruments (in music)' is a pun on 'instruments (of martyrdom)', i.e. the means of a martyr's death, e.g., the arrow for St Sebastian, the gridiron for St Lawrence, and here the soldiers' swords for the babies. In this image, the Holy Innocents, now garlanded in heaven (14), become a choir of putti, their slit throats and silenced mouths 'singing' of death, blood, and Christ (15–18). Baroque flamboyance somehow encompasses the grim and the sincere. The Holy Innocents are properly named as the first Christian martyrs, the very first to die for Christ, and it is hard to believe that Southwell could have written these lines without thinking of Edmund Campion, Alexander Briant, Ralph Sherwin, and others who had already given their lives on the English Mission. Politically, he is discreet: there is no explicit link here between the 'cruell storme of Herod's mortall spight' (x. 9) and the Elizabethan regime's persecution of Catholics, and maybe Southwell really did not think it, but something about the dark sin of the world lurks in the background.

In this second movement of the sequence, there are often links between the end of one poem and the beginning of the next, and the connection between poems x and xi is the contrast between the worldly Herod as death-bringer and the Word as life-bringer. In xi, 'Christ's returne out of Egypt', we have an idyllic moment, the holy family living quietly in Nazareth. At the same time, we have the assurance that Christ will more 'deeply' 'maime' death (xi. 3) than can ever be imagined in the face of the previous atrocity.

Southwell takes his etymology of Nazareth as meaning 'flowre' (10), i.e. flower, probably either from St Jerome's *Epistles* or from St Bernard's *Homilies in Praise of the Blessed Virgin Mary*,¹⁹ so that again the poem extends into high-flown conceit, with Christ as a 'flower' (from the tree of Jesse, from the Vulgate of Isa. 11: 1) and Mary as the *Rosa mystica*. This leads through to the thought that Christ is a 'young flower', surrounded by 'flowers' (Mary and Joseph), and also 'in flower', i.e., flourishing – but 'thorns' are not far away: the family goes to Nazareth in the first place because of Herod Archelaus, the 'thorne' of line 12, the cruel successor to his cruel father (Matt. 2: 22). There is also the intimation that this flowerly or ideal existence will eventually lead to the Cross:

Young flower, with flowers, in flower well may he be:
 Ripe fruit he must with thornes hang on a tree. (xi. 17–18)

¹⁹Jerome, *Epistola XLVI*, PL 22:491; Bernard of Clairvaux, *Homilies in Praise of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, trans. by Marie-Bernard Saïd (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010), Homily 1: p. 7.

So, we come to the final poem of this movement, xii 'Christ's Childhoo'de'. This is paralleled to poem vi, 'The Nativitie of Christ'. We may assume, given the first line here ('Till twelve yeres age, how Christ his childhood spent...'), that we are going to receive a pictorial or dramatic rendering of the Fifth Joyful Mystery, 'The Finding in the Temple', and may be surprised when this is not the case. Southwell is asking himself a different kind of question: having passed through boyhood, what was the young Christ really like on the cusp of adulthood? This is a psychological, realistic question about how he manifested to others, and it is interesting – in terms of the larger meaning of the sequence – that Southwell chooses to ask it. It is a bold, unusual move, anticipating more modern filmic or fictional treatments of Christ. In brief, Southwell's answer is to imagine, very tenderly, the deep psychological and spiritual poise of Christ's character, a real kind of golden mean: a modest, contained cheerfulness and humour; a 'sadnesse' (14), i.e. seriousness, never heavy or depressed; a close quality of attention to the world, moment by moment, to discern the truth of things. This is the 12-year-old Christ:

His mirth, of modest meane a mirrour was:
 His sadnesse, tempered with a milde aspéct:
 His eye, to trie each action was a glasse:
 Whose lookes, did good approve, and bad correct.
 His natures gifts, his grace, his word, and deede
 Well shewed that all did from a God procede. (xii. 13–18)

This is paralleled in Chapter 4 of Southwell's prose work *Short Rules of a Good Life* (c. 1591), where he describes, at more length, the kind of balance that he saw as the ideal of character. Here are just a few of the immediately pertinent sentences:

In countenance, I must avoid an unstaied kind of variety and often change, keeping as near as I may one settled tenor thereof, rather bent to smiling than heaviness and free from frowning and suchlike unseemly distemper. Neither ought I to alter countenance but when reasonable and just cause moveth me to show either mirth, sorrow, dislike, or compassion, or some other modest or temperate affection. [...] My gesture must be decent, free from affectation or singularity and from all show of inward disquietness or unordered passion [...] My voice neither ought to be very loud, nor my laughter so vehement as to be heard afar off, but both seemly and modest, for excess in the voice and immoderate loudness are always certain signs of passion and therefore ought to be used but upon some extraordinary necessity.²⁰

The young Christ embodies fully and completely this ideal of character, though of course without the imperfections that assail the normal sinner.

²⁰*Two Letters and Short Rules of a Good Life*, ed. by Nancy Pollard Brown (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1973), pp. 35–36.

4. Mary's death and Assumption into heaven: poems xiii–xiv

Now, abruptly it might seem, we come to the concluding poems, xiii 'The death of our Ladie' and xiv 'The Assumption of our Lady'. We have moved precipitously forward from when Christ was twelve to the time of Mary's death. (We will come back to this later). I think it is interesting to note that in a situation where we might expect two poems on the model of the Rosary, i.e., the Assumption and the Coronation, we instead have a separate poem on Mary's death and then a poem covering both the Assumption and the Coronation. Southwell gives special weight to the reality of Mary's death as that of an ordinary woman. This takes us back to poem i and the first line of the whole sequence: at the point of her conception, 'Our second *Eve* puts on her mortall shroude' (i. 1). Immortality was not intrinsic to humankind at the point of creation but rather an added privilege lost at the Fall. Even though Mary is sinless and full of grace, none the less she is fully one of us and must undergo ordinary human death. Southwell brings home this point by making poem xiii an elegy:

Weepe living thinges, of life the mother dyes,
The world doth lose the summ of all her blisse,
The Quene of Earth, the Empresse of the skyes,
By maryes death mankind an orphan is,
Lett nature weepe, yea lett all graces mone,
Their glory, grace, and giftes dye all in one. (xiii. 1–6)

In the following stanzas, there is no traditional visual or apocryphal material. There is nothing, for example, about the gathered disciples round the deathbed as in such famous depictions as those by Giotto, Fra Angelico, Mantegna, and Caravaggio. In baroque fashion, the intimate visual focus is on Mary's luminous face, and specifically on her eyes, and how these are now 'dymmèd' by 'Deathes darke Eclipse' (16). The striking moment occurs at the end of the second stanza:

Not prey of death but praise to death she was,
Whose uglye shape seemd glorious in her face. (xiii. 11–12)

A quasi-allegory is given a realistic turn. The ugly shape of a personified 'Death', now within Mary as it were, is transformed at the moment of her passing by the last expression on her face.

The final poem is also not obviously pictorial in the manner of so many paintings of the Assumption. The first stanza makes a theological point, the second develops the image of Mary as eagle from Revelation 12:14, and only the final stanza gives us something approaching a conventional Coronation:

Gemm to her worth, spouse to her love ascendes,
Prince to her throne, Queene to her heavenly kinge,
Whose court with solemne pomp on her attends,
And Quires of Saintes with greeting notes do singe.
Earth rendreth upp her undeservèd preye,
Heaven claymes the right and beares the prize awaye. (xiv. 13–18)

Here, traditionally and movingly, Mary is the first redeemed by Christ. Her Assumption is the promise of the resurrection.

5. The sequence's shape and meaning

To begin to see the shape of the sequence and its larger meaning, we need to recap and consolidate what we have learnt about Southwell's perspective. We have noted at various points his lack of interest in the legends of the Apocrypha and the kind of stories available in *The Golden Legend* and the way he bypasses well-established pictorial traditions. He is toughly realistic. It is as though, to him, such material runs the risk of an ersatz, sentimental humanising of Christ's life. This perception is indirectly linked to another point sometimes raised, which has been a puzzle in scholarship and criticism: why did he choose just this particular set of episodes for his sequence?²¹ Why, for example, is there such an implicit gap between poem xii, set when Christ is twelve, and poem xiii 'The death of our Ladie'? Why is there nothing about Mary at the foot of the Cross, a usual scene in her life, her most intimate sharing in the passion? Why has Southwell not followed the Rosary or one of its sixteenth-century variants? I propose three related answers to these questions.

As we have seen, Christ's passion is implicitly present in poems vii and xi but not directly present at all. Southwell's focus is Mary's life in the context of the infancy narratives in Luke and Matthew. To simply follow the Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary would have given him only five episodes of shared life, whereas he wanted to think more deeply about the physical, moral, emotional, and salvific unity of Mary and her Son, and that required, for him, more reflection on Christ's childhood. In a different context, Matthew Levering has spoken of 'the depth of Mary's participation in the mission of her Son', and that phrase is useful here.²² We might also remember the *Catechism*, which quotes from *Lumen Gentium*: 'In a wholly singular way [Mary] co-operated by her obedience, faith, hope and burning charity in the Saviour's work of restoring supernatural life to souls. For this reason she is a mother to us in the order of grace'.²³ The sequence shows the very intimate way in which Southwell understood this. It was no cipher when he called himself 'Beatae Virginis filius' ('a son of the Blessed Virgin'), but something really thought and felt. The focus is on Mary as mother, and to bring in the passion directly would have distracted from this.

Now, it is appropriate to remember that the title of the work, as we have it at present, 'The Sequence on the Virgin Mary and Christ', is modern and editorial,²⁴ and that this is not Southwell's own title. Southwell did not have the opportunity, or live long enough, to refine the sequence or to see it into print. Our primary textual witnesses, the five surviving manuscripts of these lyric poems – including the best of them, the Waldegrave Manuscript at Stonyhurst College – give no indication of an overall title for the sequence and just start abruptly with the first poem, 'The Virgine Maries conception'. Our present modern title is flat and scholarly, very much a place-holder, and perhaps we should think about changing it. The sequence, after all, is rooted in contemplation and prayer. A better title, I suggest, would be 'The Divine Motherhood of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, Sovereign of Saints'. The first part here would pick up the central focus of the sequence, while the subtitle would pick up on

²¹ See the articles listed in footnote 12, above.

²² Matthew Levering, *Mary's Bodily Assumption* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), p. 107.

²³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Chapman, 1994), § 968, p. 221.

²⁴ It was created by James H. McDonald and Nancy Pollard Brown for their 1967 edition.

the importance of kenosis to the theological perspective as a whole. Certainly, Christ ‘emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant’ (Phil. 2: 7), but, as we have seen, the sequence stresses Mary’s parallel witness of lowliness and humility.

Biographical context might also be the final clue as to how to read the sequence and, indeed, how we might learn from it. In 1585 the anti-recusant laws had tightened: now just to be a Catholic priest in England was a capital offence. When he landed near Folkstone in July 1586, Southwell knew the prior fates of Edmund Campion, Ralph Sherwin, and others who had gone before him in mission. Beforehand, in his private devotional writings, we see him wrestling with the reality of this potential sacrifice,²⁵ and in *An Epistle of Comfort* (c. 1587–88) – actually (almost miraculously given its length) seen through a secret press on English soil – he had written with great boldness and courage about how ‘Martyrdome is glorious in it selfe, most profitable to the Church’.²⁶ None the less, he would not be human if the reality of martyrdom did not assail him in certain moods. He must have been very conscious of it as a public and exposed space, a kind of historical stage where vulnerability was total. When he had lifted up the Eucharist at his first mass in England, did he sense the imminence of his own sacrifice? It may be reasonable to surmise, at the moment he wrote the sequence, that the Cross was too obvious a reality to him, too overwhelming. What was crucial, what was sustaining, was Mary’s nurturing care of souls and her Divine Motherhood, a motherhood under which, as a ‘Son of Mary’, he placed himself in loving trust.

The sequence seems to me, then, to be part of Southwell’s own preparation for martyrdom. A Mariology implies a Christology. In her deep kenotic loving, and in her exact, sensitive, and liberating tracing of God’s will, the Virgin Mary became the real ‘Queene of Earth’ (xiii. 3), utterly different from that ambivalent figure, the seemingly glorious Elizabeth I. Despite the poetry’s flamboyant baroque style, it presents a fleshly and vulnerable Mary. No fine robes for her, no princely trains, no pomp. We see her ‘saved’ from scandal by the marriage to Joseph, struggling up hills to see her cousin, sitting in the ‘poore cottage’ to receive the Magi, weeping when her child is circumcised, and dying a simple death. For devotion and guidance, Southwell needed this completely real queen, in her ordinariness, suffering, and perseverance, to help him face the prospect of what lay ahead. Ultimately, he was not the subject of Elizabeth but rather the loving son of this much more excellent ‘Empresse of the skyes’ (xiii. 3).

Feast of the Assumption, 2023

²⁵Southwell, *Spiritual Exercises and Devotions*, pp. 26, 60, 90, 99, 104.

²⁶Southwell, *An Epistle of Comfort*, a facsimile reproduction of the 1587 edn (Ilkley: Scholar Press, 1974), ch. 11: pp. 137–67 (p. 137).

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