

W. Alabaster's sonnets and the Counter Reformation

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William Alabaster (1567/8-1640) remained unknown except among his contemporaries in Cambridge literary circles until Bertram Dobell's discovery of some manuscript sonnets. His spiritual sonnets which were hardly accessible for years, have been unduly neglected, although they deserve due scholarly attention and critical appraisal. *The Sonnets of William Alabaster*, published in 1959, was jointly edited by G. M. Story and H. Gardner. The publication of this first edition, however, failed to cause an upsurge of Alabaster's literary fame.

He was one of the forerunners who wrote his poetry in the metaphysical manner. His imagination operated just as Donne's. They, as contemporaries, shared the same mental climate of the Elizabethan age. What is more, both of them were in the direct lineage of the Petrarchan tradition. Unlike Donne Alabaster in his conceit-making had, as his frame of reference, the incandescent spirit and urgency of the Counter Reformation. In particular, Alabaster was heavily indebted to St. Ignatius of Loyola whose *Spiritual Exercises* influenced the writing of his sonnets.

Robert Southwell (1561-1595), Alabaster's immediate predecessors, who wrote poetry tinged with Roman Catholic fervency and urgency, died the death of a martyr for the Roman Catholic cause. His poems were widely read after his death and received posthumous fame. He could not stand those who were wasting their talent for inordinate love and in his epistle prefatory to "Saint Peters Complaint" he expected a poet to appear who would sing

devotion to God in the form of a sonnet.

There are many conceits on the cult of saints; St. Peter (9 and 10), St. John (77), St. Augustine (35), St. Paul (31), Virgin Mary (37, 38, and 39), and Mary Magdalene (21). The dominant feature of the Counter Reformation poetry was the constant insistence upon the tears of Mary Magdalene. The poetry of Southwell, Crashaw and even Donne showed no exception. The tears of Mary Magdalene were often a theme of meditation and such meditations were recorded in the *Spiritual Exercises*. The conceits on shipwreck and heart hinge upon spiritual exercises. Three faculties of the soul are meditated upon in terms of the *Spiritual Exercises*. The conceits on the earth show a tinge of the emblem method. A collection of emblems was made by the Society of Jesus.

The language and conceits used by the Petrarchists, therefore, were adapted for religious themes. Even the sonnet form was used for religious experiences. These aspects of the Counter Reformation had a definite influence upon Alabaster in the writing of his sonnets. It also can safely be said that Alabaster is the very one that Southwell expected.

Whitman Seen from the Zen Viewpoint

Toshiro Taniguchi

The influence of Walt Whitman as father of one of the two great traditions of American poetry is great upon world poetry, though we have still pros and cons concerning his poems. His *Song of Myself* which appeared in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, under no title in 1855 is still the center of hot discussion perhaps because it is most characteristic of Whitman, and conveys his essential poetical thought. It is a consensus of opinion that the poem is very difficult to understand in both construction and thought.

It was Emerson who influenced Whitman, and I heard that Emerson learned much from Oriental mysticism in his forties together with other transcendentalists of the time, and he acquired a new way of seeing objects from the Indian philosophy of Buddhistic monism. But When I read his poems, I still feel there are some vestiges of a dialectical way of thinking perhaps from his reading of German idealistic philosophers, such as Kant, Schelling, and especially Hegel. His monistic world of "Over-Soul" is a result of dialectical thinking and reasoning that took time to develop. Whitman must have gained much from Emerson, but the final world he reached seems somewhat different from Emerson's. Whitman's poetical world resembles very much the sudden spiritual awakening of Zen priests who try to see their own true nature of self through the long practice of meditative sitting. When they experience an awakening, their world is quite different from that which it was; it is quite new and fresh to them, and it is said that such an

understanding cannot be attained through any way of reasoning.

Seen from the Zen viewpoint, Whitman's *Song of Myself* gives many indications that he reached the same monistic world as Zen, though I have never heard that he learned anything from Zen Buddhism. He did remain an earnest Quaker all his life. As is explained by Mr. Suzuki, the world famous Zen scholar, the characteristics of one who has seen the true nature of self are identification of self with outer objects, cosmical magnification of self, dynamic activity of soul, an objective way of seeing things, a deep pleasure in living at the present time, perfect freedom from all fears, a daring spirit and so forth, and I am surprised to find all these are common to Whitman.

Whitman was an American, and it is astonishing to me that he attained a Zen-like monistic world for himself. I don't know how he was able to do so.
