DWELLING IN DARKNESS:
DOWLAND’S DARK SONGS AS HERMETIC PESSIMIST
GNOSIS, AND COULD THIS BE ‘EVIDENCE’ OF THE
ESOTERIC ‘SCHOOL OF NIGHT’?

Anthony Rooley

In darknesse let me dwell, the ground shall sorrow be,
The roofe Dispaire to barre all cheerfull light from mee,
The wals of marble blacke that moistned still shall wepe,
My musicke hellish jarring sounds to banish friendly sleepe.
Thus wedded to my woes, and bedded to my tombe,
O let me living die till death doe come.
In darknesse let me dwell . . . 1

Indubitably John Dowland’s song ‘In Darkness let Me Dwell’ (A Musical Banquet, 1610)2 is one of the most profound, most sublime and most enigmatic songs of that Age. ‘Profound’ because the performers and listeners are transported to an exquisitely cavernous space, at

1 In every case when quoting original poetry or lyrics I refer to the original printed source. In each of the quotations I make, I have chosen to represent the poetry in original spelling and original punctuation (although modernizing the ‘long “s”’, and the “u”/”v” and “i”/”j” interchangeability). The inconsistency that the Elizabethans applied to first letter capitalization for personification (this was applied so much more sensibly and thoroughly in the 18thC, for example), and their wanton punctuation leaves controversial alternative readings. Nevertheless, the attentive reader can make individual judgments of their own, not filtered by editors who inevitably work from their own ‘frame of reference’, not an Elizabethan or Jacobean one. With the present topic ‘obscurity’ is the name of the game, and it would be a brave (or foolish) scholar who pronounced that one interpretation only is correct. The use of tropes, refined to a high degree of subtlety was engendered by such works as Peacham, Henry The Garden of Eloquence, 1577 (facsimile edition, The Scolar Press Ltd. Menston, England, 1971) where specifically the rhetorical figures of Antithesis, Paradox and Antiphrasis are explored in all the writers I refer to in this essay. ‘Black’ means ‘White’ and ‘White’ means ‘Black’, and all the World is at sea!

2 In every instance of quoting original books, both poetry and music, I have had the pleasure of exploring the original image via the facility of EEBO (‘Early English Books Online’) a facility that allows access to the most obscure publications, and of course to all the valuable prefatory material often set aside when editorial work on poetry has been published in scholarly editions focused on the poetry alone. A topic such as ‘Dwelling in Darkness’ is inevitably enriched by ‘contextual’ material that can only be considered when consulting the original image. I urge the interested reader to contact his or her nearest participating institution that allows access to EEBO.
once un-nerving, chilling, yet resonant with deep familiarity; ‘Sublime’ because one is transported to subtle realms of hinted insights as yet undefined; and ‘Enigmatic’ because ‘What the Hell is this really all about?’ The meaning is actually ‘secret’, but an open secret understood by those who wish to look (or listen) from a certain angle; a certain ‘trick of the light’ reveals a chink or narrow window that glances into another parallel universe. It is not unlike a Phillip Pullman fantasy, played out in an Oxford familiar yet disturbingly strange.3 When Sting performs ‘In Darkness Let me Dwell’ in his DVD version of his ‘Dowland Affair’4 it is shot in the gloomy cellar of his Tuscan Villa, and the glancing light reveals a tear, a true tear, falling from Sting’s eye onto his cheek. This is not neo-Gothic Special Effects, but a genuine result of a man searching, and in his life-long search he stumbled on Dowland, and found a resonance beyond intellect, beyond belief, because it tumbled him into that parallel universe. That tear describes better than a thousand words or a hundred songs the power of Insight, the power of real esoteric understanding. From Alfred Deller’s early 1960s ‘other-worldly’ countertenor recording (with plangent lutenist Desmond Dupre as accomplice)5 through the several varied versions of the 1970s explosion of ‘Early Music’ enthusiasm, to the 21st century contributions of an edgy, post-modern new generation, hardly a one misses out on this power, as the final note unexpectedly but inevitably plunges us into an abyss of silence . . . (and, darkness).

I perceive sufficient impetus in the best poetry and music of this period of a generally ‘Hermetic’ kind (and a more precise definition of that will emerge as this essay unfolds), and with a circle of ‘patrons’ with the education and inclination to enjoy art forms where ‘layered interpretations’ are supportable, that it is possible to claim a ‘school’ of the most open kind. A circle of cognoscenti (a better label than ‘school’, anyway perhaps) who mostly knew each other, or certainly knew of each other, and who enjoyed the intellectual thrill of the deep delight afforded by complex devices. The ‘School of Night’ is hardly tenable as a precise ‘gentlemen’s club’ with membership, rules, and rituals – where members came and went.6 But a circle or fraternity of the most open kind that developed certain ‘significations’ (such as

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3 Pullman, His Dark Material, 1995.
4 Sting, Songs from the Labyrinth, 2006 (CD and DVD).
5 Deller, Flow my tears (with Desmond Dupre) recorded by HMV, 1953.
6 The most valuable survey of ‘The School of Night is found in Bradbrook’, The School of Night; A Study in Literary Relationships of Sir Walter Raleigh, 1936. This