

Editorial

In continuing the thread from my previous editorial and clarifying the importance of the lines which preface HW's 'Threnos' I have taken up more than my accustomed space for the editorial, but I feel that the importance of these apparently casual but actually very carefully chosen lines merits special treatment.

Shakespeare's poem 'The Phoenix and the Turtle' was first published c. 1601 in what was virtually a compendium of poems, *Love's Martyr*, by Robert Chester as a memorial to a Sir John Salisbury and his wife. An inauspicious source for a poem which has come to epitomise 'the most perfect statement of the Platonic ideal in English poetry.' (Germaine Greer, *Shakespeare*, OUP, 1986)

Plato (c. 427-348 BC) was an ancient greek philosopher who studied under Socrates, and after extensive travels (perforced following the 'Trial') returned to Athens and started the all-important Academy, the foundation of all subsequent philosophy. At the heart of his philosophy is the 'doctrine of ideas' or forms, denoting the unchanging state of reality; a platonic 'idea' is resident in an ultimate realm of truth, to which the human soul provides the only means of access.

It is neither possible nor desirable to synthesise Plato's whole philosophical output within the confines of an editorial. But one particularly important fact from our point of view is that Plato considered the sun an all-important image. 'The principle light of the world, it was thus itself a figure of the Divinity.' (It might be interesting for someone to search through Plato's work for 'ancient sunlight'.)

At the time of the Renaissance renewed study of Plato's philosophy spread from the Platonic Academy in Florence (formed by Cosimo de Medici in 1459) throughout Europe in the following century through the work of the Humanists (Erasmus, Thomas More etc). This period of Neo-Platonism emphasised the importance of the ideal over the material world. And this was particularly expressed at this time as an idealised form of love: platonic love, which signified a purified, non-sexual form of love between two people in which each contemplates the spiritual beauty of the other's soul. Neoplatonism fostered a worship of beauty (interpreted as geometric proportion) and a search for harmony in the universe (the music of the sheres which showed the influence of the astronomers Copernicus and Kepler). The Italians elevated Neoplatonism to a synthetic religion, epitomised in Castiglione's *Courtier* (1528). This idea was brought to England by Roger Ascham who greatly admired Castiglione's work and it was from him that the Elizabethans learned to admire a graceful versatility, a harmony of mind and body, the cultivation of the soul through courtly love. The idealism of Plato was enlisted in the humanist cause against the Schoolmen (followers of Aristotle's more rigid thought) causing much argument in the intellectual circles of Elizabethan England.

Artistic endeavour tends to, and should, reflect (either for or against) the intellectual and social mores of its age. For example, the whole work of the Elizabethan poets Spenser and Sydney etc. was an exposition of Platonic, courtly, (and yet Puritan) ideals, whilst Sir Francis Bacon's *The Advancement of Learning* (1605) was a magnificent survey of the whole range of Renaissance learning, from divinity to natural history. And in Shakespeare's work it is reflected very obviously in the roman and mediterranean settings of the dramas, whilst his persona of the 'Sonnets' projects an ideal of constancy beyond death and dishonour. 'The platonic lover is so by virtue of his commitment not by physical intimacy'. (Germaine Greer, op. cit.)

So we come to examine 'The Phoenix and the Turtle' and HW's use of it to preface 'Threnos to T.E. Lawrence'. The poem is discussed at some length in *The Arden*

Shakespeare – The Poems (ed F.T. Prince, Methuen, 1960) where the author states that " 'The Phoenix and the Turtle' is ostensibly an elegiac poem on the death of two birds, falling into three divisions. It begins by summoning (all) other birds to a funeral pageant. This calling together of the birds passes into an Anthem which they are to sing, describing the mutual love of the Phoenix and the Turtle. And thirdly, there is the 'Threnos' the final lyrical celebration of their identity in love and death. (Threne was the greek word for funeral.) However the beauty of the poem consists in a marriage between intense emotion and almost unintelligible fantasy. It is inexhaustible because it is inexplicable."

John Masefield refers to it briefly in *William Shakespeare* (Heinemann 1954) and perhaps this reference reminded HW of these lines, but possibly most important for us (because it gives a known point of contact) the poem is discussed at length by John Middleton Murry in *Discoveries: Essays in Literary Criticism* (Collins 1924) whose opening essay 'The Nature of Poetry' fixes (after preliminary meandering) on an examination of the poetry of Shelley and Shakespeare, using 'The Phoenix and the Turtle' as sole example. Murry writes:

On the face of it, it is a requiem over the death of a phoenix and a turtle-dove, who are the symbols of a love made perfect by refinement from all earthly passion and become virginal... but the poem floats high above the plane of intellectual apprehension ... there is an absolute harmony in 'The Phoenix and the Turtle' – through it we have a glimpse of a mode of experience wholly beyond our own. This is the music of the spheres; this is the hymn of that celestial love which 'moves the sun and the other stars.' ... There is surely no more astonishing description of the highest attainable by human love ... It is the direct embodiment through symbols which are necessarily dark, of a pure comprehensive and self satisfying experience which we may call, an immediate intuition into the nature of things.

There is a great deal more in this essay than can be done justice to here but I think at this point that we can say the opening hypothesis as taken from Germain Greer can be said to have been sustained. And that these lines used by HW to preface his 'Threnos for T.E. Lawrence' were more than just 'apt'. (see editorial, HW Soc. *Journal*, No. 27). If Shakespeare compressed all his feeling of pure passion and loyalty in human love into this poem; if it is the embodiment of the Platonic ideal; then HW's use of it must surely imbue his own work with that same meaning. It is complicated by the fact that the Phoenix has its own symbolism, a mythical bird which after living a life of many centuries, died in fire, only to rise again from the ashes. But Shakespeare would also have been aware of that interpretation! The fact that this bird was supposed to live in Arabia is particularly apposite in this particular instance where HW is celebrating Lawrence of Arabia.

From the foregoing exposition I would suggest that it is obvious that HW's use of those lines was not merely accidental, not merely because they were superficially apt, but that their use was meant as a pointer to their greater meaning. I have already suggested (see. Editorial, HW Soc. *Journal*, No. 27) that *The Gold Falcon* and *The Star Born* would bear examination from this viewpoint. I would further suggest that much of HW's work reveals a reflection of platonic (and thus humanist) thought and ideals. As he states in 'Threnos': 'After 1950 I was committed to a series of novels having the Phoenix Impulse for theme.'

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