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978-1-107-62596-9 - Peter Sterry Platonist and Puritan 1613–1672: A Biographical and
Critical Study with Passages Selected from his Writings

Vivian De Sola Pinto

Excerpt

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**BIOGRAPHICAL AND CRITICAL
STUDY**

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I

THE MAN

The purpose of this book is to give some account of an English author of the seventeenth century who has hitherto been almost entirely neglected by students of literature, and to place before the public some specimens of his writings. The name of Peter Sterry does not, as far as I know, occur in any history of English literature, or even in any special survey of the literature of the seventeenth century. Yet a glance through the selections in this volume will be sufficient, I hope, to show the reader that he is a writer of an imaginative prose comparable only with that of the greatest masters of that great age of prose poetry. A closer study will also, I believe, lead to the conviction that he is a true poet, “a great and lovely mind”, to use the phrase which Coleridge applied to Jeremy Taylor, the spiritual brother of such men as George Herbert, Richard Crashaw and Henry Vaughan, who, though his chosen medium usually happens to be prose, is essentially akin to the religious poets of the age in the intensity of his feeling and the beauty of his utterance. Finally he deserves to be remembered as one who in the words of F. D. Maurice was “a very profound thinker”, the teacher of a doctrine which is valuable both for its own lofty vision, and for its interesting affinities with the thought of Milton, of Spinoza, of the Cambridge Platonists, and other ancient and modern systems of philosophy.

It is true, indeed, that Peter Sterry has never been wholly forgotten by students of mysticism and of the history of religious ideas. Richard Baxter, his great contemporary, distrusted his teaching during his lifetime, but paid a noble tribute to him after his death.¹ A small band of disciples appears to have survived him, and to have published some of

¹ See passage quoted as an epigraph to this book, and Appendix II below.

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his posthumous works at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries. John Byrom, the eighteenth-century poet and mystic (1692–1763), possessed at least one of his books,¹ and some of his prayers were reprinted in a little volume that appeared in 1785. In the nineteenth century his writings were highly esteemed by such men as John Sterling,² Frederick Denison Maurice³ and Archbishop Trench,⁴ and one of his sermons was reprinted in 1831. Tulloch in his study of *Rational Theology in the Seventeenth Century* (1872) does not allude to him once, but it is conceivable that he regarded Sterry as a mystic or visionary whose theology could not properly be called rational. In more recent times Miss Charlotte Fell Smith contributed an excellent short life of Sterry to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Mr G. Lynn Turner gave valuable biographical details in his *Original Records of Early Nonconformity*, and Mr Major Scott in his *Aspects of Christian Mysticism* (1907) and Mr F. J. Powicke in *The Cambridge Platonists* (1926) have written interesting essays dealing chiefly with his teaching. I included some extracts from his works in an anthology called *The Tree of Life* (Constable, 1928), and in an essay contributed to *Speculum Religionis* (Oxford University Press, 1929) I endeavoured to draw attention to the beauty of his style and thought and to the affinity of much of his doctrine to the ideas of Blake and of Milton. In an article which ap-

¹ *The Rise, Race and Royalty of the Kingdom of God in the Soul of Man... by Peter Sterry... London... 1683, 8vo.* Byrom's copy is now in the Library of the British Museum (4473, g. 22). It is inscribed "Johan. Byrom T. C. C. Aug^t 18. 1711".

² See *Memorials of a Quiet Life*, by A. J. C. Hare (London, 1872), II, 96.

³ See his *Modern Philosophy*, London, 1862, pp. 350, 351, and cf. Stoughton's *History of Religion in England*, London, 1867, II, 348, 349: "He [Sterry] has of late been mentioned with honour in high literary circles".

⁴ *Letters and Memorials of Richard Chenevix Trench*, edited by the author of *Charles Lowder*, London, 1888, I, 132.

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peared in the issue of the *Review of English Studies* for October, 1930, I gave a detailed account of his unpublished writings with a short study of his life and printed works.

The neglect of Peter Sterry may well be compared with that of Thomas Traherne, whom he resembles in many ways. Traherne's best work, indeed, remained in manuscript until the nineteenth century, while, although only a part of Sterry's writings was printed, it was the best part, and quite sufficient to reveal the quality of his style and thought. But Sterry's works were rare. No public library, as far as I know, even at the present time, contains a complete collection of his books and they seldom appear in the catalogues of second-hand booksellers. Moreover, they are cast into forms which are not attractive to the student of literature. They are chiefly sermons, sermon notes and theological treatises which would easily escape notice amid the mass of dead seventeenth-century divinity. The references to him in well-known contemporary works¹ would suggest, too, that he was a mere hare-brained fanatic, "a high flown mystical divine",² and finally he was closely identified with religious and political views which were regarded by most of his fellow-countrymen after the Restoration with abhorrence. He was a chaplain and a personal friend of Cromwell and a strong supporter of the Protectorate, and was thus obnoxious both to royalists and to democrats. He was an Independent minister with singular religious opinions, which were very unlike those of most English dissenters and close to the doctrines of the despised sect of the Quakers on the one hand and to those of the Platonists and Latitudinarians in the Church of England on the other, to say nothing of more dangerous affinities to ancient and modern heresies. He had distinguished himself as a strong opponent of Presbyterianism and was reported to be a sycophant and a time-server. In fact he could not be

¹ E.g. Burnet's *History of His Own Times* and Ludlow's *Memoirs*.

² Baker MSS., vi, f. 83 v.

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regarded with favour either by the Whig dissenter or the Tory high churchman, for, like Falkland in politics, he really belonged to that party of sweetness and light, which fortunately included men in the ranks of both the great contending factions of the religious and political struggles of the seventeenth century. The literary hero of the English dissenters is Bunyan, Matthew Arnold's "Philistine of Genius", not Sterry, the lover of poetry and painting, the impassioned pleader for toleration, who was friendly with Anglican divines, spoke politely of the Socinians, and ventured to remind his brethren that even a Pope had once "ascended from the *Papal Chair*, to a Throne in Heaven".¹

Peter Sterry was baptized at St Olave's, Southwark, on 19 September, 1613.² He was the son of Anthony Sterry described in the baptismal register as a "cooper", and elsewhere as a "gentleman".³ This Anthony Sterry appears to have been a son of Peter Sterry and Jane Longe, and was baptized at Ruardean in Gloucestershire on 16 June, 1584. A number of entries relating to the Sterry family in the sixteenth century appear in the Ruardean parish register. Presumably Anthony came to London and prospered in trade. The word "cooper" may mean either a maker and repairer of casks and similar vessels or a "wine cooper" or retailer of wine. In his will dated 17 March, 1631, he bequeaths to his son Peter "all my messuage or tenement wth the yard and appurtenances called or knowne by the name of the black beare scituate and being in Horsendowne lane in the parish of St Olave in Southwark

¹ *A Discourse of the Freedom of the Will*, Preface, sig. a 2 v.

² Baptismal Register of St Olave's *s.d.* I owe the discovery of this entry to the patience and energy of my father, Mr J. de S. Pinto, who found it after a long search through the registers of South London churches, and to the kindness of the Rev. A. M. Cazalet, D.D., Rector of St Olave's.

³ Admission Register of Gray's Inn *s.d.* 1658, where Nathaniel Sterry, Peter's brother, is described as "son of Anthony Sterry of Southwark Surrey Gent."

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together wth all the waynescott pertiçons and things therein”.¹ “Horsendowne lane” is the present Horsleydown Lane which formerly led to the old Horse-down or grazing and exercising place for horses. The Black Bear may have been an inn or tavern, but it may also have simply been the sign of a cooper’s yard and workshop. Such signs were not confined to inns in the seventeenth century. Anthony Sterry also possessed a house in “Milne Lane in the parish of St Olave”, which he bequeathed to his younger son Nathaniel. No record of Peter Sterry’s boyhood exists, but it may be noticed that Southwark, where he was probably brought up, was the home of the earliest separatist Church, that of Henry Barrow, at the end of the sixteenth century. His writings show that he was remarkably sensitive to the rhythms of language, and his imagination must have been affected at an early age by the sonorous music of the great English Bible of 1611. Through all his works there runs a tissue of memories of the more poetical parts of the Authorized Version, especially the *Psalms*, the *Book of Job*, the Prophets, the Canticles, the more exalted parts of the Gospels, the Pauline Epistles, the *Epistle to the Hebrews* and the Apocalypse. His prose is that of a man who has heard and read the language of the English Bible every day from his boyhood. A passage from one of his sermons shows the kind of effect which the reading of the psalms had upon his imagination:

Can you cast your eye on the eighteenth *Psalme* and not tremble? when you see there, the Earth Shaking and Trembling: v. 7. a Fire Devouring: v. 8. the Heavens bowing Down-ward: v. 9. Thick Clouds darkning the Sky; Thunders, Lightnings, Hailstones flying through the Ayre, the Foundations of the world below discover’d: v. 11, 12, 13, 14, 15.²

Elsewhere he speaks of the twenty-sixth chapter of *Leviticus* as that “thund’ring Chapter”. These are surely the words of

¹ Copy of Anthony Sterry’s will in the possession of Sir Wasey Sterry.

² *The Clouds in which Christ Comes*, London, 1648, pp. 19, 20.

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one who has listened as a boy with wonder and rapture to those tremendous rhythms and has never forgotten the experience. His acquaintance with classical literature and ancient mythology is almost as much in evidence in his writings as his knowledge of the Bible. He recurs to images drawn from the *Aeneid* especially with nearly the same familiarity as to those drawn from the Old and New Testaments. It is, perhaps, therefore, legitimate to suppose that the classics as well as the Bible, Virgil and Homer as well as the Prophets and the Apostles played an important part in his education, and that his family like that of Milton was not only a religious and a Puritan family, but a family of humanists and lovers of literature and learning. There is no record of his early life until 21 October, 1629, when he entered Emmanuel College, Cambridge, at the age of sixteen. This fact is sufficient to prove that his family was at least inclined to Puritan opinions, for Emmanuel was famous since its foundation in 1584 as a Puritan college. But, at the time when Sterry was admitted, this college was becoming the centre of a new movement in English religious thought. Benjamin Whichcote and John Smith, the two brilliant thinkers who inaugurated "Cambridge Platonism", had both entered Emmanuel three years before Sterry, while John Worthington and Ralph Cudworth came up in 1632 and Nathaniel Culverwel in 1633. The predominating influence at Emmanuel at this time was undoubtedly that of Whichcote, the possessor of one of the most acute and interesting minds of the day. He was elected to a fellowship in 1632, when Sterry was at the impressionable age of nineteen. Unfortunately few records of the relations between the two men have survived, but there is enough evidence to show that they were on terms of intimacy, and that Whichcote had the greatest admiration for Sterry's character and ability. The way in which the fresh and vigorous mind of the elder man brushed aside the barren disputes between Puritans and High Churchmen and reinterpreted Christianity in the light of

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Plato and the Neoplatonists must have been wonderfully inspiring to a youth educated in Puritan surroundings, but with the mind of a poet and a natural bias towards generous and lofty ideas. Whichcote's delight in Sterry's conversation is shown by a pleasant story that on one occasion when they were "discussing some abstruse Points in divinity", Sterry "explain'd himself with such Ease and Clearness, that the Doctor [Whichcote] rising from his Seat and Embracing him, express'd himself in this manner; *Peter thou hast overcome me, thou art all pure intellect*".¹

Whichcote's teaching, true to the Platonic tradition, combined a lofty rationalism with deep and genuine religious feeling. He could teach his young friend that "to go against Reason is to go against God" and that "Reason is the *Divine Governor of Man's Life*".² He could also make him feel that "The soul of Man to God is as the flower to the sun; it opens at its approach, and shuts when it withdraws"³ and that "though the spirit of man in this state be joined to a body, and made a member of this material visible world, yet itself doth belong to another country".⁴ It was certainly the mystical side of "Cambridge Platonism" which attracted Sterry most strongly, and it is this element in the teaching of Whichcote and Smith that he was to develop chiefly in his own works, but he was also strongly influenced by their liberal outlook, their "latitudinarianism" and their arguments for toleration. According to Burnet,⁵ Whichcote "set young students much on reading the ancient philosophers chiefly Plato, Tully and Plotin". Sterry's writings show that while he was at Emmanuel he must have acquired a truly immense learning, which included an acquaintance, not only with the writings of Plato and Plotinus and the Neoplatonists, but

¹ *The Appearance of God to Man in the Gospel*, 1710, sig. A 2.

² *Whichcote's Aphorisms* (ed. W. R. Inge, 1930), no. 76.

³ Whichcote, *Works*, Aberdeen, 1751, III, 104.

⁴ *Ibid.* IV, 140.

⁵ *History of His Own Times*, ed. Airy (1897), I, 331.

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with the whole range of ancient philosophy, history and poetry as well as with the works of the Greek and Latin Fathers of the Church, the Schoolmen and Mystics of the Middle Ages and the Italian Platonists of the Renaissance such as Ficino and Pico della Mirandola. The one fragment of information concerning his university career which has survived shows him as an ardent supporter of the new school of thought. “He & Sadler hereafter mention’d”, writes Thomas Baker in his manuscript notes on Emmanuel College, “were the first that were observ’d to make a public Profession of Platonism in the univers. of Cambridge.”¹ This Sadler was John Sadler, afterwards Fellow of Emmanuel and Master of Magdalene, and like Sterry destined to become a friend of Cromwell. He was famous as an orientalist, and it is probable that it was in his company that Sterry studied the Rabbinical and other Jewish writings, the influence of which on his thought is second only to that of ancient Greek philosophy.

On 15 April, 1637, Sterry was elected to a fellowship of his college. It is noticeable that his election almost coincides with the death of Dr Sandcroft, the master under whose rule the Platonist and Latitudinarian movements had taken such firm root in the college. Sandcroft was succeeded by Dr Holdsworth, a Fellow of St John’s, a strong Churchman, and an enthusiastic loyalist. In different circumstances Sterry might have spent the rest of his life studying and teaching at Cambridge. As it was, the smouldering quarrel between the House of Commons and the Puritans on the one hand and the King and the High Churchmen on the other was just beginning to burst into flame. A couple of months after Sterry’s election to his fellowship, Prynne, Burton and Bastwick underwent the barbarous punishment decreed by the Star Chamber. The next winter was to see the struggle over the payment of ship-money, followed by the disastrous “Bishops’ War” in Scotland. It is easy to imagine the feelings

¹ Baker MS. vi, f. 83 v. (Br. Mus. MS. Harl. 7033).