Chapter VI

POETRY

An ambitious young man of letters assembling miscellanies of poetry must have been tempted to include his own work, and in the dedication of Chorus Poetarum (1694) Gildon admits that he has "presumed to insert some of my own verses in this miscellany." Probably the same statement could also apply to his other miscellanies; but without external evidence to strengthen only probability and tenuous internal evidence, this chapter must be confined to poems clearly identified as Gildon's. Of these, three appeared in Gildon's miscellanies, one was published in Motteux's Gentleman's Journal, and the others enjoyed the dignity of separate publication.

Probably the first of Gildon's poems were his short songs in Miscellany Poems upon Several Occasions (1692) entitled "To Sylvia" and "To Sylvia, the Meeting." The former, consisting of five four-line stanzas of iambic tetrameter, is a conventional, fairly competent version of a standard theme, the lover's protest of his unhappiness and his lady's heartlessness. The second is more spirited. In three fourteen-line stanzas of poorly rhymed iambic tetrameter and pentameter couplets the lover bewails the loss of his usual eloquence when he comes into his mistress's presence, and therefore wonders:

> Ah! if your only presence give
> Such elevated Bliss,
> What Raptures and what Extasies
> Have you, bright Sylvia, yet in store,
> For the blest man you love!
> Too mighty sure for Man's frail Sense to bear,
> Or to enjoy and live!
> If but a gentle touch such Transports move,
> What must divine Fruition prove!
> Encircl'd in those tender Arms,
> Dissolving with those melting Charms;
> And oh! on that soft panting Bosome lye!
> Sylvia that Death, grant Heaven and you, I dye!

Both poems belong to the Restoration tradition of the amorous song, but though competent lack the hard finish and clever turn of a song by Dryden or Rochester; Gildon has some of the matter but too little of the manner of the best Restoration songs.

His next poem, "On Life," appeared in Peter Motteux's Gentleman's Journal for December, 1693. In it "mournful Damon" in fairly finished couplets presents the fashionable cynicism of the day. Life is

> Thou Ill that all our sorrows braves,
> Thou Carnival of Fools, thou Mart of Knaves.
> . . . thou peddling Shop of wretched Toys!
> Tedious thy Pains, but fleeting are thy Joys.

Virtue is but an idea

> Formed by Hypochondriac Brains
> To patch thy tatter'd Ease, and sooth thy raging Pains;
> But, like ill Med'cines by worse Quacks apply'd,
> That by it enrag'd, and made the wounds more wide.

Man is powerless in the grip of his desires:

> Grace faintly strives against our wild Desires,
> Nature thrusts on amain, and routed Grace retires.

Hence man's dilemma:

> The only Good then seems in this to lye,
> Not to be born, or soon as born to dye.

Compared with Gildon's earlier poems this is close, compace, and incisive. But at best it is only competent workmanship, well below what the best Restoration wits could have done with the subject.

Gildon's lengthier and better poems appeared as three separate publications. The first, Threnodia Virginea: or, the Apotheosis, came out in 1708. Apparently modeled upon Dryden's ode on the death of Anne Killigrew, this poem celebrates the beauty and virtue of the deceased Elizabeth Buckworth, only daughter of Sir John Buckworth. It was either a commissioned task or another of Gildon's many bids for patronage, for it contains no hint that Gildon had any personal knowledge of the girl; and whereas Dryden achieved a convincing tribute Gildon's praise is much overdone and obviously only a poetic exercise. It opens in stilted, heavy fashion:

> Clogg'd with a mournful Gloom, arose the Day,
> And the Sun Mounting shed a Sickly Ray,
> For Beauty's Self, alas! expiring lay.
> BUCKWORTH! The Glory of the British Plains
> The Pride of nymphs, and Idol of the Swains;
> In her first charming Bloom, unripe for Death,
> To cruel Febris now resigns her Breath.

After much talk about all nature sickening and mourning for her, the lover, mother, and father speak their grief. The lover's lament is rather moving, but the mother's is maudlin and padded with a four-line refrain which occurs three times in a page and a half! The father, conveniently, is overcome and speechless. Elizabeth, doubly beautiful in celestial life, then appears to tell them not to grieve because she is happy beyond expression. Her description of Heaven is probably the best passage in the poem, but still Gildon's hand is heavy. Altogether the poem is far from successful: it is ponderous in language and figures, merely exclamatory rather than emotionally moving, over-regular in its loose and flabby iambic pentameter couplets, and poorly proportioned because of long and obtrusive epic similes. It is

clearly only a command performance.

The second of Gildon's long poems is both more ambitious and more successful. Dedicated to George Augustus, Electoral Prince of Hanover, Libertas Triumphans rejoices at the defeat of Louis at Oudenarde and celebrates England's defiance of his corrupting power. After a preface maintaining a favorite Gildon idea that "Plan or Design" must be the distinguishing excellence of a poem, not "inundations of Similes, the Wantonness of injudicious fancy," the poem opens with a philosophical fulmination on chance versus order as the fundamental principle ruling men and the world. After observing "the Wise Order of the World" Gildon concludes that Nature is "all directed by Certain Law"; however, he observes that in man's affairs evil seems to triumph while goodness suffers, and he begins to doubt that Providence rules human affairs. But recent happy events have restored his faith:

> The Fall of Lewis did at last controul,
> This anxious Tumult of my lab'ring Soul,
> Absolv'd the Righteous Course of Providence,
> Too just, too wise for such a Curse as Chance.

He then invokes the same genius of England which gave us Chaucer, Spenser, and Milton to assist him in celebrating Louis' fall.

Thereafter the poem shows Louis, oppressed with Blenheim, Ramillies, and Turin, going to Madame de Maintenon to ask advice. She recalls that his past conquests have come by strategem and the wily arts of deceit, division, and dissension within. Promising that all will be well, she descends to the court of arbitrary power deep in hell where Lucifer presides surrounded by slavery, oppression, rapine, slaughter, atheism, desolation, pride, luxury, want, homicide, and, chief among them all, avarice. After Maintenon has told her story, Lucifer argues that since by avarice he has destroyed both Roman

liberty and English liberty in the time of Cromwell he is therefore confident that avarice will now also succeed against England. She returns to Louis, who upon her advice encourages avarice in other countries by bribes, corruption, and secret means until once more France seems everywhere to triumph. Then the scene shifts to England, where (after a passage of great praise for Anne as guardian of English liberty) appears the Angel Michael, sent from God to warn the English of Lucifer's aid to her enemy. Michael counsels that the way to victory is to follow wisdom, liberty, truth, public virtue, and courage. By so doing Britain then triumphs with Marlborough and Prince Eugene. Michael praises the promising young George and proclaims that he will usher in a golden age of England in which poetry, chief among the liberal arts, shall be encouraged until false taste disappears and the muse shall inspire heroic virtues by which the land shall enjoy "The Golden Age of Poetry, Plenty, Peace, and Love."

Gildon clearly feels that his message is of great import and therefore not only strives for a fitting elevation of tone but also works several epic features into the poem. There is a descent into hell, an epic catalogue of those grouped about Lucifer, an interference by supernatural powers in the quarrels of men and nations, a number of set speeches rhetorically conceived, and a very self-conscious invocation of the national muse of England to "raise my song above the Vulgar verse." Although the poem is really too short for such devices, they are nevertheless fairly successful and do little harm to the "design" so beloved by Gildon. In spots he even successfully attains an epic elevation. Witness this passage, which anticipates Thomson's _The Seasons_ and Pope's _Essay on Man_ in its conviction that Nature reveals beneficent order pervading the universe:

When the Wise Order of the World I saw,
And All directed by a certain Law;
When I beheld the Threat'ning Billows Roar
Check'd, and confin'd by the surrounding Shoar;
The constant Changes of the rolling Year
In various grateful seasons all appear;
The Shades succeeded by the Chearful Light.
And Day still falling in the Arms of Night;
Then vanquish'd Doubt forsook my ansious Breast,
And One o're-ruling Providence confes'd,
By whose firm Sanction every Orb moves round,
And all to Certain Ends, by Certain Means are bound.

Although the poem has no epic description of setting, it has several epic portraits, the best of which castigates Avarice. In this Gildon certainly falls short of his Miltonic models but nevertheless achieves both elevation and incisive delineation:

Blind Avarice, to Reason Foe profes't,
Held the next Place in the black Monarch's Breast;
The Favourite Mignon of the Sovereign Fiend,
And most destructive Vice to Humankind.
Uneasy Care had plowed his furrow'd Brow,
And low he seem'd beneath the Weight to bow,
A holy Leer his treacherous Aspect grac'd,
Which all Suspition of his Treason chac'd.
And gain'd him Trusts, which he with Ease betray'd.
For of the Credulous Fools, he still his Market made.

And again in epic fashion Avarice is followed by lesser fiends:

He in his Train had base Hippocrisie,
Falsehood, Distrust, Corruption, Bribery,
Pale meagre Penury, Extortion vile,
Cunning, Deceit, that murder with a Smile.
All these conven'd were met in full Divan,
To undermine the Happiness of Man.

In several other respects the poem is considerably superior to Threnodia Virginea. Its sense is more compact, and its "design"—as Gildon loves to call it—is more clearly conceived and more disciplined in execution. The iambic pentameter couplets are better, tighter (except for an occasional excessively run-on section), and less monotonous than those of the earlier

poem. Although occasionally marred by feminine or false rhymes, the couplets are usually fairly strong, the epithets apt and incisive. As a whole the poem is a rather successful warning against the dangers of avarice, but as an occasional poem it is still well below the quality of Addison's *The Campaign*, which had gained its author a place in the government. Gildon's poem brought him no such desired reward.

The last of these separately printed poems has confused bibliographers, some of whom have credited Gildon with two separate poems because the title-page reads *The Apparition: A Poem . . .* whereas the poem itself has another title, *Canons: A Vision . . .* Addressed to James, Earl of Caernarvan, it appeared November 19, 1718,[1] and was priced at a shilling. Perhaps its celebration of patrons as rewarders of poets and upholders of right standards in literature was really a follow-up bid for patronage for his *The Compleat Art of Poetry*, which also appeared in 1718 and which laid down explicit precepts for excellence in many *genres*. However, there is nothing within the poem or its attendant preface to link the two publications.

Like most of Gildon's works, this poem is accompanied by a preface arguing his favorite ideas. Here he contends that his poem differs "from those, which generally come abroad in this Age" because it is built upon "a Design or Fable, whereas it is very difficult to find any of our most taking Things which have any Design at all." Much of this defect he blames upon a faulty education which teaches boys to look only for beauties of

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1. Ralph Straus, *The Unspeakable Curll* (London, 1927), p. 246—hereafter cited as Straus. Mr. Straus (or Curll) errs in stating that the poem is addressed to the Earl of Clarendon; the title-page and contents read the Earl of Caernarvan.

diction and figures, whereas Aristotle, Horace, and Milton (in his letter to Hartlib) all stress the "design and economy" of the poem. He announces that the moral of the poem is "the Reward of Beneficence" and asserts that it has been written "in the midst of a long, and painful Sickness of Body, and not in the most easy circumstances of Fortune . . ."; probably this refers to his increasing blindness, which in 1718 was almost complete.

The poem itself is both a clear bid for patronage and rhymed exposition of three of Gildon's basic literary tenets. In extremely regular and heavy iambic pentameter couplets he opens with a verse dedicatinn praising Caernarvan's generosity to the other arts and calling his attention to poetry, the only art which can immortalize its patrons. He blames the present dearth of great English poetry on a lack of true patrons:

> Why do no VIRGILS now adorn the Age,
> But that no Patrons in their Cause engage?
> . . . .
> In this degenrate Age, when Art and Sense,
> Can find no Patron, meet with no Defence.

Caenarvan should become the needed discrimating patron of English letters:

> Peculiar Greatness 'tis to own their Cause,
> And as peculiar will be th' Applause.
> While meaner Souls ignobler Joy allures
> The Pleasure of Protecting Arts be yours.
> A Royal Care, and worthy of your Name,
> The justest and most glorious Road to Fame.

He promises that if Caernarvan will smile upon his humble but devoted head

> My soaring Muse shall spread her daring Wings,
> And equal Milton, when of thee she sings.

The poem itself begins with the poet retiring to the country, where lying upon a grassy bank he dreams of the tragic muse:

For lo! A glorious Vision now appears,
Such as was shewn of Old and Sacred Seers,
When they in mean but innocent Abodes,
With Men Convers'd all Day, all Night with Gods.
Behold advance in a Majestic Pace,
A Form divine, that with a Charming Grace
Discloses terrible Beauties in her Face.
Her Locks adown her Awful Temples fall;
While her Left Hand supports the Regal Ball:
Her Right, the Royal Scepter waves around,
And her long robe trails far upon the Ground.
Her Feet the Stately Lydian Buskins press,
These Looks, these Ensigns, and Imperial Dress
The Tragic Muse to my pleas'd Eyes confess.

She tells him that her true sons belong in cities where they can inform mankind:

To populous Cities are my Sons consign'd
For there the Harvest of their Muse they find:
To sing of Heroes, and instruct Mankind.
Tho' Fools and Knaves usurp an Useful Stage,
And tinsel Toys engross and Changeling Age;
Though in the Scene there only now is found
Tempestuous Nonsense, or meer empty Sound,
Tho' Poetry with no protection meet,
Or in the Wealthy, or as sordid Great.

Commanding him not to despair, she reassures him that he can stem false tides and re-assert right standards as long as even one great patron is alive. That Patron, of course, is Caernarvan. He flies to Caernarvan's hall to find him surrounded by all the true beauties, tastes, and wisdom of the Greeks, Romans, and the great early Britons. Thus guided the patron is completely capable of restoring true freedom, true taste, and true greatness to literature, which will reward him with immortality.

For Poets of their Patrons have these Odds,
These, Poets make, but Poets make them Gods.

This poem is less successful than Libertas Triumphans. Its couplets are looser and tediously regular; its attempted elevation and Miltonic tones

fall flat; and in its excessive didacticism it often deserts its author's cherished "design". Instead of being an artistic "vision" presenting Gildon's ideas in a convincing setting the poem falls into ponderous discussion of the literary scene, and Gildon only tardily remembers to complete the vision framework with two concluding lines. Despite his frequent insistence that the distinguishing excellence of literary art is the "design," he has forgotten both proportion and plan and fallen into the same errors of which he accused his contemporaries. The poem is also weakened by excessive unilluminating classical reference and by flabby epithets. Finally, the praise of Caernarvan is fawning and servile.

This review of Gildon as poet shows a writer of more ambition than ability, an undistinguished writer of lyrics, occasional poetry, and a few longer didactic poems. In a form demanding the light and sure touch his lyric poetry unfortunately seldom rises above heaviness. Although stronger in content than in execution, his occasional poetry is remarkable for neither; he has left no real memorials of deeds or people, and at best his work here is barely mediocre. His didactic poetry is carefully reasoned and cogently presented, but except for occasional telling passages it is hortatory rather than convincing. However, as poet he works somewhat better in drama, and before attempting final evaluation of his poetry we must also consider the dramatic poetry of the following chapter.