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Poems selected by THOM GUNN

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First published in 1974
by Penguin Books Ltd

This edition first published in 2005
by Faber and Faber Limited
3 Queen Square London WC1N 3AU

Photoset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk
Printed in England by Bookmarque Ltd, Croydon

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is available from the British Library

ISBN 0-571-22679-5

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Introduction

1

There are many Ben Jonsons to be found in this selection, and each of them is a considerable poet. The poems here range from the vernacular patter of the songs by Father Christmas or the Gypsy to the formality of the 'Hymn to Diana', from the most savage epigrams to the tenderness of the epigraphs or small elegies on dead children, from Petrarchan conceits to the severity of 'Though beauty be the mark of praise'. I haveto stop, or I would go on for another page pairing the extremes between which he moves so easily. All I can do here is to comment on a few of his poems and try to describe the kind of pattern they create for me when they are put side by side.

His poetry (as apart from his plays) has always been surprisingly neglected, considering its variety, and surely one reason for the neglect in the last century and a half is that so much of it can be damned as 'occasional'. That is, much of it is elicited by external events, or is intended to compliment some noble, or is written to commend another person's book. And nowadays we tend to use the phrase 'occasional poetry' to indicate trivial or insincere writing.

Yet in fact all poetry is occasional: whether the occasion is an external event like a birthday or a declaration of war, whether it is an occasion of the imagination, or whether it is in some sort of combination of the two. (After all, the external may lead to the internal occasions.) The occasion in all cases – literal or imaginary – is the starting point, only, of a poem, but it should be a starting point to which the poet must in some sense stay true. The truer he is to it, the closer he sticks to what for him is its authenticity, the more he will be able to draw from it in the adventures that it produces, adventures that consist of the experience of writing.

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FROM PLAYS AND MASQUES

Echo's Song

Slow, slow, fresh fount, keepe time with my salt teares;

Yet slower, yet, ô faintly gentle springs:

List to the heavy part the musique beares,

“Woe weepes out her division, when shee sings.

Droupe hearbs, and flowres;

Fall grieffe in showres;

“Our beauties are not ours:

O, I could still

(Like melting snow upon some craggie hill,)

drop, drop, drop, drop,

Since natures pride is, now, a wither'd daffodill.

(From *Cynthia's Revels*)

Hymn to Diana

Queene, and *Huntresse*, chaste, and faire,
 Now the *Sunne* is laid to sleepe,
 Seated, in thy silver chaire,
 State in wonted manner keepe:
 HESPERUS intreats thy light,
 Goddesse, excellently bright.

Earth, let not thy envious shade
 Dare it selfe to interpose;
CYNTHIAS shining orbe was made
 Heaven to cleere, when day did close:
 Blesse us then with wished sight,
 Goddesse, excellently bright.

Lay thy bow of pearle apart,
 And thy cristall-shining quiver;
 Give unto the flying hart
 Space to breathe, how short soever:
 Thou that mak'st a day of night,
 Goddesse, excellently bright.

(From *Cynthia's Revels*)

Song

Fooles, they are the onely nation
 Worth mens envy, or admiration;
 Free from care, or sorrow-taking,
 Selves, and others merry-making:
 All they speake, or doe, is sterling.
 Your Foole, he is your great mans dearling,
 And your ladies sport, and pleasure;
 Tongue, and bable are his treasure.
 Eene his face begetteth laughter,
 And he speakes truth, free from slaughter;
 Hee's the grace of every feast,
 And, sometimes, the chiefest guest:
 Hath his trencher, and his stoole,
 When wit waites upon the foole.
 O, who would not bee
 Hee, hee, hee?

(From *Volpone*)

Song

Still to be neat, still to be drest,
As, you were going to a feast;
Still to be pou'dred, still perfum'd:
Lady, it is to be presum'd,
Though arts hid causes are not found,
All is not sweet, all is not sound.

Give me a looke, give me a face,
That makes simplicitie a grace;
Robes loosely flowing, haire as free:
Such sweet neglect more taketh me,
Then all th'adulteries of art.
They strike mine eyes, but not my heart.

(From *Epicoeue*)

Karolin's Song

Though I am young, and cannot tell,
Either what Death, or Love is well,
Yet I have heard, they both beare darts,
And both doe ayme at humane hearts:
And then againe, I have beene told
Love wounds with heat, as Death with cold;
So that I feare, they doe but bring
Extreames to touch, and meane one thing.

As in a ruine, we it call
One thing to be blowne up, or fall;
Or to our end, like way may have,
By a flash of lightning, or a wave:
So Loves inflamed shaft, or brand,
May kill as soone as Deaths cold hand;
Except Loves fires the vertue have
To fright the frost out of the grave.

(From *The Sad Shepherd*)