EDMUND WALLER IMPOUNDED

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Whatever else one might think of them, it is undeniable that the Modernists -particularly Eliot and Pound- performed an invaluable service by drawing attention to ignored or undervalued literary genres. In his 1921 essay on metaphysical verse, for example, Eliot wrote of collecting poems "from the work of a generation more often named than read, and more often read than profitably studied"[1] Ezra Pound is not as well known as his contemporary for his research in the area of 17th c. literature, but he did bring one poet of the era back into the limelight. While one may praise Eliot's intelligence and taste for reviving interest in Donne and Marvell, however, Pound's choice of Edmund Waller (1606-1687) as a literary figure worthy of reappraisal is somewhat mystifying. In this paper I wish to show what on earth it was he saw in the man and why he made use of one particular lyric ("Goe, Lovely Rose") in both ***Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*** and ***Canto 81***.

It is undeniable that Waller had a huge reputation in his own lifetime (the inscription upon his tomb reads "inter poetas sui temporis facile princeps")[2] but even then he had his detractors. A large part of his output is made up of panegyrics and other "occasional" poems which are too anodyne -often too blatantly insincere and downright untruthful- for anyone to swallow. In the piece entitled "Instructions to a Painter" (1666) for example, an inconclusive sea battle fought against the Dutch of Lowestoft (June 3rd 1665) is transformed into a sweeping victory of both English king and country which "Makes their Hague tremble". The work was laughed to scorn by four parodists (one of whom may well have been Marvell) before the end of 1667. Even those praised in his verse sometimes made wry comments upon the hollowness of his flattery, the banality of his words. The most famous case of this is Charles II's reaction to the panegyric "To the King, upon His Happy Return" (1660), composed to celebrate the restoration of the monarchy after Cromwell's Protectorate. Charles wanted to know why the poem was inferior in quality to a "Panegyric to My Lord Protector" which Waller had written six years before as a mark of

gratitude for the repeal of his banishment, imposed after his arrest by Parliament for his part in the attempt to make London a Royalist stronghold by armed force in l644. Although there was little doubt as to where his loyalties really lay (his reply to the king -"Sir, we poets never succeed so well in writing truth as in fiction" (Intro p. LXII)- reflects his true state of mind) his reputation of "versifier as political opportunist" stuck.

There is nothing in the poems themselves which gainsays such a classification. Charles II must have been a perceptive literary critic indeed to detect sincerity in one, shallowness in the other: to the contemporary reader they are pretty much of a muchness. Waller's comparisons, his usages of imagery, are always hackneyed: the references to a monarch who preserves England as a pastoral idyll in the l660 poem "[...] And does the shepherds as securely keep/ From all their fears, as they preserve their sheep" (p. l67) are lifted straight from Virgil's second Ecloque -"Pan curat ovis oviumque magistros".[3] Cromwell, in lines adapted from Shakespeare's ***Henry V***, is the potential usurper transformed into unquestioned leader of the country. There is, of course, nothing intrinsically wrong with such "redactions": the Elizabethans and the metaphysicals turned literary cross-referencing into a virtue. The problem with Waller is that lines adapted from past masters are never woven into the body of his work convincingly enough to give them a new lease of life, any sense of freshness. Charles is not the shepherd who looks after his flock: he is merely a substitute for the god Pan who looks after shepherds. Cromwell may well be an usurper, but at no point in the rest of the 1654 poem does Waller develop the idea of illegitimacy: his comparisons are mere ornamentation.

Coupled with such a large amount of political to-ing and fro-ing, this tendency towards the superficial and ornate convey a great unease on Waller's part. Like other exiled Cavalier poets (Cavalier meaning here close association with the court of Charles I; the figure of Abraham Cowley springs immediately to mind), he found himself unwilling or unable to keep fully in step with "the march of events", as Pound's ***Mauberley*** puts it. l625 to l660: one monarch beheaded for, of all things, treason; an unwelcome interim (despite all statements to the contrary) of Parliamentary government, followed by the return of a Stuart to the throne. Too much for one man to keep up with. Waller longed for political (and, in his case, financial) stability. When this was not

resorted to panegyric-as-self-defence: "Cromwell will, of course, work wonders" is the basic message. He made more or less the same claim for Charles II, without giving the new king a split second to prove himself. Waller does not chart progress, he envisions it: since there exists little or no palpable fact to support his hopes for a glowing future he falls back upon a golden age of myth and history as an example for contemporary "powers that be" to repeat. Wishing to do much more than simply hope that they will do so, he transforms speculation into fact: Cromwell *is* the reincarnation of Henry V, Charles II *is* Pan.

Unwillingness to deal with the turbulent present in anything other than historico-mythological terms is understandable, then. Waller does not stop there, however: even his lyrics (as opposed to the more obviously public poetry) lean far too heavily upon pre-existent models and ideas to elicit any emotional response from the reader: rather, the said reader is forced into a somewhat dry exercise of "spot the literary reference point". "Goe, Lovely Rose" is thought to be one of several pieces written in the late 1630s (Waller rarely dated his work), addressed to Dorothy Sydney (Sacharissa), with whom the poet had a brief affair. The only outstanding feature of these poems is, as G. Thorn Drury says, "the absence of anything like the appearance of passion" (Intro. p. XXIV). While no-one is suggesting that the ability to express the profundity of one's feelings and literary excellence are synonymous, the problem, yet again, is the sheer lack of imagination with which Waller deploys his "borrowings". In the piece that Pound "redacted" to form the "Envoi" section of ***Mauberley***, for example, Waller compares his reticent mistress with the flower that displays its beauty to the world. The Rose itself is being addressed here:

> Small is the worth
> Of beauty, from the light retired;
> Bid her come forth,
> Suffer herself to be desired
> And not blush so to be admired (p. 128).

If the bashful woman/flower contrast is not quite as old as the hills, it had enjoyed a very considerable lifespan before our poet chose to use it. In

Catullus LXI (which is itself an imitation of Sappho's ephithalamion) the recalcitrant bride is compared unfavourably with a hyacinth:

> talis in vario solet
> divitis domini hortulo
> stare flos hyacinthus.
> Sed moraris, abit dies;
> prodeas, nova nupta.[4]

Spenser (***Faerie Queene*** Bk. II, 12, 74-75) does not so much contrast the flower (now a rose) with the mortal woman afraid to show forth her charms as actually blend human and plantlife together. Here he is speaking of the flower: Her bared bosome he doth broad display/ Loe see soone after, how she fades and falles away."[5]

Note how the idea of ephemeral beauty and death has come in here: the male lover, Spenser goes on, should "pluck" his female flower while she is still in bloom. What else can be done with such a metaphor as this? The Elizabethans and metaphysicals alike saw the need to adopt novel approaches to a stock idea. Samuel Daniel, in his third sonnet to Delia, breathes new life into it by, ironically, placing heavy emphasis upon the notion of withering and decay.[6] Thomas Carew, Waller's contemporary, uses metaphysical conceit to show that the rose's perished beauty lives on in his lady's charms (Song: "Ask me no more where Jove bestows/ When June is past, the fading rose").[7]

Waller himself made a bold attempt to find a new angle, may even have been trying to out-conceit Carew by giving his flower the gift of tongues and movement. While it is probably unfair to smirk at the notion of a "rambling" rose which "goes" -dragging its roots behind- to give a verbal message to Sacharissa before expiring from the effort, the temptation is always there. And even if one's interpretation is somewhat less literal -the rose is sent as a present and before wilting gradually before the lady's eyes speaks volumes upon the ephemerality of beauty- the poem still fails: fails because the relatively daring notion of letting plantlife express itself -by whatever means- is undermined by the hackneyed nature of the message it has to give. "Your beauty like a rose's will fade and die, so please attempt not to be so stingy with it"; what is this but an admixture of Daniel and Spenser? One's overall impression is that of a literary conservative making a gesture at keeping up with

a poetical age in which boldness of expression was the norm. His innate temerity where use of imagery is concerned (there is hardly anything which even approaches a conceit in the rest of his poetry) sets him at odds with Donne, Marvell and even such lesser lights as Lovelace and Suckling. One cannot class him as a metaphysical, it was simply his ill luck to be born at a time in (literary) history when vigorous reshuffling and reassessments of norms was the order of the day. Pound realized this, and, as far as Hugh Selwyn Mauberley was concerned, it suited him down to the ground.

The 1919/20 sequence is "stuffed stiff" with references to poets and artists whose work is a reflection of bygone glories; Nemesianus, who was still writing imitations of the Virgilian *Eclogues* in the 3rd century A. D.; Pierre Ronsard who, as leader of the French Renaissance poetic circle La Pléiade, wished to use classical Greek and Roman lyrics as a model for national verse; the Pre-Raphaelites (whose name speaks for itself), especially Rosetti, who rendered early Italian poetry in English. All concentrated upon poetry as redaction, and it is easy to see how Waller fits into their "group". Then, of course, there is Mauberley himself who, in despair and disgust at the decadence of the British Empire which, in his opinion, brought about both World War I and (more importantly, for a man who has lost interest in keeping track of social history) a heap of instantly disposable verse, deliberately turns his back upon his own times. Most of the first section is taken up by a blow-by-blow account of the collapse into irreparable disrepair of poetry (particularly lyric poetry) from Sappho right down to Swinburne, the Pre-Raphaelites and the Rymers' Club (the last three are cited of examples, not of great art, but as noble attempts to keep the flame of individuality and inspiration alive) and the neofascist outpourings of Marinetti and the Futurists. The latter are regarded as being particularly odious, given that their main tenets are the glorification of war and destruction (as a cleanser of society) and the annihilation of *literary* history. The question is, however, what kind of poetry Mauberley himself would write to halt the slide into irreversible decay. We find the answer in "Envoi", the last section of the first part of the poem.

And it is really no answer at all. What Pound doggedly insisted upon (and commentators, just as tenaciously, have opted to ignore) is that Mauberley, in all his splendid isolation from current events, is the obverse of what his creator wished to be (though whether the wish was ever fulfilled is a matter of speculation). In writing *through* Mauberley, donning his character as a mask,

Ezra is attempting to show exactly how a writer *should not* express dissatisfaction with his times. The worst thing he can do is to clutch *blindly* at the straws of a lost, idealized age -that of Waller, in this case. "Envoi" is not so much a parody of "Goe, Lovely Rose" (in the sense that Pope's "Waller: On a Fan of the Author's Design" or "Spring" were) as a species of dramatic monologue in which Mauberley, by imitating Waller's imitation of Catullus, Spenser, Daniel and Carew, demonstrates that he has nothing of any import to say at all.

While Waller, however bookishly, addresses nature (in the form of a rose) Pound takes the whole notion of redaction/ imitation to extremes and speaks to a book. "Goe, Lovely Rose" is, albeit indirectly, intended as a "poetic epistle" to the object of his affections. Mauberley, far too busy with his art to find time for romance (as is implied in the second section of ***Mauberley 1920***) has only an abstract figure to write of. *His* woman is the symbol of decadent English society which lets her "charm" -her lyric tradition- go to waste by simply ignoring it. While Waller's rose presents itself as the image of moribund beauty, Mauberley (in an extension of Carew's conceit) has distilled beauty in his verses -written up its essence in a, presumably, imagiste poem. Such beauty is, however distilled to the point of mummification:

> Go, dumb-born book...
> Tell her that sheds
> Such treasure (i. e. lyric tradition) in the air
> Recking naught else but that her graces give
> Life to the moment (i. e. such ephemeral poetical "fads" as Futurism)
> I would bid them live
> As roses might, *in magic amber laid*
> *Red overwrought with orange and all made*
> *One substanced and one colour*
> *Braving time.*[8]

Poetry, then, is lowered to the status of a dried flower pressed between the pages of a book. Amber, here, is an embalming agent which, although preserving the outward form of whatever is set in it, alters such essential features as colour in the act of petrification. This is verse that drains the sap

from whatever it describes. Mauberley, it is implied, will banish himself from the one-time object of his affections (England and its literary tradition) after "Envoi" is completed" [...] some other mouth/ May be as fair as hers", thus repeating Waller's exile to the continent in 1645. Both, Pound implies, will leave behind them only a clutch of pseudo-love songs (with all the emotion squeezed from them by over bookishness) to be remembered by imitations of imitations.

In ***Mauberley***, Pound drew upon Waller not because he admired him, but because his verse represented a pitfall which 20th century poets should stay as well clear of as the minefield of iconoclasm represented by Marinetti. Too much literary history is as bad as none at all. Hardly a recommendation for our poor Caroline. Yet it is notable that when Pound, in 1945, suffered a like fate to Waller's -imprisonment for treason- "Goe, Lovely Rose" is one of the works he resorts to in the attempt to encounter solace.

Again, one is made to feel that Pound disapproved of Waller here -not so much as a poet, as an individual. When the latter was arrested for attempted insurrection against Parliament, he hardly covered himself with glory by giving away the names of everyone who had been involved in the so called "plot" which bears his name. His reputation may well have been illegitimately besmirched here: the Earl of Clarendon (who was Lord Chancellor at the time of Waller's arrest) despised the poet -for reasons unknown- and probably relished the act of making him the "villain of the piece" when it came to writing up the trial. Nevertheless and yet again, the reputation of cowardly turncoat stuck, and when Pound came to write ***Canto 81*** at the Disciplinary Training Centre (Pisa) where he had been incarcerated for his pro-Mussolini broadcasts on Rome radio during World War II, it was Richard Lovelace's "To Althea, from prison" that he chose to invoke "At my gates no Althea"[9] as the expression of a martyr unjustly punished for his unstinting adherence to a cause (that of Charles I) he believed in.

Yet while Waller might have made a thoroughly undesirable cellmate, it was *his* lyrics that Ezra repeated to himself while going through the purest hell of solitary confinement, in the same way as a devout Christian may pray rosary after rosary under similar circumstances, in a desperate attempt to stop himself from going completely insane. While Pound had no Christian beliefs to hang onto, he did have an almost obsessive faith in the power of poetry (particularly lyric poetry) to make any sensitive being (its creator, its reader,

its listener) reach beyond himself, beyond the mundanity of his day-to-day existence. But why pick on Waller, of all people, as the representative of the lyric tradition here?

What, essentially, *is* a lyric? Originally it was a poem set to music (to the sound of "Sappho's barbitos" in ***Mauberley***), and here is the key. While Waller did not write great poems, he provided the words for marvellous *songs*. The poet himself admitted that without the musical settings of Henry Lawes (1596-1662) these words meant little or nothing; in (yet another) panegyric, this time dedicated to the composer, he wrote: "Verse makes heroic virtues live;/ but you can life to verses give" (p. 19).

Pound loved Caroline music: it, quite literally, transported him. In his 1918 essay "Arnold Dolmetsch" he describes how a first encounter with the composer/instrument maker/song collector lifted him away from the present and back to a time when music and song were, in his opinion, the result of divine inspiration. Dolmetsch was playing the compositions of Dowland and Lawes;

> First, I perceived a sound which undoubtedly derived from the Gods, and the I found myself in a reconstructed century -in a century of music, back before Mozart or Purcell, listening to clear music, to tones clear as brown amber.[10]

Amber, here, is not the mummifying agent of ***Mauberley***: rather it provides a transparent surface through which one can see -and more importantly hear- the past re-echoing into the present. Pound had been deprived of all his books in what Humphrey Carpenter calls "the Gorilla Cage" at Pisa: if he wished to create poetry by his usual method of literary/historical cross-referencing, he had to reconstruct his sources from memory. Pound even professed the inability to remember who exactly was responsible for "Goe, Lovely Rose" the song that went echoing round his head; was it Lawes and Waller, John Jenkyns (sic) and Waller, or even Waller as musician with Dolmetsch or Dowland as singers:

> Lawes and Jenkyns guard thy (Pound's? Waller's?) rest
> Dolmetsch ever be thy guest [...].
> Then resolve me, tell me right,
> If Waller sung or Dowland played.[11]

Whatever the case, Pound was undergoing an experience similar to the one he had on first hearing Dolmetsch's music -transportation beyond his place and time (in this case, out of his cell) and back to a golden age which the Caroline had been so anxious to see his own era as a repetition of. In Pound, Waller's 17th century *is* the golden age.

Thus, neither "Envoi" nor the section of ***Canto 81*** quoted from, see Waller as anything other than what he was -a man who was so fearful of and confused by the present that he buried himself in the past. Ezra (implicitly) criticizes him for so doing in ***Mauberley*** yet sympathizes with his reactionary nature when historical events have moved too fast and far for even a modernist to stay abreast of. Waller was not a great poet -Pound never made that claim for him- but his fate (that of being left behind by the march of history, both social and literary, might be suffered by anyone. Bitter experience taught Ezra that a man should not be damned for failing to keep up: he had placed too much faith in Mussolini, Waller in Charles I. Such blindness was forgivable.

NOTES

1.- Frank Kermode, ***Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot***, London, Faber & Faber, 1975, p. 59.

2.- Thorn Drury, ***The Poems of Edmund Waller***, New York, Greenwood Press, 1986, preface p. lxii. All references to Waller's poems refer to this work and are noted within the main body of the text.

3.- Virgil, ***Eclogues***, London, William Heinemann, 1963, II I 136.

4.- Guy Lea, ***The Poems of Catallus***, Oxford, O. U. P., 1971, p. 65.

5.- Smith, ***Spenser Poetical Works***, Oxford, O. U. P., 1975, p. 138.

6.- Helen Gardner, ***The New Oxford Book of English Verse***, Oxford, O. U. P., 1979, p. 121.

7.- Ibid, pp. 280-1.

8.- T. S. Eliot, ***Selected Poems of Ezra Pound***, London, Faber & Faber, 1973, p. 181.

9.- Helen Gardner, ***op. cit.***, pp. 328-9.

10.- T. S. Eliot, ***Literary Essays of Ezra Pound***, London, Faber & Faber, 1988, p. 431.

11.- Ezra Pound, ***The Cantos***, London, Faber & Faber, 1975, pp. 519-20.