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JOHN DONNE: "THE GOOD-MORROW"

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1. The poems of John Donne

John Donne (1572-1631) is credited with the honour of being the poet who broke the Petrarchan tradition in England and created a new mode of poetry. Rather than a complete breach, Donne's poetry is a widening of the scope of the Elizabethan tradition. He implements already existing modes in every aspect: new metrical schemes (although he will return to the sonnet in his last works), a rich and original imagery, a colloquial, conversational tone, and a mingling of intellect

and passion which disconcerted his contemporaries: he and his followers were labeled as "metaphysical poets." Not that Donne's poems have any philosophical intention: his themes are the traditional ones, although renewed by a new attitude: love, religious feeling, satire.

The love poems correspond roughly to the early period of his career. He abandons the rigid Elizabethan conventions, which sprang from Petrarchism, and adds realism, sincerity, psychological penetration and a great variety of moods enhanced with images taken from every field of experience.

Some of his love poems are harsh and cynical; others are nearly ecstatic, and celebrate love as the supreme thing in the world. The most famous among these are "The Sun Rising," "The Dreame" and "The Good-Morrow".

Love as the supreme experience suggests to Donne connections between it and other aspects of reality: everything can be used to try to describe an ineffable feeling. His imagery ranges from the vulgar to the sublime, from daily activities to old scientific theories; it may be of a deplorable bad taste or combine sheer originality with beauty and accuracy. It is never ornamental: the poet seems to think that sensation must be subordinated to thought. Much the same happens with the sound pattern of his poems, which is very far away from the smoothness of previous poets. Rhythm is secondary; at its best, it merely helps to underline ideas.

2. "The Good-Morrow"

I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I

Did, till we lov'd? Were we not wean'd till then?

But suck'd on countrey pleasures, childishly?

Or snorted we in the seaven sleepers den?

T'was so; But this, all pleasures fancies bee.

If ever any beauty I did see,

Which I desir'd, and got, 'twas but a dreame of thee.

And now good morrow to our waking soules,

Which watch not one another out of feare;

For love, all love of other sights controules,

And makes one little roome, an every where.

Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,

Let Maps to other, worlds on worlds have showne,

Let us possesse one world; each hath one, and is one.

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appeares,

And true plaine hearts doe in the faces rest,

Where can we finde two better hemispheares

Without sharpe North, without declining West?

What ever dyes, was not mixed equally;

If our two loves be one, or, thou and I

Love so alike, that none doe slacken, none can die.

The subject.

This is one of Donne's best known poems, and a perfect sample of his way. The subject is love, love seen as an intense, absolute experience, which isolates the lovers from reality but gives them a different kind of awareness; a simultaneous narrowing and widening of reality.

The contents:

The poem is divided in three stanzas:

- In the first one the lover rejects the life he led until he met his present love. He describes it as childish ("were we not weaned," "childishly") and unconscious, a kind of sleep ("Or snorted we in the Seven Sleepers' den"?). His past loves must not be considered as serious, since he was not completely aware of himself at the time. So, they are rejected:

. . . But this, all pleasures fancies be;

If ever any beauty I did see,

Which I desired, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee.

- The second stanza is, in contrast, a celebration of the present. Each soul has "awakened" to the other, and has discovered a whole world in it. The union is self-sufficient; the "little room" where they are is all the world, "an everywhere." Consequently, the outer world is rejected, under the symbols of maps and discoverers. Up to now, the poet has cut off his superfluous experience; past time (the first stanza), external space (2nd stanza). He seems to be saying "Here and now."

- The third stanza shows the perfect sincerity and adequation of both lovers, and it adds a hope for the future to that assertion of the present we have met in the first stanza. This perfect love is not only immortal: it makes the lovers immortal, too:

If our two love be one, or thou and I

Love so alike that none do slacken, none can die.

3. Metrical scheme

1	U _ U / U U _ /_ _ U _	10 A
	_ / U U _ / = U U _ U _ /	10 B
	U _ U _ U _ U / _ U U /	10 A
	U _ U _ UU _ U _ U _ /	11 B
5	_ _ / U _ / = _ U _ U _ /	10 C
	U _ U _ U _ U _ U _ /	10 C
	U _ U _ / U _ //_ U U _ U _ //	12 C
	U _ _ _ U U UU _ U _ /	11 D
	U _ U _ U _ U _ U _ /	10 E
10	U _ _ _ U _ U _ U _ /	10 D
	U _ U _ U _ U _ U _ /	10 E

__ U _ U U =_ U _ / 11 F

__ U _ U/_ U _ U _/ 10 F

_ U U _ _ _//_ U _ U_ _// 12 F

15 U _ U U =/_ U _ U _/ 11 G

U _ _ _ U U U _ U _/ 10 H

_ U U _ _ _ U _ U _/ 10 G

U U _ _/ U U U _ U _/ 10 H

U _ U _/ _ U UU_ U U/ 10 A

20 U U _ U U _ / U _ U _ 10 A

_ U U _ U _ U _ U // _ _ _// 12 A

I use (/) to mark internal pauses and verse pauses; (//) to mark caesura and strophic pause.

This stanza form is not traditional: it may have been invented by Donne. The decasyllables are used in the sonnet, but Donne adds a 12-syllable line at the end which gives a nice and nearly imperceptible variety to the scheme and rounds off the stanza.

It is worth noting that some of the rhymes have changed sound since the seventeenth century: "one" (line 14) does no longer rhyme with "gone" (line 12) or "shown" (line 13). The rhymes "childishly"/"I" and "equally"/"die"/"I" are now imperfect ones. Although the rhyme in /ai/ resumed at the end of the poem makes Donne repeat one rhyming word, "I" (1ines 1 and 20), the two instances are far apart and this is not a major defect in the rhyme-scheme.

Lines 9 and 11 have no real metrical regularity, unless we pronounce "fear" (line 9) as a monosyllable and "discoverers" (line 11) in the relaxed form [dis'kʌvrəz], not suitable to poetic style. But then syllabic regularity is not essential in English verse, which is mainly accentual; foreign schemes must adapt themselves to the characteristics of the English language. Some of the stresses (marked =) would be anomalous in an Italian or Spanish decasyllable (or rather hendecasyllable), but Donne was never too careful with this kind of harmony - in Ben Jonson's words, "for not keeping of accent, he deserved hanging". Donne would not subordinate the idea to the rhythm. Whether this is a vice or a virtue is a matter of opinion.

4. Ornamentation

We are going to examine in the first place those figures of speech that contribute to enhance musicality, not sense; those that could be appreciated on hearing the poem even by a person with no knowledge of English. Of course, the main of these are the metrical scheme and the rhyme, but these are taken almost for granted in a poem of the seventeenth century, and deserve a separate section.

- *Alliteration* is a device frequently used by Donne. There are several instances in our poem:

Line 2: ". . . *W*ere *w*e not *w*ean'd till then?"

Line 4: "Or *s*norted we in the *S*even *S*leepers' den?"

Here alliteration has an onomatopoeic character; alliteration in *- s* appears in two words related to sleep, "snorted" and "sleepers", helping thus to underline the sense.

- *Anaphora* in lines 12, 13 and 14; "*Let* sea-discoverers . . . *Let* maps . . . *let* us . . . "

- *Epanadiplosis* in line 1 (though perhaps a chance one):

"I wonder, by my troth, what thou and *I* . . . "

- *Parallelism* of construction on two occasions:

Line 18: *without sharp north, without declining west*

PREP ADJ N PREP ADJ N

Line 15: *M y face in thine eye, thine in mine . . . "*

POSS+N PREP POSS+N POSS.Pron. PREP POSS Pron.

Both parallelisms are strongly emphasized byt the pause in the middle of the line. They appear in association with other figures, such as

- *chiasm:* Line 15: *My* face in *thine* eye, *thine* in *mine . . . "*

1st p. poss. 2nd. p. poss. 2nd pl. poss. 1st p. poss.

- *Reduplication* (present too in several other instances):

Line 10: "For *love* all *love* of other sights controls"

Line 13: "Let maps to others, *worlds* on *worlds* have shown"

The word "world" or "worlds" is also present in lines 12 and 14, but the effect is not so conspicuous.

Line 14: "Let us possess *one* world; each hath *one,* and is *one"*

Line 15: "My face in *thine* eye, *thine* in mine appears"

(1) (2)

It is of no consequence that (1) is an adjective while (2) is a pronoun; the effect is the same as far as the ear is concerned.

Line 18: "*Without* sharp north, *without* declining west"

Line 21: ". . . love so alike that *none* do slacken, *none* can die"

Now for the figures of speech which add to the sense: it is in these that Donne's imagination ran

more freely:

- *Rhetorical interrogative* - The first four lines are a series of these:

> - "I wonder . . .what thou and I / Did, till we lov'd?"
>
> Were we not wean'd till then?
>
> But sucked on country pleasures, childishly?
>
> Or snorted we in the Seven Sleepers' den?"

- *Exclamation:* Line 1: "by my troth"

- *Invocation:* In line 8, the poet addresses himself to his soul and his lover's, and wishes them a "good-morrow". In fact, the whole of the poem is a sort of invocation; the poet is speaking to his lady, who doesn't intervene.

- *Metonymy:* Line 6: "If ever any *beauty* I did see"

Beauty = beautiful woman. In fact, this is everyday speech. The same occurs in lines 8 (souls = minds, people) and 16 (heart=mind, especially if in love). A far more interesing metonymy is developed in line 14:

> "Let us possess one world; each hath one, and is one".

So, each lover is a world for the other. If I consider this a metonymy rather than a metaphor, it is because of Donne's cultural background. At that time it was widely held - it was the traditional belief - that man was a "microcosm": everything was ordered in the "macrocosm" or universe just as it was in man; fluids governed the body just as elements governed the macrocosm; man's destiny was already fixed in the stars. Knowledge of the world was knowledge of man, and vice-versa. So it was not difficult for a 17th-century man to think that a person can assume the proportions of a whole world. Love makes the lover's attention focus on a part of that great whole. The part is named with the name of the whole (metonymy).

- *Metaphors* are fairly frequent:

Implicit metaphor in lines 2-3 "*Were we not wean'd* till then? *But suck'd* on country pleasures, childishly?" The state of the lovers prior to their falling in love with each other is identified with childhood. The explicit metaphor would be "we were babies before we loved".

There is another implicit metaphor in line 4. It runs much in the same way as the other: "Or *snorted* we in the Seven Sleepers' den?"

This time, the previous state of both lovers is identified with sleep. Explicitly: "We were asleep before we loved".

Line 5: "But this, *all pleasures fancies be*".

Line 6-7: ". . . *any beauty* I did see . . .*was but a dream* of thee".

This metaphor is the direct consequence of the one in line 4: if the lover was asleep, it is altogether fitting that anything he saw should be a dream. It is easy to see how these metaphors enhance the contents of the poem.

Line 8: "And now good-morrow to our *waking souls".*

This is but another extension of the metaphors in lines 3 and 7. We have already seen that the first stanza deals with the past, and that the metaphors were those of unconsciousness (childhood and sleep). The second stanza deals with the present, with the lovers having discovered one another, and, accordingly, this is dealt with with a metaphor of waking in the first line of the stanza. "The "good-morrow" with which Donne addresses the two lovers could be interpreted as a metaphor of the whole of thie poem, if we suppose the latter to be autobiographical and as sincere as as it seems to be; the "good-morrow" in the poem is the lover's rejoicing because of the love he and his lady have found in each other; "The Good-Morrow" (the poem) amouts to very much the same in real life. The title would be fully justified.

Line 11: "Love . . . makes one little room an everywhere".

This is in the same line as the metonymy "lover = world". The outer world is discarded and the little room becomes an "everywhere".

Line 16: "And true plain hearts do in the faces *rest*".

Sincerity is depicted as a heart "resting" on a face: no secret intentions for the lovers; their faces show their hearts. They are externally and internally just as true to one another.

Lines 17-18: "Where can we find two better *hemispheres*

Without *sharp north,* without *declining west?"*

The lovers were called "worlds" in line 14. Now the idea is rounded off; they are not worlds, they are "hemispheres". This adds three notions to the previous idea. First, the lovers aren't complete by themselves, they need each other. A *hemi*sphere is a perfect metaphor for any incomplete thing. Second, once the lovers are together, they form not only a complete body, but a whole world (the word "hemisphere" suggests half of the world). Third, the being they form when they are together is perfect: perfection has been associated with the spheric shape since Greek times (Democritus, Parmenides). So the world they form will have no imperfections, no sharp north or declining west. "Sharp" may stand for quarrels between the lovers, and "declining" for the gradual decay of love because of time. This last metaphor opens the way for the final conceit, which states the idea in a bolder way: immortal love makes the lovers immortal.

This last metaphor is an implicit one. It is quite complicated, for it takes Donne three lines to develop it:

> Whatever dies, was not mix'd equally;
>
> If our two loves be one, or thou and I
>
> Love so alike that none do slacken, none can die.

The first line (19) is, poetically speaking, rather superfluous, but it is necessary to make the reader understand the nature of the metaphor that follows. It is an allusion to a scholastic theory concerning matter, which is based on Aristotle's ideas on heavenly and sublunary bodies. According to that theory, heavenly bodies are eternal, they don't change, while sublunary matter is composed of elements in endless changing combinations and warfare. Sublunary matter cannot reach stability because it is not "mix'd equally". Donne applies this as a metaphor of eternal love in lines 20-21. If the total love which is formed with the love of each of the members of the couple is in perfect poise, that love will be a perfect body, a heavenly being, and it will never die. If love can never cease, it means that the couple will go on living and loving each other forever. This image is very typical of Donne, and a perfect sophism.

So much for the figures of speech. One more thing to note: the overtly hyperbolic character of the metaphors, in accordance with the subject of the poem. In line 4, the hyperbole already present in the metaphor of sleep is rounded out with an allusion to the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus; these were seven Christian youths who slept for *two hundred* years in the cave where they had been immured during Decius' persecution (AD 251).

5. Conclusion

The general characteristics we attributed to Donne's poetry in section 1 are all present in this poem. In section two, we have seen that it follows one of Donne's two optional views of love, love as a nearly mystical experience which defies mutability, in contrast to the cynical attitude of other poems ("The Flea", or "Woman's Constancy" among the best known). In section 3, the metrical scheme has proved itself to be original, although slightly imperfect. Donne's poems gain nevertheless in conversational directness and sincerity what they lack in rhythm. In section 4 we have observed the imagery to be in perfect tune with the contents of the poem. Even figures of speech such as parallelism or chiasm help to underline a sense of reciprocity between the lovers. As for the metaphors and other figures of thought, they carry Donne's seal. It is interesting to compare the last and most important metaphor of the poem to these lines of "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning":

> Dull sublunary lovers love
>
> (Whose soule is sense) cannot admit
>
> Absence, because it doth remove
>
> Those things which elemented it.

The allusion is the same and is used in much the same way. It is not difficult to understand why Donne was termed a "metaphysical" poet.

The poem is a moving one: the emotion it carries can be seen even in the language, which is overtly emphatical; there are three instances of affirmative clauses with "do" in only 21 lines (liness 6, 16, 21). Even the adverb "everywhere" (line 11) is turned into a noun to make the expression stronger. The impression of totality, of closeness and of rejection of the outer world that the poem conveys finds here its perfect expression, although it can be found in other poems by Donne, such as "The Sun Rising", whose last three lines run thus (the poet is also in a room with his lover, addressing the sun):

. . . since thy duties be

To warm the world, that's done in warming us,

Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;

This bed thy centre is; these walls, thy sphere.