

# Notes on Metaphysical Poems

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The following remarks are short notes on some aspects of metaphysical poems. Though brief, the paper is divided into two sections for the benefit of clear discussion.

## I. Donne's Search for Eternity

The two poems of Donne are discussed in this section as expressions of poet's search for eternity.

### 1. On "The good-morrow"

"The good-morrow" is written in the literary tradition of the aubade, a morning serenade or a song of lovers awakening at dawn. Donne uses this literary type to symbolize the awakening of the two lovers to a new kind of life which they have not experienced before. The lovers consider that their souls were asleep before they get to know their mutual love. When they are awakened, they suddenly find a new revelation of the wonderful truth that they are one in mutual love and exclaim joyously, "good morrow to our waking souls" (1. 8).

The structure of "The good-morrow" is dramatic. The poem opens with casual, colloquial, conversational tempo: "I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I/Did, till we lov'd?" (1. 1). Then the tempo of the poem is quickened by the repetition of these questionings: "were we not wean'd till then?/But suck'd on country pleasures, childishly?/Or snorted we in the seven sleepers den?" (11. 2-4). These questions are answered in a short, sudden, emphatic spondee, "T'was so" (1. 5). And there is an effective, dramatic pause after this spondee. Thus

the first four lines and a half constitute the induction to the poem. The lines following this dramatic pause make up the main body of the poem.

Donne's primary technique in the main part of this poem is that of comparisons and contrasts. First of all, her beauty is compared to that Platonic archetype of which all earthly beauties are but dim reflections: "t'was a dreame of thee" (l. 7). Secondly, the lovers' true, mature, spiritual world is contrasted with their childish, sensual past of the opening lines. The sensualness of their past is suggested in the words like *wean'd* in line two and *suck'd* in line three. Donne carefully avoids the use of sensual words in the main part of the poem. Thirdly, there is the comparison of the lovers' world to a "little roome" (l. 11). Fourthly, Donne compares the lovers' spiritual microcosm with the material macrocosm. It is suggested that the outer, physical macrocosm has "sharpe North" (l. 18) and "declining West" (l. 18) and thus this material world is subject to the change and decay. On the other hand, it is asserted that the lovers' inner, spiritual microcosm is timeless, eternal and unchanging. Finally, the lovers are first compared to two distinct hemispheres, and then to one simple substance, indestructible because irreducible to anything less primary and elemental than it already is.

"The good-morrow" celebrates the theme of mutual love like Shakespeare's "The Phoenix and the Turtle." In Donne's poem, the lovers are awakened to find a new world of their own, a world of true committed love for each other. The theme of mutual love is most effectively expressed through the image of the lovers' spiritual microcosm:

Let us possesse one world, each hath one, and is one. (l. 14)

Mutual love is a change of two separate souls into a single whole, two hemispheres into a simple, all-embracing world. Though the lovers are two distinct hemispheres, they are one in the mystery of mutual

love. This idea is an echo of Shakespeare's "The Phoenix and the Turtle."

So they loved, as love in twain  
 Had the essence but in one ;  
 Two distincts, division none :  
 Number there in love was slain. (st. 7)

Like these lines, the concluding lines of "The good-morrow" assures us that pure and mutual love between man and woman can live forever.

If our two loves be one, or, thou and I  
 Love so alike, that none doe slacken, none can die. (ll. 20-21)

2. On "A Hymne to Christ, at the Authors last  
 going into Germany"

In May 1619 Donne made his last journey abroad. The King appointed him to accompany Viscount Doncaster's mission to arrange the Bohemian succession in favor of a Protestant ruler. Before leaving England for Germany, he wrote this poem "Hymne to Christ, at the Authors last going into Germany."

As in his other poems, Donne was intensely aware of the fallen nature of the reality of our world. He was keenly conscious of man's depravity, isolation and duality which we have inherited. It was this consciousness of the fallibility of human nature that urged Donne to seek to be the real man God made him, to be truly whole. This wholeness he sought throughout his life was the perfection and harmony of the paradisaical state, i. e., the oneness of Thou and I.

First Donne sought this state in the experience of human love, the oneness with the earthly lover, and at the end in God himself, the oneness in Christ as his lover. What Donne seeks in his poems, all he really yearns for, is the security of this everlasting reality, the *one little roome* (l. 11) of "The good-morrow," and the *Eternall root/Of true Love* (ll. 15-16) of "Hymne to Christ." Donne's search has been for that truth, that ultimate reality, which he felt was hidden, perma-

nently, behind the flux of things. He is now finally assured of the One that is at once the Cause, the Being, and the consummation of the Many. God is the real and permanent, the Essence in the heart of things.

Thus the poet's crossing of the North Sea is not less but more significant because it is seen as the Christian's voyage towards home. Here is an equation of voyage and experience. Donne starts with, and never loses sight of, his own experience. The actual is the emblem of the ideal. The sea itself, once seen as a women's tears, is now the emblem of Christ's blood, the *torne ship* (1. 1) the emblem of the ark of his salvation. The implied image of storm and shipwreck in the first stanza suggests the poet's submission to the will of God. Donne surrenders himself to God's will in this poem. He has his peace in the end. He is anchored fast to the inexhaustible and unchanging image of a personal savior, *I know those eyes* (1. 6), and achieves a profound strength and calm in "A Hymne to Christ."

This poem can truly be described as both a prayer and a love-song. The conceit of Christ as a lover who should be jealous is Donne's own clever invention. All true lovers are jealous, so why not Christ? This is an effective dialectic of Donne the love-poet. For Donne, with the death of his wife, all earthly loves are over, and he is not sorry. Christ is now his fulfilling lover. Donne asks Christ to

Seale then this bill of my Divorce to All,  
On whom those fainter beames of love did fall;  
Marry those loves, which in youth scattered bee  
On Fame, Wit, Hopes (false mistresses) to thee. (11. 25-28)

In the last lines the poet prays for death: "I chuse/An Everlasting night" (11. 31-32). This is a prayer for the divorce from this world of utter depravity, isolation and duality. This is also a prayer for the happy marriage with the poet's only true lover Christ so that he can be one with Christ in God's mercy. Thus Donne's great hunger for God is finally satisfied.

## II. Poetry and Faith

The relationship between poetry and faith is difficult and subtle to be discussed. The following notes deals with this acute problem.

### 1. On Marvell's "The Coronet"

"The Coronet" is a poem of penitence, repentance, and humility, treating the peculiar kind of penitence proper to a poet's sins. The problem in the poem is what the poet's particular sins are. Here is presented the subtle question of the relationship between poetry and faith, art and religion.

The poem begins with the contrast of crowns. On the one hand there is the crown of thorns, which is the emblem of both man's sins and Christ's victory over them. The thorns also signify the poet's particular sins and are daily added to Christ's crown of thorns. To redress this wrong, the poet first seeks the flowery garland, which is the laureate crown of the erotic pastoral, an emblem of the sensual world realized and exploited by literary art. The poem centers its problem on the question whether this garland can be an appropriate coronet for Christ.

The poet searches through "every Garden, every Mead" (1. 5), for flowers for this garland as if he were gathering them for the pastoral lover. The pastoral lover's world, the beauty of nature, is now turned to a new use, an adornment for Christ. The flowers are gathered for this garland especially at the cost of

Dismantling all the fragrant Towers

That once adorn'd my Shepherdeses head. (11. 7-8)

Now the poet intends to make the most beautiful and perfect garland ever made for the glory of Christ:

So rich a Chaplet thence to weave

As never yet the king of Glory wore: (11. 11-12)

But, alas!, the poet finds the fatal defect in his collection; the Serpent disguised is discovered in the gathered flowers. Here is Satan tempting a repetition of the original sensual fault. The garland, the beauty of nature, is a victim of Satan. Thus the poem explicitly asserts that the flowery garland cannot redress the poet's sins. The flowers themselves are accused of complicity in Satan's attempt.

The problem here is what the flowers represent in the poem. It seems that they stand for secular love poetry praising a mistress and celebrating the natural world. Or they may represent the poetry itself, for there seems to exist the belief in the poet that the writing of poetry is a somewhat unsubstantial achievement and thus to regard it as essentially a mere decoration of life. Whichever the case, each poem of the poet in this light is a thorn adding "a piercing wound" (1. 2) to Christ's head. The flowery garlands, the new attempts to write devotional poems, are nothing but the "wreaths of Fame and Interest" (1. 16) and "mortal Glory" (1. 18). It becomes evident that the poet is trying to redress the wrong by the wrong things which get into his attempts. He cannot redress the wrong in the usual way of poetry, for he repeats the original offence and seemingly recrowns Christ with thorns.

It follows that the poet appeals to Christ to smite Satan through him, sacrificing himself, as a poet, and the flowers, his poems. To be free from Satan, he asks Christ to shatter his "curious frame" (1. 22), ingenious construction of his poetry. To drive Satan from his hiding place, the poet gives up natural beauty of his poem "though set with Skill and chosen out with Care" (1. 24). *Skill* and *Care* suggest the notion of the poet as a maker, a craftsman in imaginative art. The poet makes his poems with wit, invention, fancy and imagination rather than with inspiration from God. This concept of the poet is in conflict with the Christian notion of the poet as a prophet who is possessed and seized by God's spirits. The poet of "The Coronet" realizes that he is on the Devil's side and thus has to sacrifice himself.

The flowery garland becomes the symbol of the poet's sacrifice in the end. The garland of the pastoral is proper for crowning Christ's feet, not his head. It may "crown thy Feet, that could not crown thy Head" (l. 26). The poet's act of crowning Christ's feet with the flowery garland is that of humility and repentance for his sins.

## 2. On Herbert's "The Forerunners"

Herbert's "The Forerunners" presents the problem of the subtle relationship between poetry and faith, art and religion, like "The Coronet" of Marvell. This problem seems to challenge every writer of devotional poems. The core of the problem is the tension between simple spiritual sincerity and the deviousness of poetic art.

"The Forerunners" is a poem of both devotion and dejection. It is a devotional poem of religious sincerity and also a poem of artistic dejection. It begins with the figure of death's harbinger chalking the door. The harbingers have come to mark in white not only the doors but also the poet's head. The whitening hair of the aging poet forecasts the loss of "sparkling notions" (l. 4) of poetry. The death's harbingers destroy the poet's creativity and causes his intellectual decay. The persona of this poem regrets his artistic dejection. But, though the death's harbingers caused much damages to the poet, they have left him the simple statement, "Thou art still my God" (l. 6), the best of all language. The tension between art and belief is thus presented in the first stanza.

The poet is also glad, in the second stanza, that the harbingers did not take away his ability to say the simple statement, which, he believes, is all that he really cares. The *rest* (l. 9), the *embellishment* (l. 33) of poetic language, does not matter. As long as the poet is able to express his faith in God, though in a simple manner, "He will be pleased with that dittie" (l. 11); and that is the most serious concern of the poet, "if I please him, I write fine and wittie" (l. 12).

In the third stanza, the poet addresses directly to the art of poetry :

“Farewell sweet phrases, lovely metaphors” (1.13). Here the poet regretfully relinquishes the artifice of poetic language in spite of his past effort to give it the proper function. Though the art of love poetry lead to its lascivious end, “stews and brothels” (1. 15), the poet tried to turn it to a new use of praising the glory of God:

Then did I wash you with my tears, and more,  
Brought you to Church well drest and clad: (11. 16-17)

Here the art of poetry is seen as a kind of guiltless thing which may be used by either Church’s side and the World’s side.

The similar discussion continues in the fourth and fifth stanzas. “Lovely enchanting language” (1. 19) and “beauteous words” (1. 30) should be the aid and support in expressing religious truth and beauty. God represents “True beauty” (1. 28) and “Beautie and beauteous words should go together.” (1. 30) The poet is in the great effort to turn poetry to sacred uses.

Yet the last stanza recapitulates the simple devotional statement: “My God, My King” (1. 15) of “Jordan (I)” is best and occupies all his heart. The poet does not care even if he lost the artifice of poetry. What poetry can add is only peripheral embellishment. The simple statement, “Thou art still my God” (1. 32), is the best and sincerest phrase the poet ever can write.

The problem remains unsettled between the artifice of poetry and Christian faith. The poet seems to be asking the two different questions in the poem. On the one hand he says that fine language of poetry should be used for the expressions of religious truth and beauty. On the other hand he says that the fine language of poetry is a distracting irrelevance in the expression of religious faith. The poet further implicates that poetry deals with trifling fictions, its beauty is separate from truth and it turns the plain sense to indirection, concealing meaning. Then he concludes that the simple statement of devotion is the best of all language. It is difficult to resolve the



tension between these claims. It is hard for a good Christian to follow the first claim because of the wrong which gets into his attempts. It is harder for a good poet, or any poet, to follow the second claim. And I don't think that the poet has solved the conflict between poetry and faith in this poem.

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