

Classic Poetry Series

Robert Southwell
- poems -

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Robert Southwell(1561 - 1595)

Robert Southwell was born at Horsham St. Faith's, Norfolk, England, in 1561; hanged at Tyburn, 21 February, 1595. His grandfather, Sir Richard Southwell, had been a wealthy man and a prominent courtier in the reign of Henry VIII. His grandfather had been a prominent man in Henry VIII's court and the family remained among the elite of the land. He was so beautiful as a young boy that a gypsy stole him. He was soon recovered by his family and became a short, handsome man, with gray eyes and red hair.

It was Richard Southwell who in 1547 had brought the poet Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, to the block, and Surrey had vainly begged to be allowed to "fight him in his shirt". Curiously enough their respective grandsons, Robert Southwell and Philip, Earl of Arundel, were to be the most devoted of friends and fellow-prisoners for the Faith. On his mother's side the Jesuit was descended from the Copley and Shelley families, whence a remote connexion may be established between him and the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley.

Even as a child, Southwell was distinguished by his attraction to the old religion. Protestantism had come to England, and it was actually a crime for any Englishman who had been ordained as a Catholic priest to remain in England more than forty days at a time. In order to keep the faith alive, William Allen had opened a school at Douai, where he made a Catholic translation of the Bible, the well-known Douai version. Southwell attended this school and asked to be admitted into the Jesuits. At first the Jesuits refused his application, but eventually his earnest appeals moved them to accept him. He was ordained a priest in 1584. Two years later, at his own request, he was sent as a missionary to England, well knowing the dangers he faced.

Southwell's arrival in England was reported to the authorities. For six years they kept him under surveillance. He assumed the last alias "Cotton" and found employment as a chaplain to Lady Arundel. He wrote a prose elegy, *Triumphs over Death*, to the earl to console him for a sister's premature death. Although he lived mostly in London, he traveled in disguise and preached secretly throughout England. His downfall and capture came about when he became friendly with a Catholic family named Bellamy. They were arrested on charges of treason and Southwell was tricked into the clutches of Richard Topcliffe, a notorious agent of the anti-Catholic persecution.

Southwell was in prison for three years. Tortured thirteen times, he nonetheless refused to reveal the names of fellow Catholics. During his incarceration, he was

allowed to write. His works had already circulated widely and seen print, although their authorship was well known and one might have expected the government to suppress them. Now he added to them poems intended to sustain himself and comfort his fellow prisoners. On February 21, 1595 Southwell was brought to Tyburn, where he was hanged and then quartered for treason, although no treasonous word or act had been shown against him. It was enough that he held a variation of the Christian faith that frightened many Englishmen because of rumors of Catholic plots

Southwell's writings, both in prose and verse, were extremely popular with his contemporaries, and his religious pieces were sold openly by the booksellers though their authorship was known. Imitations abounded, and Ben Jonson declared of one of Southwell's pieces, *The Burning Babe*, that to have written it he would readily forfeit many of his own poems. *Mary Magdalene's Tears*, the Jesuit's earliest work, licensed in 1591, probably represents a deliberate attempt to employ in the cause of piety the euphuistic prose style, then so popular. *Triumphs over Death*, also in prose, exhibits the same characteristics; but this artificiality of structure is not so marked in the *Short Rule of Good Life*, the *Letter to His Father*, the *Humble Supplication to Her Majesty*, the *Epistle of Comfort* and the *Hundred Meditations*. Southwell's longest poem, *St. Peter's Complaint* (132 six-line stanzas), is imitated, from the Italian *Lagrime di S. Pietro* of Luigi Tansillo. This with some other smaller pieces was printed, with license, in 1595, the year of his death. Another volume of short poems appeared later in the same year under the title of *Maeoniae*. Perhaps no higher testimony can be found of the esteem in which Southwell's verse was held by his contemporaries than the fact that, while it is probable that Southwell had read Shakespeare, it is practically certain that Shakespeare had read Southwell and imitated him.

A Child My Choice

Let folly praise that fancy loves, I praise and love that Child
Whose heart no thought, whose tongue no word, whose hand no deed defiled.

I praise Him most, I love Him best, all praise and love is His;
While Him I love, in Him I live, and cannot live amiss.

Love's sweetest mark, laud's highest theme, man's most desired light,
To love Him life, to leave Him death, to live in Him delight.

He mine by gift, I His by debt, thus each to other due;
First friend He was, best friend He is, all times will try Him true.

Though young, yet wise; though small, yet strong; though man, yet God He is:
As wise, He knows; as strong, He can; as God, He loves to bless.

His knowledge rules, His strength defends, His love doth cherish all;
His birth our joy, His life our light, His death our end of thrall.

Alas! He weeps, He sighs, He pants, yet do His angels sing;
Out of His tears, His sighs and throbs, doth bud a joyful spring.

Almighty Babe, whose tender arms can force all foes to fly,
Correct my faults, protect my life, direct me when I die!

Robert Southwell

Content And Rich

I dwell in Grace's court,
Enriched with Virtue's rights;
Faith guides my wit, Love leads my will,
Hope all my mind delights.

In lowly vales I mount
To pleasure's highest pitch;
My silly shroud true honour brings;
My poor estate is rich.

My conscience is my crown,
Contented thoughts my rest;
My heart is happy in itself;
My bliss is in my breast.

Enough, I reckon wealth;
That mean, the surest lot,
That lies too high for base contempt,
Too low for envy's shot.

My wishes are but few
All easy to fulfil;
I make the limits of my power
The bounds unto my will.

I fear no care for gold;
Well-doing is my wealth;
My mind to me an empire is,
While grace affordeth health.

I clip high-climbing thoughts,
The wings of swelling pride;
Their fall is worst that from the height
Of greatest honour slide.

Since sails of largest size
The storm doth soonest tear;
I bear so low and small a sail
As freeth me from fear.

I wrestle not with rage,
While fury's flame doth burn;
It is in vain to stop the stream
Until the tide doth turn.

But when the flame is out,
And ebbing wrath doth end,
I turn a late enraged foe
Into a quiet friend.

And, taught with often proof,
A temper'd calm I find
To be most solace to itself,
Best cure for angry mind.

Spare diet is my fare,
My clothes more fit than fine;
I know I feed and clothe a foe,
That pamper'd would repine.

I envy not their hap
Whom favour doth advance;
I take no pleasure in their pain
That have less happy chance.

To rise by others' fall
I deem a losing gain;
All states with others' ruin built,
To ruin run amain.

No change of fortune's calm
Can cast my comforts down;
When fortune smiles, I smile to think
How quickly she will frown.

And when, in froward mood,
She prov'd an angry foe;
Small gain I found to let her come, -
Less loss to let her go.

Look Home

Retired thoughts enjoy their own delights,
As beauty doth in self-beholding eye ;
Man's mind a mirror is of heavenly sights,
A brief wherein all marvels summed lie,
Of fairest forms and sweetest shapes the store,
Most graceful all, yet thought may grace them more.

The mind a creature is, yet can create,
To nature's patterns adding higher skill ;
Of finest works with better could the state
If force of wit had equal power of will.
Device of man in working hath no end,
What thought can think, another thought can mend.

Man's soul of endless beauty image is,
Drawn by the work of endless skill and might ;
This skillful might gave many sparks of bliss
And, to discern this bliss, a native light ;
To frame God's image as his worths required
His might, his skill, his word and will conspired.

All that he had his image should present,
All that it should present it could afford,
To that he could afford his will was bent,
His will was followed with performing word.
Let this suffice, by this conceive the rest,
He should, he could, he would, he did, the best.

Robert Southwell

Love's Servile Lot

LOVE, mistress is of many minds,
Yet few know whom they serve;
They reckon least how little Love
Their service doth deserve.

The will she robbeth from the wit,
The sense from reason's lore;
She is delightful in the rind,
Corrupted in the core.

She shroudeth vice in virtue's veil,
Pretending good in ill
She offereth joy, affordeth grief,
A kiss where she doth kill.

A honey-shower rains from her lips,
Sweet lights shine in her face;
She hath the blush of virgin mind,
The mind of viper's race.

She makes thee seek, yet fear to find
To find, but not enjoy:
In many frowns some gliding smiles
She yields to more annoy.

She woos thee to come near her fire,
Yet doth she draw it from thee;
Far off she makes thy heart to fry,
And yet to freeze within thee.

She letteth fall some luring baits
For fools to gather up;
Too sweet, too sour, to every taste
She tempereth her cup.

Soft souls she binds in tender twist,
Small flies in spinner's web;
She sets afloat some luring streams,
But makes them soon to ebb.

Her watery eyes have burning force;
Her floods and flames conspire:
Tears kindle sparks, sobs fuel are,
And sighs do blow her fire.

May never was the month of love,
For May is full of flowers;
But rather April, wet by kind,
For love is full of showers.

Like tyrant, cruel wounds she gives,
Like surgeon, salve she lends;
But salve and sore have equal force,
For death is both their ends.

With soothing words enthralled souls
She chains in servile bands;
Her eye in silence hath a speech
Which eye best understands.

Her little sweet hath many sours,
Short hap immortal harms;
Her loving looks are murd'ring darts,
Her song bewitching charms.

Like winter rose and summer ice,
Her joys are still untimely;
Before her Hope, behind Remorse:
Fair first, in fine unseemly.

Moods, passions, fancy's jealous fits
Attend upon her train:
She yieldeth rest without repose,
And heaven in hellish pain.

Her house is Sloth, her door Deceit,
And slippery Hope her stairs;
Unbashful Boldness bids her guests,
And every vice repairs.

Her diet is of such delights

As please till they be past;
But then the poison kills the heart
That did entice the taste.

Her sleep in sin doth end in wrath,
Remorse rings her awake;
Death calls her up, Shame drives her out,
Despairs her upshot make.

Plough not the seas, sow not the sands,
Leave off your idle pain;
Seek other mistress for your minds,
Love's service is in vain.

Robert Southwell

Man's Civil War

MY hovering thoughts would fly to heaven
And quiet nestle in the sky,
Fain would my ship in Virtue's shore
Without remove at anchor lie.

But mounting thoughts are haled down
With heavy poise of mortal load,
And blustering storms deny my ship
In Virtue's haven secure abode.

When inward eye to heavenly sights
Doth draw my longing heart's desire,
The world with jesses of delights
Would to her perch my thoughts retire,

Fon Fancy trains to Pleasure's lure,
Though Reason stiffly do repine;
Though Wisdom woo me to the saint,
Yet Sense would win me to the shrine.

Where Reason loathes, there Fancy loves,
And overrules the captive will;
Foes senses are to Virtue's lore,
They draw the wit their wish to fill.

Need craves consent of soul to sense,
Yet divers bents breed civil fray ;
Hard hap where halves must disagree,
Or truce halves the whole betray !

O cruel fight ! where fighting friend
With love doth kill a favoring foe,
Where peace with sense is war with God,
And self-delight the seed of woe !

Dame Pleasure's drugs are steeped in sin,
Their sugared taste doth breed annoy ;
O fickle sense ! beware her gin,
Sell not thy soul to brittle joy !

Robert Southwell

New Heaven, New War

Come to your heaven, you heavenly choirs,
Earth hath the heaven of your desires;
Remove your dwelling to your God,
A stall is now his best abode;
Sith men their homage do deny,
Come, Angels, all their fault supply.

His chilling cold doth heat require,
Come, Seraphins, in lieu of fire;
This little Ark no cover hath,
Let Cherubs' wings his body swath;
Come, Raphael, this Babe must eat,
Provide our little Tobie meat.

Let Gabriel be now his groom,
That first took up his earthly room;
Let Michael stand in his defence,
Whom love hath link'd to feeble sense;
Let Graces rock when he doth cry,
Let Angels sing his lullaby.

The same you saw in heavenly seat,
Is he that now sucks Mary's teat;
Agonize your King a mortal wight,
His borrowed weed lets not your sight;
Come, kiss the manger where he lies,
That is your bliss above the skies.

This little Babe so few days old,
Is come to rifle Satan's fold;
All hell doth at his presence quake,
Though he himself for cold do shake;
For in this weak, unarmed wise,
The gates of hell he will surprise.

With tears he fights and wins the field,
His naked breast stands for a shield;
His battering shot are babish cries,
His arrows made of weeping eyes,

His martial ensigns cold and need,
And feeble flesh his warrior's steed.

His camp is pitched in a stall,
His bulwark but a broken wall;
The crib his trench, hay stalks his stakes,
Of shepherds he his muster makes;
And thus as sure his foe to wound,
The Angels' trumps alarum sound.

My soul with Christ join thou in fight,
Stick to the tents that he hath dight;
Within his crib is surest ward,
This little Babe will be thy guard;
If thou wilt foil thy foes with joy,
Then flit not from the heavenly boy.

Robert Southwell

New Prince New Pomp

Behold, a seely tender babe
In freezing winter night
In homely manger trembling lies;
Alas, a piteous sight!
The inns are full, no man will yield
This little pilgrim bed,
But forced he is with seely beasts
In crib to shroud his head.
Despise him not for lying there,
First, what he is enquire,
An orient pearl is often found
In depth of dirty mire.
Weigh not his crib, his wooden dish,
Nor beasts that by him feed;
Weigh not his mother's poor attire
Nor Joseph's simple weed.
This stable is a prince's court,
This crib his chair of state,
The beasts are parcel of his pomp,
The wooden dish his plate.
The persons in that poor attire
His royal liveries wear;
The prince himself is come from heaven;
This pomp is prized there.
With joy approach, O Christian right,
Do homage to thy king;
And highly prize his humble pomp
Which he from heaven doth bring.

Robert Southwell

The Burning Babe

AS I in hoary winter's night
 Stood shivering in the snow,
Surprised I was with sudden heat
 Which made my heart to glow;
And lifting up a fearful eye
 To view what fire was near,
A pretty babe all burning bright
 Did in the air appear;
Who, scorched with excessive heat,
 Such floods of tears did shed,
As though His floods should quench His flames,
 Which with His tears were bred:
'Alas!' quoth He, 'but newly born
 In fiery heats I fry,
Yet none approach to warm their hearts
 Or feel my fire but I!
'My faultless breast the furnace is;
 The fuel, wounding thorns;
Love is the fire, and sighs the smoke;
 The ashes, shames and scorns;
The fuel Justice layeth on,
 And Mercy blows the coals,
The metal in this furnace wrought
 Are men's defiled souls:
For which, as now on fire I am
 To work them to their good,
So will I melt into a bath,
 To wash them in my blood.'
With this He vanish'd out of sight
 And swiftly shrunk away,
And straight I called unto mind
 That it was Christmas Day.

Robert Southwell

The Nativity Of Christ

Behold the father is his daughter's son,
The bird that built the nest is hatched therein,
The old of years an hour hath not outrun,
Eternal life to live doth now begin,
The Word is dumb, the mirth of heaven doth weep,
Might feeble is, and force doth faintly creep.

O dying souls, behold your living spring;
O dazzled eyes, behold your sun of grace;
Dull ears, attend what word this Word doth bring;
Up, heavy hearts, with joy your joy embrace.
From death, from dark, from deafness, from despairs
This life, this light, this Word, this joy repairs.

Gift better than himself God doth not know;
Gift better than his God no man can see.
This gift doth here the giver given bestow;
Gift to this gift let each receiver be.
God is my gift, himself he freely gave me;
God's gift am I, and none but God shall have me.

Man altered was by sin from man to beast;
Beast's food is hay, hay is all mortal flesh.
Now God is flesh and lies in manger pressed
As hay, the brutest sinner to refresh.
O happy field wherein that fodder grew,
Whose taste doth us from beasts to men renew.

Robert Southwell

Upon The Image Of Death

Before my face the picture hangs
That daily should put me in mind
Of those cold names and bitter pangs
That shortly I am like to find;
But yet, alas, full little I
Do think hereon that I must die.

I often look upon a face
Most ugly, grisly, bare, and thin;
I often view the hollow place
Where eyes and nose had sometimes been;
I see the bones across that lie,
Yet little think that I must die.

I read the label underneath,
That telleth me whereto I must;
I see the sentence eke that saith
Remember, man, that thou art dust!
But yet, alas, but seldom I
Do think indeed that I must die.

Continually at my bed's head
A hearse doth hang, which doth me tell
That I ere morning may be dead,
Though now I feel myself full well ;
But yet, alas, for all this, I
Have little mind that I must die.

The gown which I do use to wear,
The knife wherewith I cut my meat,
And eke that old and ancient chair
Which is my only usual seat,-
All these do tell me I must die,
And yet my life amend not I.

My ancestors are turned to clay,
And many of my mates are gone;
My youngers daily drop away,
And can I think to 'scape alone?

No, no, I know that I must die,
And yet my life amend not I.

Not Solomon for all his wit,
Nor Samson, though he were so strong,
No king nor person ever yet
Could 'scape but death laid him along;
Wherefore I know that I must die,
And yet my life amend not I.

Though all the East did quake to hear
Of Alexander's dreadful name,
And all the West did likewise fear
To hear of Julius Caesar's fame,
Yet both by death in dust now lie;
Who then can 'scape but he must die?

If none can 'scape death's dreadful dart,
If rich and poor his beck obey,
If strong, if wise, if all do smart,
Then I to 'scape shall have no way.
Oh, grant me grace, O God, that I
My life may mend, sith I must die.

Robert Southwell