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0521450306 - *The Reinvention of Love: Poetry, Politics and Culture from Sidney to Milton*

Anthony Low

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In *The reinvention of love* Anthony Low argues that cultural, economic and political change transformed the way poets from Sidney to Milton thought and wrote about love. Examining the interface between broad social, political and economic practices and individual psyches, as reflected in literary texts, Professor Low illuminates the connections between material circumstances, perceptions and ideals. In a series of well-informed readings of the work of Sidney, Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, Carew and Milton, he shows how from the late sixteenth century poets struggled to replace the older Petrarchan tradition with a form of love in harmony with a changing world, and to reconcile human love and sacred devotion. Donne fled the social world; Carew made new accommodations with it; Milton revised it. For Milton, sacred love, cut off from communal norms, verges on hatred, while married love takes on the burden of assuaging loneliness in a threatening world. Thus, under the pressures of psychosocial change, new cultures, new habits of perception, and new forms of poetry emerge.

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Poetry, politics and culture from Sidney to Milton

ANTHONY LOW

New York University



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*This one is for Peter, Liz,
Katie, Nick, Alex,
Michael, Frances, Jessie,
Edward, and Charlotte*

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“We sat grown quiet at the name of love.”

Yeats, “Adam’s Curse”

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Preface

I began working on this book in 1986, but, because of various obligations unconnected with it and the pressure of administrative duties, my ideas saw light only gradually, in the form of preliminary articles and talks. Completion was delayed until New York University granted me sabbatical leave in the fall of 1991. Perhaps that delay was as well, since the subject I had undertaken – the effect of cultural, political, and economic change on how people think about love, as seen in representative seventeenth-century poetry – was subtle and complicated. As far as possible, I have tried to let the poems and the other materials I have worked with dictate the kind of book that has emerged. One may be tempted, in exploring such a large area – much subject at this time to political passions – to begin with a set thesis, method, or ideology. My own biases will no doubt emerge and convict me. Still I have tried at every stage not only to interpret, which is the essence of the study, but to let the poetry guide that interpretation and speak for itself.

After having undertaken a previous investigation of poetry and cultural change, I have been confirmed by this new study in my faith that poets are far more sensitive than most of us to the broad cultural and political transformations in society that impact on our individual lives. Poets may usually be relied on to respond to religious, political, and economic forces of change in ways far more subtle and interesting than any theories that we, as critics, might retrospectively bring to bear. The critic's task is to tease out and to bring into comprehensible order what might not be evident to a casual reader. This is not to argue that theory is useless. Any theory worth its salt should open our eyes

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to things we would otherwise miss. My primary allegiance, however, has always been to the writer, to the individual text and the texts as they relate to one another, and to historical facts and social forces, so far as we can reasonably know or infer them. In these latter days, no one would venture to proclaim that fathoming any of these three – writer, poem, or history – is a matter of complete, transparent certitude or of undoubted factuality. But neither, most reasonable people would agree, are they matters of utter indeterminacy.

My other allegiance is to notional readers, who, I like to think, are persons – whatever their beliefs or desires – curious to learn something new. There is something oppressive in the thought of “interpretive communities” of like-minded readers, clubbing together to read only like-minded writers – and consigning all others to oblivion. What ennui, only to read what we already know.

I also write for non-notional friends and colleagues. I have been helped and encouraged in the course of writing by many such friends, including Ernest Gilman (who not only read the book with grace and efficiency but ran the department in my absence so I could write it), Harold Bloom, Denis Donoghue, Blanford Parker, Robert Raymo, Raphael Falco, Marshall Grossman, Michael C. Schoenfeldt, Robert V. Young, John R. Roberts, Arthur Kinney, Kirby Farrell, Deborah Shuger, Achsah Guibbory, and Judith Hertz, as well as by a dozen anonymous journal readers and two readers for the press, and by friendly or helpfully critical remarks from audiences at several scholarly conferences. John T. Shawcross and Jason P. Rosenblatt were among those who made helpful suggestions. I remember a frequent query from friends at such conferences: “What are you working on now?” “Well, actually, it’s the same thing I told you about last year.” (And the year before.) As usual, none of these persons is responsible for my perseverance in error, whether factual, political, or stylistic; but they have often cheered me up and faithfully pointed out omissions of citation, phrases needing disentanglement, points that readers might misunderstand, and embarrassing lapses and typographical errors that will never see print.

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Early versions of parts of this book were presented as papers: at the MLA convention in 1986, at the NEMLA conference in Boston and the second annual conference of the John Donne Society in Gulfport in 1987, at the ninth Renaissance Conference at Dearborn in 1990, and at the Milton Seminar at Harvard in 1992. Versions of parts of the book have also appeared as articles: in *Studies in the Literary Imagination* (1989); as “Donne and the Reinvention of Love,” *English Literary Renaissance* 20 (1990): 465–86; in *New Perspectives on the English Religious Lyric of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. John R. Roberts (University of Missouri Press, 1993); in *Culture and Cultivation in Early Modern England: Writing and the Land*, ed. Michael Leslie and Timothy Raylor (Leicester University Press, 1992); in *Discourses of Desire*, ed. Claude Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (University of Missouri Press, 1993); and in a special Herbert issue of *Renaissance* edited by R. V. Young scheduled to appear in 1993. I thank the editors of these journals and presses for their courtesy, their frequent helpfulness, and for permission to reprint. I am also grateful for permission to quote as my epigraph a line from “Adam’s Curse,” in *The Poems of W. B. Yeats: A New Edition*, edited by Richard J. Finneran (New York: Macmillan, 1983).