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## SENSES OF UNENDING IN THE WORK OF SIR JOHN DAVIES

### Echoes of Endlessness

"Not finished": the 1622 subtitle of Sir John Davies' *Orchestra* sets indeterminacy in black and white.<sup>1</sup> Critical debate about the cohesiveness of the poem – a dialogue between Ulysses' wife Penelope and Antinous, one of her suitors, involving much discourse on the propriety of dancing – is itself incohesive. Robert Krueger has challenged the "erroneous belief" that it is not completed<sup>2</sup>. Other critics refute this perspective to observe "in no version can the poem be said to be finished", and that no amount of addition resolves "the central issue posed by the action: Will Queen Penelope accept Antinous's invitation to dance?"<sup>3</sup> Commentators similarly uphold or deride the notion that the poem places "in a pleasant fiction the eternal verities of the Elizabethan faith."<sup>4</sup>

Critical confusions alone attest that the poem causes "irresolvable problems".<sup>5</sup> However, despite some critics affirming that the poem is not simply something playful, few have extended beyond work locating Davies' dilemmas in a context of broad issues of mutability and stasis to offer analyses of the significance of inconclusion the work inscribes (as, crucially, do others in the canon). For *Orchestra*, obsessed by the problems and

<sup>1</sup> Sir John Davies, *Orchestra*, in: *Silver Poets of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Douglas Brooks-Davies (London, Vermont: Everyman, 1947 rpt 1997), p. 354.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Krueger, "Sir John Davies: *Orchestra* Complete, *Epigrams*, Unpublished Poems", *Review of English Studies* XIII (1962): 17–29, 113–124.

<sup>3</sup> James L. Sanderson, *Sir John Davies* (Boston: Twayne, 1975), p. 68; and J. R. Brink, "Sir John Davies's *Orchestra*: Political Symbolism and Textual Revisions," *Durham University Journal* LXXII (1979–1980), p. 196.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Krueger and Ruby Nemser, *Introduction to The Poems of Sir John Davies*, ed. Robert Krueger (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. lxiii.

<sup>5</sup> J. L. Sanderson, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

possibilities of its reception, iteration and survival, actually *orders* its irresolution, cultivating senses of unending in the face of limits on the controls that can be applied to it.

A mythic archetype shadowing the concerns of controlling the unending is potentially, if not conclusively, illuminating here. In Book III of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Echo falls in love with the beautiful Narcissus.<sup>6</sup> Suffering the consequences of punishment for an earlier lack of control in her excessive chattering to deceive Juno, the nymph is condemned to repeat all the object of her affections utters. Yet, neither Narcissus nor Echo can control the besotted nymph's reproductions. What begins as consolidation, vocalizing consonance, becomes painfully discordant: as will become clear, such discordance characterizes later aesthetic representations of this scene.<sup>7</sup> Eventually, thinking himself free from Echo's attentions (though she observes him still), Narcissus sees and is then on fire with love for his own reflection. Enduring a superfluity of himself he utters the motto, which became a Renaissance commonplace: *Inopem me copia fecit* ("Abundance has rendered me poor").<sup>8</sup>

What Narcissus perceives mocks – copies and parodies – the perceiver. In a fitting replication of Echo's ultimate demise, the boy wastes. Echo's overabundant expressions cause her to suffer the greater lack. Equally, even – or especially – the most reflexive, self-absorbed subject (Narcissus) cannot escape being haunted by the notion that their conceptions, their reflections (things that are the same but different), elude them. Conceits survive to exist beyond the control of impotent agents.

The myth vitally translates into Renaissance concerns about not only the interdependence of succession and decay, but also matters of the utility, iterability and integrity of poetry and rhetoric. This is particularly relevant with regard to the device of achieving plenitude, "a rich, many faceted discourse springing from a fertile mind," by reworking materials so they appear the same but different. *Copia* was a "ubiquitous synonym" for eloquence. It also signified dominance – a power, also termed *copia* in Ovid, that Narcissus refuses to grant Echo, and that she craves – necessarily enacted and/or abdicated as expression occurs: "in many of its senses, *copia* implies the notion of mastery, whether social or linguistic."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *The Metamorphoses of Ovid* transl. and introd. Mary M. Innes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955). For an alternative yet informative reading of this moment as a primal scene of writing, see Jonathan Goldberg, *Voice Terminal Echo: Postmodernism and English Renaissance texts* (New York, London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 11–13, 25–29.

<sup>7</sup> See John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, 5.3., in: *The Duchess of Malfi and Other Plays*, ed. with introd. René Weis (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> J. Webster, *The White Devil*, 2.1.322, in: *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Terence Cave, *The Cornucopian Text: Problems of Writing in the French Renaissance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 5, 3.

Often, "fruitful imitation," rhetorical and otherwise, was shadowed by *inopia* ("poverty of diction"), *garrulitas* ("empty repetition"), or *loquacitas* (*copia* lacking *varietas*).<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, in *De duplici copia verborum ac rerum* [Foundations of the Abundant Style] (1512) Erasmus optimistically "opened up" the "metaphorical implications" of *copia*, beyond yet mindful of the Medieval Latin senses of "to copy". In so doing he adumbrated "a theory of writing... at once productive and open-ended":

Prescription is reduced, even undermined ... Writing is acknowledged to be dependent on what has been written before (particularly in classical antiquity); according to Erasmus, the writer must assert his independence by both multiplying and fragmenting his models so that he is not trapped by the prestige of a single author.<sup>11</sup>

Or, indeed, the power of a single authority. Opportunity, control and repression: the work of Sir John Davies is alive to all these concerns.

The *Epigrammes* (1595) are models of mastery in miniature, seemingly impervious to such issues. Having imitated Martial from Winchester onwards, Davies was appreciative of his gestures towards a structural cohesion that described the maintenance of conservative hierarchies. Little escapes the Roman's requiting glare:

Diaulus was once a surgeon, now he's an undertaker. He's started to practice medicine the only way he knew how.<sup>12</sup>

However, Martial was not always so sure:

A certain party to whom I paid a compliment in my little book, Faustinus, plays innocent, as though he owes me nothing. He has cheated me.<sup>13</sup>

Balancings out and reckonings, the bitter exchanges characteristic of Latin epigrams, are as often conspicuously absent as present. For Davies though, there are no too obvious imbalances. All tends towards a static closure, hermetic in its resolve:

Lycus which lately is to Venice gone,  
Shall if he do returne, gaine three for one:  
But ten to one, his knowledg and his wit,  
Wil not be bettered nor increasde a whit.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 164, 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xi, 322.

<sup>12</sup> Martial, *Epigrams*, ed. and transl. D. R. Shackleton Bailey (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1993), Vol. I, pp. 62–63.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 386–387.

<sup>14</sup> Sir John Davies, "In Licum.42," in: *The Poems of Sir John Davies*, ed. R. Krueger, p. 148.

These concise works are self-contained, made complete with retaliations and reciprocations. For the poet, supremely confident, there is no change, no loss:

The false knave Flaccus once a bribe I gave,  
The more fool I to bribe so false a knave,  
But he gave back my bribe, the more foole he,  
That for my follie, did not cousen me.<sup>15</sup>

An epigram's perfectly contrived conclusion is complete, clinching the argument, paying back the debt or dishonour, ensuring things at least stay the same. But a form so parasitic upon social realities is prone to changes in taste and restrictions upon permissiveness. Having his work burnt by Archbishops was not Davies' sole concern. As he writes in the last epigram of the sequence:

What fame is this that scarce lasts out a fashion?  
Onely this last in credit doth remaine,  
That from henceforth, ech bastard cast forth rime  
Which doth but savour of a Libel vaine,  
Shal call me father, and be thought my crime.  
So dull and with so litle sence endude,  
Is my grose headed judge, the multitude.<sup>16</sup>

Literary offsprings damagingly live on, beyond the compass of their putative progenitors. Martial's wry humility acknowledged limits and authority:

May the gods and you, Caesar, give you all you deserve. May the gods and you give me what I wish, if I have deserved it.<sup>17</sup>

These negotiations suggested the promise of success in survival:

But thefts do not harm paper and the centuries do it good. These are the only memorials that cannot die.<sup>18</sup>

Davies' posturings, in the *Epigrammes* at least, offer no such solace. For all his formal efforts to attain resolution, the threat of things escaping and adulterating in reproduction, being sort of the same but disconcertingly different, remained.<sup>19</sup> Significantly, Davies himself voices this concern. Thus,

<sup>15</sup> J. Davies, "In Flaccum. 18," *ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>16</sup> J. Davies, "Ad Musam. 48," *ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>17</sup> Martial, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 68-69.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 326-327.

<sup>19</sup> As equally, the "self-contained", "gnomic" structures of *Nosce Teipsum* facilitated their own "mutilation" in iteration: see T. S. Eliot, "Sir John Davies," in: *On Poetry and Poets* (London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1957 rpt 1986), p. 132.

given the nature of Davies' revisions of Martial, and the ways in which the *Epigrammes* are reliant on assumed poses, any anxiety is perhaps attributable to the desire to make an effort to further problematize the power of poetry to reach definitive resolution with integrity.<sup>20</sup> The *Epigrammes* are important then, in that they suffer the same perturbations as their source (though which the source seems to resolve). Trying to keep his reflections under close control, in tight formats, Davies recognizes that it is impossible, that they multiply, abound, live on.<sup>21</sup>

### Orchestrating Unending

The seemingly contrasting literal and superficial formal inconclusion of *Orchestra* is thus in fact a manifestation of earlier concerns. The poem begins, like the *Epigrammes*, as a process of completion: "abundant" though Homer's original "verse" was, being "old and blind", "but one thing he forgot".<sup>22</sup> Davies presumes to supplement something already finished. Yet this very act admits the possibility of poetic incompleteness being a function of reproduction. As Jacques Derrida has observed:

The supplement and the turbulence of a certain lack fracture the limit of the text, forbidding an exhaustive and closed formalization of it, or at least a saturating taxonomy of its themes, its signified, its meaning.<sup>23</sup>

It is not only the poem's metaphor of the dance that enjoys a copiousness of figurings. Rhetorical *copia* ensures that innumerable conceits multiply in re-presentation:

"And thou, sweet Music, Dancing's only life,  
The ear's sole happiness, the Air's best speech,  
Lodestone of fellowship, charming rod of strife,  
The soft mind's paradise, the sick mind's leech."<sup>24</sup>

Images of harmony dynamize differences within the same entity. Emphasized by a parallelism constructed of syntactical bifurcations, the integrity of the whole is compromised as it is invoked. Elsewhere, the congruent uses of

<sup>20</sup> See R. Krueger and R. Nemser, *Introduction*, pp. xxxiv, lx.

<sup>21</sup> For a useful reading of the epigram as stylistically encoding the defeat of neat attempts to categorize London and its inhabitants, see Lawrence Manley, *Literature and Culture in Early Modern London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 426-428.

<sup>22</sup> J. Davies, *Orchestra*, p. 355.

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, transl. Alan Bass (London: Athlone, 1981), p. 45.

<sup>24</sup> J. Davies, *Orchestra*, p. 365.



of Pan," and has a "pastoral identity" or "heavenly role," the nymph has something of a "credential voice". Yet she also distorts meaning, causing its integrity to perish through her indiscriminate mimicry:

The negative readings of Echo come from associations of fragmentation of the anterior voice, the hollowness of her concavities of origin transferred to the figurative hollownesses of her words, and the progressive diminution of successive reverberations.<sup>32</sup>

Davies is at pains to stress that her ability to make sounds vibrantly live on is in fact a barren termination, a diminishing of expression in mortal temporality:

"And yet her hearing sense is nothing quick,  
For after time she endeth every trick."<sup>33</sup>

Rather than enhancing meaning, such abundant supplements, echoes and "doublings," keep it further off.<sup>34</sup> *Copia* here, the work of such a "powerful mocker" as garrulous Echo, or a poet struggling with terminal definitions, has the potential to render expressions endless.<sup>35</sup> To Jonathan Goldberg *copia* is a "technique of writing that replaces antecedent texts through a simultaneous fragmentation and multiplication, opening up antecedents (mining them and undermining them) and replenishing a full store." Goldberg continues:

Perpetual deferment becomes the rule in the perpetuation of texts, both in the attempt to recapture past texts and to write new ones. Writing runs ever towards an end it never reaches and back to a source it never recovers ... and the writer does not so fully control language as to bend it to either of these aims.<sup>36</sup>

What are the uses of this? Do copious meta-rhetorical echoings, reflections and doublings express merely an acknowledgement of their own empty fecundity and deconstruction? Perhaps not. As Erasmus' handbook suggested, the living on of expression need not bring only loss and sorrow. Echoes return sounds, albeit fragmented and disembodied, to their makers. Narcissus, though annihilated by self-absorption, blooms anew, and *Nosce Teipsum* (1599) at least offers a glimpse of a version of the myth that suggests the dangers and problems of such moments, though considerable, can be metamorphosed into something more positive:

<sup>32</sup> John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and after* (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1981), p. 11.

<sup>33</sup> J. Davies, *Orchestra*, p. 365.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 360.

<sup>35</sup> J. Hollander, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>36</sup> J. Goldberg, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

Looke in thy *Soule*, and thou shalt beauties find  
Like those which drown'd *Narcissus* in the flood.<sup>37</sup>

Davies was a poet capable of significant literary reflexivity and more than willing to exhibit revisionary modes, not least the poetic doublings offered by parody. For example, in "systematic" fashion, the *Gullinge Sonnets* "deride the extravagances" of Petrarchan sonneteering, to the extent that it becomes – in the correlative verse, fittingly enough – "difficult to distinguish the parody... from its subject."<sup>38</sup>

Thus it is possible to perceive the "playful" "mock-learned" qualities of *Orchestra*, identifying "disproportion" between Antinous' "rigorous argument" and the "comparatively trivial end it seeks," to characterize the poem as an "intellectual burlesque rather than serious philosophical exposition."<sup>39</sup> Indeed some have gone so far as to consider the "mock-encomium," with its "essential levity," as a "joke" commensurate with the satire typifying the conceits of a young gentleman of the Middle Temple: "His contemporaries considered it trivial at best".<sup>40</sup> This may be true, but is not reason enough to denigrate the seriousness of the play. Parody, however superficially jocose, is a means of expeditiously accommodating multiple receptions and meanings. This articulates an indeterminate tone. In turn, this confuses the "normal processes of communication" by suggesting "more than one message to be decoded by the reader, which may also serve to conceal the author's intended meaning from immediate interpretation."<sup>41</sup> To assert this is not – as a critic – to hide in the "subterfuge of ambiguity" however.<sup>42</sup> For as parody demonstrates "the processes involved in the production and reception of fiction from within a literary text" so does it convey "how a literary work exists both within a particular social context and literary tradition." Hence:

The role of meta-fictional parodies in criticising naive concepts of art as a mirror to the world, by providing a mirror to the writer's art itself, may ... serve to argue for a more "realistic" representation of the world as the world of the writer, and a more self-conscious use of art as fiction.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>37</sup> *Nosce Teipsum*, p. 66.

<sup>38</sup> G. A. Wilkes, "The Poetry of Sir John Davies," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 25 (1962): 285; J. L. Sanderson, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

<sup>39</sup> J. L. Sanderson, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

<sup>40</sup> R. Krueger and R. Nemser, *Introduction*, p. lxiv. See G. A. Wilkes, *op. cit.*, p. 287.

<sup>41</sup> Margaret A. Rose, *Parody//Meta-fiction* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), p. 50.

<sup>42</sup> R. J. Manning, "Rule and order strange: A Reading of Sir John Davies' *Orchestra*," *English Literary Renaissance* 15 (1985): 176.

<sup>43</sup> M. A. Rose, *op. cit.*, pp. 66, 73.

Philip J. Finkelpearl characterizes *Orchestra* as "a social celebration of the Elizabethan world picture" rather than an "exposition" of it:

Most of Davies' poetry was pre-eminently social, designed for the entertainment of his immediate circle and for the Court; clearly, it assisted his worldly advancement. But it was a sport of his youth. It is the clearest sign of the nature of his relationship to his milieu that once he had left the surroundings which had nurtured his wit and provided a ready audience, he wrote no more poetry of significance.<sup>44</sup>

This is certainly true. However, that poetry, for so seemingly delimited an audience, was republished with the poet's consent (as the *Epigrammes* were not; the *Gullinge Sonnets* were never published to begin with). Davies must have perceived that something in that perhaps parodic poetry, intimating the problems of iteration in the ways described, sufficiently transcended the contemporaneity of its production, to allow its subsequent reproduction.

### Reflexivity and Redemption

*Orchestra* is intensely self-conscious. At times, theme, person and punctuation are mimetic of the poem's (at least vocal) repetition:

For when you breath, the ayre in order moues,  
Now in, now out, in time and meafure trew; ...  
For all the words that from your lips repaire,  
Are naught but tricks and turnings of the aire.<sup>45</sup>

Suitably, these lines, concerning what Love speaks, preface the attack on Echo's abilities to assume such voicings. If *Orchestra* displays reflexivity, the poem does so in order to evince the ways in which its performances can be done and undone, demonstrating the limits of its powers to reach conclusion that expression itself desires. The recognition of fallibility is not simply a profession of a grand humility *topos*. It is also fundamental to the idea that if conceits and expressions are to survive they must be responsive to the difficulties of surviving in new, unforeseeable contexts. This strangely invigorates E. M. W. Tillyard's perception of the poem's "ability to have it both ways."<sup>46</sup> Rather than simply an exposition of the

<sup>44</sup> Philip J. Finkelpearl, *John Marston of the Middle Temple: An Elizabethan Dramatist in his Social Setting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 78.

<sup>45</sup> *The Poems of Sir John Davies, Reproduced in Facsimile*, ed. and introd. Clare Howard, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941), p. 79.

<sup>46</sup> E. M. W. Tillyard, *Five Poems 1470-1870: An Elementary Essay on the Background of English Literature* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948), p. 40.

successes and failures of the Elizabethan world picture, the work of Sir John Davies signifies the poet's precarious position in relation to the world. Thus it signifies the need to inscribe strategies of parody, concealment or self-exculpation, deferring too static formulations that might become otiose as times and temperaments changed; it discloses the need, in fact, to adopt equivocating poses. Hence the poem's epigraph, from "a passage in which Ovid warns against actual drunkenness and advocates feigned drunkenness because the latter will allow the lover to speak more freely."<sup>47</sup>

Recollecting Martial's negotiations with power and his art, the poet, then, is a figure typically assuming a "twofold" place, both "servile and dominant"<sup>48</sup>:

The pompe of Coronation  
Hath not such power her fame to spread,  
As this my admiration.<sup>49</sup>

Poetry treads a fine line:

"So curiously doth move each single pace  
As all is marred if she one foot misplace."<sup>50</sup>

Admitting the adversities and failures of poetry and poets is additionally crucial in delineating the ineffable and inexpressible.<sup>51</sup> Expressions with integrity are located in the performance of failure:

But I, by niggard praysing, do dispraise  
Prayse-worthy Musicke in my worthles Ryme:  
Ne can the pleasing profit of sweet layes,  
Any save learned Muses well define.  
Yet all by these rude lines may clearly see,  
Prayse, Pleasure, Profit, in sweet Musicke bee.<sup>52</sup>

The poet, as an individual, postlapsarian entity, no less than an artist, possesses "*Senses* ... which oft do erre".<sup>53</sup> Yet "*Afflictions* lookes," though painful, are in themselves educative:

<sup>47</sup> J. R. Brink, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

<sup>48</sup> *Nosce Teipsum*, p. 11; Mary C. Erler, "Davies's *Astraea* and Other Contexts of the Countess of Pembroke's 'A Dialogue'," *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 30 (1990): 51.

<sup>49</sup> J. Davies, *Hymnes of Astraea in Acrosticke Verse*, in: *Poems*, ed. R. Krueger, p. 86.

<sup>50</sup> J. Davies, *Orchestra*, p. 375.

<sup>51</sup> Manley identifies a comparable successful "failure" in Davies' *Epigrammes*, in: L. Manley, *op. cit.*, p. 428.

<sup>52</sup> J. Davies, "A Hymne in Prayse of Musicke", in: *Poems*, ed. R. Krueger, pp. 237-238.

<sup>53</sup> *Nosce Teipsum*, p. 18.

Then let us praise that Power, which makes us bee  
*Men* as we are, and rest contented so;  
 And knowing mans fall was Curiositie,  
 Admire Gods counsels, which we cannot know.<sup>54</sup>

For a poet after Edmund Spenser's own heart, if not martial manner, the Protestant hermeneutic shadows all such uses of adversity. The inability to conceive ends and results (whether socio-religious or aesthetic), articulates expedient abdications of control and admissions of defeat:

And heare, how oft one disagreeing string  
 The harmonie doth rather make, then marre:

And view at once, how *death* by *sinne* is brought,  
 And how from *death* a better life doth rise, ...

Cast down thyselfe, and onely strive to raise  
 The glorie of thy Makers sacred name.<sup>55</sup>

Redemptive adversity, the technologies of self-knowledge, poetic responsibility, and a perception of the significance of God's representations on earth, fuse in depictions of the Queen. Certainly, if it was true that she "standeth fixt" and "Great changes never change her," so was it evident that

the maids harte a fayer white table is:  
 Spotles and pure, where noe impressions bee  
 But the imortall carracters of blisse,  
 Which onely God doth write, and angells see.<sup>56</sup>

Just as the deification of "Saint Astraea" displeased some, so did this prove problematic for a poet:

Because her temper is so fine,  
 Endewed with harmonies divine:  
 Therefore if discord strike it,  
 Her true proportions do repine,  
 And sadly do mislike it.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 34.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 30, 67.

<sup>56</sup> *Nosce Teipsum*, p. 4; *Hymnes of Astraea*, p. 85; *A Contention between a Wife, a Widowe and a Maide for Precedence at an Offringe*, in: *Poems*, ed. R. Krueger, p. 221.

<sup>57</sup> See Frances A. Yates, *Astraea: The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Pimlico, 1975 rpt 1993), pp. 80–81; Roy Strong, *The Cult of Elizabeth: Elizabethan Portraiture and Pageantry* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), p. 125; *Hymnes of Astraea*, p. 81.

Trite panegyric, though often indulged in, was not sufficiently reverential: there was no struggle as the poet admitted the impossibility of portraying the majesty of the ineffable. Thus what Davies tries to attain in his acknowledgement of failed achievements is what Jonathan Dollimore terms a “discoherence – an incongruity verging on a meaningful contradiction.” Dollimore observes:

In the process of being made to discohere, meanings are returned to circulation, thereby becoming the more vulnerable to appropriation, transformation, and reincorporation in new configurations.<sup>58</sup>

The “repetitive schemes” of epigrams threaten to become an “endless” yet ultimately expressive series. Equally, the problems of over-copiousness (superfluities resulting in emptiness, being haunted by echoes and doublings, raised by parody and pun) are utilized here in a manner mimetic of and eminently suited to what Lawrence Manley has called an “Elizabeth cult ... held together by such paradoxes.” Manley notes:

The strength of the Elizabethan image lay in its capacity to be read and re-read many ways and never to present a single outright statement which left no room for manoeuvre.<sup>59</sup>

### The Dance Divided

These polyvalencies are most evocatively reproduced in setting the central symbol of *Orchestra*, dancing, against a background of violently bifurcated cultural representation. Antinous dutifully registers Platonic precedents to expose an ancient dancing elemental harmony. With its novelty diminished, the dance legitimates teleological arguments:

“Or if this All, which round about we see ...  
Of undivided motes compacted be,  
How was this goodly architecture wrought?  
Or by what means were they together brought?  
They err that say they did concur by chance:  
Love made them meet in a well-ordered dance”.<sup>60</sup>

Possessed of an “antique gentry,” Dance reifies edifying honour, with Antinous as his “herald,” to “blaze his arms, and draw his pedigree.”<sup>61</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991 rpt 1996), p. 87.

<sup>59</sup> L. Manley, *op. cit.*, p. 427; R. Strong, *op. cit.*, pp. 47, 112.

<sup>60</sup> J. Davies, *Orchestra*, p. 359.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361.

But can we trust the constructions of our synthesizing rhetorician? Orchestra may invoke Amphion's use of "a siren of the air" to make the walls of troubled Thebes complete, yet occult Neo-Platonists, incautious about the "infusion of demons and angels," appropriated Ficino and Mirandola to disturbingly imagine that sounds themselves "became demons."<sup>62</sup>

Thus it was that Elyot carefully noted that while not all dancing was to be reprov'd (suggesting perhaps some *should* be), the type and nature of dancing allowed were, accordingly, to be strictly delineated, prohibiting idolatry, lasciviousness, and what Penelope contemptuously terms "frantic jollity."<sup>63</sup> Yet the sensuality of dance could not be so easily arrested: "it is said that the volta caused dancers to perspire so much that ladies at the French court used to change their linen after it."<sup>64</sup> Indeed, *Orchestra's* 1596 title cites an amorous Ovid: "if you have a voice, sing; if your arms are lithe, dance; and please by whatever means you may give pleasure."<sup>65</sup> If dancing betokened concord, concord betokened matrimony, and matrimony, unlike the abstinence of "maidenheade," "is a continuall feast."<sup>66</sup> If not sensual, earthly dancing verged on the chaotic. In *The Malcontent*, a dance is termed a "brawl" by Aurelia: Antinous' implausible arguments concerning "well-ordered war" go some way to admitting this.<sup>67</sup>

Yet these qualifications of the decency of dancing are not as problematic as they seem. Elyot evinces how dancing can formulate unions transcending oppositional models, merging fierceness and mildness to constitute severity, and bonding audacity and timorousness to make magnanimity.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, iconography suggested that, born "from the god of strife and the goddess of love," Harmony "inherits the contrary characters of her parents: *Harmonia est discordia concors*."<sup>69</sup>

Nonetheless, we cannot be sure that Penelope – whose "dainty ears" bear "too long" the "tedious praise of that she did despise" – is convinced.<sup>70</sup> Replicating her loom-work, Penelope dramatically undoes Antinous' elaborate

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 359; Gretchen Ludke Finney, *Musical Backgrounds for English Literature: 1580–1650* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1962), p. 111.

<sup>63</sup> J. Davies, *Orchestra*, p. 360.

<sup>64</sup> Bruce Pattison, *Music and Poetry of the English Renaissance* (London: Methuen, 1948 rpt 1970), p. 187.

<sup>65</sup> J. Davies, *Orchestra*, p. 354.

<sup>66</sup> J. Davies, *A Contention*, p. 223.

<sup>67</sup> John Marston, *The Malcontent*, ed. George K. Hunter (London: Methuen, 1975), IV. II; *Orchestra*, p. 374.

<sup>68</sup> Sir Thomas Elyot, *The Book Named The Governor*, ed. and introd. S. E. Lehmborg (London, New York: Everyman, Dent, 1907 rpt with introd. 1962), p. 78.

<sup>69</sup> Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (London, New York: W. W. Norton, 1958 rpt 1968), p. 86.

<sup>70</sup> J. Davies, *Orchestra*, p. 376.

discriminations, forcing him into an attempt – unsatisfying at this stage – at weaving his own synthesis:

“For that true Love, which Dancing did invent,  
Is he that tuned the world’s whole harmony  
And linked all men in sweet society.”<sup>71</sup>

What are the consequences of this? In the first instance, arguments about the rhetorical utility and credibility of dance as a metaphor for the universe and as a universal metaphor are not conclusive. Certainly, “against the gloomy and stormy denunciations of . . . austere critics” of dance’s pleasures, Davies’ ludic, Lucianic appropriations in an “amusingly graceful encomium” appear “in refreshing and bright relief.”<sup>72</sup> However, as legalistic disputation, the final verdict is suspended. The bases of Antinous’ claims are neither confirmed nor denied with any resolution. In deriding accusations that dancing “is a frenzy and a rage,” the precedents Antinous invokes, expressing the *Antiquity and Excellency* of his subject, are legitimate and well founded.<sup>73</sup> Still, he fails in his petitions.

It is thus erroneous to reductively assume that in allowing such failures Davies employs, in the words of R. J. Manning “a disreputable character . . . to put forward unacceptable views.” As Manning comments:

In fact, the Machiavellian opportunist that Davies depicts beneath the brilliant disguise of the dashing and eloquent suitor would probably coincide with the way the Cecil faction assessed Essex’s character.<sup>74</sup>

True, Davies held no high regard for Essex: he participated in an entertainment parodying the favourite’s roles in court events.<sup>75</sup> But this does not imply outright contempt. One of Davies’ patrons was Charles Blount, Lord Mountjoy, the lover of Essex’s sister and a member of his circle. Additionally, would Davies so willingly jeopardize his own potently articulated assertions of precedence in order to ridicule the favourite? While it is crucially important to question the capacities of the “divinely appointed . . . hierarchical, and analogical order” of the “Elizabethan World Picture” to “represent, contain, and explain” the Elizabethan world, it does not seem probable that Davies was intent on articulating a destabilizing sense of disjunction between that ideology and the “unprecedented changes affecting English

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 377.

<sup>72</sup> J. L. Sanderson, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

<sup>73</sup> J. Davies, *Orchestra*, pp. 358, 354.

<sup>74</sup> R. J. Manning, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

society" to which it responded.<sup>76</sup> For, though undoubtedly sensitive to contradictions and problems, Davies himself was an apologist for and steadfast believer in the power of historical prefiguration, contributing to the Society of Antiquaries for a number of years, on topics dealing with the traditional authority of institutions.<sup>77</sup> As an M. P. he put such interests to pragmatic use, launching an attack on royal prerogatives as regards monopolies.<sup>78</sup> Yet Davies would not have been unmindful of the possible results of such gestures. King James proved himself wary of the unsettling potential of precedent, and particularly of "invidious comparisons" with Elizabeth, when he oversaw the disbanding of the Society.<sup>79</sup> Thus if *Orchestra* proves ultimately ambivalent towards arguments of precedence, it reflects its maker's concerns, in 1596 and 1622, to expediently avoid too absolute statements of faith. Copiousness, the multiplication of the poem's ends, or its liability to be seen as parody, are both a response to and elaboration of the changeable nature of the Elizabethan court and its political imperatives.<sup>80</sup> J. R. Brink describes, for instance, a process whereby this might be ascribed directly to policies concerned with the succession:

Penelope's initial rejection and ultimate indecision regarding dancing becomes a rejection of order. Davies develops this symbolism, not as a "joke," but as a means of pleading with Queen Elizabeth to settle the succession and so insure the future order of England. Because of the dangers of writing on the succession, Davies "conceals" and "reveals" his political symbolism in very subtle ways.

Yet as Brink admits, the work could just as easily undermine, as it consolidated, any such ambitions:

Antinous's "disorderly" reputation in the *Odyssey* made him in certain respects an ideal spokesman for orderly settlement of the succession. The Homeric setting invited the reader to make parallels, but was handled lightly enough so that *Orchestra* could, if need arose, masquerade as a simple wooing poem.<sup>81</sup>

Whether good or bad, the dance is itself an unending image. How better to portray it than with incompleteness?

<sup>76</sup> See Louis A. Montrose, "The Purpose of Playing: Reflections on a Shakespearean Anthropology," *Helios* 7 (1980): 54.

<sup>77</sup> R. Krueger and R. Nemser, *op. cit.*, pp. xli-iii.

<sup>78</sup> J. R. Brink, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

<sup>79</sup> Anne Barton, *Ben Jonson, dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984 rpt 1986), p. 308.

<sup>80</sup> This poetry is more than a reflective *analogue*; it is a transmitting *medium*: see Louis Adrian Montrose, "Of Gentlemen and Shepherds: The Politics of Elizabethan Pastoral Form," *English Literary History* 50 (1983): 451.

<sup>81</sup> J. R. Brink, *op. cit.*, pp. 196, 199.

"Hence it is that these Graces painted are  
With hand in hand, dancing an endless round".<sup>82</sup>

It was similarly aesthetically and politically efficacious to ascend to a re-actualization of the monarchy by the vehicle of such symbolism, providing means to admit the inexpressibility of that body, and to mimetically comprehend the discontinuities and progresses of succession, before and after the turn of the century:

"What if, by often interchange of place,  
Sometime the woman gets the upper hand?  
That is but done for more delightful grace,  
For on that part she doth not ever stand".<sup>83</sup>

Such lines validate Elizabeth's position as they permit the possibility of her succession by a man not her son. The monarchy lived on (*rex qui nunquam moritur*): the institution embodied the significance of inconclusions, of deaths that were not deaths, ends that were not ends:

By that Eclipse which darkned our *Apollo*,  
Our sunne did sett, and yett noe night did follow.<sup>84</sup>

### Poetry, Posterity and Power

Though claims that "nostalgic admiration" typify and yet smother *Orchestra*, Davies' regard for the past did not render him reluctant to historicize and reconstruct precedents, political or literary, or, on the contrary, to curtail contributions to ongoing debates about tradition.<sup>85</sup> Consequently, for a man so mindful of the past (while married to a prophetess) an obsession with futurity, or the possibilities of posterity, was not remarkable. Thus the telling words on epitaphs, balancing a regard for the past with a concern for later status, addressed to the Society of Antiquaries:

I speake not this as if I lov'd not antiquities which were Aie venerable/, I reverence them  
as I wold Reverence Adam if he were alive, but I speake this for honor of our / English

<sup>82</sup> J. Davies, *Orchestra*, p. 371.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 379.

<sup>84</sup> J. Davies, "Mira Loquor Sol Occubuit Nox Nulla Secuta Est", in: *Poems*, ed. R. Krueger, p. 231; see R. Strong, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15, and Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 316.

<sup>85</sup> J. R. Brink, *op. cit.*, p. 201; compare R. J. Manning, *op. cit.*, p. 194, and A. Barton, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

Epitaphes I meane the ancient Epitaphes of England, which I will mayntayne to be good Epitaphes, and yet ar they not cutt out according to this measure, but as they ar divers so have they divers formes and yet none without a Generall grace /.<sup>86</sup>

If Davies' works are possessed of qualities grittily "realistic" (in the sleights of the urban epigrams) or subtly "mimetic" (in the abstractions of *Orchestra*), these features facilitate a recognition that, as with so much contributing to and indicative of the phenomena of the "Elizabeth cult," the gap "between idea and reality was truly enormous."<sup>87</sup> What Davies responsively apprehended were the uses of performance. As an ugly tasteless youth he assumed the poise of an urbane commentator. The amplitude of his literary modes ran from ingratiating epistles (the undated letter to Cecil) to psalms or the – perhaps – penitential (*Nosce Teipsum*).<sup>88</sup> In his most blatant adulation of the Queen, Davies professes (semi-ironically) that his "Pen" was never "mercenary."<sup>89</sup> Functioning within the variegated "flexible medium of address" of the Elizabeth cult, the poet's unifying feature is thus his "versatility":

Here my Camelion Muse her selfe doth change  
To divers shapes of gross absurdities,  
And like an Antick mocks with fashion straunge  
The fond admirers of lewde gulleries.<sup>90</sup>

These characteristics of changeableness and inconsistency may confound contemporary criticism. As Manning notes "the modern categories 'serious' and 'unserious' are finally too gross and indiscriminating to catch so nimble a figure as Davies."<sup>91</sup> Hence, equally, it is not too remote a possibility that *Orchestra* articulates the mechanics of "*the argumentum in utramque patrem*, the cultivation of the scholar's power to speak equally persuasively for diametrically opposed positions."<sup>92</sup> In a purportedly mock-judicial environment, with the poet self-consciously acting as an advocate for one with devilish eloquence (or at least a capable "salesman" of dance), the debate becomes all, with a variety of assumed postures safeguarding against temerarious resolve in an uncertain world.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Cited in R. J. Krueger and R. Nemser, *op. cit.*, pp. xlii–iii.

<sup>87</sup> R. Strong, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>88</sup> J. L. Sanderson, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>89</sup> *Hymnes of Astraea*, p. 86.

<sup>90</sup> A. Montrose, *op. cit.*, p. 441; J. L. Sanderson, *op. cit.*, p. 111; "Dedication" to *Gullinge Sonnets*, in: *Poems*, ed. R. Krueger, p. 163.

<sup>91</sup> R. J. Manning, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

<sup>92</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1980 rpt 1984), p. 230.

<sup>93</sup> E. M. W. Tillyard, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

Davies was, therefore, more than willing and able to knowingly occupy a position of mimicking and contributing to a panoply of "superbly stage-managed occasions," celebrating, in "an utterly coherent image" (yet one which thus necessarily admitted disparate, even contrary, elements) the beauties of an aged Queen, herself playing the Virgin.<sup>94</sup> This does not denigrate his contrivances, however:

Most of the major Renaissance poets were at one time or another in the service of powerful monarchs, and their language of necessity fell in with the language of power; but far from regarding this process as "natural," they developed elaborate strategies to try to preserve a degree of independence for their writing.<sup>95</sup>

If arguments concerning what is natural, essential, teleological, and possessed of the authority of precedent and tradition, are mere rhetorical devices constructed to claim the weaving wife of an absent husband they are none the worse for that. It is the reflexively imposed recognition of the limitations and failures of conceits, foregrounded by the capability to know the self, with all its inherent weaknesses, and the external dangers that the present and the future might subject it to (and those in-between), that in turn produces such tantalizing propaganda, artefacts "weaved and unweaved":

In the early modern period ... the individual was seen as constituted by and in relation to – even the effect of – a pre-existing order. To know oneself was to know that order.<sup>96</sup>

This leads to the saving grace of exacting some authority over the problematic possibilities of art living on. These plans to negotiate (if not surmount) the pressures of contingency, dependency, and connections the poet may or may not choose to nurture, expose the value of leaving things indefinite and unending, despite and because of copious echoes and multiplications of meaning. Through this the identity and fortunes of the poet might be enhanced. Simultaneously the structures in which the poet finds themselves are expediently enhanced. Combined, these enhancements produce a kind of relative aesthetic autonomy from and within shifting contexts, personal, literary and temporal; an autonomy that creates Elizabethan images that are more than just images of Elizabeth:

<sup>94</sup> R. Strong, *op. cit.*, pp. 115, 47. Krueger speculates that stanzas 119–126 of *Orchestra* "suggest that they might have been written for use in a Court entertainment at which the Queen was present. All the action narrated is such that it could easily have been acted." See "Sir John Davies: *Orchestra* Complete...", p. 23.

<sup>95</sup> David Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* (London, Boston, Melbourne: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 6.

<sup>96</sup> J. Dollimore, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

I know my Bodi's of so fraile a kinde,  
 As force without, feavers within can kill;  
 I know the heavenly nature of my mind,  
 But tis corrupted both in wit and will:

I know my Soule hath power to know all things,  
 Yet is she blind and ignorant in all;  
 I know I'am one of Natures litle kings,  
 Yet to the least and vilest things am thrall.

I know my life's a paine, and but a span,  
 I know my Sense is mockt with every thing;  
 And to conclude, I know my selfe a Man,  
 Which is a proud and yet a wretched thing.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> *Nosce Teipsum*, p. 11.