

On Sonnet 18, from *Amoretti*, by Edmund Spenser

approx. 1200 words by Joshua Weiner / for Poetry Daily, April 2014

The rolling wheele that runneth often round,
The hardest steele in tract of time doth teare;
And drizzling drops that often doe redound,
The firmest flint doth in continuance weare.
Yet cannot I with many a dropping teare (5)
And long intreaty soften her hard hart,
That she will once vouchsafe my place to heare,
Or looke with pittie on my payneful smart.
But when I pleade, she bids me play my part,
And when I weep, she sayes teares are but water: (10)
And when I sigh, she sayes I know the art,
And when I waile, she turns hir selfe to laughter.
So doe I weepe, and wayle, and pleade in vaine,
Whiles she as steele and flint doth still remayne.

This sonnet by Edmund Spenser is one of the highlights in a sequence called *Amoretti* (or love songs); it reads as a chapter in a loosely structured hot romance with a tumultuous emotional pitch that changes from sonnet to sonnet as the lover's campaign to win over his beloved fails or succeeds. 'The rolling wheele' (1595), Sonnet 18 in the sequence, is played in the sharp key of *Frustration*. So, if you've totally fallen for someone, and you're trying to make the moves and win that beloved's heart, and you are getting absolutely nowhere, how would you begin to convey your desperate frustration and your beloved's unbelievably unjust firmness in rebuffing you? Where's the heat in a cold shoulder?

Spenser's gambit is to make a kind of sweeping negative comparison. He opens with a general proposition about the nature of the world, how material objects and the forces of the physical universe act on each other; to wit, that even the hardest most obdurate material, whether in a natural or forged form, wears down over time. But then,

the lover tells us, the beloved's heart is somehow *supernaturally* hard and impervious to his most sincere entreaties. The physics of attraction obey a different set of laws; the hardest steel forged by a master craftsman is nothing compared to the hardness of the heart forged in the theater of romantic overture and seduction. To the beloved, the lover's pleading, weeping, sighing, and wailing—the emotional intensifications which step up with each line of the third quatrain—are merely affectations in this drama, to be expected. The roles have been written: he must beseech her, and she must refuse him. Those are the understood laws of *Amore*.

The Italian poet, Petrarch, established many of these amorous poetic conventions a couple of hundred years before Spenser's time, and poets had been working them over ever since—we hear them even today in pop music. What's special about Spenser's poem is his invention with poetic form; how he creates a feeling of rolling momentum and accumulation in the syllogistic organization of this sonnet. The way, for example, that the four adjective-noun pairs in the first four lines (rolling wheele, hardest steele, drizzling drops, firmest flint) weights the beginnings of those lines to such a degree that it's like hearing that wheel roll around on a track, spiking in its pitch as it approaches you and ebbing as it departs from you in four cycles. The wearing down in life is an effect of repetition; verse form stages qualities of repetition more intensely than any other verbal art; and Spenser maximizes that intensity by virtue of an irresistible parallel construction. The music of the opening quatrain is irresistible as well: the way alliteration alternates with assonance in each line; how internal rhymes thicken the effect of end rhyme; the sneaky consonance between 'continuance' and 'weare;' how the opening 'r' and 'd' sounds (in lines 1 and 3) are then harmonized in the one end-word 'redound.'

Spenser's impressive formal cunning creates the effect of a developing argument unfolding in continual relation to an enriching music. The lover takes images from the first quatrain about material properties and reapplies them to the romantic situation he describes in the second. The third quatrain heightens the performance of his complaint by amping up the parallelism with anaphora. I'm seduced every time by the way the three most intense actions (pleade, weep, waile)—each of which occupies its own line—are then combined in a different sequence all on one line (line 13): pleade and weepe and waile reappear immediately in the order of weepe and wail and pleade: 'So doe I *weepe*, and *wayle*, and *pleade* in vaine.' The force of that recombination and intensification is akin to hearing a pungently sweet chord change or inversion of notes in a blues tune or jazz riff—every time I push play in anticipation of hearing it, it hits me a little differently; but it never disappoints. How a poem written over 400 years ago plays such changes in a way that still feels fresh and forceful is a testament to Spenser's art. It's not a matter of craft, but of a technique enlivened by experience. That the experience is one of frustration and pain, and that one takes such pleasure in hearing it—that paradox presents an endless conundrum for psychologists of aesthetics. It is a knot at the center of all the formal actions of art.

And there are other actions in this poem to relish: the move to slant rhyme (water/laughter) right before the culminating full rhyme in the couplet (vaine/remayne); the unexpected repetition of the rhyming pattern between the second and third quatrains (smart/part)—a vestigial trace here of Petrarchan form in what's otherwise a straight English sonnet; how the ripping action of 'teare' (line 2) repeats but with a vowel change in the dropping 'teare' (line 5); the way the beloved's cynicism in the third quatrain *turns*

the lover's sincerities into mere affectations. These are consummate tricks of the trade; they're startling if you notice them, but they affect the ear and excite the mind, regardless.

William Carlos Williams defined a poem as a large or small machine made out of words; and there is surely a mechanical aspect to the gross form of the sonnet. But the operations of language and form taking shape in relation to the psyche constitute the *mysteries* of poetry more than they do the mechanics. The poem is written by intention and instinct, a harmonizing of the conscious and subconscious mind that affects the reader in much the same way as it does the poet.

That the final line ('Whiles she as steele and flint doth still remayne') contradicts the whole argument—that is, the beloved does *not* remain as steel and flint, because, as we've been told, steel and flint wear down with time and the beloved does not—that *that* contradiction seems simply not to matter: the force of the sonnet's concluding formal move completely eclipses any light cast by the sonnet's *idea*. It's not a paradox; it's simply a contradiction. (The double meaning of 'remayne'—to stay, but also to *restore*—suggests that, although the lover's ardor may be depleted by the beloved's refusals, in a less obvious way it may be re-energized: refusal begets renewal). The heart's assertion trumps any card played by intellection's thesis. So it is in love, and ever will be.

The poem may not be for everyone—you have to have an appetite for the artifice; but Spenser's style here is plain, and keeps the poem on track—no straining for effect, no false embellishments. And doesn't every seduction play always involve its cunning

artifice! The flowers, the dinner, the thoughtful note. The poem. It's a rolling wheel of a poem, rolling still, and the sound of its approach wakes me with delight.

--for Gerard Passanante